CHAPTER II

Swift's Views on Poetry

Your tragick Heroes shall not rant,
Nor Shepherds use poetick rant:
Simplicity alone can grace,
The Manners of the rural Race,
Theocritus and Philips be,
Your guides to true Simplicity.

Before we proceed further into the realm of Jonathan Swift's poetry, it is better for us to realise his views on poetry and the best way to do so is to study first the critical background and the opinions of the great contemporaries of his age.

We can start with Dryden who argues in the Defence of an Essay that 'delight is the chief, if not the only, end

of poesy: instruction can be admitted, but in the second place, for poesy only instructs as it delights"². From the first he has felt the need for guidance in art derived from earlier masters. More than once he discusses whether classical, French, or native models were to be utilized for that purpose. He puts forward a new conception of how best to imitate great masterpieces in his Preface to Troilus and Cressida. Dryden explains with a few lines of Longinus, concerning Plato's imitation of Homer:

"Those great men whom we propose to ourselves as patterns of our imitation, serve us as a torch, which is lifted up before us, to enlighten our passage, and often elevate our thoughts as high as the conception we have of our author's genius" ³

The idea was something different from the earlier crude notion of a slavish copying of formal characteristics or an indiscriminate borrowing of incidents, phrases or diction.

Again, he comes to approve of the occasional use of an Alexandrine, to add majesty to the verse and to bring

the thought to an effective close; or again, he commends a judicious use of triplet rhymes to bind and emphasize the sense. Both of these devices came under bitter attack from Swift's pen as we will see later in this chapter.

Of Dryden's critical predecessors the one who comes nearest to Dryden in humanity, good temper, and colloquial liveliness is Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586). Dryden mentions The Defence of Poesy, by Sidney as early as 1664 in his dedicatory Epistle to The Royal Ladies. Hence it seems possible that the civilized and discursive tone of his own criticism owes something to the gentle Sidney.

The theoretical content of Sidney's moral defense and purpose of poetry is explicit in the following memorable lines:

"Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end, - to teach and delight".


The sources of Sidney's writings were classical, but the spirit were not very sternly classical. Ben Jonson wrote a kind of native classicism which it has been difficult for any audience since the mid-18th century really to enjoy—obscene yet moralizing, caustic, thorny, vulgar, immediate, Londonian and very much topical. We may cite, for instance, his Prologue to The Alchemist:

"Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known,
No country's mirth is better than our own;
No clime breeds better for your whose,
Bawd, Squire, imposter, many persons more,
Whose manners, now call'd humours, feed the stage."

The same bias for imitation and morality persists in Alexander Pope when he writes—

"Those Rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are nature still, but nature methodiz'd;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrain'd
By the same laws which first herself ordain'd."

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There is little difference between Sir Philip Sidney in the sixteenth century and Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, when they declare in bare terms the function of poetry.

"Poesy ....... is an arte of imitation .... with this end, to teach and delight" (An Apologie for Poecie), 'The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing'.

But somewhat disappointing and altogether different from the critical writings of Dryden and Pope is the contribution of that enigmatic genius, Jonathan Swift. His criticism, scattered throughout works of various kinds, has little to offer in the way of constructive theories or appreciations. It is, in fact, confined almost entirely to correcting current literary abuses. Notwithstanding these obstacles, a close study of his miscellaneous works will certainly reveal a great deal about Swift's views on poetry. For, a writer or a poet often expresses his opinions on such occasions.

A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet⁹ is the main

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prop of our study in this regard although William Bragg Ewald Jr. does not think the author of this letter to be thoroughly credible and Dr. Herbert Davis points out the very real difficulty of proving that Swift is the writer of it. We can be somewhat on the safer ground if we take into account the fact that in ironical purposes, in a way it looks back in the direction of A Tale of A Tub and An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity, and forward to A Modest Proposal and A Vindication of Carteret. Our ground becomes still stronger when we came across the opinion expressed in this piece in various other writings of Swift. Critics like Ricardo Quintana and John M. Bullitt have consolidated our position by their supposition that the piece really came from Swift.

The Letter to a Young Poet tells us a great deal about Swift's positive doctrines of poetry - more, in fact, than can be gathered from any one of his other compositions.

Not only has it a peculiar importance because of the fact that Swift nowhere else discoursed on poetry at such length, but it is also distinguished by the texture of its satire and irony. It is a grave discourse, evenly modulated, but with crushing irony lurking in every phrase. The opening paragraph is in itself a masterpiece of ironic statement. The writer addressing a young man who has resolved to become a poet, expresses his satisfaction with the youth's choice of a profession, and goes on to praise poetry as that which not only advances its practitioners to fortune but is of great use to mankind and society.

The author takes an exaggerated and lofty view of the place of poetry based mainly on statements from Sir Philip Sidney. There is no person, ancient or modern, he says, who was eminent in any station of life without being skilled in poetry. In it Swift ridicules modern learning by concentrating upon its artful methodology which supplants the natural purposes of study. In comparing the 'business of a poet' with that of a shoemaker, Swift shows that the poet's 'stock of similes', like the shoemaker's lasts, should be "sized, and ranged, and hung up in order in his shop, ready for all customers, and shaped to the feet of all sorts of verse".

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This depreciation of modern poets by equating with tradesmen vending physical wares is also employed in *A Tale of a Tub*. Hence Swift ridicules the "true critic as 'a sort of mechanic; set up with Stock and Tools for his Trade'". Likewise, in *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, he comes to suggest the connection of religious enthusiasm with mechanical artifice. The device of ridiculing modern scholarship by pointing out the mechanics of its methodology is carried by Swift into other fields. A good illustration appears in his "Introduction" to *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation* in which he continually emphasizes the mechanical "art of conversation" for which the treatise was intended as a manual. Likewise, it is characteristic of Swift, that the poem which begins with:

"A Set of Phrases learn't by Rote;
A Passion for a Scarlet - Coat" - (p.328, Ll.1-2).

should be entitled: *The Furniture of a Woman's Mind*. The associations of 'furniture' with an immobile irrationality are expected in *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet* to a simile between a trading pedlar and the work of a "painful and judicious editor of the classics".

In this work the reader will find little which he has not already encountered in the author's earlier writings: the attack on poetic enthusiasm and the ridicule of those who would achieve universal knowledge through the use of abstracts, summaries, and indices carry one back to *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, while the derisive treatment of irreligious wits and of writers in constant search of the eccentric calls to mind any number of earlier passages.

Now, verse without rhyme is a body without a soul or a bell without a clapper, from which it follows that no aspiring poet should neglect to furnish himself with a goodly supply of rhymes. Let him also lay up a store of images and a variety of similes for all subjects. Swift continues ironically that frequent attendance at the coffee houses and the play-houses is an indispensable part of the young poet's education.

That there is such a thing as artistic genius he was no more denying than was Sidney; his quarrel with Sidneian school was rather over the meaning of artistic genius. Believing as he did that imagination is entirely the outgrowth of certain physical conditions, and believing furthermore that beauty is a deception which obscures reality, Swift
saw in the mysterious powers which some would confer on the poet only arrant nonsense. The genius was not a seer; he was one distinguished from his fellows by his greater intellectual capacity, by his keener wit, and by his extraordinary voice. We should note in this connection that Swift's uncompromisingly hostile view of the poetic imagination was something unique, and not, as many would have it, the characteristic attitude of his age. But despite his debasement of imagination, he was, by virtue of his own genius and exquisite taste, fully sensitive to the inexplicable qualities of great literature. His insistence that poetry must be civilized, that it must reach through reality, and that its matter must be acceptable to men of sense in no way ruled out the artistry which only genius can come by.

Swift uses the masks when he urges the poet to read the scriptures, and to become an entire master of them. His reason for the advice is: "to read them as a piece of necessary furniture for a wit and a poet; which is a very different view from that of a Christian." The Bible becomes a mere source-book for wit, images, allusions, and examples, when he recommends:

"I intend nothing less than imposing upon you, a task of piety. Far be it from me to desire you

16 Ibid., Vol. XI, p. 96.
believe them, or lay any great stress upon their authority .......

In his Letter of Advice to a Young Poet. In the same vein, Swift advises the young poet to read the great humanistic writers of antiquity only because to use them merely as pump-primer, and the way to reach them is not through laborious work, but through abstracts, abridgements, and indices. In this way Swift's positive views on poetry come through "the distortions of his persona" or masks as William Bragg Ewald, Jr. puts it, in A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet. They can be inferred from his negative criticism of contemporary bad poetic practices. Through a mere presentation of the contemporary poetic scene, Swift gets part of his satiric message across.

The Letter apart, we may also come to know of Swift's opinion about poetry from his miscellaneous writings. For although he did not profess to be either a poet or a critic, he has nevertheless in his casual and contemptuous manner the most extreme example that we have ever had in English literature of reaction against the heroic or romantic view of the poet's function and art.

Swift had no professional pride, and never showed

the least inclination to set much value on the business of writing poetry. He wrote always not as an artist but as a man of action, or else he wrote as a gentleman writes, to amuse himself and his friends. He refused to be considered as a writer or a poet professionally, and he emphasized the difference contemptuously in Thoughts on Various Subjects Continued, 1726:

"A copy of verses kept in the Cabinet, and only shewn to a few friends, is like a virgin much sought after and admired; but when printed and published, is like a common whore, whom anybody may purchase for half-a-crown."  

In his Discourse on the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit he adds a fantastic travesty of a mechanistic theory of the activity of the brain, which purports to be an explanation of the way in which poetry is written. And perhaps the most fundamental attack upon "inspiration", which may be equally applied to the prophetical or poetical variety, is found in the paragraph:

"For, I think, it is in Life as in Tragedy, where, it is held a conviction of great Defect, both in order of Invention, to interpose the Assistance of pretender Power, without an absolute and last Necessity ......."  

We find Swift to amuse himself in verse, by laughing at the exalted flights of Grub-Street wits, when sufficiently freed from the "Incumbrances of Food and Cloathes"\textsuperscript{21}, but the inspiration immediately flags as soon as they have received their pay. The line is from a short poem in very colloquial cocotosyllabic lines, called \textit{The Progress of Poetry}. But it was followed much later by one of Swift's most vigorous and sustained efforts in verse, which he is said to have regarded as one of his best pieces, \textit{On Poetry: A Rapsody}. It was published anonymously in London on December 31, 1733.

Swift begins by looking over the whole Commonwealth of letters, and ridiculing the strange ambition of the human race, which drives every fool to try to be a writer and a poet:

"But \textit{Man} we find the only creature,  
Who, led by \textit{Folly}, Combats \textit{Nature};  
Who, when \textit{she} loudly cries, \textit{Forbear},  
With \textit{Obstinacy} fixes there;  
And, where his \textit{Genius} least inclines,  
Absurdly bends his whole Designs". \textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21}. \textit{The Progress of Poetry}, p. 179, L. 42.  
In the world of letters, as everywhere else in life, Hobbes's view is justified that every creature lives in a state of war by nature, only here it is the lesser who prey upon the greater—a condition of things found in nature only among vermin.

"So, Nat'ralists observe, a Flea
Hath smaller Fleas that on him prey,
And these have smaller yet to bite 'em,
And so proceed ad infinitum:
Thus ev'ry Poet in his mind,
Is bit by him that comes behind." 23

Again:

"In Bulk there are not more Degrees,
From Elephants to Mites in Cheese,
Than what a curious Eye may trace
In creatures of the rhiming Race.
From bad to worse, and worse they fall,
But, who can reach to Worst of all?
For, tho' in Nature Depth and Height
Are equally held infinite,
In Poetry the Height we know
'Tis only infinite below." 24

23 Ibid., p. 578, Ll. 337-42.
There is nothing left to do in such a world but to rail, or simply to amuse oneself and one's friends. Swift was not one of those who could build a little private palace of art for himself, or find consolation in dreams of a better existence than the present. He was never willing to buy happiness at the price of being well deceived, nor would he allow himself to be lulled into contentment by the soothing incantations or divine raptures of romantic poetry.

Swift scorned above all the artificial conventions, the outworn ornaments and false sentimentalities, which are perhaps at all times the marks of minor poetry. His attitude towards such poetry is shown in a parody, written probably in 1733, A Love Song in the Modern Taste. All the usual tricks are here exposed - the ornamental epithets, the classical references, the personification, the alliteration, the sing-song lilt, the unreal language, the sentimental commonplaces, and all the dreary staleness of these false, imitated, poetical devices:

III

"Thus the Cyprian Goddess weeping,
Mourn'd Adonis, darling youth:
Him the Boar in Silence creeping,
Gor'd with unrelenting Tooth."
IV

"Cynthia, tune harmonious Numbers;
Fair Discretion string the Lyre;
Sooth (e) my ever-waking Slumbers;
Bright Apollo lend thy choir."

Or,

VI

"Mournful Cypress, Verdant Willow,
Gilding my Aurelia's Brows,
Morpheus hov'ring o'er my Pillow,
Hear me pay my dying Vows."

VII

"Melancholy smooth Meander,
Swiftly purling in a Round,
On thy Margin Lovers wander,
With thy flow'ry Chaplets crown'd."

Again, on his being appointed the vicegerent of Apollo on Earth, Swift proclaims in Apollo's Edict, what may and what may not be done by his vassals:

"Let his Success our Subjects sway
Our Inspirations to obey,

And follow where he leads the way:
Then study to correct your Taste,
Nor beaten Paths be longer trac'd. 27

Then follows a list of things to be avoided—all the worn-out tags of poetic finery:

No Simile shall be begun,
With rising or with setting Sun;
And let the secret Head of Nile
Be ever banish'd from your Isle. 28

and,

Your tragick Heroes shall not rant,
Nor shepherds use poetick Cant:
Simplicity alone can grace,
The Manners of the rural Race,
Theocritus and Philips be,
Your guides to true Simplicity. 29

He proscribes all the nonsense of love-poetry:

"When you describe a lovely Girl,
No Lips of Coral Teeth of Pearl.
Cupid shall ne' er mistake another
However beauteous for his Mother:

28 Ibid., p. 211, Ll. 12-15.
29 Ibid., p. 211, Ll. 27-32.
Swift's more violent attack on poetic cant is found in a little group of poems, which were included in the Miscellaneies by Pope in 1727. The first of these - Phillis, or, The Progress of Love, 1716, gives the past history of the landlord and hostess of the Old Blue Boar, at Staines, which the poet used to pass on his journeys to Windsor. It is possibly a version of some story he has heard there. But even if that is so, it is certainly at the same time a satire upon the popular notions of romantic love and such attendant follies as a girl's elopement with a servant to escape from a reasonable match properly arranged by her parents. The adventures which befell the lovers are very rapidly sketched, until at last:

"When Food and Payment now grew scarce
Fate put a Period to the Farce;
And with exact Poetical Justice:
For John is Landlord, Phillis Hostess;
The keep at Stains the Old Blue Boar,
Are Cat and Dog, and Rogue and Whore." 31

30 Ibid., p. 212, Ll. 53-58.
It is worth comparing with this poem a letter that Swift wrote to Mrs. Swanton, a distant relative, on July 12, 1732, giving her advice as to how to deal with her daughter who had left her home in order to be free to marry according to her own wishes. In life and in literature Swift never ceased to protest against ideas and conduct which he considered against common sense and the opinion of rational people.

The poem, The Progress of Beauty, shows us how Swift is prepared to deal for himself with subjects which have been 'sicklied O'er' with the sentimentality of romantic poets. He demands "No lips of coral, Teeth of Pearl", in the poem Apollo's Edict. Now, this poem he goes a little further, and substitutes for the usual flatteries such lines as these. If the poets want to celebrate the beauty of the moon, then let them look more closely:

When first Diana leaves her Bed
Vapours and Steams her Looks disgrace,
A frouzy dirty colour'd red
Sits on her cloudy, wrinkled Face.

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And there is to be found an exact parallel between earthly females and the moon:

"To see her from her Pillow rise
All reeking in a Cloudy Steam,
Crackt Lips, foul Teeth, and gummy Eyes,
Poor Strephon, how would be blasphemed".

The comparison is continued throughout, and Celia's fading beauties are given no longer date than the waning moon. The last stanza closes the story with a gay little note, unusual in Swift:

"Ye Pow'rs who over Love preside,
Since mortal Beautyes drop so soon,
If you would have us well supply'd,
Send us new Nymphs with each new Moon"

Herbert Davis rightly points out that the poems to Stella "are if possible both in subject and in style an even more complete triumph over any temptation to indulge in sentiment or romance"; Swift in his poem *To Stella*, who collected and Transcribed his Poems glories in the fact

36 Ibid., p. 175, ll. 97-100.
that theirs is a relationship existing in defiance of all the laws of romance:

"Thou Stella, wert no longer young,
When first for thee my Harp I strung:
Without one word of Cupid's Darts,
Of Killing Eyes, or bleeding Hearts:
With Friendship and Esteem possesst,
I ne'er admitted Love a Guest". 38

There follow thirty-four couplets which in substance are as remarkable as anything which Swift ever indited. They should be read with scrupulous care by everyone desiring to follow the basic pattern of Swift's mind and character. The scrubby poet is deluded by a fleeting glimpse of some Chloe, Sylvia Phillis, or Iris into imagining the damsel to be a paragon of beauty, and proceeds to translate his delusion into romantic verse. But sooner or later comes the cruel awakening when he discovers Chloe tippling with footman, Sylvia an intimate of Bridewell, Phillis mending her ragged smocks, or Irish disfigured by disease. Swift seems to suggest that it is only true poets who can look quite through the false beauty at the surface to the inner reality. The same thought impels

the poet to go on writing:

"How should my Praises owe their Truth
To Beauty, Dress, or Paint, or Youth,
What Stoicks call without our Power,
They could not be insur'd an Hour;
'Twere grafting on an annual Stock
That must our Expectation mock,
And making one luxuriant Shoot
Die the next year for want of Root.
Before I could my verses bring,
Perhaps you're quite another thing.

So Maevius, when he drain'd his skull
To celebrate some Suburb Trull;
His Similes in Order set,
And ev'ry crambo he could get;
Had gone through all the Common-Places
Worn out by Wits who rhyme on Faces;
Before he could his Poem close,
The Lovely Nymph had lost her Nose

Your Virtues safely I commend,
They on no Accidents depend:
Let Malice look with all her Eyes,
She dares not say the Poet lyes. 39

39 Ibid., pp. 185-86, Ll. 61-82.
Whatever else went into that series of apparently nauseating compositions which in The Lady's Dressing Room seemed to attain a degree of disgust, one element was moral realism. It was this same moral realism which controlled his feelings for Stella. Again, it is moral realism, not cynicism, which led Swift to see the whole world with eyes undimmed by folly and sentiment. The most reviled of Swift's poems, The Lady's Dressing Room, A Beautiful Young Nymph, Strephon and Chloe, Cassinus and Peter are not to be explained by morbidity alone. They supplement in their strange fashion the description of the imagination found in the Mechanical Operation and the ironic defence of poesie in the Letter to a Young Poet. They are really parodies on sentimental poetry, styptics to the sensual imagination. Swift's undying hatred of 'enthusiasm' and the satiric expression to which he accorded this hatred stand in close relation to his aesthetic principles and to the attitude of general revolt against 'enthusiasm' of the seventeenth century.

The Progress of Poetry is in every way superior to the poem - Phillis, or, Progress of Love. Though it is completely outdistanced by the later piece On Poetry - A Rhapsody, it is worthy to stand as an envoy to the Letter to a Young Poet. The well-fed goose does not cackle, but turned out to graze in the common she grows lank and spare and before long is flying over the parish, singing harmoniously
as she wings her way. So is the poet. Replete, he is good for nothing, but let him starve and his powers increase in proportion to his hunger:

"Now his exalted spirit cloaths,
Incumbrances of Food and Cloaths;
And up he rises like a vapour,
Supported high on wings of Paper;
He singing flies, and flying sings,
While from below all Grub-Streetings". 40

The Progress of Beauty is one of the revolting compositions of the order of The Lady's Dressing Room. The disgust of which Swift was the master, lies in every line that tells of Celia's appearance as she rises in the morning:

"To see her from her Pillow rise
All reeking in a Cloud Steam,
Crackt Lips, foul Teeth, and gummy Eyes,
Poor Strephon, how would he blaspheme!" 41

In On Poetry: A Rapsody there are hundreds of lines of advice to the would-be poets - lines in which the ironic tone never once cracks. At length the satirist approaches a

41 The Progress of Beauty, p. 173, Ll. 13-16.
new topic: the indignity and shame of prostituting the Muse by flattering Kings, of whom - abroad - not one can be found that is not polluted with every vice. In this poem, as in Directions for a Birthday Song, Swift ironically assumes the guise of adviser to the aspirant poet as a cover for political satire. But the satire is not narrowly limited to political and court personalities, as it is in the 'Directions'. Swift satirizes Grub Street poets, pamphleteers and critics with energy and wit. Indeed he goes further still, probing to discover the innate perversity of the human race:

"Brutes find out where their Talents lie:
A Bear will not attempt to fly:
A Founder'd Horse will oft-debate,
Before he tries a five-barr'd Gate:
A Dog by Instinct turns aside,
Who sees the Ditch too deep and wide.
But Man we find the only creature,
Who, led by Folly, combats Nature;
Who, when she loudly cries, Forbear,
With Obstinacy fixes there;
And, where his Genius least inelines,
Absurdly bends his whole Designs". 42

Swift chooses advice to a poet as a vehicle for this general satire, and shows infinite contempt for the inadequate poet. At the same time he makes the highest possible claims for poetry in his paradoxical way. The following may be taken as a double irony:

"Not Beggar's Brat, on Bulk begot;
Not Bastard of a Pedlar Scot;
Not Boy brought up to cleaning Shoes,
The Spawn of Bridewell, or the Stews;
Not Infants dropt, the spurious Pledges
Of Gipsies littering under Hedges,
Are so disqualified by Fate
To rise in Church, or Law, or State,
As he, whom Phoebus in his Ire
Hath blasted with poetick Fire."\(^{43}\)

The 'old experienced Sinner' who is giving his advice to the young aspirant to poetry is wise in the worldly ways, and follows them pretending to shape poetry and wit to the world rather than to shape the world by poetry, which is, it is implied, the proper way.

Swift's opinion about poetry is also revealed in his prose masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels*. Speaking about

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the poetry of the Houyhnhnms he observes that their poetry is of superlative excellence by reason of the justness of similes, the minuteness and exactness of the descriptions and the matter:

"Their verses usually contain either some exalted Notions of Friendship and Benevolence, or the Praises of those who were Victors in Races, and other bodily Exercises."

Swift always gave an impression of power and reach of a Gulliver in a Lilliputian world, and we may assume that he was himself not unaware of this. For he once wrote in a letter to Gay on November 20, 1729:

"The world is wider to a Poet than to any other Man, and new Follies and Vices will never be wanting: any more than new fashions. JeBon Dieu the wrong Notion that Matter is exhausted. For as poets in their Greek Name are called Creator, so in one circumstance they resemble the great creator by having an infinite space to work in ...."

Swift's letters to his friends and relatives bring to light, not a little, his view on poetry. They are direct statements and hence authentic and less ambiguous. On 3 May, 1692 Swift wrote his Cousin Thomas whom he had visited at


46 Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 6-11.
Oxford in the previous year. The greater part of this letter is concerned with his problems as a poet, which Swift discusses with a rather self-conscious air. He envies the ease with which Thomas writes verse, for his part he can compose nothing of a sudden, nor write anything easy to be understood. Two hours in the morning, 'the flower of the whole day', he gives over to poetry, but ordinarily he requires an entire week for two stanzas of a Pindaric ode, and when all is done he must alter them a hundred times. He is, he confesses, overfond of his own writings and can re-read them a hundred times with pleasure. But he finds it equally difficult to criticize severely the writings of his friends, for he discovers beauties in their work in proportion to the love he bears them: 'I never read his ['Temple's] writings but I prefer him to all others at present in England, which I suppose is all but a piece of self-love, and the likeness of humors makes one fond of them as if they were ones own'.

Swift's disgust with Cant poets and bad-rhymers that we have come across in his prose and poetical works is also amply revealed in his letters. In one such letter to Miss Jane [dated April 29, 1696 he equates the bad rhymer with a beggar and writes:

"Two strangers, a poet and a beggar, went to cuffs yesterday in this town, which minded me to curse heartily both employments. However, I am glad to see those two traders fall out, because I always heard they had been constant cronies, but what was best of all, the poet got the better, and kicked the gentleman beggar out of doors. This was of great comfort to me, till I heard the victor himself was a most abominable bad rhymer, and as mere a vagabond beggar as the other, which is a very great offence to me, for starving is much too honourable for a blockhead."

Swift is "angry at some bad rhymes and triplets" and suggests in his letter to Alexander Pope dated June 28, 1715, "in your next do not let me have so many unjustifiable rhymes to 'war' and 'gods'."

We have already noticed previously in this chapter Dryden's approval of the use of Alexandrine and triplet rhymes. But Swift was dead against these two devices. His life-long hatred for triplet and Alexandrine also comes out in his letter of April 12, 1735 to Thomas Beach where he repudiates John Dryden for his introduction and use of these forms in the reign of Charles II. On reading the poem of Thomas Beach Swift comments:

49 Ibid., Vol. II, 1911, p. 287.
"I read your poem several times, and showed it to three or four judicious friends, who all approved of it, but agreed with me, it wanted some corrections; upon which I took the number of lines, which are in all two hundred and ninety-nine, the odd number being occasioned by what they call a triplet, which was a vicious way of rhyming, where-with Dryden abounded, and was imitated by all the bad versifiers in Charles the Second's reign. Dryden, though my near relation, is one I have often blamed as well as pitied. He was poor, and in great haste to finish his plays, because by them he chiefly supported his family, and this made him so very uncorrect; he likewise brought in the Alexandrine verse at the end of the triplets."

Giving vent to his own feelings in the concluding lines:

"Sweeping from Butcher Stalls Dung, Guts, and Blood, Drown'd Puppies, stinking sprats, all drench'd in Mud, Dead cats and Turnip-Tops come tumbling down the Flood" of the poem *A Description of a City Shower* Swift writes:

"...I was so angry at these corruptions, that about twenty-four years ago I banished them all by one triplet, with the Alexandrine, upon a very ridiculous subject."}

Swift is ever cautious of the corrupting influences

51 Ibid., Vol. V, p. 162.
of bad poets. Declaring Rochester as his favourite poet, he writes to Pope:

"Take care the bad poets do not outwit you, as they have served the good ones in every age, whom they have provoked to transmit their names to posterity." 52

Swift is ever mindful of his traditional moral duties of a poet like Sidney, Jonson, Dryden or Pope and we get a glimpse of his mind in his letter to Charles Wogan of August 2, 1732:

"I have been only a man of rhymes, and that upon trifles, never having written serious couplets in my life, yet never any without a moral view" 53

and then again in his letter to Alexander Pope on December 2, 1736:

"I had reason to expect from some of your letters, that we were to hope for more Epistles of Morality; and assure you, my acquaintance resent that they have not seen my name at the head of one. The subject of such Epistles are more useful to the public, by your manner of handling them, than any of all your writings; and although in so profligate a world as ours they may possibly not much mend our manners, yet posterity will enjoy the benefit, whenever a court happens to have the least relish for virtue and religion." 54


"Believe it, Men have been the same,
And all the Golden Age, is but a Dream."

Swift offers his opinion in his letter to Viscount Bolingbroke on April 5, 1729:

"I have read my friend Congreve's verses to Lord Cobham, which end with a vile and false moral, and I remember is not in Horace to Tibullus, which he imitates, 'that all times are equally virtuous and vicious' wherein he differs from all Poets, Philosophers, and Christians that ever writ. It is more probable that there may be an equal quantity of virtues always in the world, but sometimes there may be a peck of it in Asia, and hardly a thimble-full in Europe, But if there be no virtue, there is abundance of sincerity; for I will venture all I am worth, that there is not one human creature in power who will not be modest enough to confess that he proceeds wholly upon a principle of corruption. I say this because I have a scheme in spite of your notions, to govern England upon the principles of virtue, and when the nation is ripe for it, I desire you will send for me. I have learned this by living like a Hermit, by which I am got backward about nineteen hundred years in the Aera of the world, and begin to wonder at the wickedness of men. I dine alone upon half a dish of meat, mix water with my wine, walk ten miles a day, and
The letter of August 2, 1732 to Charles Wagon also reveals Swift's admiration for Milton. Although some commentators have assumed that Swift had only a superficial knowledge of Milton and Harold Williams has doubted the extent of Swift's knowledge of Milton, it is evident from his annotation of Milton's works for Stella, his Letter to a Young Poet, and his remarks on Burnet's History of his Own Times that Swift held Milton in high esteem, and was an ardent student of his works.

The same letter, which has been dated July/August 2, 1732, in Harold Williams' Edition of The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, also bears testimony to his love and admiration for Milton and abhorrence of descriptive Romantic trend in poetry. It reads:

"As to your Blank-verse, it hath too often fallen into the same vile Hands of late. One Thomson, a Scotsman, has succeeded the best in that way, in four poems he has writ on the four seasons. Viz. The Season Yet I am not over fond of them, because they are all Descriptions, and nothing is doing, whereas Milton engages me in actions of the highest importance ......."

Swift's letter of August 20, 1733 to Earl of Orrery supporting Mrs. Barber's poems gives us an inkling of his mind about poetry. He opens that the poetry of Mrs. Barber "generally contains something new and useful, tending to the Reproof of some vice or Folly, or recommending some virtue. She never writes on a subject with general unconnected Topics, but always with a scheme and Method driving to some particular end; wherein many writers in Verse, and of some Distinction, are so often known to fail. In short, she seemeth to have a true poetical Genius, better cultivated than could well be expected, either from her sex, or the scene she hath acted in, as the wife of a citizen. Poetry hath only been her favourite amusement; for which she hath one Qualification, that I wish all good poets possess'd a share of, I mean, that she is ready to take Advice, and submit to have her verses corrected, by those who are generally allowed to be the best Judges." 57

Swift's poetry always undergoes close scrutiny at the hands of the poet himself. He is equally critical while examining others' poems submitted to him for scrutiny. He was adjudged "the best and most correct writer of English that hath ever yet appeared as an author" 58 by Dr. William King.

57 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 192.
the published of Swift's poem Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift.

In Swift's opinion "False spelling is onely excusable in a chamber-maid for I would not pardon it in any of your waiting women".

As a poet Swift tries to be correct in all respects and advises other poets to be so. He distrusts every ambiguous cloud of significance and insists on culture to improve the quality of poetry. Writing about Sir William Fownes, Swift notes:

"He had indeed a very good natural understanding, nor wanted a talent for poetry; but his education denied him learning, for he knew no other language except his own."

This insatiable craving for correctness leads him to write to Charles Ford on August 7, 1714:

"I will bring you my Poem myself - when I return from Ireland. It is not yet sufficiently corrected to my mind, tho' I have labored it much."


On reading the Dunciad he does not fail to give some practical and valuable suggestions to Alexander Pope in his letter dated July 16, 1728:

"The Notes I could wish to be very large, in what relates to the persons concerned; for I have long observed that twenty miles from London no body understands hints, initial letters, or town-facts and passages; and in a few years not even those who live in London. I would have the names of these scriblers printed indexically at the beginning or end of the poem, with an account of their works, for the reader to refer to. I would have all the parodies (as they are called) referred to the authors they imitate .... Again I insist, you must have your Asterisks filled up with some real names of real Dunces" 62.

Swift's zeal for correctness, as well as his preference or disgust against certain words or usage can be best illustrated from his same letter to Thomas Beach dated Dublin, April 12, 1735. In making emendations in a poem Swift writes:

"I abhor those hast's and wot's, etc. etc. they are detestable in verse as well as prose" 63. He cannot "suffer an ill rhyme, such as seen and scene" 64. He wants to replace whilst

64 Ibid., p.163.
with while and reascend with ascend, and to clip one of the three wings of the triplet. He thinks the word that in that dares has spoilt the whole line and hence should yield place to the right word, who. Again, he is of the opinion that the word does should be avoided as a mere expletive. With this letter we may read his letter to John Gay and the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry of December 1, 1731 where Swift describes his own technique of writing the Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift:

"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 eneynes and Detractors . . . . . .65

In this way we can understand from Swift's letters that he "cannot write anything easy to be understood though it were but in praise of an Old Shoe"66 and that he was apprehensive of the declining trend in the standard of poetry when he writes:

"The town is run mad after a new opera. Poetry and good sense are dwindling like echo with repetition and voice. Oric! Dennis Vows to G -


these operas will be the ruin of the nation, and brings example from antiquity to prove it." 67

The same apprehension is noticeable again in A Proposal for Correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English Tongue dated February 22, 1711-12 where he writes:

"There is another set of men, who have contributed very much to the spoiling of the English tongue. I mean the poets from the time of the Restoration. These gentlemen, although they could not be insensible how much our language was already overstocked with monosyllables, yet, to save time and pains, introduced that barbarous custom of abbreviating words, to fit them to the measure of their verses, and this they have frequently done so very injudiciously, as to form such harsh unharmonious sounds, that none but a northern ear could endure. They have joined the most obdurate consonants with one intervening vowel, only to shorten a syllable; and their taste in time became so depressed that what was at first a poetical license, not to be justified, they made their choice, alleging, that the words pronounced at length sounded faint and languid. This was a pretence to take up the same custom in prose; so that most of the books we see now-a-days, are full of those mangelings and abbreviations"

He cites the instances of

"the words, drudg'd, disturb'd, rebuk'd, fledg'd and a thousand others every where to be met with in

prose as well as verse, where, by leaving out a vowel to save a syllable, we form so jarring a sound.68

Thus from a study of Swift's views on poetry as revealed in his own poems, letters, and miscellaneous writings, one cannot fail to observe certain common features standing out in prominence. We notice that Swift is not interested in daring flights of fancy to which new meanings may be attributed. He distrusts ambiguity of thought and expression. He is content with the old meanings and angry that they are denied; poetry is a way of maintaining their force. He favours the study of classical and ancient literature and shows extraordinary zeal for correctness in all his writings. He shows his dislike of the scant and insufficient poets - the Grub-Street dwellers. He, like his fellow poets of the age, is in favour of a moral tone in poetry guiding which, he thinks, should be one of the most important factors in a successful poet. He does not like his poems to be full of metaphorical expressions which Coleridge took to be the hallmark of poetry. His poems contain matter of fact realism and he urges the poets to see things as they are, toeing in the Augustan tradition. But his uncompromisingly hostile view

of the poetic imagination was not in keeping with the characteristic attitude of his age. He is in favour of colloquial language, and his poems, almost bereft of passion, are more products of the head than of the heart.

He did his best, deliberately stripping his poems of all pretentiousness. His style in poetry, as he professed and as we will find in succeeding chapters, is less ornate than that of any other poet of his age. For example, Dryden often followed his own view that:

"Poetry requires ornament; and that is not be had from our Old Teuton monosyllables; therefore, if I find any elegant word in a classic author, I propose it to be naturalised by using it myself...." 69

Swift's rhymes are infinitely more varied and original. The little that he owes technically is to Butler rather than to Dryden, whom the rest of his age followed almost slavishly. In his endeavour to adopt colloquial language of the people he tried to imitate the language of the laity, and this did not irritate his countrymen because they knew the peculiar bent of Swift's mind.

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