

QUESTIONS OF CONSUMPTION – the price of the rise of the bourgeoisie

selling, and wealth generation. Everyone aspires to live like those who are richer than themselves, and in the new world of goods, the consumption of commodities makes such fantasies of social improvement seem realisable – at least for an instant. The labourer's wife wants to dress like the weaver's wife, the weaver's wife like the shopkeeper's, who in turn adopts the fashions of the merchant's wife. The merchant's wife 'flies for Refuge to the other End of Town', and emulates the ladies of the court, alarming them so profoundly that the 'Contrivance of Fashions becomes all their Study, that they may have new Modes ready to take up'. 'It is this,' Mandeville concludes, 'that sets the Poor to Work, adds Spurs to Industry, and encourages the skilful Artificer to search after further Improvements.' (*FB*, I: 129–30) Mandeville describes a world in which the desire for material goods generates wealth and industry. But this desire also engenders a highly theatricalised style of social interaction in which all perform according to their social aspirations as though they were actors on a stage.⁵ For Mandeville, then, these appetites are fundamentally productive, and create commercial opportunities for all – not least for Bernard Mandeville himself. A physician who specialised in nervous disorders, the classic symptoms of the new 'diseases of civilisation',⁶ Mandeville's *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions, Vulgarly Call'd the Hypo in Men and Vapours in Women* would run to three editions between 1711 and 1730.

Not all were as sanguine about the effects of luxury as Mandeville – especially not Swift. At the time at which the *Fable* was published, it was

also widely held that the new fashion for consuming goods was having a demoralising influence on the nation. It was a 'spreading contagion', one commentator objected; consumption was 'the greatest Corrupter of Public Manners and the greatest Extinguisher of *Public Spirit*'.⁷ This great consuming passion that enveloped fashionable city dwellers sapped the entire nation's energies, making everyone effeminate, and distracting them from their higher Christian duties. For many, the new commercial society brought about a pernicious shift in the balance of power, away from landowners, the traditional ruling class, towards an increasingly influential and wealthy class of merchants. Such anxieties about changes in the social order were exacerbated by the new habits of emulation, which were held to diminish traditional distinctions of rank.⁸ Indeed, Swift was among those who called for the re-institution of sumptuary laws, to prevent 'Excesses in Cloathing, Furniture and the Like',⁹ and in order to help restrict some of the dangerous levelling effects of commercialism. *A Modest Proposal* is informed by this sharply critical view of commercial society, the pernicious effects of which were all the more severe in a colonial nation like Ireland where the markets were dominated by the metropolis which dictated inequitable terms of trade.¹⁰ According to Swift, commerce '*promote[s] foreign Luxury*'; encourages '*Pride, Vanity, Idleness, and Gaming*' in women; discourages '*Parsimony, Prudence, and Temperance*'; makes people act '*like the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very moment their City was taken*'; and relieves shopkeepers of '*a Spirit of Honesty, Industry, and Skill*' (MP, 116). All of which, in Swift's eyes, is tantamount to killing babies.

On the issue of the appetites, as much else, Swift and Mandeville hold sharply contrasting views. More striking, then, that both should choose to make the unnatural deaths of infants a pivot around which their contrasting arguments turn. We shall see that the murder of children in particular emerges as a convenient vehicle through which Swift and Mandeville express quite different views not only on the uses and abuses of luxury but on other issues too: for example, the true nature of mankind, the proper organisation of society, and the relationship between human and monetary value. Mandeville will use child murder – specifically the murder of illegitimate newborns by their mothers – as a figure that encapsulates what for him is the wonderful theatricality of modern life itself. For Dean Swift, on the other hand, the notion of child murder is deployed in a deeply moralising discourse, which resonates with biblical accounts of the redemptive potential of sacrifice. If for Swift, child murder is at the heart of a critique of commercial society, for Mandeville it is equally useful in his celebration

of commerce's dangerous pleasures – the pleasures of consumption that he renders satirically in the image of the greedy, infantophagous sow.

TWO KINDS OF KILLING IN SWIFT'S *A MODEST PROPOSAL*

Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 19:14)

The unthinkable thought perversely articulated throughout *A Modest Proposal* is that people might profit from the killing of children. This idea is no less shocking today than it was at the time of publication, and, as though trying to dispel its unsettling implications, critics still seem almost transfixed by the attempt to track down its origins, identifying ever more arcane sources for this cannibalistic fantasy: biblical and classical sources, commentaries on Irish history and politics, European romances.¹¹ Despite all this, Irvin Ehrenpreis was probably close enough to the mark when he wrote that both 'religious indignation' and 'economic theory' lay behind the piece.¹² The injunction in Jeremiah, 'And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters' (Jer. 19: 9), an Old Testament premonition of present decadence, may well have been the motto in Swift's mind when he composed the piece.¹³ The work was one of over seventy pieces on Irish affairs written by Swift in the period from 1714 until his death in 1745.¹⁴ In 1714 he had returned to Ireland, the place of his upbringing, as Dean of St Patrick's in Dublin, having already established himself as a literary celebrity in London, a pamphleteer for the Tory administration, editor of the newly established Tory journal, *The Examiner*, and essayist and poet.¹⁵ His return to Ireland was precipitated by the Tory ministry's fall from power in 1714, and was an expedient move for a man who had already swapped party allegiance once before from Whig to Tory, and was now held under considerable suspicion by the new Whig government. When he reached Ireland he witnessed widespread poverty and suffering among the people. Failing crops – when Swift wrote *A Modest Proposal*, Ireland was in the midst of the third famine caused by crop failure since 1708¹⁶ – restrictions on trade instituted by the London government, high taxes, absenteeism among landowners, and the habits of the middle-class consumers: all of these were among the factors that he considered had conspired to reduce the Irish to conditions of abject misery.¹⁷

Swift's correspondence shows that he was moved by the conditions of extreme poverty he encountered on his return to Ireland. He observed with disgust the degrading conditions to which the Irish had been reduced.

'Three terrible years dearth of corn', he wrote to Pope, 'and every place strowed with beggars... Imagine a nation the two-thirds of whose revenues are spent out of it, and who are not permitted to trade with the other third, and where the pride of the women will not suffer them to wear their own manufactures even where they excel what comes from abroad.'¹⁸ Such scenes rebutted the reports that circulated at the same time by mercantilists who held the high population in Ireland to be an indicator of its wealth. Following the political arithmetician, Sir William Petty, whose survey of Ireland carried out in the previous century continued to shape English colonial responses to Ireland, they enumerated Ireland's resources, including population, and found it to be in a period of 'unprecedented prosperity'.¹⁹

A Modest Proposal satirises this kind of panglossian economic optimism, mimicking its language of calculation, and ridiculing the idea that size of population in itself was a simple measure of a country's wealth. The proposal that the Irish might enrich themselves by literally consuming their excess population, was an idea that built on documented beliefs to the effect that in previous times, the Irish had shown a peculiar penchant for human flesh. The seventeenth-century writer, Fynes Moryson, had reported incidents of intergenerational, famine-induced cannibalism during Tyrone's Rebellion in 1602: an old woman eaten by her starving children, and others who lured little children to a fire, to murder and devour them – stories that bore all the hallmarks of fairy tales.²⁰ Swift's friend and collaborator, Sheridan, had referred to these events in an essay published in the *Intelligencer* shortly before Swift produced his pamphlet.²¹ According to Claude Rawson, ancient associations between the Irish and cannibalism went even further than this.²² Swift himself held the Irish to be descended from the Scythians, a people whose cannibalistic ways had been noted by Herodotus. In Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, these signs of a primordial Irish savagery are subverted by a stroke of economic genius: the realisation that the delicate meat of children has a commercial potential that is ripe for exploitation. The baby-banquet envisaged here is no wild, native ritual, no orgy of bestial scoffing, as in the Mandeville account. Rather, baby flesh will be food for the polite and refined – decidedly not fodder for the untamed poor. 'Stewed, roasted, baked or boiled', or more elaborately, French-style, in '*Fricasie*' or '*Ragoust*', baby-meat is 'delicious and nourishing', and economical too: 'A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends; and when the Family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable Dish; and seasoned with a little Pepper or Salt, will be very good Boiled on the fourth Day, especially in *Winter*.' (MP, 112) 'Those who are more thrifty... may flay the Carcase; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make

value of the death of children. The austere Spartans – as opposed to the Athenians – routinely abandoned their children, gathering in only those tough enough to survive; while one of the most widely cited examples of Roman republican political commitment was the gesture of Brutus in ordering his errant sons to be executed for crimes against the republic.²⁷ For many writers, especially Swift, these practices of child sacrifice resonated with examples found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, most notably God's sacrifice of Christ.

Although Swift's *A Modest Proposal* makes the killing of children a sign of a decadent society and draws on the idea of the child-killing savage, it simultaneously, albeit in a more muted way, evokes this civic humanist motif of the virtuous acceptance of infant death. The satire is thus intensified by the comparison which hovers over the piece, between the profligate slaughter of children for sensory indulgence and monetary gain in decadent commercial society on the one hand, and Roman or Spartan, or indeed Christian self-denial – the death of children for the welfare of society – on the other. The latter view is never stated directly in *A Modest Proposal*, but within the dense texture of the prose there are traces of a standpoint from which it is imaginable that children might be killed as a sacrifice for a greater social good – the merest innuendo that infanticide might be considered an act of redemption.

The closest Swift comes to articulating this idea directly is in the penultimate paragraph where he writes:

I desire those Politicians who dislike my Overture, and may perhaps be so bold to attempt an Answer, that they will first ask the Parents of these Mortals, Whether they would not, at the Day, think it a great Happiness to have been sold for Food at a Year old, in the Manner I prescribe; and thereby have avoided such a perpetual Scene of Misfortunes, as they have since gone through; by the *Oppression of Landlords*; the Impossibility of paying Rent, without Money or Trade; the Want of common Sustenance, with neither House nor Cloaths, to cover them from the Inclemencies of the Weather; and the most inevitable Prospect of intailing the like, or greater Miseries upon their Breed for ever. (*MP*, 117–18)

The idea that a man would rather have been sold for food when a year old than perpetuate the miseries of Irish poverty is of course mired in irony. But it is an irony invigorated by distant evocations of classical and Christian notions of self-denial for the common good, encapsulated in the necessary death of a child. The idea of the sacrificial infant death thus shadows the burlesque of sensual gratification, and pierces the insistent vocabulary of economic calculation – 'Prospect', 'intailing', 'Breed' – with the pathos of human suffering. For an instant, the Irishman who would rather have been

killed is transmogrified and ennobled; the brute savage flickers into view as a human saviour, willing to lay down his own life for the good of his 'Breed'.

At the heart of Swift's critique are thus two very different and mutually contradictory figures of child murder. On the one hand, it is the pastime of the idle savage and the product of sensuous indulgence encouraged by apologists for commercial society and colonial policy, and encapsulates the demoralising effects of civilisation. On the other hand, and from a different perspective, child murder is presented as the necessary sacrifice that is forced on people through human need; an emblem of self-restraint and civic virtue.

These opposing terms become the staple of subsequent critiques of capitalism, trade, and commodity culture throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. The complaint articulated in various ways from now on is that the mechanisms of commerce and capital obviate the realities of human need, distracting people with the glistening world of goods, which conjure new and powerful desires; people are enslaved to their passions and appetites, and become no better than child-eating savages. Walter Benjamin will evoke something like this in his famous aphorism, that 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,'²⁸ although the underlying assumption here, of a logic of parasitism – that civilisation is made possible by the exploitation of other, colonised peoples, often represented in figures of ingestion, the vampiric sucking of resources from the colonised body – is the insight of a later age, and not clearly evident in Swift's essay. In Swift's case, not only do the colonising English eat the Irish; the Irish eat themselves in mimicry of, and defence against, the neglect shown by the colonising country. But in both cases, civilisation is made degenerate by money, with the result that it is drawn together with barbarity as an identical, rather than a distinct, formation. Coincidentally, however, the position from which Swift argues against the infanticidal tendencies of modern society has implicit within it the idea of a different kind of infant death – the socially useful death, based on the model of Brutus, or the deadly child abandonment of Spartans, or indeed the child sacrifices of Christian tradition. Torn between these figurings of infant death, a critique opens up in which the suffering or dead child stands as the embodiment of human value, in opposition to the demoralising effects of commercialism. Embedded in this is the suspicion that there is some particular connection between the mechanisms of capital and a disregard for infant life: as if to love money – or merely to make money – is to kill children.

CHILD MURDER AND MODERNITY: MANDEVILLE'S
FABLE OF THE BEES

For Swift, as for other eighteenth-century readers, Bernard Mandeville was the most notorious apologist for luxury.²⁹ In sharp contrast to Swift, Mandeville seemed to celebrate the unlicensed gratification of the appetites, evoking a society in which people are ruled by their passions, driven by their overwhelming quests to gratify their own self-love. While Swift was driven by classical ideals of virtuous restraint, Mandeville on the other hand proffered a more naturalistic account of society, in which it was seen to have developed from a savage state, spurred by the forces of the human passions.³⁰ 'The Seeds of every Passion are innate to us', he wrote, 'and no body comes into the World without them' (*FB*, I: 281). For Mandeville, then, there was no essential difference between people in their civilised and so-called savage states; on the contrary, he held that civilised society had been formed by the operations of the passions – principally, self-love. While his contemporaries – such as Swift – found this approbation of savagery a matter of disgust, a mark of the demoralisation endemic to modern society, Mandeville's views would influence the development of a strain of primitivist thought that held sway in the later eighteenth century, explored most significantly through the notion of the noble savage, an idea to which Jean Jacques Rousseau gave a significant twist.³¹ Of interest

Josephine McDonagh, *Child murder and British culture, 1720-1900*
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