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SWIFT'S STYLE, THE NAKEDNESS OF THE HOUYHNNHNS, AND THE DECEITS OF RHETORIC

David Venturo

A second-generation Augustan, Jonathan Swift shares the suspicions of rhetoric articulated by such first-generation predecessors as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Samuel Butler, author of *Hudibras*. Swift advocates a simple, plain style and endorses language as a vehicle for conveying useful information clearly and precisely. As Master Houyhnhnm explains to Gulliver, "the Use of Speech [is] to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts."¹ Yet, in practice, the style of Swift's prose and poetry, even when plain, is rarely simple and unambiguous.² He often speaks indirectly, through irony and parody, and delights in satirizing his

¹ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Herbert Davis, intro. Harold Williams. Vol. 11 of *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (1726; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959), 240.

² On the challenges of interpreting Swift's rhetoric in *Gulliver's Travels* alone, see Richard H. Rodino, "Splendide Mendax": Authors, Characters, and Readers in *Gulliver's Travels*, in *Reading Swift: Papers from the Second Münster Symposium*, ed. Richard H. Rodino and Hermann J. Real, with the assistance of Helgard Stöver-Leidig (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967–84).

opponents from the inside out by creating personas whose stylistic signatures epitomize abuses of language that appall and fascinate him. Most significantly, Swift recognizes more fully than the first-generation Augustans, and perhaps more acutely than any author before or after him, the profoundly deceptive qualities of rhetoric—which might be defined as the self-conscious use of language, whether simple or complicated. As a result, Swift's style often reflects his efforts to dramatize and expose those very deceptions. Swift's life's work, is, arguably, a heroic struggle to force the recalcitrant medium in which he worked to confess its own lies and ambiguities.

Swift's reservations about rhetoric are similar to Hobbes's and Locke's, though ultimately more profound. Those philosophers regarded the conceited style of seventeenth-century Baroque writers not merely as bad art but as symptomatic of the same diseases of imagination that fomented civil and ecclesiastical violence at home in the English civil wars and abroad in the Thirty Years' War. Religious enthusiasm and rhetorical fervor were, for them, complementary manifestations of the same pathology. The disruptive energies of wit required the countervailing restraints of judgment to maintain discipline and order in state, church, and the arts.³

For the first generation of Augustans, the artifice of figurative language constituted a form of lying. Hobbes denounced metaphor as a device for "deceiv[ing] others,"⁴ and Locke, anticipating Master Houyhnhm, wondered how rhetoric, "that powerful instrument of Error and Deceit," could be "publicly taught, and has always been had in great Reputation."⁵ For Locke, rhetoric is nothing more than a moral, psychological, and intellectual trickster and incendiary: "all the artificial and figurative applications of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat[s]."⁶

This fear by supporters of the Restoration settlement of the subversive power of eloquence helps account for the enormous popularity during the 1660s and '70s of Samuel Butler's relentlessly anti-

³ Blanford Parker, *The Triumph of Augustan Poetics: English Literary Culture from Butler to Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2-4.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26.

⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; reprinted with corrections, 1979), 508.

⁶ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 508.

rhetorical mock-epic poem, *Hudibras*. Nine editions of part one of *Hudibras* (1662), including four piracies, were printed within a year, and a spurious second part, written by another hand, quickly went through at least three more.⁷ Part two of *Hudibras*, published in 1663, also was popular. A revised edition of parts one and two appeared in 1674, and even the less critically successful part three (1677) made it through three editions in three years.⁸ By contrast, Milton's eloquent, rhetorically complex and sophisticated Baroque epic *Paradise Lost* (1667), also, of course, handicapped by its author's reputation as a rebel and heretic, as well as its philosophically weighty subject matter, took seven years to reach its second edition.

Butler's pointedly anti-rhetorical rhetoric notably manifests itself in three features, all later appropriated by Swift: the awkward rhythms of its octosyllabic couplets, known since as Hudibrastics, its double and triple rhymes, and its deliberately debased figurative language. In addition, by immersing itself in the physical world of the here and now, and scornfully rejecting metaphysics as the realm of madness, strife, and chicanery, *Hudibras* became the perfect model for much of Swift's poetry and prose. The opening lines of *Hudibras* epitomize Butler's themes and style:

WHEN *civil* Fury first grew high,
 And men fell out they knew not why;
 When hard words, *Jealousies* and *Fears*,
 Set Folks together by the ears,
 And made them fight, like mad or drunk,
 For Dame *Religion* as for Punk,
 Whose honesty they all durst swear for,
 Though not a man of them knew wherefore:
 When *Gospel-trumpeter*, surrounded
 With long-ear'd rout, to Battel sounded,
 And Pulpit, Drum Ecclesiastick,
 Was beat with fist, instead of a stick:
 Then did Sir *Knight* abandon dwelling,
 And out he rode a Colonelling.⁹ (1-4)

⁷ John Wilders, "Introduction," in Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), xix.

⁸ Wilders, "Introduction," in Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, xx.

⁹ Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 1. Further references to *Hudibras* are cited in the text of this essay.

Here the elegance and urbanity of Milton's tetrameters in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, not to mention the polished octosyllabic couplets of such Cavalier poets as Lovelace, Carew, and Herrick are replaced by a self-consciously harsh style and corrosive skepticism designed to strip away the beautiful surface of poetic artifice to reveal the unseemly truths beneath. Butler reduces the terminology of the earnest theological debates that helped precipitate the Civil Wars to "hard words" (presumably as opposed to *difficult concepts*) and likens the impassioned disagreements themselves to a drunken brawl over a prostitute. The pulpit, once the station from which the word of God was delivered, is degraded into a battle drum (described with mock-Latinate syntactical inversion) beaten by the fists of militant preachers, and their parishioners, into a cry of hounds ("long-ear'd rout"). The eponymous hero of the poem, his name pilfered from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, is a fat, foolish Presbyterian version of Cervantes's knight-errant, Don Quixote, a ridiculous symbol of Interregnum enthusiasm who loves rhetorical figures and scholastic learning.¹⁰ The poetry advertises and mocks its own artifice, emphasizing its creation not by a divine muse, as Milton claimed, but by the fallen imagination of a mortal poet.¹¹

Swift's style, informed by the theory and practice of his early Augustan predecessors, tends to be plain and direct. "Proper Words in proper Places, makes the true Definition of a Stile," explains the person of quality, an experienced auditor of sermons, to the young clergyman in "A Letter to a Young Gentleman Lately Entered into Holy Orders."¹² To appeal to one's audience's reason, not their passions, one should write with "that Simplicity, without which no human Performance can arrive to any great Perfection."¹³ The Brobdingnagians and Houyhnhnms follow this recommendation. In Brobdingnag, Gulliver recalls, the "Stile is clear, masculine, and smooth, but not Florid, for they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary Words, or using

¹⁰ Butler, *Hudibras*, see especially Part 1, Canto 1, lines 51–118.

¹¹ Earl Miner, *The Restoration Mode from Milton to Dryden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 129–57; Parker, *Triumph of Augustan Poetics*, 25–60; John Farrell, *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 174–82; and David Ventura, "Sense Experience from Milton and Hobbes to Keats," in *The Sensational Centuries*, ed. Kevin L. Cope and Robert C. Leitz III (New York: AMS Press, forthcoming).

¹² Jonathan Swift, *Irish Tracts, 1720–1723, and Sermons*, ed. Louis Landa. Vol. 9 of *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), 65.

¹³ Jonathan Swift, *Irish Tracts, 1720–1723, and Sermons*, 68.

various Expressions."¹⁴ Because the Brobdingnagians believe that all learning must "be useful in Life," they restrict themselves to the study of "Morality, History, Poetry, and Mathematicks."¹⁵ They reject such scholastic disciplines as metaphysics as a waste of time: "as to Ideas, Entities, Abstractions, and Transcendentals, I could never drive the least Conception into their Heads."¹⁶ Moreover, exercising their reason more carefully than most nations, they suffer from fewer differences of opinion, and therefore publish fewer, as well as shorter, books. The king's library, the largest in the country, "doth not amount to above a thousand Volumes."¹⁷ Even their attorneys express themselves in "the most plain and simple Terms," perhaps because all laws are restricted to twenty-two or fewer words and it is a "capital Crime" to "write a Comment upon any Law."¹⁸ Moreover, their case law is uncomplicated because the wise giants, preferring reasonableness to ingenuity, rely on few precedents.

Like the Brobdingnagians, the Houyhnhnms pursue only knowledge that can be put to use. They love nothing more than morality, instructing their young chiefly in "TEMPERANCE, Industry, Exercise, and Cleanliness."¹⁹ They understand enough medicine, especially pharmacology, to treat injuries caused by accidents, but have no need of physicians, since they suffer from none of the diseases caused by human civilization.²⁰ Being self-regulating, the Houyhnhnms have no need for law, though they convene a Grand Assembly, a kind of parliament, every four years to "inquire into the State and Condition of the several Districts," mostly to review the allocation of resources.²¹ Their astronomy suffices to allow them to calculate years and months and to understand (and thus probably not to fear) eclipses.²² They love poetry, though the subjects of their verses (rather like those in Plato's *Republic*) are limited to "exalted Notions of Friendship and Benevolence, or the Praises of those who were Victors in Races, and other bodily

¹⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 137.

¹⁵ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 136.

¹⁶ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 136.

¹⁷ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 136.

¹⁸ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 136.

¹⁹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 269.

²⁰ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 273.

²¹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 270.

²² Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 273.

Exercises."²³ Interestingly, the range of poetic genres is rather narrow thanks to the Houyhnhnms' moderating virtues. No Houyhnhnm would ever write a *carpe diem* or Petrarchan love poem, and, because they have no vices, they have no need for satire. Moreover, speculative philosophical poems such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* also do not exist in Houyhnhnmland, nor do epics celebrating war and empire, such as the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*. While the subject matter of their poetry is "exalted,"²⁴ the style, paradoxically, is precise and detailed, not grand: "the Justness of their Similes, and the Minuteness, as well as Exactness of their Descriptions, are indeed inimitable."²⁵ By contrast, literary style in Lilliput couples pomposity, as in the praise of the King in the preamble to the articles Gulliver signs to recover his liberty, with bald-faced lying, as in the celebration of the King's lenity that precedes the commission of any official atrocity.²⁶ In Laputa, Gulliver adopts the "scientific" style of his hosts, which manages to be simultaneously flat, Latinate, jargon-ridden, and redundant.

Unlike all the other nations Gulliver visits, the Houyhnhnms are illiterate and prehistoric: they "have no Letters, and consequently, their Knowledge is all traditional."²⁷ As Gulliver emphasizes, this is never disadvantageous, since the concord and simplicity of Houyhnhnm history (this isolated nation has never had any major public disagreements except what to do with the Yahoos) make it easy to memorize and transmit information from one generation to the next. Moreover, their illiteracy is perfectly consistent with their inability to lie, or as the Houyhnhnms put it, to "*sa[y] the thing which [is] not*."²⁸ If, as Hobbes and Locke contend, rhetoric encourages deceit and discord, then literacy, from Swift's point of view, must be a benchmark of moral and historical decline, not progress. Indeed, when Gulliver asserts that the Houyhnhnms "have not the least Idea of Books or Literature," we are to understand that he has entered not a backward, but a prelapsarian

²³ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 274.

²⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 274.

²⁵ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 273.

²⁶ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 72-73.

²⁷ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 273. By contrast, the Brobdingnagians "have had the Art of Printing, as well as the *Chinese*, Time out of Mind" (136).

²⁸ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 240.

society.²⁹ Since the human species already has degenerated into writing, the best it can do is follow the example of the Brobdingnagians, who limit the scribbling itch by producing as few books as possible and keeping their style clean and simple. Wit, humanity's creative faculty, is, from Swift's perspective, at best a mixed blessing; it gives us literature which may instruct and delight, but also signifies our fundamental corruption.

Thus, it is probably not surprising that the style of *Gulliver's Travels* is, for the most part, plain, flat, and circumstantial. Gulliver, after all, has absorbed the values of the Brobdingnagians and Houyhnhnms. Paradoxically, for Swift, this simple, matter-of-fact style, copied from travel writers real (William Dampier) and fictional (Robinson Crusoe), supports the illusion of verisimilitude in the book no matter how tall the tale. *Talking horses? Seventy-foot giants? A floating island? I've seen them all, just as I'm now writing to you.* Gulliver's talent for sounding as though he never has stretched the truth (indeed, he usually downplays the wonder of his experiences) helps explain the response, quoted with great amusement by Swift, of an Irish cleric whose rejection of Gulliver's "lies" betrays an uneasy suspicion that the story may be true: "A Bishop here said, that the book was full of improbable lies, and for his part, he hardly believed a word of it; and so much for Gulliver."³⁰ For Swift, even the plain style endorsed by Hobbes and Locke and practiced by the fellows of the Royal Society and the new breed of Anglican homilists led by John Tillotson and Edward Stillingfleet, is tainted by the original sin of rhetorical self-consciousness.

At other times, Swift uses this simple style exactly as Master Houyhnhnm recommends, "to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts."³¹ In the *Drapier's Letters*, for example, assuming the persona of a Dublin cloth merchant (itself, paradoxically, a fiction), Swift urges the Irish not to accept as legal tender newly minted halfpence imported from England worth only one-twelfth their face value: "Mr. WOOD made his HALF-PENCE of such *Base Metal*, and so much smaller than the *English* ones, that the *Brazier* would hardly give you above a *Penny* of good Money for a *Shilling* of his; so that this

²⁹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 235.

³⁰ Swift, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, 4 vols., ed. David Woolley (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 3:56.

³¹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 240.

sum of 108000 £ in good Gold and Silver, must be given for TRASH that will not be worth above *Eight or Nine Thousand Pounds* real Value."³²

The disparity between the worth of Wood's halfpence and the present currency is made so categorically that no one could mistake the Drapier's intentions. His simple humor, presented through concrete imagery, clinches the Drapier's argument about the inflationary effects of Wood's coinage. He comically imagines the inconvenience to Thomas Connelly, speaker of the Irish Parliament and one of Ireland's wealthiest inhabitants, in transporting the rents received from his tenants: "THEY say SQUIRE CONNOLLY has *Sixteen Thousand Pounds a Year*, now if he sends for his *Rent* to Town, *as it is likely he does*, he must have *Two Hundred and Fifty Horses* to bring up his *Half Year's Rent*, and two or three great *Cellars* in his House for Stowage."³³

Swift also uses a lean, spare style on the occasion of the death of Esther Johnson, his beloved Stella. The brief character sketch of her that he wrote in the days following her death expresses his admiration and affection without ever indulging in rhetorical excess: "She loved Ireland much better than the generality of those who owe both their birth and riches to it; and having brought over all the fortune she had in money, left the reversion of the best part of it, one thousand pounds, to Dr. Stephens's Hospital."³⁴ Swift mourns like the Houyhnhnms, keeping his grief subdued and his focus on Stella, her patriotism, and her generosity, not himself.

Swift, as an Augustan, faced an even bigger challenge in writing poetry than he did prose, because the rhetorical expectations for poetry were greater. The specific stylistic demands for each poetic genre were daunting. As Pope noted in *An Essay on Criticism*, "diff'rent *Styles* with diff'rent *Subjects* sort, / As several *Garbs* with Country, Town, and Court" (lines 322-23).³⁵ No wonder Thomas Gray remarked to a friend

³² Jonathan Swift, *The Drapier's Letters and Other Works, 1724-1724*, ed. Herbert Davis, intro. Harold Williams. Vol. 10 of *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959), 4.

³³ Swift, *Drapier's Letters and Other Works*, 7.

³⁴ Jonathan Swift, *The Miscellaneous and Autobiographical Pieces, Fragments, and Marginalia*, ed. Herbert Davis. Vol. 5 of *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959), 235-36.

³⁵ Alexander Pope, *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams. Vol. 1 of *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1969), 275.

that "[o]ur poetry... has a language peculiar to itself."³⁶ In addition, poetry was associated more with the passions than prose. Samuel Johnson put it well: "The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing."³⁷ If rhetoric was, as Locke claimed, inherently deceptive, and poetry was the most rhetorical form of writing, then Swift, whose chief goal in writing was to tell the truth, faced his greatest challenge in writing poetry, especially if "Expression is the *Dress of Thought*."³⁸ If that metaphor is correct, then style serves to cover thought (that is, to mask one's real self and intentions) as Gulliver's clothes did his naked body in Houyhnhnmland. The Houyhnhnms are surprised and puzzled by Gulliver's clothing after the sorrel nag discovers him one night sleeping naked. After all, no Houyhnhmn wears clothes. The Houyhnhnms' unself-consciousness about their own nakedness and their complete lack of any "Idea of Books or Literature," that is, their prelapsarian illiteracy, are closely related to their scrupulous veracity.³⁹

Many of Swift's best poems are, at heart, about facing reality by removing layers of poetic falsehood to expose the truth. Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's schoolmaster in *Biographia Literaria*, Swift seeks to strip away the rhetorical conventions and clichés that impede honest perception and assessment of life: "Harp? Harp? Lyre? Pen and ink, boy, you mean! Muse, boy, Muse? your Nurse's daughter, you mean! Pierian spring? Oh, 'aye! the cloister-pump, I suppose!"⁴⁰ Swift's two mock-Ars Poeticas, "On Poetry: A Rapsody" and "Directions for a Birth-day Song," share this purpose with the so-called Excremental Poems, such as "Cassinus and Peter," "Strephon and Chloe," "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," and "The Lady's Dressing Room," and the urban pastorals, including "A Description of the Morning." Swift rewrites Ovid's

³⁶ Thomas Gray, "[Letter] 103. Gray to [Richard] West, London, [8] April, Thursday [1742]," in *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, 4 vols., ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, with corrections and additions by H. W. Starr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1:192.

³⁷ Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, intro. Bertrand Bronson. Vol. 7 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, gen. ed., John Middendorf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 67.

³⁸ Alexander Pope, *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, 275. The passage is from *An Essay on Criticism*, 318.

³⁹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 234–37. For more on the Houyhnhnms' illiteracy, see Terry J. Castle, "Why the Houyhnhnms Don't Write: Swift, Satire, and the Fear of the Text," in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Frank Palmeri (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), 57–71.

⁴⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. J. Bate. Vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 10.

affectionate tale of Baucis and Philemon from the *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's first *Georgic* (in "A Description of a City Shower") as if to say, *my versions are truer to life*.⁴¹ Perhaps most daringly, Swift, the Anglican priest, replaces St. John's Revelation with his own puckish "The Day of Judgment," in which "Jove" (5), more amused than irate, reprieves on the last day the "[o]ffending Race of Human Kind" for what amount to "Pranks" (line 20), not sins.⁴² Occasionally, Swift confronts poetic falsehoods by using figurative language to expose its own deceptions, for example, with the cosmetics metaphors in "The Progress of Beauty" and "The Lady's Dressing Room." In such poems, art reveals itself as a temporary, misleading illusion, and the artist, at best, an artist-manqué. Sometimes, as in "The Progress of Poetry," Swift mocks a self-aggrandizing poetic conceit by wryly revising it to emphasize the limitations of the artist.

Perhaps most troubling for Swift is his recognition that, although there are ways of lessening one's entanglements in the rhetorical web, there is no way for fallen humanity altogether to avoid them. To write is in some degree to engage in deception. Thus, Swift is playfully blunt when addressing friends, such as Esther Johnson and Lady Anne Acheson, even when writing encomia, in order to be honest. Ultimately, there is no way out of the rhetorical bind, as "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" and the Sinon episode at the end of part four of *Gulliver's Travels* demonstrate.

In "On Poetry: A Rapsody" and "Directions for a Birth-day Song," Swift uses the persona of a poet-manqué, an "old experience'd Sinner" (line 75) in the writing trade, to instruct a young poet.⁴³ The old writer of "Directions," for example, punctures the young writer's idealized conception of poetry as a divine calling by explaining that, if one hopes to make it one's livelihood, one may be compelled to make moral concessions by turning the truth on its head:

Thus your Encomiums, to be strong,
Must be apply'd directly wrong:

⁴¹ In the case of "Baucis and Philemon," Swift is also satirizing John Dryden's translation of the tale from *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700).

⁴² Jonathan Swift, *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 2:576-79.

⁴³ Swift, *Poems*, 2:639-59 and 2:459-69. The quotation is from "On Poetry: A Rapsody."

A Tyrant for his Mercy praise,
 And Crown a Royal Dunce with Bays;
 A squinting Monkey load with charms;
 And paint a Coward fierce in arms.
 Is he to Avarice inclin'd?
 Extol him for his generous mind:
 And when we starve for want of Corn,
 Come out with Amalthea's Horn.
 For all experience this evinces
 The only art of pleasing Princes;
 For Princes love you should descant
 On Virtues which they know they want.⁴⁴ (117–30)

The bluntness of the old poet, his obvious pleasure in revealing the yawning divide between the squalid reality of kings and the poetic clichés used to butter them up, and his delight in his ability to bridge that gap, reinforce the truth of his comments. *Let me show you what writing poetry is really about*, he explains. He even shows off his wit by rhyming “princes” with the unlikely but perfect “evinces.”

In “Cassinus and Peter” and “Strephon and Chloe,” Swift unmasks the fantasies of Petrarchan and Ovidian love poetry. The young men in the poems are deluded by poetic fictions that shape their perceptions of women. Cassinus and Peter are “College Sophs of *Cambridge Growth*” whose knowledge of love, if their classical and Petrarchan clichés are any indication, comes from books of poetry.⁴⁵ Strephon, a callow bridegroom duped by similar nonsense that someone read him from a book, imagines his bride a goddess.⁴⁶ (Recall that the Houyhnhnms, by contrast, have “not the least Idea of Books or Literature,” and regard their mates as friends, not erotic deities.)⁴⁷ In both cases, witnessing the reality of women’s excretion (a subject rarely addressed in poetry) puts an end to the men’s “romantick” (meaning “naïve” and “erotic” as well as “literary”) illusions:

⁴⁴ Swift, *Poems*, 2:464. I have restored lines 127–28 to the text. Williams included them in an editorial footnote.

⁴⁵ Swift, *Poems*, 2:593.

⁴⁶ Swift, *Poems*, 2:587. See lines 100–2.

⁴⁷ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 235, 268–69.

ADIEU to ravishing Delights,
 High Raptures, and romantick Flights;
 To Goddesses so heav'nly sweet,
 Expiring Shepherds at their Feet;
 To silver Meads, and shady Bow'rs,
 Drest up with *Amaranthine* Flow'rs.⁴⁸
 (197–202)

Swift's narrator enjoys piling the clichéd fictions on top of one another, the sooner to sweep them away. "Criticism," as Samuel Johnson remarks, "disdains to chase a school-boy to his common places."⁴⁹

In "The Progress of Beauty," one of his best poems, Swift uses figurative language to attack its own fictiveness.⁵⁰ First, he calls attention to the system of analogy on which poetic conceits are constructed. Then, by poetic analogy, the very device he has set out to satirize, he mocks the struggles of the artist to conceal the truth. The narrator constructs his poem around a hackneyed trope: women are like the moon. But he pushes it to unprecedented lengths: "'Twixt earthly Femals and the Moon / All Parallels exactly run" (lines 9–10). Celia, the heroine of the poem, is an aging prostitute who "strols the Street / When sober Folks are all a-bed" (lines 103–4). To counter the ravages of disease and time, each day, before leaving her apartment, she makes up her face "By help of Pencil, Paint and Brush" (line 46). When her cosmetic labors are done, Celia stands before her mirror like an artist, viewing her living canvas, "filled with Admiration" (line 50) as "Other Painters oft adore / The Workmanship of their own Hands" (lines 51–52). By her efforts, she fashions herself into a facsimile of a Petrarchan beauty: hair, black; lips and cheeks, red; forehead and neck, white. However, though she dupes her customers with her artistry and, back home after work, goes "entire to bed, / All her Complexions safe and sound" (lines 29–30), when she awakes the next day, the colors of her makeup are disordered, "form[ing] a frightfull hideous Face" (line 24). Though the diction and syntax are simple, the stanzas describing

⁴⁸ Swift, *Poems*, 2:590.

⁴⁹ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works*, 4 vols., ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 4:181.

⁵⁰ Swift, *Poems*, 1:226–29. Further references to "The Progress of Beauty" are cited in the text of this essay.

this grotesque transformation teem with active jurisdictional, military, and topographical metaphors:

the Lilly slipp
Into the Precincts of the Rose,
And takes Possession of the Lips,
Leaving the Purple to the Nose.
The Black, which would not be confin'd
A more inferior Station seeks
Leaving the fiery red behind,
And mingles in her muddy Cheeks.
The paint by Perspiration cracks,
And falls in Rivulets of Sweat,
On either Side you see the Tracks,
While at her Chin the Conflu'ents met. (25–28, 33–40)

The narrator imagines Celia's face as a dynamic landscape subject to time, marked by flowing streams, rivers, and waterfalls. Moreover, the colors she so skillfully applied take on a life of their own and go where they will, contrary to the artist's intentions. Swift uses a metaphor drawn from the domestic art of weaving, an enterprise designed to create order, paradoxically to emphasize how nature, in the form of perspiration, undermines Celia's efforts to maintain her "artificial Face" (line 6):

A Skillfull Houswife thus her Thumb
With Spittle while she spins, anoints,
And thus the brown Meanders come
In trickling Streams betwixt her Joynts. (41–44)

Each day, Celia must repeat her artistry to re-create the illusion of beauty. But these efforts can continue only so long before nature overwhelms art. Just as the moon wanes, so must poor Celia if the poetic logic of "all Parallels" is to continue to run "exactly" (line 10). But the prostitute's waning is not (like the moon's) a temporary illusion caused by light and shadow, but a grim, irreversible biological fact. Thus, Swift forces the conceit until it breaks under the pressure of a reality different from poetic fiction. The moon will wax with its next cycle, but Celia, as a "mortal beaut[y]" (line 118), cannot, her face by the

close of the poem so grievously disfigured by syphilis that no art can hide, or medicine reverse, the effects.

For the Augustan Swift, Petrarchan conceits and Celia's makeup both represent the deceptions of art. The poet and Celia can create illusions of beauty, but they are temporary. Swift takes an ancient adage and corrects it: *Natura longa; ars brevis*. Reality keeps breaking through despite the artist's efforts to cover it with a fictional veneer. More often than not, then, for Swift, the artist (or poet) turns out to be an artist- (or poet-) *manqué*.

Indeed, Swift's concerns about the delusive qualities of rhetoric (and art) go beyond those of at least one of his Augustan predecessors, John Locke. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the philosopher, after denouncing rhetoric, reverses himself. Locke concludes that, the practice of rhetoric is morally tolerable because men willingly acquiesce to its blandishments. They "love to deceive, and be deceived," he observes, anticipating the narrator in "A Digression on Madness" from *A Tale of a Tub*.⁵¹ He concludes with a gentlemanly simile: "Eloquence, like the fair Sex, has too prevailing Beauties in it, to suffer it self ever to be spoken against."⁵² But Swift is made of sterner stuff, and in "The Progress of Beauty," "The Lady's Dressing Room," and "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," his parallel critiques of figurative language and cosmetics are reminders of his determination that art not be allowed to evade the truth. Just as he rejects different moral standards for men and women, he strives to hold rhetoric and art to the same standards of truth as life itself.⁵³

In the most surprising ways, Swift delights in emphasizing that poetry or art deceives, that its depiction of reality needs correcting, and that readers must be on guard lest they be duped by it. Sometimes, a minor adjustment to a common conceit is enough to reveal unflattering truths. In "The Progress of Poetry," for example, Swift begins with a

⁵¹ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 508. See Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub, With Other Early Works, 1696-1707*, ed. Herbert Davis. Vol. 1 of *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 108-9.

⁵² Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 508.

⁵³ On Swift's rejection of a gendered double standard, see David F. Venturo, "Concurring Opponents: Mary Wollstonecraft and Jonathan Swift on Women's Education and the Sexless Nature of Virtue," *Pope, Swift, and Women Writers*, ed. Donald C. Mell (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 192-202.

simile that likens poets to birds.⁵⁴ In so doing, he follows in a long tradition. But poets, being self-interested, aggrandize themselves as swans, nightingales, and larks—that is, birds with reputations (real or legendary) as songsters. The descendentalist Swift counters by likening poets to geese. They are indeed “Brethren of the Quill” (line 20), beginning with the physical connection between them: the pens with which eighteenth-century poets wrote commonly were made from goose quills, and so, geese played a material role in the creation of poems. Furthermore, Swift argues that both poets and geese are quiet and lazy when well fed and sing (if that is the right word) only when they are hungry:

Such is the Poet, fresh in Pay,
 (The third Night's Profits of his Play;)
 His Morning-Draughts 'till Noon can swill,
 Among the Brethren of the Quill;
 With good Roast Beef his Belly full,
 Grown lazy, foggy, fat, and dull:
 Deep sunk in Plenty, and Delight,
 What Poet e'er could take his Flight?
 Or stuff'd with Phlegm up to the Throat,
 What Poet e'er could sing a Note?
 Nor *Pegasus* could bear the Load,
 Along the high celestial Road;
 The Steed, oppress'd, would break his Girth,
 To raise the Lumber from the Earth.
 But, view him in another Scene,
 When all his drink is *Hippocrene*,
 His Money spent, his Patrons fail,
 His Credit out for Cheese and Ale;
 His Two-Year's Coat so smooth and bare,
 Through ev'ry Thread it lets in Air;
 With hungry Meals his Body pin'd,
 His Guts and Belly full of Wind;
 And, like a Jockey for a Race,
 His Flesh brought down to Flying-Case:

⁵⁴ Swift, *Poems*, 1:230–31. Further references to “The Progress of Poetry” are cited in the text of this essay.

Now his exalted Spirit loaths
 Incumbrances of Food and Cloaths;
 And up he rises like a Vapour,
 Supported high on Wings of Paper;
 He singing flies, and flying sings,
 While from below all *Grub-street* rings. (17-46)

The poem ironically reflects the Houyhnhnms' poetic ideal: "the Justness of their Similes, and the Minuteness, as well as Exactness of their Descriptions, are indeed inimitable,"⁵⁵ because in this case the simple, precise style helps degrade, rather than elevate, its subject, as in Butler's famous simile from Part 2, Canto 2, of *Hudibras*.

The Sun had long since in the Lap
 Of *Thetis*, taken out his Nap,
 And like a *Lobster* boyl'd, the *Morn*
 From *black* to *red* began to turn. (29-32)

Like Butler, Swift mixes classical myth and contemporary reality. He imagines Pegasus as a figure of speech for the art of writing poetry and as a horse that might be foundered by its bulky rider, since this horse (like a goose and other birds) has wings that cannot lift too heavy a load. The reference to Hippocrene works rather differently, with Swift emphasizing its empty fictiveness. If Pegasus is more horse than trope (despite its wings), Hippocrene is nothing but a figure of speech, since drinking from this mythical stream does nothing to quench one's bodily thirst. The absence of drink paradoxically serves as inspiration—in this case reduced to physical stimulus—for writing poems.

Swift also imagines a mock-metaphysical exaltation—a kind of literary rapture—as the poet's spirit takes wing, leaving his jockey-slim body (continuing the Pegasus metaphor) behind. Thus, Swift satirizes the concept of inspiration, taken so seriously by seventeenth-century Baroque writers. Poets are moved, he implies, by bodily needs, not the creative breath of a deity. Swift's conflation of the spiritual and the physical is an Augustan satiric gesture that may be traced back to Hobbes's *Leviathan* and his "Answer to Davenant's Preface to *Gondibert*"

⁵⁵ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 273.

via *A Tale of a Tub*. For Swift, poetic inspiration is just another manifestation of the religious enthusiasm feared and mocked by the first generation of Augustans.⁵⁶

Sometimes rather than revising a metaphor, Swift must retell the whole story. In "Phillis, or, The Progress of Love," he takes the elopement of the foolish, "romantick" Phillis with her family's butler, John, a story which in eighteenth-century romances probably would end happily (*Pamela* is part of this tradition), and plunges it back to earth like the foundered Pegasus in "The Progress of Poetry."⁵⁷ Indeed, Swift imagines the heroine of the poem behaving as she does partly because her sense of reality has been perverted by reading romances. (The young men in the Excremental Poems suffer from similar "romantick" delusions.) In his realistic retelling, however (which anticipates Fielding's comic *Shamela*), events turn out differently:

But what Adventures more befell 'um
The Muse has now not Time to ell 'um,
How Johnny wheadled, threatened, fawnd,
Till Phillis all her Trinkets pawn'd:
How oft she broke her marriage Vows
In Kindness to maintain her Spouse;
Till Swains unwholsome spoyld the Trade,
For now the Surgeon must be paid;
To whom those Perquisites are gone
In Christian Justice due to John.

When Food and Rayment now grew scarce
Fate put a Period to the Farce;
And with exact Poetick Justice;
For John is Landlord, Phillis Hostess;
They keep at Stains the old blue Boar,
Are Cat and Dog, and Rogue and Whore. (85–100)

Swift substitutes the ironic reality of "Farce" (line 96) for the wish fulfillment of Romance. Moreover, like Pope in *The Dunciad*, he mixes

⁵⁶ David Venturo, "Sense Experience from Milton and Hobbes to Keats," in *The Sensational Centuries*, ed. Kevin L. Cope and Robert C. Leitz III (New York: AMS Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁷ Swift, *Poems*, 1:221–25. Further references to "Phillis, or, The Progress of Love" are cited in the text of this essay.

high and low genres: "Fate," which with "Poetick Justice" normally "put[s] a Period" to tragedy (lines 96-97), does the same to this wretched comedy. Phillis and John have no idea that by flouting marriage customs and class lines, they have sentenced themselves to a life of indigence, prostitution, venereal disease, and the kind of labor (innkeeping) that John, as a house servant, probably thought his marriage would allow him forever to escape. In addition, Swift vulgarizes "The Muse," that lofty vehicle of poetic inspiration, by having it baldly summarize the miserable history of Phillis and John's marriage. He also mixes high and low poetic diction. "Swains unwholsome" (line 91), for example, is a mock-pastoral euphemism (complete with Latinate inversion) for *men infected with venereal disease*. The final couplet of the poem presents the plain truth, using a blunt trope and then no trope at all. The monosyllabic "Cat and Dog" (line 100) describes as straightforwardly as metaphor can the discord within this ill-advised marriage. The phrase, "Rogue and Whore" (line 100), discards metaphor altogether: it describes as unmediatedly (if reductively) as possible what Phillis and John have become.

Swift's efforts to counter the blandishments of rhetoric with truth occur even in occasional poems to friends, which are as likely to criticize their persons and temperaments as to praise them, or to engage in a complicated mixture of both. Though affectionate, Swift's Market Hill poems to Lady Anne Acheson regularly call attention to her thinness. "Death and Daphne," subtitled, "To an agreeable young Lady, but extremely lean," imagines Lady Acheson frightening away the specter of Death, who has come to court her, because her touch, since she is so slender, is even colder than his.⁵⁸ In "My Lady's Lamentation and Complaint against the Dean," Swift tries to have it both ways, teasing Lady Acheson about what he regards as her faults (including her weight), but softening the blow by making her the speaker of the poem who turns the tables on him by impersonating him criticizing her:

Next, for his diversion,
He rails at my person;
What court-breeding this is?
He takes me to pieces.

⁵⁸ Swift, *Poems*, 3:902-5.

From shoulder to flank
I'm lean and am lank;
My nose, long and thin,
Grows down to my chin;
My chin will not stay,
But meets it half way;
My fingers, prolix,
Are ten crooked sticks:
He swears my el—bows
Are two iron crows,
Or sharp pointed rocks,
And wear out my smocks[.]⁵⁹ (67–82)

Swift thus speaks the truth but only ventriloquially through a fictionalized version of a friend. But what, given the rhetorical complexity of the poem, is the truth? Swift's criticism of Lady Acheson? Lady Acheson's criticism of Swift? Both? Neither?

Even Stella, whom Swift celebrated for her probity, charity, decency, and courage is reminded (as in "On Stella's Birth-day, Written AD. 1718–[19]") that she is aging and overweight:

Stella this Day is thirty four,
(We won't dispute a Year or more)
However Stella, be not troubled,
Although thy Size and Years are doubled,
Since first I saw Thee at Sixteen
The brightest Virgin of the Green,
So little is thy Form declin'd
Made up so largely in thy Mind.
Oh, would it please the Gods to split
Thy Beauty, Size, and Years, and Wit,
No Age could furnish out a Pair
Of Nymphs so gracefull, Wise and fair
With half the Lustre of Your Eyes,
With half your Wit, your Years and Size:
And then before it grew too late,

⁵⁹ Swift, *Poems*, 3:851–58.

How should I beg of gentle Fate,
 (That either Nymph might have her Swain,)
 To split my Worship too in twain.⁶⁰ (1-18)

Swift's poem is affectionate, especially its slightly self-mocking conclusion embellished with playful pastoralisms and exaggerated gallantry. Swift enjoys the incongruity of pastoral fiction (Greek nymphs courted by Middle English swains) and eighteenth-century Irish fact (he and Stella are middle-aged Dubliners). At the same time, the compliment is complicated by repeated references to, and denials of the significance of, Stella's doubled size and age. The poem presents competing, not entirely reconciled or reconcilable truths—*age has taken its toll on you* and *age doesn't matter; you are wonderful and I love you still*. Moreover, the poem ignores chronological facts that would spoil the poem's doubling conceit. Stella was eight, not sixteen, when Swift first met her, and in March, 1719, she turned thirty-eight, not thirty-four or thirty-two (though this discrepancy is gently alluded to in line two of the poem).

Swift's balancing of compliment and truth can take surprising twists. His truths can be simultaneously pointed and tempered, as "To Stella, Who Collected and Transcribed His Poems," one of his most unusual love poems, demonstrates.⁶¹ Swift designed this poem morally to test Stella by including it among a group of his poems for her to transcribe. Instead of using the occasion to thank her (her task would be time-consuming and perhaps tedious), he challenges her by focusing on what he regards as her chief fault, her difficulty in controlling her temper when receiving criticism:

Stella, when you these lines transcribe,
 Lest you should take them for a bribe,
 Resolv'd to mortify your Pride,
 I'll here expose your weaker Side.
 Your Spirits kindle to a Flame,
 Mov'd with the lightest Touch of Blame,
 And when a Friend in Kindness tries
 To shew you where your Error lies,

⁶⁰ Swift, *Poems*, 2:720-22.

⁶¹ Swift, *Poems*, 2:727-32. Further references to "To Stella, Who Collected and Transcribed His Poems" are cited in the text of this essay.

Conviction does but more incense;
 Perverseness is your whole Defence:
 Truth, Judgment, Wit, give Place to Spite,
 Regardless both of Wrong and Right.
 Your Virtues, all suspended, wait
 Till Time hath open'd Reason's Gate:
 And what is worse, your Passion bends
 Its Force against your nearest Friends;
 Which Manners, Decency, and Pride,
 Have taught you from the World to hide:
 In vain[.] (lines 83–101)

Swift's diction and syntax are plain and clear-cut; his tone, measured and critical, but never cruel. He has prepared Stella for this criticism by contrasting earlier in the poem his frankness (and the general importance of honesty in poetry) with what he regards as the clichéd duplicity of ordinary love poets.⁶² The tired tropes of the poet-manqué, *Mævius*, mechanically assembled, have no correspondence to the reality of his beloved, who turns out to be a syphilitic prostitute:

So *Mævius*, when he drain'd his Skull
 To celebrate some Suburb Trull;
 His Similes in Order set,
 And ev'ry Crambo he could get;
 Had gone through all the Common-Places
 Worn out by Wits who rhyme on Faces;
 Before he could his Poem close,
 The lovely Nymph had lost her Nose. (71–78)

That Swift would joke about venereal disease in a poem to Stella reminds us how far, while still maintaining intimacy, he has departed from the fictions of ordinary love poetry. Indeed, Swift takes his familiar Houyhnhnnic stance, denying that he is a lover, or writing a love poem at all:

Thou *Stella*, wert no longer young,
 When first for thee my Harp I strung:

⁶² See especially lines 57–60: "Unjustly Poets we asperse; / Truth shines the brighter, clad in Verse; / And all the Fictions they pursue / Do but insinuate what is true."

Without one Word of *Cupid's* Darts,
 Of killing Eyes, or bleeding Hearts:
 With Friendship and Esteem possest,
 I ne'er admitted Love a Guest. (9-14)

For Swift, conventional declarations of love are disingenuous, clothed in the commonplaces of Petrarchan and classical cliché. Only by mocking such commonplaces or avoiding them altogether can he speak of his affections. Thus, paradoxically, he can write love poetry only by denying that he is doing so.

In lines 101-26, Swift uses the humor of disproportion to bring Stella's anger into perspective:

For see, your Friend hath brought
 To publick Light your only Fau't;
 And yet a Fault we often find
 Mix'd in a noble generous Mind;
 And may compare to *Ætna's* Fire,
 Which, tho' with Trembling, all admire;
 The Heat that makes the Summit glow,
 Enriching all the Vales below.
 Those who in warmer Climes complain
 From *Phæbus* Rays they suffer Pain,
 Must own, that Pain is largely paid
 By gen'rous Wines beneath a Shade.

Yet when I find your Passions rise,
 And Anger sparkling in your Eyes,
 I grieve those Spirits should be spent,
 For nobler Ends by Nature meant.
 One Passion, with a different Turn,
 Makes Wit inflame, or Anger burn;
 So the Sun's Heat, with different Powers,
 Ripens the Grape, the Liquor sours.
 Thus *Ajax*, when with Rage possest
 By *Pallas* breath'd into his Breast,
 His Valour would no more employ;
 Which might alone have conquer'd *Troy*;
 But blinded by Resentment, seeks
 For Vengeance on his Friends the *Greeks*.

Stella's anger genuinely seems to trouble him. But by comparing it to the eruption of Mount Etna (lines 105–8) and then in a double mock-epic simile to the heat of the Mediterranean sun and Ajax's suicidal rage after he lost the rhetoric contest to Odysseus for the slain Achilles' armor (lines 119–26), he cuts it down to size while still making a serious point. Indeed, the latter trope gently reminds Stella that, for Swift, rage, like inspiration, is a form of madness. Moreover, here and elsewhere in the poem, Swift minimizes gender differences and denies the gendered double standard by playfully comparing Stella to the Greek sun god and a Greek hero and by cleverly modifying the heat trope to address the passion of anger, not love.

In the closing lines of the poem, Swift challenges Stella to bridle her temper when she transcribes his lines:

Say, *Stella*, when you copy next,
Will you keep strictly to the Text?
Dare you let these Reproaches stand,
And to your Failing set your Hand?
Or if these lines your Anger fire,
Shall they in baser Flames expire?
Whene'er they burn, if burn they must,
They'll prove my Accusation just. (137–44)

The diction and syntax are slightly more formal and ornate (note, for example, the inversions in lines 141–42 and the elision in line 143) than before Swift raised the issue of Stella's anger. Indeed, the heightening of the language is part of Swift's ploy as he stiffens his resolve to test Stella's temper. But the language is fresh, uncliché, and *accurate*. Swift deftly links the figurative flames of Stella's anger to the actual flames to which she might consign the poem should her anger consume her. Swift's conclusion perfectly captures the proportion of metaphoric tenor to vehicle.

The complex relation of rhetoric to truth in Swift's writing is never better illustrated than in the following two closing examples, from "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" and the Sinon episode in the final chapter of part four of *Gulliver's Travels*. "Verses," perhaps Swift's best known poem, is premised on the inevitability of the pleasures and pains

(often kept secret) of human self-interest.⁶³ We cannot resist comparing our circumstances with others', Swift insists, congratulating ourselves on our good luck when friends suffer misfortunes and feeling envious when their successes eclipse ours. For the first 298 lines of the poem, Swift satirically anticipates how friends and enemies alike will react self-interestedly to the news of his death. Then at line 299, about three-fifths of the way through the poem, he creates an "indifferent" (line 305) persona who promises to judge Swift's character impartially. The speaker begins his extended character sketch with his opinion of Swift the writer:

"As for his Works in Verse and Prose
 "I own my self no Judge of those:
 "Nor, can I tell what Critics thought 'em;
 "But, this I know, all People bought 'em;
 "As with a moral View designed
 "To cure the Vices of Mankind:
 "His Vein, ironically grave,
 "Exposed the Fool, and lashed the Knave:
 "To steal a Hint was never known,
 "But what he writ was all his own. (309-18)

The claims appear to be unimpeachable, reflecting public consensus rather than the private prejudices of an individual. Everyone knows, even those such as the speaker, who has no pretensions to critical judgment, that Swift was famous as a moralist, ironist, and satirist. For good measure, the speaker insists on Swift's reputation for originality, which was also indisputable. Who among his contemporaries would disagree that Swift was one of a kind? Certainly, the open, simple style of the passage, unadorned by rhetorical artifice lends weight to its credibility. But how true is this seemingly guileless assertion? After all, hasn't Swift repeatedly warned his readers from the beginning of the poem of the inevitability of human self-interest? And isn't Jonathan Swift the creator of the "impartial" (line 306) speaker who praises his originality? It turns out that the final couplet of the passage, celebrating Swift for never stealing a hint is, in fact, cribbed from Sir John Den-

⁶³ Swift, *Poems*, 2:551-72. Further references to "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" are cited in the text of this essay.

ham's elegy, "On Mr. Abraham Cowley: His Death and Burial Amongst the Ancient Poets": "To him no Author was unknown / Yet what he writ was all his own" (lines 29–30).⁶⁴ The speaker's assertion is paradoxical, simultaneously true and false, plagiarized and daringly original. For those readers familiar with Denham's poem, Swift seems to undermine his own credibility with this unacknowledged quotation. Yet, by staking his claim to originality on purloined lines, Swift also unconventionally asserts it. Ultimately, the passage reminds us how acutely aware Swift is of the duplicity, the doubleness—in the etymological sense—of human language, as a hidden quotation, when discovered, complicates a seemingly simple statement.

In the Sinon episode at the end of the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift uses an open quotation to complicate a seemingly emphatic assertion of truth. Here, Gulliver reinforces his probity ("I imposed on myself as a Maxim, never to be swerved from, that I would strictly adhere to Truth")⁶⁵ by quoting Sinon's profession of honesty from Book II of the *Aeneid*:

*Nec si miserum Fortuna Sinonem
Finxit, vanum etiam, mendacemque improba finget.*⁶⁶
[Although Fortune has made Sinon wretched, she will not,
though untrustworthy herself, make him deceitful or
untruthful.]

The statement, on its face, is compelling. But, as the couplet from "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" demonstrates, context is crucial. Sinon, of course, is the Greek who agreed to stay behind when his compatriots pretended to leave after ten years of conflict with the Trojans, and to persuade his foes to admit into their city the great wooden horse the Greeks had left behind as a symbol of capitulation. Having just confessed that he is an Argive, an honest admission that endangers his life, why wouldn't his story about the horse be true?

The rhetorical situation of Gulliver's assertion is indeed complicated. Sinon lies—but does so to defeat the enemy that had begun the Trojan War by harboring the kidnapped Helen. One also must recall

⁶⁴ <http://etext.virginia.edu/kinney/small/elegies.htm>

⁶⁵ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 291.

⁶⁶ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 291. The translation of *Aeneid* 2:78–79 is my own.

that in the *Aeneid*, the eponymous hero of the poem, a displaced Trojan prince, tells the story of Sinon to emphasize the Greeks' perfidiousness. But that perfidiousness is a matter of opinion. As Swift knew, the English, at least since the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth, regarded themselves as descendents of the Trojans. London was sometimes called New Troy, and the eponymous founder of Britain was Brutus, a grandson of Aeneas. English writers from the Gawain poet to Shakespeare drew on this mythological origin, and Virgil's popularity in England through Dryden's time had something to do with this connection. Swift, however, was not English, but Irish, and perhaps would have identified more with the Greeks than the Trojans, especially in the aftermath of the Declaratory Act of 1720, which asserted the right of the British parliament to legislate for Ireland,⁶⁷ and the dispute over William Wood's inflationary brass halfpence that precipitated the *Drapier's Letters*. If Gulliver speaks truth in the context of his story and Swift lies (as the creator of a fiction), Swift lies in the same fashion as Sinon, to defeat a longtime enemy that started the dispute. Indeed, one might argue that Swift assumes the role of Sinon, and his Houyhnhnms (which are, paradoxically, a thing which is not) become an Irishman's Trojan horse designed to destroy his imperial English opponents and the corrupted modes of thinking and behavior that they embrace and promote.⁶⁸

Thus, in both the "Verses" and *Gulliver* passages, it might be said that irony trumps simple assertions of frankness and sincerity. This does not mean that Swift despairs of discovering the truth or that he cannot write with straightforward honesty and exploit tropes without defensive self-consciousness, as his final poem to a mortally ill Esther Johnson, "Stella's Birth-day, March 13, 1726/7," poignantly reminds us.⁶⁹ But, these passages emphasize how deeply suspicious of rhetoric he is—even more so than the first generation of English Augustan writers. Of all the

⁶⁷ Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age*. Vol. 3: *Dean Swift* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 120-23.

⁶⁸ For a complementary reading of the Sinon episode, see Howard D. Weinbrot, "Swift, Horace, and Virgil: Brave Lies, Dangerous Horses, and Truth," in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 2nd ed. (Norton Critical Edition), ed. Albert J. Rivero (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 500-4.

⁶⁹ Swift, *Poems*, 2:763-66. For example, in this poem Swift uses a homely alimentary metaphor in lines 55-66 without any of the irony or satire that accompanies such metaphors elsewhere in his writing. Cf. lines 61-70 of "On Poetry: A Rhapsody," which liken reading a poem to eating chicken.

figures of speech that inform Swift's style, the most important is irony, which is based on equivocation—the disjunction between what one says and what one means. Forcing one's readers to decipher irony is a way of compelling them to confront the equivocations of language for themselves. It may be dangerous (because readers may misconstrue what the writer hopes to convey, as Swift learned early and painfully from his experience with *A Tale of a Tub*), but there is no good alternative, and, it can, of course, also be extraordinarily liberating, since it allows Swift to speak a veiled truth while saying the thing which is not.⁷⁰ If language is, as Swift believed, fallen and therefore necessarily equivocal, the best that we can do is to face those equivocations in pursuit of a real but perpetually elusive truth. Unlike Milton and other Baroque writers who held out hope for the possibility of prophetic inspiration and redeemed language in the postlapsarian world, Swift, "Sunk over head and ears in matter"⁷¹ thought such faith was madness.⁷² For the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, the pursuit of truth, through the duplicity of language and the deceits of rhetoric, is quixotic but necessary.

⁷⁰ On the liberating qualities of Swift's equivocation, see Ian Higgins, "Language and Style," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 146–60.

⁷¹ Swift, *Poems*, 3:900. Line 59 quoted from "The Dean's Reasons for not Building at Drapier's Hill."

⁷² David Venturo, "Sense Experience from Milton and Hobbes to Keats" in *The Sensational Centuries*, ed. Kevin L. Cope and Robert C. Leitz III (New York: AMS Press, forthcoming).