Toward a participatory Rhetoric: Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal

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Abstract
This essay is a literary analysis of the special form of satire Swift invented for *A Modest Proposal*. Some of Swift's more conventional classical figures of speech have already been noted, though more or less in isolation to one another as well as to larger designs and aesthetic aims. Swift's genius in *A Modest Proposal* is to create a speaker whose monologue keeps two distinct styles operational at all times. The style of which the speaker is aware is constantly opposed by covert and innovative verbal and grammatical techniques which the proposer sets in motion but of which he remains unaware, which slowly but surely turns a reader's sympathies against him and against those who share his callous social views. By playing his proposer's classical rhetoric against Swift's own invention of a covert, more powerful kind of rhetoric, two antithetical points of view are embodied in one monologue. The proposer never seems to understand that the monologue Swift has given him is actually a dialogue that subverts him at every turn. Once our model of Swift's unique form of dual style satire has been built, we can see how similar it is to Michelangelo Antonioni's film satire, *Blow-up*. Both embody two antithetical styles that allow the more imaginative and positive point of view to move the reader. In both art forms the message is positive rather than negative. In my own classes on Swift, I assign the practical task of using our model as a writing program. Swift's kind of satire can be used with modern subject matter and addressed to a modern audience. In discussing the real problems writers or directors of this kind of satire must face, and considering solutions, students better understand Swift's literary achievement.

Part I

Students of *A Modest Proposal* have commonly seen Swift leading his unsuspecting reader into a trap sprung, at the earliest, by the proposer's proud reference to himself as a "projector" (Louis Landa has pointed out the pejorative connotations of this word for an eighteenth century audience\(^1\)) or, at the latest, by the presentation of the proposal, beginning in paragraph eight with the words, "I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts." A reader of the *Modest Proposal*, however, might have been initiated into

the satirical purpose of the work and warned away from any form of identification with
the proposer long before either of these points had been reached. From the first sentence
of the Proposal, in fact, the proposer's grammar and rhetoric begin to turn the reader's
sympathies against him: "It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great
town, or travel in the county, 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."

The construction of this opening sentence is a short main clause ("It is a melancholy
object") followed by long subordinate clauses heavily modified by phrases. The fact that
Swift uses a complex sentence of this type does not in itself tell us very much, but a study
of how its rhetoric is related to its grammar may suggest why Swift so often repeats this
sentence structure in the Modest Proposal. Where do the abstract and general words
occur in the sentence? The word "object," an abstract noun, appears in the main clause.
The more concrete and specific nouns fall in the subordinate clauses: "streets," "roads,"
"cabin-doors," "beggars," "three, four, or six children," "all in rags." Swift's more active
and colorful verbs, too, like "importuning," "walk," "see," "travel," are found in the
subordinate part of the sentence: a form of "to be" is used in his main clause. And the
only emphatic rhetorical figures in the sentence are located in the subordinate part:
compounding in triplets ("the streets, the roads and cabin-doors;" "three, four, or six
children"). The first triplet emphasizes the present extent of the poverty in town and
country, while the second emphasizes the large number of people affected in the present
and in the future. It is important to see that although the reader feels this poverty to be sad
and shocking, Swift's narrator uses no words that denote the feelings of the poor. He
reserves, on the contrary, an emotional adjective like "melancholy" to express the
feelings of those who, like the narrator, must observe the poor, those "objects." In other
words, although the narrator details vividly and with rhetorical emphasis the grinding
poverty, he reserves the only emotion in the sentence for himself and members of his
class. Swift is, in short, playing his rhetoric against the narrator's point of view and
sentence structure, writing a sentence that contains two points of view working in
opposite directions. The effect of two opposing points of view is to alienate the reader,
perhaps unconsciously, from a narrator who can view with "melancholy" detachment a
subject that Swift has directed us, rhetorically, to see in a much less detached way.

If a modern writer were to construct a sentence like the following, in which
grammatical construction and point of view compete with an arresting vocabulary of
specific and concrete words and an emphatic rhetoric, she would achieve a two-faced
effect similar to that of Swift's first sentence: "It is indeed a distressing experience for a
tourist who travels to New York on the railroad, to see all those crowded uptown
tenements with curtainless windows, where in doorways, streets, and alleys, idly sit
hundreds of dirty, half-dressed and hollow-eyed children." All the emphatic
compounding, all the specific, concrete, and arresting language could be meant to
program a reader to feel unconsciously annoyed or uncomfortable with the cool
detachment of a narrator whose values, reflected in his sentence structure and main
clause, seem upside down. The reader's heart is not in the same part of the sentence as the
narrator's. If we want our readers to sympathize with the narrator's point of view we could construct a sentence like the following, where the emphatic figures and arresting language are weighed in on the side of the narrator in the main clause, while leaving abstract the poverty in the subordinate clauses: "My wife and I have invested forty hard years, and grown old, sad, and worn, in efforts that we hoped would raise the standard of living of those who lack the basic requirements of subsistence."

From his very first sentence, then, Swift has created a narrator with whom he does not seem to agree, and with whom he evidently does not want a reader to agree either. That the rhetorical pattern of this first sentence is not accidental might be shown by a look at other similar sentences in the Proposal, each of which repeats the rhetorical pattern of a main clause concerned with the feelings of the rich and an antithetical subordinate clause filled with detail that moves the reader but is evidently unfelt by the narrator. Paragraph nineteen, for example, contains two sentences, both constructed on this same pattern:

Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern about that vast number of poor people, who are aged, diseased, or maimed, and I have been desired to employ my thoughts what course may be taken to ease the nation of so grievous an encumbrance. But I am not in the least pain upon that matter, because it is very well known that they are every day dying, and rotting, by cold, and famine, and filth, and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected.

Again the emotional words apply not to the poor but to the proposer and his friends. Yet as if to contradict the narrator's point of view, the subordinate clauses contain arresting detail, concrete nouns, strong verbs, emphatic compounding. In addition to the compounding in triplets, Swift here uses for emphasis the compounding of words which are each preceded by a conjunction (polysyndeton): "dying, and rotting, by cold, and famine, and filth, and vermin." He further compounds the misery of the poor by poetic alliteration: "filth," "famine," "vermin."

In these examples of Swift's sentences, the contrast between the main clause (reflecting the detached interest in poverty that the proposer is trying to share with his audience), and the subordinate clauses (containing stylistically emphasized and concrete realities of poverty) give offense to the reader. We object to the callousness of a narrator who subordinates the concrete and compounded plight of the poor to the abstract concerns and subjective feelings of gentlemen like himself. Swift's style operates effectively on two levels: that of the proposer and his audience, whom he addresses frankly and sincerely as honest equals, and the level that reveals (and condemns) the proposer's selfish feelings. As readers, we are invited to share this second, or covert points of view, and not the narrator's, or overt point of view. In Swift's very first sentence the direction of sympathy and interest of the audience part company with the narrator, never again to merge. This first sentence might be considered a microcosm of the rhetoric.
of the whole Proposal. From the beginning, and throughout A Modest Proposal, Swift disengages us from the overt narrator by providing, through his covert point of view, a set of values upon which the reader can base her judgment of the values shared by the narrator and people like him.

Since it will probably be easier to examine the techniques Swift uses to set up and control his overt point of view, let us first consider this more conventional part of Swift's rhetoric. Then we can turn to the more unusual, because implicit, techniques Swift uses to set up a covert point of view that discredits the proposer and offers an alternative at every turn to his proposal.

Swift's Overt Speaker

In establishing his overt speaker, Swift uses mainly classical rhetoric. I recognize that most teachers of Swift's Proposal already know this side of his art, and so I shall give only a brief account, to show as I proceed precisely how Swift's classical rhetoric is related to his less conventional rhetorical techniques, and what the relation of both kinds of rhetoric is to his larger purposes and goals.

Most of the proposer's sentences are complex or compound-complex; a large number are interrupted, sometimes by parentheses, sometimes by the insertion of a gratuitous detail or the addition of an idea: e.g. "I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child (in which list I reckon all cottagers, labourers, and four-fifths of the farmers) to be about two shillings per annum, rags included, and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, as I have said, will make four dishes of excellent nutritive meat, when he hath only some particular friend or his own family to dine with him." Such sentence structures imply painstaking effort and careful control on the part of the user. Swift could be employing sentence structure and grammar to characterize his proposer as an extremely diligent, painstaking planner, a bit of characterization which would be consistent with the proposer's assertions that he has "maturely" weighed his subject for many years, or with his careful use of mathematical terms such as "reckoned upon a medium," "computed the charge," "I calculate." The figure of speech on which the proposer relies heavily, litotes, further suggests his cautious character: "neither indeed can I deny," "it is not improbable that," "I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass. ..."

The proposer's vocabulary is sober, businesslike, and painfully precise, conforming to what we have already learned of his character. He is careful several times to specify in his calculations the more scientifically modern "solar year," which is a silly twenty minutes shorter than the older astral year, based on the geocentric theory and measuring the revolutions of the sun relative to the fixed stars. He remembers to include small, painstaking details such as the cost of raising the average one-year-old at two shillings,
"rags included," and the market price of twelve-year-olds, "three pounds, or three pounds and half a crown at most on the Exchange."

The proposer uses the vocabulary of animal husbandry ("a child just dropped from its dam"); it is just a step for him to go from seeing the Irish poor as animals to seeing them as meat. Along with the vocabulary of agricultural economics the proposer uses the jargon of political arithmetic: "Supposing that one thousand families in this city would be constant customers for infants flesh, besides others who might have it at merry meetings I compute that Dublin would take off annually about twenty thousand carcasses, and the rest of the kingdom-(where probably they will be sold somewhat cheaper) the remaining eighty thousand." He has turned people into animals, then meat, and from meat, logically, into tonnage worth a price per pound. The narrator's specialized vocabularies define him as a wide-ranging social scientist, at home in business, political economy, agricultural economics, statistics—as scrupulously careful and seemingly expert a social planner as can be.

The organization of the proposal shows a similar careful contriving of parts to fit an obviously premeditated formal pattern. Paragraphs one to seven (exordium) state the nature of the problem and the intention or purpose of the present proposal. Paragraphs eight through sixteen (narratio), beginning "I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts," contain the statement of the proposal itself. A formal digression that considers and rejects one possible refinement on the proposal follows in paragraphs seventeen through nineteen; it ends with the first sentence of paragraph twenty ("I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my subject"). Paragraphs twenty through twenty-eight (confirmatio),—beginning with the second sentence of paragraph twenty ("I think the advantages by the proposal I have made are obvious and many"), followed by each subsequent paragraph beginning "first," "secondly," "thirdly," etc., enumerate these advantages in order to prove the worth of the proposal. Paragraphs twenty-nine and thirty (refutatio), beginning "I can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it be urged that..." attempt to refute possible objections to the proposal. The final three paragraphs (peroratio) summarize the strongest arguments and disclaim any "personal interest in endeavouring to promote this necessary work...." These divisions correspond dutifully to the conventional five-part organization taught in the classical rhetoric textbooks of Swift's day.

The narrator's conventional organization has been noted by scholars, although I do not think that anyone has regarded his organization as a method of characterizing the proposer. The noticeably careful and mechanical manner in which the divisions of A Modest Proposal correspond to the conventional organization taught in the classical

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rhetoric textbooks may be a way of characterizing the proposer as a diligent, conventional, and unimaginative writer. (A modern student who slavishly follows a rigid beginning-middle-end organization as taught in some composition courses similarly characterizes himself.)

When we turn to the covert organization of the Proposal, the characterizing function of the formal organization should become apparent; certainly it complements the pattern of cautious premeditation that we have seen in the proposer's character through his sentence structure and vocabulary. Perhaps Swift means the proposer's rational stylistic traits to form a contrast with his outrageous proposal. By playing the proposer's careful control against the almost inconceivable perversion of his scheme, Swift may be able to prevent his readers from simply laughing at the ridiculousness of the proposal; instead they will have to consider just what perverted values and assumptions would allow such a diligent, thoughtful, and conventional man to propose so perverse a plan.

When we dismiss a Hitler, for example, as a madman, we do not have to try to understand the warped assumptions and values that led to his acts. Swift makes it difficult for us to discount his proposer as a lunatic, or even to explain him away as a sadist who enjoys cruelty for its own sake; in fact, he carefully introduces evidence that the proposer is not a particularly vicious individual. Cruelty, he tells us, is his "strongest objection against any project, howsoever well intended." Swift even pointedly shows us how sympathetic the proposer feels towards babies murdered by their unwed mothers (an expedient forced upon them by extreme poverty), when he calls attention to "that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas, too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, I doubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast."

Since the proposer has taken care to establish his ethos and insinuate his expert credentials, why does Swift allow him to make such gross errors as his reference to Rabelais as a "grave author," or his acceptance of "Psalmanazar" as a serious student of Formosan customs? The proposer is evidently intended to seem too literal-minded to recognize either humor or hoax. Swift gives the proposer these and many other moments of weak-mindedness, obvious to Swift's audience, when he unwittingly throws away his credentials as an authority. He tries, for instance, to impress us by his international friendships with important men of affairs, like that "very knowing American of my acquaintance in London." Any favorable impression is dispelled when this friend turns out to be a cannibal-connoisseur, whose palate has become a reliable judge of human flesh. In short, Swift makes sure that almost every device the proposer uses to establish his good character fails, causing the audience to recoil from the narrator.

Nor are these the only instances where we can see Swift discrediting the narrator's point of view. The proposer uses, as I have noted, poetic alliteration of "famine," "filth," and "vermin" to describe the sufferings of the poor; later he pictures the fifteen-year-old girl, first crucified, then sold to the court in "joints from the gibbet." The proposer seems
not to realize that his playfully detached alliteration of horrors increases the reader's horror of him and his proposal. But if the proposer is not in control of the reader's feelings, who is?

**Swift's Creation of a Covert Point of View to Subvert His Proposer**

Dialogue is the most conventional method of handling two different points of view; to sustain two antithetical points of view in a monologue requires the invention of rhetorical devices that must be unconventional. Almost all the techniques of the covert point of view are more or less unconventional emotion-producing devices, some of which seem 'to be original with Swift. His inappropriate use of alliteration is the most minor instance of Swift's use of the covert point of view to manipulate feelings that the overt proposer has engendered by accident and let go by default.

Four distinct kinds of verbal irony Swift often employs result from a similar clash of overt and covert points of view. The first of these four types, a kind of cliche-image, involves the use of a cliche by the proposer, part of which returns to life for the reader as an uncomfortable sense impression, turning him against the proposer. Consider what happens to the word "figure" in the phrase "a well-grown, fat yearling child, which roasted whole will make a considerable figure at a Lord Mayor's feast." The proposer's use of the cliche "make (cut) a considerable figure" when the "figure" is not a guest but the entree brings the overtly colorless word "figure" to felt life in the covert point of view, as the reader visualizes a crisp and burnt figure of a little child, "roasted whole," with perhaps an apple in its mouth. The audience is forced to feel the image rather than accept the proposer's cliche as a colorless idiom. This possibility of a cliche turning into a felt image was realized recently by Mrs. Philip Blaiberg over international TV when reporters asked her on the night of the operation how her husband had reacted when he was first told that he was to receive one of the world's first heart transplants. "I want it with all my heart," she reported he had said. And then, as the cliche came to life for her, added nervously, "and - uh soul."

A second kind of verbal irony results from the proposer's use in the overtly material sense of words that have, covertly, moral meanings. In this group we find his frequent use of "poor people," and "instead of being a charge upon their parents or the parish," "charge" meaning overtly- "expense," covertly "moral responsibility." Another kind of verbal irony is secured by the use of words that have literal meanings to the proposer, but that flower covertly into metaphor: "butchers will not be wanting," for instance. Still another technique involves the proposer's use of words whose meanings are warped out of all recognition by the contexts in which they appear: "I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child." To the proposer, a "gentleman" is evidently a not ungenerous cannibal, and a "good" child is a dead but tasty one. And observe the twist given to "thrift" in the following: "those who are more
thifty... may flay the carcass." Throughout the proposal the covert point of view criticizes the proposer's language, whenever Swift puts into the context of cannibalism words like "good table," "wholesome food," "modest," "practical," that ordinarily connote decent middle-class values. The proposer hangs his words to parallel his warped values, while with the covert point of view Swift shows the reader the shocking perversions being institutionalized when a "thrifty gentleman" has come to mean an ungentleman who literally "skins" the poor. Of course there are many other examples of each of these techniques.

We have seen Swift counter the narrator's overt point of view by covert means in the construction and rhetoric of some sentences, the development of a flawed ethos, and various kinds of verbal irony. Less obvious, but even more controlling than these means is Swift's use of a covert organization for the entire Proposal. Overtly, the narrator organizes in an unimaginative fashion, dutifully following the textbook models. Covertly, Swift is using a far more imaginative organization to guide the audience to his system of positive values. To discover this we might begin by noticing reiterated word groups and their relation to one another and to Swift's larger goals and purposes in A Modest Proposal.

Any reader of the Proposal will notice that certain words appear over and over again in conjunction. Among these we find reiterated juxtapositions of words having to do with animal husbandry or political arithmetic, which we expect from the proposer, with words having to do with man defined as a spiritual being, which we might not expect from the proposer: "The number of souls in Ireland being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couples whose wives are breeders, from which number I subtract thirty thousand couples who are able to maintain their own children...". Since the narrator is identifying human couples as animals whose only significance is that they may be breeders, he is working against his overt purpose in calling attention to the spiritual definition of man ("souls"), and to the bonds of family ("wives," "own children"), using terms that rivet our attention on people as individual souls and as husbands, wives, and families.

One particular word group occurs in almost every paragraph of the Proposal: "mother" ("father," "parent") "child" ("infant," "babe"). On the surface this is not at all surprising, since the narrator is talking about mothers selling their children as meat, but we might have expected a clever proposer either to have avoided or to have found some more colorless substitutes for these emotion-laden words that stand universally for a relationship of care, love, and mutual trust. By having the proposer mention frequently the parent-child relationship Swift establishes in the reader's mind a revulsion against the narrator's complete unconcern with this basic natural bond. Other reiterated word groups include "landlord"/"tenant," "kingdom" ("country")/"people." In some sentences the landlord-tenant relation is juxtaposed with the mother-child relationship, for both landlord and mother will profit from the sale of babies: "Thus the Squire will learn to be a good landlord, and grow popular among his tenants, the mother will have eight shillings net profit, and be fit for work until she produces another child."
Why does Swift repeat these word groups and even weave them together? Maybe our
disgust at the perversion of the parent-child relationship is meant to expand to a revulsion
against other, anal-ously perverted, basic legal and political relations. The natural bonds
between a landlord and his tenant and between a kingdom and its citizens, were in Swift’s
time, according to the political and social ideals derived from the assumption of a "Chain
of Being," thought to be very like those of parent and children. Each bond was ideally a
relation of mutual trust and responsibility. Swift transfers his audience's horror at a
perverted family ideal to the perversion of legal and political relations, abstract bonds that
could not in their own right have called up such a strong reaction, being less intimately
ingrained in common human experience.

At one point Swift makes explicit the analogy between the parent-child and the
landlord-tenant perversions (this is also the first place where Swift evidently feels it is
important for the covert point of view to become overt): "I grant that this food will be
somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already
devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children." This sentence
not only makes explicit the landlord-parent analogy, but it is the first place in the Modest
Proposal where Swift uses the idea of devouring people as a metaphor, to indicate that
taking economic advantage is only another kind of cannibalism, such as the narrator has
been proposing literally. This rising to the surface of a voice that is not at all like that of
the overt narrator is another of Swift's techniques that build opposition to his proposer.

Later, with another noticeably metaphorical statement from the literal-minded
proposer, Swift overtly links "devouring," as in the landlord-tenant passage, to the
relations of England and Ireland: the proposer says that his proposal "can incur no danger
in disobliging England. For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, the flesh
being of too tender a consistence to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I
could name a country which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it.

In relating the perversions of parent-child to those of landlord-tenant, kingdom-
people, and England-Ireland, we see Swift organizing an opposing case to that of his
proposer, and organizing it by analogy deep in basic human emotions. And all the while
his proposer has been organizing in a classically conventional, predictable structure, it
was, of course, the analogical organization that must have had the more profound
emotional effect on Swift's contemporaries. Unless we grasp the analogical organization
it is easy to overlook the fact that the Modest Proposal from beginning to end represents
a persuasion of the deepest emotional kind toward a heartfelt restitution of legal, political,
and human rights to the impoverished people of Ireland. His analogical organization may
be Swift's most powerful and pervasive covert means of rallying his readers around a set
of values opposed to those of the overt proposer.

I am aware that I have been suggesting a covert but positive side to Swift's art that is
different from the common emphasis on the negative-destructive elements in his work.
Here, for instance, is F. R. Leavis in his chapter, "The Irony of Swift," in *The Common Pursuit* (London, 1952): "We have, then, in his writings—probably the most remarkable expression of negative feelings and attitudes that literature can offer—the spectacle of creative powers (the paradoxical description seems right) exhibited consistently in negation and rejection" (p. 86). Modern critics', in being able to see only the negative side of Swift's art, may be unconsciously revealing more about the limitations of their own milieu than about Swift's limitations as a writer. It seems hard in our changed world even to recognize the kind of positive values and implications that Swift in the *Modest Proposal* relied on his readers to feel, and understand, and hopefully to act on in order to amend society. I am suggesting in the light of this analysis that Swift's uniqueness and genius as a writer may be in his mastery and inventive control of the positive moral and emotional values and feelings of his contemporary audience.

So successfully has Swift created both an overt and a covert point of view that we might wonder, finally, whether the "proposer and the author are even talking about the same subject. The proposer is suggesting cannibalism as a solution to the economic conditions of Ireland. Swift seems, by means of a covert rhetoric, to be appealing to common sense, common feeling, and common humanity—to be proposing moral regeneration rather than economic reform to counter the perversions of political, social, and economic institutions that have caused human misery in Ireland. The proposer's attitude is reasonable if we accept his assumption that the Irish poor are animals; the covert point of view is emotionally irresistible if we feel that the Irish poor are human.

**Part II**

Before asking students to write their own modern version of a Swiftian satire, it might be well to prove to them immediately and in as lively a way as possible that Swift's basic rhetorical program can be used with different subject matter to produce imaginative satires relevant to the contemporary world. We might even consider the use of a rhetorical program very similar to Swift's in a different medium—the recent film *Blow-up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966).

We have found Swift simultaneously controlling two different points of view in a monologue. The overt point of view is set up and controlled by conventional rhetorical devices; the covert point of view has to be controlled in more unusual ways. Those few who have not seen *Blow-up* can imagine how a movie director might in a film create a certain overt point of view—here, that of a busy fashion photographer. The director might control this point of view by following the photographer around for a day in his life. He might have him, while photographing the passing scene, by chance photograph an act of murder, which he discovers when he develops the roll of film. The director can now use all the devices for creating and sustaining suspense that we expect in conventional detective plots. How, at the same time, without introducing a new plot or "hero," could the director control a very different, even antithetical, point of view? Among the
techniques he might use to establish a covert point of view might be: 1) shifting the movie camera independently of the "hero's" still (static) camera point of view in such a way that the director and not the fashion photographer would decide what to give life to or emphasize, 2) limiting the photographer to black and white while the movie camera photographs in lush, color, 3) frustrating the conventional suspense and detection plot (even frustrating the "hero's" love life), so that the audience would draw back from the frustrated point of view, 4) making the point of view appear stupidly literal-minded or limited, 5) creating an illusion in which the audience but not the fashion-photographer "hero" (until the end) could participate, 6) eliminating completely the overt point of view by making the fashion photographer vanish before our eyes.

But why would a movie director or a writer ever want to set up and control two points of view? Certainly to do so is much harder than simply to control a single point of view. Controlling an overt and covert point of view is a very compact way to mold an audience's mind against a large set of attitudes and assumptions, or even a whole philosophy. Suppose that our movie director has built into his overt point of view certain attitudes and assumptions about art. Let us further suppose that the director characterizes the fashion photographer "hero" as a man who assumes that the purpose of art is to approach reality, that his camera provides a mirror of reality, and that if he blew up a photograph he would discover more and more detail about reality— even, for instance, about a murder that was occurring as he took the picture. Characterization might suggest that the serious work of the fashion photographer away from his job was taking starkly realistic black and white photographs. He might also be shown to be so un-imaginative that for his studio prop he buys a large wooden propellor because to the literal mind "a prop is a prop." We might also have a scene in which his inability to understand non-representational art is shown. Then, by covert means, using the same rhetorical program as Swift's, but with visual techniques, as well, the director could take the point of view away from the fashion photographer and discredit his entire set of assumptions: mainly, that art mirrors reality. His audience might even recognize the complete (except for the "hero") assembled cast of characters, but in different roles, at the beginning and end of the film, suggesting again that this movie's art is not reality but imaginative illusion. Finally, when the director has, through covert direction, wrested control from the limited photographer's overt point of view, the clever audience might feel a peculiar satisfaction in seeing this too limited overt point of view literally diminished and "blown out" by the director, who has proved artistically that art is not reality, but illusion or imagination. The rhetorical program of Blow-up is surprisingly similar to that used in Swift's Modest Proposal, even though the subject matter, media, and some of the techniques are different.

With this analogy of the director in mind, let us return to the writer. A satirist controlling two opposing points of view can draw together a number of disparate attitudes and assumptions, and use these to activate and control the overt point of view of his narrator who, while he thinks he controls us, is bit by bit discredited by a more powerful covert point of view. Attitudes and assumptions that we might otherwise have
to argue individually can thus be efficiently and compactly organized around the character of the overt narrator. What could have been, in Swift's *Modest Proposal*, a disparate group of abstract propositions (i.e. "Economics is more important than people," "Any means to reduce the threat of Catholicism is justified," "Ireland exists for the benefit of England"), is by this means brought to life and allowed to motivate logically a shocking proposal, so that the potential for mischief of such ideas stands revealed. At the same time Swift, operating through the covert point of view, discredits the--entire--way of thought of the narrator. The covert point of view makes implicitly such counter-propositions as "Men should restore "to their rightful condition the natural bonds of trust and responsibility linking landlord and tenant, kingdom and citizen," "economic and social policies should accord with common sense, humanity, and morality," "Catholic and Protestant should not hate one another to their mutual destruction," and "the well-to-do should not regard the poor as objects or animals to be used, but as souls to be nurtured." The personification and then destruction of the overt point of view provides an effective, compact, and lively way to argue against hundreds of large and small, stated and implied, attitudes and assumptions. Modern students often feel that Swiftian irony and satire beat around the bush when directness would do the job more simply and efficiently. Swift's type of satire, when looked at carefully, is however not less efficient than direct statement but really much more efficient. It would not be to Swift's advantage, if such argumentative effectiveness is one of his aims, to produce a highly individualized narrator of the *Modest Proposal*. The overt proposer is intentionally more a type than an individual, Swift having excluded all detail of his narrator's appearance, taste, residence, profession, and dress. Swift evidently does not wish us to experience a revulsion against any single individual, but against a far too typical set of values and assumptions.

At this point students could be encouraged to think seriously about writing a short satire of their own, following Swift's general rhetorical program but of course using some strongly felt modern subject of their own choice. But before they can begin to write a modern Swiftian satire intelligently from an overt and an antithetical covert point of view, they should be made aware that an understanding of the moral, social, or political assumptions of their modern audience, as well as how to control these, is part of the literary challenge that they as writers must solve. Needless to say, students should be assured that the excellence of their finished satires will not depend on any particular political or social position they might choose to take, but rather on how intelligently they" solved, considering their chosen subject and audience, the literary problems that their satire raised.

Like any writer Swift is tuning his rhetoric to the specific predictable emotional and intellectual responses of his own contemporary audience. If these responses are basic enough, distortion—even over hundreds of years—is minimal. For at least some of our students, the relation between parent and child, for example, remains much as it was thought to be in Swift's day, one of mutual trust and responsibility. But even so seemingly elemental and universal a bond as that of parent and child cannot be counted on to move some modern audiences. Since Freud, it may seem that a lack of mutual love
and trust within families is not so *unnatural* or inhuman as Swift might have considered it. In fact the "generation gap" is likely to become even deeper as technology advances and social and moral changes accelerate and cut off the generation that is still learning from older generations that do not for the most part show much interest in continuing to learn. I am not suggesting that any changes from Swift's milieu to ours are necessarily good or bad, but I wish to insist that any such changes create a problem that should be discussed.

The relation of landlord and tenant, which again Swift thought of as one of mutual trust and responsibility, has radically changed. Even in Swift's day, obviously, the landlord-tenant relation was declining from its more feudal but never ideal one of the lord of the land caring for and guarding his tenant who, at least in theory, worked for him in a bond of mutual trust. One has only to think of slum landlords (including venerable educational institutions) and their poor tenants in our cities to begin to doubt the possibility of care and mutual trust that Swift considers their *mutual* relation. On the contrary, their *natural* relation seems to modern students (who have learned something about a much less benificent nature from evolution) more a Darwinian predation of carnivores on herbivores. Apparently even our definitions of "nature" and "natural" have changed since Swift's day. Possibly, then, modern writers will have to find some new shared assumptions upon which to build a covert point of view.

It might be only slightly less difficult for a modern audience to see a country's relation to its citizens as one of mutual trust and responsibility. What the modern student sees is a widening rift between unresponsive bureaucracies, and individuals denied democratic participation in the institutions under which they live. Students' burning of draft cards is perhaps too obvious a case in point.

That the relation between mother countries (like England) and the smaller countries under their protection and control (like Ireland) is by nature that between parent and child seems hard to believe when students consider the modern relation between large powerful countries and small helpless ones. A belief that all such bonds were ordained by nature was more congenial to minds brought up assuming that all laws were sanctioned by analogy with a benevolent and true nature. Perhaps modern students may even need a brief history-of-ideas explanation to understand how any society could have believed in the relation of all levels of life and realms of knowledge and activity (the family, economics, social justice, politics, morality) to natural law that was "self-evident" to the man of "right reason." Because of their assumptions, Swift's readers would probably have grasped his covert analogy in the *Modest Proposal* more surely and quickly than we do. If today's audience possibly would not respond to the same analogy Swift's audience responded to, what could we use instead? What values and attitudes of a modern audience are so deeply rooted that they can be called from us almost unconsciously? This is a discussion worth pursuing with students.
Another part of Swift's covert positive proposal suggests to his readers that the meanings of words have deteriorated. Although the perversions of some words that the proposer abuses—such as "fair," "modest," and "dear"—strike modern students much as they must have struck Swift's contemporary audience, the misuse of certain other words by the proposer is not today so shocking and immoral as Swift must have covertly intended. Even though the word "gentleman," for instance, may not indicate to most modern people much more than gender on a rest room door, it implied in Swift's day an important moral, social, and political entity with privileges and responsibilities. His audience would have responded with amusement but with horror as well at the corruption of the word by the proposer. Swift focuses our concern on the loss in meaning of such words not to show us, as many a modern relativist might, the inevitability of linguistic change, but rather to show us how to take the first step in mending our ways: by restoring words, and therefore institutions, to their "right" and "natural" meanings. For Swift, words stood for permanent ideal forms. Shifts of meaning in a world of shifting contexts did not seem as inevitable then as they do to us. To Swift and his audience changes in meaning implied regression from the truth of a better past, and therefore seemed actually immoral.

Students are usually quite disappointed in what is often pointed to as Swift's only positive point of view in the Modest Proposal—that revealed in paragraph twenty-nine, where certain specific remedies are offered in reversal of the proposer's intention in castigating them. Students wonder vaguely but disappointedly why Swift did not propose a program of slum clearance, or possibly advocate full employment, or perhaps universal higher education. They will learn something about their own age as well as Swift's from an honest recognition that almost all of Swift's proposals for ameliorating the lot of the Irish poor recommend primarily a return to the stricter morality of the past. Swift is in no sense a liberal Believer in the betterment of human life through modern learning and material progress. He is a conservative moralist who sees that his society has strayed from the "natural" and "reasonable" institutions laid down by their forebears. The success of his positive program depends on his developing in his readers a sickening emotional and intellectual recoil from the warped definitions and institutions that have replaced the former "true" definitions and institutions. Most students, whatever modern audience they choose to address, will find it hard to rely on a strong, unconscious belief in a better past of moral rectitude, when a gentlemanly aristocracy, like wise parents, cared for a happy peasantry, who knew their place in the beneficent scheme of nature. If we wish to use Swift's general rhetorical program, we obviously cannot follow it slavishly because unless an audience believes unconsciously in the same way as Swift's audience, we can not rely on it as Swift did to provide the basis of our covert argument.

Another problem for our student writers here is whether they can rely, as Swift's audience did, on a strong belief in common sense moral solutions to difficult economic and social problems, which are aggravated in the modern world by complex technological change. It is one thing simply to trust a not-so-simple morality of man-to-man relations. But considering the necessary though uncomfortable expansion of bureaucracies and corporate institutions since Swift's time, can we seriously count on a bureaucracy to have a warm heart and simple trustworthy moral sense? In our world we
seem to have to count on legal definitions of civil rights, for example, and a difficult enforcement of such rights—including whatever power is necessary to insure continuous extensions of civil rights legislation and enforcement—to begin to engage the moral sense of the nation. Students know that the last generation's moral sense alone was not enough to make them see and act on what was morally plain since Swift's time and before: that all humans are human, and that no humans are to be treated as less than human.

Perhaps a whole new type of covert organization would have to be worked out for a modern Swiftian satire to be as effective with its audience as Swift's was with his contemporaries. On the other hand, some students may believe that there is still a great deal to be said for a return to the morality of the past, in spite of the slavery and colonialism and wars that other students will be quick to point out were part of that morality. I am not recommending imposing on students any particular social or political stance: they have a right to believe and write what they want.

We are not going to be able to solve any social problems for students in our English classes (and we have no credentials for such an attempt anyway), but we might make past and present writing more understandable and interesting by entertaining the problems that literary and scholarly comparison and contrast uncover, and then allowing students to think and write their way toward their own modern solutions. Contemporary social concern, far from being extrinsic to English studies is, in this instance, quite a necessary part of the writer's study. For she must determine how to set up antithetical points of view about a controversial issue and also understand the feelings, values, and assumptions of some specific audience well enough to control their attitudes by covert means.

But even with a class discussion devoted to prewriting problems, some students will have trouble choosing sensible positive values and assumptions that will have fairly wide audience appeal. The fact that the students will have little difficulty finding targets for satire, but experience serious difficulty articulating positive values is related to the reasons in our modern world for what seems to be hostility and destructiveness toward "the Establishment" without a clear alternative to it. If we pursue this curious problem, our students and we may learn something interesting about Swift's art and world and, indirectly, something quite interesting about our own.

When we consider all the careful devices that Swift employs to guide his reader away from the proposer (who seems to assume that he controls the audience), it will appear that Swift wants his readers to accept his covert point of view and understand his counter-proposal. Obviously writing this kind of satire demands mastery of audience emotional response and of all the literary skills that such mastery presupposes. Some kinds of satire written today are different in kind from Swift's. Often less time is spent controlling and guiding a possibly naive reader towards enlightenment, while much more effort goes into "putting on" the stupid or naive reader, who takes the overt point of view at face value. Swift's aesthetic aim in A Modest Proposal was not only to entertain' but to instruct: his art is more didactic than ours. If an average reader is not already an insider
when he starts to read some modern satires, he may not be promoted from innocence even when he is finished. This difference in the form and intent of satire is an interesting matter to pursue with students. It may be caused partly by social change and the appearance of mass culture and mass education. The naive audience in modern satire is often mass-educated, mass-cultured middle-class—by definition the largest number of readers. In Swift's day the writer and his audience were a much smaller group, but on the whole more uniformly educated, so that Swift could count on most of the audience to share his own values, although they may have fallen away from these values, and needed considerable prodding to return. Modern satire often entertains an elite audience. The fun depends on making this relatively small "in" group laugh at the larger American middle class—Mr. and Mrs. Square.

Some modern satire, then, presupposes two audiences: a large audience of outsiders who accept the overt point of view, and a small inside audience who enjoy the "put-on." In the audience for the satirical modern film Blow-up, the insiders who know that "art is imaginative experience" are outnumbered by the middle-class outsiders who believe that "art mirrors reality" and are, consequently, "put-on"—at least until the very end when the overt point of view finally learns to play with an imaginary ball just before disappearing. Certainly this "putting on" of a naive audience is part of Swift's entertainment as well. But to think that this is Swift's primary purpose is to miss his art, and consequently to lose sight of one of our own major modern problems as well. Indeed it is for us a social and even a political problem as well as a literary one. And at this point our concern for contemporary social problems may be entertained without falsifying the work being studied. A student who is highly motivated to understand Swift's satirical program for her own practical writing purposes can begin to understand and appreciate Swift's literary accomplishment in its own time, for its own sake as well as for its modern audience. So long as modern social concern does not replace but extends the worth and interest of English studies, it may be a very good thing for all of us.

**Conclusion**

Suppose we see the historical development of literature as dynamic and evolving. Then, as literature changes, the innovations of an earlier writer may enter the reservoir of available structural principles for subsequent writers. It may be that a reconceived literary history, which defines itself as an open and expanding body of knowledge about effects that can be achieved in writing, would serve to keep literature not only new but alive. Perhaps, too, some accurate knowledge of the growing body of post-classical structures that writers have continued to invent (the innovations of one age becoming the conventions of the next) might give the student some idea that she could, in her own writing, make use of and even contribute to an evolving culture. This discussion of Swift's *Modest Proposal* is a step toward relating older literature to contemporary
literature and writing to the modern world, in the hope that the study of earlier literature can remain a relevant discipline in a changing culture.