

Jonathan Swift: Exile from Emotion

It has been universally observed that Jonathan Swift had great difficulty in facing emotion, either in himself or in others. It is pure vanity to attempt a complete psychological autopsy across the centuries (though it is a growth industry) when it is so tenuous a pursuit even in the present. Nevertheless, the evidence remains, within the collection of literary, personal and historical texts that comprise our idea of Swift, that here was a man who simultaneously drew people toward him and held them off at a safe distance. He studiously avoided the extremes of intrusion and isolation as too emotionally taxing, and true to the Swiftian dilemma struggled to hold a tantalizing middle ground.

From his youth, Swift appears to have enjoyed company and particularly that of women. His first visit to his mother's home in Leicester sparked scandal at a time when he enjoyed rather than dreaded notoriety; here he revelled in the company of women probably for the first time in his life. His spirits were so buoyant and congenial, his conduct so witty and diverting, that the rumours of intrigue naturally followed. After the dour atmosphere of all-male company at Trinity, this first taste of English society must have established predilection that held for duration of his life. In the later "Hints towards an Essay on Conversation", Swift admits "that a little Grain of the Romance is no ill Ingredient to preserve and exalt the Dignity of human Nature, without which it is apt to degenerate into every Thing that is sordid, vicious and low." This is an interesting admission for Swift, as one passion is enlisted in the general project of limiting the others. Clearly for Swift the tincture of romance in female company was an irresistible and indispensable tonic, which could rescue him from the depths of stronger emotion. The unmistakable contradiction in this position will be the root of Swift's one great emotional trauma.

Not surprisingly, the proper conduct of conversation, as the medium of social interaction, became a genuine concern and here Swift found that once again humanity had managed to foul what could be its chief distinction and consolation. He resolved to write on the subject, illuminating and rebuking the "Multitude of Errors" that beset polite discourse. So he explains:

"I was prompted to write my Thoughts upon this Subject by mere Indignation, to reflect that so useful and innocent a Pleasure, so fitted for every

Period and Condition of Life, and so much in all Men's Power, should be so much neglected and abused."

This in fact becomes the topic of Swift's last major work, A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation (1738) which was a product of his life-long obsession with bearable company. It is clearly a piece that lacks the concentrated brilliance and ironic multiplicity of Swift's greatest achievements but in its portrayal of Simon Wagstaff, the "vulgar" exponent of polite manners, and of the interchanges within fashionable society it is sharply drawn and even, at times, sensitive to human tribulations.

Referred to as Polite Conversation, this piece studies the malice that animates the apparently vacuous pleasantries of social intercourse. An example provides the best way forward:

Lord Sparkish:	Miss, shall I fill you another Dish of Tea?
Miss Notable:	Indeed, my Lord, I have drank enough.
Lord Sparkish:	Come, it will do you more Good than a Month's fasting. Here take it.
Miss Notable:	No, I thank your Lordship, enough's as good as a Feast.
Lord Sparkish:	Well, but if you always say no, you'll never be married.
Lady Answerall:	Do, my Lord, give her a Dish, for they say Maids will say no, and take it.
Lord Sparkish:	Well, and I dare say, Miss is a Maid in Thought, Word and Deed.
Mr. Neverout:	I would not take my Oath of that.
Miss Notable:	Pray, Sir, Speak for your Self.

Thus far, what would appear to be the most simple of offices of the Tea trolley have in fact served to isolate the nubile Miss Notable and thus make her an object of discourse rather than a participating subject. Her refusal to take tea is turned to a thinly veiled discussion of her status as a marriageable virgin – a precarious status in this property – oriented society and one which Miss Notable must be acutely conscious of. Word-play becomes malice as the sexual overtones become unmistakably clear. The discussion, responding to Miss Notable's staunch independence, degenerates:

Lady Smart:	Fye, Miss: Maids, they say, should be seen, and not heard.
Lady Answerall:	Good Miss, stir the Fire, that the Tea – Kettle may boyl. You have done it very well, now it burns purely. Well, Miss, you'll have a chearful Husband.
Miss Notable:	Indeed, your Ladyship could have stirred it much better.

Lady Answerall: I know that very well Hussy, but I won't keep a Dog, and bark my self.
Mr. Neverout: What; you are stuck Miss?

“Maid” is turned from meaning “Virgin” to meaning “servant”. Sexual servitude was initially suggested as the price of marriage and now manual servitude is added. Miss Notable, who is otherwise remarkably potent in the verbal forum, has been driven to her linguistic knees by a ruthless exposition of her status as a powerless dependent in a society where power is a thinly disguised presence.

Throughout there is a sense of pain emanating from the exchange and this demonstrates Swift's sympathy (not a word to appear frequently in discussions of Swift) for the emotional agony this scene is inflicting on Miss Notable. Whereas discourse and friendship should be a relief and a balm, it is more frequently the cruelest stroke on the back of an already beleaguered ego. Swift's strength of feeling about this tendency in polite conversation to expose weakness in order to drive people down is seen in the earlier “Letter to a Young Lady, on Her Marriage” (1723):

“There is never wanting in this Town, a Tribe of bold, swaggering, rattling Ladies, whose Talents pass among Coxcombs for Wit and Humour: Their Excellency lies in...what they call running a Man down.... I have often thought that no Man is obliged to suppose such Creatures to be Women; but to treat them like insolent Rascals, disguised in Female Habits, who ought to be stripped, and kicked downstairs.”

Just as women held out the greatest delight for Swift, so they possessed the power within the sphere of discourse to inflict great pain. Swift's response to the prospect of himself being in Miss Notable's degrading situation is an hysterical fantasy of male physical power exerting itself as the final solution.

Swift was clearly sensitive to his treatment in social occasions and his pride, of which he was well aware, could not bear mistreatment. He sought to cultivate friendships, particularly with women, that would elevate him and set him at ease. He also sought to cultivate a social persona which emanated wit and gracious ease in hope to be repaid in kind. Not surprisingly, this appreciation of female company, teamed with the absence of the typical male designs, proved to be attractive to many women, and for two in particular, proved to be irresistible.

The two women who came nearest to Swift's heart are both described and complimented in terms of their fitness for conversation. Of Ester Johnson, Swift reflected that:

“Never was so happy a conjunction of civility, freedom, easiness and sincerity. There seemed to be a combination among all that knew her, to treat her with a dignity much beyond her rank: yet people of all sorts were never more easy than in her company.”

(On the Death of Mrs. Johnson)

Similarly Hester Vanhomrigh is mistaken “for a boy” by the “Queen of Learning” who:

“Then sows within her tender mind
Seeds long unknown to womankind:
For manly bosoms chiefly fit,
The seeds of knowledge, judgment, wit.” (Cademus and Vanessa, e201-4)

Both are eminently equipped for civilized discourse where spite and intrigue gives place to interest and mirth. Swift was, in both cases, the self-appointed educator who found the security of a father-daughter relationship pleasantly improved by a tincture of “Romance”. These women filled Swift's need for intelligent and indulgent company; he renamed each and so tried, it must be said, selfishly and callously to fix them into an orbit around him. This suited his purposes perfectly, but it offered none of the security, let alone satisfaction, that women need especially in a society where marriage is a woman's only chance at a decent life. There is an interesting moment in “Cadenus and Vanessa”, where the Dean suddenly realizes that his pupil is not listening to the lessons:

“His was a visionary scheme:
He waked, and found it but a dream;
A project far above his skill,
For Nature must be Nature still” (e598-601)

With “For Nature must be Nature still” the reference is made back to what is posited as the natural tenderness of the female mind; the Dean is surrendering his dream of an educated woman who could supply his need for company. But this line “For Nature must be Nature Still” is also interesting because it implicitly undercuts (and I would suggest, unconsciously) Swift's own plan for holding women in an unnatural emotional orbit which offers neither independence nor commitment. Vanessa is not listening to Swift's lessons because she is in love; the problem lies in the fact that Swift will not or could not

reciprocate. As he managed to spell out for Stella in 1720, love and full commitment were not options:

“Thou Stella, went 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” (e9-14)

In the third book of Gulliver’s Travels, a work very much dedicated to self-criticism, there is an account of a “great Court Lady” who abandoned her family and wealthy husband, preferring to live “in an obscure Eating-House” with “an old deformed Footman, who beat her every day” than to survive among ideals and speculations. It is tempting to see this as Swift’s oblique recognition that the relationship he offered to Vanessa and Stella was insufficient to their needs. In Vanessa’s case discontentment was painfully obvious as she repeatedly rebelled against her role. Vanessa accordingly moved out of Swift’s orbit. The case of Stella is far more complex but follows basically the same line of growing discontentment, though neither Swift nor Stella can bring themselves to express it. We find confirmation in Swift’s poems to Stella.

Initially, these poems present themselves as trifles, performances of wit suitable for a Birthday gathering. They strive for the light joking and teasing of intimate conversation; their intent, however, is clear. They seek repeatedly to confirm her in Swift’s orbit. Her age and size are repeatedly introduced, ostensibly to be rejected as unimportant. The effect however is to degrade her eligibility as a woman then to reject her femininity altogether. This leaves her with, oddly enough, the consolations of the mind and pleasant company for which she is continually upheld as a model for emulation, literally a saint. But as the series of annual poems wears on into the 1720s there appears, first a manifest hollowness as in “Stella at Wood-Park” (1723), and then the growing dimension of emotion which makes the later Birthday Poems so moving. Put in simple terms, the approach of Stella’s death, forewarned by declining health, forced Swift to consider her life, her love for him, and how he had repaid her devotion. In the last of the Birthday poems (1726-7), Swift asks”

“Say. Stella, feel you no content,
Reflecting on a Life well spent?” (e35-6)

That the question had to be asked means that the answer is no. Stella was to die unfulfilled and unhappy, and this was something Swift could not bear to admit, though nor could he forget it.

All Swift can do is thank her for sustaining his life in services that include friendship and nursing and express his guilt in self-depreciation:

“Nor let your Ills affect your Mind,
To fancy they can be unkind.
Me, surely me, you ought to spare,
Who gladly would your suff’rings share;
Or give my scrap of Life to you,
And think it far beneath your Due;
You, to whose Care so oft I owe,
That I’m alive to tell you so.”

Again we find Swift telling Stella what she “ought” to do. He is saying that she ought to forgive him. Rather pathetically, Stella throughout her life seems to be willing to live on what scraps Swift’s did allow her. She meticulously transcribed his poems to her, and in her own poetry had worked hard to demonstrate her acceptance of his credo. When he was ill she did nurse him, and during a particularly bad fit in 1720 he wrote what two decades later would be true of his relationship with Stella: “I dying leave the Debt unpay’d.”

In a rough version of the “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift”, called the “Life and Character of Dean Swift”, we find a poem which is far more direct in its assessment of Swift’s own life. This poem Swift was furious to see in print and did everything in his power to disclaim it. Its essential difference from the more urbane and tidy “Verses”, is in the amount of self-accusations which is permitted. Misanthropy, frustration, pride and reforming zeal are all offered as explanation for his satiric vein. Unlike the “official” version of his life in the “Verses”, the debate on his merit does not conclude in a vindication but in, of all things, an admission of a sense of guilt.

“Then, since you dread no further Laches,
You freely may forgive his Ashes” (e201-2)

Of all the things which may have contributed to a deep sense of guilt, the one of which there can be no doubt is his treatment of Stella. It is recorded that his last words were “I am what I am”, which he repeated incessantly. In a flight of the historical imagination befitting a conclusion, we can read this as a struggle to accept himself and what he had

done. It is difficult for us to imagine the horror for one who took good conduct so seriously to realize that he had committed the one inexcusable crime for a moralist – he had inflicted pain upon someone who was innocent and who had loved him.



Esther Johnson (Stella)