CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: The Age of Swift: Society and Poetry:
Swift's Poetry in relation to his age

"'Tis well an. Old Age is out,
And time to begin a New" ¹

The Age of Swift:

Jonathan Swift is identified with a distinct age in literary history/which embraces more or less four political periods in England/though his life (1667-1745) extended over six reigns. These four periods consist of the reigns of James II (1685-1688), William III (1689-1702), Queen Anne (1702-1714) and George I (1714-1727). The term 'Augustan' is more applicable than 'Eighteenth century' to this period, for the break with the past age and signs of a new era became visible even during the reign of Charles II and manifested itself in clear terms as early as 1688, the year of the 'Glorious Revolution' when James II was replaced

by William of Orange and his wife Mary — a few decades before the actual eighteenth century began. Literally, the death of Dryden in 1700 closed the past century, but in reality Cowley's death in 1667 — the year Swift was born — marked a shift from the old age to the new. Actually the Restoration Period is termed 'Augustan' from its feeling of kinship with the Rome of Octavius Augustus Caesar (31 B.C.), although the term is generally used by literary men for the whole age of Dryden and Pope to which Swift belonged. It is also called 'Neo-classical' for its adoption of classical rules and models, and 'the Age of Reason' for its application of reason and common-sense rather than emotion to its literature.

Society and Poetry:

"The Augustan Age", as A.R. Humphreys says, "is noted for its sense of man as a social being, divinely intended to collaborate in a great task. That task, which the age made particularly its own, was to live in widespread harmony, abjuring the hazards of war and fanaticism which had convulsed the seventeenth century. By instinct and intention men strove for a congenial society: they pondered on a principle of a civilized community and hoped to extend the doctrines of sympathy". 2 The conflicts and enthusiasms

of the mid-seventeenth century receded into the past and English society and culture settled down into a period of relative stability. Then it became possible to distinguish that view of life and letters which was held as "Augustan" by those who liked that appellation.

The Revolution of 1688 brought in the Rule of Law instead of the despotic control by a monarch or a religious aristocracy. The change at the Revolution meant that the court no longer overshadowed the society. The court was beginning to be superseded by the town. The new race of statesmen were coming to depend upon parliamentary influence instead of court favour. This decline of the court had many consequences, direct and indirect, on English life. It had no analogy in contemporary France, where Versailles still drew men like a magnet, and impoverished the life of chateau and province. With the flight of James II, English society was left without the guidance it had hitherto received in matters of state. The ancient system of semi-Gothic imagination that had formed itself round the court was, by the Revolution, thrown into ruins, and the violent and extravagant traditions, fostered by Royalist Reaction, were the only artistic models that enjoyed any prestige with the people. If a sound public opinion in morals and manners was to be built up, it could only be under the
conscious guidance of sagacious minds giving a fresh development to the established institutions of the country. Fortunately, the men available for the task were equal to its accomplishment.

Among the circumstances most favourable to the formation of public opinion was the rapid growth of the London coffee-houses. Coffee, introduced into England under the Commonwealth, was at first regarded as a mere medicine. But, from its stimulating qualities, it soon became popular as a drink, and (it may be presumed), from its non-intoxicating character, was found to promote at once social relations and discussion. Augustan London had something like five hundred coffee-houses, differentiated often by social or professional distinctions but augmenting society's intermingling. With the inn, the tavern and the club these created much of the mental world in which literature lived and contributed, as Swift said to Stella, "to advance conversation and friendship". For a proper understanding of this century we should never forget the value then placed upon good conversation. This was the most universal of all arts, cultivated by all but the most boorish. Society, in fact, was

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more compact, more conscious of itself than it had been in
Elizabethan or Jacobean days. This new gregariousness is
reflected in the vastly increased number of eating-houses,
and of the comparatively few coffee-houses. Conversation,
that most social of all arts, was cultivated there, and the
discussion of new books and new authors proceeded at dif­
ferent levels of urbanity and wit. In case of Augustan
London, for instance, what impresses us is not its magnitude
but what seems, curiously enough, its small-town intimacy.
The arts and society kept to the city of London and the
regions west of it, and recurrently dealing with this fami­
liar ground they created a sense of pattern and community
of interest.

But while this multitude of social Parliaments out­
side the House of Commons enabled each small circle of English­
men to form its own public opinion, some central focus was
required, if the general sense of society was to make head
against the organised lead given to the nation by the manners
of the court. And here again circumstances had gradually
prepared the necessary intellectual organisms in the growth
of the periodical press. As the use of what was medicinal
drug had eventually brought individuals together to discuss
high points of liberty and morality, so the supply of News
Letter, to satisfy the craving of men for the latest tidings
of what other men were saying or doing, had led to the passing of public judgments on these reported actions or opinions. In such conditions Steele, the *Tatler*, took the first step towards setting up a new tribunal of taste and manners, which was followed afterwards by *The Spectator*. We may reproduce here the view expressed by Richmond P. Bond regarding the affinity and characteristics of the two periodicals in his own words:

"*The Spectator* was in a sense both a continuation and an imitation of the *Tatler*, retaining, modifying, and omitting characteristics of its predecessor and originating several of its own. These famous journals shared a fundamental substance devoted to abolition of vice and folly, advancement of intelligence, and elevation of taste, and they held in common most of the basic methods of presentation through various forms and devices."4

The Age of Swift was moved alike by the excitements of party politics and the heated controversies on religious sects. The three-cornered religious quarrel among the Papists or Catholics, Dissenters or Puritans, and the Anglicans became allied to the political rivalry of Whigs and Tories. In the midst of this sectarian confusion, there was the use

of the appellations 'High Church' and 'Low Church' to indicate those who conformed to the moderate rituals indulged in by the Church of England, and those who used to apply rational methods of inquiry concerning these practices. The latter by their rationalism were dubbed 'Latitudinarians' and were equally named 'Deists' because they believed in the existence of God, but not in the doctrine of Revelation and the need for ritualistic dogma. These Deists wished to analyse many of the old faiths of religion in the light of reason.

There were other influences at work on the literature and language of the age. Swift's England was fortunate in having behind it not only the Glorious Revolution of 1688, but such a physicist as Newton, and such a philosopher as Locke. The brilliant explanations of John Locke (1632-1704) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) had not only removed the strain of living in a mysterious universe, but confirmed the principles of religion. Both of them found a place for God in their universes. Locke argues that "Since God shows Himself everywhere and, as it were, forces Himself upon the eyes of men much in the fixed course of nature now as by the frequent evidence of miracles in time past, I assume there will be no one to deny the existence of God, provided he recognizes either the necessity for some rational account of our life, or that there is a thing that deserves to be
And Newton explains that -

"The same Power, whether natural or supernatural, which placed the Sun in the centre of the six primary Planets, placed Saturn in the center of the Orbs of his five secondary Planets, and the Jupiter in the center of his four secondary Planets, and the Earth in the Center of the Moon's Orb; and therefore had this cause been a blind one, without contrivance or Design, the Sun would have been a Body of the same kind with Saturn, Jupiter, and the Earth, that is, without Light and Heat. Why there is one Body in our System qualified to give Light and Heat to all the rest, I know no Reason, but because the Author of the System thought it convenient..."

The Royal Society - in unofficial existence since 1645, more formally founded in 1660, and receiving its charter incorporating it as the Royal Society in 1662 - had for its primary purpose the carrying out of practical scientific experiments. Its various committees were concerned with

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mathematics, astronomy, optics, chemistry, agriculture, literature among other subjects.

The Royal Society was severe on its own members, and its prestige must have caused its directions to be more widely followed:

"They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants before that of Wits, or Scholars..."

The uses to which science might be turned, in agriculture, industry, navigation, medicine and engineering, appealed to the practical English mind. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was also a man of reason who saw religion in man only:

"Seeing there are no signs, nor fruit of Religion, but in Man onely; there is no cause to doubt, but the seed of Religion, is also onely in Man; and consisteth in some peculiar quality, or at least in some eminent degree thereof, not to be found in other living creatures".

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But Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton and the early members of the Royal Society were religious men, who repudiated the sceptical doctrines of Thomas Hobbes. They familiarized the minds of their countrymen with the idea of law in the universe and with scientific methods of inquiry to discover truth. It was believed that these methods would never lead to any conclusion inconsistent with Biblical history and miraculous religion. Newton lived and died in that faith. But his law of universal gravitation and his calculus supplied methods of approaching truth that had no relation to theology. The spread of scientific inquiry affected the character of religious belief, though not as yet its content. The age of latitudinarian piety that followed the Revolution of 1688 was being prepared by these intellectual movements of the Restoration. In a world governed by such studies, it is natural that superstition would be exposed, and poetry would yield place to prose. For this patronage of science, Charles II and his courtiers deserve all praise. The supremacy which Newton held in physics belonged to Locke in philosophy. His authority was behind the eighteenth-century belief in the inalienable rights of the human individual as such, and in the natural liberties of man. In his religious writings too, he gave his age just what it was ready to receive, a reasoned plea for toleration and a demonstration of the Reasonableness of Christianity. Locke,
like a true son of his age, took it for granted that 'Reason must be our last Judge and Guide in everything.'

Reason itself he calls 'natural revelation,' whereby God communicates to us as much truth as lies within the reach of our natural faculties. What he offers us is always the reasoning of a grave and sober man, not the visions of enthusiasm or the fictions of poetry.

The Age of Swift is also termed 'neo-classic.' It is of much importance to learn what classical literature meant to that generation. In the first place, the education of a gentleman meant nothing then except a certain drill in Greek and Latin - whereas now it includes a little dabbling in other branches of knowledge. As in The Battle of the Books controversy, the general opinion seems to be that the critic should have before him the great classical models, and regard the English literature of the seventeenth century as a collection of all possible errors of taste. When at the end of this period, Swift with Pope formed the project of the Scriblerus Club, its aim was to be a joint-stock satire against all 'false tastes' in learning, art, and science.


10 Ibid., p. 689.
That was the characteristic conception of the most brilliant men of letters of the time. Pope advised to 'know well each ancient's proper character', and Jonathan Richardson asked to 'look upon what the ancients have done'. Reynolds traced all excellences ultimately to them. For both literature and art tradition was a vital force drawn from antiquity and learned traditionalism is as characteristic of a painter like Reynolds as of a writer like Johnson. These two men provide almost identical philosophies of their respective arts, a similarity strengthened by their friendship but also inherent in the time. Greek scholarship in England then had not fallen as low as in the rest of Europe. G.M. Trevelyan is correct in saying that:

"in the Germany of that day not only was classical Greek no longer studied, but the names and stories of the mythology and history of Hellas were unknown. But they were familiar to educated people in England, if not through Greek then through Latin and English authors. Every man of fashion in the reign of George I had at least to pretend an acquaintance with Pope's rendering of Homer."  

Very significant, though not so immediately and simply attributable to the restoration of Charles II, was the new attitude to poetry which developed in the latter part of the seventeenth century and which was to determine the course of English poetry for over a hundred years. This attitude with its emphasis on urbanity, decorum, elegance, and 'sweetness of numbers' does not represent a total revolution in English taste. There was a classical element in Elizabethan literature and criticism—an emphasis on order and control and fitness, which we find not only most notably in Ben Jonson but also intermittently in much sixteenth and seventeenth-century writing. After the restoration this current, which hitherto had been a minor one in English literature, became swollen by other streams to become for a long period a dominant strain in English literary theory and practice. A major influence was that of France, which by the middle of the seventeenth century, had become a major cultural influence in Europe. Returning Royalist exiles brought back with them an admiration for everything French, and French influence can be found in philosophy, literature, the theatre and the social behaviour of the people. Most of the eighteenth-century poets had received a prolonged and thorough classical education. Classical poetry, in particular, was for them a sort of secondary inspiration, always present at the back of their
minds, and often coming to the front in a phrase or a classical allusion. Mr. Howard D. Weinbrot reminds us that -

the Imitation reaches its qualitative peak in Pope's Imitation of Horace (1733-38), and has its large major display in Johnson's Vanity of Human Wishes (1749). Through much of the later eighteenth century the form loses its strength, and some of its attractions; but between about 1660 and 1750 this important genre attracted such poets as Cowley, Rochester, Dryden, Oldham, Congreve, Swift, Prior, Rowe, Pope, Johnson. 13

Against this background, we will have to study the poetry that the age produced. Poetry in such a period worked within relatively narrow limits. Limitations and conventions of this kind are a challenge to art, and art, it is often found, thrives on such challenges. The delicate satire and oblique wisdom developed by Pope in The Rape of the Lock show what perfect poetic achievements were possible in - were, in fact, encouraged by - a social atmosphere of this kind. Such an atmosphere also produced the kind of Vers de société so happily exemplified in the poems of Mathew Prior, whose playful elegance as well as graceful vulgarity must be distinguished from Pope's more formal performance. Wit and high spirits are equally apparent in

much of the work of Prior, Swift and Gay. As for the standard of craftsmanship, that too remains remarkably high in the poetry of the period, even when it has comparatively little matter to work upon. Another aspect of early eighteenth-century civilization is caught perfectly by John Pomfret's poem, *The Choice* (1700) - a very popular verse-essay describing the gentleman's ideal way of life, a leisured, civilized "golden mean". We are reminded, so often in this period, of the mood and tone of many of the poems of the Roman poet Horace, who was one of the favourite poets of the age.

We, who belong to this generation, have little cause than our predecessors to undervalue the poetic output of the eighteenth century. Conformity to truth and good reason is never a wholly bad principle, even for poets; and we owe to it much first rate satire; as well as a work like the *Essay on Man*. Much eighteenth-century poetry is the poetry of calm and measured statement, packed with meaning. The language of Augustan poetry (and also prose) was the culmination of a complicated process of discipline and refinement. Its secret is embodied in two words, 'polish' and 'perspicuity'. The poetry of Dryden and Pope differs from earlier and later English poetry in that it is not a poetry of suggestion but of emphatic statement. The 'meaning' of a Metaphysical or a Romantic poem, the totality of impressions
created by it, is implicit - an obscure complex in which the contributions of logic, rhythm, and emotional suggestion are always inextricable. But an Augustan poem is explicit. The meaning is, and must be, on the surface, and in so far as the wording or rhythm introduces subsidiary elements, which distract the attention from the structure of the poem, it ceases to be purely Augustan. There is rarely any plunging beneath the surface, for that is not common sense. The poets were to voice what every human being felt, "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." The contemporary 'employment' of imagery to illustrate a statement rather than itself be the statement serves to reinforce the notion. Thus most of the verse invites a happy collaboration rather than stirs any deep emotion; or if it vivifies our emotions they are such as take up only a part of ourselves, and do not involve the whole man. Yet if this poetry lacks a fine exess, the poets are not wanting in excitement. Among the best poets there is constantly a sense of sustained balance. If the age fails to provoke any great depth of emotion or height of excitement or great enthusiasm, it makes poetry familiar, brings it down from ivory towers into the street - from the

Cowleyan Pindaric to Gay's *Trivia*. It ensures its having the virtues of prose at least, since it has to strike the reading masses directly. Moreover, poetry was as much subject as prose to the change of use in language, with the new insistence on compact statement.

Verse was extensively employed in the political controversies of the later seventeenth century. Much of this political poetry was satirical, but some of it was panegyrical too. These two kinds continued to be written in large quantities, and sometimes coalesced in the same poem as we will see later in some of the poems of Jonathan Swift. Since political poetry was intended to influence the largest possible public in the quickest possible way, it was often crude in both content and style, and had little of that 'fine raillery' that Dryden admired, and that he was to achieve so admirably in *Absalom and Achitophel*. A good deal of verse satire took the form of shapeless invective, but a series of satirical moulds was invented or rediscovered - advices to a painter, mock elegies, visions, dreams, allegories, beast fables, and the like - and such indirect methods gave the various pieces some literary interest.

When we consider the language of Augustan poetry we may think first of 'poetic diction', of those abstract generalities and inflated periphrases that give a glossy
vagueness to so much writing of the period, and not merely of bad poets - the great repository being Pope's translation of Homer. Such diction, which had begun to appear at the end of the Elizabethan age, came most obviously from the study, writing, and translation of Latin verse; and from the effort both to avoid the 'lowness' of concrete realism (exemplified in Homer and Shakespeare) and to achieve 'the grandeur of generality', an approximation to uniform nature truer than that of particulars. In Milton and earlier writers this poetic diction was not only much more sparing in quantity but was more commonly justified by special purposes. In much Augustan verse it was automatic. The writing for rhetorical periphrases and generic images was not altogether in harmony with the scientific impulse towards precise denotation. Yet the two could flourish together and even support each other, since science itself tends to abstraction and some elements of poetic diction were petrified science. The value of poetic diction lay partly in its power to make the reader pay attention to what he might otherwise neglect. The poet, no less than the prose-writer, had to struggle constantly to defeat the inattention of his readers. He could use fine allusions and bright images, but poetic diction was his most reliable weapon. Perhaps no eighteenth-century poet got so much fun and so much beauty out of the
poetic diction of the period as Gay. In *Rural Sports* and *Trivia* he revels in its absurdity, its dangerous dignity and its exquisite artificiality.

Eighteenth-century poetry, however remote in diction may sometimes be from the idiom of contemporary speech, has at least this in common with conversation that it is concisely addressed to some one else. The eighteenth-century poet is addressing the reader in a variety of ways, and with different ends in view, but he is not murmuring to himself alone. Poetry was to him like good conversation, a social activity. It exacted from him a consideration for the reader and a corresponding restraint upon himself. This purpose was served by the introduction of the heroic couplet.

The Restoration and Augustan periods of English culture were, in fact, fundamentally unheroic; not the heroic but the mock-heroic was their chosen province. It was the neo-classic theory of "kinds" which put the epic at the top of the hierarchy of poetic kinds, that led so many poets of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century to sigh after the epic. But their real genius was for a more intimate, social poetry, dealing knowingly with contemporary events and personalities. Hence they had to invent the mock-heroic in order to be able both to have their cake and eat it too — to work within the neo-classic theory of 'kinds' and yet to
employ a tone and style appropriate to their situation and genius.

The development of the heroic-couplet provided a medium that could combine rhetoric with polish, precisely what was required in presenting heroes whose passions were both tremendous and conversational. The rules which govern them have never been fully ascertained. Geoffrey Tillotson has tried to put them in a formula:

"The ten feet of the couplet were to be kept as closely iambic as possible, the metrical surprises accordingly being of fine gradation. The rimes were to fall on monosyllabic words which therefore revived, and could bear to receive, the full terminal accent of the line ......... The monosyllabic rime-word, if possible should have a long vowel, and it was best if one of the two rime words of the couplet were a verb".

The poet tried to work out as many contrasts and parallels within the couplet as he could, providing the maximum number of internal geometrical relationship. "This meter had its foundation", as W. J. Courthope says, "partly in the conversation of the society, partly in the tradition of literature".

It was used with excellent success by Ohaucer, who had imported it from France. It received a new development from Drayton, whose practice, improved by Drayton and by Sir John Beaumont, was afterwards followed by Waller, and used, as a vehicle of panegyric, in opposition to the Pindaric style of Cowley. Waller, however, was essentially a poet of the Court. He aimed at paying compliments in verse, smooth, lucid, and melodious, and to this end he imported into his poetry as much as possible of colloquial usage. But he shrank from the appearance of vulgarity, and, while discarding metaphysics, strove to give elevation to the subjects of his praise by associating them with a childish Pagan mythology. Hence his style was far from being adapted to the requirement of a society in which the Court played a diminished part. We have only to examine the verse of any representative courtier under the two last Stuarts, to see how it differs in tone from the easy well-bred manner attained in the artistic regime by poets like Prior and Cowper.

In order to form a refined poetical idiom, answering to the needs of civil society after the Revolution (1688), it became necessary that the courtly style of Waller should receive a strong mixture of the popular speech, just in the same manner as Addison had brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies.
assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses. She expounded Bourtier, the man of affairs, and the coffee-house philosopher in England, were in fact doing the refining work that the king, the Hotel Rambouillet, and the Academy, had together done in France.

The process was a long and gradual one, for it was not easy to blend the tendencies which were naturally opposed to each other. Still the feat was achieved, and the course of the movement may best be traced by making a starting point from two early apostles of correctness, whose names happen to be joined together in a well-known couplet of Pope—"Granville the polite, and knowing Walsh." 18

The sociable eighteenth century gave to Nature a less prominent place, and held that the proper study of mankind was not the river Hudson or the Westmoreland mountains, but Man. Natural description in Pope is usually incidental, serving characteristically to adorn or emphasize some statement or event, as it does, too, in the epics silies of Homer and Virgil. It is a fallacy to assume that eighteenth-century

poetry is lacking in feeling. It is still more naive to suppose that the poets of that century did not feel as men. They felt such things as those, and much more, but they rarely gave 'direct' expression to such feelings in their poetry. It is clear that the more private and personal emotions aroused a certain self-consciousness; a man kept those to himself, or unburdened his soul only to a friend. It is not, therefore, an eighteenth-century poet who writes: "My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky" or "Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!" Here the difference is not one of feeling and not-feeling: It is a difference mainly in the conventions of expression, which turns ultimately on a different relationship with the reader.

We cannot afford to ignore another half-forgotten trend here, viz. the early craving for 'Pindaric' odes. The fashion for it had been started in the previous generation by Cowley, who had attempted to show that the sublimity of Pindar and the enthusiastic vigour of his style were best imitated in irregular verse.

The Pindaric ode, as Cowley practised it in such odes


20 Wordsworth's sonnet: Composed upon Westminster Bridge ibid., p.140, l. 11.
as To Mr. Hobbes and To the Royal Society, consisted of an indefinite number of stanzas containing an indefinite number of lines, the lines containing an indefinite number of stresses. "This lax and lawless versification," wrote Dr. Johnson, one hundred years later, "so much concealed the deficiencies of the barren, and flattered the laziness of the idle, that it immediately overspread our books of poetry; all the boys and girls caught the pleasing fashion, and they that could do nothing else could write like Pindar."

That is one way of looking at the fashion. Viewed from another angle, this fashion reveals that, in an age of respect for rule and classical precedent, there were poets who believed that they could "snatch grace beyond the reach of art" if their inspirations were sufficiently sublime.

Swift's Poetry in relation to his Age:

A study of Swift's poetry reveals at once his conformity to and aversion from custom or convention of the time.

His poems deal with the events of his career, public and private; with the interests that engaged him from time

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to time; with his friends and enemies; with the people whom he met in every grade of society and the houses into which he stayed. They take the form of satires, parodies, riddles, burlesques, fables, political skits and ballads, vers de société — in fact, every form which occasional verse can assume. They afford, not only a running commentary upon his own history, but a panorama of the society of his age. In these and in many other matters, he is conventional. But in his adherence to "the language of common life" and in his reactions against the high adulation showered on science he is a rebel to his time.

The compromise in church and state arrived at in the Revolution of 1688 cast its influence upon the literary work of the age. Moreover, Swift was a classicist both with regard to style, diction and the choice of themes. These two principles in combination also determine the conscious aim of Swift's literary style, which, as Johnson says, is "well suited to his thoughts". He himself describes in a letter to Isaac Bickerstaff, the nature of the 'simplicity' after which he strove — a mode of expression founded on polite conversation, and yet removed from pedantry. Each

word in his verse knows how it got there, and can give a neat and satisfactory account of its presence. His style in verse shows 'propriety' and 'precision' - 'conscious neatness and precision of statement'. He represents best the eighteenth-century ambition to combine clarity and strength of style. In the field of satire and familiar poetry, wit, and knowledge of mankind, joined to facility of expression, are the principal requisites for excellence, and in these Swift stands supreme. The sheer bulk of his poetry is surprising, for we hardly expect a busy public person taken up as he was with ecclesiastical and political affairs to write as much poetry as Pope and more than Prior, Parnell, Gay, or Young. The 'several occasions' of his poems are nearly always fresh and revealing, because he has no high falutin notions of 'poetry' or literary reputation to restrain him. Swift was less pre-occupied with poetry than Dryden and Pope, but closer than they to the civic ideal of his time. At one extreme are his lampoons, their victims ranging from George II and Walpole to the shoals of Irish officialdom and small fry. At the other extreme are his impersonal satires on the sexual relationship. There are poems of social satire like The Furniture of a Woman's Mind, The Journal of a Modern Lady, and those ruthless studies in discontinuity - The Lady's Dressing Room, A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed, Strephon and Choln, and Cassimix, and Peter.
One of the strongest of all his poems, imaginatively powerful and leading up to a singularly effective ending is *Death and Daphne*.

Swift with Pope formed the project of the Scriblerus Club and its aim was to be a joint-stock satire against 'false tastes' in learning, art, and science. Swift and his fellows of the Scriblerus Club stood against the excessive adulation that was showered on Newton and science of his time. Man might explore nature, the *Essay on Man* argued, but he could not understand himself. Pope argues that even Newton, 'whose rules the rapid comet bind', could not 'describe or fix one movement of his mind'. But in following science, the temper of the age already ran towards classification, codifying, abstracting - and that was one of the reasons why Swift held against science.

In Swift a sense of tradition and community is challenged by a strong feeling for the anarchic and the predatory. It was his practice, we are given to understand, to have two of his few servants brought in before him to listen to his poems being read, which if they did not

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comprehend, he would alter and amend, until they understood it perfectly well, and then would remark, "This will do; for I write to the vulgar, more than to the learned". How well he succeeded may be seen on almost any page of his poetic works, where the idiomatic and the familiar style carries his meaning easily and forcibly to the least learned reader.

But here, as in some other matters already hinted at, Swift was not wholly at one with his age. This conscious ignoring of the polite was part of 'Dr. Swift's odd way', and aroused no protest because everyone knew that Swift was himself one of the elite, a learned man, and one used to court manners and conversation of gentlemen.

Of all the beauties in the poem, *The Humble Petition of Francis Harris*, the supreme is Swift's use of vulgar speech patterns, the coarse sententiousness of the semi-literate for effects which are funny and decorous at once:

"'Tis not that I value the Money three
Skips of a House;

But the Thing I stand upon, is the
Credit of the House;" 26

The Description of the Morning (1709) and The City Shower (1710) are deflating of poetic vapour, recklessly free of poetic adornment, bare of connotation, and uncompromising in their determination to see things as they actually are. Swift in these poems gives us a foretaste of Wordsworth's selection of "incidents and situations from common life"\(^\text{27}\), and "the real language of men"\(^\text{28}\) minus the Romantic poet's "emotion recollected in tranquillity"\(^\text{29}\).

Guided by this main principle of composition, Swift's style naturally moved ever further away from the Pindaric manner with which he started. As he wrote mainly for the unsophisticated public, whose minds, he himself says, unless imposed upon, are open to reason, his tendency, was more and more to banish ornament; and the metaphysical conceits of the seventeenth century became increasingly distasteful to him. A study of his verse reveals the truth of Samuel Johnson's observation as to the scarcity of his metaphor.\(^\text{30}\) It also points to his growing preference for octosyllabic verse as


\(^{28}\) Ibid., p.267

\(^{29}\) Ibid., p.266

a vehicle for familiar writing. In his metrical and in his prose writings the ideal was the same "proper words in proper places". Poetical diction, as a style to be aimed at per se, was a thing abhorrent to him, when once he had rejected the Pindaric manner. A feature, henceforth characteristic of him, is the proverbial turn of phrase and the idiomatic exclamation: "just about the time of Gooseberries", 'three skips of a Louse'.

The charm of many of Swift's poems lies in nuances of speech which we unhesitatingly accept as authentic without other evidence than they provide. The very accent of human speech is imposed upon the rhythm, giving it an actuality in which mere sweetness is transcended. It is more remarkable that he should have so often caught the accents of real speech in his short lines. Really, "no one ever yoked poetry so mercilessly to life".


32 The Humble Petition of Francis Harris, I1. 33 and 38 respectively.