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William Burchard Cogswell

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JONATHAN SWIFT AS A POET

by

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I. WHY READ THE POETRY OF JONATHAN SWIFT?

Why read the poetry of Jonathan Swift? So much does it lack renown that many readers of English poetry are surprised to learn that Swift wrote any. Furthermore, those readers who have only a cursory acquaintance with his verse often shudder and hem if reference is made to it because they have found it coarse and unsavory and consider it best ignored. This attitude arises from the emphasis given only a few of Swift's poems—"A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" and "Strephon and Chloe," for instance—which are of such a character that some readers can find them shocking. But for fanciers of poetry to assume that these verses epitomize the whole of Swift's poetic achievement and for them to describe his poetry only in terms of these poems is for them to reveal their negligence in examining the whole of it. Even a close reading of these poems can show them to have a significance above and beyond that of mere ribaldry.

Over the years since his death, Swift's reputation as a man of letters has been subjected to many reappraisals. To judge any man is a problem, but to evaluate Swift is a particular problem; for he was certainly an eccentric figure, a law unto himself. The critical differences of opinion about him have been numerous and heated; and he continues to vex. Only with difficulty can he be ignored. Even the dullest college student who acquires any effective acquaintance with Swift's writings cannot help but be amused by Swift, even if he never makes the effort to define the reason for this amusement and is content
merely to give the Dean a distinction in his memory as that queer old man who wrote *Gulliver's Travels*.

Indeed, rather than as a poet Swift is known primarily for his work in prose. He is given credit for being a masterful and influential English prose stylist and is often accorded the title of the greatest English prose satirist: "Jonathan Swift aimed at mankind the most venomous arrow that scorn has ever yet let loose," states Carl Van Doren in his book *Swift*. Because he is a satirist, even as a prose writer Swift is commonly assigned a backseat to those artists in the language who have attempted not to correct mankind into accordance with some concept of the best possible man, which is a satirist's goal, but who instead have endeavored better to explain man to himself, to give him deeper insights into himself, and to provide for him new and more meaningful directions than he has. These artists, termed the "creative" artists, are by some criteria categorized separately from the "satiric" artists. The criteria used is questionable, however, because the satirist does indirectly provide his readers with guidance, and, if he is skillful, cannot fail to give man an insight into himself, unpleasant though the perception might be. Whatever is Swift's reputation as a writer, the significant fact, for the purposes of this paper, is that this reputation is generally based entirely upon his prose writings:

Jonathan Swift, 1667-1745, greatest English prose satirist; political pamphleteer, verse-writer

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1 New York, 1930, p. 3.
sends that boon to the college student of English, *An Outline-History of English Literature*. But commentators on Swift usually mention his verse only in passing, and then seldom with any intent to increase his stature as a man of letters.

For example, *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (1913) contains the following passage by George Atherton Aitken, which summarizes a brief survey of Swift's poetry:

> ...Swift's verse has very little imagination or sentiment. It is merely witty prose put into fluent verse, with clever rhymes. There is no chivalry, no real emotion, except the fierce passion of indignation. If "poet" connotes the love of beauty, the search after ideals, the preaching of what is ennobling, then Swift is not a poet. But his verse is an admirable vehicle for the expression of his passion and irony; and it is excellent of its kind, simple, sincere, direct, pointed, without any poetic ornament or show of learning.\(^2\)

The words "very little," "merely," "no," "except," "not," "of its" convey the slant of this passage, which is that Swift's verse has ultimately little significance as English poetry. Yet the critic who wrote it transcends any hasty inclination to brand Swift's verse a obscene. His language contains much honest praise of the verse: It is "witty," "fluent," "filled with clever rhymes," "an admirable vehicle," "excellent" (if only "of its kind"), "simple, sincere, direct, pointed." Not as much can be said for many English verses


which are continually being anthologized. Even Aitken allows for the possibility that the criteria he lists by which Swift can be judged to be only a minor figure as a poet might be questioned. In fairness to Swift it must be pointed out that he did not assign value to that criteria.

In the first place, Aitken states that Swift's verse shows little "imagination." The term is a difficult one to handle because it has such a wide variety of meanings. However, Aitken probably is saying that in his poetry Swift offers no original creative and constructive ordering of human experience capable of giving the reader relief from a dreary, ordinary state of everyday living. He doesn't because he distrusted any attempt to transcend common experience. A realist and a believer in the necessity of all persons exerting self-discipline to maintain permanence in the order of their own personal worlds and of society as a whole, Swift scorned originality, mystic insight, and speculative dealings with intellectual subtleties as tending to error and to the disruption of order. 4 The content of his poetry, accordingly, is concentrated on commonplace scenes and commonplace experiences.

Then Aitken remarks that Swift's poetry lacks "sentiment," meaning that in his poetry Swift expresses no tender susceptibility nor delicate sensibility. However, Swift saw the world as a place in which anything of a tender or delicate constitution could not

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long endure. Anyone who went looking for only that in life which was
tender and delicate, who refused to come to grips with that in life
which was not, was subject to his ridicule; for by his evaluation,
that which was not delicate ruled the world and had to be recognized
to be controlled. Swift does express delicacy in his poems,
especially in those to Stella; but his tenderness was grounded in a
realistic awareness that to be genuine and lasting it had to be able
to withstand harsh rebuff.

If Swift's verse lacks any expression of "chivalry" it does so
because Swift's intention was that it should. He meant to parody
heroic poetry and the heroic concept of life. Much supposed
gallantry in the world about him he perceived to be affectation and
monstrous sham. Little honor was demonstrated: the weak were kept in
chains, not protected and kindly dealt with; defeated foes were not
treated with generosity, but were barbarously trampled. To charge
Swift with portraying no "chivalry" in his verse is to miss his point
that most life is not chivalrous.

Though Aitken states that Swift's verse expresses no "real"
emotion other than "indignation," on the contrary, as shall be
demonstrated, Swift does express other emotions in his poetry. Amuse-
ment, loneliness, affection, appreciation are all included. Moreover,
even the tenderest reader should agree that there are times when
"indignation" seems the only emotion; and certainly any effective
presentation of this honest human agitation takes on attributes of
beauty.
Then Aitken says that Swift's verse demonstrates no "search after ideals." To be sure, Swift attempted to formulate no new ideals. Of visionary efforts he disapproved; what was immediate held his concern. However, to wish to correct mankind, even if the task was impossible, was to hold an ideal; so was it to attempt to knock off mankind's rose-colored glasses. Swift had no need to search after ideals; the necessary ones were at hand. His indignation resulted from mankind's unwillingness to recognize them. In his verse is no "preaching of what is ennobling" because to Swift's way of thinking the most noble act mankind could perform would be to become aware of and to come to grips with that in life which was not tender and delicate and to subject it to his will.

Swift's poetry, then as does all poetry, reflects much of the poet's attitude toward life. If it is judged to be lacking in quality the reason is that something can be found lacking in Swift's dealings with his own experience. As will be shown in a later chapter in this paper, his poetry demonstrates that he had much talent with the use of poetry technique. It is the content of his poems which frequently piques the reader and is responsible for the little recognition given his verse. The complexity of the problem of being critically fair to the poet Swift can be noted by examining some of the differences of opinion expressed about him.
II. FAVORABLE CRITICAL COMMENT ABOUT SWIFT'S POETRY

Some of the critical studies of Swift done during the past quarter of this century have tended to approach Swift's poetry with some sympathy and appreciation. The authors of these studies have indicated that in their own thinking they have found themselves in agreement with some of Swift's own critical attitudes. They have admired the extent to which Swift was aware of the obstacles in the way of his making his own life satisfactory to himself and have given attention to his evaluation of the complexity of the task of encouraging stability in his society. His desire to unify and to order human experience and human activity as he knew it is not questioned. Just how practical and how just are some of his demands to that end have been subjects of disagreement, however.

In 1931 appeared an essay entitled "Swift's View of Poetry," by Herbert Davis. In it Davis offers a lead toward finding in Swift's verse some qualities to be admired and appreciated. Davis states that "in his casual and contemptuous manner" Swift is "the most extreme example" in English literature of "reaction against the heroic or romantic view of the poet's function and art." He makes the statement not in denunciation of Swift but out of a kind of fascination for him. He is not shocked by Swift; he even shows admiration for the vigor of the man. In support of remarks made previously in this paper, Davis

\footnote{Appears in Studies in English by Members of University College, Toronto, (Toronto, 1931), pp. 9-58.}
states that Swift found himself in a world in which "the sublime" and "the pathetic" had no place allowed them. Swift, he says, saw that nothing could be done in his world but to rail, or more quietly, to amuse himself and his friends—which he did in and with his poetry. Moreover, states Davis, Swift refused to escape from such a world into "a little private palace of art" or to "find consolation in dreams." He would not deceive himself or "allow himself to be lulled into contentment by the soothing incantations or divine raptures of romantic poetry." Instead, he "needed only to say with his perfect simplicity what he saw to be true." Many readers, he remarks, who live perpetually in a world of romance and sentiment, have been stung by what Swift had to say in his poetry. To them he has appeared "a mad fellow, indeed, turning everything to wit and foolery—friendship and hate, love and marriage, and at last, death and judgment."

The point of these somewhat rhetorical remarks is that Swift found life to be hard and harsh. The tone of Davis's comments indicates that he largely agrees with Swift's evaluation. To that extent is he attracted by the robustness with which Swift managed in part to confront his tribulations, a robustness evident in his poetry.

In a later essay,² Davis (perhaps influenced by Ricardo Quintana's work on Swift) terms Swift a moralist as a poet. If some of Swift's outbursts in his poetry seem excessive, the motivation for

them, he indicates, was a concern more for the effect he aimed to have on his readers than for the releasing of his own emotional pressures. However, Davis qualifies the extent to which Swift is effective as a moralist in his poetry by remarking that his concerns tend often to be too personal and too particular, not far enough removed from his own personality to have universal application. Even general moralities in Swift's verse, he says, have an individual ring and do not change into anything "timeless" and "eternal."

Finally, his remarks on the vulgarities in Swift's verse, which, as has been stated, cause some readers to wince, deserve mention. They were accepted as humor, he says, by Swift's readers in his own day and as being in accord with a tradition of violence traceable through the writings of Christian and pagan moralists of most ages. The accuracy of this point perhaps needs testing; but it certainly merits consideration before Swift's use of what can be called obscenities is condemned.

Ricardo Quintana, in his critical biography of Swift, first published in 1936 and reprinted with additional notes in 1953, which despite weaknesses remains a standard work on Swift, has much to say that is valid and appropriate in evaluating Swift's poetry. Swift was, in Quintana's terms, a moral realist. What was primary to his outlook as a satirist was an "insistence on the actualities of experience and human nature,"3 or in other words, an "insistence upon

3Mind and Art, p. 22.
the inside of things rather than the outside, upon actuality rather
than illusion, on the undisguised truth regarding human nature
and the human situation."^{4} Says Quintana, Swift's view of human
nature in general—excluding that of men of true taste, those men with
whom Swift willingly kept company—was not one to appease the
delicacies, the self-concepts, and the pride—that is, self-righteous,
unwarranted pride—of the vast majority of his fellow men. Swift was
a satirist for the simple reason that he genuinely felt mankind to be
in need of correction. From the beginning of his career to the end,
Quintana insists, Swift was a moralist, at least "in his own eyes."
If Swift is to be criticized for the nature of some of his verses,
Quintana indicates that the criticism is due his methods as a satiric
poet and not his intentions.

He admits that Swift perhaps went too far at times, that he
became "sensational" and even overly despairing about the moral
condition of his world. Yet he sympathizes with Swift in his bout
with frustration and attempts to excuse his excesses. He is unwilling
to assign motives of self-righteousness and of foiled self-interest
to all Swift's invective; he prefers to assume that much of Swift's
scorn was "theoretical and essentially disinterested," the expression
of an intellectual judgment and not of an impulsive emotional reaction.
Like Davis, he indicates an admiration for the tough masculinity he
finds in Swift, calling Swift's scorn a "terrible and magnificent

 creed," which "refused to turn in whimpering self-pity." These remarks are made in defense of a poet whose evaluation of mankind is perhaps best summarized in these lines which conclude the poem "The Beasts Confession to the Priest":

...the Moralist design'd
A Compliment on Human-Kind:
For, here he owns, that now and then
Beasts may degener'ate into Men.5

a "Compliment" as scathing as any Swift could devise.

Then, too, he is concerned with the "strange fascination which the human body held for Swift," made evident in lines of verse such as these in praise of the cleanliness of a young lady:

No Humours gross, or frowzy Steams,
No noisom Whiffs, or sweaty Streams,
Before, behind, above, below,
Could from her taintless Body flow.6

To apologize for such lines, Quintana, like Davis, claims that Swift's age was not squeamish and that Swift was not one to conceal his most repulsive writings.7 In Quintana's opinion, Swift was not coarse just to be coarse; he concentrated on physical ugliness and body functions in effect to ridicule possessors of soft constitutions who out of weakness were incapable of coping with even such basic factors of life. However, moral purpose alone, says Quintana, does not account for "the peculiar intensity" with which Swift focused on physical

6"Strephon and Chloe," Poems, II, 584 (lines 11-14).
7Mind and Art, p. 154.
ugliness; his scatology is manifestly uncommon. Nevertheless, he indicates, Swift's obvious literary talents preclude the accuracy of his being tabbed as merely a demented mind.

An enthusiastic eleven-page summary of Swift as a person and as a poet can be found in A. L. Rowse's *The English Spirit: Essays in History and Literature*, published in 1945. Four of the eleven pages of the essay on Swift were occasioned by Quintana's *The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift* and deal with the personality of Swift; the other seven were occasioned by Harold Williams's 1937 edition of Swift's poems and comment on Swift as a poet.

Swift, says Rowse flatly, had perhaps the most extraordinary mind in the whole range of English literature. For that in his character which is disquieting he need not be excused, as Quintana tries to excuse him; by twentieth-century standards it is enough to understand him. Swift was, he emphasizes, a misanthrope. "He admits it, indeed states it proudly. Hatred of human beings is as legitimate a subject of art as love of them, and its possibilities more rarely explored." Though Swift harbored no illusions about human nature, states Rowse, he did—as has previously been pointed out—expect mankind to be better than it is, insisting, "indeed to much," on the moral responsibility of the individual; and the physical disgust pervading many of his poems is, says Rowse, "due to a morbid degree of sensitiveness acting upon a disillusioned temperament, to make him

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8 In New York, pp. 182-192.
torture himself and others. "But why complain, or excuse?" he states. "Things are what they are."

Swift's poetry is esoteric, he says; and therefore, it has had few readers since Swift's time, possibly because of the romantic tradition in English literature, into which Swift obviously does not fit. Much in Swift's poetry should, in his opinion, appeal to the modern age: "the uncompromising intellectualism of his attitude toward experience, its essential hardness, realism, absence of illusions, its force, clarity and candour, its complete self-consciousness." However, he states, Swift's poetry is not well-known today for perhaps three reasons: 1) Swift's foible to care more for a reputation as a man of society than for that as a poet, 2) the rapid change in the fashion of poetry which came about after his death, and 3) Swift's own consistent, half-humorous deprecation of his own verse. Nevertheless, the truth is, says Rowse, that Swift is "one of the great English poets."

A case can be made, he suggests, for the insistence that the more complete Swift is the poet Swift, that Swift said nothing in his prose which he did not say as well in verse, and that his poems contain many good things not to be found in his prose. He quotes statements from Quintana's *The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift* (1936), from Williams's introduction to his edition of Swift's poems (1937), and from F. Elrington Ball's *Swift's Verse: An Essay* (1929), to the effect that what Swift had to say is more personally and forcefully expressed in his poetry than in his prose.
The form of Swift's verse, Rowse insists, is a "perfect instrument" for the expression of what Swift intended, a concession previously granted by Aitken in *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (1913); and like Maurice Johnson later,\(^9\) he recognizes that it has a far greater variety than is usually realized. Perhaps, he admits, Swift's peculiar "fear" of romanticism caused him to set ends for his poetry which were too limited. He might have given more to English poetry had he let himself go; but, says Rowse, Swift's restraint adds to his poetry a quality of power held in reserve. If anything, his poetry lacks variety in tone; for he wrote "too much from the head, and not enough from the heart." However, not to call his results poetry because of some preconceived notion of what poetry should be is "silly." Swift's chief emotion was intellectual passion, states Rowse, "a very rare thing in an Englishman; which is perhaps why the English have never understood his poetry." "No English poet," he concludes, "offers greater problems or has more complex bibliography."

Johnson's short volume *The Sin of Wit: Jonathan Swift as a Poet* is the most extensive work yet done on Swift as a verse writer. It is useful primarily as a study of the craftsmanship of Swift's poems, adequately demonstrating that Swift had considerable technical talent as a poet. Some of Swift's skills which Johnson points out will be noted later. Unfortunately, his endeavors to explain the

\(^9\) In *The Sin of Wit: Jonathan Swift as a Poet* (Syracuse, 1950), to be discussed next.
intellectual, moral, and artistic aims of Swift as a poet, which for
the most part are a superficial echoing of Davis and Quintana, do not
penetrate the depths of Swift's personality. Consequently, he fails
to impart enough significance to the content of Swift's verse to go
even as far as Rowse does in a few short pages to build Swift into a
major poet. Indeed, he avowedly shys away from attempting to do this.

However, besides giving a thorough analysis of the technique of
Swift's verse, Johnson does succeed in clearly restating some of the
critical problems to be dealt with in attempting to evaluate Swift's
poems. He reasons that they have seldom been anthologized since the
eighteenth century and have no more reputation than they do today
because readers of them have considered them to be too much poetry of
statement of the same kind that they have already seen in his prose.
It is just that judgment on the part of readers and critics which
Rowse and the others Rowse quotes have recognized and attack in
arguing that Swift's remarks are best expressed in his poetry. More-
over, though Johnson finds Swift's verse praiseworthy for its solidity,
conciseness, intensity, and tangibility--characteristic for the most
part the same as those for which even Aitken found it laudable—he
recognizes that it is for these very qualities that critics have
considered Swift's verse limited in subject matter and in variety of
tone, to the extent that they have not granted it a place in the great
tradition of English poetry. Even Rowse, as previously stated, feels
that it lacks variety in tone. With Rowse, Johnson agrees that the
verse is often too "casual," too "careless," and merely "occasional" to
have been permitted any more recognition than it has. Yet like Rowse, he finds a wider variety in Swift's poetry than is commonly allowed it; and going farther than Rowse, he successfully demonstrates this variety.

In the end, however, Johnson leaves unanswered the question of Swift's ultimate worth as a poet. He states that no good edition of Swift's poems to be read as poems has yet been published; furthermore, he indicates what he himself does not do and what needs to be done in adding that no extended consideration has yet been given to what Swift was trying to do in poetry, to what degree he succeeded, and whether or not the poems themselves can give pleasure to a modern reader.

Nevertheless, in a statement that Swift's concern with human feces was intended to lay open "one of the fundamental moral and emotional problems of civilized Man," a remark left undeveloped, Johnson implies a respect for the content of Swift's verse which he is either unwilling or unable to express. The same kind of respect is implied by Davis, Quintana, and Rowse. Until the nature of and the reason for their respect is reduced to words, the issue of Swift's stature as a poet will remain unresolved. Rowse, who, as has been noted, resolutely calls Swift "one of the greatest English poets," perhaps comes closest to making clear the reason for his respect for Swift in stating "Things are what they are." As evidenced in his poetry, this fact Swift recognized and lived with for some seventy-seven years:

VAIN human Kind! Fantastick Race!
Thy various Follies, who can trace?
Self-love, Ambition, Envy, Pride,
Their Empire in our Hearts divide:
Give others Riches, Power, and Station,
'Tis all on me an Usurpation.

... 
"By Innocence and Resolution,
"He bore continual Persecution", 11

III. UNFAVORABLE CRITICAL COMMENT ABOUT SWIFT'S POETRY

Davis, Quintana, Rowse, and Johnson—and to a limited extent, even Aitken—have expressed an admiration and a respect for Swift's poetry. The first four critics are agreed that as a poet Swift should be considered a moralist. And Maurice Johnson, whose work is the most recent, takes pains to indicate that true artistic talent is to be found in Swift's verses, occasional pieces though they may be. However, differing from these four critics in their approach to Swift's poetry are others of some repute. The complete picture of the critical problem Swift presents is not understood until the opinions of these others, too, are examined.

In 1954, J. Middleton Murry published a critical biography of Swift, in which he accuses Swift of subjecting his warmth and affections, even his sexual passion, to such a rigid control by his "reason" that he ultimately became inhuman; and this inhumanity, Murry attempts to show, is well evident in Swift's later poems. Swift's own pride, Murry argues, was extraordinarily hardened. Twice in his life, says Murry, Swift was willing to throw it away, once in his relationship with Sir William Temple, and once in his matrimonial pursuit of Miss Jane Waring (Varina). Both times he received only injury; and as the result, Murry concludes, from then

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1Jonathan Swift: A Critical Biography (London [1954]).
on in his life Swift protected his pride by wilfully distorting his own deeply affectionate nature in the name of reason, an act for which he paid dearly.

Swift, he states, saw that folly was an element universal in human nature, one which could be either vented or controlled. He chose to control it; and because he noticed that the mass of mankind were content to vent theirs, Swift, with moral intent, vowed to make folly "bleed." In calling Swift a man with a moral purpose, Murry is, of course, in agreement with Davis, Quintana, Rowse, and Johnson. However, he is disgusted by the extent and the intensity of Swift's methods.

What primarily disturbs him about Swift, particularly the poet Swift, is the attack he made on sex. The Dean, he says, considered sex merely the means of procreation and not a means by which a man and a woman can show their love to each other. In fact, Murry states, Swift's "overweening pride in the righteousness of his own reason" took "the form of a will to annihilate the sexual relation, and with it every function of the body (and above all the female body)." This extreme loathing of the physical Murry claims was self-induced and arose from Swift's deliberate and prolonged repression of the emotion of love in the name of reason. His use of physical nastiness as a forceful symbol of moral corruption is unacceptable and misleading in Murry's opinion; Swift, he says, does not attack moral corruption but the human body itself, not whoring but the whore. Studiously avoiding

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2 See line 134, "To Mr. Congreve," Poems, I. 47.
mention of the sexual act itself, Swift, Murry states, displays no Shakespearian light-hearted and healthy jesting of it. Shakespeare saw the sex act as a natural human function, he says; Swift did not. And because in Murry's judgment Swift did not see it as a normal, healthy function, he stands condemned in Murry's eyes.

Yet Murry reflects a respect for Swift's pride, even though he feels it did ultimately destroy the man. Early in life, he says, Swift experienced a "negative illumination" concerning the nature of his existence, an apprehension which resulted from his having gained nothing from twice throwing away his pride. Seeing the world as he did, to plot a course through his life was a "difficult undertaking" for Swift. Murry goes so far as to admire him for not surrendering to humiliation, for refusing to give into melancholy, even if, as he points out, Swift needed society and conversation to keep it away. His genius was his main resource, Murry states; but, he adds in disparagement, Swift wanted his genius acknowledged.

That Swift did have genuine substance as a man Murry fully admits. He quotes letters from Swift's friends which show the true regard in which they held him. From a letter from Arbuthnot to Swift Murry quotes these lines: "That hearty sincere friendship, that plain and open ingenuity in all your commerce, is what I am sure I can never find in another man. I shall want often a faithful monitor, one that would vindicate me behind my back and tell me my faults to my face." From a letter written by Vanessa to Swift he quotes these lines:

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3 The letter is dated 12 Aug. 1714.
"Sometimes you strike me with that prodigious awe, I tremble with fear; at other times a charming compassion shines through your countenance which revives my soul."

In Murry's estimation, then, Swift had genius and depth as a person but allowed himself to become inhumanly hard, unable to deal with the well of human sensitivities within him, forced to cover them over and seal them inside him. He was unable, in Murry's judgment, to deal honestly with his inner emotional turbulence. His failure in this Murry deems a tragedy; his attack on the human body Murry considers inexcusably brutal.

A like disgust with the frankness in much of Swift's poetry is expressed by Carl Van Doren in his book on Swift published in 1930. Swift's candor was "sick," he says. All his poems on love "strummed the same chord," all pointing out that women "had cosmetic secrets, soiled linen, and made use of their alimentary canals." Swift, he states, tried to laugh at his swains for their shock at the unromantic discovery of what their loved ones actually were; but his loathing

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4 The letter is dated Celbridge, 1720.
5 See the Philological Quarterly, XXXIV (1955), 322-323, for a severely critical review of Murry's book by Irvin Ehrempreis. The weakness in Murry's approach to Swift is that it is dependent too much on a personal interpretation of biographical data. Swift's poems he considers only in so far as they support a notion about Swift which he has previously formulated. He does not study them for what they themselves have to say.
6 Swift (New York); previously mentioned on page 2.
countered his laughter. His poems prove he was "the victim of pathological fastidiousness," states Van Doren. What a healthier man would have forgotten Swift was sickened by. His antipathy got beyond his control; his poems about undressed women mark one of the nastiest episodes in his life. He was, Van Doren implies, trying to convince himself that he had not done wrong in his relations with the woman in his life by putting his "nauseous images" of women into "brutal words." He had a "sick" heart—"a pit without a bottom"—and a "stony" heart—"a blank mirror to beauty and chaos both." 7

Also appalled by Swift's attitude toward sex and women, D. H. Lawrence, in his short work Apropos of Lady Chatterley's Lover, offers Swift's treatment of the human body in his poems as an example in support of his statement that the mind is commonly in fear of the body and its potencies. He quotes Swift's line "But--Celia, Celia, Celia s**s," 9 and comments that of course she does, who doesn't, and how much worse if she didn't! Swift's mind, he implies, was simply not sufficiently developed in physical and sexual consciousness. 10

The last three mentioned critics find Swift the poet disgusting because of his attitude toward sex, women, and the emissions of the human body. All have significance in any man's life; but just what attitudes he should form towards them is a personal concern involved

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7 Swift, pp. 246-248.
8 London, 1931.
10 Apropos, pp. 19-20.
with personal experience. An adequate discussion of the issues subsumed in attempting to formulate rules by which any one man's attitude can be justly evaluated would go far beyond the scope of this paper. The fact has been established that Murry, Van Doren, and Lawrence have felt disgust at Swift's disposition as shown in his poems on love. The reader can best arrive at a judgment as to the warrant of that disgust by examining the poems himself. Two points of contention against the judgments of these critics do fall within the limits of this paper, however.

All three exemplify a lack of caution warned against in the first paragraph of this thesis—that of emphasizing only a few of Swift's poems. If these poems about love offend, one way to treat them is simply to do as one commentator on Swift's poetry suggests—forget them. One of the objects of this paper is to support the argument of Rowse and Johnson that Swift's poetry possesses variety. Not all of his poems, by any means, have love, physical emissions, and naked women as their subject matter. On the other hand, as Marius Bewley suggests, Swift seems to have focused on the physical functions of man because he could find nothing to offset the filth. The circumstance was unfortunate—primarily for Swift; but again to quote Rowse, "Things are what they are."

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Furthermore, since Swift was a satirist, an employer of indirection, to determine to what extent he ever was fully serious, fully without jest, is difficult. His method he explains in these lines from "An Epistle to a Lady":

I may storm and rage in vain;  
It but stupifies your Brain.  
But, with Raillery to nettle,  
Set your Thoughts upon their Mettle:  
Gives Imagination Scope,  
Never lets your Mind elope:  
Drives out Brangling, and Contention,  
Brings in Reason and Invention. 

In the poems with which Murry, Van Doren and Lawrence concern themselves, Swift's nettling goes to distant extremes; but this fact does not prove that it thereby ceases in essence to be nettling. The mood in which he wrote the poems may likely have been but a passing one. That he preserved the poems and allowed them to be published does not prove that that mood was a permanent fixation. Indeed, the above poem itself shows that Swift could address himself very civilly to women:

THO' you lead a blameless Life,  
Are an humble, prudent Wife;  
Answer all domestick Ends,  
What is this to us your Friends?

Col'nel.....may be your Debtor  
We expect Employment better.  
You must learn, if you would gain us,  
With good sense to entertain us. 

---


To condemn him for having written some brutal poems is unfair. So, for instance, did William Butler Yeats, one of the greatest of twentieth-century poets.
IV THE INDIGNANT SWIFT

In Swift's own words, the "Rillery" in his poetry was meant "to nettle" his readers in order to set their thoughts "upon their Mettle."¹ Too many minds he found sluggish, dull, and cantankerous. The extreme sensitiveness of Swift, on which Rowse and Murry remark, manifests itself in the severity of his critical judgment of people. He indicates in the lines previously quoted from "An Epistle to a Lady" that for him it was not enough even that people be "blameless," "humble," and "prudent" (few he found of that much quality); they had also to be able "with good sense to entertain [him]."² As Rowse states, Swift was concerned with being a gentleman of society. He preferred the company of jovial, refined, and cultured people—like his companions Pope, Gay, Arbuthnot, and Bolingbroke—and was distressed that, though many persons presumed to be of such timber, few in actuality were.

He no doubt asked too much of mankind. The Popes and Gays of this world have been few in number. Yet arrogance is not a tone to be heard in his poems. Rather, despondency is—evidence of the accuracy of Rowse's statement that Swift's attitude toward experience was one of "uncompromising intellectualism." If all persons were not Popes and Gays, he wanted them to be. In his judgment, by all rights, they

²Chap. II, pp. 24-25.
should have been. Swift's loyalty to this "terrible and magnificent creed," in Quintana's terms, frightened many of his acquaintances and left him a lonely man. Yet he would not, as Murry states, yield his position and submit to humiliation.

Swift's sensitiveness toward people showed in a second reaction other than that of his scorning them for their lack of culture and "good sense." Whatever his complaints, he directed them not at his fate, not at his god, but only at people. For the evils of the world the fault lay with them alone—such was the burden of responsibility Swift assigned man. An Anglican dean, it was easy for him to accept the Christian concept of the fall of man because it so readily explained the behavior of most men.

A Christian by imbuement, Swift maintained a belief in the need for faith in the scriptures as divine revelation. All his life he stanchly supported the Anglican church as the core around which his society must organize if it were to maintain any kind of stability. Yet Swift had his doubts about the Christian view of God and man's relationship to Him. Sensitive as he was, he was highly aware of the little peculiarities of life, many of which were ugly. All of what

3"Sometimes you strike me with that prodigious awe, I tremble with fear": letter from Vanessa, quoted in Chap. III, p. 21.
4Kathleen Williams, Jonathan Swift and the Age of Compromise (Lawrence, 1958), p. 64.
5Compromise, p. 34.
6Mind and Art, p. 139.
7Compromise, p. 34.
he saw did not fit the Christian scheme of things. At least two of
the demands he seems to have made on others were 1) that they
recognize the reasons for doubting the Christian explanation of
things, yet 2) that they acknowledge, in spite of all doubt, that the
need for maintaining the Christian religion as a unifying cohesive for
all mankind was greater than any compulsion to deny it. With those
who missed either or both points he was indignant.

That Swift's poetry is characterized by restraint of the emotions
other than indignation has been noted by the critics looked at.
Perhaps Swift "feared romanticism" because in his youth his sensitive
feelings were injured—the fact Murry tries to make so much of.8
However, Swift's poetry possesses a startling intensity, which if not
deserving to be called emotional must be termed "intellectual," after
Rowse. This intensity results from the detail which Swift could mass
in an individual poem to support a particular theme or build up a
desired atmosphere. His sensitivity and his resulting awareness gave
him a keen eye for detail; and because his detail is frequently ugly,
his poetry is termed "anti-romantic." Nothing escaped Swift's focus,
not even, as seen, the discharges of the human body. His awareness of
the unsavory in life caused him to doubt easy doctrinaire glossings
of it. What can be seen in his poetry is the discoveries of the eye
of the realist, of the moralist, of the Anglican dean troubled by
scepticism, who, focusing on the commonplace and the everyday, presents
it as he sees it, passing judgment on human failure and human folly
wherever it is evident.

8 See Compromise, p. 4, for substantiation of the fact.
V. SWIFT'S EARLY POEMS

Modern critical thought, then, considers Swift a figure in English literature, on the one hand, to be respected and admired for his rigorous moral judgment and his intense misanthropy, based on a strict discernment of what constitutes quality in a human being. On the other hand, some criticism has derided him for lacking tolerance and civility and for cultivating a morbid obsession with the functions and discharges of the human body, particularly the female human body. Evidence for supporting both critical positions can be found in his poetry, in a more succinct and distinctive form than in his prose. The following study of his poems is intended to demonstrate that in the main Swift was not as harsh as the second critical summary noted above makes him out to be. It will also endeavor to show that with a somewhat careless genius, for the most part casually exercised, Swift succeeded in fashioning his awareness of the ordinary and the immediate into vigorous poetry which is earnest, often humorous, and sometimes moving in a restrained, masculine way.

The remarks of the critics previously consulted have indicated that Swift made no pretense to be an accomplished poet. The writing of verse was a leisurely activity of his, indulged in to occupy his mind and to entertain his friends. A moralist, he was not lyrical; and having the eye of a realist, he tended to be frank and blunt, delighting to parody poetic gloss. A gentleman, he was restrained in
all emotions but that of indignation. Concerned with everyday existence, his subject matter tends to be personal. Because he circulated in the literary circles of his day, his poetry is poetry of statement—like most eighteenth century verse. As such, it contains little imaginative and highly individualistic imagery. Instead, it is composed of plain and simple diction, intended to be readily understood by its reader.

As most Swiftian scholars and commentators state, Swift's early poems are laborious to read. These poems number at least five definitely established by scholars to be Swift's.¹ Three are odes, the "Ode to the Athenian Society," the "Ode to Dr. William Sancroft," and the "Ode to Sir William Temple." All three are composed in the irregular, rhetorical style of Abraham Cowley, who, in translating into English the odes of the ancient Greek lyric poet Pindar, attempted to adapt to English the form of those odes. The result was for the most part awkward to English verse. Swift's three odes are commonly termed flat, strained, and overly serious. They were written by a twenty-two and twenty-three-year old poet who was obviously trying too hard, without success, to be a creator of the sublime and the elevated in verse. The freedom of the ode, intended for lyric expression, is not suited to the heavily philosophical content of Swift's lines. These, for instance, can hardly be called musical:

¹Sin of Wit, p. 3.
Philosophy, as it before us lyeth, 
Seems to have borrow'd some ungrateful tast 
Of Doubts, Impertinence, and Niceties, 
From ev'ry Age through which it pass't, 
But always with a stronger relish of the Last.

Despite the rhymes, somewhat forced, of "lyes" with "Niceties" and of "tast" with "pass't" and "Last," and despite the metric ordering of the lines (primarily iambic, with the number of theoretic beats varying from five in the first three lines to four in the fourth and six in the fifth), they are basically prosaic critical statement.

Only the words "ungrateful" and "relish" have connotation enough or expressiveness enough to pass as poetic rather than prosaic diction.

In many instances in these first poems, Swift's attempt to sound exalted becomes ludicrous, as for example, in these lines from the "Ode to the Athenian Society":

Pardon ye great Unknown, and far-exalted Men, 
The wild excursions of a youthful pen; 
Forgive a young and (almost) Virgin-muse, 
Whom blind and eager Curiosity 
(Yet Curiosity they say, 
Is in her Sex a Crime needs no excuse)
Has forc't to grope her uncouth way 
After a mighty Light that leads her wandering Eye; 
No wonder then she quits the narrow Path of Sense 
For a dear Ramble thro' Impertinence, Impertinence, the Scurvy of Mankind, 
And all we Fools, who are the greater part of it, 
Tho' we be of two different Factions still, 
Both the Good-natur'd and the Ill, 
Yet wheresoe'er you look you'll always find We join like Flies, and Wasps, in buzzing about Wit.

\(^2\)"Ode to the Athenian Society," Poems, I, 22 (lines 211-215).

\(^3\)Poems, I, 17-18 (lines 60-75).
The poet begins his extended sentence with an appeal to be pardoned for the impertinence of his address to a group of men to whom he is a total stranger. Although the language of that appeal approaches the sublime in the exaggeration explicit in the words "Ye great Unknown," "far-exalted," and "wild excursions," and in the metonymy of "youthful pen," the metonymic use of "(almost) Virgin-muse" for the poet's inspiration and "mighty Light" for the society he is addressing tends to be strained. And the metaphor in the lines

No wonder then she quits the narrow Path of Sense
For a dear Ramble thro' Impertinence...

approaches the bathetic. Moreover, the poet's interest in "Impertinence" gets him completely away from his original purpose. He drops his apology to begin a complaint about the "greater part" of mankind, whom he calls "Fools," comparing them to "buzzing" "Flyes" and "wasps." Swift's moral judgment prevented his being successful as a poet of the sublime. The scolding tone of the last six lines was more natural to him. Even the use of italics—evident in these lines—to attempt to gain sublime effect Swift himself later came to ridicule.4

Yet to glance through Swift's early odes is to gain a taste of the personality of Swift. The harsh, crude meters and crowded thoughts of these poems impart to them a masculine vigor and an intensity of mental effort. Many of the lines can be admired not

for what they are as poetry but for what they reflect of the attitudes of the man who wrote them. For example, much of the nature of Swift’s Christianity is revealed in this first stanza of the “Ode to Dr. William Sancroft”:

TRUTH is eternal, and the Son of Heav’n,
Bright effluence of the immortal ray,
Chief cherub, and chief lamp of that high sacred Seven,
Which guard the throne by night, and are its light by day:
First of God’s darling attributes,
Thou daily seest Him face to face,
Nor does thy essence fixed depend on giddy circumstance
Of time or place,
Two foolish guides in ev’ry sublunary dance:
How shall we find Thee then in dark disputes?
How shall we search Thee in a battle gain’d,
Or a weak argument by force maintain’d?
In dagger-contests, and th’ artillery of words,
(For swords are madmen’s tongues, and tongues are madmen’s swords)
Contriv’d to tire all patience out,
And not to satisfy the doubt...

These lines contain an honest and disturbing concern with doubt. The poet is compelled to believe in the Christian god and his eternal truth, an absolute truth dependent not on “giddy circumstance”—a noteworthy phrase. However the lines

How shall we find Thee than in dark dispute?
How shall we search Thee in a battle gain’d,
Or a weak argument by force maintain’d...

express earnest uncertainty. Furthermore, they are poetically strong. They contain counterpoint in that a theoretical iambic pentameter pattern is broken by natural accents on “How” and “Thee” in both the first and second lines and on “weak” and “main-” in the third. Also,

5 Poems, I, 34-35.
the alliteration of "Thee then" and of "dark disputes" gives flavor to the lines, as does the assonance of "battle gain'd." And the words "dispute," "battle," and "force," are strong, hard words which give vigor to the lines. So are "dagger-contests" and "artillery" in the line following. Furthermore, the choice of the word "madmen's" used toward the end of the stanza connotes a decided intensity of feeling on the poet's part for a condition of life which is perplexing and wearying, expressed with forceful restraint in the last seven lines of the stanza. The creator of this stanza shows both a capacity to be poetic and an undeniable deep emotional involvement with his subject matter.

However, in "To Mr. Congreve" and "Occasioned by Sir W- T-'s Late Illness and Recovery," the remaining two of Swift's five early poems, he uses the iambic pentameter couplet, that verse form so common to eighteenth-century English poetry. By nature, it is far better suited to Swift's tendency to statement. The former poem, one of 234 lines, has coherence which the odes lack. In it Swift exposes himself as the kind of poet he was to become, the character of the lines indicating a turn in the direction of his endeavors as a verse writer. Many of the themes and attitudes to be found in his later works, both prose and poetry, are given early expression here, as in this verse paragraph:

Last year, a lad hence by his parents sent
With other cattle to the city went;
Where having cast his coat, and well pursu'd
The methods most in fashion to be lewd,
Return'd a finish'd spark this summer down,
Stock'd with the freshest gibberish of the town;
A jargon form'd from the lost language, wit,
Confounded in that Babel of the pit;
Fon'd by diseas'd conceptions, weak, and wild,
Sick lust of souls, and an abortive child;
Born between whores and fops, by lewd compacts,
Before the play, or else between the acts:
Nor wonder, if from such polluted minds
Should spring such short and transitory kinds,
Or crazy rules to make us wits by rote
Last just as long as ev'r cuckow's note:
What bungling, rusty tools, are us'd by fate!
’Twas in an evil hour to urge my hate,
My hate, whose lash its heaven has long decreed
Shall on a day make sin and folly bleed;
When man’s ill genius to my presence sent
This wretch, to rouse my wrath, for ruin meant;
Who in his idiom vile, with Gray’s-inn grace,
Squander’d his noisy talents to my face;
Nann’d ev’ry player on his fingers ends,
Swore all the wits were his peculiar friends;
Talk’d with that saucy and familiar ease
Of Wycherly, and you, and Mr. Bays;
Said, how a late report your friends had vex’d,
Who heard you meant to write heroics next;
For tragedy, he knew, would lose you quite,
And told you so at Will’s but t’other night. 6

In these lines, written when he was twenty-six, Swift began forcefully and emphatically to express his dislike for much of humanity. His use of strong language is already noticeable with the words "lewd," "gibberish," "jargon," "diseas’d," "sick lust," "abortive," "whores," "fops," "polluted," and "bungling." Such harsh, uncompromising words became stock in Swift’s vocabulary and are the reason for the usual severity of tone of his scorn and satire. What Swift complains of in the lines is the lack of tact, of taste, and of social grace on the part of the lad and the city-dwelling theater-goers who made of the lad a "finish’d spark." The lad returned from the city all pretense and pride, offensive to Swift’s discernment. The underscored

6 Poems, I, 46–47 (lines 115–146).
lines are justly famous with Swiftian scholars as a concise assertion from Swift's own pen of what his attitude and intent was to be as a man of letters. The implied intent in the vow to make man's "sin and folly bleed" was to correct mankind, or failing that, at least to puncture its unmerited pride in itself.

What the Swift of the early poems demanded of mankind was humility, like that he himself expressed in the "Ode to the Athenian Society,"

Who must my Weakness and my Ignorance confess,
    That I believe in much, I ne'er can hope to see...

In the "Ode to Dr. William Sancroft, he praised Sancroft as

...a mind fix'd to combat fate
With those two pow'rful swords, Submission and Humility

Yet most of humanity failed to be what Sancroft was in his estimation. He was forced to conclude that

...foolish Man still judges what is best
In his own balance, false and light,
Foll'wing Opinion, dark, and blind,
That vagrant leader of the mind,
Till Honesty and Conscience are clear out of sight.

It was the fault of the lad who "roused" Swift's "wrath" that he judged what was best "In his own balance.../ Foll'wing Opinion, dark, and blind." To those persons who would be truly brilliant Swift gives this advice in "To Mr. Congreve":

Beat not the dirty paths where vulgar feet have trod
But give the vigorous fancy room.

---

Poems, I, 20 (lines 133-134).
Poems, I, 36 (lines 47-48).
Poems, I, 36 (lines 54-58).
For when like stupid alchymists you try
To fix this nimble god,
This volitile mercury,
The subtil spirit all flies up in fume;
Nor shall the bubbl'd virtuoso find
More than a fade insipid mixture left behind. 10

Too many would-be wits, like the lad, were but "bubbl'd virtuosos," lacking "vigorous fancy," which for Swift meant insight and critical taste.

In brief, Swift was indignant with the many who did not possess "common Breeding, common Sense." 11 Lacking the quality he desired of them, they were to him but mere animals—mere Yahoos. The lad was sent to the city "With other cattle." A similar reference to people as animals is found in these lines late in "To Mr. Congreve," in which is to be noted the beginning of Swift's obsession with body odors:

The Muse, like some bright country virgin, shows
Fall'n by mishap amongst a knot of beaux;

She, who on shady banks has joy'd to sleep
Near better animals, her father's sheep;
Sham'd and amaz'd, beholds the chatt'ring throng.
To think what cattle she has got among;
But with the odious smell and sight annoy'd,
In haste she does th' offensive herd avoid. 12

Swift felt the human being to be constituted something other than an animal; he was indignant that most men failed to utilize their

10 Poems, I, 49-50 (lines 205-212).
12 Poems, I, 50 (lines 215-216, 221-226).
capacities which differentiated them from the beasts. Yet just what those distinguishing capabilities are Swift leaves obscured in such words as "Conscience," "Submission," "Humility," "common Breeding," "common Sense."

The Muse mentioned in the quoted passage above Swift rejected in turn in "Occasioned by Sir W- T-'s Late Illness and Recovery." In this poem, Swift exchanges remarks with the Muse, who charges him to "expell" "insolent" grief now that Sir William has recovered, or "At least confine the tyrant to his cell," for to continue to express gloom is to deaden the joy of all around him, as

...nature's craz'd convulsions make us dread
That time is sick, or the world's mind is dead.

To this petition, Swift answers,

Malignant goddess! bane to my repose,
Thou universal cause of all my woes;

***
Fools common-place thou art, their weak ensconcing fort,
Th' appeal of dullness in the last resort:

***
Ah, should I tell a secret yet unknown,
That thou ne'er hadst a being of thy own,
But a wild form dependent on the brain,
Scatt'ring loose features o'er the optic vein;
Troubling the chrystal fountain of the sight,
Which darts on poets eyes a trembling light,
Kindled while reason sleeps, but quickly flies,
Like antic shapes in dreams, from waking eyes:

---

Poems, I, 53 (line 56).


Poems, I, 53 (lines 81-82, 87-88).
In sum, a glittering voice, a painted name
A walking vapor, like thy sister fame.16

To thee I owe that fatal bent of mind,
Still to unhappy restless thoughts inclin'd;
To thee, what oft I vainly strive to hide,
That scorn of fools, by fools mistook for pride;
From thee whatever virtue takes its rise,
Grows a misfortune, or becomes a vice....

Madness like this no fancy ever seiz'd,
Still to be cheated, never to be pleas'd;
Since one false beam of joy in sickly minds
Is all the poor content delusion finds.—
There thy enchantment broke, and from this hour
I here renounce thy visionary pow'r;
And since thy essence on my breath depends
Thus with a puff the whole delusion ends.17

The Muse, Swift found, was an illusion fabricated by the human mind itself. To attempt to pursue her, to be a visionary, was to be but a dreamer whose delusions evaporated against reality. Only discontent resulted from his efforts; only the "sickly" mind could hold to the notion that the sublime existed and but awaited the poet to express it. Strangely, Swift blames his striving to discover and to express the essence of the sublime for his "scorn of fools," as if he regretted having found that most people lacked any quality of what he could term grandeur. He felt he had deceived himself in thinking that life held any exaltation for him; consequently, he determined to rid himself of false hope. For about five years after writing these lines Swift destroyed any verses he might have penned.18 When he

again began to preserve what he wrote, his subject matter and style had changed. His lines were often flip, quite bitingly satiric.
written upon trifles and personal circumstances; yet seldom were they sparing in force of discernment and moral judgment. And often they please as poetry.
VI. HIS "BAGATELLE" POEMS

One of Swift's first poems in his new "bagatelle" style was "Verses Wrote in a Lady's Ivory Table-book," composed about 1698:

PERUSE my Leaves thro' ev'ry Part,
And think thou seest my owners Heart,
Scrawl'd o'er with Trifles thus, and quite
As hard, as sensless, and as light;
Expos'd to every Coxcomb's Eyes,
But hid with Caution from the Wise.
Here you may read (Dear Charming Saint)
Beneath (A new Receipt for Paint)
Here in Beau-spelling (tru tel deth)
There in her own (far an el broth)
Here (lovely Nymph pronounce my doom)
There (A safe way to use Perfume)
Here, a Page fill'd with Billet Doux;
On t'other side (laid out for Shoes)
(Madam, I dye without your Grace)
(Item, for half a Yard of Lace.)
Who that had Wit would place it here,
For every peeping Fop to Jear.
To think that your Brains Issue is
Expos'd to the' Excrement of his,
In power of Spittle and a Clout
When e're he please to blot it out;
And then to heighten the Disgrace
Clap his own Nonsense in the place.
Whoe'er expects to hold his part
In such a Book and such a Heart,
If he be Wealthy and a Fool
Is in all Points the fittest Tool,
Of whom it may be Justly said,
He's a Gold Pencil tipt with Lead. ¹

These are thirty rather delightful lines written about a commonplace possession of a lady of society, a table-book on which to jot down messages and miscellaneous memoranda. Though the article is trivial, Swift uses it as a persona by which to expose the emptiness of the

¹ Poems, I, 60-61
society of which ivory-table-books are paraphernalia. The book is a representation of its "owners Heart."

Scrawl'd o'er with Trifles thus, and quite
As hard, as sensless, and as light... [7]

and it is a display of its mistress's "Brains Issue," which consists of nothing more profound than a concern for "Paint," "A safe way to use Perfumes," and "half a Yard of Lace."

Though bitingly satiric, the poem does not sound so harsh as much of Swift's verse does. In the first place, it is not explicitly didactic in tone. It is actually only commentary on a social circumstance; and therefore, it conveys a hint of resignation on the part of the poet toward the conditions he is ridiculing. This resignation is not one of contentment, but rather one of realization, somewhat angry, that little hope exists for the alteration of the conditions. Secondly, the poem is undeniably clever in its conception. The method of quoting and juxtaposing snatches of the scrawlings to be found in the pages of the book allows the reader to become intimately acquainted with both the contents of the book and those persons who have written in it. The quoted misspellings are particularly betraying. And the metaphor in the concluding lines is witty, appropriate, and revealing. The man who hopes to win the heart of the owner of the table-book must be "Wealthy and a Fool," having the aura of wealth and the fine appearance of a "Gold Pencil," with an accompanying head of carbon. On the whole, the poem is much more humorous than acrid, more entertaining than biting.
In the poem Swift uses a verse form with which he became adept, the iambic tetrameter couplet. This form was more natural to him than the irregular Pindaric ode as adapted by Cowley and even than the iambic pentameter couplet. Its simple, earthy ballad flavor is appropriate to the casualness of his verse. Though the four-beat line can easily become rhythmically monotonous because it is symmetrical and tends to break into two equals parts—as does the first line of the above poem for example:

Peruse my Leaves / thro' ev'ry Part...—

Swift manages to impart a touch of sophistication to it by using counter-point in its meter and by varying the caesura. For instance, the line "There (A safe way to use Perfume)" is theoretically an iambic line. But proper comprehension of its content requires a reading which puts stresses on "There," on "safe," on "way," on "use," and on "-fume." A strict iambic reading of the line, however, requires emphasis of "A," and no emphasis of "There" and "safe." Then, the lines already singled out—

Scrawl'd o'er with Trifles thus, and quite
As hard, as senseless, and as light

exemplify how Swift was frequently able to avoid the monotonous even split. Those lines that do divide into halves preserve the simplicity of the verse, which would lose much of its casual charm if it were too neatly fashioned.

Another one of Swift's early bagatelles and an example of the kind of poem Swift wrote which some readers find offensive is "The Problem." Sixty lines long, this poem is a short narrative in which is again employed the iambic tetrameter couplet. One theme of
the poem is a favorite of Swift's previously mentioned—body odor. Though ribald, the poem is wittily conceived. It is the kind of careless verse one might laugh at privately but be embarrassed to be caught amused by in public. No doubt it was written by Swift only for the entertainment of himself and a few close friends, for it was not published until after his death. That Swift wrote it is of academic interest; his editors can take the blame for any lack of taste in its being published. A satiric poem, it is, however, somewhat nonsensical, but no less humorous on that account:

DID ever Problem thus perplex,
Or more employ the Female Sex?
So sweet a Passion who cou'd think,
Jove ever form'd to make a S---k?
The Lady's vow, and swear they'll try,
Whether it be a Truth, or Lye.
Love's Fire, it seems, like inward Heat,
Works in my Lord by St--l and Sweat,
Which brings a St--k from ev'ry Pore,
And from behind, and from before;
Yet, what is wonderful to tell it,
None but the Fav'rite Nymph can smell it.  

"The Lady's" make their experiment and

...approach the speaking Part,
To try the Back-way to his Heart;
For, as when we a Gun discharge,
Altho' the Bore be ne'er so large,
Before the Flame from Muzzle burst,
Just at the Breech it flashes first:
So from my Lord his Passion broke,
He f--ted first, and then he spoke.
The Ladys vanish, in the Smother,
To confer Notes with one another...

\[1\] Poems, I, 65.
\[2\] Poems, I, 66 (lines 4-1-50).
\[3\] Poems, I, 65 (lines 1-12).
\[4\] Poems, I, 66 (lines 41-50).
They conclude,

Let's not fall out; We all had share.
And, by the most we can discover
My Lord's an universal Lover. 5

To attempt to determine whom, if anyone, Swift intended as the butt of this poem would perhaps entertain a scholar; but for most readers, knowing who the "Lord" is does nothing to enhance any reading enjoyment of it. Such enjoyment, if any, comes through an appreciation of its satire, which is directed at genteel society not only through revealing that one of its members literally "st—ks" but also through exposing the frivolous activities of its ladies, who are concerned with no greater "Problem" than determining who is the lord's "Fav'rite Nymph." The poem's deflation of the "sweet" "Passion" may offend the reader who tends to idealize it; but the reader who is as impatient with gloss as Swift was might find this spoof of the "Passion" somewhat refreshing.

One of the best of Swift's poems and one of the most widely anthologized is a short one of eighteen lines entitled "A Description of the Morning":

Now hardly here and there an Hackney-Coach
Appearing, show'd the Ruddy Morns Approach.
Now Betty from her Masters bed had flown,
And softly stole to discompose her own.
The Slipshod Prentice from his Masters Door,
Had par'd the Dirt, and Sprinkled round the Floor.
Now Moll had whirl'd her Mop with dext'rous Airs,
Prepar'd to Scrub the Entry and the Stairs.
The Youth with Broomy Stumps began to trace
The Kennel-Edge, where Wheels had worn the Place.

5 Poems, I, 67 (lines 58-60).
The Smallcoal-Man was heard with Cadence deep,
'Till drown'd in Shriller Notes of Chimney-Sweep,
Duns at his Lordships Gate began to meet,
And Brickdust Moll had Scream'd through half the Street.
The Turnkey now his Flock returning sees,
Duly let out a Nights to Steal for Fees.
The watchful Bailiffs take their silent Stands,
And School-Boys lag with Satchels in their Hands.

As Maurice Johnson points out in his Sin of Wit, from its "ugly, asthmatic," alliterative first line on, the poem is parody of attempts to glorify the dawn in poetry. Swift's realistic eye remains unfailing and unrelenting. It focuses on such incidental detail as the absence of hackney-coaches on the streets as an indication that morning has come. The first movement in the early hours he alertly notes is made by the maid Betty stealthily leaving her master's chambers, where she has spent the night, to return home slyly "to discompose her own" bed to conceal her nocturnal activities. Then he sees the hirelings and laborers at work, the unwilling, "Slipshod" apprentice; the energetic scrubmaid; the youth who listlessly "traces" the gutter's edge with a broom; the coal seller beginning his rounds; the chimney sweep advertising his services; the bill collectors early gathered at a lord's gate; the turnkey watching file back to jail the prisoners whom he let out at night in return for a cut of their evening's take; the police taking their posts to keep suspicious watch over the day's pursuits; and finally, the schoolboys lagging on their way to school. The day he sees begins noisily and wearily,
just another day with little promise of any unusual reward. The
moral condition of the society is exposed in the waywardness of Betty,
the accumulation of debts by the lord, and the corruption of the turn-
key. The drudgery of existence is emphasized by the apprentice, the
scrubmaid, the youth, the coalman, and the chimney sweep. The
unwelcomed demands of the day are reflected in the behavior of the
schoolboys. Swift's picture of the morning is honest and complete.

Yet it is not fully as harsh a picture as seen by Marius Bewley,
who says that in the poem "Swift gives us a microcosm that looks like
the foyer of hell." Nor need the schoolboys all be "rancorous little
malcontents waiting under the eyes of the police to perpetuate the
corrupt world to which they are heirs." Such a "corrupt world" has
existed for a long time and continues to exist. The tone of the poem
is stronger in resignation than in disgust.

Maurice Johnson's analysis of the poetical qualities of the lines
of the poem is extensive. It need only be summarized here. He points
out Swift's deft manipulation of alliterative and assonant sounds
throughout the poem—the "h" sounds of the first line, the "s" sounds
and "o" sounds of the fourth, the "m" sounds in the seventh, and the
"e" sounds in the tenth, for examples. Then, as Johnson states,
the meter in a number of the lines varies from the theoretical iambic
pentameter. The "from" in the third line, for instance, does not take
a heavy accent as it should according to pattern; and lines thirteen

and sixteen begin with a trochaic foot instead of an iambic one.

The diction of the poem is primarily concrete and prosaic; few words are imagistic. The words "Ruddy" in line two, "softly" in line four, and "silent" in line seventeen are the most connotative of any in the poem. However, what makes the lines read like poetry rather than prose is that their syntax is frequently inverted, a characteristic perhaps often occasioned by Swift's need to jockey certain words into the rhyming position. Line three, for example, reads "Now Betty from her Masters bed had flown" in order to get the rhyme of "flown" with "own," which is in its proper position in the word order of line four. Such altering of word order for the sake of getting a rhyme can often be indication of a poet's lack of skill. Yet nowhere in this poem is the use of inversion awkward and obtrusive; and so much is it a characteristic of the lines that it seems natural to the poet's manner of speech.

For occasional verse written by a casual poet, "A Description of the Morning" is skillfully constructed. As parody, it makes seem unreal any attempt to glorify the dawn; as satire, it makes seem naive any insistence on seeing only glory in the dawn. Swift's view of eighteenth-century London is not flattering, but it is instructive.

Another poem among Swift's best, and the one he himself preferred according to comments he made about it in his Journal to Stella, has also to do with the city. "A Description of a City Shower" is in the opinion of one critic, Brendan O. Hehir, a form of a "city georgic" and thus a mock-georgic, though not necessarily one directed against the genre and its exemplars (Vergil and his originals and Dryden and

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Poems, I, 136.
his translations of Vergil). The "import" of the poem in Hehir's estimation is "primarily an oblique denunciation of cathartic doom upon the corruption of the city"—the "Devoted" in the sense of "doomed" Town. He quotes Addison to support his position: "Where the Prose-writer tells us plainly what ought to be done, the Poet often conceals the Precept in a Description." Any description is a critical comment because its creator must by necessity be selective in his use of detail. But to read a "denunciation of cathartic doom" into his poem is certainly to exaggerate its message.

Indeed, Maurice Johnson takes a different view from that of Hehir. He claims that the last three lines of the poem "give the show away" and quotes Swift to support his point: "I was so angry at these corruptions [Dryden's favorite Alexandrines and triplet-rhymes] that above twenty-four years ago I banished them all by one triplet, with the Alexandrine, upon a very ridiculous subject." According to Johnson, the poem has three levels: it is a description of what a rainstorm was like in eighteenth-century London, it is a criticism of all "romantic" and all "dishonest" description of nature, and it is a parody of the afore mentioned poetic style of Dryden.

But reading the lines themselves is, as always, more entertaining and enlightening than reading criticism of them. As is to be expected with Swift, the lines contain a run of realistic detail, which shows the richness of Swift's awareness:

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10 "Meaning of Swift's 'Description of a City Shower,'" ELH, XXVII (1960), 194-207.

11 Sin of Wit, pp. 85-86.
CAREFUL Observers may fortell the Hour
(By sure Prognosticks) when to dread a Show'r:
While Rain depends, the pensive Cat gives o'er
Her Frolicks, and pursues her Tail no more.
Returning Home at night, you'll find the Sink
Strike your offended Sense with double Stink.
If you be wise, then go not far to Dine,
You'll spend in Coach-hire more than save in Wine.
A coming Show'r your shooting Corns presage,
Old Aches throb, your hollow Tooth will rage.
Sauntering in Coffee-house in Dulman seen;
He damns the Climate, and complains of Spleen. 12

NOW in contiguous Drops the Flood comes down,
Threat'ning with Deluge this Devoted Town.
To Shops in crowds the dagged Females fly,
Pretend to cheapen Goods, but nothing buy.
The Templer spruce, while ev'ry Spout's a-broach,
Stays 'till it's fair, yet seems to call a Coach.
The tuck'd-up Sempstress walks with hasty Strides,
While Streams run down her oil'd Umbrella's Sides.
Here various Kinds by various Fortunes led,
Commence Acquaintance underneath a Shed.
Triumphant Tories, and desponding Whigs,
Forget their Feuds, and join to save their Wigs.
Box'd in a Chair the Beau impatient sits,
While Spouts run clatt'ring o'er the Roof by Fits;
And ever and anon with frightful Din
The Leather sounds, he trembles from within. 13

NOW from all Parts the swelling Kennels flow,
And bear their Trophies with them as they go.
Filth of all Hues and Odours seem to tell
What Street they sail'd from, by their Sight and Smell.
They, as each Torrent drives, with rapid Force
From Smithfield, or St. Pulchre's shape their Course,
And in huge Confluent join at Snow-Hill Ridge,
Fall from the Conduit prone to Holborn-Bridge.
Sweepings from Butchers Stalls, Dung, Guts, and Blood,
Drown'd Puppies, stinking Sprats, all drench'd in Mud,
Dead Cats and Turnip-Tops come tumbling down the Flood. 14

12 Poems, I, pp. 136-137 (lines 1-12).
13 Poems, I, 138-139 (lines 31-46).
14 Poems, I, 139 (lines 53-63).
These lines possess much of poetic merit, as Maurice Johnson points out. Almost every one contains alliteration and assonance. For example, note the repetition of the "r" sounds and the "o" sounds in the first line, the "s" sounds in the second. Line three contains a repetition of syllable in "depends" and "pensive," and line thirty-nine a repetition of the word "various," devices which serve to tie the individual lines together. Swift makes good use of the iambic pentameter couplet to present what is basically a narrative, expressed in short, pithy phrasing, which makes the lines flow rapidly like the current of the rain water in the gutters they describe. The diction of the lines is again prosaic and concrete, for the most part made up of one- and two-syllable words, with occasional three-syllable words, such as "Prognosticks," "contiguous," and "Triumphant." Since it is basically a narrative, the poem is almost entirely one of statement, the word "Trophies" in line fifty-four coming as close to being metaphorical as any used. Again, the occurrence of syntax inversion in the lines—such as in "A coming Show'r your shooting Corns presage"—makes the reader cognizant that he is reading poetry and not prose.

Rather than being denunciative, the tone of the poem is wryly humorous. Amusing is Swift's recollection of the effect of the weather on a person's physical state and emotional outlook. Precise is his psychological insight into the women who, desiring only to get in out of the rain, enter a shop pretending to be interested in its goods, too vain to let the mere weather seem to curtail their activities; into the lawyer who though short of funds attempts to appear readily able to hire a coach; into the beau frustrated from his
getting to his "Fav'rite," frightened by the force of the storm.

Keen, too, is Swift's perception of how unexpected events can make strange acquaintances and of how the vital importance of affairs of state evaporate when personal well-being is threatened. In this poem, Swift pictures his people not as corrupt beings but as vain, very human personalities. And the "Filth of all Hues and Odours" which flow through the gutters come not from streets full of abject decay and depravation but from streets honestly dirty. Nature is not taking retribution from the city but merely disrupting its daily intercourse.

Not all of Swift's verse lends itself to interpretation as a blast at corrupt humanity. The following lines from "On the Little House by the Church Yard of Castleknock," though they may contain a veiled complaint that a vicar should have only a tiny building to use as a vestry, are humorous and entertaining without castigating anyone:

WHOEVER pleaseth to enquire,
Why yonder Steeple wants a Spire,
The Gray old Fellow Poet Joe
The Philosophic Cause will shew.

Once, on a Time a Western Blast,
At least twelve Inches overcast,
Reckoning Roof, Weather Cock and all,
Which came with a prodigious Fall;
And tumbling topsy-turvy round
Light with its Bottom on the Ground. 15

The Vicar once a Week creeps in,
Sits with his Knees up to his Chin;
Here combs his Notes, and takes a Whet,
Till the small ragged Flock is met.
A Traveller, who by did pass,
Observed the Roof behind the Grass;
On Tiptoe stood and rear'd his Snout,
And saw the Parson creeping out;

15 Poems, I, 125-126 (lines 1-12).
Was much surpriz'd to see a Crow
Venture to build his Nest so low.... 16

Again is demonstrated Swift's effective use of the four-beat iambic line in rhymed couplets. Though some of the lines tend to read with a sing-song lilt, as four-beat lines often do, Swift frequently managed to alter their rhythmic flow. Note the variance in the fall of the caesura in the first five lines. In lines one, two, and four, the caesura splits the third iambic foot rather than separating the second foot from the third. In line three the entire metrical pattern is broken, with emphasis falling on "gray," "old," "Fel-," "Po-," and "Joe"—the line having five beats instead of four; and light pauses are felt after "gray," "old," and "Poet." Line five has yet a different pattern. It begins on an accented beat, and then, because of the position of the caesura, continues with what amounts to an anapestic foot. Two iambic feet then complete the line. Line seven, to look at one other line, like line three, has five beats, taking emphasis on "Reck-" on "Roof," on "Wea-" on "Cock," and on "all." Two strong caesuras are felt in that line, after "Roof" and after "Cock." For a merely occasional poet, Swift managed to demonstrate surprising control of metrical and rhythmical variety in his lines.

In the foregoing poem Swift is obviously attempting simply to be humorous. In line twenty-three of the poem can be found an example of an inversion of syntax which is awkward—"A Traveller, who by did pass." Yet in so being, it serves to emphasize the lightness of the verse. And the use of "Snout" for "nose" in line twenty-five to get

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16 Poems, I, 126 (lines 19-28).
a rhyme with "out" also makes fully evident the playfulness of the lines.

Much of Swift's verse, then, can be read profitably for humorous entertainment, for parody of conventional poetic form and poetic language of his day, for satire directed against genteel society and mankind in general, and for insights into the complex personality of the writer himself. It is successful as poetry both in its technique and in its content. A charge that it lacks variety and breadth in either area can be refuted, as investigation shall show.
Most of the chief stylistic features of Swift's verse have previously been mentioned. His lines are, in the first place, thoroughly alliterative and assonant. Secondly, though many are four-beat lines, which can easily become metronomic and monotonous to read, they frequently offer interruptions in their metrical and rhythmic patterns, and thus demonstrate variety. Thirdly, they are characterized by numerous syntactical inversions, which differentiate them from lines of simple prose. But like lines of simple prose, their diction is, for the most part, plain, elementary, and concrete rather than highly connotative, as what is termed poetic diction is usually expected to be. Finally, because their diction is plain, Swift's lines are ones of easily comprehended statement rather than of abstruse symbolic imagery.

Even though Swift made extensive use of the four-beat iambic couplet, he did not confine himself to it. The first verse form he attempted to use, the free ode, was awkward for him; but with the second he chose, the iambic pentameter couplet, he was successful, particularly in "A Description of the Morning" and "A Description of a City Shower." A variety of yet other forms can be found in his verse, however.

For example, in a few poems Swift used a four-line stanza, rhyming abab, such as in "The Progress of Beauty":

55
When first Diana leaves her Bed  
Vapors and Steams her Looks disgrace,  
A frouzy dirty colour'd red  
Sits on her cloudy wrinckled Face.

But by degrees when mounted high  
Her artificiall Face appears  
Down from her Window in the Sky,  
Her Spots are gone, her Visage clears.

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Occasionally, he used the ballad stanza, with the same rhyme scheme:

THE glass, by lovers nonsense blurr'd,  
Dims and obsctires our sight:  
So when our passions Love hath stirr'd,  
It darkens Reason's Light.

Also, he made use of irregular verse patterns and rhyme schemes:

THE walls of this Town  
Are full of renown,  
And strangers delight to walk round 'em  
But, as for the dwellers,  
Both buyers and sellers,  
For me, you may hang 'em, or drown 'em.

Such irregular patterns resulted especially where he set words to music:

(To the Tune of the Cutpurse.)

ONCE on a time, as old Stories rehearse,  
A Fryer would needs show his Talent in Latin;  
But was sorely put to't in the midst of a Verse,  
Because he could find no word to come pat in.

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1 Poems, I, 226 (lines 1-8).

2 "Written upon Windows at Inns, in ENGLAND," Poems, II, 402.

3 "Another, in CHESTER," Poems, II, 403.
Then all in the Place
He left a void Space,
And so went to Bed in a desperate Case.
When, Behold the next Morning, a wonderful Riddle,
He found it was strangely fill'd in the Middle.

Cho. Let Censuring Criticks then think what they list on't,
Who would not Write Verses with such an assistant.4

Still other forms occur. Note the irregularly metered doggerel
couplet used in "Mrs. Harris's Petition," one of the most unusual and
entertaining of Swift's poems:

So when I went to put up my Purse, as God would have
it, my Smock was unript.
And, instead of putting it into my Pocket, down it slipt:
Then the Bell rung, and I went down to put my Lady
to Bed,
And, God knows, I thought my Money as safe as
my Maidenhead.5

Note, too, the two-beat line of "My Lady's Lamentation":

SURE never did man see
A wretch like poor Nancy,
So Teaz'd day and night
By a Dean and a Knight;
To punish my sins,
Sir Arthur begins,
And gives me a wipe
With Skinny and Snipe.6

Then, "To the Earl of P-b-w" has a three-lined, triple-rhymed stanza:

MORDANTO fills the Trump of Fame,
The Christian World his Deeds proclaim,
And Prints are crowded with his Name.

4"Lady B- B-" [who filled in the space], Poems, I, 76-77. (stanza I).
5Poems, I, 69 (lines 8-11).
6Poems, III, 851-852 (lines 1-8).
In Journeys he out-rides the Post,
Sits up till Midnight with his Host,
Talks Politicks, and gives the Toast.  

From these few examples can be concluded that, indeed, Swift was in no way confined to the tetrameter couplet. The variety of his talent in writing verse is evident.

Yet probably the dominant feature of his verse is its end rhyme. Since English is a rhyme-poor language, Swift often found himself having to stretch his ingenuity to get rhymes; and some of the rhyming pairs he came up with are amazing. Because his verse is intended to parody, to vex, or merely to entertain, their outlandishness adds to rather than detracts from the total effect of his efforts. As examples of his often surprising rhymes, note these from the lines just quoted: "round 'em" with "drown 'em"; "Latin" with "pat in"; "list on't" with "assistant"; "man see" with "Nancy." Note these, too, all from "An Epistle to a Lady," which has previously been quoted from:

If I always seem to dull t'ye;  
I can solve the Diffi---culty.

You, like some acute Philosopher,  
Ev'ry Fault have drawn a Gloss over....

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7 **Poems**, II, 397-398 (lines 1-6).
8 **Poems**, II, 628-638.
Horses, thus, let Jockeys judge else,
Switches better guide than Cudgels.

... Talk with Sense, what'ler you please on,
Learn to relish *Truth* and *Reason*.

These unusual rhymes are predominantly feminine. However, the vast majority of Swift's rhymes are masculine, contributing to the vigor of his line. A glance at the passage of his poetry so far included in this paper will verify this fact.

Certainly Swift was no accomplished master of nor innovator in the techniques of English poetry; he did not attempt to be. The Muse of inspiration he cast off in a puff after endeavoring in vain to write earnest, polished poetry in the best accepted modes. Perhaps having lacked the talent, he more importantly lacked the incentive to gain rank with the renowned. As Rowse states, he was more intent on being a gentleman. His awareness of "things as they were" and his insistence on man's moral responsibility caused him to reject and denounce visionary and evasive reverie. Yet he appreciated that good poetry could be written, in accordance with Pope's definition of "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed":

> In POPE, I cannot read a Line,
> But with a Sigh, I wish it mine:
> When he can in one Couplet fix
> More Sense than I can do in Six.

Unusual genius, he realized, was required to write great poetry:

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12*An Essay on Man,* line 298.

13*"Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,“* Poems, II, 555 (lines 47-50).
Say Britain, cou'd you ever boast,—  
Three Poets in an Age at most?  

One of three he was not; and he was honest enough with himself not to be one who

...where his Genius least inclines.  
Absurdly blends his whole Designs.  

His vow was to "make sin and folly bleed." Developing a style of his own, adapting techniques which came natural to him, Swift pursued his task in a casual, everyday manner. But the skill he demonstrates sets him far above the mere occasional turner-of-phrase. A composer of some two hundred fifty or more poems, Swift deserves stature as a poet if only on the basis of his distinct individuality.

16 "..."twas affirm'd, he sometimes dealt in Rhime..."; "The Author upon Himself," Poems, I, 193 (line 10).  
17 Poems, I, xvii.
VIII. THE VARIETY IN THE CONTENT OF SWIFT'S VERSE

Swift's poetry, as shown, features variety in forms. Does the charge that it lacks variety, then have reference primarily to its content? Is it characteristically obscene, focused only on the ugliest of life's pockmarks, formulated by a diseased mind? Hardly! "A Description of the Morning" and "A Description of a City Shower," for instance, can only by a highly prejudiced mind be jammed into such a narrow categorical slot. Not even the ribaldry of "The Problem" can be termed "sick"—indecorous, perhaps, but not for a gentleman who was a "man's man." His own words on himself may be rationalization, a playing down of his excesses; yet they state much that is true:

S—had the Sin of Wit no venial Crime...  

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"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... "

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1Quintana, The Mind and Art, p. 36.
2"The Author upon Himself," Poems, I, 193 (line 9).
"PERHAPS I may allow, the Dean
"Had too much Satyr in his Vein;
"And seem'd determined not to starve it,
"Because no Age could more deserve it."

"True genuine Dulness mov'd his Pity,
"Unless it offer'd to be witty.
"Those, who their Ignorance confess'd,
"He ne'er offended with a Jest."

The most damaging criticism that can be leveled at Swift as a poet is that his "moral View" is expressed only in platitudes which offer little usable direction. He felt communion with those "who their Ignorance confess'd" who were "fix'd to combat fate / With those two pow'rful swords, Submission and Humility," who possessed "common Breeding, common Sense." Such a delineation of the good men, however earnest and sincere, can unfortunately not get beyond the vagueness of words; it has little to furnish as guidance for shaping the complexity of minute and multitudinous human experience.

However, Swift's age was not troubled by the inadequacy of words as is the twentieth century. It had not yet been driven to abandon the world outside man himself as a realm for exploration in search of meaning and order. It was not fully self-conscious, at least to the extent that it examined its self-consciousness in its literature. That compulsion is a twentieth-century phenomenon resulting from world-wide catastrophes experienced only in the twentieth century. Swift's language probably meant something to him, and to his readers; at least both thought it did.

Because of the vagueness of his language, Swift's poetry does not define his inner turbulence; but it does reflect it. One is forced to read between the lines to get a sharp picture of him; but that one can do. The writer of poems which have made some readers wince, Swift hardly exemplified the docility which the terms "Submission" and "Humility" suggest. As active and as forthright as was his mind and judgment, he was not one to be tolerant and civil toward persons whose discernment and mental vigor did not equal his. His recognition of the paradoxical nature of the "fate" he confronted is evident in his envisioning "Submission" and "Humility" as "pow'rful swords," weapons of "combat." Before his doubt, before the complexity of his human experience, before his own limitations as a human being, he could be humble and submissive. Before a mankind that was incognizant of those conditions, he could not be. At it he could but hurl his "venomous arrow" of scorn.

At least a sense of the principles and the attitudes with which Swift "combated fate" can be gained from his poetry. Though he may have gone insane at the end of his life, his condition had contributing causes.\(^5\) Almost seventy-eight when he died, Swift "combated fate" for a good share of years. As has been seen in "A Description of a City Shower," for example, Swift had the alert, open eye of the realist;

\(^5\)"On Death," lines 81-84.

Poor Gentleman, he droops apace,
You plainly find it in his Face;
That old Vertigo in his Head,
Will never leave him, till he's dead [ ]
yet his awareness of the ugly and the unsavory in life did not cause him to wallow continually in despondency, as previously pointed out by the critics looked at. His observation of "Triumphant Tories, and desponding Whigs" joining "to save their Wigs," and his notation of "Dead Cats and Turnip-Tops...tumbling down the Flood," show that he looked at life with a sense of humor, and not a merely cynical one. The richness and the robustness of his humor is evident in this poem, "Clever Tom Clinch going to be hanged":

AS clever Tom Clinch, while the Rabble was bawling,
Rode stately through Holbourn, to die in his Calling;
He stopt at the George for a Bottle of Sack,
And promis'd to pay for it when he'd come back.
His Waistcoat and Stockings, and Breeches were white,
His Cap had a new Cherry Ribbon to ty't.
The Maids to the Doors and the Balconies ran,
And said, lack-a-day! he's a proper young Man.
But, as from the Windows the Ladies he spy'd,
Like a Beau in the Box, he Bow'd low on each Side;
And when his last Speech the loud Hawkers did cry,
He swore from his Cart, it was all a damn'd lye.
The Hangman for Pardon fell down on his Knee;
Tom gave him a Kick in the Guts for his Fee,
Then said, I must speak to the People a little,
But I'll see you all damn'd before I will whittle.
My honest Friend Wild, may he long hold his Place.
He lengthen'd my Life with a whole Year of Grace.
Take Courage, dear Comrades, and be not afraid,
Nor slip this Occasion to follow your Trade.
My Conscions is clear, and my Spirits are calm.
And thus I go off without Pray'r-Book or Psalm,
Then follow the Practice of clever Tom Clinch,
Who hung like a Hero, and never would flinch."

6Poems, II, 399-400.
In these lines, obvious parody of the heroic in poetry, Swift reveals a respect for the person who is true to his own individuality regardless of the price he must ultimately pay. The same attitude is reflected in these lines on himself:

"Fair LIBERTY was all his Cry; 
"For her he stood prepar'd to die;  
"For her he boldly stood alone;  
"For her he often expos'd his own. [7]

And in these:

"Of no Man's Greatness was afraid, 
"Because he sought for no Man's Aid. [8]

Even his well-known poem "Day of Judgment," written late in his life, shows his independence of spirit and his loyalty to his own judgment, however it might have isolated him from the greater part of humanity. Human frailty, pride, pretense, and conceit remained his targets of ridicule.

WITH a Whirl of Thought oppress'd,  
I sink from Reverie to Rest.  
An horrid Vision seiz'd my Head.  
I saw the graves give up their Dead.  
Jove, arm'd with Terrors, butst the Skies,  
And Thunder roars, and Light'ning flies!  
Amaz'd, confus'd, its Fate Unknown,  
The World stands trembling at his Throne.  
While each pale Sinner hangs his Head,  
Jove, nodding, shook the Heav'n's, and said,  "Offending Race of Human Kind,  
By Nature, Reason, Learning, blind;  
You who thro' Pride step'd aside,  
And you who never fell—thro' Pride;

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8 "On Death," lines 327-328.
You who in different Sects have sham'm'd,
And come to see each other damn'd;
(So Some Folks told you, but they knew
No more of Jove's Designs than you)
The World's mad Business now is o'er,
And I resent these Pranks no more.
I to such Blockheads set my Wit!
I damn such Fools!—Go, go, you're bit. 9

These lines are too robust to have been composed by a demented mind. Swift is still but making man's "sin and folly bleed": those who pretend to too much knowledge and certainty remain the object of his indignation. In the thoroughness of the damnation lies humor; for actually, Swift knew and cherished the friendship of a number of persons, as these lines about himself indicate:

"In Exile with a steady Heart,
"He spent his life's declining Part;
"Where, Folly, Pride, and Faction sway,
"Remote from ST. JOHN, POPE, and Gay." 10

The "Exile" mentioned in the above lines was Swift's retirement to Ireland after the political party with which he had allied himself, the Tories, fell from power in England. Soon after his arrival in Ireland, he wrote the following lines, perhaps the most despondent of any in the collection of his poems:

IN SICKNESS

'Tis true,—then why should I repine,
To see my Life so fast decline?
But, why obscurely here alone?
Where I am neither lov'd nor known.
My State of Health none care to Learn;
My Life is here no Soul's Concern.

9 Poems, II, 578-579.
And, those with whom I now converse,  
Without a Tear will tend my Herse.  
Remov'd from kind Arbuthnot's Aid,  
Who knows his Art but not his Trade;  
Preferring his Regard for me  
Before his Credit or his Fee.  
Some formal Visits, Looks, and Words,  
What mere Humanity affords,  
I meet perhaps from three or four,  
From whom I once expected more;  
Which those who tend the Sick for pay  
Can act as decently as they.  
But, no obliging, tender Friend  
To help at my approaching End,  
My Life is now a Burthen Grown  
to others, e'er it be my own.

Ye formal Weepers for the Sick,  
In your last Offices be quick:  
And spare my absent Friends the Grief  
To hear, yet give me no Relief;  
Expir'd To-day, entomb'd To-morrow,  
When known, will save a double Sorrow.

The ungenerous mind might consider the suffering expressed in these lines justly deserved by its bearer for his own failure to demonstrate in his writings "What mere Humanity affords"; perhaps even a note of whimpering can be detected. Nevertheless, a genuine loneliness touches them, indicating both that his friends meant much to Swift and that he knew and could express emotion other than disgust, scorn, and indignation.

Indeed, even appreciation and affection are conveyed in these strangely moving lines from "Stella's Birth-day" (1720-1721), in which an unlikely analogy is drawn between Stella and a comfortable old inn. That the lines should be moving in spite of Swift's

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11 Poems, I, 203-204.
frankness about the appearance of Stella's face, and in spite of the
restraint in comparing a woman to an inanimate building, is indication
of the sincerity of the tribute intended:

All Travellers at first incline
Where'er they see the fairest Sign,
And if they find the Chambers neat,
And like the Liquor and the Meat
Will call again and recommend
The Angel-Inn to ev'ry Friend:
And though the Painting grows decay'd
The House will never lose it's Trade;
Nay, though the treach'rous Rascal Thomas
Hangs a new Angel two doors from us
As fine as Dawber's Hands can make it
In hopes that Strangers may mistake it,
They think it both a Shame and Sin
To quit the true old Angel-Inn.

Now, this is Stella's Case in Fact;
An Angel's Face, a little crack't;
(Could Poets or could Painters fix
How Angels look at thirty six)
This drew us in at first to find
In such a Form an Angel's Mind
And ev'ry Virtue now supplyes
The fainting Rays of Stella's Eyes:
See, at her levee crowding Swains
Whom Stella freely entertains
With Breeding, Humor, Wit, and Sense,
And puts them to so small Expence,
Their Minds so plentifully fills,
And makes such reasonable Bills
So little gets for what she gives
We really wonder how she lives;
And, had her Stock been less, no doubt
She must have long ago run out.  12

The following lines, too, also to Stella, show not only Swift's
appreciation of her concern and care for him but also full awareness
of his own contrary behavior:

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12 Poems, II, 734-735 (lines 1-32).
Ungrateful, since to her I owe
That I these pains can undergo.
She tends me, like an humble slave;
And, when indecently I rave,
When out my brutish passions break,
With gall in ev'ry word I speak,
She, with soft speech, my anguish cheers,
Or melts my passions down with tears:
Although 'tis easy to descry
She wants assistance more than I;
Yet seems to feel my pains alone,
And is a Stoic in her own.

Whatever base returns you find
From me, Dear Stella, still be kind.
In your own heart you'll reap the fruit,
Tho' I continue still a brute.
But when I once am out of pain,
I promise to be good again...

The fact that the poet who wrote the above lines is the same poet who wrote the lines of "The Problem" testifies to the variety in the content of his verse. Swift's mind was not pathologically narrow in its focus; his interests as a writer of verse were not severely limited. To demonstrate that Swift exhibits variety both in the form and in the content of his poetry is to make the significant point that he was undeniably a deep and complex personality who defies any neat and easy categorization. Swift's poetry is not more than it is because he early gave up his attempts to attack with ardor the difficulties of creating it. He had not the necessary inspiration; he found the efforts unrewarding. Yet in the over two hundred casual verses he wrote, he shows extensive talent and reflects, as a poet should, the workings of an active mind on its experience.

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IX. THE POET SWIFT: CONCLUDING PICTURE

The full range of subject matter in Swift's poems has not been documented in this paper. His riddles and his political satires, for instance (some of the latter too topical to be readily appreciated or understood) have, among other categories of his poems, not been touched upon. What has been attempted is a demonstration that the breadth of his subject matter is considerable. As has been shown, the variety in the content of his poems extends from a description of morning breaking upon eighteenth-century London, to thoughts on his illness, to an account of a man going to be hanged. What was attempted has been accomplished.

However, no examination of the group of poems which have so disturbed the critics Murry, Van Doren, and Lawrence (who in the work of his referred to only uses Swift as an example to support a point and does not in this case actually merit the distinction "critic") has yet been made. These commentators on Swift have not been able to ignore this group of poems, as Marius Bewley suggests be done. Consequently, some endeavor must be made to estimate the justice both of their concern and disgust with these poems and of the influence that disgust has had on their total evaluation of Swift as a poet.

Five poems, which deal with love and with the naked woman, are usually included in that group of Swift's most offensive poems. They are "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," "Cassimius and Peter," "The Lady's Dressing Room," "The Progress of Beauty," and "Strephon"
and Chloe. The last of these is a poem about a wedding night. For such lines as these, about Chloe, has it been found distasteful:

Her dearest Comrades never caught her
Squat on her Hams, to make Maid's water.
...
At Country Dances, not a Nose
Could in the Dog-Days smell her Toes. 1

The lines of the poem become even more intimate, however, though even Swift himself recognized limits of sorts:

Strephon had long perplex'd his Brains,
How with so high a Nymph he might
Demean himself the Wedding-Night;
For, as he view'd his Person round,
Mere mortal Flesh was all he found:
His Hand, his Neck, his Mouth, and Feet
Were duly washt to keep 'em sweet;
(With other Parts that shall be nameless,
The Ladies else might think me shameless.)
The weather and his Love were hot;
And should he struggle; I know what—
Why let it go, if I must tell it—
He'll sweat, and then the Nymph may smell it. 2

Perhaps the poem is unnecessarily frank; yet an attempt can be made to excuse it on the grounds 1) that it is unquestionably witty, and 2) that it has a moral—as follows:

Fair Decency, celestial Maid,
Descend from Heav'n to Beauty's Aid;
Though Beauty may beget Desire,
'Tis thou must fan the Lover's Fire;
For Beauty, like supreme Dominion,
Is best supported by Opinion;
If Decency brings no Supplies,
Opinion fails, and Beauty dies. 3

1 Poems, II, 584 (lines 17-18, 23-23).
2 Poems, II, 586 (lines 72-84).
3 Poems, II, 590-591 (lines 219-226).
Just what Swift meant by "Decency" he indicates in these lines of advice in the poem:

Now, Ponder well ye Parents dear; 
Forbid your Daughters guzzling Beer; 
And make them ev'ry afternoon
Forbear their Tea, or drink it soon;
That, e'er to Bed they venture up,
They may discharge it ev'ry Sup;
If not; they must in evil Flight
Be often forc'd to rise at Night,
Keep them to wholesome Food confin'd,
Nor let them taste what causes Wind... 
Since Husbands get behind the Scene,
The Wife should study to be clean;
Nor give the smallest Room to guess
The Time when Wants of Nature press... 4

Startling though the poem is, it has a point—and a sound point. But is it one fit to be treated in poetry? Yes, if the poet wishes to deflate any transcendent value assigned poetry; and Swift found little not deserving of deflation—neither poetry, nor civility. Yes, if he is insistent upon making the point that love in reality is not as glamorous as it is often made to seem.

To examine the others of Swift's strong poems is not necessary. Most certainly Swift is excessive in them. (But how keen is his eye for detail!) Yet to insist that he did not recognize his own exaggeration is to be unfair to the man. That of these lines is obvious:

With gentlest Touch, she next explores
Her Shankers, Issues, running Sores
Effects of many a sad Disaster... 5

4Poems, II, 587-588 (lines 115-124, 137-140).
5nA Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," Poems, II, 582 (lines 29-31).
Surrounded with a Hundred Stinks... 6

Certainly Swift was intelligent enough to see it. He had enough control of his "loathing" that he could tell when it got out of hand. The fact is explicit in his consciousness of himself in these lines about himself, from "To Stella," previously quoted: 7

...when indecently I rave,
When out my brutish passions break,
With gall in ev'ry word I speak...

And these on himself, also quoted previously: 8

"PERHAPS I may allow, the Dean
"Had too much Satyr in his Vein... "

The poems were published during his lifetime. 9 They cannot be defended as written for only select consumption. They constitute part of the "too much" of which Swift himself speaks; they are expression of his "brutish passions," with "gall in ev'ry word." At the extreme they mark, his nettle thrust too deep. "But why complain, or excuse? Things are what they are." He wrote them.

The poet Swift was a Christian, with doubts; but he continued to have faith in what he "ne'er" could "hope to see." No blasphemy is to be noted in his poetry. He was always on the side of "Jove," especially in his misanthropic act of damning all humanity—most of it, anyway. This misanthropy was based on a firm belief in man's

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6 "Nymph," 583 (line 48).
7 Chap. VIII, p. 71.
8 Chap. VIII, p. 64.
9 See Harold William's notes to each in Poems.
moral responsibility that directed any and all complaints with life at no one but mankind, its sin, and its follies. These were on Swift "an Usurpation," which he bore as best he could with "Innocence and Resolution." What is primarily vexing about the man is that severe as was his castigation of people, the criteria by which he judged is obscured in words which today retain little meaning. The only point of his thinking that is clear is that faced with an existence which was, and remains for us today, crowded and perplexing, so much so that he could have his doubts about his Christian belief, Swift was annoyed by and distrusted persons who had the answers. Those "who their Ignorance confess'd" he accepted as brethren. With those who did not he was indignant.

What can be found in his poetry is the casual, occasional pouring of his everyday experience into artistic molds. That the finished products have some rough edges both by substance and design only adds to their novelty. They evidence a resiliency, a toughness, and a prickliness which can only be admired. Their style is talented and individual.

Swift's poetry represents an extreme which deserves attention. With its realism, pointedness, simplicity, robustness (as in part noted by Aitken)—even it ribaldry, perhaps nastiness—it has merit if only as a foil against which to measure other English verse, as the exception which proves the rule of greatness by which other poets' works are judged. Furthermore, since misanthropy has been and remains, as Rowse points out, a fit subject for literature—and a fit subject because it

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10 See quotation at end of Chap. II, p. 17.
is a widely accepted attitude—Swift's expression of it can delight many readers today. Even if much of it is topical and personal, in its quantity and variety is much entertainment. Its being personal verse is, in fact, to its benefit; for what interests readers today is the personal. If it lacks variety in tone, that tone it does maintain has a modern flavor—a mixture of indignation, resignation, and stubborn self-reliance, with even a touch of self-consciousness.\[11\]

Though Rowse will probably never gain wide support for his statement that Swift is "one of the greatest English poets," English poetry would be less without Swift's contribution.

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\[11\] Noticeable in the lines of the poem "To Stella" and best evidenced by the numerous lines written about himself.


Hehir, Brendan O. "Meaning of Swift's 'Description of a City Shower,'" ELH, XXVII (Sept., 1960), 194-207.


