

TODD C. PARKER

"The Idlest Trifling Stuff That Ever Was Writ," or, Why Swift Hated his Sermons

THE JONATHAN SWIFT I conjure up for my students is usually the one who enjoins us to "Abi Viator / Et imitare, si poteris, / Strenuum pro virili / Libertatis Vindicatorem."¹ Swift's "saeva Indignatio," or "savage indignation," has long been one powerful rubric under which his major satires, particularly "A Modest Proposal," have been read. As David Nokes observes: "*A Modest Proposal* is often produced as a *locus classicus* of [Swift's] mature ironic style. In it he challenges us to register our own humanity by supplying those human qualities which his rhetorical and logical formulae deliberately leave out of account."²

It is against just this sort of humane inscription, though, that Nokes warns us when it comes to interpreting Swift's sermons: "Yet in accepting this challenge we must beware of allowing our liberal principles to prejudice our understanding of what Swift must have meant, supplying lacunae where none was left, and laying virtues to Swift's charge of which he was not guilty" (219). Indeed, Nokes's observation that the sermons "are not of a kind to warm the hearts of humanitarians," puts it mildly, to say the least (219). Here, for instance, is a brief excerpt from Swift's sermon, "On the Poor Man's Contentment":

¹ "Go, traveler, and imitate if you can one who with all his might championed liberty." Translated in Victoria Glendinning's *Jonathan Swift: A Portrait* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998) 275.

² David Nokes, "Swift and the Beggars," *Essays in Criticism* 26 (1976): 219.

you of the meaner Sort are subject to fewer Temptations than the Rich; and therefore your vices are more unpardonable. Labour subdueth your Appetites to be satisfied with common Things; the Business of your several Calls filleth up your whole time; so that Idleness, which is the Bane and Destruction of Virtue, doth not lead you into the Neighbourhood of Sin: Your Passions are cooler, by not being inflamed with Excess, and therefore the Gate and the Way that Lead to Life are not so strait or so narrow to you, as to those who live among all the Allurements to Wickedness. To serve God with the best of your Care and Understanding, and to be just and true in your Dealings, is the short Sum of your Duty and will be the more strictly required of you, because nothing lieth in the Way to divert you from it.³

Even granting the rigid structures of class and race relations in early eighteenth-century Ireland, this Swift exerts few charms. Any indignation here seems to be aimed at the poor for aspiring to sin above their station, and yet this too is the Swift whose heart was presumably lacerated by social injustice. As a substantive figure of eighteenth-century literature, Swift suffers more from the quotidian hypocrisies of life; not, I contend, because he was more of a hypocrite than his contemporaries, but because he left us a paper trail of his vagaries. More importantly, our own assumption that the author of "A Modest Proposal" should not in all seriousness chastise the poor for the moral quality of their poverty is a function of the coherence we invest in "Swift" as author and moralist. The reverend dean has received comparatively little critical attention as compared to his tub-flinging, linen-draping, and cannibalistic others, in part, I believe, because the modern critic shies away from the harsh dogmatism of Swift's sermons and the mundanity of their prose. I will argue, though, that Swift's identity as the great satirist of the modern age is incomplete without an understanding of his sermons and the effect they have on Swift's authorial persona.

³ "On the Poor Man's Contentment," in *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, Vol. IX, *Irish Tracts 1720-1723 and Sermons*, ed. Herbert Davis and Louis Landa (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968) 196.

Swift himself was famously ambivalent toward both his reputation as a preacher and his sermons. When John Winder, Swift's successor at Kilroot, wrote to Swift about the sermons Swift had left behind there, Swift replied:

Those sermons ... will utterly disgrace you, unless you have so much credit that whatever comes from you will pass. They were what I was firmly resolved to burn, and especially some of them, the idlest trifling stuff that ever was writ.... They will be a perfect lampoon on me whenever you look upon them, and remember they are mine. (*Irish Tracts and Sermons* 97)

Given the strict Anglican orthodoxy of those sermons that survive, we should ask what constitutes the idle and trifling character from which Swift is so eager to dissociate himself. Swift's sermon, "On the Trinity," for instance, reasons that comprehending the mystery of the Trinity is much less important than accepting it as received teaching of the Church:

God commandeth us, by our Dependence upon his Truth and his holy Word, to believe a Fact that we do not understand. And, this is no more than what we do every Day in the Works of Nature, upon the Credit of Men of Learning. Without Faith we can do no Works acceptable to God; for if they proceed from any other Principle, they will not advance our Salvation; and this Faith, as I have explained it, we may acquire without giving up our Senses, or contradicting our Reason. (*Irish Tracts and Sermons* 168)

Since it is through the Church that God speaks to his servants, it is to the Church that we must turn to clarify the relation between reason and faith. Just as we accept the reasonable, if incomprehensible, workings of nature "upon the Credit of men of Learning," so we should accept the divinely incomprehensible, the "Fact that we do not understand," by submitting to the Church and its ordained representatives. By making "reason" an act of obedience and not

of understanding, Swift reinforces the authority of the Church, which becomes the guarantor of those "facts" upon which we bring our "reason" to bear. That we can "know" facts we cannot understand is typical of the Anglican rationalism of Swift's day, and Swift's sentiments would not have seemed out of place in either Irish or English pulpits of the time. As Louis Landa explains in his introduction to the sermons,

On the Trinity, which is Swift's most elaborate statement on Christian doctrine, exhibits clearly the orthodoxy and conventionality of his religious views. The Earl of Orrery praised this sermon as "one of the best in its kind," but a contemporary who had read or listened to some conventional Trinity Sunday sermons would have found little in Swift's sermon, either in ideas or phraseology, that had not been utilized often by his fellow-clergymen in their many defenses of the Trinity and the other mysteries of Christianity (*Irish Tracts and Sermons* 107).

Indeed, Swift's Trinitarian theology is consistent with the rationalist projects of such figures as Henry More, Edward Stillingfleet, John Tillotson, and other prominent divines.⁴ Swift's orthodoxy was hardly "trifling": as a vigorous defender of the Church and its privileged position vis-à-vis the state, Swift remains constant from his early days as a parish priest in Kilroot to his discouraged last years in Dublin. Michael DePorte argues that Swift's identification of Christianity with the Church of England was so profound that "opposition to the church in both England and Ireland had made him give up 'all hopes of Church or Christianity.'" ⁵ Writing to Charles Ford, Swift notes, "A certain author (I forgot his name,) hath writ a book (I wish I could see it) that the Christian Religion will not last above 300 and odd years. He means, there will always be Christians, as there are Jews; but it will be no longer a Nationall Religion" (79).

⁴ See Phillip Harth, *Swift and Anglican Rationalism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) especially 46–51.

⁵ "Swift, God, and Power," *Walking Naboth's Vineyard: New Studies in Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox and Brenda Tooley (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1995) 79.

Since his doctrine and rhetoric conform to the conventions of the time, why are the sermons so offensive to Swift? These texts were a necessary part of a parish priest's life and insured his ongoing presence in the public discourse of his community; they were, after all, one important way Swift exercised what limited authority he possessed as a priest of the Church of Ireland. Moreover, as Swift's clerical authority came increasingly under attack after *A Tale of a Tub* was published in 1704, the sermons could have stood as public proof of his orthodoxy. Why, then, did Swift abhor his sermons and wish them destroyed? Why do Swift's sermons remain among the least regarded texts in his canon?

What if, I would like to propose, it is not the content of his sermons that Swift belittles as trifling, but rather their position and context within the totality of his writings? The sermon puts a public face on Swift's piety, certainly, but it also imposes a generic orthodoxy, in that texts marked as sermons invoke a different concept of authority and audience—at least ideally—from the kind of response one elicits with a satiric text. And herein lies Swift's dilemma. The authority behind the author of *A Tale of a Tub*, one who can hypothesize "A Panegyric Essay upon the Number THREE," must somehow reconcile with the authority of an Anglican dean. Swift the satirist and Swift the divine work in such parodic proximity to each other that the difference between parody and orthodoxy often erodes; the alignment of the terms "satirist/priest" too easily reinforces that of "satire/sermon," so that texts that should read least like religious commentary or theology may be mistaken for their parodic others. To write as a satirist, that is, requires Swift to reject the sermons, not because he disagrees with their doctrine, but because they surrender themselves so easily to what Swift, as a churchman and dean, must view as perverse interpretation. Ironically, Swift can safeguard his identity as a priest only by abjecting the sermons and thus separating them from the body of his satire.

If we look at the Introduction to Swift's *Tale*, for example, we find the narrator excluding "the *Bench* and the *Bar*" from his "List of Oratorical Machines" less because they are inappropriate to the list than because:

it were sufficient, that the Admission of them would overthrow a Number which I was resolved to es-

tablish, whatever Argument it might cost me; in imitation of that prudent Method observed by many other Philosophers and great Clerks, whose chief Art in Division has been, to grow fond of some proper mystical Number, which their Imaginations have rendered Sacred, to a Degree, that they force common Reason to find room for it in every part of Nature; reducing, including, and adjusting every *Genus* and *Species* within that Compass, by coupling some against their Wills, and banishing others at any Rate.⁶

Here, form takes precedence over content; worse, an arbitrary form dictates content; worst of all, the author acknowledges both the arbitrariness of the form and its adequacy to his purpose in the same rhetorical gesture. Irvin Ehrenpreis argues that "the satire is directed against the polemical writers who produced a great controversy over the doctrine of the Trinity during the years around the turn of the eighteenth century. It is not directed against the doctrine."⁷ But the problem with Ehrenpreis's contention is that satire as a mode of expression cannot be so easily stabilized. Ehrenpreis is not alone in seeing the possibility of determinate meaning in the *Tale*. Peter E. Morgan, for example, writes that

Happiness, according to the illustrious philosopher responsible for the "*Digression concerning Madness*" in *A Tale of a Tub*, is "*a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived*." "How fad[ing] and insipid," he continues, "do all Objects accost us that are not convey'd in the Vehicle of *Delusion*." Of course, these are the rambling speculations of a madman: Swift is making the narrative persona out to be a fool, so we need not credit what he has to say, and ought not take it at face value.⁸

⁶ *A Tale of a Tub*, reprinted in the *Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and William Bowman Piper (New York: Norton, 1973) 294.

⁷ *Swift, the Man, His Work, and the Age*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) 3:69 n.3.

⁸ "Last Week I Saw a Woman *Flay'd*": Swift's Meta-Social Discourse and the Implication of the Reader," *Swift Studies* 1 (1999): 59.

Morgan's "of course" depends for its obviousness on the assumptions (1) that Swift as author controls the *Tale's* narrative voice and (2) that the reader indeed recognizes "the rambling speculations of a madman" as such. It is, for Morgan, simple common sense to see the narrator as a fool, because otherwise the narrator's comments become dangerously suggestive—of what, we may not be sure, but we do know that readers who approach the narrator unaware of his madness do so at their own risk. These seem to me problematic assumptions, first, because Morgan's reading simply projects the question of authorial intention onto the persona—which displaces, not resolves, the issue of intentionality—and, second, because once contained as speculations "we need not credit," Swift's digression loses its radical character as a species of social critique. There is, moreover, something uncanny in the way that such positivist statements on authorial intent mirror the *Tale's* own positivism:

'tis easie to Assign the proper Employment of a *True Antient Genuine Critik*; which is, to travel thro' this vast World of Writings: to pursue and hunt those Monstrous Faults bred within them: to drag out the lurking Errors like *Cacus* from his Den; to multiply them like *Hydra's* Heads; and rake them together like *Augea's* Dung. Or else to drive away a sort of *Dangerous Fowl*, who have a perverse Inclination to plunder the best Branches of the *Tree of Knowledge*, like those *Stymphalian* Birds that eat up the Fruit. (*Tale* 312)

Morgan's comment that we "ought not take" the narrator "at face value" cannot, I submit, be made qualitatively different from the narrator's own dicta about critics. Both Morgan and the narrator make the same kind of categorical statements about their subjects; both find it "easie to Assign" the correct value to the authorial function; neither contextualizes his own statement as susceptible to ironic subversion; both thus neutralize the possibility of an improper or contestable reading. In other words, the more insane the narrator's position, the easier it is to claim a satiric meaning for his text, and—consequently—the easier it is to define his "real" intention. It makes less difference that we know what this intention is

than that we know that some other intention underwrites it; under this interpretive model, the determinate meaning of a text is always other than the available meaning. That is why Swift's satires, scandalous as they are, yield so easily to the neutralizing certainties of common-sense criticism.

As a member of the clergy, Swift had first-hand experience with satire's corrosive effect on the appearance of propriety:

According to tradition, Swift was greeted on the day of his installation as dean of St. Patrick's by an anonymous verse tacked to the front door of the cathedral:

Look down, St. Patrick, look down we pray
On thine own church and steeple;
Convert the Dean on this great day;
Or else, God help the People. (quoted in DePorte, 73)

Swift faced charges of apostasy, lunacy, and atheism throughout his career and after his death, so it is hardly surprising that he takes issues with those who see the "mystical number" of oratorical machines in the *Tale* as an attack on the Trinity.⁹ In a passage critics such as Ehrenpreis and Morgan would mark as satiric (and thus hermeneutically containable), the *Tale's* narrator obsesses with strictly formal criteria:

Now among all the rest, the profound Number THREE is that which hath most employ'd my sublimest Speculations, nor ever without wonderful Delight. There is now in the Press, (and will be publish'd next Term) a Panegyric Essay of mine upon this Number, wherein I have by most convincing Proofs, not only reduced the *Senses* and the *Elements* under its Banner, but brought over several Deserters from its two great Rivals SEVEN and NINE. (*Tale* 292)

⁹ See, for instance, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letter to her daughter in which she argues that Swift's impiety can only be the result of madness, in *Complete Letter of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Robert Halsband, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-67) 3:57.

But the formal criteria that privilege THREE over SEVEN and NINE result not from some internal logical necessity of the number itself, but rather from the author's own idiosyncratic intention. The Dean's argument against Socinians and anti-Trinitarians exploits the same strategy:

But there is another Difficulty of great Importance among those who quarrel with the Doctrine of the Trinity, as well as with several other Articles of Christianity; which is, that our Religion abounds in Mysteries, and these they are so bold to revile as Cant, Imposture, and Priest-craft. It is impossible for us to determine for what Reasons God thought fit to communicate some Things to us in Part, and leave some Part a Mystery. But so it is in Fact, and so the Holy Scripture tells us in several Places. ("Irish Tracts and Sermons" 162)

For Swift's opponents, the Trinity has no internal logic or necessity. As "Cant, Imposture, and Priest-craft," it is an empty, external construct imposed upon the gullible as if it were the wholly internal and self-authorizing plenitude of "mystery." There is no answer to this charge, except to refute it through the competing authority of "Fact." The Trinity thus becomes a function of readerly intention in much the same way as satire operates as "a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's face but their Own."¹⁰ Either one accepts the Trinity through faith in the authority of scripture, or one rejects it as an external imposition of form over content: either way, it is the interpretive act that brings the Trinity, like satire, into being as such. Swift's defense of the Trinity is made even more difficult by the question surrounding the scriptural source for the term "Trinity" itself:

Thus it happened with the great Doctrine of the Trinity; which Word is indeed not in Scripture, but was a Term of Art invented in the earlier Times to express the Doctrine by a single Word, for the Sake

¹⁰ "The Preface of the Author," *The Battel of the Books*, reprinted in *The Writings of Jonathan Swift* 375.

of Brevity and Convenience. The Doctrine then, as delivered in Holy Scripture, although not exactly in the same Words, is very short, and amounts to only this, That the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are each of them God, and yet that there is but One God. ("Irish Tracts and Sermons" 159–60)

Crucially, how different is the "Trinity" as "a Term of Art invented in the earlier Times" from the "Art" of those "other Philosophers and great Clerks" who force doctrine and scripture to their own ends in the *Tale* (294)? Can the "Trinity" in any way be read as "a great Mystery, being a Type, a Sign, an Emblem, a Shadow, a Symbol, bearing Analogy to the spacious Commonwealth of Writers, and to those Methods by which they must exalt themselves to a certain Eminency above the inferiour World" (*Tale* 296)? In commenting on this passage, Greenberg and Piper write

In this and the next few paragraphs the professed author gives his reader an example of the deductions, or, as he will call them, the exantlations, of deep meanings which, he insists, are persistently present within his work. If one follows the author's example in studying his whole system of oratorical machines, he may exantlate the drop of sense from *that* and find it to be simply, "this is an amusing book." By comparing this small measure of meaning with the elaborate discourse in which it was hidden, the reader may test the validity of this discourse and judge the mind, the sensibility, that would compose and publish it. (*Tale* 416 n.33)

To follow the author's example as Greenberg and Piper suggest, however, the reader must already have decided that the "deep meaning" of the *Tale* in some manner involves Swift's non-identity with the *Tale's* "professed author." The doctrine of the Trinity is an approximation "not exactly in the same words" of a meaning from scripture that cannot be localized in any particular verse. The "term of Art" which signifies the Trinity is, then, a signified without local signifiers, and its adequacy to the doctrine it symbolizes depends, perhaps disturbingly, on the skill of those readers "of an earlier

Time to express, the Doctrine by a single word for the Sake of Brevity and Convenience." In other words, Trinitarian dogma is founded on a kind of exegetical shorthand that translates God's intent from the missing text of His word.

Again, Swift negotiates here between authorial intent and readerly competence. For Swift, the Trinity is "real," even if it can only be inferred from scripture. It is "really" there in a way that the mystery of the "Oratorical Receptacles" cannot be, even though the "Trinity," like Swift's receptacles, depends at some point or another on exegetical expertise. The "Trinity" is not, after all, a word in scripture, and its legitimacy depends on the reader's ability to piece various references together in just such a fashion as to produce the correct meaning. Fostering this sort of readerly competence is no easy task, as Swift admits when he describes the Athanasian Creed's limited catechetical value:

This Creed is now read at certain times in our Churches, which, although it is useful for Edification to those who understand it; yet, since it containeth some nice and philosophical Points which few People can comprehend, the Bulk of Mankind is obliged to believe no more than the Scripture-Doctrine, as I have delivered it. Because that Creed was intended only as an Answer to the *Arrians* in their own way, who were very subtle Disputers. ("Irish Tracts and Sermons" 160)

If the Athanasian Creed exists principally to defend the Trinity from "very subtle Disputers," but is itself too subtle to be useful to the laity, then the Creed subverts its own purpose; if, that is, the "meaner sort" Swift addresses in his sermons cannot tell the difference between the subtlety of heresy and that of right doctrine, all that is left to them is the form of obedience. Scripture in itself is impeccable, but that is not the issue. At some point, scripture must be construed if it is to give up the fullness of its meaning, and it is in the moment of reading that competence may fail, perhaps without even giving a readable sign of its failure.

Twice in "On the Trinity" Swift cites the authority of precedent as a guarantee for the reading process: once when he refers his auditors to the "Credit of Men of Learning" to "believe a fact

that we do not understand," and once when he invokes those unnamed scriptural exegetes who "invented in the earlier Times" a term competent to describe the Triune God. For Swift the priest, epistemological certainty results from prior authority. But did these earlier authorities know that their "Term of Art" would play such a foundational role in Christian theology, and even if they did, can we be certain that the precedent they set in reading Scripture is one that Swift's parishioners cannot claim for themselves? Swift as dean argues that one only has liberty of conscience in religious matters if one has "thoroughly examined by Scripture, and the Practice of the ancient Church, whether those points are blamable or no . . ." ¹¹ The "ancient Church" authorizes Swift's certainty, but what in its turn authorizes the ancient church? In the *Tale*, the father's will enacts its own self-referential interpretation:

You will find in my will (here it is) full Instructions in every particular concerning the Wearing and Management of your Coats; wherein you must be very exact, to avoid the Penalties I have appointed for every Transgression or Neglect, upon which your future Fortunes will entirely depend. I have also commanded in my Will, that you should live together in one House like Brethren and Friends, for then you will be sure to thrive, and not otherwise.

(*Tale* 302)

The father's deictic gesture ("here it is") closes the referential circle and insures that this moment in history cannot be counterfeited or reproduced; as a moment of origin, the father's final commandment marks itself as unique. As Swift reads his own text, any deviation from the father's will is thus an intentional act on the sons' part, no matter how hard they work to justify their disobedience or to disguise it as legitimate exegesis. But we already know that the concept of the Trinity cannot be traced to one specific moment, only to "the earlier Times." History in the sermons is, consequently, inaugural and vague, foundational and untraceable. History authorizes Swift's exegesis, but no one moment is in itself authorita-

¹¹ "On the Testimony of Conscience," *Irish Tracts and Sermons* 151.

tive. "History" as such thus becomes the principal trope of instability, yet another feature Swift's satires and his sermons share. Because Swift cannot legitimize the privilege he accords history, his only recourse is to deploy that privilege as if it were an inherent characteristic of his signifier: the "Term of Art invented in the earlier Times" must be made to authorize itself in a way that terms and doctrine resulting from "the Liberty of Conscience which the Fanaticks are now openly in the Face of the World endeavouring at with their utmost Application" cannot (*Irish Tracts and Sermons* 151). The degree to which the authority of history fails is, therefore, the degree to which Swift's texts may be misappropriated by his audience.

Swift's identity as satirist is thus open to the contesting interpretations of his audience, and even his own attempts to stabilize his intention—and to clear his reputation—fall short. Swift argues, in his "Apology," that those who see the *Tale* as impious or atheistic do so only by violently misconstruing his intentions:

There are three or four other Passages which prejudiced or ignorant Readers have drawn by great Force to hint at ill Meanings; as if they glanced at some Tenets of Religion, in answer to all which, the Author solemnly protests he is entirely Innocent, and never had it once in his Thoughts that any thing he said would in the least be capable of such Interpretations, which he will engage to deduce full as fairly from the most innocent Book in the World. And it will be obvious to every Reader, that this was not any part of his Scheme or Design, the Abuses he notes being such as all Church of England Men agree in, nor was it proper for his Subject to meddle with other Points, than such as have been perpetually controverted since the Reformation. (*Tale* 267)

These are odd readers: on the one hand forcing prejudiced and ignorant misconstructions of Swift's design; on the other hand able to read the author's obvious meaning without error. As with "On the Trinity," what is reasonable for Swift is what accords with the power of authority, particularly the author's authority to determine his own meaning.

This same desire to fix meaning informs Swift's sermons on conditions in Ireland. If we return to the question of social justice, we find Swift describing the role of parish charity-schools for the deserving Irish poor:

In these Schools, Children are, or ought to be trained up to read and write, and cast Accompts; and these Children should, if possible, be of honest Parents, gone to Decay through Age, Sickness, or other unavoidable Calamity, by the Hand of God; not the Brood of wicked Strolers; for it is by no means reasonable, that the Charity of well-inclined People should be applied to encourage the Lewdness of those profligate, abandoned Women, who croud our Streets with their borrowed or spurious Issue.¹²

These eighteenth-century welfare mothers presumably correspond to the “deservedly poor” wretches Swift chastises in “On the Poor Man’s Contentment.” These unworthies suffer as a consequence of their own “Laziness or drunkenness, or worse Vices” and “are not to be understood to be of the Number” of those to whom society must extend its limited resources in good Christian conscience (*Irish Tracts and Sermons* 191). Nokes describes this attitude as “unpleasantly pharisaical” and Swift’s example as “a distasteful inversion of the parable of the lost sheep” (223), but I wonder if Swift’s “distasteful” proposals are in reality any more or less ethical than the satirical suggestions of “A Modest Proposal.” Nokes sees this as a point of convergence for Swift and his satiric persona:

For the crucial similarity between Swift’s tone and that of the proposer is that both see the problem from the viewpoints of the hard-pressed alms-giver called upon to support an idle population. There is never any consideration of the situation from the view of the beggars themselves. (231)

¹² “Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland,” *Irish Tracts and Sermons* 202.

But the peculiarity of this argument is that while Swift and the proposer become increasingly similar rhetorically and politically, they remain, at least for Nokes, stubbornly individual in terms of morality. Swift's sermons are "distasteful" and "pharisaical" because they originate with Swift himself and not with some dim-witted cleric or public benefactor in one of Swift's satires. Nokes, along I suspect with many of the rest of us, deplors the sentiments of the sermons because Swift's notion of charity is so punitive; worse yet, the Dean has no difficulty defining and policing the category of the "deserving poor" despite those social and political complexities that would render the designation impossibly open in practical terms. Swift clearly desires that his policies belong to, and be shared by, what Claude Rawson calls "the world of practical action":

Nor were the badges a solitary fancy of Swift's own. At the time of the *Proposal*, they were already notionally in place, partly in execution of an earlier recommendation by Swift. The idea was to identify the parish from which the beggars came, which was the institution legally responsible for supporting them when they could not support themselves. Beggars were unproductive, by definition, and since, in Swift's view, most of them were able-bodied and capable of employment, they fell into the category which mercantilist thinking ... described as "undeserving."¹³

We can date the thinking behind Swift's 1737 "Proposal for Giving Badges to Beggars" at least as far back as 1726.¹⁴ Licensing beggars with mandatory and visible badges distinguishes "those who have proper title to our charity" from those "sturdy Vagrants" who divert limited charitable resources.¹⁵ Swift is most concerned

¹³ *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination, 1492–1945* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 224–25.

¹⁴ See Swift's preliminary "Upon Giving Badges to the Poor," dated 26 September 1726. Reprinted as Appendix C of *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, Vol. 8, Directions to Servants etc. 1733–1742* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959) 172–73.

¹⁵ "A Proposal for Giving Badges to Beggars in All the Parishes of Dublin," *Directions to Servants* 138.

to distinguish Dublin's "Original Poor," those who owe their poverty to circumstances beyond their control, from the "undeserving vicious Race of human Kind" who make up "the Bulk of those who are reduced to Beggary, even in this beggarly Country":

For, as a great Part of our Public Miseries is originally owing to our own Faults (but, what those Faults are I am grown by Experience too wary to mention) so I am confident, that among the meaner People, nineteen in twenty of those who are reduced to a starving Condition, did not become so by what Lawyers call the Work of GOD, either upon their Bodies or Goods; but merely from their own Idleness, attended by all Manner of Vices, Particularly Drunkenness, Thievery, and Cheating. ("Badges to Beggars" 135)

Here, Swift reserves his savage indignation for the majority of Dublin's poor people. Having warned people publicly about their own imprudence and excess to no purpose (the "faults" Swift "is grown by Experience too wary to mention"), he now turns his attention to the fate these individuals deserve. "Nineteen in twenty" are by their own choice, after all, an unproductive, parasitic annoyance to urban life who should be driven from the city. Swift has no compassion for these folk even in their old age: "As for the Aged and Infirm, it would be sufficient to give them nothing, and then they must starve or follow their Brethren" ("Badges to Beggars" 138).

This Swift hardly accords with the (albeit ironic) champion of the people the author of "A Modest Proposal" has become in liberal academic criticism. Even as he argues for a more rigorous understanding of Swift's rhetorical ploys, Nokes still desires an authoritative voice that rules and subordinates those other, more radical voices we find in Swift's texts.¹⁶ But hearing Swift's true voice through the babble of his personae is, in reality, an attempt to stabilize the body of texts we read as "Swift" in accordance with our own desires. As compared to "A Modest Proposal" or the *Tale*,

¹⁶ "Swift is literature's great ventriloquist, and we have come to recognise that understanding his works is a matter of distinguishing the master's voice from those of his puppet personae" ("Swift and the Beggars" 219).

are Swift's sermons any more monologic, any more serious, or any more controllable by authorial intention than his more conventionally "satiric" works? Louise K. Barnett warns that reading Swift "requires that we relinquish the security of genre itself, its authority to confer and name coherence What is difficult to tolerate when we approach a work through genre is plurality, a degree of latitude that obliterates generic boundaries entirely rather than merely emphasizing their existence by over-stepping them."¹⁷

It is also appropriate to recall Foucault's observation that "if we wish to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence and his link to death, which has transformed him into a victim of his own writing."¹⁸ What Swift resists in his sermons is satire's rapacious applicability, the difficulty of claiming that a text is *not* satire. As "a victim of his own writing," Swift cannot prove what the sermons are not, any more than he can prove what his satires are. I would argue that positing the impossibility of generic stability is, in effect, the same thing as acknowledging a text's openness to satiric subversion, even co-optation by the unruly or incompetent reader. Nokes's reading, good as it is, depends upon our ability to control Swift's identity as author as well as the reliability of generic distinctions between "sermon" and "satire." What makes the modest proposer's anthropophagic musings "satire" is the genre-based conviction that Swift's prose is multi-layered, polyvalent, even duplicitous. But what enables Nokes's—and probably our own—ire is the understanding that the Swift of the sermons is univocal, that he successfully intends an un-ironic text, and that his readers will know the lack of irony when they don't see it. That is, the message of "A Modest Proposal" or of the *Tale* is awful; Swift cannot mean it; the message of the sermons is awful; Swift must mean it. Ultimately, neither Swift nor his intentions are proof against satire, since satire is no positive quality that can be isolated or quarantined. The author of Swift's sermons is one constituted at the expense of its own integrity, both in a moral and a rhetorical sense, because the same notions of authority and

¹⁷ "Deconstructing *Gulliver's Travels*: Modern Readers and the Problematic of Genre," reprinted in *Jonathan Swift*, ed. Nigel Wood (London: Longman, 1999) 256.

¹⁸ "What Is an Author?" reprinted in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) 123.

genre inform satire and its other. Perhaps, then, a more accurate genre for Swift's sermons might be "the literary abject," because to forestall the misreading of his sermons as satire or his satires as atheism is to suppress one body of texts in favor of the other.¹⁹ If Swift forgets, loses, or burns the sermons, they can no longer "be a perfect lampoon" on him, but only because the only way to contain satire is to obliterate its medium. To read unironically means to abject the subject, to halt the play of signifiers, and, finally, to bury the body that was once so savagely indignant.

¹⁹ "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," *Powers of Horror* [New York: Columbia UP, 1982] 1).