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The subjective Romantic author—Wordsworth in *The Prelude,* for example—frequently sets himself up for direct examination by the reader. With the neo-classicist, however, objectivity is the goal, and one of the techniques for achieving this is to set someone else up “pinned and wriggling” against the wall, as do Pope for his sylph in *The Rape of the Lock* and Eliot for J. Alfred Prufrock. In one sense this is the role played by the various *personae* who appear frequently in eighteenth-century literature. In the case of Swift's creations these *personae* sometimes take on not only a character of their own—Bickerstaff, the Drapier, Gulliver, the supposed authors of *The Tale of a Tub,* the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity* and the *Modest Proposal*—but in addition—as with the simple seamanlike reporting of Gulliver or the scientific reasoning of the *Modest Proposal*—they even act as a “feedback” and control Swift himself with reference to the tone which he imparts to the work under his pen.

This paper shall concern itself with the *persona* in *A Modest Proposal,* firstly as a satire against projectors, secondly as a vehicle for a satire against ourselves, and lastly as a vehicle for the positive proposals of the puppet master who stands behind him.

In dealing with the satire against projectors, one is struck by the extraordinary uniformity of the character of the putative author, and the tone of controlled reasoning which, as Leavis points out, contrasts sharply with the suggestions which he makes. Occasionally it is true—as when he speaks of landlords who have devoured most of the parents, and particularly when he talks of the country (England) which would gladly “eat up our whole nation”—Swift's proverbial flood of *saeva indignatio* breaks through. In general, however, even the points of individual satire, as those against the indolent young women in Dublin or against the incidence of stealing in the country of Cavan, have been well integrated.

We do not need to know the details of the actual “projects” of the eighteenth century in order to appreciate the dangers of reason, when it stands alone without the heart. Swift was not only writing a *Critique of Pure Reason* half a century before Kant, but he was also looking forward to times closer to our own. The very reasonableness with which the projector speaks must put us on our guard, because he is one of us. Kafka writes, in his *Penal Colony,* of an island where the officer explains to the *persona* with pride, and with a detachment identical to that of our own projector, the details of a machine which methodically strips his prisoner to death. Just a few years later six million Jews received similar scientific treatment at the hands of one of our most civilized communities. Shortly after the last war an essay was written suggesting the enslavement of fifteen million displaced persons as a means of dealing with the pressing problem which they presented, while Swift himself, before writing his *Modest Proposal,* had made the even more modest suggestion of slavery in his *Maxims Controlled in Ireland* (1724?). Similar problems are pressing in our modern world, and we are certainly not lacking for projectors who offer to rectify them. Paralleling, for example, the population problem in Ireland are the teeming millions in Eastern Asia. As many of us are aware, such projects as the defoliation of Vietnam by atomic means is not without advocates in our own country, and perhaps, in some measure, in our own minds.

The problem with the various projects mentioned, whether they be rooted in seriousness or in satire, is that we do not know to what extent we would identify with them if they could solve difficulties, while not in any way implicating ourselves. It is not without purpose that Swift has left to the very last line the *persona*'s assertion that, since his children are more than nine years of age and his wife past child-bearing, he has no personal axe to grind. Certainly, on one level, this is a satire against the projector, but on another he may represent ourselves; and on this level we might wonder whether the fact that perhaps our children are under nine years of age and our wives capable of child-bearing might make a difference.

Of course the suggestion made by the *persona* could be described as preposterous, inconceivable and inhuman, or with any other of the adjectives with which we ward off in our minds that which we do not wish to contemplate. However, it remains an essential element in the *Modest Proposal* that mass annihilation and cannibalism both were and are at no great distance from the human psyche. Indeed, in contradistinction to the Houyhnhnms, we could hardly dispense with such terms in our language and thought.

Before moving from the *persona* as projector to the *persona* as vehicle for positive suggestions, it will be necessary to consider some aspects of the genre with which we are concerned. Schiller, in his *Essay on Naive and Sentimental Poetry,* has defined satire, be it of the serious or of the laughing kind, as that which points up the difference between the real and the ideal. In the *persona* as projector we have seen, apart from the parody involved in the title and content of the work, a satire against this fictitious author by a pointing up of the difference between his expressed ideals—objectivity, compassion and a dislike of cruelty—and the real results which we feel may ensue from his suggestions. On this level, too, the very name ‘projector,’ within the Swiftian and the neo-classical context, was sufficient to prepare us for irony against the *persona.* It is essential, of course, that the purveyor of irony gives us a clue to the fact that what he, or his author, means moves in quite another direction from what he says. One of the best methods for doing this is to exaggerate the ‘real,’ thereby accentuating its disparity with the ‘ideal.’ Thus in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* the adventures associated with Roland are purposely exaggerated in a way which points up the difference between these and many of the expressed ideals of the chivalric tradition. The failure of such exaggeration or other clues to be perceived by the reader may result in the work being taken seriously—as is the case with some of the satire in Goethe which is only now being brought to light by modern irony hunters—but it can also have dangerous results for the author. In this respect it will be remembered, of course, that Defoe suffered at the hands of the very faction for whom he was supposedly writing.

In the *Modest Proposal,* the *persona,* on the level at which he is a vehicle for corrective satire, provides us with an exaggeration which no ‘homocentric’ society could possibly miss, since the ‘real’ is the butchery of young children, and the ‘ideal’ against which it is set is by implication the expressed *mores* of the people who are to carry this out. Thus, in Schillerian terms, the satire results from juxtaposition of a reality which is butchery, and an ideal which is Christian brotherly love.

Needless to say this is not laughing satire. Laughter may well be the result of a pleasant shock, as we observe that two things thought to be similar are surprisingly and amusingly different, as occurs perhaps, for those who are amused, when we realize the difference between the *persona*'s expressed standards and the motives or results which are implied. More frequently however, as with the high and low life in *The Beggar's Opera* or *Jonathan Wild the Great,* laughter results when we discover that two things commonly held to be different are surprisingly and amusingly the same. As Ewald points out, though in widely separated statements, the humour, such as it is, is in the unassuming *persona* of the *Proposal,* while on the other hand he maintains that “no modern reader ever put down this essay with a feeling that the problems in it were not tragically serious.” Indeed, this is Schiller's pathetic satire and Swift serves it up biting, trenchant, unadulterated and piping hot from the oven of his savage indignation; while it is both the purpose and the magic of the *persona,* in his role as vehicle for constructive satire, that he achieves the well nigh impossible task of presenting positive proposals without dulling the edge of the wit.

It is, I feel, observably true that forms such as satire and the mock epic tend to belong to those periods of both literature and life when men have acquired a certain objectivity and are not passionately involved in the policies, be they religious or political, which they endorse. Thus among the Romantics we should be surprised to find satire, except in such ‘hermaphrodite’ creatures as Byron and Goethe, while the possibility of either Pope or Swift producing an epic with either the sublimity of Milton or the bathos of Southey is hard to conceive. It was often claimed for satire (as indeed for drama) that its purposes were constructive, yet the very act of producing a list of constructive proposals is bound to dull the edge of the satire itself, since this displays patently that the author is merely cutting down one crop of enthusiasms for the purpose of planting another of his own choosing. Here of course the *persona* permits Swift to speak through a discredited person, as occurs with Byron's Satan or Goethe's Mephistopheles. For the latter authors this represented a subtle method of escape from the censorship of society. Swift has other ends in view. Not only does the pseudo-author reinforce the anonymity of his puppeteer, as occurs with the Drapier, but as a projector he lists a number of positive proposals which Swift had been developing for over a decade. Yet the putative author frames them in a condemnation on utilitarian grounds, and we sense that we are being offered the simple choice between these proposals on the one hand and the fire of cannibalism, in which we may not remain entirely unscathed, on the other hand. Nevertheless the technique has been such that neither Swift nor the *persona* has made these suggestions directly, and the satire still cuts with a razor edge.

The author of the “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” was well aware of La Rochefoucauld's preoccupation with man's self interest, and he is not above using this knowledge through many judicious and yet highly exaggerated hints in several of the satires. Thus behind the *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* is the insinuation that the whole church, and indeed public order itself, would come to chaos if the Test Act were repealed; behind the “Examiner Paper” on Marlborough is an indication of the enormous continuing cost to the public if the military are not brought under civilian control; behind *The Drapier's First Letter* is the ‘shocking’ hint that the price of beer would rise to thirty-six halfpence per quart; in *The Answer to ‘the Craftsman’* is the suggestion that France and Spain might import Irish troops; and behind the *Modest Proposal* lies the hint that the entire structure of human *mores* might degenerate if Swift's methods for dealing with the Irish problem are not accepted. Part of the artistry of Swift is to leave his heavy handed insinuation in the background, while speaking to us through a *persona* who allows him to cut and thrust with as finely edged a rapier as any which the wit of Congreve brought upon the stage.

The *persona* demonstrates—with all the mathematical precision used earlier by Swift in the “Examiner Paper” on Marlborough and imitated so well a century later by Buchner—that Ireland's excess of population can only be turned into an asset by using children as meat for home consumption. He lists, in a scientifically restrained tone, those advantages which would accrue: the number of Papists would be reduced, the tenants would have money with which to pay their landlords, there would be a circulation of funds from an internal manufacture which did not interfere with England and her mercantilist policies, taverns would prosper, husbands would become as fond of their wives as of their cows in calf, and barrelled beef would be freed for the export market.

These, of course, are all suggestions by the *persona,* which lead directly up to the positive proposals that he will then render in a negative framework; but it is interesting to observe how, at this stage, Swift is interweaving with subtlety other less clearly defined points which would not fit too comfortably into the simple list of his true proposals. Thus there are thrusts at young Protestant ladies living beyond their means in Dublin, at the risks of Ireland being lost to the Pretender, at the absentee landlords in particular (and especially those who do not pay their tithes), at the heartlessness of landowners in general and at the scarcity of money in circulation, at taverners and gourmets and at the lack of consideration in husbands. After this veritable *lanx satura* the *persona* lists some suggestions, which he has written off not because they are immoral but because they are impractical. Among these are the use of home manufactures, the taxation of absentees, the avoiding of luxury in all and particularly in women, the love of one's country, the development of mercy among landlords and a refusal of shopkeepers to unite for the purpose of making arrangements to the detriment of the public. The *persona* writes off all these possibilities as “visionary thoughts.” What he is offering instead is a proposal which is “solid and real.”

Here, towards the end of the pamphlet, Swift has clearly juxtaposed his own visionary ideal and a brutal and exaggerated version of the ‘real.’ It is interesting that the very terms which Swift uses are involved in the Schillerian definition of satire. Indeed this is satire of the most biting kind, but Swift is also holding over our heads the unspoken threat of a disruption in our Christian *mores* through his insinuation that, since all other methods had been considered without success, there remained only a choice between the hidden proposals of Swift or the modest proposal of his *persona.*

In the pages of the *Modest Proposal,* Swift's *persona,* though he has neither a name nor a profession, comes very much to life. He is a man who expresses compassion and sensibility, a man who may well be troubled by the poverty, misery and filth of the life which surrounds him. He has carefully weighed the schemes of other projectors, but he has always found them “grossly mistaken in their computation.” Like the fox which will not kill the “John, Peter or Thomas” rabbit in whose warren he is lodging, the *persona* is nevertheless able to consider objectively schemes which deal with man in the mass, while being moved to “tears and pity” when considering the individual. He propounds his scheme with the scientific approach and careful logic on which Western civilization has been based, and he claims to be able to view the situation objectively, because his own wife and children are not included in the criteria of his modest proposal.

Curiously, as we come to consider the man with greater care, many of his characteristics seem uncommonly familiar to us. Very probably, like the *persona* in the *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity,* he assumes politely that one is only defending a “nominal” religion, and he does not appear unduly involved with Christ's concept of brotherly love at the local and perhaps more uncomfortable level. Could he be our neighbor who advocates a scheme for birth control in India and equality in Alabama (though not at home of course), or is he the man who proposes the stronger line of atom bombs for China before they are able to deliver the home product? If only Swift had suggested a name or a profession as a clue, but then perhaps in part the *persona* is Swift himself, and he would naturally find protection behind satire, which by his own definition is “a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own.”