

TONE AND INTENTION IN SWIFT'S
VERSES ON HIS OWN DEATH

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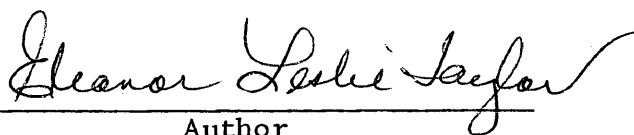
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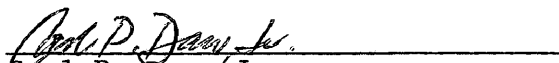
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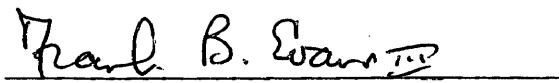


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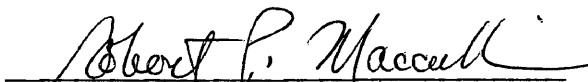
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to suggest a better understanding of Jonathan Swift's "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" in terms of the author's tone and intention in the poem, especially regarding the role of the eulogist in the third section. The first two sections of the poem are examined as preface, contrast, and background to the third section.

The poem has elicited mixed reactions from critics and scholars, most of whom have seen it as being strictly autobiographical rather than exemplifying Swift's gifts as satirist and moralist. I believe that a possible solution to this critical controversy can be found in a comparison of the "impartial" eulogist with some of Swift's other personae and a recognition of Swift's characteristic satiric techniques throughout the poem.

The study shows that Swift uses a series of carefully constructed scenes of increasing length and complexity to draw the reader into a satiric mirror-world designed to heighten moral awareness. Swift uses his own imaginary death and the reactions of those around him to it as an example by which the reader may take his own measure and thereby come to some understanding regarding his own capacity for self-delusion.

TONE AND INTENTION IN SWIFT'S
VERSES ON HIS OWN DEATH

Jonathan Swift wrote "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" at the age of sixty-four. He had reached that time in life when a man might begin to look back and assess the value of his existence. Although his life and career were by no means over (he still had such poems as "Cassinus and Peter," "On Poetry," and "The Beasts' Confession to the Priest" as well as some important Irish tracts to write), he felt that because of political conditions he had seen England for the last time; Stella was gone, most of his literary triumphs were behind him, and his health was not good. In these last fifteen years or so of his life he was content to visit friends and amuse himself writing what he referred to as "trifles" about love, poetry, and death.¹ It was in one of these trifles that he imagined his own death, responses to it, and what people would remember about him and his accomplishments. In December 1731, he wrote to his friend John Gay,

I have been severall months writing near five hundred lines on a pleasant Subject, onely to tell what my friends and enemyes will say on me after I am dead. I Shall finish it soon, for I add two lines every week, and blott out four and alter eight, I have brought in you and my other friends, as well as enemyes and Detractors.²

The poem is divided into three parts, each of which could stand independent of the others. Each section differs from the others in the quality of imagination and degree of involvement or detachment. In the first section, Swift defends La Rochefoucauld's maxim in order to present the reader with his own point of view. He speaks of self-love, envy, and ambition in general terms and includes himself as one who indulges in these vices. The second section deals primarily with the impact of his decline and death on those around him. The third section, presented by one "indiff'rent in the Cause," gives an account of the kind of man Swift was and what he did. Put together, the three sections produce a strong statement of Swift's views on the human condition after a lifetime spent observing it. As in other Swift works such as Gulliver's Travels and A Modest Proposal, there is an air of complete verisimilitude and evenness of tone surrounding the treatment of a wholly imaginative subject. It is the conversational quality, the illusion of reality and the lack of emotionalism regarding his death that give Swift's "Verses" such power and make them so memorable.

"Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" has a more serious intent and tone than would seem to be indicated by the humorous narration and the frequent feminine rhymes. Maurice Johnson feels that this poem is one of Swift's most eloquent statements regarding his feelings about mankind.³ All three sections are made lively by Swift's imaginative

use of language and remarkable economy of words. In taking the maxim from La Rochefoucauld that "in the adversity of our friends, we find something that does not displease us," Swift reveals his long-standing pre-occupation with the contrast between what people think they are doing and what they are really doing. The poem also reminds us of those accomplishments which Swift felt were most significant in his life and for which he hoped to be remembered.

The third section of the poem has been the cause of much debate among critics and scholars who have tried to discern Swift's intended meaning. The problems with this section are those of content, tone, and intention. Is this poem a simple apologia, an ironic obituary, or a traditional meditation on death? Was Swift dissembling by having an intermediary recount his good deeds? If so, does the use of the intermediary excuse the lack of humble tone in this section? In this paper, I will suggest a better understanding of this section in terms of Swift's tone and intention, especially regarding the role of the eulogist. Because this reading of the poem requires an understanding of Swift's habits as a writer, the first two sections will be examined as preface, contrast, and background to the third section. I hope to indicate certain elements in the work which show Swift's skill as poet and satirist and which also mark the work as being typically Swiftian in terms of method and ideas presented.

The first section, or "Proem" (ll. 1-72) serves as an elaboration of the sentiment stated in the maxim. Here we see an examination of self-love, ambition, envy, and pride. Swift speaks of insincere people who see everything in terms of themselves and are unable to empathize with others' misfortunes. In fact, he says, they are not only undisciplined at the grief of friends, they are actually mournful of friends' successes. Self-love was a phenomenon in which Swift, as a student of human nature and as a moralist, had a great interest. In "Cadenus and Vanessa" (1713) he had said that "Self-love, in Nature rooted fast,/Attends us first and leaves us last" (ll. 684-685).⁴ Just as in "Cadenus and Vanessa" he indicates here that love for friends (and anyone else) is really based on love of self, and that how we feel about our friends has nothing to do with them but has everything to do with how we see ourselves in comparison to them. Self-love is the root from which envy, ambition, and pride grow. Although Swift makes liberal use of feminine rhyme to indicate humor here, he is, as in so many of his other works, teaching a moral lesson at the same time that he is making us smile. In admitting envy for friends like Pope, Gay, Arbuthnot, Bolingbroke, and Pultney by actually praising them, Swift is, as John Fischer points out, showing how closely envy and magnanimity are related: they are both self-interested responses to the condition of other people.⁵ The third section will provide the most explicit example of this kind of self-interest.

The second section of the poem (ll. 73-298) deals with Swift's imaginary treatment of the effects of his death on the public and on his friends and is generally regarded by critics as the best in the work. It is important in reading this section to remember that Swift loved to create brief and vivid scenes. This particular section of the poem is full of them, each providing an example of moral blindness and insensitivity. Swift first imagines what will be said behind his back when he begins to deteriorate. The reader can hardly avoid visualizing Swift's acquaintances sadly shaking their heads as they describe their friend slowly beginning to show all the signs of senility (ll. 80-104). These friends would appear to be concerned, but are actually relieved to see that they are better off than he. Even their attempts at "tenderness" (ll. 106-109) are a dig at their friend. They excuse his senility by saying that he is really much older than he looks. The irony throughout this scene is that instead of being relieved in seeing their differences from Swift, they should be seeing their similarities and realizing that they themselves will be like this some day. This blindness on their part shows the delusionary capacity of self-love. Once it has been decided that he will die, Swift's friends are pictured as preferring to see him die rather than have their predictions proven incorrect.

He imagines that the first thing people will want to know once he has died is what will happen to his money, and their disapproval at the discovery that he bequeathed it to "public uses." Swift made few references to his philanthropy in his works, and when he did, as in this poem, it was usually with ironical purpose. Actually, Swift had quite definite ideas regarding the "debt" that public servants owed the public they served. His bequest of his estate for the founding of a hospital for the insane in Dublin was the natural outcome of a life devoted to public service. The founding of this hospital appears to have been anything but an impulsive gesture on his part or a subtle statement regarding his views of mankind. J. N. P. Moore points out that Swift had served as a governor of Bethlehem Hospital in London and had observed disturbing practices such as the public viewing and exploitation of the patients. In order to avoid the insensitive and inhumane treatment of patients that he treats satirically in "The Digression on Madness" in A Tale of a Tub, Swift left strict instructions in his will regarding the administration of his bequest. So determined was Swift that his estate be as large as possible when the time came for its intended use that whenever he lent money to friends, he did so with interest.⁶

As the news of his death is received in the streets, he sees all the Grub Street hacks publishing sickeningly sentimental (and totally insincere) eulogies. At Court, as

the news of his death is giddily repeated by his old enemy, Lady Suffolk, he imagines the Queen to be relieved and happy that she had never gotten around to giving him the medals she had promised him. Walpole, revealing what must have been bitter feelings concerning Swift's attacks on him, will wonder why he was not hanged. (In line 191, Walpole expresses surprise that Swift dies "without his Shoes." According to a proverb popular in the eighteenth century, a man who died without his shoes on died naturally; a man who died with his shoes on had been hanged.)⁷ Walpole will also wish that a more immediate enemy had died. The infamous printer Curll will publish and attribute to Swift three worthless books written by three worthless writers whom Swift had attacked most vehemently: Cibber, Theobald, and Moore. He sees his closest friends, Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot grieving for him in a limited fashion. They are perhaps the only people to receive the news of Swift's death who see any significance in it at all.

A particularly memorable scene produced by Swift is the treatment of the news of his death among his women acquaintances. He sees them discussing his death at their card games, hardly interrupting their bidding to do so. Maurice Johnson has analyzed in great detail the poetic skill shown by Swift in his creation of this scene:

Concentrated in an eighteen line paragraph there is the tour-de-force in which the Dean's 'female friends' interruptedly discuss his

demise while they pursue a game of cards. Through a series of five parallel stages, death and the business of playing cards are exactly equated, beginning with "'The Dean is dead, (and what is Trumps)'" and concluding with "'He lov'd the Dean (I lead a Heart),'" each uttered in a singly indiscriminating breath, with alternatives each of which is equatable and interchangeable with the others, the seriate construction acts as a testing of the reader's powers of discrimination.⁸

What all these people, with the exception of Swift's friends who are the only ones to mourn at all, have failed to see in Swift's death is the fact that they too will die someday. In ignoring the significance of this death, they are ignoring their own mortality. As he was so fond of doing, Swift has held up a mirror in which they have failed to see their own faces.⁹

Within a year, Swift sees his works become unavailable in the reputable book shops because they will have been sent to shops which sell only old books and because they will have been used for such lowly purposes as lining cake tins in pastry shops. All that will be available in the book shops will be the trash of hack writers, whom Swift had attacked consistently in his writing. Now that their main critic is out of the way, so extensive will the triumph of the hacks be that a corrupt man like Walpole will be successfully defended against charges that Swift had levelled against him earlier, and despicable clergymen like Henly and Wolston, also attacked by Swift for writing pamphlets undermining the church, will be revered. In the

imagined description of his decline and death, their significance has gone unnoticed by all but his best friends, and his enemies have enjoyed seemingly complete triumph. Values have been turned upside-down. It is enough to bring a moralist to despair.

The situation at the end of the second section is reminiscent of the state of affairs in A Modest Proposal, in which people fail to see how their lack of insight and indifference to the significance of a situation only serve to perpetuate their ignorance. Just as in A Modest Proposal, where he ironically rejects a list of his earlier proposals by which the Irish people could lift themselves out of their deplorable conditions, Swift cannot resist the temptation to teach a moral lesson by referring to things he has said before. In "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" he speaks of those things he feels have given his life meaning and which apparently had little lasting effect on others.

This final part of the second section gradually builds to a crescendo in Lintot's speech. This enthusiastic endorsement of detestable people contrasts sharply with the voice of the supposedly unemotional author and interrupts the ironically detached tone of the poem. It is Swift's habit to create characters whose unacceptable enthusiasm allows an inverse expression of indignation. In this poem, the energy of the bookseller's praise of bad writers is equivalent but diametrically opposed to Swift's detestation of them.

The first two sections of the poem, with their many examples of self-centered people oblivious to the significance of the decline and death of someone very much like themselves, have provided the background against which Swift can place an invented eulogist who embodies all the self-interest and insensitivity he had deplored and illustrated earlier in the poem. In the third section of the poem (ll. 299-484), Swift, in the persona of an impartial speaker, reminds us of those things for which he wishes to be remembered. He hopes that he will be remembered in the following ways: as a man who exposed the vices of mankind, who wrote without being dependent on and influenced by a patron, who was a good friend to his friends, and who spoke out, although anonymously, on the terrible conditions in Ireland. He was especially proud of having helped to prevent the introduction of inferior inflationary coinage into Ireland and was well aware that his writings would not be well-received in England and could even be seen as seditious. He also wishes to be remembered as a man who died having forgiven all those who had wronged him and who left his money for the public good.

It is hard to believe that Swift, who attacked the sin of pride throughout his career as both writer and churchman, would indulge so flagrantly in a display of it in a valedictory work. Although the accounting of his good deeds is a fairly accurate (though frequently distorted) chronicle

presented by a man Swift calls "one quite indiff'rent in the Cuase," (l. 305) we must remember, as Irvin Ehrenpreis has pointed out, that the creator of the speaker and the energy behind the entire poem are to be identified with Swift himself.¹⁰ Are we therefore to believe that Swift really meant for us to take this final section of the poem as an exercise in self-approbation? It is this controversy over content, tone, and intention which has puzzled scholars and critics who have written about this poem.

One of the most helpful explanations comes from Peter J. Schakel who suggests that one answer to the controversy might be that the impartial eulogist drawing Swift's character at the Rose Tavern is an extension of the method established and used in the first sections of the poem. This impartial speaker, Schakel feels, is used by Swift to illustrate dramatically and concretely the politically motivated self-interest demonstrated by various characters on the occasion of Swift's death. The eulogist makes exaggerated (and sometimes completely false) claims about both Swift's writings and personal life:

To steal a Hint was never known
But what he writ was all his own. (ll. 317-318)

He lash'd the Vice but spar'd the
Name. (l. 460)

Though trusted long in great Affairs
He gave himself no haughty airs.
Without regarding private Ends,
Spent all his Credit for his Friends. (ll. 329-332)

Was chearful to his dying Day. (. 476)

A living example of the self-love and selfish interests illustrated so brilliantly in the first two sections of the poem, the eulogist becomes a final illustration of the truth of La Rochefoucauld's maxim. He uses Swift's death as the occasion for a speech which does not bestow praise on Swift's life but which invokes Swift's reputation and accomplishments in order to advance the eulogist's own political beliefs.¹¹

I think it should also be noted that with the introduction of the speaker "quite indiff'rent in the Cause" at the beginning of the third section, Swift repeats a familiar technique. An experienced reader of Swift would be instantly on guard against any claims of impartiality on the part of Swift's personae. Speakers in Swift's works who claim to have no special interest in what they are discussing usually prove themselves to be anything but indifferent. Swift almost always used his impartial speakers for ironical purposes. He had introduced them in several previous works:

But if that may not be hoped for; my next Wish
should be, that Both might think me in the wrong;
which I would understand, as an ample Justification
of myself, and a sure Ground to believe that I
have proceeded at least with Impartiality and
perhaps with Truth.

(The Sentiments of a Church-of-
England Man, 1708)

I, being possessed of all Qualifications requisite
in an Historian, and retained by neither Party;
have resolved to comply with the urgent Importunity
of my Friends by writing down a full Impartial
Account thereof.

(The Battel of the Books, 1710)

But, because I am resolved, by all means, to avoid giving Offence to any Party whatever; I will leave off discoursing so closely to the Letter as I have hitherto done, and go on for the future by way of Allegory, tho, in such a manner that the judicious Reader, may without much straining, make his Applications as often as he shall think fit.

(The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit, 1710)

I meddle not the least with any Party, but write without Passion, Prejudice, or Ill-will against any Man or number of Men whatsoever.

(Gulliver's Travels, 1726)

I am not provoked by any personal Interest, being not the Owner of one Spot of Ground in the whole Island.

(A Short View of the State of Ireland, 1728)

I profess, in the Sincerity of my Heart, that I have not the least personal Interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary Work; having no other Motive than the public Good of my Country, by advancing our Trade, providing for Infants, relieving the Poor, and giving some Pleasure to the Rich. I have no children, by which I can propose to get a single penny, the youngest being nine Years old, and my wife past Childbearing.

(A Modest Proposal, 1729)

Swift also maintained a pretense of impartiality in the author of The Bickerstaff Papers, but the comparison between "Verses" and The Bickerstaff Papers may be taken even further. Both, of course, deal with an imaginary death. As in The Bickerstaff Papers, the impartial eulogist in the "Verses" not only claims his indifference to the cause, but in terms of the persona itself, he is a person possessing a character which Swift loathed. Bickerstaff was an astrologer, and Swift hated astrologers. Similarly, the eulogist in the "Verses" is the kind of self-serving opportunist Swift attacks in the first sections of the poem.

The creation of the eulogist in the third section is equally as important as the other created scenes in the poem. The speaker impresses the reader as being rather melodramatic and pompous. We are never convinced that he feels any real grief over Swift's loss. Although we are reminded over and over that everyone has "private ends" (the implication always being negative), the eulogist tries to convince us that Swift had no "private ends" and that his motivations were always of a benevolent nature. In so doing, he overstates his case and because of his exaggerations and untruths discredits himself. If we accept Schakel's argument that the eulogist is really fulfilling his own private political ends, then we see that this praise of Swift by the eulogist is not for Swift's sake, but for his own. Combine this purposeful distortion of Swift with the setting--the Rose Tavern was generally thought to be a gathering place for low-life individuals¹²--and we are left with a person who is no more fit to eulogize Swift than any of the hacks of Grub Street.

But the question remains: why would Swift create such a character? One would think that if he were serious about his eulogy and the person who delivered it, he would have chosen a more admirable person and placed him in more dignified surroundings. Perhaps he created this sort of eulogist for the same reason he created a character like Gulliver, who never seemed to remember or gain any insight from his voyages.

Characters who failed to learn from their experiences or missed the significance of them were favorite Swiftian targets. The eulogist here seems to be unaware of what any others have had to say about Swift's passing or the public reactions to it, as shown in the previous sections of the poem. He also fails to have any thoughts regarding his own mortality as he becomes caught up in the eloquence of his eulogy.

There is also something to be said about the kind of "character" the eulogist draws (l. 306). To Swift and other enlightened readers of the eighteenth century, a "character" would have meant a literary portrait modeled on those of the Greek writer Theophrastus. The art of literary portraiture had developed in the seventeenth century as a part of the effort to improve the writing of history. Its first and chief purpose in England was to show to later ages the kinds of men who had directed the affairs and shaped the fortunes of the nation. The great feature of the Theophrastan character (and a quality Swift would undoubtedly have admired) was that it taught balance and unity. David Nichol Smith indicates that

a haphazard statement of features and habits and peculiarities might suffice for a sketch, but perspective and harmony were necessary to a finished portrait. The Theophrastan models taught that the surest method in depicting character was first to conceive the character as a whole, and then to introduce detail incidentally and in proper subordination.¹³

Judging the character drawn by the eulogist by these criteria, we see that the "character" he draws is not really a character at all; it is not even a sketch. So perhaps Swift is doing the same thing with his eulogist that he did with his modest proposer and the author of the essay on political lying (The Examiner, No. 14): he is showing in subtle (and some not so subtle) ways that they are not to be believed or trusted. We must remember that Swift had stated in his letter to Gay that he had been working on a pleasant subject. While the prospect of one's death can hardly be called pleasant, Swift would still have found it fun to expose or ridicule those who would be insensitive toward a person's death or use the occasion for their own purposes.

To make apparent the difference between what people said or thought they were doing and what they were really doing was an abiding interest of Swift's. In "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" he refers to these real motives as "private ends" (ll. 8, 76, 331, 404), and he satirizes them throughout the poem. Instead of thinking about how a friend is affected by success or failure, most people think in terms of how they themselves are affected by a friend's success or failure. A friend's success grieves them; his failure comforts them. Thus, in this poem, a person who commiserates with someone who is ill or has experienced misfortunes is really saying to himself that he feels fortunate not to be in a similar situation. Swift had

earlier demonstrated the discrepancy between motives and actions in The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit, where he describes the people who gaze at the stars (representing those who think that they are upstanding and moral) and walk into ditches while doing so. The narrator of A Tale of a Tub, in the dedication to Lord Somers, in saying he will not enumerate the Lord's virtues, which he knows the world has heard before, proceeds to do just that. This latter example shows not only the confusion of intent with action, but is typical of Swift's use of the indirect compliment in his works. In A Tritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind and A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversations, Swift indicates that he is about to criticize the banality of thought and expression which had become commonplace in his society. However, the "authors" of both these works achieve the dubious distinction of becoming more banal than the object of their complaints.

Swift also echoes earlier works when he says in lines 461-462 that "No individual could resent/Where Thousands equally were meant." He had said much the same thing in A Tale of a Tub:

But Satyr being levelled at all, is never resented
for any offence by any, since every individual
Person makes bold to understand it of others, and
very wisely removes his particular Part of the
Burthen.

But the couplet takes on particular significance for a proper understanding of "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" when it

is recognized that Swift showed a life-long interest in the concept of satire as a looking-glass in which people may or may not see themselves. He makes this comparison explicitly in The Battel of the Books:

Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover everybody's Face but their Own: which is the Chief Reason for that kind of Reception it meets in the World, and that so very few are offended with it.

Closely connected with the metaphor of satire as mirror is the idea of people seeing in a mirror only what they want to see:

This Goddess flies with a huge Looking-glass in her Hands to dazzle the Crowd, and make them see, according as she turns it, their Ruin in their Interest, and their Interest in their Ruin.
(The Examiner, No. 14)

. . . to behold my Figure often in a Glass, and thus if possible habituate my self by Time to tolerate the sight of a human creature.
(Gulliver's Travels)

Swift uses several significant mirror images in Gulliver's Travels about which W. B. Carnochan has made the following observations:

The mirror symbolizes vanity, symbolizes prudence; it is the common property of virgin and sinner; it is the usual emblem of self-knowledge; it is also the Gnostic emblem for the soul's betrayal and descent into the material world. Like the moon in which we discern an image of ourselves, it may sharpen reality; or it may delude us and attenuate reality. But it is always paradoxical. . . The mirror as the sign of an ambivalent reality sums up all our epistemological terrors--those terrors that lead us to play the god with words, in compensation. . . Uses of the mirror have their distant origin in the primitive belief that it is a magic

property, just as the mirror of self-understanding has its origin in the primitive belief that one's reflection is the exposed soul.¹⁴

A sense of order and purpose can be found in "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" if the poem is read with an awareness of its implicit mirror-like structure. The entire poem, in fact, may be seen in terms of its mirror images. Internally, the sections mirror each other and externally the entire poem is a mirror for the reader himself. All the created scenes are distortions or reflections of the maxim. The eulogist is the embodiment and reflection of the individuals concerned with "private ends" described in the first two sections of the poem. The entire third section may likewise be seen as a mirror of the first and second sections. The character of Swift drawn by the eulogist in the third section may also be a distorted reflection of the Theophrastan model.

By letting the reader in on the secret that the object of his satire is to give a mirror image of reality, Swift does several things at once. First he pays the reader the compliment of being taken into the writer's confidence, and, for a while, sharing his point of view. Second, he reveals that he subscribes to an objective and just standard of judgment and that it will be accepted by all the discriminating individuals who make up his proper reading audience. Finally, by plainly stating that this satire is merely a device by which reality is reflected, he is issuing a challenge and giving the reader fair warning that unless he

also sees himself reflected, than he is also the object of the satire. The participation of the reader in such a situation is vital for the reader's pleasure and instruction. Unlike his other works, however, in which he used Gulliver, Peter, Jack, Martin, and other characters as "mirrors" by which men might take their own measures, Swift here uses himself and his death as a mirror in which men might see their own mortality and the worth of their accomplishments.

The use of the mirror to indicate the intended effects of satire was by no means unique to Swift: it was a creative and historical technique which had grown out of the moral tradition of the Renaissance. Images of mirrors and mirror reflections fascinated Swift, suited his purposes, and recurred frequently in his works. Mirror literature was a genre from an earlier age, and a backward-looking person like Swift would probably have been acquainted with such previous historical works as Gower's didactic Mirour de l'Omme (ca. 1381) and The Mirror for Magistrates (1559). In these works real historical figures from the past told the stories of their downfalls. Swift would also probably have read satires like Wireker's translation of Speculum Stultorum (The Fool's Looking-Glass) (1190) and Gascoigne's The Steele Glas (1576). Barclay's argument to The Ship of Fools (1570) could have been a Renaissance version of something Swift himself might have written:

This our Booke representeth unto the eyes of the Readers the states and conditions of men, so that euery man may behold within the same the course of his life and his misgoverned maners, as he should beholde the shadowe of the figure of his visage within a bright Myrrour.¹⁵

Since Swift uses traditional forms in other places as a satiric tool either to parody the tradition or to reinforce the satire, it is not unreasonable to assume that he might be using the mirror tradition in "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift."

It is essential to read "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" with a recognition of the way he repeats familiar devices and narrates his own biography. This recognition of Swift's literary habits prepares the reader to regard the eulogist of the third part as unreliable and self-centered like the narrators of A Tale of a Tub and Gulliver's Travels. To an uninitiated reader it might seem macabre that Swift mentions his own autopsy in the "Verses," but the experienced reader would remember that in A Tale of a Tub Swift describes the dissection of a "Beau." The author is amazed to find so many bodily imperfections as the man's clothes are stripped from him. On cutting him open, the author finds more and more imperfections as he goes along from organ to organ. This beau was said by the author to be a philosopher--a man who had a good outward appearance, but who contained hidden flaws. Swift had created this scene as part of his "clothes philosophy" to point out the difference between what appears

to be and what is. He reminds us of this operation in "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" when he has the author say in lines 175-176 that Dr. Swift was cut open following his death and was found to be sound within. Swift is saying in this repetition of the earlier scene that he was a man who was on the inside what he appeared to be on the outside. There were no hidden motives or moral flaws in him.

The idea of what can and cannot be considered original apparently held great interest for Swift. In A Tale of a Tub he has the author say that "through the whole Book he has not borrowed one single Hint from any Writer in the World." A Tritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind presents an author who says

I have been of late offended with many Writers of Essays and moral Discourses for running into stale Topicks and thread-bare Quotations, and not handling their Subject fully and closely: All which Errors I have carefully avoided in the following Essay. . . The Thoughts and Observations being entirely new, the Quotations untouched by others, the Subject being of mighty importance, and treated with much Order and Perspicuity. . . I desire you will accept and consider it as the utmost Effort of my Genius.

In "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift," the eulogist says of the late Dean that "To steal a Hint was never known,/But what he writ was all his own" (ll. 317-318). Not only does Swift echo his earlier works here, but these lines in "Verses" were probably borrowed, as Barry Slepian suggests, from Denham's elegy on Cowley ("To him no author was

unknown/Yet what he wrote was all his own").¹⁶ It seems like typical Swiftian irony that Swift would steal a line which said he had never stolen a line.

These devices need to be recognized despite the fact that the eulogist asserts in ll. 309-310 that

As for his Works in Verse and Prose
I own my self no Judge of those:

Swift reinforces this non-literary tone of the third section by having the eulogist give a particularly enthusiastic narration of Swift's involvement in Irish affairs. Here again the experienced reader will recognize how ironic this involvement was. Swift defended Irish interests not because he particularly loved the Irish but because he hated tyranny of any kind. Each of the four references to Ireland and the Irish in "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" concerns a different cause for much of the suffering the Irish had to endure. He first mentions the Irish Parliament, which he sarcastically refers to as the "Senate." (ll. 343-346) This reference to the Parliament as Senate must be understood as a pseudo-classical name which carries with it an implicit criticism of that modern body's difference from classical models. Swift had created a more graphic comparison between the ancient and the modern assemblies in Gulliver's Travels, Part III, when he has Gulliver request the appearance of the Roman Senate during his visit to the Part of Maldonada:

I desired that the Senate of Rome might appear before me in one large Chamber, and a modern Representative, in Counterview, in another.

The first seemed to be an Assembly of Heroes and Demy-Gods; the other a Knot of Pedlars, Pick-Pockets, Highwaymen and Bullies.

The Parliament in Ireland was, by their own concession, virtually powerless, and seemed content to stay that way. They had powers only to make laws that had to be approved in England, and had been given the dubious authority to "approve" laws already made for them in England. By refusing to assert themselves and thus perhaps jeopardize their positions, they did nothing to help the people they represented. Swift attacks this pusillanimous attitude in A Short View of the State of Ireland.

The second reference to the Irish (ll. 394-398) concerns the common people, who seemed so apathetic to their exploitation. It was this apathy that Swift attacked so memorably in A Modest Proposal. In suggesting that the Irish sell their infants for consumption by the rich he was pointing out to them a profitable form of genocide compared to that which they were allowing through their indifference to English tyranny. Swift's third reference to Ireland (ll. 407-414) pertains to the fact that Swift was in the forefront of the opposition against Wood's halfpence and through his Drapier's Letters was able to help thwart the introduction of this inflationary copper coinage into Ireland. These letters, although published anonymously, earned him the undying gratitude of the Irish people, who refused to reveal him as the author of the letters even when a reward was

offered by King George I for the name of the person who had published the pamphlets. The final reference to Ireland (ll. 431-454) concerns Swift's disgust with Anglo-Irish absentee landlords who did nothing to improve the land. As a supporter of Tory landed interests, Swift saw cultivation of fertile land as necessary to provide for the inhabitants as well as provide exports to help the economy. Anglo-Irish landlords not only neglected the cultivation of the land, they further impoverished the country by taking the rents they received from the lands back to England, where the money further enriched the English economy. A Short View of the State of Ireland attacks this practice of systematic impoverishment.

Swift had made a career of pointing out that motives are seldom simple. Here he creates a eulogist who proceeds to break all of his rules. In narrating Swift's involvement in Irish affairs the eulogist not only assumes simple motives but also becomes rhapsodic:

Fair LIBERTY was all his Cry;
 For her he stood prepar'd to die;
 For her he boldly stood alone;
 For her he oft expos'd his own. (ll. 347-350)

The experienced reader of Swift would find the eulogist's explanations of Swift's motives too simplistic and would see the elements of parody in the language Swift assigns the eulogist. Such inflated language stands out when compared with the rest of the poem. By alluding to his own practical schemes for alleviating the problems of Ireland, Swift further calls attention to the emptiness of the eulogist's rhetoric.

Maurice Johnson suggests that much of the power of the poem comes from its controlled tone, its everyday language, and the ordinary detail within an imaginary situation. Swift uses a similar technique in A Modest Proposal, expressing the horror of the cannibalism of children in detached, unemotional terms; in Gulliver's Travels, where Gulliver moves through fantastic situations, describing them as commonplace; in "Baucis and Philemon," where miracles and supernatural events are described factually and with great care for detail; and in "Cadenus and Vanessa," in which deities conduct legal proceedings much as they would in any court.

"Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" is representative of Swift's gifts as both satirist and moralist. Writing verses on his own death gives him a chance to enjoy his own funeral, just as he had enjoyed the funeral he had invented for Mr. Partridge some years before. But the poem also gives him a chance to make some pungent observations about self-love, friendship, and human values. By constructing scenes of increasing length and complexity, Swift draws the reader into a satiric mirror-world intended to heighten moral awareness. As the characters become more detailed and lifelike, an unwary reader might forget Swift's satiric intentions. But I would argue that the longer portraits, and especially that of the eulogist, need to be read with a recognition of their subtle but insidious self-interest. Balancing the humorous

tone created by the detail, wit, and verbal facility is a more profound moral intention. Swift wants us to see here, as in Gulliver, the dangers of self-delusion.

NOTES

¹ Carl Van Doren, Swift (New York: Viking Press, 1930), p. 246.

² Harold Williams, ed., The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), III, 506.

³ Maurice Johnson, The Sin of Wit: Jonathan Swift as a Poet (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1950), p. 62.

⁴ Harold Williams, ed., The Poems of Jonathan Swift, 2nd ed. (1937; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), II, 708.

⁵ John I. Fischer, "How to Die: 'Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,'" The Review of English Studies, 21 (Nov. 1970), 431.

⁶ J.N.P. Moore, "Swift's Philanthropy," in Jonathan Swift 1667-1967: A Dublin Tercentenary Tribute, eds. Roger McHugh and Philip Edwards (Dublin: Dolmen Press, Ltd., 1968), pp. 137-156.

⁷ Hans F. Fetting, "Swift's 'Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,' 189-192," The Explicator, 26 (1973), Item 75.

⁸ Maurice Johnson, "Swift's Poetry Reconsidered," in English Writers of the Eighteenth Century, ed. John H. Middendorf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 238.

⁹ Jonathan Swift, A Tale of a Tub in The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939-1968), I, 139.

¹⁰ Irvin Ehrenpreis, "Personae," in Restoration and Eighteenth Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugold McKillop, ed. Charles C. Camden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 25-37.

¹¹ Peter J. Schakel, "The Politics of Opposition in 'Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift'," Modern Language Quarterly, 35 (1974), 246-256.

¹² Pat Rogers, Grub Street: Studies in a Sub-Culture (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1972), p. 183.

¹³ David Nichol Smith, Characters from the Histories and Memoirs of the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), p. xxx.

¹⁴ W. B. Carnochan, Lemuel Gulliver's Mirror for Man (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 176.

¹⁵ Alexander Barclay, trans., The Ship of Fooles (London, 1570), sig. 29^v.

¹⁶ Barry Slepian, "The Ironic Intention of Swift's Verses on His Own Death," The Review of English Studies, 14 (August 1973), 255.

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