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SWIFT'S CONCEPT OF PHYSICAL EXERCISE: THE GRAVEL PATH TO HUMAN PERFECTION

ESTHER F. SOMMER

*J*onathan Swift, the dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin, is known as a man of many parts, as satirist, politician, and poet. Swift has long been known as the author of the *Tale of a Tub* and of *Gulliver's Travels*, but he is less well known as an addict to motion, as a rider, runner, and jogger (not to mention the swimmer). He was also one of the first to propagate that physical exercise improves a person's health.

In the Age of Queen Anne, England's fashionable society followed the traditional aristocratic recreation scheme. This meant that riding, walking, and dancing were parts of one's entertainment, while physical labor was executed by servants. Skating was a possibility in winter, and tennis was occasionally

played, too. Early on, children of the nobility and gentry were taught how to ride. Male members of the upper classes were given fencing lessons, because duels were still fought, a habit often criticized by Swift.¹

Parforce hunting was the sport of the upper classes; hunting parties were attended by both sexes, with the ladies riding sidesaddle. Jonathan Swift used to go hunting in a rural district near his parish at Trim, where his friend Robert Longfield possessed extensive lands. Given the opportunity, he did not shun an invitation to a royal hunting party at Windsor Forest, either.² Queen Anne enjoyed hunting, and her royal vigor is described by Swift in biblical images: "The queen was abroad to-day in order to hunt, but finding it disposed to rain, she kept in her coach; she hunts in a chaise with one horse, which she drives herself, and drives furiously, like Jehu, and is a mighty hunter, like Nimrod."³

Swift was an excellent and tireless horseman, spending whole days in the saddle.⁴ As dean of St. Patrick's, he could afford the expense of keeping a horse, or even several horses of his own, yet he had frequent difficulties to obtain a suitable animal.⁵ In 1719, however, he was able to write to his friend, Charles Ford: "I am absolutely ordered to ride, and my Health having grown somewhat better, I have bought a Horse at a great Price, and am resolved to ramble about this scurvy Country this Summer." Wearing one of his three waterproof beaver hats, Swift set out for Trim, county West Meath, and Wicklow.⁶

Even when nearing seventy, the dean delighted in galloping long distances and thought little of riding twelve miles at a stretch in good weather.⁷ Although Swift's malady, Menière's disease, had not yet been diagnosed at his time, so that, as a result, there was no known cure for the cause, an exercise regimen was (and is) one remedy against the disease, prescribed by physicians

¹ Thomas Sheridan, *The Life of the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St Patrick's, Dublin* (Dublin: White, 1785), 367.

² Harold Williams, ed., *Journal to Stella*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), II, 376.

³ *Journal*, ed. Williams, I, 324.

⁴ David Woolley, ed., *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt on Main: Peter Lang, 1999–2007), I, 237n2, 250n, 255n, 497n1, 498n2, 502, 503, 503n, 506, 506n8, 529n4, and II, 81, 82n1.

⁵ Woolley, *Correspondence*, II, 76, 83, and 84n2.

⁶ Woolley, *Correspondence*, II, 301–2.

⁷ Michael dePorte, "Swift's Horses of Instruction," *Reading Swift: Papers from the Second Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, eds. Richard H. Rodino and Hermann J. Real (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1993), 200.

or recommended by friends.⁸ More or less on instinct, it seems, Swift knew that riding was the best cure for his disorder: "This whole Kingdom will not afford me the medicine of an unfoundred trotting horse," he wrote to Ford.⁹

Swift's correspondents were usually bombarded with good counsel on how to achieve physical fitness. "I am returned to be a rider, wherein I wish you would imitate me," he advised Pope.¹⁰ And John Gay was instructed: "Pray venture on Horseback when you are in Wiltshire."¹¹ Behind his back the dean chided Arbuthnot in a conversation with Pope: "He is a man that can do every thing but walk."¹² Swift's female friends are not exempted from his calls to order. "Your Illness is the Effect of too little Exercise," he told the lamenting young beauty, Anne Long.¹³ The success these continual rebukes had especially with young women is testified in a letter by Lady Howth, in which she reported to him: "I am now in Connaught, where I assure you I spend the least of my time at cards. I am on horseback almost every day to view the beauties of Connaught, where I am told you have been. . . . I view all the places. . . . I make nothing of going down sixty steps."¹⁴

Only a sportswoman could have become a suitable consort for Swift. His female friend Esther Johnson possessed a horse called "little Johnson," which she loved to ride, wearing a mask¹⁵ and a hat adorned with feathers or ribbons, according to the fashion of the day.¹⁶ "Pray be at Trim, by the time this letter comes to you," Swift wrote to her in the *Journal to Stella*, "and ride little Johnson, who must needs be now in good case."¹⁷ He often urged her to ride for the sake of her health, and once pretended astonishment that she had ridden nine miles. Unfortunately, "little Johnson" stumbled one day and threw its rider off, so Swift, concerned as he was, urged Esther to sell the horse.¹⁸

⁸ Wanda J. Creaser, "The most mortifying malady': Jonathan Swift's Dizzying World and Dublin's Mentally Ill," *Swift Studies*, 19 (2004), 38–39.

⁹ Woolley, *Correspondence*, II, 290.

¹⁰ Woolley, *Correspondence*, III, 245.

¹¹ Woolley, *Correspondence*, III, 292–93.

¹² This incident was documented in a letter from Pope to Robert Digby in: *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn. 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), II, 253.

¹³ Woolley, *Correspondence*, I, 401.

¹⁴ Woolley, *Correspondence*, IV, 336.

¹⁵ C. Willett Cunningham, Phillis Cunningham and Charles Beard, *A Dictionary of English Costume* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960), 134.

¹⁶ C. Willett and Phillis Cunningham, *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 162–64.

¹⁷ Williams, *Journal*, I, 8.

¹⁸ Williams, *Journal*, I, 124.

In his youth, Swift was fond of rambling, and visited his mother regularly once a year, let his residence be where it would.¹⁹ His constitution was strong, and on foot he went from one place to another.²⁰ Swift was so remarkably fit that he would jump over gates and other obstacles in his way without any difficulty.²¹ When in his twenties, he was first attacked by Menière's disease, while working as secretary to Sir William Temple at Moor Park. Temple's physician recommended physical exercise, which Swift daily practiced by running up a hill near the house and back again every two hours.²²

In 1700, Swift was made vicar of Laracor and rector of Agher and Rathbeggan. Wearing a suit of black clothes, with strong worsted stockings, a large gray surtout, and a round slouched hat, he walked from Dublin to Laracor in order to take up his duties. In his hand, he carried a pole considerably longer than himself, which he had probably procured from some country haymaker. In his bag, he carried a second pair of stockings and a clean shirt.²³ On the evening of the fourth day, he reached his destiny, with a hasty step, having composed a poem on the towns he had passed through.²⁴

During his stay in London, Swift sometimes walked three or four hours with secretary of state, Henry St. John, later Viscount Bolingbroke.²⁵ Swift was a member of the Scriblerus Club, and whenever the members of the club met in London, they made little tours to the countryside on foot. Once they decided to visit Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington. As usual, Swift was keen on securing for himself the best bed whenever he stayed elsewhere overnight, so he proposed that everybody should walk as fast as they could, knowing that he himself was the fastest of them all.

Parnell, seemingly consenting, hired a horse as soon as Swift was out of sight; and taking another route, arrived at Burlington's country mansion much earlier than Swift. He negotiated with Burlington, and they agreed that for once they would thwart Swift's plan. When Swift was approaching the

¹⁹ Woolley, *Correspondence*, I, 106n, 120, 148n2, and 156n.

²⁰ Daniel Cook, ed., *The Lives of Jonathan Swift*, 3 vols (London: Routledge, 2011), III, 101–2 [Deane Swift, *An Essay upon the Life, Writings and Character of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (London: Charles Bathurst, 1755), 99–100].

²¹ Cook, *The Lives of Jonathan Swift*, II, 419 [W. H. Dilworth, *The Life of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of Saint Patrick's, Dublin* (London: G. Wright, 1758), 15].

²² Charles Henry Wilson, ed., *Swiftiana*, 2 vols (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), I, xviii. The biographical data and anecdotes cited are based on information given by Swift's first cousin, Theophilus Swift, as can be deduced from I, viii.

²³ Wilson, *Swiftiana*, ed. Wilson, I, 2.

²⁴ Wilson, *Swiftiana*, ed. Wilson, I, 60.

²⁵ Williams, *Journal to Stella*, I, 325.

mansion, he was met by a servant who told him that the smallpox was raging within, and that he had better sleep in the summer house in the garden. Swift consented, because he was mortally afraid of contracting the disease. After a cold and uncomfortable evening on a field bed, he was finally led inside, where his friends were already reveling in wine and venison. Willingly, he promised to change his habits, and swore never again to try to obtain a bed which was better than that of his friends.²⁶

From 1714 onward, there was among Swift's companions Reverend John Worrall, vicar at St Patrick's Cathedral, who was a good walker. Worrall's situation in the Church called for his frequent attendance upon the dean, which commonly ended in a walk except when the weather was too bad.²⁷ If this was the case, a spectacle took place which is described by Laetitia Pilkington, a lady of Swift's acquaintance: "The Dean . . . ran up the Great-Stairs, down one Pair of Back-Stairs, up another, in so violent a Manner, that I could not help expressing my Uneasiness [to Mrs Brent, the housekeeper], lest he should fall, and be hurt . . .; she said, 'It was a customary Exercise with him, when the weather did not permit him to walk abroad.'"²⁸

In 1714, Swift was loitering one Sunday afternoon in the house of Dr. Raymond, the hospitable vicar of Trim. The bell rang for evening prayer, and the parishioners were assembling in the church, a little distance from the house. As Dr. Raymond was preparing to go to church, Swift said: "I'll lay you a crown I will begin prayers before you this afternoon!" Dr. Raymond accepted the wager, and immediately they both ran as fast as they could towards the church. Raymond arrived first at the door; and when he entered the church, he collected himself, walking decently towards the lectern. By contrast, Swift never slackened his pace, and running up the aisle, left Dr. Raymond behind him in the middle of it. Stepping onto the reading desk, without putting on a surplice, or opening the prayer book, he began the liturgy in an audible voice, and continued long enough to win his wager.²⁹

Swift not only knew that exercise was a useful therapy against the attacks of his vertigo, but also estimated that it was good for his friends. In

²⁶ Wilson, *Swiftiana*, I, 16.

²⁷ Cook, *The Lives of Jonathan Swift*, II, 356 [John Hawkesworth, "An Account of the Life of the Reverend Jonathan Swift, D. D., Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin," *The Works of Jonathan Swift, D. D., Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin*. 12 vols. (London: Charles Bathurst, 1755), I, 34].

²⁸ Laetitia Pilkington, *Memoirs*, ed. Archibald C. Elias, Jr., 2 vols. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), I, 36.

²⁹ Cook, *The Lives of Jonathan Swift*, II, 527-28 [Dilworth, *The Life of Dr. Jonathan Swift*, 123-24].

the 1720s, the Grattan brothers Robert and John were boon companions of Swift.³⁰ Sometimes he would chase the Grattans through the large apartments of the deanery, and up and down stairs, until he had accomplished his usual amount of exercise.³¹ In his old age, the retired dean still used to go about his rooms, sometimes eating while walking.³²

Yet walking, running, and riding were not the only physical activities Swift engaged in. During his stay in London (1710–1714), he showed remarkable skills moving in the liquid element. In May 1711, he announced in the *Journal to Stella*: “I am just this minute going to swim. I take Patrick down with me to hold my nightgown, shirt and slippers, and borrow a napkin from my landlady for a cap. So farewell till I come up . . . I have been swimming this half-hour and more; and when I was coming out I dived, to make my head and all through wet, like a cold bath; but as I dived, the napkin fell off and is lost, and I have that to pay for. O faith, the great stones were so sharp, I could hardly set my feet on them as I came out. It was pure and warm.”³³ As the weather continued to be hot, Swift swam in the Thames a second time, but felt disturbed by boats which came dangerously near in the dark.³⁴

In his later years, Swift used to spend the summer in the company of good friends. The Rochfort family possessed an estate at Gaulstown, featuring a vast garden and a lake, which could be used for rowing. After breakfast, Swift and the young Rochforts rowed. Dinner would follow at two, then some wine and backgammon. From four until sunset, there was rowing again, then prayers, more backgammon, and an hour of drink and talk before bedtime.³⁵ Back in Dublin, Swift proudly reported to his superior, Archbishop King: “I row after Health like a Waterman, and ride after it like a Postboy . . . I am . . . so dextrous at the Oar, such an Alderman after the Hare.”³⁶

Swift recommended walking to his female friends, too, going for long walks with Esther Johnson in Laracor, and with Esther Vanhomrigh

³⁰ Pat Rogers, ed., *Jonathan Swift: The Complete Poems*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 916–17.

³¹ Sir Walter Scott, *Memoirs of Jonathan Swift, D.D., Dean of St Patrick's, Dublin*. 2 vols. (Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1826), II, 55.

³² John Boyle, Fifth Earl of Cork and Orrery, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift*, ed. Jono Fróes (Newark: University of Delaware Press, and London: Associated Univ. Presses, 2000), 178.

³³ Williams, *Journal*, I, 285–86.

³⁴ Williams, *Journal*, I, 287.

³⁵ Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), III, 339.

³⁶ Woolley, *Correspondence*, II, 399.

in Celbridge. He prescribed tours through the countryside to Lady Anne Acheson, which are described in his poetry. As far as women are concerned, contemporary educationalists allowed them dancing as a possibility to engage in exercise. Indeed, dancing was much thought of as an accomplishment, and parents who had acquired enough to give their children a liberal education would expose their daughters to the tuition of dancing masters.

Books were written on "Chorography," illustrated with wonderful and perplexing diagrams. One book alone, *The Dancing Master*, came out in 15 editions, containing 358 different figures and tunes.³⁷ Women's shoes and clothes, however, were unfit for moving naturally, as described by Swift in his poem "The Revolution at Market-Hill," which features a lady who is unable to move: She wears "embroider'd high Heel Shoes."³⁸ Such shoes could be of silk damask, covering a wooden heel two inches high. The prevailing colours were green, yellow, and salmon pink. White silk shoes with gold lace, or shoes of fawn silk brocade were also very typical.³⁹ Masks were mandatory to keep the skin fashionably pale⁴⁰; additionally, white gloves⁴¹ and a fan were required whenever a lady ventured outdoors.⁴² The corset was an instrument of female mortification, and another hindrance to physical exercise, because it resulted in difficulties to breathe.⁴³

Aspects of health and physical exercise became more and more important in the course of the eighteenth century, but were also considered from an increasingly medical point of view. Riding and bathing were recommended to ailing persons. Being plagued by migraines, Lady Henrietta Howard, Countess of Suffolk, was advised by Swift's friend Dr Arbuthnot, one of Queen Anne's physicians-in-ordinary. On 4 July 1728, he wrote to her: "Riding and bathing are what I think you ought to continue."⁴⁴ Two years later, the Countess reported on her state of health: "I have mine better

³⁷ John Ashton, *Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne taken from Original Sources* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1904), 20.

³⁸ Harold Williams, ed., *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1958), III, 885, l. 63.

³⁹ Cunningham, *Dictionary of English Costume*, 195.

⁴⁰ Cunningham, *Dictionary of English Costume*, mask.

⁴¹ Cunningham, *Dictionary of English Costume*, gloves.

⁴² Joan Wildeblood and Peter Brinson, *The Polite World: A Guide to English Manners and Deportment from the Thirteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 219.

⁴³ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 70–71.

⁴⁴ John Wilson Croker, ed., *Letters to and from Henrietta, Countess of Suffolk*, 2 vols. (London: Murray, 1824), I, 295.

than I used to have; I find exercise agrees with me."⁴⁵ Having experienced the salutary effects of physical exercise, Lady Suffolk recommended it to her friends and acquaintances.⁴⁶ Both men and women sometimes had problems with obesity, but the reciprocal effect of exercise and reduced meals was already observed.⁴⁷

Gulliver's Travels may be considered the world's bestseller on the topic of motion. In it, the protagonist is constantly on the move, visiting "Several Remote Nations of the World," there encountering various kinds of society which he compares to his native country. The educational doctrine that all boys and girls were to be given lessons in physical exercise is introduced in Book I. "[In] the [Lilliputian] Nurseries for Males . . . two Hours [of the day are reserved] for Diversions, consisting of bodily Exercises. . . . In the female Nurseries, the young Girls . . . are educated much like the males . . . only that the exercises of the Females [are] not altogether so robust."⁴⁸ Even in the realm of these diminutive people, the educational system is so far advanced that physical training is a standard part of the schedule. Agility is a precondition for preferment in this country, and Lilliputian courtiers are forced to jump over a stick or to creep under it; apart from that they have to undergo rope-dancing competitions.⁴⁹

In Book II, Gulliver is so tiny in comparison to his hosts that in several instances he is perceived as a "small dangerous animal,"⁵⁰ a "LUSUS NATURÆ,"⁵¹ as a "diminutive Insect,"⁵² or even as "Vermin."⁵³ Although the giant inhabitants surpass him in size and strength, Gulliver's physical fitness earns him friendship and respect. "The Queen became so fond of [his] Company, that she could not dine without [him]."⁵⁴ With his "Hangar" he defends himself against two rats,⁵⁵ and bravely fences against twenty wasps, attacking them "in the Air."⁵⁶ The queen then asked him "whether [he] understood how to

⁴⁵ Croker, *Letters to and from Henrietta, Countess of Suffolk*, I, 385.

⁴⁶ Croker, *Letters*, II, 22.

⁴⁷ Croker, *Letters*, I, 21-22.

⁴⁸ Herbert Davis et al., eds., *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, eds 16 vols (Oxford, 1939-68), XI, 61-62.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 38-39.

⁵⁰ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 86.

⁵¹ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 104.

⁵² Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 107.

⁵³ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 132.

⁵⁴ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 105.

⁵⁵ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 93.

⁵⁶ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 109-10.

handle a Sail or an Oar; and whether a little Exercise of Rowing might not be convenient for [his] Health." Within a few days, Gulliver is the owner of a "Pleasure-Boat with all its Tackling," and is set into a "wooden Trough," filled with water. "Here [he] often used to row for [his] Diversion, as well as that of the Queen and her Ladies, who thought themselves agreeably entertained with [his] Skill and Agility."⁵⁷

Once a "Fancy came into [his] Head that [he] would entertain the King and Queen with an English Tune upon [a spinet]. . . . To that purpose [he] ran sideling upon it that way and this, as fast as [he] could, banging the proper Keys with . . . Two Sticks; and made a shift to play a Jigg to the great Satisfaction of both their Majesties: But, it was the most violent Exercise [he] ever underwent."⁵⁸ Not all of Gulliver's sportive demonstrations ended that luckily, however. On an excursion to a field not far from the town, "there was a Cow-dung in the Path, and [he] must needs try [his] Activity by attempting to leap over it. [He] took a Run, but unfortunately jumped short, and found [himself] just in the Middle up to [his] Knees."⁵⁹ As a long jumper, Gulliver would not have qualified as an Olympic medallist.

In the Fourth Book, horses epitomizing ideal rational and moral creatures undergo a customary training of jumping and running. Four times a year, the youth of certain districts meet to show their proficiency in running and leaping, and other feats of strength or agility; afterward the victor is rewarded with a song made in his or her praise.⁶⁰ Swift here had presumably the Grecian Olympic games in mind. At any rate, the Houyhnhnms, "Perfection of Nature"⁶¹ that they represent, seem to enact the old Juvenalian concept (Satire X, 356) of *MENS SANA IN CORPORE SANO*.⁶² For Swift, it did not matter what size the several diverse creatures "of the World" had, what they looked like, or what language they used. Far more important it was that they acted rationally, as well as ethically correct—and that they exercised.

⁵⁷ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 120.

⁵⁸ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 126–27.

⁵⁹ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 124.

⁶⁰ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 269–70.

⁶¹ Davis, *Prose Works*, XI, 235.

⁶² T. E. Page et al., eds., "ORANDUM EST UT SIT MENS SANA IN CORPORE SANO" (It is desirable that there should be a healthy mind in a healthy body), *The Loeb Classical Library: Juvenal and Persius*, (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1961), 218.