SATIRE AND THE CORRESPONDENCE OF SWIFT

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Your Ladyship's letter made me a little grave, and in going to answer it, I was in great danger of leaning on my elbow, I mean my left elbow, to consider what I should write, which posture I never used except when I was under a necessity of writing to fools, or lawyers, or Ministers of State, where I am to consider what is to be said, but as I write to a person whom I esteem, I am in no pain at all. —Swift to the Countess of Suffolk (Mrs. Howard), October 26, 1731.

Since the first secret publication, in 1740, of part of the correspondence with Pope, Swift's letters have become a standard source for all of his biographers and critics. The letters furnish information, wit, and sheer fun; in one instance, Swift begrudgingly replies to an imaginary invitation; in another, the usually pompous Earl of Orrery sends Swift an entire letter written backwards. For all their entertainment, though, the letters are not strictly reliable for biographical fact, and they have often been taken too literally. Samuel Johnson, reviewing Pope's correspondence, asserts: "There is indeed no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse."[1] Johnson's warning surely should be applied to Swift's letters as well as Pope's.

In his letter to Mrs. Howard, for example, Swift is not completely ingenuous. He did "lean on his elbow," and his very disclaimer suggests that he consciously criticized his own epistles. Even his passing reference to fools, lawyers, and Ministers recalls faintly one of his favorite satirical techniques.

Swift's explanation to Mrs. Howard is hardly unique in

the correspondence.[2] Four years later, Swift assures Pope: "You need not fear any consequence in the commerce that has so long passed between us; although I never destroyed one of your letters. But my executors are men of honor and virtue, who have strict orders in my will to burn every letter left behind me. Neither did our letters contain any turns of wit, or fancy, or politics, or satire, but mere innocent friendship; yet I am loath that any letters from you and a few other friends, should die before me. I believe we neither of us ever leaned our head upon our left hand to study what we should write next, yet we have held a constant intercourse from your youth and my middle age, and from your middle age it must be continued till my death, which my bad state of health makes me expect every month" (September 3, 1735).[3] Here Swift answers Pope's first request for the return of his letters, and it seems possible that he is deliberately teasing Pope. In any event, Swift certainly recognizes that the correspondence attracts interest, and he is scarcely sincere in denying wit, fancy, politics, and satire. Indeed, it is precisely these elements in the letters, particularly satire, which have distorted many of the biographical interpretations of Swift.

Swift's career has attracted several dozen biographers and far more critics, and their views of the letters fall into several categories. Eighteenth-century writers, given access to only small parts of the correspondence, tended to take Swift at face value, particularly in the letters describing

his life in Ireland from 1727 onward. Orrery, Swift's first and most eccentric biographer, regards the correspondence as unimpeachable evidence; he quotes one of the elbow statements and interprets: "By which expression he meant, that he never studied for particular phrases, and polished paragraphs: his letters therefore are the truer representations of his mind. They are written in the warmth of his affections; and when they are considered in the light of kindness and sincerity, they illustrate his character to a very high degree."[4] Johnson, despite his caution about "fallacy and sophistication," appears to follow Orrery's example: "Of Swift's general habits of thinking, if his letters can be supposed to afford any evidence, he was not a man to be either loved or envied. He seems to have wasted life in discontent, by the rage of neglected pride and the languishment of unsatisfied desire. He is querulous and fastidious, arrogant and malignant; he scarcely speaks of himself but with indignant lamentations, or of others but with insolent superiority when he is gay, and with angry contempt when he is gloomy."[5] Johnson does not explain precisely how he derives his evidence from the correspondence, but from his account of Swift's mental state it seems unlikely that Johnson seriously questioned the sincerity of the letters.

Nineteenth and twentieth century biographers, more detached from their subject, have possessed larger collections of the correspondence. Most have been more cautious than Orrery or Johnson. Henry Craik, for example, cites

one of the letters to Bolingbroke and explains that Swift is "putting, as usual, a bad construction on his own acts, and substituting a motive of pure mischief for one of good sense."[6] Elsewhere, however, Craik does not retain this important distinction, nor do all of his successors. In one extreme example, W. B. C. Watkins quotes several morbid passages from Swift's correspondence and states: "Such hatred of life was not with him the pose of the professional satirist or empty cynic." Watkins then concludes that Swift spent his Dublin career "gradually disintegrating under years of frustration, the exacerbation of growing bitterness, and loss of reason."[7] Watkins' assessment, while dramatic, hardly differs from Johnson's commentary written 150 years before.

All of these biographical passages focus on the epistles to Pope, and occasionally Bolingbroke, and on the years 1727–1740, when Swift wrote his bleakest and most forceful letters. Thus on fairly limited evidence, biographers have contributed to the tradition of Swift's gloom – the tradition of Swift as a true misanthrope. Increasingly, editors and critics have challenged this interpretation. Stanley Lane-Poole observes: "A common belief maintains, and generally rightly, that the best of a man comes out in his writings, when the cloak of reserve and self-consciousness is cast off and he dares to write what he could not venture to say. But this is not true of Swift. He preferred to show himself in a repellant character – he has a singular knack of 'putting his worst foot foremost.' Bolingbroke, with

customary insight, said of him that 'Dr. Swift was a hypocrite reversed.' "[8] George Sherburn applies this same idea more specifically: "The second phase of Swift's life in which chronology demands added emphasis is the so-called 'last years.' The whole spirit of Swift's Dublin residence must be carefully and objectively reconsidered, and the account of his mental decay needs sharper focus and definition. The blurring begins when biographers regard all the years – almost 17 – after Stella's death as 'last years.' The effect is heightened by stressing Swift's complaints of ill health and forgetting that at brief intervals he has been making the same complaints since at least 1704 . . . Swift is not too trustworthy a commentator on his pains and aches in any period, and there may also be some doubt as to the sincerity of his loud expressions of dislike for Dublin. At any rate we must realize that he was one of the best Deans St. Patrick's ever had, and in Dublin he lived – literary productivity apart – very busily and not too unhappily. Throughout life he was, seriously or humorously, a *grognard*."[9]

As Lane-Poole and Sherburn have examined the autobiographical aspects of the letters, other writers have analyzed the artistic aspects. Progressively, Swift emerges in their critiques as a self-conscious craftsman, acutely sensitive to his audience. J. H. Bernard applauds Swift's adaptation of style to circumstances but rigorously defends his integrity and ingenuousness as a correspondent. He accuses Pope of "insatiable vanity" in writing for the press, and he

carefully distinguishes Swift's conduct: "The fact is that while Swift did not write for publication in the ordinary sense, he was conscious that his letters were handed about – notably the long epistles to Bolingbroke and Pope and Arbuthnot – and he was far too good an artist, and too sensitive to the meaning of words, to set down even trivialities upon paper without deliberation."[10] William Henry Irving, investigating the correspondence of all the Scriblerians, places Swift closer to Pope. He observes, "Swift certainly felt, along with most men in his time, that letters might well be written for the public view," and he cites evidence to show that Swift was sometimes negligent, sometimes highly concerned about preserving and circulating his letters. Later he identifies Swift and Pope as "the first great artists in our literature who 'deliberated letters' as a special form,"[11] and he develops their letters almost as a distinct genre.

Oliver Ferguson restores the correspondence to a more ordinary context. He maintains that Swift did not write personal letters for publication, but he suggests that Swift found letter-writing "a literary activity."[12] He discusses the literary character of Swift's letter to Robert Percival (see below, p. 22) and then finds other "affinities"—raillery and persona – between the letters and Swift's "public writings."

Of the three critics, Ferguson is most helpful. He assesses Swift's letters by themselves, instead of measuring them entirely according to the standard of Pope's, and he emphasizes the similarities between the ostensibly private

letters and the published works. Probably Ferguson does not go far enough. He mentions a few letters when, in fact, there are a great many which resemble the prose satires. These "satirical" letters, potentially, can show much about Swift's attitude toward letter-writing, about his relations with Pope, and about his stance as a satirist. Ultimately, these letters suggest that the body of Swift's correspondence should be read not only as biographical material, but also as valuable literary work.

The Incidence of Satire

Private letters, of course, do not normally provide a vehicle for satire, and even the most enthusiastic students of the genre have not found extended, organized satire in Swift's letters. Satiric material appears, rather, in definable sections of the correspondence and, within those sections, in short passages.

Within the great volume of Swift's letters are many which treat matters of business. First as the sort of informal Irish Church legate in London and later as Dean of St. Patrick's, Swift managed many Church affairs; in fact, more letters survive from Swift to Archbishop King and to Archdeacon Walls than to Pope. During the years 1709–1714, Swift also wrote many letters designed mainly to convey personal or public news. The *Journal to Stella* falls into this class; while highly entertaining, the *Journal* obtains its character not from calculated literary presentation, but from intimate, spontaneous rendering of detail. In all of Swift's

correspondence, literary content falls off when he has an abundance of fresh news or gossip to communicate.

Satire, then, emerges in the letters where neither business nor news predominates. Johnson, in Rambler 152, explains: "The purpose for which letters are written when no intelligence is communicated, or business transacted, is to preserve in the minds of the absent either love or esteem; to excite love we must impart pleasure, and to raise esteem we must discover abilities."[13] Swift's correspondence subscribes closely to Johnson's principle; literary material, including satire, occurs most consistently in the letters prior to 1710, when Swift seeks to raise esteem, and in the letters after 1714, when he wishes to preserve love in the minds of his English correspondents.

When it does appear, satire does not govern entire letters; it appears in short flashes, lasting for one paragraph, one sentence, or even one clause. When he writes his disdainful message to Percival, Swift sustains one satirical approach through a fairly long letter, but this example is unusual. Elsewhere, Swift adopts each satirical device for a few moments only. The satirical passages, then, can be identified more by mechanism than by tone. Swift writes satirically in a letter when he employs some rhetorical technique familiar in the published satires. If satire itself can be defined, strictly functionally, as indirect derogation, this completes the distinction. A letter by Swift is satirical if it shares some method of indirect derogation with the published works. This seems a fairly technical definition, yet

it includes many satirical tactics and a large number of letters.

Allegory, perhaps, is the most noticeable device common to the literary works and the letters. Swift was expert at interchanging fact and fiction, and he exercised this skill in all his writings. Thus allegory controls the narrative sections of *A Tale of a Tub* and operates conspicuously in *Gulliver's Travels*; among the less famous works, allegory appears in such treatises as "The Battle of the Books" and "A Famous Prediction of Merlin." These last two show a useful distinction between two forms of Swift's allegory. In "The Battle," Swift creates a fictional analogue to historical fact. Given an acquaintance with the personalities and ideas involved in the pedantic dispute of Ancients and Moderns, Swift produces an amusing parallel account of the strife of classical and modern authors in St. James's Library. In the "Prediction of Merlin" Swift proceeds differently. He takes a spurious, incomprehensible text and draws historical references from it. He is parodying astrologers and almanac-makers, and his method constitutes a sort of reverse allegory – finding historical analogues for a fiction.

Swift uses both of these forms of allegory in his letters. In a late epistle to Lord Castle-Durrow, he remarks: "I often reflect on my present life as the exact burlesque of my middle age, which passed among Ministers that you and your party since call the worst of times. I am now acting the same things in miniature, but in a higher station as first Minister, nay sometimes as a Prince, in which last quality

my housekeeper, a grave elderly woman, is called at home and in the neighborhood Sir Robert. My butler is secretary, and has no other defect for that office but that he cannot write; yet that is not singular, for I have known three Secretaries of State upon the same level, and who were too old to mend, which mine is not. My realm extends a hundred and twenty houses, whose inhabitants constitute the bulk of my subjects; my grand jury is my House of Commons, and my Chapter the House of Lords. I must proceed no further, because my arts of governing are secrets of state" (December 24, 1736). Here, as in "The Battle," Swift begins with a factual account – the story of his career at St. Patrick's – and embellishes it with an analogy. The embellishment is not strictly fictional, but it does draw rather selectively on the details of Swift's "middle age." An earlier letter perhaps clarifies Swift's technique. In 1725, when Pope promises to introduce him to a deaf lady (Mrs. Howard) who is "considerable at Court, yet no party woman" (September 14, 1725), Swift replies: "The lady whom you describe to live at court, to be deaf, and no party woman, I take to be mythology, but know not how to moralize it. She cannot be Mercy, for Mercy is neither deaf nor lives at Court. Justice is blind, and perhaps deaf, but neither is she a Court lady. Fortune is both blind and deaf, and a Court lady, but then she is a most damnable party woman, and will never make me easy, as you promise. It must be Riches, which answers all your description. I am glad she visits you, but my voice is so weak that

I doubt she will never hear me" (September 29, 1725). Here Swift starts with a real character and compares her to a variety of abstractions. He moves away from fact.

In other letters, Swift moves toward fact. The Court lady herself tells Swift: "Our island is in great joy; one of our Yahoos having been delivered of a creature, half ram and half Yahoo; and another has brought forth four perfect black rabbits" (November 17, 1726). Swift answers: "I have been five days turning over old books to discover the meaning of those monstrous births you mention. That of the four black rabbits seems to threaten some dark Court intrigue, and perhaps some change in the administration; for the rabbit is an undermining animal, that loves to work in the dark. The blackness denotes the bishops, whereof some of the last you have made are persons of such dangerous parts and profound abilities; but rabbits being clothed in furs, may perhaps glance at the judges. However, the ram, by which is meant the Ministry, butting with his two horns, one against the Church, and the other against the law, shall obtain the victory; and whereas the birth was a conjunction of ram and Yahoo, this is easily explained by the story of Chiron, governor, or which is the same thing, chief minister to Achilles, who was half man and half brute; which, as Machiavel observes, all good governors of Princes ought to be" (November 27, 1726). This explanation follows the same allegorical method as the "Prediction of Merlin." Swift takes an obvious hoax and discovers historical portents from it. In the process he displays great

satirical ingenuity – particularly for a correspondent who never leaned on his elbow or studied what he would write.[14]

Just as Swift enjoys manipulating allegory, so he also enjoys playing with metaphor. In his nonsatirical prose, Swift does not commonly use metaphorical language at all; when he introduces it in the published satires or in the letters, he usually ascribes it to a persona, often a literary hack. Thus he satirizes not by true comparisons but by false ones, which reflect not so much on their subject as on their author and his audience. In the Preface to *A Tale of a Tub,* Swift's Grub Street writer mentions "a most ingenious Poet, who soliciting his Brain for something new, compared himself to the Hangman, and his Patron to the Patient."[15] Here it is not the patron who is ridiculed, but the luckless poet who devises the metaphor and the narrator who describes him as "ingenious." In a way, the metaphor backfires. This is again the case in the "Meditation on a Broomstick" and in the "Letter of Advice to a Young Poet." The "Meditation" parodies Robert Boyle by exploring a series of ludicrous similarities between man and a broom. The "Letter of Advice" condemns Grub Street poetry through a variety of misapplied metaphors which nominally commend shabby writing. For example, the author praises indexes as a substitute for reading, "For authors are to be used like lobsters, you must look for the best meat in the tails, and lay the bodies back again in the dish."[16] In fact, the "Letter of Advice" may not be by Swift, but if not, it

remains strongly imitative of Swift, and it duplicates his own use of metaphors.[17]

Swift's taste for distorted comparison frequently finds expression in the correspondence. Especially when he writes on literary topics, Swift tends to employ backfiring metaphors and thus laugh politely at himself or at his correspondent. In 1709 he sends Ambrose Philips an epistle, part of which might almost be called a Confidential Letter to a Young Poet: "Your versifying in a Sledge seems somewhat parallel to singing a Psalm upon a Ladder, and when you tell me it was upon the Sea, I suppose it might be a Pastorall, and that you had got a Calenture, which makes men think that they behold green Feelds and Groves on the Ocean. I suppose the Subject was Love, and then came in naturally your burning in so much cold, and that the Ice was hott Iron in comparison of her disdain. Then there are frozen Hearts, and melting Sighs, or Kisses, I forget which, But I believe your Poetical Faith could not arrive at allowing that Venus was born on the Belts or any Part of the Northern Sea" (March 8, 1709).[18] Twenty-six year later, writing to Orrery, Swift reviews his own literary output: "As to writing in Verse or Prose, I am a real King, for I never had so many good *Subjects* in my life; and the more a King; because like all the rest of my Rank (except K. George) I am so bad a Governor of them, that I do not regard what becomes of them, nor hath any single one among them thrived under me these three Years past" (July 17,