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From a Modest Proposal to the Final Solution:

The Cauterizing of the Popular Imagination

BARRY SANDERS

Swift turned the *proposal* into a genre of writing. Its peculiar nature appealed to his own, for he recognized that a lively proposal has to be shrewd and wily; that it thrives only through wild imagination and grand gesture; that it convinces by gambit and strategy. Compromise is its enemy, continually threatening to bite off one part after another until, finally, little remains of the original. At the bargaining table, every scheme ends up a mere blushing modesty. To survive, therefore, a proposal must start out grand; the smart proposer must ask for too much, guarding against defeat by writing into the original scheme whatever bits can be safely negotiated away.

So while modesty might produce a useful suggestion, or a fine recommendation, it just won't do for proposals. Propose something, and you immediately taste luxury, a chance to act in an off-hand and casual manner, the freedom to say something far-fetched without having to prove it. Be wild, and you make a new friend. Some bystander will prick up his ears, eager to get in on the action by modifying and shifting, or just cutting your initial idea down to size. Proposals begin with one person, but they always finish in collaboration—two people each surrendering power and control in joint authorship. The only way there lies through cooperation.

How crafty of Swift, then, the creator of the genre, to call his ghoulishly immoral proposal—eating children—a modest one. Surely, civilized people must be eager to compromise on the worst thought imaginable, cannibalism. But Swift won't allow it. By insisting on his proposal as something tame to begin with, he has eliminated all necessity

to fiddle with his plan. He has sacrificed the negotiating partner and established himself as the sole authority. Which makes sense since his topic is, ultimately, domination. But Swift does more than take away his readers' power. He makes them feel grateful by forcing them to think what he *could* have produced, if he had pulled out all the stops on his imagination—shown the world what he's really capable of conjuring. That is, if he hadn't, out of kindness for his readers, wrung every ounce of compromise from his proposal, hadn't denied himself the luxury of presenting a fully-fleshed, really grand scheme, instead of settling for this bare-bones attempt.

But of course "A Modest Proposal" is fully fleshed. Recall Swift's description of the problem: Homeless women, their raggedy infants clutched to their breasts, clog up every street and byway in eighteenth-century Dublin with their begging. Unhoused and unfed, they offend the proprieties of civic leaders. The fortunate infants slowly starve to death, while the smart women eventually submit to abortions. But the situation calls for swifter action, for city treasuries can no longer afford to support those derelicts, and without a solution the general population will lose all faith in their government. An answer had to be found—a "fair, cheap and easy" answer.

An American friend of Swift's hatches a brilliant plan. Let the kids suckle at their mothers' breasts for one year—free food!—and then—presto—feed those tasty morsels to Irish "persons of quality and fortune." To ensure a steady food supply, he adds as a practical note, more male babies should be served up than female babies. So "A Modest Pro-

posal," published in 1723, reads like a cookbook—except that every recipe requires the flesh of humans. With that central image, Swift harks back to the earliest definition of *greedy*: an appetite so voracious that it drives one beyond the limits of civilized behavior—to consume human flesh itself. In Swift's ironic world, greedy appetites will become an institutionalized remedy for the very thing that fostered poverty in the first place: greed. Government officials need only put their policies where their mouths are—act what they legislate and get it over with. With a straight face, Swift asks them to gobble up the poor.

Most proposals issue from the gut. They spring from a sudden insight, an inspiration. They feed on passion and imagination and they disregard logic. They love the devil-may-care life. That's their strength. But that's also why they remain so vulnerable to attack. So Swift leaves the traditional, emotional language of proposals for the stable operations of numbers, and the clinical reasoning of science. He prefers to argue not from the heart, but from the head. Swift's proposal feels modest because he has made a demonic idea sound quietly reasonable through a calm voice and a calculating prose.

Swift argues his case in such a reasonable and dispassionate way, supports his conclusions with such precise numbers, that many contemporary readers took his essay seriously. Those with consciences were angered by it. Others denounced him as crazy. Swift could play with his readers because they still felt overwhelmed, he knew, by that amazing phenomenon called literacy. The first newspaper, as well as the first magazine, hit the streets in the eigh-

teenth century. Subscribers got treated to that new, highly experimental genre, the novel, serialized in the pages of the *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Readers found themselves marooned on Crusoe's island, or felt freshly contaminated with each entry in Defoe's journal of the plague year, or flew headlong into the beyond with Lemuel Gulliver.

Swift knew that by manipulating tiny characters on a white page he could create something sharper and far more convincing than anything reality could offer. Like every writer, though, he hoped to reach the most sophisticated of his audience, those readers able to dig through layers of irony, like archaeologists, to uncover his powerful, political warning. In a society strongly marked by clear caste divisions, satire and irony mirror power relationships by creating different levels of understanding among the literate, the highly literate, and—those left out of the joke altogether—the illiterate. As Socrates, the first *ieron*, knew, when irony hits with its sudden shock of recognition, it wakes a reader up like a slap in the face. For when the reader finally catches on, he feels smart for only an instant, realizing in his insight that he has been hoodwinked, that the author has been busy manipulating meaning. As the smart fades, the reader is left feeling dumb.

The surface irony in "A Modest Proposal" derives from Judaeo/Christian tradition. Ordained Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, Swift plays with a theological tradition he knew well. Burnt or holocaust offerings, the most important and most frequently mentioned type of sacrifice in the Old Testament, refer to rituals in which animals or grain were wholly burned on an altar to God. In some lesser sacrifices, only part was burned and the rest consumed by the priests or the people. The story of Abraham and Isaac, in some ways the founding sacrifice of the Old Testament, reveals, however, that the Hebrews rejected human sacrifice. They chose the lamb as their ritual animal, strict codes permitting only one year old, unblemished males to enter heaven through holy fire.

Church Fathers observed that the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb, which took place on Passover, coincided exactly with the Crucifixion: "Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed" (I Cor 5:7). In the Old Testament, the Hebrews sought to propitiate God through sacrifice, to secure His pleasure as a way of atoning for their own sins: first "fruits" were offered up in a willing surrender of sweetness. The New Testament continues the theme, completes the typology, as the Church Fathers would say, when God offered *His* only Son to redeem the sins of all humankind. Christians experience that sacrifice by transforming the holy wafer and the sip of wine into the body and blood of Christ during Mass. Through transubstantiation, which takes place on the tongue and in the mind, every Christian could embody the spirit of Christ. To live a virtuous life, the novitiate must take that attitude of sacrifice to heart.

Swift borrows those rituals from the Old and New Testaments—burning and ingesting—and domesticates them by moving them from the altar into the kitchen—cooking and eating—to argue a serious point. The poor and the homeless are already sacrificial victims, Swift seems to be saying, so why not finish the job? And look how modest a proposal this is: it comes with the sanction of religion—though it is hard to believe that politicians could become more upright and virtuous by ingesting those holy waifs. For "A Modest Proposal" carries not even the barest trace of the Lamb of God; if anything, God is on the lam. Swift has forced Him out, and usurped His lofty place. Swift will call all the shots now, telling his readers when and how to sacrifice, and who should be fired. All this *not* to appease God, or even some god, but to please aristocratic Dubliners: to placate the powerful.

The deeper irony in "A Modest Proposal" comes from what may be called the grid of literacy. Those eager, eighteenth-century readers knew what literacy should look like: letters, of course, but better yet letters supported by numbers. To create a tantalizingly believable

world—which in turn intensifies the irony—Swift relies on key words like *reckoning* and *number*, *computation* and *accounting*, a strategy which enables him to quietly slip out of the category of essay—an attempt, a trial—and into scientific fact. Swift takes us back to a time when ancient Roman magistrates, who had supervision over morals, used a public census for censure. "A Modest Proposal" dispenses precise information: instructions (on how to carve up a small boy); lists (of body parts); details (about weight and average milk consumption); and careful tabulations—numbers of infant males, percentages of those homeless, of those above a certain income, and on and on. Swift entices his readers to devour his ideas as readily as they devour—well, flesh.

It is no coincidence that "A Modest Proposal" reads like an early tract on statistics. Though the word was not used until the end of the eighteenth century, statistics, along with other mercantilist theories, was being formulated as a science during this period. It lacked only the probability of calculus to make it complete. Statistics actually began in the most mundane way: an English surgeon, Sir William Petty, was appointed Physician General of the army in Ireland and ordered to prepare a survey of forfeited estates throughout that country. He dealt with the problem in the most familiar way he knew—by operating on the Body Politic as if it were the Body Natural. With his scalpel, he sliced a diverse population into its constituent parts: age, race, sex, income, and so on. The physician's knife is a great equalizer; it makes no distinctions between a pauper's flesh and a king's. It cares little for personalities. So Petty cut the Body Politic into digestible bits and fed them to government officials: "A Modest Proposal" as serious domestic policy! His results constitute the first attempt to base governmental policies on the predictability of mathematical computations.

In the narrative that accompanied his survey, titled *The Political Economy of Ireland*, and published after his death in 1691, Petty coined the ter-

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rifying phrase, "political arithmetic." (A Scotsman, Sir John Sinclair, borrowed the word *Statistik* from German mathematicians and replaced Petty's phrase in 1798 with that German adaptation.) By reducing people to ciphers, Petty converted them into a resource, whose labor could be exploited. "People," as Petty describes them, in terms worthy of Swift, "are capital material . . . raw and indigested." His economic views, widely quoted during Swift's day, prepared the way for a new and dreadful form of manipulation; they make the worst atrocities, even the idea of cannibalism—as gruesome metaphor—sound reasonable. Here is Petty's preface, which so much resembles Swift's fleshy irony that, were it not written by a serious medical man, we could easily dismiss it as satire: "As students of medicine practice their inquiries upon cheap and common animals, and such whose actions they are best acquainted with, and where there is the least confusion and perplexure of parts; I have chosen Ireland as such a political animal, who is scarce twenty years old." (Petty clearly left his mark on Ireland: the word *bureaucrats*, officials who govern out of their desk drawers, first describes absentee administrators in Swift's place of birth, Dublin.) In other words, Petty has chosen to inventory the beastly inhabitants of Ireland, its poor—those "cheap and common animals."

Body, as in *corpus*, applies to literature, too. We all know what the shape of literacy should look like, and have come to expect it. But the page is a mirror, informing the reader in just the way a tool gradually begins to shape the hand. Through reading and writing we become "self" reflective, form our identities and fill out our personalities. Which raises the problem of Swift's "Other," those poor, mostly women, beggars, who of course were not literate. Those poor people lived unshaped lives, and thus were un-people: no-bodies. The eighteenth century is the first time, in fact, when a group of people got labeled as a *mass*—an unformed blob, easily reduced to mere ciphers. Statistics, like democracy, congeals individuals into an indistinguishable

mass. It is shocking to realize that *population* first means decimation, a process by which one group forces its will on another. As if he were some deranged political clairvoyant, Swift creates the most potent, ultimately the most terrifying image imaginable: a population destined for "mass extermination." He is the first author to show us the possibility of people disappearing by having their identities rubbed out. He gives us our first glimpse of the mathematization of death.

While Swift gave birth to the proposal as a literary genre, he also instantly killed it off—sacrificed it. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to think of another example in literature. By dissecting the proposal so thoroughly, he made it impossible for anyone else to operate on it. So by the time we finish reading "A Modest Proposal," ironically enough, it fades before our very eyes. But Swift always manages to shake one more trick out of his sleeve: he saw the great political irony in latching onto an endangered species. By the second decade of the eighteenth century, the world had already grown too busy and complicated, too impatient for proposals. Compromise and negotiation—the heart and soul of participatory democracy—take time. Power and domination, on the other hand, move at breakneck speed. Solutions ultimately reach the speed of sound. Better to get it over with. More expedient to drop the bomb and then talk peace; better to count kilotons and megatons and then shake hands. A world fed on statistics turns greedy for solutions—fast and final ones. The days, like pages, are numbered.

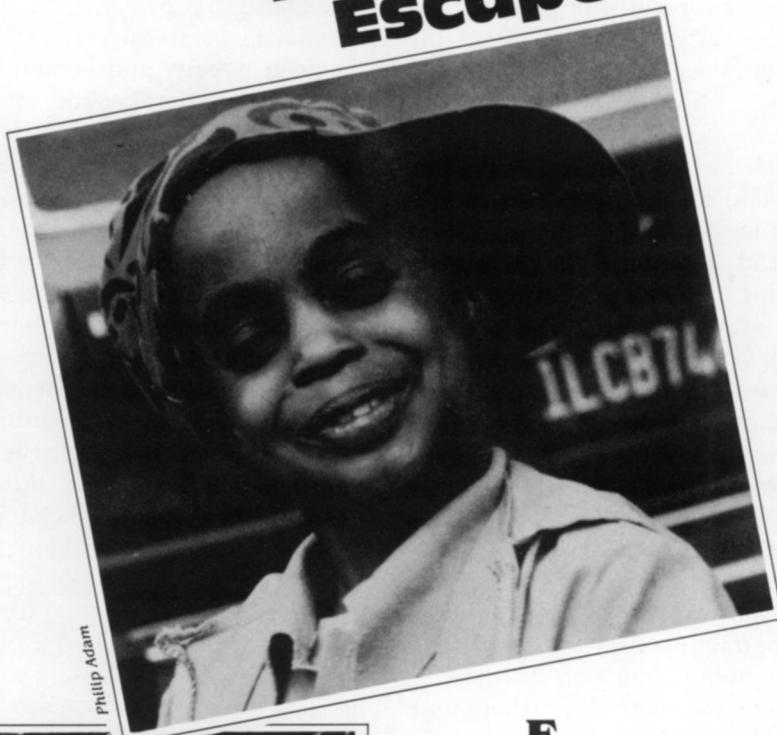
Letters and numbers share the same history. Wherever literacy developed, so did numeracy. The earliest inscriptions, on bits of clay eight thousand years before Christ, were probably intended for accounting—tokens that could keep "track" of cattle. Phoenician sailing merchants introduced our own alphabet, in a rudimentary form, to the Greeks, not to foster communication but to facilitate commercial transactions. As audiences listen to stories, they quickly become auditors, checking

on the facts to hear if they add up. Even in the absence of numbers, language itself still counts: by describing and categorizing, it knifes through reality, slicing it into discrete parts. No wonder we tend to believe the authority of authors all the more when they can give us the score.

But the reader cannot count on an author who is only kidding around. Swift makes up most of his facts and numbers, tossing off phony weights and measures, fabricating amounts and sizes, to make a convincing argument for mass extermination. At bottom, of course, Swift is a humanitarian. He advocates the radical elimination of the poor and the homeless because he cares so fervently about their plight. That's how irony works. But history has turned him into a serious scientist, who concocted the social experiment that reached far ahead of his time. For exactly one century after the publication of "A Modest Proposal," an Englishman named Sir Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, coined a new word, *eugenics*, derived from the Greek for "well born." Like Swift, Galton foresaw the possibility of eliminating the base and poor from society by permitting "the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable." Unlike Swift, however, Galton was not kidding around. To prove that he wasn't, he founded his argument on the solid ground of mathematical theory—namely, on the probability calculus—and created the new science of Eugenics.

As Daniel Kevles points out in his history of Eugenics, from its inception that pseudo-science was biased against minorities—of color, ethnicity and social class—and its early proponents used it to argue the superiority of upper-class white males. Indeed, by the first half of the twentieth century, Kevles says, "eugenic claims merged with misinterpretations of the new science of genetics to help produce cruelly oppressive and, in the era of the Nazis, barbarous social results." "A Modest Proposal" can be read as a crude prototype of eugenic theory, founded on a trumped-up set of numbers—a silly send-up. Read from the perspective

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of the Final Solution, though, it looks more like the first ghastly step into the death camps. Without knowing it, Galton transformed the idea of selective extermination from an ironic literary proposal into a frightening reality. Armed with statistical theory, he might well be called our first social scientist—pointing the way toward a strange and frightening future.

Statistics, which derives from the Italian word for *state*, provided an efficient means for the state to account for, and then control, its citizens. By making actuarial predictions possible, statistics gave the modern nation/state a precise guidance system for directing its domestic policies. In the hands of the Fascists, it allowed the worst evil to be implemented. The Fascist state reduced Jews to ciphers, oddly enough, so they would not finally count. Himmler even commissioned a chief statistician for the SS, Inspector Koeherr, on January 18, 1943 to provide interim reports on the progress of the extermination; a short time later, Himmler chastised Koeherr for using the term “final solution” in his report, and ordered him to substitute euphemisms like “evacuated,” “removed,” or, as a last resort, to say the Jews had been given “special treatment.” In the camps the Nazis made statistics an indelible fact by burning identification numbers into the flesh of every Jew. Those lucky enough to escape the death camps were designated—de-signed—with a yellow Star of David, a symbol that even an illiterate could de-cipher. Eugenics debased the Jews even further by depriving them of any trace of life as human beings; posters depicted them as vermin or cockroaches, and even *teufelsdröck*, “devil’s shit.” By the time they had fed the Jews into the ovens, the Nazis had already sucked the life out of every single one of their victims.

The moment the Nazi leaders agreed on their plan for the Final Solution, sometime in 1941 or 1942, a radical shift occurred: with a stroke of the pen, the Nazi High Command dispatched one of literature’s major weapons, irony. Reality had become

stranger, more savage and ghoulish, than anything that could be conjured by fiction. Once we catch on to an ironic statement, we understand that the author intended to correct some social injustice by distorting the problem into something so grotesque we are forced to trip over it. “A Modest Proposal” points to very real problems of poverty and homelessness and political entropy and says, Do Something! But it obviously does not advocate cooking kids. Swift exaggerates his claim because he knows that, in reality, evil has limits. But the Holocaust destroyed that border separating irony and reality: the Final Solution not only advocated, but put into practice the roasting of people—on the grandest of scales. Irony won’t help us catch on to something so downright evil. Indeed, no level of literacy will help; even illiterates must finally shake their heads in disbelief.

The Nazis actually turned Americans into dumbfounded readers. When the *New York Times* carried the first mention of the Final Solution in December, 1942, scores of readers refused to believe the stories of torture and wholesale extermination. Too wild, they protested, too bizarre to have ever happened. Even if they wanted to, they couldn’t possibly dismiss the news as ironic, because they knew that, except with special columnists, newspapers and magazines cannot afford to risk misunderstanding through irony. So they were forced to reach one conclusion: the *New York Times* must have been mistaken. The Holocaust was simply too evil, too monstrous, to take as fact; its horror lay beyond conceptualization. In January of 1943, after the Allied Declaration condemning Nazi atrocities, more than half the Americans polled said they did not believe the Nazis were deliberately and system-

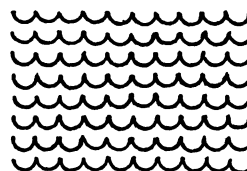
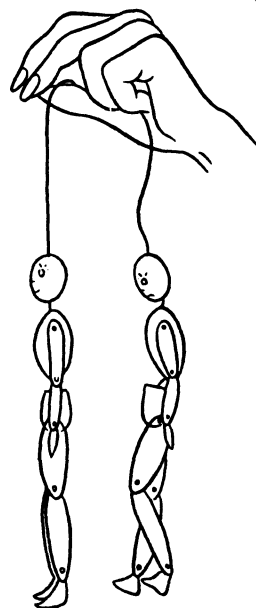
UPRIVER (A ‘Keats and Chapman’ story, in the manner of Flann O’Brien)

During the Vietnam War, Keats and Chapman worked for a time in Saigon as stringers for the networks. Once, they got wind of a secret visit nearby by Ho Chi Minh and they set off to interview him, upriver by rowboat.

Along the banks, everything was devastated. It was groundwork for decades of deprivation. There weren’t even birds in the trees. Where were the birds? Instead, now and again, natives shouted stuff from the shore, but Keats and Chapman couldn’t make out what.

The air around was at least as hot as inside them, and, since there were no birds, insects had taken it over, and the crosscurrents grew so strong Keats and Chapman were constantly grasping at oars yanked out of their cradles.

“Whew,” remarked Keats, mopping up, “it’s a hard row to Ho,” where-at Chapman toppled overboard.



atically killing Jews. Even American servicemen, who “knew,” were themselves shocked by the atrocities they saw when they liberated the camps. One correspondent began his account of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, on April 15, 1945, this way: “It is my duty to describe something beyond the imagination of mankind.” And Belsen was a camp without gas chambers.

What free-thinking citizen *could* possibly believe such a thing? In a democracy, the wildest, most far-fetched proposal always glimmers with hope, for it invites dialogue. In the end, even Swift’s gruesome proposal invites us to join in. Once we realize we’ve been taken in, we can laugh him off. Or take *him* in: thank him for his help. But a final solution implies that all avenues have been exhausted, and thus, since every alternative has failed, no choice remains but to enact this drastic thing. A final solution admits of no dialogue, will brook no response, can tolerate no leap of the imagination. It says: *You have stopped becoming*. Knowledge, defined as what is imaginable, ceases to exist. To verify the brutality of the whole affair, we must fall back on numbers; we have to report the body count, “six million,” which, like Sigma or Chi Square, points to a standard, statistical event. The mathematization of the world, which started in earnest with Petty’s “political arithmetic,” catapulted into a statistical horror of finality, the decimation of the discounted.

“A Modest Proposal” also involves holocaust—a religious pyre. We restrict the term now, of course, to one ghastly event, but the term originates in ancient Greece, and refers to those sacred occasions when the gods were ceremoniously invoked. These two utterly disparate holocausts burn with different flames. It is odd, then, what we have done: we degrade the word, and strangely elevate the event. But what other word could be appropriate for a ritual slaughter of such monstrous proportions? A term seized from the remotest past implicates all of civilization or, worse yet, suggests that we need to begin all over again. But it also provides aid,

by giving the imagination some promontory, solid and recognizable, to hang on to—a potent mnemonic device for remembering cosmic horror.

That handhold was absolutely necessary, for the Holocaust had cauterized the imagination. Nazi atrocities were too wild to imagine, too horrible to grasp. Without diligence and determination, Holocaust images simply do not catch in the mind. That one event burned with such a white heat it seared the imagination, the Holocaust demanding that we picture grisly details beyond the mind’s capacity. People could only recoil in disgust and shock—or turn away in disbelief. Walter Laquer, who has written the most comprehensive study of reactions to the news of the Final Solution, *The Terrible Secret*, tells this typical story: “The problem [of believability] was put most succinctly by Judge Frankfurter in a meeting during the war with Jan Karski, a Polish emissary recently arrived, who told him about the mass slaughter in Europe. Frankfurter explained that he did not imply that Karski had in any way not told the truth, he simply meant that he could not believe him—there was a difference.” As bits of information about the intricacies of torture continue to fill out the picture, we still respond with disbelief.

Over the years, Elie Wiesel has harped at Jews to visit the Holocaust Museum in Israel precisely because he knows that descriptions of such colossal horror—even for literate, well-educated people—do not sink in. We must see the details, must stare at the photographs; memories must be assembled piecemeal, like a jig-saw puzzle, until a composite picture begins to take shape. Guernica has its canvases, but not the Holocaust. Without mechanically reproduced images, there is no Holocaust; the imagination refuses to be impressed. That’s why the Holocaust has become, over the past forty years, a major industry in the documentation of horror, and why Jewish leaders continue to exhort their people with the phrase, “We must never forget!” and not, “We must always remember!” Learn to become a witness, they imply, by looking and per-

ceiving. Learn to read the fate of six million in the anguish of one. Learn to see our fate in theirs.

But no quantity of images, not even six million of them, can ever hope to re-invigorate the imagination. For the imagination is far more than a repository of horror. In the midst of pain and anguish, it can conjure the most reassuring and satisfying dreams and fantasies—of a world even stripped clean of poverty and homelessness. The clever proposal percolates deep in the wellspring of the imagination. Christa Wolf, an East German novelist who grew up during the Third Reich, argues that for us moderns the imagination acquires its power in one way only—through reading and writing. She says it flatly: “The mechanism which deals with the absorption and processing of reality is formed by literature.” Her observations should make us gasp for all its historical irony. For she implies that to live an examined, critical life—to give a damn that things are wrong, and to want to set them right again—we must all of us risk the ovens and become People Of The Book. Forget facts and figures. We must read to keep hope alive. We must hang on to the book for dear life.

Without a critical judgment—and literacy develops this in a special way—we run the risk of being bullied by every politician and ad man who grabs hold of our collar. Swift sounded the warning: We get gobbled up by those in power—the gullible go first. Irony keeps us particularly fit by demanding that we constantly exercise our judgment. Irony requires readers to stay on their toes, alert to every subtlety and nuance, even in the simplest sentences. Sometimes it takes a jaundiced eye to see through pat solutions, and a tin ear to hear jingo bells. But to propose something better, something more humane and dignified, takes the force of a fertile imagination. In a world that takes pride in achieving state of the art methods of torture and extermination, perhaps only someone like Einstein can set the priorities before we are willing to stop and listen: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” □