

A Spider's Poison: Wit in Swift's *Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*

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SWIFT'S low opinion of literary criticism accounts undoubtedly for the fact that he never wrote any extended or straightforward explanation of his artistic theories. Critics, he reminds us,¹ are directly descended from Momus, god of mockery and censure, and Hybris, who in the course of history begat such egregious modern brats as Bentley, Rymer, Wotton and Dennis. Criticism, says the cantankerous goddess herself, "*deposed Wit and Knowledge from their Empire over Poetry, and advanc'd my self in their stead.*"² This negativism is nowhere so systematically and amusingly demonstrated as in *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*, a satire adroitly debunking the profession of letters while providing considerable insight into Swift's conception of imagination and poetry, and possibly his attitude toward his own success as a satirist. Unfortunately, the main interest scholars have had in the *Letter of Advice* is whether it is authentic. Written in 1721, it was never acknowledged by Swift, although attributed to him in later eighteenth-century editions and included in Temple Scott's collected edition. Herbert Davis had serious reservations and relegated it to an apocryphal appendix in his edition,³ where it has been poked over by computer critics.⁴ In spite of Davis' doubts,⁵ the vast majority of commentators consider the *Letter* wholly typical if not brilliant Swiftian satire. Some of the stylistic crudities have been explained away by the presence of an alien hand, a convenient critical ploy for saving the reputation of a writer from the embarrassment of later admirers.

To look for the occasion for this satire would perhaps be futile. Grub Street and all it stood for was a perpetual obsession to Swift. Dublin in the first quarter of the eighteenth century made few attempts to curry favor with the muses and had no counterpart to London's publishing world. We must therefore regard with wry amusement the speaker's suggestion that the Dublin authorities establish "an Apartment for the *Muses*" like the brothels set aside in the red-light districts of Rome and Amsterdam. There is also the speaker's support for plans to build a new theater in Dublin to provide "elegant divertisements of this town." This almost certainly refers to the actor Thomas Elrington's proposals in 1720-21 to erect a new theater, to which plan Swift was probably ambivalent. In *A Letter of Advice*, however, the theater proposal is mocked by being put on a par with "*Gaming Ordinaries, Groom Porter's, Lotteries, Bowling-Greens, Nine-pin Allies, Bear-Gardens, Cock-pits, Prizes, Puppet and Raree-Shews. . .*" One might add to these topical references the allusion to the calamitous economic effects of the South-Sea Bubble and the ironic plea to boycott imported British wit in favor of native poetry of Irish manufacture, a parody of Swift's own serious concern with English exploitation of Ireland. A contemporary proposal to charter a public bank in Ireland is also derided in the letter by the suggestion "that *Poetry* may be a Sharer in that Privilege." All these Irish issues had commanded Swift's interest in the years previous to the letter's publication in December 1721.

Notwithstanding these immediacies and Ireland's economic and poetic depression, the letter's main attack is directed at the entrepreneurial approach poets were taking to enlarge their poetry and their estates. The persona here, like the more subtle creation in *A Modest Proposal*, is an old duffer, narrating under a guise of modesty but really full of self importance, showing a young man the nearest way to success in poetry. The persona disclaims any experience in writing poetry, "having never made one

Verse since I was at *School* where I suffered too much for my Blunders. . . ." He offers only "some scatter'd Thoughts upon the Subject." With such tipoffs the reader can then judge the cogency of this recipe for compounding verse. The measure of success is entirely financial. Hence the suggestion for the establishment of another Grub Street and a new theater in Dublin, outlets for the young man's poetic wares. All these seemingly positive suggestions must be read ironically; the reader must reverse all principles to their opposites if he is to perceive Swift's grim smile lurking behind the clown's face paint.

In defending Swift's authorship Professor Paul Fussell sees a dramatic structure to the letter, in which the mechanical transitions and prolixity of style reveal the comic blundering of the speaker, like Dogberry's formalities of speech in *Much Ado About Nothing*.⁷ The paragraphs are strung together with such splicing as "In the first place . . .," "Besides, it is farther to be observed . . .," "But to proceed . . .," "I would now offer some poor Thoughts . . .," "Another Point . . .," "To conclude . . ." and the like. These writing clichés and the occasional excess lumber in the prose add a further dimension to this parody of literary criticism by providing dramatic point to the lack of skill of the letter writer. Where others have argued, notably Herbert Davis, that these compositional crudities militate against Swiftian authorship, Professor Fussell turns blemishes into beauties by asserting that these are comic devices which exhibit the senility of Swift's persona. The narrator is a superannuated man, Professor Fussell concludes, whose poetic ideals are of the metaphysical school, since he appears to favor wit over good sense, words rather than learning, embellishment rather than the plain untortured truth. The butt of satire would then be the wit of the elaborated conceit and play on words of a Herbert or a Cowley, the false wit derided ten years before by Addison in *The Spectator*. It is unlikely that Swift was beating this dead horse, which even in Addison's time few

found ready to resuscitate. Moreover, Professor Fussell ignores the context of Swift's satirical letter and the controversies about "wit" in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

"Wit," as every reader of Augustan literary criticism knows, is a proteus that resists easy explanation. It has its pleasant as well as its unpleasant connotations. Pope could speak of "the rash dexterity of Wit" in *An Essay on Man* and celebrate it in *An Essay on Criticism* as "True wit is Nature to advantage dressed." There was also the common epithet of the period, a coffee-house wit, a clever but shallow talker, a know-it-all, a type detested by Swift. But wit could have a profound meaning to others. Abraham Cowley, whose poetry the young Swift had admired and imitated wrote a famous ode on wit, in which the poet said:

In a true piece of Wit all things must be,
 Yet all things there *agree*.
 As in the *Ark*, joyn'd without force or strife,
 All *Creatures* dwelt; all *Creatures* that had Life.
 Or as the *Primitive forms* of all

Which without Discord or Confusion lie,
 In that strange *Mirror* of the *Deitie*.

Wit here is the agency for reconciliation of the disparate elements of the world, brought together harmoniously like the animals of Noah's ark. There is no suggestion — notwithstanding the metaphysical label often pinned on Cowley — of the violent yoking together of dissimilar objects. The poet implies that wit has divine sanction, like Noah's mission to save God's creatures. Swift emphatically rejects this notion as I shall presently show.

Still another conception of wit, which is probably closer to the meaning most often used by the persona of the letter, is the free-thinking kind of wit, unabashed and unfettered thought associated with the deists and *philosophes* in France. It is, he says, "better to be a *great Wit* than a *good Christian*," putting wit and Christianity at odds with one another. He quotes with approval Petronius' phrase *Liber*

Spiritus — free spirit — as the chief qualification of a good poet, but then proceeds to misinterpret Petronius' meaning by taking it out of context: "i.e., a Spirit or *Mind*, free or *disengag'd* from all prejudices concerning God, Religion, and another world, it is to me a plain Account why our present Sett of Poets are, and hold themselves oblig'd to be *Free-Thinkers*." It is the wit excoriated by Jeremy Collier in 1698 in his *Short View of the Profanity and Immorality of the Stage* and which from his narrow clerical view led to the licentiousness and irreligion of Restoration drama. Imagination or wit (often synonymous) was among orthodox Christian apologists condemned for its irreligious tendencies. Malebranche, the French philosopher, in 1684 wrote in *A Treatise of Morality* (I quote the 1699 English translation):

But that which is most opposite to the efficacy of the Grace of Christ, is that which in the Language of the World is call'd *Wit*; for the better the Imagination, great qualities in the Eyes of Men, are the most prolifick and the most general causes of the blindness of the Mind and the corruption of the Heart.⁸

The man of wit or poet, Malebranche goes on to say, "is charm'd with his own production, and instead of contemplating things as they are in themselves and as their Ideas represent them, delights continually in seeing his own Farces acted, and applauds the Fictions of his own Brain." (p. 115) Orthodox English divines often echoed these same admonitions. An Anglican divine and contemporary of Swift, Dr. Samuel Clarke, who is known for his attacks on deists and free thinkers, also denounced the wayward tendencies of wit:

. . . whatso ever things are profane, impure, filthy, dishonorable and absurd; these things [men of wit] make it their business to represent as harmless and indifferent and to laugh Men out of their natural shame and abhorrence of them; nay, even to recommend them with their utmost Wit. Such Men as these, are not to be argued with, till they can be persuaded to use Arguments instead of Drollery. For Banter is not capable of being answered by Reason: not because it has any strength in it; but because it runs out of all bounds of Reason and good

Sense, by extravagantly joining together such Images, as have not in themselves any manner of Similitude or Connexion; by which means all things are alike easy to be rendered ridiculous. . . .⁹

To return to Swift, his earlier *Tale of a Tub* explodes the claims of modern wit:

He that can, with *Epicurus*, content his ideas with the *Films* and *Images* that fly off upon his senses from the *Superficies* of Things; Such a Man, truly wise, creams off Nature, leaving the Sower and the Dregs, for Philosophy and Reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined Point of Felicity, called *the Possession of being well deceived*; the Serene Peaceful state of being a Fool among Knaves. (Sec. IX)

Such a felicity is personified in the hack persona of the *Tale*, which, although a travesty of wit, he claims will rival ancient works in religion and philosophy. The *Letter of Advice*, I would like to think, answers a similar satiric end; to ridicule Grubbean claims to literary merit by mocking their most cherished felicity, their vaunted wit. In the wit of the free thinker is collapsed together with satiric nicety the coffee-house wit, the skeptic philosopher, the modern poet and facile debunker, not the Metaphysical conceit-maker, whom Swift is laughing at in the letter. But the satirist goes beyond the attack on free-thinking poets of his own time. He impugns the whole tradition that assumed wit, truth and morality could be reconciled and unified in a work of transcendent art, a tradition whose strongest defense can be found in Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*. The Elizabethan poet and defender of poetry is mentioned four times in the *Letter of Advice* and each time with cutting sarcasm.

Now Sidney was no free thinker. On the contrary, *An Apology for Poetry* advanced the strongest arguments up to that time that poetry has the power to induce moral behavior. Sidney thought poetry could bring together Christian activism and Platonic idealism. Wit, in the largest sense of the word, was the agency by which man's highest good is to be known and followed: "our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is." The poet is *vates*, a prophet

whose rage is divine in origin, whose visions deliver to men a golden world of unexpected and wonderful beauty, which draws men to it by the force of its splendor. Sidney thus turns aside the old Christian (and Puritan) objections that poets are liars and makers of dangerous fictions; they are the supreme soothsayers and moral teachers. All of this sounds refreshingly noble — if not somewhat old fashioned — to us in the twentieth century, but to Swift in 1721, living in provincial Dublin under the ignominy of Walpolean corruption in both kingdoms, Sidney's idealism seemed arrant nonsense when compared with contemporary reality. The gap had always been to Swift a matter of pain and then indignation (as it was in truth to Sidney, who was not indifferent to the poetasters of his age). But for all Sidney's talk of the poet's golden world there was to Swift always Grub Street. A year before the publication of *A Letter of Advice* he wrote the *Progress of Poetry*, a mockery of the Grub Street poet. The poet rises in imaginative flight not from divine rage but only when he is out of pocket. Swift's characteristic response to his own indignation was sarcasm and controlled fury, particularly directed at the source of fake idealism; to him Sidney's theories and the critical tradition that stressed the notion of poetry as a spur to piety and morality.

We have in the first part of the letter a systematic attempt to ridicule wit. Religion and all its beliefs, we are informed "are a wonderful check to Wit and Humor, and such as a true Poet cannot possibly give in to. . . ." In a brilliant and convivial simile the old adviser says "that the smallest quantity of Religion, like a single drop of Malt-liquor in Claret, will muddy and discompose the brightest Poetical Genius." The Bible, however, is useful for the ready stock of "Images, Allusions, Similitudes, Examples or even Language itself." "For the Scriptures are undoubtedly a Fund of Wit, and a Subject for Wit." Here wit is used in two senses; in the first it is meant to refer to stories and imagery, while the latter usage equates wit

with mockery and denigration through the quick sally and joke. Both senses carry an implication of impiety and knavery with a suggestion of plagiarism.

In another devastating paragraph the poet is compared to a priest. The young aspirant may qualify for poetical orders and be ordained by bishops in poetry, for poetry may be used to cure souls. As the old speaker points out — a parody of Sidney's idea of the poet as transmitter of divine truth — “as of old, poets and priests were one and the same function, the alliance of those ministerial offices is to this day happily maintained in the same persons.” That is, happily for the speaker, unspeakably ill for Swift that the clergy resort to poetry as a means to hierarchical advancement. In the dialectic of the letter, truth and wit — as Swift understands these terms — are at odds with one another.

In matters of study the young man need not develop his knowledge of ancient literature: “Abstracts, Abridgments, Summaries, etc.” (analogues to *The Reader's Digest* in the eighteenth century) are the easy short cuts to learning. Sidney is again quoted sympathetically but wrongly: in “Ireland, where true learning goes very bare, yet are their Poets held in devout Reverence,” which the persona misinterprets as Sidney's belief that learning is superfluous to poetry. This feat of false logic and nimble parody have all the marks of Swiftian wry humor. Sidney of course meant the opposite; poetry is such a divine and pleasing art that even where there is little learning it is appreciated. We also recognize the echo from the ancients and moderns controversy, for the modern poet needs no aid from ancient books: “I am for every Man's working upon his own Materials,” the persona rationalizes ignorance. One recollects the self-sufficient spider from *The Battle of the Books*, who “by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeding and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom, producing nothing at all but flybane and a cobweb. . . .” Instead of reading the

best that has been thought and said, the persona recommends various word games, "diminutive sports," he calls them, and coffee-house conversations as the school for poets. In case of short memories, a commonplace book will be as good a source for plagiarists to draw upon as the ancients themselves, which in any case will not have been read.

Having mocked the usual route to poetic sterility in the age of Walpole, Swift proceeds to the persona's bad advice on composing verse. The would-be poet is told to invoke the muse, sprinkle freely from Greek and Latin authors and swell the lines with grand words and epithets, all of which suggest to the reader the empty literary conventions of Augustan verse. In a probable reference to his own ideal as a poet, Swift says ironically that literary puffery is "contrary to the practice of some few *out-of-the-way* writers who use a natural and concise Expression, and effect a stile like unto a *Shrewsbury-Cake*, *Short and Sweet* upon the palat, they will not afford you a Word more than is necessary to make them intelligible. . . ." A simple bare style devoid of the pretentious wit spoken of earlier. This is as close as Swift ever got to an expression of his own poetic ideals; it is at one with his laconic "proper words in proper places."

The poet is further advised to begin his career with spleen: "Let your first Attempt be a *coup d'eclat* in the way of *Libel*, *Lampoon*, or *Satyr*. Knock down half a score Reputations, and you will infallibly raise your own, and so it be with *Wit*, no matter with how little Justice, for Fiction is your trade." Is this Swift's repudiation of his own methods? A confession of his "sin of wit"? Notwithstanding his own "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift," in which the final moral end of satire justifies the "too much Satyr in his vein," Swift was always ambivalent about satire. Not the least interesting fact about Swift's ironies is that they are often self-directed. No sin or form of pride or cruelty he ever attacked could not be found

within his own breast. It is perhaps this truthfulness about his own moral ambiguities which makes Swift the supreme moralist he is and why he is so interesting to us moderns.

The *Letter of Advice to a Young Poet* is finally then a satire on Swift's own wayward tendencies as a witty satirist. Paradoxical as this sounds, it nevertheless is true that the wit excoriated in this piece is everywhere to be found in Swift's early works, in *A Tale of a Tub* and *Battle of the Books*, both crammed with skeptic sallies, personal lampoons and allegorical fictions. Satire in the *Letter of Advice* goes simultaneously outward and inward. On the surface it riddles the pretensions of modern poetry, particularly among the Irish, who wished to emulate Grub Street. In the course of this mockery the wit and nimble imagination associated with the romantic strain in English poetry is exploded and shown to be the creation of vain illusions, the greatest illusion of all the power of poetry to move men toward good. Grub Street in reality produced a vast outpouring of debased and lucrative verse, mainly raillery, lampoons and satire, which Swift indirectly laments as the poet's best way toward fame. The inescapable conclusion, however, is that the cankered muse so derided here was Swift's own literary bitch, who had made men both fear and hate him. "Kick the World, and the World and you live together at a reasonable good understanding," says the speaker, a nasty reflection on Swift's perverse wisdom. Only Swift could have had in 1721 that withering insight into his own literary ambitions and the audacity to write *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*. It is this self-knowledge which mitigates and finally overthrows whatever charges of cynicism and despair that have been leveled at Swift.

NOTES

¹"Digression Concerning Critics," *A Tale of a Tub* in *Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1957), I, 57.

²"Battle of the Books," *Works*, I, 114.

³*Works*, IX, 325-345.

⁴Louis T. Milic, *A Quantitative Approach to the Style of Jonathan Swift*, (The Hague, 1967), and C. S. and W. F. Matlack, "A Statistical Approach to Problems of Attribution: *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*," *CE*, XXIX (May 1968), 627-632.

⁵"Introduction," *Works*, IX, xxiv-xxvii.

⁶See W. R. Chetwood, *A General History of the Stage*, (London, 1749), pp. 132-136.

⁷"Speaker and Style in *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*, (1721), and the Problem of Attribution," *RES*, X (1959), 63-67.

⁸Trans. James Shipton, (London 1699), p. 113. For some of these references to wit I am indebted to Edward N. Hooker, "Pope on Wit: *The Essay on Criticism*," *The Hudson Review*, II, (1950), 84-100.

⁹*Works of Samuel Clarke*, (1738), II, 603-604.

Good Wif of Bathe

"By God, if women had but . . ."

While the threshing April winds upon the road
swell Dame Alice's high-coloured hue
sly Jenkyn's ghost now glides, now zeros in,
addressing her above the threatening crew,
"Alisoun, dear wag your tongue and
 needle these men."

All day long, ignored, while faring forth,
bumping her palfrey's side in scarlet time,
she's brooded long, and laughed until she's raged,
"God's bones, I'm dealt out like a *Venus aged*
begrudged *some* husbands, this headdress of twenty pounds
— or worse."

Then suddenly she turns
and, via Jenkyn from above the tepid sun,
without much fuss, she floors them with her tale,
Nay, she admits her taste for "coltish" sex
"meek, young and fresh in bed" . . .
 until *they* blush.

Anne Farrell Bailie