

The Troubled Reader of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*

Separating the voice of author Jonathan Swift and that of the speaker in *A Modest Proposal* is a problematic task for the reader. Swift seemingly conflates the two, carefully rebalancing the rhetorical scales when one voice begins to overshadow the other. The ongoing debate concerning a “precise point in the text where...the author’s meaning diverges from the narrator’s” (Phiddian 606) is set to continue ad infinitum as long as the notion of an actual “precise point” persists. The narrator’s tone during the opening paragraphs of the *Proposal* is nearly as lunatic and transparent as it is during the following arguments for the cannibalistic consumption of the Irish poor. Swift is undoubtedly present behind the scenes of the *Proposal* – when referring to his own sincere proposals that others have discarded, for example – but the satire operates more like a marionette than a mask. Swift speaks through the narrator of the text, sometimes loudly and sometimes quietly, but the narrator always dwells on the former side of the divide between the insane and the realistic, the “eaters and the eaten in this world” (Phiddian 618). I argue that the pressing and truly challenging complication is not the location of this “precise point” but more how the *reader* occupies “this world.”

It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms. These mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants, who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country... (Swift 417)

So begins the increasingly gruesome satire, and so begins Swift's (initially) subtle manipulation of the reader. This essay largely ignores the differences between a twenty-first century reader and one from the eighteenth century, presumably closer to the depressing situation described in the *Proposal*. I will assume, however, due to similar situations existing in the world today and the narrator's vivid descriptions of the Irish poor, that all readers become involved in the *Proposal*. At the very least, the narrator suggests that all readers would benefit from the execution of his plan, for who would argue against the solution to such a problem? Already the reader is in a corner. Thus, "those who walk through this great town [and] see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors crowded" represent all readers, whether they are eighteenth century observers or contemporary interpreters.

Is a passive agreement with the speaker genuine, or the product of his language? The first adjective of the *Proposal*, "melancholy," sets a tone for the piece, and the reader reacts accordingly. The narrator declares, rather than implies, that the situation is "melancholy." Indeed, the reader processes this adjective and adopts a corresponding frame of mind before knowing anything about the scenario that supposedly warrants its use. Of course, few readers would argue that the sight of poor children is not a melancholy one. Regardless, the rhetoric of the narrator remains noteworthy and Swift emerges as the satiric orchestrator behind the scenes; one must question with what degree of sincerity the *narrator* employs "melancholy." Is this sight really a melancholy one or is it more of an annoyance for the gentry? "Melancholy" brings with it connotations of sensitivity and emotion, but the children are portrayed more as physical burdens than tearjerkers: overly numerous pests bogging down their mothers and congesting the infrastructure, always "importuning every passenger." Moreover, the "melancholy object" is not

the toddling population but rather the visual image of them, the space they occupy, the moment when “those who walk through this great town...*see* the streets” (italics mine). The children become visual targets before the narrator introduces them as gustatory ones. The twisted speaker suggests that they need only appeal to the senses and not to sensibility.

The projector treats children like objects on multiple levels. The abstract of the *Proposal* is to find a “fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth” (417) – just as one might find a similar method of extracting resources. While the speaker’s instability is evident throughout the text, the details and vividness of his imagery certainly gain momentum as the text unfolds. The speaker gradually raises the curtain, so to speak, giving the reader one small glimpse at a time of his scheme. He elaborates: the children shall “contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing, of many thousands” (418). The actual meaning of these words remains obscure at this point, but the speaker’s language develops his insensitive persona. Instead of saying, for instance, that the children will find rewarding employment or participate in public projects, etc., he envisions them as objectified supplements to a consuming society. As the speaker laboriously introduces his scheme, he nearly laments the fact that “a boy or a girl before twelve years old is no *saleable commodity*” (italics mine) (418). Further research indicates that plugging people into economic systems is not such an uncommon practice for the period. Just like “their comic counterparts,” *A Modest Proposal* serving as a quintessential example, serious projectors “do not observe any sharp distinction between human and material resources, [while]...they also mount an appeal to the venal or selfish interests of their readers” (Ward 288). This is nearly an understatement. The speaker of the *Proposal* consciously sets up the reader through a desensitizing process before unveiling the

gruesome plan. Swift speaks strongly through the narrator here, satirizing both the presumably sane projectors in the real world and their readership either gullible or morally depraved enough to listen. That the speaker goes to the trouble to find out when children become saleable commodities creates a foundation for the oncoming “parody of the jargon of the social science then called political arithmetic” (Yankauer 985). Of course, Swift expects his readers not to believe the speaker in the *Proposal* – although I doubt that he was surprised to find that more than a few people accepted it as valid – but the speaker harbors the exact opposite set of expectations. He “can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised against this proposal” (421) and, “[a]s he sees it, the material facts of the situation preclude any course of action other than the one he has outlined” (Phiddian 615). Swift likely hopes that the reader can think of a seemingly infinite number of objections, and the reader undoubtedly feels – and *revels in feeling* – the same way. Nevertheless, the reader cannot help but continue his or her silent interpretation and is thus quietly grouped with the “eaters” in society – not just for reading and understanding the text’s multiple references to the upper class, but also for simply letting the speaker have his entire say. The relationship of Swift and the persona is no longer a back-and-forth, mask-on, mask-off affair (although I have argued against such a simple understanding in the first place) but instead a synchronized binary; while “Swift’s projector was recommending his own unique manner of dressing Ireland’s children to perfection[,] Swift was simultaneously dressing down his reader, chastising his inhumanity” (Bengels 15).

The level of detail increases exponentially, and Swift pushes his speaker to the line even of fictional credibility, carefully planning for the speaker to acclimate the reader. When the former plainly states his intentions, the latter is hardly taken aback, because the first explicit

mention of cannibalism, although striking, is far from the first example of the speaker's instability. I suspect that a hypothetical *Proposal* opening with the declaration that "a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled..." (418) would elicit a much more hostile, disgusted reaction from its audience. In pushing the limits of what the reader can process without walking away from the text altogether, Swift takes advantage of the innate, perverse curiosity that pervades humankind. Readers delve into this part of the *Proposal* like the cliché watchers of a train wreck, unable to turn away from the "irresistible excess" of the image (Phiddian 603). Swift has his speaker stay between the lines – disgusting enough to appeal to this innate curiosity yet restrained enough to avoid going overboard and exposing the *Proposal* as nothing more than an opportunity to describe horrific, visceral acts; it is at once "grotesque without being carnivalesque" (Phiddian 603). Such a "recurrent and vicious pattern of imagery" (Bengels 13) further develops the speaker's insensitivity and heightens the parody of other projectors whose suggestions result in a similar, albeit less directly violent, consumption of the Irish poor.

As an integral aspect of his materialistic views on children, the speaker goes to great lengths to describe the forms in which infants will appear on the table. For instance, a given infant "will make two dishes at an entertainments for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter" (419). Culinary knowledge places the narrator, and the reader able to identify with such gustatory habits, among the "eaters" in society. Eating is not only a literal, but, and here I see Swift pulling the strings and making earnest social commentary, also a symbolic activity. The "landlords," for example, "have already

devoured most of the parents” (419) of Irish children via monetary exploitation, economic pressure, etc. Yet the reader, in part from knowing that the *Proposal* is a satire, does not want to belong to the “eaters.” Perhaps the ultimate ensnarement of readers revolves around their seemingly requisite protest against cannibalism. That is, Swift’s “undressing” of readers drives them to a proud despair in which they must proclaim their refusal of human flesh. To reach such a low point speaks to Swift’s effectiveness in “dressing down his reader” and simultaneously “chastising his inhumanity.” Readers feel compelled to respond to the text, to defend their ethics, to exclude themselves from their twisted antitheses: “gentlemen of fortune in the kingdom who have any refinement in taste” (Swift 420). Unsurprisingly, research indicates that the *Proposal* was marketed “to a readership that...was struggling to reconcile a taste for excessive consumption with a compassionate urge to help those less fortunate than themselves” (Ward 284). At this point in the text, the reader is on shaky ground, caught between an enjoyable lifestyle of consumption (where food and clothing specifically are status symbols) and pressure to stand against a biting satire of their social habits. It is an unfortunate testament to *A Modest Proposal* that upper class individuals in today’s world find themselves in similar situations.

The reader feels especially inclined to stand against the speaker’s cannibalistic urgings given his lunatic tone; also recall that Swift satirizes other projectors in that some of their schemes are hardly less inhumane. In fact, “the line between genuine and cod proposals was so fine that when a scheme by Swift offering to reduce the national debt was reprinted in the 1735 edition of his works, it carried a warning that ‘The Reader will perceive the following Treatise to be altogether Ironical’” (Ward 288). These two voices, one that of the insane, the other that of the statistician, fuse together nicely even before the speaker describes the nutritional benefits of

infants. In short, he begins the calculations before revealing the scheme. The role of the number in the *Proposal* is twofold. As noted, numbers can represent humans and vice-versa, but they also become the playthings of the projector, figures that he points to as evidence of his intellect and his bird's eye view of Ireland. His first calculation is his most encompassing; he reckons the "number of souls in this kingdom being...one million and a half" (418). The reader can accept this figure; its accuracy is not as important as following calculations. Noted is the narrator's confidence in his scheme and in its reception. In this case, he rigidly maintains that his own proposal is free of error, stating, "I have always found [other projectors] grossly mistaken in their computation" (418). Considering that these claims precede the scheme itself, they set up expectations for the reader. If the calculations turn out to be correct, then the speaker earns additional legitimacy; if wrong, then the speaker's persona becomes all the less sane. He informs the reader that a "fore or hind quarter" will suffice for a family dinner and that "one thousand families in this city would be constant customers for infants' flesh" (421). A sufficient amount of text in the *Proposal* separates these two statements, but judging by the constant reassurance that the speaker is confident in his calculations, it seems doubtful that he has lost track of his numbers. Rather, the careful reader assumes that Swift has deliberately created an inaccurate persona considering that "[w]ith each family eating one child every four days, 91.25 infants each year are consumed. The thousand families in Dublin would, then, actually consume 91,250 infants annually, not twenty thousand, as computed by the modest proposer" (Hozeski 54). Such a large error cannot be written off. Rather, it supports the notion that the "melancholy object" of the Irish represents a burden to the upper class, for the discrepancy between the speaker's arithmetic and the actual figure signal the eventual extinction of the Irish altogether, let alone the

poor. The solution to the problem is thus not one in the typical sense of the word, but instead a horrifyingly systematic cleansing.

Between pushing the limits of imagery – “I rather recommend buying the children alive and dressing them hot from the knife” (419) – and quietly promoting genocide, the essay is “simply too aggressively alienating to be successful as hoax” and consequently fails to “lull us into a false sense of security” (Phiddian 605). Swift could certainly have taken advantage of the “[fine] line between genuine and cod proposals” to create a satire believable enough to capture the imagination of the public. But doing so would not implicate readers to the extent of carefully introducing them to a truly revolting proposal, which is structured in such a way that it taps the perverse, inviting the collective curiosity, and finally grouping readers with the “eaters” just when it is too late for them to throw down the text in disgust. The closest similarity between Swift and the created persona is the advocacy for change; the latter runs away with the idea and never looks back.



Works Cited

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