

THE LITERARY OPINIONS OF JONATHAN SWIFT

by 7214

JAMES ALLEN VROONLAND

B. A., Central College, 1961

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

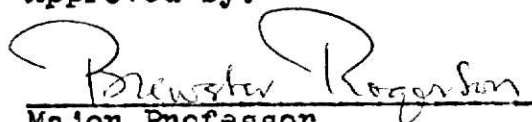
MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1971

Approved by:


Major Professor

LD
2668
T4
1971
V76
C.2

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
SOME RELEVANT EXTRA-LITERARY VIEWS	8
GENERAL NOTIONS ABOUT LITERATURE	15
TECHNIQUE	30
MAJOR CRITICAL PIECES	34
CRITICISM OF AUTHORS AND WORKS	53
CONCLUSION	55
LIST OF WORKS CITED	65

THE LITERARY OPINIONS OF JONATHAN SWIFT

Jonathan Swift rarely presents himself as a critic of literature. He has no corpus of works dealing systematically with literary theory, or with specific works and authors. Even in the satires with nominally literary subjects, he offers a minimum of explicit commentary on critical values. In an age distinguished for its intensive debate over the problems of criticism, he stands out not for his leadership, as one might expect of so decisive and significant a man, but for his silence. Yet here and there in the prose works, the poems, and the correspondence can be found a good many judgments upon literary matters; and in a few works Swift discourses at some length on topics related to literary theory. It is the purpose of this report to assemble these scattered utterances, and thus to put into more regular form the ideas that Swift expresses about literature.

First, however, it must be recorded that the evidence is not only fragmentary, but often indirect. Swift simply is not interested in pontificating about literature; and though he must surely have discussed it on many occasions with his friends, particularly the Scriblerians, he is not even inclined to write much about it in his letters. One is obliged to work by inference much of the way, and to share the frustrations of other students such as Herbert Davis and Harold Kelling,¹ who have attempted to systematize Swift's literary opinions. "It is disappointing," wrote F. E. Ball after his editorial study of the correspondence, "to find comparatively few references...to

literature or literary criticism."² When Swift does make a reference to an author or work in one of his letters, he gives little more than his verdict: a work gives pleasure, the author a worthy person; or it is dull, the author a puppy. Ball concludes -- wrongly, I think -- that Swift is not greatly concerned about literary issues, and that "it is safe to say that statecraft occupied a larger share of his thoughts than literature."³

Herbert Davis, on the other hand, found a larger quantity of material which reflected Swift's literary thinking when he examined the poetry -- enough that he remarked of Swift's pervasive interest in literary matters.⁴ There is, however, no Horatian poem, no Essay on Criticism, no Dunciad. In a few poems he gives straightforward praise or condemnation of a poet or work, or lists some trite similes to be avoided. But the bulk of the literary ideas in the poetry comes by indirection; they are set out in irony, burlesque, parody, and statements of Swift's personae. The tenor of Swift's critical statement is usually clear and powerful, but lacking in elaboration, so that it resists translation into detailed positive terms.

In his prose works there is more of this indirect criticism and implicit theorizing. Neither A Tale of a Tub nor The Battle of the Books makes its statement directly. "A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet" is ironical. The "Meditation upon a Broomstick" is a parody. Almost alone among the more considerable pieces, "A Letter to a Young Gentleman" advances ideas and definitions directly and explicitly.

Despite any and all difficulties, however, it is plain that Swift had some very decided convictions about literature and literary standards, and wove them incessantly into his work. Some of his specific views are famous, and it may be well to begin with a few of these, if only to meet him at once in his most assertive mood.

For example, it is well known that he could find nothing good to say about Dryden. Now, Dryden had his detractors -- a sizeable number of them, mostly for political reasons -- but he was clearly the central literary figure of post-Restoration England, and was acknowledged generally to have done major work in a variety of forms. If we come to Swift looking for any recognition of this, any generalized approval of Dryden's prose style, dramatic skills, or critical insight, we are to be disappointed. Swift does not mention these things at all. Instead, Dryden's work is damned, though not, as one might perhaps expect, for the excesses of heroic drama or for equivocation in the Essay of Dramatick Poesie. Indeed Swift seems not to be exercising his literary judgment at all, for his most energetic pronouncements upon Dryden are on strictly personal grounds. He complains of Dryden's personal ambition, his abandonment of principle to gain money, power, or vulgar praise, his self-adulation in several prefatory pieces which assure the reader of the merits of his writings. Swift, like the other Dryden detractors, seems concerned more with the personal morality of Dryden than with the merits of his works. Later on we will see him dealing in a similar fashion with other specific writers and works.

Swift also speaks out conspicuously on some of the more general critical questions of his age; he is involved, for example, in the Ancients-Moderns controversy -- particularly in the Battle of the Books. His interest, however, is clearly not that of Rymer, Perrault, or even Dryden. He does not examine the writers of Greece and Rome and compare them with the Moderns. He is not concerned with either group's observance of the unities, or use of the chorus in tragedy, or following the Rules, or keeping distinctions in the genres. Nor is he interested primarily in stating his preference for Lucan or Blackmore, or for the Ancients in general over their counterparts -- although this is the feature of the Battle of the Books which first strikes our attention. Indeed if we are looking for insights into the relative merits of ancient and modern writers, we are to be disappointed by Swift's neglecting the matter. Battle of the Books is simply not a contribution to classical scholarship or practical criticism.

What Swift is really doing in the Battle of the Books is setting forth some common-sense rules about how any man should formulate his notions of religion, politics, and manners -- as well as literature. His concern, when he acknowledges the Ancients' superior claim to Parnassus, is that the Moderns should learn from the successes and failures of the Ancients in order to improve their morals, politics, manners, and writings. It makes obvious sense, he would contend, to learn from those who are wiser and more widely experienced than oneself. Later on we will see again that Swift has interests besides literature which

he finds a chance to discuss even as he deals with a major literary issue.

In Battle of the Books Swift does, however, assert himself on a matter of literary scholarship, that being the disputed authorship of the Phalaris Letters. Swift's mentor-employer, Sir William Temple, had written some warmly appreciative things about them, assuming all the while that Phalaris, an Ancient, had indeed written them. For this Temple was set upon harshly by Bentley and Wotton, who, with formidable scholarly explanations, judged the letters to be spurious. Nevertheless, undaunted by the overwhelming weight of the evidence, Swift comes to the aid of Temple and roundly castigates the scholars. He does not really deal, however, with the substance of the argument; he makes no contribution to the discussion, except in allying himself to what is clearly the wrong side.

Elsewhere we find that he often assumes or implies general notions about his theory of literature -- for example, about the relationship of art to nature or the effect of literature upon the reader. And since Swift has no direct and systematic theoretical treatise on these matters, we must look to his criticisms of works, to his own practice, and to some apparent definitions. We will find that Swift is inconsistent. More specifically, he seems to be of two minds on the matter of how truthfully art should mirror nature.

On the one hand, he sometimes implies that the writer should give an accurate account of his subject. This apparent

intention to champion verisimilitude leads him on a few occasions to eulogize a good man for his good works; but far more often (as readers from Thackeray to Orwell have complained) he focuses upon the foolish, corrupt, filthy, vulgar, and base. This concentration upon unpleasant things is obvious, for instance, in his many parodies and burlesques of pastorals, where he mocks the sanctified romantic nonsense of poems that fail to record the truth. The damsels of Swift's own countryside are not altogether pure, mannerly, and honey-lipped, and they are not likely to inspire any deluded, fanciful notions in the heads of shepherd swains. Swift implies that his reader must be made to see things, especially the things that might harm him, as they really are. The reader is then able to make wise choices in the conduct of his life.

Swift draws starkly accurate pictures in his own poetry; "A Description of a City Shower" minces neither words or images. "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" strips away the clothing, cosmetics, and other artifice to expose the true ugliness of the prostitute. It seems fair to say of these poems that they are unremarkable for intrinsic merit. The moral effect outside the poem, however, may be for the good. Again, Swift might well assert that a young man can choose a friend or mistress best if he sees things clearly; he will then not be led to contract marriage or syphilis unwittingly. Good sense and sound morality seem to demand that the writer show things as they really are.

In a critical statement about Restoration drama, however,

Swift contradicts this notion flatly:

The Reformation of the Stage is entirely in the Power of the Queen; and in the Consequences it hath upon the Minds of younger People, doth very well deserve the strictest Care. Beside the undecent [sic] and prophane Passages; beside the perpetual turning into Ridicule the very Function of the Priesthood; with other Irregularities in most modern Comedies, which have been often objected to them; it is worth observing the distributive Justice of the Authors, which is constantly applied to the Punishment of Virtue, and the Reward of Vice; directly opposite to the Rules of their best Criticks, as well as to the Practice of Dramatick [sic] Poets in all other Ages and Countries.⁵

But, one might object, if the writer is to call attention to what is true about experience, if art is to imitate nature, the dramatic work should not shy away from profanity and indecency. And if priests are sometimes dull, foppish, or hypocritical, they should be shown that way. Would Swift argue, for example, that the reader or playgoer should be deliberately misled by a representation of punished vice and rewarded virtue? The fanciful golden world may operate that way, but Swift has seemed before to condemn the fanciful distortions of truth. Later on in this paper we will see how this apparent contradiction may be resolved.

Here, then, are four different points on which Swift has stated or implied his opinions. His judgment of Dryden appears to be at best extra-literary; his approach to the Ancients-Moderns controversy seems puzzling; his apparent conviction about the Phalaris authorship is wrong; and his implied statements about the relationship of art to nature are contradictory. Critics unsympathetic to Swift might assert some easy explanations for each of these judgments -- and with some truth. The

first might be attributed to personal bias, resentment over Dryden's conversion to Catholicism or his oft-quoted "Cousin Swift, you will never be a poet." The second and third might be explained by Swift's loyalty to friends and, by implication, his own lack of literary or moral principle. The fourth might be dismissed because of Swift's alleged misanthropy and generally disagreeable nature, an amalgam of frustrated pride, skepticism, cynicism, and his own particular kind of common sense. Those same critics might add an indictment for madness, vertigo, ecclesiastical sour-grapes, and over-zealous churchmanship. We might judge from all this that we are dealing with a man whose critical statements are less than valid and, therefore, deserve no attention. Before resorting to that unhappy conclusion, however, we should take a closer look at Swift's writings.

II. SOME RELEVANT EXTRA-LITERARY VIEWS

If one is in search of consistency and unity in the criticism -- or at least in Swift's approach to literature -- he does well to consider the suggestion made by Ricardo Quintana in The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift, that Swift's literary ideas are an extension of his moral thought.⁶

The obvious term which can be used to describe Swift's position is "conservative." He was a Christian humanist, a neo-classical realist in literature, a Tory in politics, and orthodox, authoritarian, High-Church Anglican in religion. In general he had a high regard for the best that had been thought, said,

written, devised, and instituted by the good men who came before him.

Among these best things was a concept of the nature and purpose of Man which we are accustomed to identifying as Christian humanism:

It [the general outlook or system of values of "humanism"] viewed man's intellectual and moral nature as ideally the same, and it assumed as its goal the evolution of the total man in accordance with that view. It especially emphasized man's ethical "reason" as his own distinctive nature, and the means of gaining insight into the ideal and of comprehending the standard or end which this ideal comprises....

The classical direction of art to human actions and potentialities mirrors the traditional humanistic stress upon moral knowledge and cultivation rather than upon the scientific investigation of the external world.... "Our business here," said Locke, humanistic even in his empiricism, "is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct."?

Man must both know and will right conduct here on earth. For these ends he has good help -- tradition. In one man's own lifetime he could possibly amass some small knowledge, even wisdom, about the proper conduct of his life. The wisdom of tradition, after all, is built upon the cumulative experience of many good men. Swift seems to indicate that even the single human being has some taste for the good; if he can see clearly he will prefer it to the bad. "A Modest Proposal," for example, exposes grotesque immorality, and the writer assumes that the reader who has clear perception will react in a right manner. The proper reaction depends, indeed, upon some considerable previous human experience. The persona of the work is judged according to the reader's previous experience.

The trial-and-error method of learning is slow and painful -- and foolish, since the single human being can rely, if he chooses, upon the vast experience of antiquity. Tradition has provided aids for the proper conduct of men. In religion, it has left the visible Church, in politics the state, in society the aristocratic tradition and values, in literature the classics. Each of these things, religion, politics, social intercourse, and literature, has as its end the bringing to realization of the potential of Man. To have this potential realized, each man must know his own capacities, and thereby his proper place in the society of men. The need for order, balance, and proportion is axiomatic.

These ideas are Swift's. In A Tale of a Tub he asserts, indirectly and ironically through his Grub-Street persona, that Man has a certain role to play in the great theater of this world; and that religious, political, and literary order are related and necessary to that role:

Nor shall it any ways detract from the just Reputation of this famous Sect [the Aeolists], that its Rise and Institution are owing to such an Author as I have described Jack to be; a Person whose Intellectuals were overturned, and his Brain shaken out of its natural Position; which we commonly suppose to be a Distemper, and call by the Name of Madness or Phrenzy. For, if we take a Survey of the greatest Actions that have been performed in the World, under the Influence of single Men; which are, the Establishment of new Empires by Conquest: the Advance and Progress of new Schemes in Philosophy; and the Contriving, as well as the Propagating, of new Religions: we shall find the Authors of them all, to have been Persons, whose natural Reason hath admitted great Revolutions....⁸

The hack's admiration for political revolution, imperialistic conquests, eccentric philosophizing, and new religions must not be construed as Swift's own. The intellectual confusion and

denial of any universal, permanent values, the hack's reliance upon personal whim, rather than upon common (universal) sense -- these things are obviously foolish. The results of anarchy, all sorts of inhuman barbarism, are immediately sensed as being bad -- to anyone but a fiend. Swift demands that men be reasonable; i.e., that they use the experience and wisdom of tradition (along with their own good sense) and pass their lives in the common forms:

... if the Moderns mean by Madness, only a Disturbance or Transposition of the Brain, by Force of certain Vapours issuing up from the lower Faculties; Then has this Madness been the Parent of all those mighty Revolutions, that have happened in Empire, in Philosophy, and in Religion. For, the Brain, in its natural Position and State of Serenity, disposeth its Owner to pass his Life in the common Forms, without any Thought of subduing Multitudes to his own Power, his Reasons, or his Visions; and the more he shapes his Understanding by the Pattern of human Learning, the less he is inclined to form Parties after his particular Notions; because that instructs him in his private Infirmities, as well as in the stubborn Ignorance of the People. But when a man's Fancy gets astride on his Reason, when Imagination is at cuffs with the Senses, and common Understanding, as well as common Sense is kicked out of Doors; the first Proselyte he makes, is Himself.... For, if we take an Examination of what is generally understood by Happiness, as it has Respect, either to the Understanding or the Sense, we shall find all its Properties and Adjuncts will herd under this short Definition: That, it is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived. And first, with Relation to the Mind or Understanding; 'tis manifest, what mighty Advantages Fiction has over Truth; and the Reason is just at our Elbow; because Imagination can build nobler Scenes, and produce more wonderful Revolutions than Fortune or Nature will be at Expense to furnish.⁹

Since the hack prefers the dictates of his imagination to those of his good sense, he is destined to live a deluded and immoral life. He would change his form of religion as whimsically as a tailor creates new fashions. He would send a kingdom to battle

to contest his rights to a whore. He would adopt a new philosophy because of his preference for the number three. As a literary critic he does not ascertain principles of judgment from wide reading and experience, nor apply himself to restoring ancient texts, but rather he gives purely personal reflections about works, interpretations which reflect principally what he is like instead of what the work is like. He sees figures in clouds or meanings in Tom Thumb¹⁰ by referring only to what his own peculiar fancy conjures up. At his highest he is totally self-sufficient. No standards outside of himself have validity. Solid empirical experience, either personal or universal, is irrelevant to this Bedlamite, feasting on his own excrement.¹¹ He obviously lacks good sense.

Swift, of course, would have a man use his reason, his empirical good horse-sense, whenever it can legitimately regulate his opinions and actions. There are, however, some profound Truths which cannot be discovered by applying good sense to one's experiences. Certain religious mysteries, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, for example, are given in Holy Writ and are not to be reasoned nicely upon. They are simply to be proclaimed and believed. Man's proper sphere is earth, and he should not presumptuously aspire too high:

Too intense a Contemplation is not the Business of Flesh and Blood; it must by the necessary Course of Things, in a little Time, let go its Hold, and fall into Matter. Lovers, for the sake of Celestial converse, are but another sort of Platonicks, who pretend to see Stars and Heaven in Ladies Eyes, and to look or think no lower; but the same Pit is provided for both; and they seem a perfect Moral to the Story of that Philosopher, who, while his Thoughts and Eyes were fixed upon the Constellations, found himself seduced by his lower Parts into a Ditch.¹²

While attention to things beyond the human comprehension is not proper for Man, neither is too close attention to mere material. Misapplied attention to either area might distract Man from his proper moral concerns as a human being.

Concentration on material phenomena, the stuff of science, had long since revealed the inadequacy of traditional scientific lore and had caused some Moderns to question the validity of traditional learning and values in general. As one may see even in the comparatively limited arena of the Royal Society during Swift's youth, the contest was waged between experimental science and traditional lore; between the theory of mankind's constant progress and that of its decline or cyclic peaks and lows; between optimism over the possibility of Man's discovering and mastering the laws of nature and society -- and sceptical conservatism; between the democratic temper which asserted that through use of proper method all men could ascertain the truths of politics, religion, literature, and social structure -- and the aristocratic temper which clung to the best of tradition and the wisdom and taste of widely travelled, educated, and experienced men.¹³

The democratic, iconoclastic, utilitarian nature of contemporary

"learning" called the traditional, aristocratic, humanist values and methods into question. In the course of the lengthy controversy between Ancients and Moderns the advocates for either side did not concentrate their attention exclusively on science, or on literature, or on politics. These things seemed to be bound up together; if modern science prevailed, traditional morality seemed doomed. In his "Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning," Temple did not confine himself to arguing that the pyramids are nobler than the telescope; in his "Of Poetry" he elaborated upon the real crux of the controversy:

... our different opinions in religion and the factions they have raised or animated for fifty years past, have had an ill effect upon our manners and customs, inducing more avarice, ambition, disguise (with the usual consequences of them) than were ever before in our constitution. From all this may happen, that there is no where more true zeal in the many different forms of devotion and yet no where more knavery under the shows and pretences. There are no where so many disputers upon religion, so many reasoners upon government, so many refiners in politics, so many curious inquisitives, so many pretenders to business and state-employments...and yet no where more abandoned libertines, more refined luxurists, extravagant debauchees, conceited gallants, more dabblers in poetry as well as politics, in philosophy, and in chemistry.¹⁴

He concluded with aristocratic asperity, "I have had several servants far gone in divinity." Temple outlined here what the controversy was really about. New methods of thinking about material things led to new thinking about religious, social, literary, and civil matters. And this new thinking in turn, because both the methods and the thinkers were not suited to the job, led to vicious behaviour on several fronts.¹⁵

Swift shares Temple's concern over the results of modern thinking, and in the Tale of a Tub and the Battle of the Books he demonstrates that he is aware of the extent of the controversy. For example, when he catalogues the Moderns' forces getting ready for battle, he includes Descartes, Gassendi, and Hobbes -- philosophers; Harvey and Paracelsus -- medical men; Guicciardini and Davila -- historians; Regiomontanus and Wilkins -- mechanical scientists; Scotus, Aquinas, and Bellarmine -- profound theologians; and L'Estrange -- a pamphleteer.¹⁶

It is obvious that in the Battle of the Books and the Tale of a Tub Swift launches himself, even if tangentially, into what is a major intellectual controversy of his age -- one that, in spite of its external appearance of being a trifling academic affair, is intimately connected with vital religious, social, and moral problems. Basic concepts about the nature and purpose of Man were being examined, and when literature entered the discussion it had to be seen in relation to these crucial matters.

III. GENERAL NOTIONS ABOUT LITERATURE

Given Swift's more general ideas about Man and the world, we can anticipate much of his literary thinking. For him literature is a means toward improving the manners of men. Thus it plays its part in helping men to realize their potential and fulfill their moral duties. All of Swift's literary opinions seem to stem from this central notion. The moral function of literature must necessarily affect both the artist's choice of materials and his treatment of them. Naturally the moral lesson must be a true one, but just as important is the need for effective presentation.

Here we appear to have the familiar dulce and utile of much classical criticism. Just as obvious as these are the notions that the work must be effectively organized and clearly written.¹⁷ Such a public thing as a work of art must not defy comprehension.

The nature of the writer is vitally important to the making of a good work. The writer must be a man of good morals if he is to teach. He must likewise be fluent in the language, and he must know how to please and instruct, must be familiar with proven rhetorical practices.¹⁸ His devotion to the true ends of art must be such that he will not be seduced by the bribes of faction or by delusions of the importance of his own idiosyncratic ideas or literary mannerisms.

The worthy writer ought to share Swift's concern for the manners of men, Swift's view being that these manners should manifest good sense, reason, the application of the wisdom of tradition as well as of personal experience to human actions. At court, theater, and coffee-house, however, he found offenses against sound morality. "On Good-Manners and Good-Breeding" outlines the problem:

As the best law is founded upon reason, so are the best manners. And as some lawyers have introduced unreasonable things into common law; so likewise many teachers have introduced absurd things into common good-manners.

Pride, ill-nature, and want of sense, are the three great sources of ill-manners; without some one of these defects, no man will behave himself ill for want of experience; or of what, in the language of fools, is called, knowing the world.

As the common forms of good-manners were intended for regulating the conduct of those who have weak understandings; so they have been corrupted by the persons for whose use they were contrived.¹⁹

The duty of the writer is to concern himself with manners and morals:

I have heard of the Wife of Bath; I think in Shakespeares. If you wrote one it is out of my head.... I wonder you [Gay] will doubt of your genius. The world is wider to a poet than to any other man, and new follies and vices will never be wanting, any more than new fashions. Je donne au diable the wrong notion that matter is exhausted....²⁰

Swift leaves little doubt about what should be the subject matter of literature. A work of art must deal with the actions of men, making effective comment about their worth and desirability, if the work is to serve its proper function as literature. This is further evident in several comments he makes in a letter to Charles Wogan:

... I find at present your genius runs wholly into the grave and sublime, and therefore I find you less indulgent to my way by your dislike of the Beggar's Opera, in the persons particularly of Polly... whereas we think it a very severe satire upon the most pernicious villainies of mankind. And so you are in danger of quarrelling with the sentiments of Mr. Pope, and myself.... As to your blank verse, it has too often fallen into the same vile hands [i.e. the hands of "shoals of wretches who write for their bread"] of late. One Thomson, a Scotchman, has succeeded the best in that way...yet I am not over fond of them, because they are all description, and nothing of doing, whereas Milton engages me in actions of the highest importance....²¹

Swift seems genuinely to expect that through literature manners will be improved; at any rate, this must be the poet's aim:

... I am so much of your [Pope's] mind concerning the morality of poets, that I know not whither virtue can possibly find a corner to retire, except in the hearts of men of genius and learning; and what you call their levities have not the least tincture of impiety, but, directly otherwise, tend to drive vice out of the world.²²

And because he expects literature to affect manners, he includes in "A Project for the Advancement of Religion" a proposal that the stage be reformed:

The Reformation of the Stage is entirely in the Power of the Queen; and in the Consequences it hath upon the Minds of younger People, doth very well deserve the strictest Care. Beside the undecent and prophane Passages; beside the perpetual turning into Ridicule the very Function of the Priesthood; with other Irregularities in most modern Comedies, which have been often objected to them; it is worth observing the distributive Justice of the Authors, which is constantly applied to the Punishment of Virtue, and the Reward of Vice; directly opposite to the Rules of their best Criticks, as well as to the Practice of Dramatick Poets in all other Ages and Countries.²³

This is no isolated outbreak of Puritanical feeling. Some years later Swift took the same stance about the moral implications of the use of the language itself, declaring to the Earl of Oxford,²⁴ that "nothing would be of greater Use towards the Improvement of Knowledge and Politeness, than some effectual Method for Correcting, Enlarging, and Ascertaining our Language."

We begin, then, by seeing that literature and even good language are connected in Swift's mind with manners and morality. Going on from there we find that his ideas about the qualifications of the writer and critic follow logically. "On Poetry: a Rapsody" [sic] makes it clear that the man of letters is a special sort:

All Human Race wou'd fain be Wits,
And Millions miss, for one that hits.
Young's universal Passion, Pride,
Was never known to spread so wide.
Say, Britain, cou'd you ever boast, --
Three Poets in an Age at most?
Our chilling Climate hardly bears
A Sprig of Bays in Fifty Years:

While ev'ry Fool his Claim alledges,
 As if it grew in common Hedges.
 What Reason can there be assign'd
 For this Perverseness in the Mind?
 Brutes find out where their Talents lie:
 A Bear will not attempt to fly....²⁵

The special qualities that Swift demands in the poet follow logically from his previous insistence upon the moral function of literature. The poet or critic has a responsibility. He must himself be a good man, a man of good sense who has used the proper means available to him for the improvement of his own manners and morals. In this regard the poet is like the good politician and the good churchman. One should note, for example, the qualities for which Swift recommends an aspiring poetess, Mrs. Barber:

She is by far the best poet of her sex in England,
 and is a virtuous, modest gentlewoman, with a
 great deal of good sense, and a true poetical genius.²⁶

... my opinion [is] that she deserveth your protection on account of her wit and good sense, as well as of her humility, her gratitude, and many other virtues. I have read most of her poems, and believe your Lordship will observe, that they generally contain something new and useful, tending to the reproof of some vice or folly, or recommending some virtue.... [S]he hath one qualification, that I wish all good poets possessed a share of, I mean that she is ready to take advice and submit to have her verses corrected by those who are generally allowed to be the best judges.²⁷

Numerous instances could be given of Swift's praise or condemnation of poets, and they are strikingly similar to the treatment given Mrs. Barber. Swift's conceptions of the good man and the good poet constantly merge, almost unconsciously at times -- which shows how natural and fundamental the equation is to him. He praises the poet Dunkin, as a "thorough churchman"²⁸ and

damns the poet Richard Daniel, as a "public enemy to mankind."²⁹ In his adverse moral judgment of Daniel, Swift might also mean that he is technically incompetent or simply stupid. That Swift has contempt for the fashionable dullard is clear from "On Poetry: a Rapsody," where he ironically maps out for all dunces a way to a life of letters:

But if you think this Trade [Poetry] too base,
 (Which seldom is the Dunce's Case)
 Put on the Critick's Brow, and sit
 At Wills the puny judge of Wit.
 A Nod, a Shrug, a scornful Smile,
 With Caution us'd, may serve a-while.
 Proceed no further in your Part,
 Before you learn the Terms of Art;
 (For you may easy be too far gone,
 In all our modern Criticks Jargon.)
 Then talk with more authentick Face,
 Of Unities, in Time and Place.
 Get Scraps of Horace from your Friends,
 And have them at your Fingers Ends.
 Learn Aristotle's Rules by Rote,
 And at all Hazards boldly quote:
 Judicious Rymer oft review:
 Wise Dennis, and profound Bossu.
 Read all the Prefaces of Dryden,
 For these our Criticks much confide in,
 (Tho' meerly writ at first for filling
 To raise the Volume's Price, a Shilling.)³⁰

Obviously Swift is not serious in suggesting that dunces should set up shop as poets or critics. This would violate the reasonable maxim that each man should know his place, his own link in society's great chain. This same maxim is implied in the prose preface to the "Beast's Confession," where Swift renders directly what he is to go on to show in the fable. The idea concerning the man of letters is Swift's usual one:

I have been long of Opinion, that there is not a more general and greater Mistake, or of Worse Consequences through the Commerce of Mankind, than the wrong Judgments they are apt to entertain of their own Talents.... How many Pretenders to Learning expose themselves by chusing to discourse on those very Parts of Science wherewith they are least acquainted.... Not to mention the Wits, the Railliers, the Smart Fellows, and Criticks; all as illiterate and impudent as a Suburb Whore.³¹

Swift assumes that the poet or critic must prepare himself for his job by wide and perceptive reading.

When men have not made themselves proficient in the language and in rhetorical technique, or receptive to the proper ends of literature, they are destined to be false poets or critics. Presumption and pride cause the ill-suited to seek the laurel. False and immoral poets or critics have less regard for the true ends of literature than for their personal aggrandizement. Swift's pronouncements upon Dryden have this criticism at their base:

At Wills you hear a Poem read,
Where Battus from the Table-head
Reclining on his Elbow-chair,
Gives Judgment with decisive Air,
To whom the Tribe of circling Wits,
As to an Oracle submits.
He gives Directions to the Town,
To cry it up, or run it down,
(Like Courtiers, when they send a Note,
Instructing Members how to Vote.)
He sets the Stamp of Bad or Good,
Tho' not a word be understood.³²

One may rightly wish to challenge Swift's statement that Dryden gives judgment "Tho' not a word be understood," but that is only a part of Swift's criticism. He is objecting more to Dryden's apparent relish for a personal cult, an indication that personality and self-gratification are eclipsing the real purpose

of writing and criticism. The accentuation of personal brilliance and the desire for recognition, as can be seen in the hack of Tale of a Tub and the Moderns of the Battle of the Books, are the causes of much bad writing and criticism and subsequent bad manners.

Personal interest also leads to literary prostitution. This has already been seen in the case of Mr. Daniel, the Government's churchman who wrote a celebration of George I's return from Hanover. The sycophant has a moral flaw which clearly disqualifies him from being a poet. It is hardly likely that his work will be perceptive and honest. Swift frequently condemns the sycophant, and praises the man of integrity, as in "A Libel on D-- D--:"

Thus, Congreve spent, in writing Plays,
And one poor Office, half his Days....
And, crazy Congreve scarce cou'd spare
A Shilling to discharge his Chair,
Till Prudence taught him to appeal
From Paean's Fire to Party Zeal....
Thus, Steele e
Thus, Gay....
Thus Addison....
Hail! happy Pope, whose gen'rous Mind,
Detesting all the Statemen kind,
Contemning Courts, at Courts unseign,
Refus'd the Visits of a Queen....³³

Swift, of course, had his own problems with ecclesiastical preferment; this may account for some of his strong feeling about self-prostitution. In "The Author Upon Himself" he complains bitterly that after the publication of the Tale he was:

By an [old redhair'd murd'ring Hag] pursu'd,
A Crazy Prelate, and a Royal Prude.
By dull Divines, who look with envious Eyes,
On Ev'ry Genius that attempts to rise....³⁴

Swift claims in several of his autobiographical poems to have been

constant to literary and moral principles in his literary practices. In his "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" his persona says:

The Dean, if we believe Report,
Was never ill receiv'd at Court:
As for his Works in Verse and Prose,
I own my self no Judge of those:
Nor, can I tell what Criticks thought 'em;
But, this I know, all People bought 'em;
As with a moral View design'd
To cure the Vices of Mankind:
His Vein, ironically grave,
Expos'd the Fool, and lash'd the Knave....³⁵

Swift found it necessary to make apology not so much for political accommodation as for his seemingly dual personality. He was both High-Church advocate and author of the irreverent Tale of a Tub:

S-- had the Sin of Wit, no venial Crime;
Nay, 'twas affirm'd, he sometimes dealt in rhyme;
Humour, and Mirth, had Place in all he writ:
He reconcil'd Divinity and Wit.³⁶

He insists in numerous places that his own works are intended for the improvement of manners and morals. He makes proper use of his own wit, according to his own standard.

The concept of wit is essential to understanding how Swift could reconcile his interest in good morals with his use of scatological humor. In this period wit was regarded as a native faculty which could be cultivated by experience and effective learning and reading -- an ability both to perceive truths and to express them aptly. It was a moral quality insofar as it comprehended a right judgment of men's actions and expressed home truths accurately and effectively. Wit included both incisive intelligence and potent expression. The man of wit knew from experience

how to convey his insights effectively; for exposing folly and vice and reforming manners he might well resort to satire, irreverent as it sometimes might seem. Aware of his own powers, Swift takes readily to satire, exploiting men's fear of ridicule, their sense of shame, in order to remedy their flaws. That this traditional conception of the use of satire is Swift's own may be seen in the words he addressed to Charles Wogan, a clerical colleague, in 1732:

As I am conjectured to have generally dealt in Raillery and Satyr, both in Prose and Verse, if that Conjecture be right, although such an Opinion hath been an absolute Bar to my Rising in the World, yet that very World must suppose that I followed what I thought to be my Talent, and charitable People will suppose I had a Design to laugh the Follies of Mankind out of Countenance, and as often to lash the Vices out of Practice. And then it will be natural to conclude, that I have some Partiality for such Kind of Writing, and favor it in others.... But I find at present your Genius runs wholly into the grave and sublime, and therefore I find you less indulgent of my Way by your Dislike of the Beggar's Opera.... You see Pope, Gay, and I, use all our Endeavours to make folks Merry and wise, and profess to have no Enemies, except Knaves and Fools.³⁷

For laughing the follies of mankind out of Countenance and lashing the vices out of practice, Swift is not reluctant to use the most aggressive methods, shocking images, downright language, even scatology. If such methods are suited to the job, they are in his view legitimate.

Knaves and fools will not find any sweetness in such satire, obviously; nor, Swift discovers, will it be palatable to some squeamish souls, no matter how well-intended -- Wogan for example. Nevertheless, as he indicates in his letter, wits and great men of letters not only take pleasure in, but also champion and use

satire. For them, at any rate, it yields both sweetness and light and fulfills the demands of both divinity and wit.

As we might expect, when Swift comments on bad poetry, both utile and dolce concern him: either the poetry is untrue and imperceptive, or it is badly expressed -- or both. In his "Directions for a Birthday Song," for example, he ironically gives a recipe for a specific kind of unworthy verse. He recommends impressive classical allusions, hackneyed poetical devices for the praise of the regent. There is a double irony in his directions, moreover, since Swift does not approve of the devices or the lying panegyric -- and since in his selection of allusive materials he manages to write insults to the royal family. The poem is at once a mock-panegyric and a mock-recipe. The first twenty lines will show this clearly:

To form a just and finish'd piece
Take twenty Gods of Rome or Greece,
Whose Godships are in chief request,
And fit your present Subject best.
And should it be your Hero's case
To have both male and female Race,
Your bus'ness must be to provide
A score of Goddesses beside.
Some call their Monarchs Sons of Saturn,
For which they bring a modern Pattern,
Because they might have heard of one
Who often long'd to eat his Son:
But this I think will not go down,
For here the Father kept his Crown.
Why then appoint him Son of Jove,
Who met his Mother in a grove;
To this we freely shall consent,
Well knowing what the Poets meant:
And in their Sense, 'twixt me and you,
It may be literally true.³⁸

Swift's mocking poem points again at the two major flaws of prostitute verse; it offers neither truth nor pleasure. Petty

ambition has clouded the panegyrist's moral vision, and besides, he is dull. And Swift, while he is exposing the flaws of unworthy verse, clearly aims at giving both truth and pleasure. He is virtually giving a demonstration that poetry has at its disposal pleasing and effective means to demonstrate the difference between sense and nonsense.

The panegyric is not the only kind of nonsense that Swift lashes out against. The mindless products of the Modern Muse are also denied the stamp of poetry, and curiously enough it is Apollo himself who speaks this great truth through Swift in "Apollo to Dean Swift":

But thirdly and lastly, it must be allow'd
I alone can inspire the poetical Crowd;
That is gratefully own'd by each Boy in the College,
Whom if I inspire, 'tis not to my Knowledge;
This every Pretender to Rhyme will admit,
Without troubling his Head about Judgment or Wit:
These Gentlemen use me with Kindness and Freedom,
And as for their Works, when I please I may read 'em.³⁹

Swift is hitting at the shabby writers who claim to be divinely inspired, but he suggests too that the proper poet is not a rapt visionary, but rather a man who functions on a more mundane level, one who uses hard-won intelligence and writing skills -- one, perhaps, who deals in what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.

Swift himself calls upon the Muse in "Cassinus and Peter -- A Tragical Elegy," but (amusingly) only for help in finding names for his characters -- names that will fit the meter. In this pathetic piece Peter comes to friend Cassinus, who is dirty, dishevelled, and woeful. Cassinus is despondent over his beloved

Caelia, though she is not dead, nor "played the whore," nor been disfigured by the pox, nor found another swain. Cassinus, like the poets who dabble in this kind of poetry, is troubled by something far greater:

Nor wonder how I lost my Wits;
Oh! Caelia, Caelia, Caelia sh-- .⁴⁰

The poem constitutes more than just a foul joke; the critical statement is quite clear. Swift is saying that poetry should deal with the actions of men in some effective and significant way. Here nonsense and delusion are exposed; the poem suggests the possible harm that might result from enthusiastic romantic fantasies.

Swift's insistence is that literature is an important matter to the real world; romantic falsehood does not fulfill its serious purpose. In his own poems he exposes the ugliness and vice and folly that lie ominously hidden beneath the pleasing surface of things. For example, he has no airy panegyrics upon Woman that are calculated to make young men lose their senses and do foolish things. Swift's poems on Woman, like his "Description of the Morning" and "Description of a City Shower" and poems on other subjects, are decidedly anti-heroic and unromantic.⁴¹

In "A Pastoral Dialogue," for example, Swift is again mimicking the romantic nonsense that often passed for poetry. In this poem his method differs from the burlesque of his other pastorals. Here he adopts the pastoral characters, but his treatment is realistic. Oaten flutes, pleasant-sounding names, and all other vestiges of false sweetness and light are absent. The diction is coarse, the action trivial. Dermot and Sheelah, swain and nymph,

sit on their bums and vow their love in ridiculous similes. Dermot offers his nymph a mat to protect her bum from the sharp stones. Sheelah explains that the wetness of her pants is caused by mere sweat. Dermot offers her a chaw of cast-off tobacco-plug. There is a slight lovers' quarrel, he being jealous of Tady, she of Oonah. They make up after she disparages the pleasure of picking Tady's lice-ridden hair and he promises never again to kiss the dirty bitch, Oonah. The poem closes as the vulgar lovers get up off their bums to greet some approaching nymphs and swains.

One wonders, as Swift may have, why such stuff should be eternized. The insistence is here, as elsewhere, upon seeing things disenchantedly -- as they really are. Pastoral dialogues, those of Ambrose Philips for example, sometimes failed in this regard. Swift seems to be condemning the distorted poetry which deals with common, vulgar, even vicious subject matter, without letting it be seen for what it is. A good part of the problem, of course, is that false poets pervert the use of the language, in that their words do not bear the real substance and flavor of the things they symbolize. Their poems are full of romantic archaisms, euphemisms, inappropriately high-toned allusions -- all of which turn back upon them with ironic effect in a poem like "A Pastoral Dialogue."

A Nymph and Swain, Sheelah and Dermot hight,
 Who went to weed the Court of Bosford Knight,
 While each with stubbed Knife remov'd the Roots
 That rais'd between the Stones their daily Shoots;
 As at their Work they sate in counterview,
 With mutual Beauty smit, their Passion grew.
 Sing heavenly Muse in sweetly flowing Strain
 The soft Endearments of the Nymph and Swain.⁴²

Swift is often at pains to mock the excruciatingly clever writer. In his two punning tracts, "A Modest Defence of Punning" and "A History of Poetry," he demonstrates how a writer can be misled from accurate and clear expression -- all for the sake of verbal cuteness. In a more direct statement on the matter, he announces in the advertisement to Number CCXXX of The Tatler that "the Affectation of Politeness, is exposed in this Epistle with a great deal of Wit and Discernment...."⁴³ In The Tatler itself he asserts that it is the Grub-Streeters, shabby courtiers, and men of that ilk who unsettle the language by means of their innovations and other abuses:

These two Evils, Ignorance, and want of Taste, have produced a Third; I mean the continual Corruption of our English Tongue; which, without some timely Remedy, will suffer more by the false Refinements of Twenty Years past, than it hath been improved in the foregoing Hundred. And this is what I design chiefly to enlarge upon....⁴⁴

He goes on in this piece to give an example of the stylish writing of hack works, pamphlets, and coffee-house ephemera. His selection is replete with new jargon, contractions, and other manifestations of false wit. "And these," he concludes, "are the Beauties introduced to supply the Want of Wit, Sense, Humour, and Learning; which formerly were looked upon as qualifications for a writer."⁴⁵

The work of art, then, is not simply a piece of dressed-up insignificance. It is -- to repeat -- a representation of the actions of men, put into proper form and style. It is a manifestation of true wit, as that term has already been defined,⁴⁶

a matter of right perception (light) and apt and delightful expression (sweetness). And it aims toward the improvement of manners and morals.

IV. TECHNIQUE

A good part of Swift's ideas about prose and poetic technique have been seen or at least implied in what has been said about the work of art in general. The technique of a poem or prose work must be such as will communicate morals and move men to act rightly; light and sweetness complement each other. Cleverness and prettiness ought not to be ends in themselves:

I quarrel with your author, as I do with all writers, and many of your preachers, for their careless, incorrect, and improper style, which they contract by reading the scribbling from England, where an abominable taste is coming into the world, to put a stop to these corruptions, and recall that simplicity which in everything of value ought to be followed. These are some of my sudden thoughts....⁴⁷

These are some sudden thoughts, indeed, and hardly enough to make clear his definition of good style -- proper words in proper places.⁴⁸ In his "Remark's upon Tindall's Rights of the Christian Church" he is troubled by Tindall's impressive, polysyllabic, abstracted definition of government. Swift's prose would employ more concrete terms, words which put the reader in touch with the real stuff of human experience:

I shall not often draw such long Quotations as this, which I could not forbear to offer as a specimen of the Propriety and Perspicuity of this Author's Style. And, indeed, what a Light breaketh out upon us all.... How thoroughly are we instructed in the whole Nature of Government.... Let us melt this refined Jargon into the Old Style, for the Improvement of such, who are not enough conversant in the New.

If the Author were one that used to talk like one of us, he would have spoke in this Manner: I think it necessary to give a full and perfect Definition of Government, such as will shew the Nature and all the Properties of it; and, my Definition is thus. One Man will never cure another of stealing Horses, merely by minding him of the Pains he hath taken, the cold he hath got, nay, to warn him, that the Horse may kick or fling him, or cost him more than he is worth in Hay and Oats, can be no more than advice. For the Gallows is not the natural Effect of robbing on the High-way, as Heat is of Fire: And therefore, if you will govern a Man, you must find out some other way of Punishment, than what he will inflict upon himself.⁴⁹

What is significant about Swift's definition is that it sets forth the nature and function and necessary origin of government in terms both clear and true. Tindall's abstract definition has truth, but it does not give the reader, most importantly the vulgar reader, the concrete things of experience which he knows and can deal with. By contrast, Swift makes the reader imagine horse-thieving, colds, kicks, and gallows. Government, as opposed to self-discipline, is shown as it really operates in men's lives. The vulgar reader can measure the truth of Swift's definition against his own experience; and equally important, he can adopt a right attitude toward the concept of "government." The passage does exactly what Swift thinks should be done; it embodies significant thought in clear, concrete language.

In a letter to Ambrose Philips, Swift registers a complaint, on these same grounds, against affected and ingenious literary manners:

Your versifying in a sledge seems somewhat parallel to singing a Psalm upon a ladder; and when you tell me that it was upon the ice, I suppose it might be a pastoral, and that you had got a calenture, which makes men think they behold green fields and groves on the ocean. I suppose the subject was love, and then came in naturally your burning in so much cold, and that the ice was hot iron in comparison of her disdain. Then there are frozen hearts and melting sighs, or kisses, I forget which....⁵⁰

Clearly Swift is objecting to ingenuity for its own sake, false wit which demonstrates some mental nimbleness but which does not get to the point clearly or forcefully.

Swift's ideas about technique are usually in accord with his literary theory, but at least one of his specific pronouncements is puzzling. He apparently has little relish for the triplet with Alexandrine close. His criticism is indirect; he offers:

Sweepings from Butchers stalls, Dung, Guts, and Blood,
Drowned Puppies, Stinking Sprats, all drench'd in Mud,
Dead cats and Turnip-Tops come tumbling down the Flood.⁵¹

His rationale is hinted in a note appended to the poem in Faulkner's edition, 1735: "These three last lines were intended against that licentious manner of modern Poets, in making three rhimes together.... Alexandrines were brought in by DRYDEN.... They were the mere effects of Haste, Idleness, and want of Money: and have been wholly avoided by the best Poets, since these Verses were written." Williams asserts that this note is clearly of Swift's hand.⁵²

Among those "best poets" who have avoided triplets, Swift would probably include Alexander Pope, a friend and frequent correspondent who shared (perhaps even instilled) Swift's distaste for the triplet. Swift's rationale in this matter, nevertheless, remains unsatisfactory. He says nothing of the triplet's lack of clarity or strength, the criterion he has used before in evaluating technical devices. In the long run, Swift's dislike of the triplet can probably be interpreted as personal prejudice against the oft-abused Dryden.

In two other poems Swift illustrates with ludicrous effect the folly of a too devilishly ingenious playing with rhyme ("An Answer to the Ballyspellin Ballad"), or of being transported into esoteric meanings in the amplification of a simile ("Answer to a Scandalous Poem"). Here, just as in his punning tracts, he is condemning verbal play which is devised for its own sake. Such ingenuity is not an aid to communication; it is false wit.

But the poet must be equally careful to avoid hackneyed images and personifications. In "Apollo's Edict," for example, Swift accepts his appointment (by Delany) as Vicegerent of Apollo and proceeds to offer advice on poetic technique:

No Simile shall be begun,
 With rising or with setting Sun:
 And let the secret Head of Nile
 Be ever banish'd from your Isle.
 When wretched Lovers live on Air,
 I beg you'll the Camellion Spare.
 And when you'd make an Heroe grander,
 Forget he's like a Salamander.
 No son of mine shall dare to say,
 Aurora usher'd in the Day,
 Or ever name the milky Way....

Your tragick Heroes shall not rant,
 Nor shepherds use Poetick Cant....⁵³

In only a couple of instances does Swift offer technical suggestions for specific poems. In reply to the author's request, Swift offers corrections for Pope's epitaph on Gay. Swift's reply shows something of the close attention he can give to diction and other minutiae, but also something of real taste in matters of expression:

I have not seen in so few lines more good sense, or more proper to the subject, yet I will tell you my remarks, and submit them. The whole is intended for an apostrophe to the dead person, which however, doth not appear till the eighth line. Therefore, as I checked a little at the article "the" twice used in the second line, I imagined it might be changed into "thy," and then the apostrophe will appear at first, and be clearer to common readers.... The beginning of this last line, "striking their aching bosoms." Those two participles come so near, and sounding so like, I could wish them altered, if it might be easily done. The Scripture expression upon our Saviour's death is, that the people "smote their breasts." You will pardon me, for since I have left off writing, I am sunk into a critic....⁵⁴

Generally Swift's notions of proper technique follow logically from his other ideas about literature. Words, images, allusions, and other such minutiae are to be selected with an eye toward their value as effective communicators of moral truth, their clarity and strength. They are the tools of the qualified man of letters who has regard for the proper ends of his work.

V. MAJOR CRITICAL PIECES

The outline of Swift's literary thought which we have pieced together from his poetry, letters, and prose is interesting for its own sake, but it may also prove helpful for understanding some of his extended works that seem to deal, at least in part, with literature. The first of those works that we will deal with here, however, needs a minimum of explication. In fact, since the "Letter to a Young Gentleman" puts its statements directly, it may reasonably be expected to provide a test of the accuracy of the inferences made from the pieces already discussed.

The "Letter" is addressed to a young clergyman, and the subject of discussion is the sermon. Swift assumes that the sermon, no less than any other kind of literary product, can and should have an effect on the manners of its audience. He recognizes, however, that a good number of the population are not to be reached:

In an Age where every Thing disliked by those, who think with the Majority, is called Disaffection; it may perhaps be ill interpreted, when I venture to tell you, that this universal Depravation of manners, is owing to the perpetual bandying of Factions.... when, without weighing the Motives of Justice, Law, Conscience, or Honour, every Man adjusts his Principles to those of the Party he hath chosen, among whom he may find his own best account.⁵⁵

It is futile to try to reason with these men, he feels, since "Reasoning will never make a Man correct an ill Opinion, which by Reasoning he never acquired; For, in the Course of things, Men always grow vicious before they become Unbelievers...."⁵⁶ The preacher must know his audience and aim toward its enlightenment, his particular audience probably containing few of the hopelessly dissolute sort. He recognizes the problem involved in his moral task, and he will apply his good sense to overcoming it.

Taking Demosthenes and Cicero as examples, Swift points out that "...the principal Thing to be remembered is, that the constant Design of both these Orators in all their Speeches, was to drive home one particular Point...." With regard to the sermon:

As I take it, the two principal Branches of Preaching, are first to tell the People what is their Duty; and then to convince them that it is so.

The Topicks for both these, we know, are brought from Scripture and Reason.... That it seems to be in the Power of a reasonable Clergyman, if he will be at the Pains, to make the most ignorant Man comprehend what is his Duty; and to convince him by Arguments, drawn to the Level of his Understanding, that he ought to perform it.⁵⁷

I DO NOT find that you are any where directed in the Canons, or Articles, to attempt explaining the Mysteries of the Christian Religion. And, indeed, since Providence intended there should be Mysteries; I do not see how it can be agreeable...to go about such a Work.⁵⁸

The duty of the preacher and the nature and ends of the sermon are thus clear in Swift's mind. They are strikingly similar to the duty of the man of letters and the nature and ends of literature. In either case some heed is paid to the larger meaning of human life in the Christian humanist's system, and the sermon or piece of literature takes its proper place as a moral tool.

Swift has something to say about the preacher too. He urges, first of all, that the preacher be a student of the English language:

I could likewise have been glad, if you had applied your self a little more to the Study of the English Language, than I fear you have done.... run on in a flat kind of Phraseology, often mingled with barbarous Terms and Expressions.... Proper Words in proper Places, makes the true Definition of a Stile....⁵⁹

Assumed, of course, is the preacher's familiarity with Christian materials, but Swift would also have him a student of the Classics:

Before you enter into the common unsufferable Cant, of taking all Occasions to disparage the Heathen Philosophers, I hope you will differ from some of your Brethren, by first enquiring what those Philosophers can say for themselves. The system of Morality to be gathered out of the Writings, or Sayings of those antient Sages, falls undoubtedly very short of that delivered in the Gospel.... But I am deceived, if a better Comment could be any where collected upon the moral Part of the Gospel, than from the Writings of those Excellent Men.⁶⁰

Much of the preacher's moral teaching is, after all, humane learning:

To return then to the Heathen Philosophers: I hope you will not only give them Quarter, but make their Works a considerable Part of your Study. To these I will venture to add the principal Orators and Historians, and perhaps a few of the Poets: by the reading of which, you will soon discover your Mind and Thoughts to be enlarged, your Imagination extended and refined, your Judgment directed, your Admiration lessened....⁶¹

The classics have a favorable effect on the reader:

If a rational Man reads an excellent Author with just Application, he shall find himself extremely improved, and perhaps insensibly led to imitate that Author's Perfections; although in a little Time he should not remember one Word in the Book....⁶²

The properly formed writer or preacher will be an effective moral teacher, and since he is a good man, he will naturally avoid several pitfalls of the improper aspirer to letters:

When a Man's Thoughts are clear, the properest Words will generally offer themselves first; and his own Judgment will direct him in what order to place them, so as they may be best understood. Where Men err against this Method, it is usually on Purpose, and to shew their Learning, their Oratory, their Politeness, or their Knowledge of the World.⁶³

The nature of the writer and his purpose are thus clear. He is a widely read and experienced man of moral principles

who seeks to urge men to their moral duty -- and is willing and able to adapt proper means to that end. No ungentlemanly qualities, such as vanity or pedantry, distract him from that end. He recognizes the need for simplicity and clarity:

I have been curious enough to take a List of several hundred Words in a Sermon of a new Beginner, which not one of his Hearers among a Hundred, could possibly understand....⁶⁴

A common Farmer shall make you understand in three Words, that his Foot is out of Joint, or his Collar-bone broken; wherein a Surgeon, after a hundred Terms of Art, if you are not a Scholar, shall leave you to seek.⁶⁵

Neither is he duped by false manners:

The Fear of being thought Pedants hath been of pernicious Consequence to young Divines. This hath wholly taken many of them off from their severer Studies in the University; which they have exchanged for Plays, Poems, and Pamphlets, in order to qualify them for Tea-Tables and Coffee-Houses. This they usually call Polite Conversation, knowing the World, and reading Men instead of Books.⁶⁶

Nor does he allow pedantry or niceness to interfere with his purpose:

Whoever only read, in order to transcribe wise and shining Remarks, without entering into the Genius and Spirit of the Author; as it is probable he will make no very judicious Extract, so he will be apt to trust to that Collection in all his Compositions; and be misled out of the regular Way of Thinking in order to introduce those Materials....⁶⁷

I have lived to see Greek and Latin almost entirely driven out of the Pulpit; for which I am heartily glad.⁶⁸

He is not intent upon showing his own sparkling wit:

I CANNOT forbear warning you, in the most earnest Manner, against endeavouring at Wit in your Sermons: Because, by the strictest Computation, it is very near a Million to One, that you have none; and because too many of your Calling, have consequently made themselves everlastingly ridiculous by attempting it. I remember several young Men in this Town, who could never leave the Pulpit under half a Dozen Conceits....⁶⁹

But neither are "flat, unnecessary Epithets" or "old threadbare phrases" useful. The preacher or writer is to appeal to reason or good sense by making his words have a close connection with the stuff of experience; he knows what his audience will be attracted to and what they will loathe. The thoughts and sentiments must find suitable and potent images and words.

Good sense, taste, is the ruling faculty, and passion is subordinate and useful to it:

If your Arguments be strong, in God's Name offer them in as moving a Manner as the Nature of the Subject will properly admit; wherein Reason, and good Advice will be your safest Guides: But beware of letting the pathetick Part swallow up the rational: For, I suppose, Philosophers have long agreed, that Passion should never prevail over Reason.⁷⁰

Here Swift is prescribing for the sermon precisely what we have already seen him demonstrate in his definition and in his "Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed." A piece of writing is not properly an overflow of powerful feelings, an ungoverned flow of passion; nor, obviously, is it to be merely a dry-as-dust exposition of sensible ideas. It can make legitimate use of the passions, though good sense must be in firm control both in the conception of the argument and in the exposition of it. It is only prudent (it is good sense), according to Swift, to avoid the diseased prostitute, and he makes his argument strong by

appealing to the passion of disgust. That the passions are to be roused in order to make an effective argument is as true to Swift as the notion that a work must please in order that it may instruct.

* * * * *

In his "Letter of Advice to a Young Poet" Swift puts out much the same notions of literature that he has elsewhere, but here his technique is ironic. Ostensibly "Your most Humble Servant, E. F.," is doing the writing -- a dunce whose advice is little akin to Swift's own, and whose letter is a marvelous specimen of bad composition. He is foolish enough to begin by disqualifying himself for writing such a piece:

For my own part, having never made one Verse
since I was at School, where I suffered too much
for my Blunders in Poetry to have any love to it ever
since; I am not able from any Experience of my own....
besides my Age and Infirmities might well excuse me
to you as being unqualified.... However...I shall
here give you some scattered thoughts....⁷¹

He goes on to completely disregard common sense, cogency of organization, propriety of similes, and other such niceties. Whatever sense he does utter, usually in the form of common-places, he fails to comprehend. Poetry, he asserts, is a most useful business; in order to be a good man, even a good bell-man, one must be a poet.⁷² Swift would find a degree of truth here, but not as this dunce puts it. The dunce proves that poetry is useful by referring to the good effect of the play-houses. Here any young man can be relieved of his prejudices in favor of God and morality, and he learns the genteel art of swearing --

clearly as Swift would not have it.⁷³

The good poet is one who has been freed, it seems, from the prejudices of religion; he need not (preferably does not) believe in God.⁷⁴ Religion would only hamper the free spirit:

PETRONIUS, another of their [the Moderns] Favourites, speaking of the Qualifications of a good Poet, insists chiefly on the Liber Spiritus; by which, I have been ignorant enough heretofore to suppose he meant, a good Invention, or great compass of Thought, or a sprightly Imagination: But I have learned a better Construction from the Opinion and Practice of the Moderns; and take it literally for a free Spirit, i.e. a spirit or Mind, free or disengag'd from all Prejudices concerning God, Religion and another World....⁷⁵

The poet may make good with his wit upon Scriptures, but mostly his production is spun out of his own fiber. He is not dependent upon the wisdom of tradition in any substantial way; he is largely self-sufficient. He need not bother, as some perverse souls would have it, to read widely in "Human Letters."

So Horace has told us.

Scribendi recte sapere est & principium & fons,
Rem tibi Socraticae poterunt ostendere chartae.

But to see the different casts of Mens Heads, some not inferiour to that Poet in Understanding (if you will take their own word for it,) do see no Consequence in this Rule, and are not ashamed to declare themselves of a contrary Opinion.⁷⁶

The essentials of classical learning, the useful part, can be gotten out of appendices, compendia, and summaries, all generously provided by a current scholar [Bentley]. One should look to these hind parts of books, since it is an old philosophical notion that "Finis est imprimis in intentione."⁷⁷ Again the dunce fails to comprehend a significant rhetorical maxim.

Turning to the intrinsic qualities of a poem, the dunce finds that rhyme, Milton notwithstanding, is the soul of poetry.⁷⁸ The poet takes common clay, (or, since he uses stuff spun out of his own self-sufficiency, excrement) and molds and glazes it.⁷⁹ The poet is a decorator of shabby materials. He is stocked with picture devices, eccentric similes, coffee-house wit, uncommon discoveries from his commonplace book, mottoes, and other bits of filler and artifice. The hack makes no mention of any need for incisive moral perception and poignant expression of it. These things would not suit the ends of his poet.

A proper first-piece for this aspiring poet would be a libel or lampoon. By being waspish to society and destroying six or seven reputations, he can gain his own. He then proceeds to have a scurrilous edition of his work published and to gain the protection of some faction. If the young poet does not think all this advice is good, he should look about him at the accepted wits who have made good. He will then realize that this good advice has been extracted from broad experience on the literary scene.

One can easily see through the foolish utterances of Swift's persona to apprehend the tenor of the serious literary ideas. He suggests here, as always, that literature has a significant moral end, that the writer must be qualified and insistent upon working toward that end, and that the stuff of the poem will, therefore, be such as is appropriate to that end.

* * * * *

Read in the light of the preceding discussion, both the Tale of a Tub and the Battle of the Books prove to be more deeply expressive of specific literary attitudes than they seem at first to be. The Tale in particular, while it has the broad interest of "a satire on abuses and corruptions in learning and religion,"⁸⁰ contains fundamental notions which have literary implications. Nor can one overlook the author-persona's great concern about this work itself as a specimen of belles lettres. Again Swift is teaching by doing; the Tale is wholly characteristic of Swift's oblique but forceful insistence on moral intelligence as the first and last essential of good art, and his detestation of falsehood, bad logic, and pointless literary exhibitionism.

We must begin by recognizing the role of the persona, the Grub-Street hack, expatriate of Bedlam. Much of Swift's statement comes by indirection, implied in the hack's ineptitude or the perversity or inconsequence of his ideas. He is well qualified to write an amazing work such as the Tale. In his vast study of the nature of man, he has discovered Man's need for diversion and instruction, especially the former. By his own admission, his bent lies in such diversions, in tales of tubs which are wooden and empty, but which offer wonderful opportunity for using his peculiar art and for diverting enemies of the ship.⁸¹ At this point he is concerned about using a diversion to protect Church and State from the too-nice attack of wits -- a concern which he abandons later in his admiration for revolutions of all kinds. But that is no matter; it is a part of his free-spirited,

aimless method. Tenacity would only limit his vast wit, something he would not like as a modern writer. One hardly needs an explicator here to give Swift's views.

There seems to be no purpose to the hack's writing except to give ungoverned exercise to his imagination. Digressions are valuable merely if he pleases to digress; the reader is given permission to arrange them if he likes. Toward the conclusion of the work, where the hack sees the end closing in (one wonders how), he shows reluctance to quit:

After so wide a compass as I have wandered, I do now gladly overtake, and close in with my subject, and shall henceforth hold on with it an even pace to the end of my journey, except some beautiful prospect appears within sight of my way, whereof though at present I have neither warning nor expectation, yet upon such an accident, come when it will, I shall beg my reader's favour and company, allowing me to conduct him through it along with myself.⁸²

If the reader looks closely at the literal statement of the hack, he will see that the hack is better at diversion than at worthwhile instruction; the hack's ideas are fiendishly immoral; his organization is governed by whim, rather than by forethought; and likewise his use of the language conforms to personal quirks rather than to sound practice. Communication is not his first concern; in fact, he would have the reader to know that where he is most obscure he is most profound,⁸³ and in his most amazing reaches he trails off into asterisks. Nor have words any established meaning for him:

But the concern I have most at heart, is for our corporation of poets...one hundred thirty-six of the first rate; but whose immortal productions are never likely to reach your eyes.... The never-dying works of these illustrious persons, your governor, sir, has devoted to unavoidable death....⁸⁴

A reader of the common sort may wonder that "Immortal productions" should be already dead. Such an amazing writer has no more care about his metaphors. He complains to Prince Posterity about Time's cruelty to hack works:

His inveterate malice is such to the writings of our age, that of several thousands produced yearly from this renowned city, before the next revolution of the sun, there is not one to be heard of: unhappy infants, many of them barbarously destroyed, before they have so much as learn't their mother-tongue to beg for pity.⁸⁵

Amazing indeed that these meritorious works show not even an infantile mastery of the language. One wonders too why Time should preserve the mental overflow of this former Bedlamite, since he himself asserts that only the most modern work can be best. But he can also assert a contradictory notion, that the Grub-Streeters at present upon the stage-itinerant have managed to triumph over Time, and, moreover, "have clipped his wings, pared his nails, filed his teeth, turned back his hour-glass, blunted his scythe, and drawn the hob-nails out of his shoes."⁸⁶

The hack shows reluctance to walk by the best light that is available to him. This is true of his conduct among men as it is of his use of the language. Neither his manners nor his communication conforms to good common sense. He is fundamentally immoral; pride leads him to prefer his own standards to those which the good men of ages past have found best. This immorality carries

over into his communication, which neglects the moral purpose of human life and the effective, conventional implementation of morality in literature.

Swift is rallying for order and reason (good common sense), and he has some specific criticism in the Tale. The hack finds the need, for example, of praising himself -- self-sufficiency taken to an extreme:

For it is here to be noted, that praise was originally a pension paid by the world; but the moderns finding the trouble and charge too great in collecting it, have lately bought out the fee-simple; since which time, the right of presentation is wholly in ourselves.⁸⁷

To this same prideful end, the hack finds dedications, prefaces, publication lists, and the like all useful. He intends, in the modern manner, to have copies of his other works surreptitiously printed. It is fashionable so to do. Dryden again is Swift's target, as Swift explains in a note:

Dryden, L'Estrange, and some others I shall not name, are here levelled at, who, having spent their lives in faction, and apostasies, and all manner of vice, pretended to be sufferers for Loyalty and Religion. So Dryden tells us in one of his prefaces of his merits and sufferings, and thanks God that he possesses his soul in patience....⁸⁸

Swift is critical of Dryden's self-interest and self-approbation. The hack, an admirer and imitator of Dryden, after outlining what should be the direction of the work, hopes he can complete it to make good account of his unfortunate life:

This indeed is more than I can justly expect from a quill worn to the pith in the service of the state, in pros and cons upon Popish plots, and meal-tubs, and exclusion bills, and passive obedience, and.... from a head broken in a hundred places by the malignants

of the opposite factions; and from a body spent with poxes ill cured.... Fourscore and eleven pamphlets have I written under three reigns, and for the service of six and thirty factions.⁸⁹

Swift's footnote makes clear the allusion: "Here the author seems to personate L'Estrange, Dryden, and some others, who after having passed their lives in vices, faction and falsehood, have the impudence to talk of merit and innocence and sufferings."⁹⁰ The grounds on which Swift damns (and his hack praises) Dryden are noteworthy:

Such is exactly the fate, at this time, of Prefaces, Epistles, Advertisements, Introductions, Prolegomenas, Apparatuses, To-the-Readers. This expedient was admirable at first; our great Dryden has long carried it as far as it would go, and with incredible success. He has often said to me in confidence, that the world would have never suspected him to be so great a poet, if he had not assured them so frequently in his prefaces, that it was impossible they could either doubt or forget it.⁹¹

It is on these apparently extra-literary grounds that he finds also against Wotton:

... that this answerer had, in a way not to be pardoned, drawn his pen against a certain great man then alive, and universally revered for every good quality that could possibly enter into the composition of the most accomplished person; it was observed how he Wotton was pleased, and affected to have that noble writer called his adversary....⁹²

With regard to Bentley, Swift complains of a misdirection of scholarly energies. He has the hack imitate Bentley's pedantic manner in the etymology of the True Critic:

But now, all this he cunningly shades under the following allegory; that the Nauplians in Argia learned the art of Pruning their vines, by observing, that when an ASS had browsed upon one of them, it thrived the better, and bore fairer fruit. But Herodotus, holding the very same hieroglyph, speaks much plainer, and almost in terminis. He hath been so bold as to tax the true critics of ignorance and malice; telling us openly, for I think nothing can be plainer, that in the western part of Libya, there were ASSES with HORNS: upon which Ctesias....⁹³

In spite of these emphatic criticisms of Dryden, Wotton, and Bentley, the Tale is a general work about learning and religion. Indirectly Swift makes broad assertions and criticisms of abuses in religious and scholarly matters; the appearance of these prominent figures only helps to make the suggestions poignantly relevant -- besides adding the clarity and corroboration that any suitable example lends to a generalization. Specific criticism is not Swift's primary intention.

Throughout the Tale Swift shows the same moral concern about literature that he has in all of his other writings on the subject. Mistaken literary notions and practices, he seems to assert, have their roots in mistaken morality. When talking about morality with regard to Swift or his hack, one must remember that intelligence is necessarily involved.⁹⁴ The hack is a fiend, but he is also a dolt. Swift's ideal writer must be intelligent; he must know sound morality by means of his own experience, as well as from other proper sources. He must have read with perception, and have mastered the craft of composition. The man who lacks these basic intellectual qualities should have the good sense and sound morality to be something other than a writer. Sound

morality, which for Swift depends upon the proper use of intelligence, determines the worth of author, work, or technique.

* * * * *

The ruling idea in the Battle of the Books, just as in the Tale, seems to be an indictment against pride, self-sufficiency. War is the child of pride, and pride is related to beggary and want.⁹⁵ The argument is over possession of Parnassus, the Ancients claiming it because of long possession. They point out that the Moderns gain shade and protection in their lower station.⁹⁶ But the real force of the Ancients' argument is found in the spider-bee encounter. The self-sufficient spider uses method to weave a structure out of his own excrement. He condemns the bee:

"Your livelihood is an universal plunder upon nature; a freebooter over fields and gardens; and for the sake of stealing will rob a nettle as easily as a violet; Whereas I am a domestic animal, furnished with a native stock within myself. This large castle (to show my improvements in the mathematics) is all built with my own hands, and the materials extracted altogether out of my own person."

"I am glad," answered the bee, "to hear you grant at least that I am come honestly by my wings and my voice; for then, it seems, I am obliged to Heaven alone for my flights and my music; and Providence would never have bestowed on me two such gifts, without designing them for the noblest ends. I visit indeed all the flowers and blossoms of the field and the garden; but whatever I collect from thence enriches myself, without the least injury to their beauty, their smell, or their taste."⁹⁷

The issue, then, is:

Whether is the nobler being of the two, that which by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeding and ingendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom, produces nothing at last, but flybane and cobweb; or that which, by an universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax.⁹⁸

The Moderns' disavowal of ancient science, literature, political wisdom, morality, and church government stems from pride, not knowing their own nature, their place in the great scheme of things. Because of pride the Modern refuses to recognize both his limitations and the proper sources and kinds of knowledge. Such is the case of Bentley, who:

... in an engagement upon Parnassus, had vowed, with his own hands, to knock down two of the Ancient chiefs, who guarded a small pass on the superior rock, but, endeavouring to climb up was cruelly obstructed by his own unhappy weight, and tendency towards his center, a quality to which those of the Modern party are extreme subject; for, being light-headed, they have in speculation a wonderful agility, and conceive nothing too high for them to mount, but in reducing to practice discover a mighty pressure about their posteriors and their heels.⁹⁹

The modern goddess, Criticism, is the daughter of Ignorance and Pride, sister of Opinion, mother of Noise, Impudence, Dullness, Vanity, Positiveness, Pedantry, and Ill Manners. Her works are wondrous:

"'Tis I," (said she), "who give wisdom to infants and idiots; by me, children grow wiser than their parents. By me, beaux become politicians, and school-boys judges of philosophy. By me, sophisters debate, and conclude upon the depths of knowledge; and coffeehouse wits, instinct by me, can correct an author's style and display his minutest errors.... 'Tis I who have deposed wit and knowledge from their empire over poetry, and advanced myself in their stead."¹⁰⁰

There is some suggestion here that a proper grounding in the Ancients, wide learning and experience, will prevent pedantry, pride, revolution, schism, licentiousness, and manifold other personal and public ills. The proper effects of learning, as Swift has Scaliger observe, are not to be found in Bentley:

"Miscreant prater," said he, "eloquent only in thine own eyes, thou raillest without wit, or truth, or discretion: the malignity of thy temper perverteth nature, thy learning makes thee more barbarous, thy study of humanity more inhuman; thy converse amongst poets, more grovelling, miry, and dull. All arts of civilizing others render thee rude and untractable; courts have taught thee ill manners, and polite conversation has finished thee a pedant. Besides, a greater coward burdeneth not the army...."101

That Swift had a concern much greater than merely asserting his taste for ancient literature is clear. Again he is insisting that Man's primary concern is with his moral life, and that attention to the best of traditional learning is essential to him. The intelligence which Swift admires is always intimately connected with his demand that Man be moral. Besides this larger interest, however, one must acknowledge that purely personal interests are involved. He is defending his friends -- Temple, Boyle, and Atterbury -- from their attackers -- Wotton and Bentley. In his "Bookseller to the Reader" Swift gives a brief summary of the controversy:

In this dispute, the town highly resented to see a person of Sir William Temple's character and methods roughly used by the two reverend gentlemen aforesaid, and without any manner of provocation.102

In the Battle itself Swift gives extreme praise of Temple -- indirectly:

W-tt-n, observing him, with quaking knees, and trembling hands, spoke thus to himself: "Oh that I could kill this destroyer of our army, what renown should I purchase among the chiefs! But to issue out against him, man for man, shield against shield, and lance against lance, what Modern of us dare? For he fights like a god, and Pallas or Apollo are ever at his elbow."103

It is undeniable that Swift shows some warmth for his friends, notably Temple, and vehemence toward their opponents. This is not to say, however, that he compromises his principles. Temple is praised not for being right about the Phalaris business (indeed, he seems to have been wrong), but for being a man made good by proper study. Wotton and Bentley are damned on personal, not scholarly grounds. Yet in the larger matter of the Ancients-Moderns controversy, Swift's statements in the Battle are consistent with his usual position. The moral perverseness and ungentlemanly demeanor of his opponents account for some of the strength of his language, but it is clear that personal interests do not alter the judgments that Swift should otherwise have made. Furthermore, the scholarly question about the Phalaris authorship is not really important to Swift; the ostensibly indefensible position he assumes becomes tenable because he sees manners and morals as a more important business than niggling scholarship.

The Battle, to summarize, does not offer extended criticism of any literary works. Indeed there is little of what appears to be literary theory. In the terms of the Ancients-Moderns controversy Swift does not vindicate the specific accomplishments of the Ancients in science or literature. He deals with questions more fundamental: the nature of Man, his intellectual equipment, the sources of his knowledge and values, and his proper duty in this life. From what has been shown thus far it should be clear that when Swift gives judgment about a man or work, he is referring to a system of thought and values that includes much more than a mere theory of literature.

VI. CRITICISM OF AUTHORS AND WORKS

Some of Swift's specific criticisms of writers or works, of Dryden for example, have already been shown in those places where they were related to his general notions about literature. In the corpus of the works, one finds a host of additional judgments about men and works -- most of them, as suggested before, brief and unsubstantiated. He praises or damns the writer or work with a slight mention of the author being a puppy or the work pleasing. In one of his odes, for example, Swift eulogizes Congreve, showing a general appreciation for his works:

Thus I look down with mercy on the age,
By hopes my Congreve will reform the stage;
For never did poetic mine before
Produce a richer vein or cleaner ore;
The bullion stamp in your refining mind
Serves by retail to furnish half mankind.¹⁰⁴

One is struck not only by the obvious moral grounds of the criticism, but also by Swift's manner. Here is the gentlemanly appreciation on the part of one man of letters for the work of another. Swift does not strain his scholarly abilities to look too closely at parts of any work or to allude pedantically to the maxims of classical authorities. His criticism here is simple, clear, direct, and urbane. It might be more accurately called appreciation than criticism, however, since it does not look at any specific works or features of them. Swift's criticism of works, indeed, is quite rare.

He does, however, offer a criticism of the Meditations of the Honorable Robert Boyle, a favorite work of Lady Berkeley.

Swift read these Meditations to her occasionally, and once slipped in a parody of them, his "Meditation upon a Broom-Stick." In the style and manner of Boyle, Swift meditates upon the broom-stick and then brings forth a barrage of comparisons -- the Broom's life with Man's -- and spells out profound morals. The morals are perfectly acceptable, but the method of discovery is ludicrous. The flashing ingenuity takes attention away from the moral content instead of helping the reader to grasp it more vividly. The Meditations are therefore unworthy by the criterion that has already been discussed. Swift's verdict and reasoning are clear and powerful -- though not explicitly stated. His own wit does not interfere with his making a point. The question he must have asked himself about Boyle's work was, "Why should the moral writer resort to such devices when there are so many incidents in normal human experience which involve moral precepts -- and which would therefore cause a stronger response in the reader?"

In another piece of criticism Swift makes a straightforward comment on Gay's Beggar's Opera -- in his Intelligencer No. 3. This is the closest Swift ever comes to writing a critical piece, in the usual sense of that term. He deals quite generally with Gay's popular work, praising the humour, by which he seems to mean both a keen perception of things, particularly vices and folly, and an apt, urbane treatment of them:

It is certainly the best Ingredient towards that Kind of Satyr, which is most useful, and gives the least offence; which, instead of lashing, laughs Men out of their Follies, and Vices; and is the Character that gives Horace the Preference to Juvenal.¹⁰⁵

He goes on to talk in general terms about the usefulness of satire and general aims of Gay's work. He does not pick pedantically at any specific faults or merits, but rather shows a gentlemanly understanding of the subject matter and the manner of presentation. His conclusion is consistent with what seems to be the tenor of his attitude toward literature:

Upon the whole, I deliver my Judgment, that nothing but servile Attachment to a Party, Affectation of Singularity, lamentable Dullness, mistaken Zeal, or studied Hypocrisy, can have the least reasonable Objection against this excellent moral Performance of the Celebrated Mr. Gay.¹⁰⁶

In his anticipation of what kind of person might object to the Beggar's Opera, Swift shows again how heavily his extra-literary interests, in this case politics and morality, weigh in his judgments of writers and works. These extra-literary interests, as I have attempted to demonstrate, affect the way Swift deals with literary issues.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is useful, in conclusion, to turn back to the specific literary views discussed initially in this report -- and to Swift's comments and judgments. Enough has been said of the Dryden criticism to show that, while one flinches at Swift's severity, his judgment is consistent with the demands he makes upon the writer or critic. Dryden, according to Swift, lacks integrity; he is too willing to abandon methods and opinions which are sensible and moral, in order to make himself popular in the coffee-house or acceptable to political powers. Dryden is

not a good man; he cannot, therefore, be a worthy writer or critic.

We have also seen that Swift's concern with the moral implications of the Ancients-Moderns controversy determines how he treats that controversy in the Tale and the Battle. The general principle most important to Swift is that the contemporary thinker or writer be instructed by the good thinking and writing to be found in the best of the Ancients. Swift's interest is in order, intelligence, and good conduct in every aspect of one's life.

Swift's approach to the Phalaris controversy appears to be non-literary or non-scholarly; he does not really say who wrote the Phalaris letters. Instead he is concerned with applying the notions he has about the proper effect of literature; it should improve manners. Swift's admiration for Temple and contempt for Wotton and Bentley are consistent with this notion; they are judged as gentlemen, not merely as scholars.

Swift seems inconsistent, however, when he comes to a definition of the nature and function of literature; we have seen his apparently contradictory suggestions about the relationship of art and nature. His criticism of Restoration drama is at first sight especially troubling. One must set Swift's own apparent relish for filth against his complaints at the bawdiness of Restoration comedies; his own stark and ugly and honest realism about the nature and sentiments of men (in the pastoral burlesques) and the ugliness of the city whore, against his demand for poetic justice and respectful treatment of the priesthood in drama. If Swift were operating as a literary theorist, his implied definitions

of literature would be contradictory. However, as a practical moralist, one who is interested in improving manners, he is consistent. A work of art, he would surely argue, must affect its audience so that they will be attracted to good works and will develop a loathing for bad things.

Swift might well argue that the occasional filth in one of his own poems does not make folly and vice attractive to his readers; he wishes that the bawdiness of Restoration comedy were made equally repulsive -- certainly it should not be made to seem fashionable. Again, clear perception of the whore (such as is afforded by Swift's poem) should cause young men to avoid her; but if the whore-monger is charming and successful, like Dorimant or Horner, the practical moral effect is less fortunate. With regard to the portrayal of the clergy in drama, Swift would look to the effect on the manners of the audience. Contempt for the priest leads to contempt for the tradition and morality which he represents. It becomes clear, then, that Swift has not attempted a definition of literature at all; indeed we see that literature cannot be defined except as a subordinate part of the only significant matter in this life, good morality.

To summarize, it seems fair to say that the position Swift takes with regard to several literary questions of his age is the one he must take, given his definition of the nature and purpose of Man. His answers to the literary questions follow logically. The end-product of literature must be sound morality, an attraction for and understanding of a bit of genuine wisdom -- implemented by clear, forceful, appropriate, and, therefore, pleasing

presentation. Aesop's explication upon the spider and the bee sums it up neatly:

For the rest, whatever we have got, has been by infinite labor and search, and ranging through every corner of nature; the difference is, that instead of dirt and poison, we have rather chose to fill our hives with honey and wax, thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light.¹⁰⁷

One would have liked to see him expatiate more often on the various means of attaining sweetness; he might well have catalogued a lively "Art of Rhetoric," using illustrations from his own works. It is on the point of sweetness, however, that he remains most oblique and tantalizing. Swift demands sweetness, but in the long run nothing is clearer than that he is more deeply concerned with the light. Like Arnold, who in the nineteenth century made "sweetness and light" more famous (while slightly changing their meanings), Swift clearly belongs among those who judge literature -- not wholly, but mainly -- as criticism of life.

NOTES

¹Herbert J. Davis, "Swift's View of Poetry," Jonathan Swift: Essays in His Satire and Other Studies (New York, 1964); Harold Kelling, "The Appeal to Reason," unpublished dissertation (Yale, 1948).

²The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D. D., ed. F. Elrington Ball (London, 1910), I, xl.

³Ball, I, xl.

⁴Davis, p. 178.

⁵The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, ed. Herbert J. Davis (Oxford, 1939--), II, 55, 56. --hereafter cited as Prose Works.

⁶(Oxford, 1953), p. 62.

⁷Walter Jackson Bate, From Classic to Romantic (New York, 1961), pp. 2, 3.

⁸Prose Works, I, 102.

⁹Prose Works, I, 107, 108.

¹⁰Swift probably refers to a chapbook version of this story. See Ashton's Chapbooks of the Eighteenth Century. This note is from the Guthkelch-Smith edition of the Tale (Oxford, 1958), p. 68.

¹¹A full account of this attack on self-sufficiency in its various forms is found in Ronald Paulson's Theme and Structure in Swift's Tale of a Tub (New Haven, 1960).

¹²"A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit," Prose Works, I, 189, 190.

¹³Richard Foster Jones offers a full treatment of the controversy in England in Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Background of the Battle of the Books, Washington University Studies -- New Series Language and Literature, VI (St. Louis, 1936). Muriel Starkman gives a brief, general account in the first chapter of Swift's Satire on Learning in a Tale of a Tub (Princeton, 1950).

¹⁴Five Miscellaneous Essays by Sir William Temple, ed. Samuel Holt Monk (Ann Arbor, 1963), pp. 200, 201.

¹⁵The aftermath of the squabble which Temple started with his "Essay Upon the Ancient and Modern Learning" is well known. Boyle saw the need for a new edition of the letters of Phalaris, an Ancient whom Temple had admired in his "Essay." Bentley, however,

used his vast learning to show the letters to be spurious. Boyle with some encouragement from Atterbury and others, "examined" Bentley's "Dissertation." Atterbury penned his own "Short Review of the Controversy" in 1701, raising the question of what things are proper for Man's study.

¹⁶Prose Works, I, 151, 152.

¹⁷This is clearly implied in the irony of the Tale. See also below, pp. 37, 38.

¹⁸This too is implied in the Tale, in the misuse of language and metaphor. See also below, p. 39.

¹⁹Prose Works, IV, 213, 214.

²⁰A letter to John Gay, Nov. 20, 1729. Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford, 1963--), III, 360. --hereafter cited as Correspondence.

²¹Correspondence, IV, 53.

²²Correspondence, IV, 134. This is Swift's usual justification for his own work; however, in some few places he is misleading when he jests sourly of his intention to "vex" mankind -- when he speaks of his hatred for Man (Correspondence, III, 103). See also his letter to Pope, expressing his sadistic desire for Pope to publish his "Dunciad" in order to "mawl the rogues." (Correspondence, III, 267).

²³Prose Works, II, 55, 56.

²⁴Prose Works, IV, 5.

²⁵Poems, p. 640.

²⁶A letter to the Earl of Oxford, Aug. 2, 1733. Correspondence, IV, 187.

²⁷A letter to the Earl of Orrery, Aug. 20, 1733. Correspondence, IV, 191.

²⁸A letter to John Barber, March 9, 1738. Correspondence, V, 96.

²⁹F. E. Ball's footnote in his Correspondence, IV, 47.

³⁰Poems, pp. 647, 648.

³¹Poems, pp. 599, 600.

32 "On Poetry: A Rhapsody," Poems, p. 649. "Battus" is Swift's name for Dryden (Williams' note).

33 Poems, pp. 481, 482.

34 Poems, p. 192. Williams' edition shows a series of dashes instead of the reading here in brackets. This new reading is provided by Orrery in his Remarks; see Williams' head-note.

35 Poems, p. 565.

36 "The Author Upon Himself," Poems, pp. 193, 194.

37 Correspondence, IV, 53.

38 Poems, pp. 460, 461. Swift hits here at the constant disputes between George I and the Prince of Wales and at the rumor of love intrigue between Sophia Dorothea and Count Konigsmarck (Williams' notes).

39 Poems, p. 263.

40 Poems, p. 593.

41 See also "The Journal of a Modern Lady," "The Lady's Dressing Room," and "A Beautiful Young Nymph." Herbert Davis shows how some of Swift's own poems, the serious pieces addressed to Stella, manifest a controlled sensibility ("Swift's View of Poetry").

42 "A Pastoral Dialogue," Poems, p. 880.

43 Prose Works, II, 173.

44 Prose Works, II, 174.

45 Prose Works, II, 175.

46 Cf. Addison's distinctions between true and false wit in Numbers 101, 104 of the Spectator.

47 A letter to Rev. Henry Clarke, Dec. 12, 1734. Correspondence, IV, 274.

48 "Letter to a Young Gentleman," Prose Works, IX, 65.

49 Prose Works, II, 80, 81.

50 A letter to Ambrose Philips, March 8, 1709. Correspondence, I, 128.

- 51 "Description of a City Shower," Poems, p. 139.
- 52 Poems, pp. 139, 140.
- 53 Poems, p. 270. See also "On Poetry: A Rhapsody."
- 54 Correspondence, IV, 132, 133.
- 55 Prose Works, IX, 79.
- 56 Prose Works, IX, 78.
- 57 Prose Works, IX, 70, 71.
- 58 Prose Works, IX, 77.
- 59 Prose Works, IX, 65.
- 60 Prose Works, IX, 73.
- 61 Prose Works, IX, 74.
- 62 Prose Works, IX, 76.
- 63 Prose Works, IX, 68.
- 64 Prose Works, IX, 65.
- 65 Prose Works, IX, 66.
- 66 Prose Works, IX, 67.
- 67 Prose Works, IX, 76.
- 68 Prose Works, IX, 75.
- 69 Prose Works, IX, 72.
- 70 Prose Works, IX, 70.
- 71 Prose Works, IX, 327, 328.
- 72 Prose Works, IX, 327.
- 73 Prose Works, IX, 343.
- 74 Prose Works, IX, 328.
- 75 Prose Works, IX, 329.
- 76 Prose Works, IX, 331.

- 77 Prose Works, IX, 334.
78 Prose Works, IX, 335.
79 Prose Works, IX, 338.
80 Prose Works, I, 6.
81 Prose Works, I, 24, 25.
82 Prose Works, I, 120.
83 Prose Works, I, 28.
84 Prose Works, I, 20.
85 Prose Works, I, 20.
86 Prose Works, I, 38.
87 Prose Works, I, 28.
88 Prose Works, I, 3.
89 Prose Works, I, 42.
90 Prose Works, I, 42.
91 Prose Works, I, 81, 82.
92 Prose Works, I, 5, 6.
93 Prose Works, I, 60.
94 See above, p. 9.
95 Prose Works, I, 141.
96 Prose Works, I, 143.
97 Prose Works, I, 149.
98 Prose Works, I, 150.
99 Prose Works, I, 145.
100 Prose Works, I, 154.
101 Prose Works, I, 161.
102 Prose Works, I, 139.

- 103 Prose Works, I, 162, 163.
- 104 "To Mr. Congreve," Poems, p. 45.
- 105 Prose Works, XII, 33.
- 106 Prose Works, XII, 37.
- 107 "Battle of the Books," Prose Works, I, 151.

LIST OF WORKS CITED

- Bate, Walter Jackson. From Classic to Romantic. New York, 1961.
- Davis, Herbert. Jonathan Swift: Essays on His Satire and Other Studies. New York, 1964.
- Jones, Richard Foster. Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Background of the Battle of the Books. Washington University Studies, New Series Language and Literature, VI (January, 1936). St. Louis.
- Kelling, Harold D. The Appeal to Reason: A Study of Jonathan Swift's Critical Theory and Its Relation to His Writings. Unpublished dissertation (Yale, 1948).
- Paulson, Ronald. Theme and Structure in Swift's Tale of a Tub. New Haven, 1960.
- Quintana, Ricardo. The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift. Oxford, 1953.
- Starkman, Miriam Kosh. Swift's Satire on Learning in A Tale of a Tub. Princeton, 1950.
- Swift, Jonathan. The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D. D., ed. F. Elrington Ball. 6 vols. London, 1910.
- _____. The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, ed. Harold Williams. 6 vols. Oxford, 1963-65.
- _____. The Poems of Jonathan Swift, ed. Harold Williams. 3 vols. Oxford, 1937.
- _____. The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, ed. Herbert J. Davis. 14 vols. Oxford, 1939--.
- _____. A Tale of a Tub, ed. Adolph C. L. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith. Oxford, 1958.
- Temple, Sir William. Five Miscellaneous Essays by Sir William Temple, ed. Samuel Holt Monk. Ann Arbor, 1963.

THE LITERARY OPINIONS OF JONATHAN SWIFT

by

JAMES ALLEN VROONLAND

B.A., Central College, 1961

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1971

Jonathan Swift never set forth his literary opinions in any work or series of works that purport to be literary criticism; he wrote no "Art of Poetry," no "Essay on Criticism," no Rhetoric, no Lives of the Poets. Nevertheless, he delivered himself of a number of opinions about the proper function of literature, the qualities of a good poet, the techniques for successful writing, and the value of particular authors, devices, and kinds of writing. Only rarely does he express a judgment explicitly or with much explanation--as he does in the "Letter to a Young Gentleman" or "On Poetry: A Rapsody." Most of his views must be inferred, both from the major works such as the Battle of the Books and the Tale of a Tub, and from burlesques and parodies and lesser pieces such as the "Meditation upon a Broom-stick," "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," and "A Description of a City Shower." Some of his particular judgments--his intense dislike for Dryden, his preference for the Ancients over the Moderns, his support of Temple against Wotton and Bentley in the controversy over the letters of Phalaris, and his condemnation of the nastiness of the Restoration stage--may appear at first to be ill-founded, but they prove in the end to be consistent with Swift's premises.

If we are to understand Swift's opinions of literary matters, we must look to the larger context of his thinking. Swift believed in Church, King, Aristocracy, and the Classics, and he defended the religious, political, social, and literary traditions that made for civilized living and sound morality. He preferred the accumulated wisdom of the ages to the private visions of the Moderns, and he thought it the duty of poets to

assimilate and promote that wisdom in their special way, by giving pleasure with their instruction.

The worthy poet, according to Swift, is one suited to his task by nature and by extensive preparation. He must know his craft; he must be able to handle the poetic tools which have been tested by long tradition and have proved themselves useful and pleasing. Moreover, the poet must be committed to his moral function; he should not be misled by pride or ambition into pedantry, flattery, lies, or sheer ingenuity. He should avoid writing silly pastorals or amorous poems which are trivial or which promote self-deception in men and lead to unwise living.

The core of Swift's literary thought, then, is quite simple: he approves of those writings which bring about an accurate perception of things and which cause the reader to desire good and loathe evil. Literature for Swift is primarily a criticism of life--it should bring "light"; but he knows too that the writer must tailor his work expertly if he is to achieve the "sweetness" that makes his teaching effective.