Introduction

How to analyze the Tub, was a Matter of difficulty; when after long Enquiry and Debate, the literal Meaning was preserved.

Irvin Ehrenpreis refers to "the brilliant style which makes A Tale of a Tub the greatest prose satire in English." Few would quibble with his judgment. But like the critics Swift condemns, we have been too often satisfied to catalogue stylistic devices or merely to cite them as examples of the Modern Author's faults. What we have failed to recognize is that the young Swift, after his early imitative, conventional odes (1690-94), was experimenting in the Tale (1696-97) with a new tone and genre and that he was using style in this work as a way of working toward some important truths. Mark Schorer points out that for the contemporary novelist technique has become a preoccupation, a means not just of containing intellectual and moral implications but of discovering them. Similarly, I think that for Swift technique in the Tale is a means of exploring his relationship to his mentor, Sir William Temple, his inherited literary traditions, and a wide range of seventeenth-century ideas and values. And what remains constant in all his satire is his willingness to let style, rather than plot or character, carry the burden of his message.

Criticism has over the past twenty-five years made up for its earlier slighting of Swift's rhetoric. In particular, Martin Price's Swift's Rhetorical Art (1953), Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr.'s Swift and the Satirist's Art (1962), and John R. Clark's Form and Frenzy in Swift's "Tale of a Tub" (1970) have dealt with Swift's language at close range. But criticism, like everything else, moves in cycles, and discussion of the Tale seems to have entered a new phase, one that focuses less on the nature of Swift's persona and more on his own presence in the satire: I am thinking especially of studies of the Tale by Gardner D. Stout, Jr., John Traugott, and Cary Nelson. What
recent criticism has shown is that it is impossible to split the function of the author between a persona who is a modern hack and a wholly detached manipulator of that persona. In fact, the Modern Author is not a persona in the sense that Swift's other speakers are—a "style," Kathleen Williams calls him. Although as a convenience I refer in the pages that follow to the "Modern" or to Swift's "persona," I intend by these terms to signify not a character but a certain identifiable style. I have accepted the rhetoric of the Tale as Swift's but have discovered that it everywhere pulls simultaneously in two directions, toward a convoluted verbosity and toward a concise plain-spokenness. Swift has cleverly intermingled these two styles for satiric effect.

In the Tale the relationship between language and reality—a critical issue in the seventeenth century—is one of Swift's most important themes as well as the basis for his unique style. Philosophers from Descartes to Locke deal with this same linguistic and philosophical issue. So too does Antoine Arnauld in La logique ou l'art de penser, a popular and often translated logic that Swift may have read while at Trinity College. In discussing the language of madness, philosophers and physicians such as Thomas Willis approached this same question from another angle. The Royal Society's insistence on a plain style appropriate to scientific inquiry was yet another manifestation of such concern, as was the interest in a simpler pulpit style. The search of John Wilkins and others for a universal language was likewise part of this attempt to systematize language as well as knowledge. And finally, no one denies the influence of Cervantes on Swift, and Don Quixote, like the Tale, is a satiric fiction that is very much about words and their dubious connections with things. This whole period was marked by what Murray Cohen has described as "a lively struggle with the structure of language, or, more precisely, with the relationship between reality and language." A Tale of a Tub reflects and comments on this struggle, is very much a product of its time, and could have been written in no other century, with the possible exception of our own.

The Tale was the first English book to take advantage of both the satirical and the philosophical possibilities inherent in this heated, contradictory debate over the relationship between language and reality. Anglican preacher and political conservative, Swift as a young man was looking for his own solution to this problem at the
very time when the old structure of the universe was giving way to the new science and philosophy. In the *Tale Swift* comes across not as a gloomy skeptic but rather as a brilliant satirist and (although he would never admit it) something of a philosopher. "His Invention at the Height, and his Reading fresh in his Head" (p. 4), he self-consciously mixes fact and fiction, empiricism and rationalism, and reality and language in a way that is surely meant to reflect the confusing intellectual struggles of the previous half century. What emerges is a paradoxical style that often contradicts itself. But such is modernism.

Throughout this study I take style to be neither the same as a writer's ideas nor the vehicle for his ideas, but rather his habitual means of arranging concepts, experiences, and implications into a significant form. As linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf says in his essay "Language, Mind, and Reality," "Thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language." Whorf posits a connection between language and reality so intimate that the systematizations inherent in a particular language (be it English, Chinese, or Hopi) dictate the reality of a person who speaks that language, forcing certain perceptions on him, denying others, and channeling his reason. Pushing Whorf's hypothesis somewhat further, we may infer a comparable link between an individual's private habits of language and his private perception of reality. If there is validity to this argument—and I think there is—then we may say that the uniqueness of a writer's style represents his personal organization of the world, his personal arrangement not merely of words but of reality itself.

Richard Ohmann, in his "Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style," describes the aim of such an approach as clearly as one could want it: "If the critic is able to isolate and examine the most primitive choices which lie behind a work of prose, they can reveal to him the very roots of a writer's epistemology, the way in which he breaks up for manipulation the refractory surge of sensations which challenges all writers and all perceivers." A study of a writer's style is thus no mere description of image patterns, nor a computerized table of nouns and verbs, nor a rhetorical analysis of a given passage. We can go well beyond this. In pointing up the connection between style and epistemology, Ohmann has provided a firm theoretical basis for the study of diction, syntax, and other configurations of a
text. The proper study of style is very exciting and can bring together linguistics, philosophy, and psychology in a way that has been impossible since the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{12}

What makes this approach to style singularly appropriate for a study of Swift is his peculiar awareness of how language can inhibit or be the means of reaching an understanding of reality. To cite only the most obvious example, \textit{Gulliver's Travels} dwells on right and wrong interpretations of experience: Gulliver delineates his reality for us in a plain, circumstantial style (he insists on this), but Swift implies that such a style is too plain and too circumstantial to bear complex, subtle interpretations of complex, subtle experiences. Gulliver views things too simply and seems incapable of accepting ambiguity. When Swift offers him the choice of being a beastly Yahoo or a reasoning Houyhnhnm, Gulliver opts for the latter and denies any resemblance he bears to the Yahoos, just as he denies any animal traits in his Houyhnhnm master. But \textit{Gulliver's Travels} presents at least one alternative that is too subtle for its narrator: man is both a physical and a rational being, and neither mere Yahoo nor mere Houyhnhnm.

Swift's interest in the relationship between language and reality, however, antedates \textit{Gulliver's Travels}. Although \textit{A Tale of a Tub}'s broken, bathetic style is in no way an epitome of Swift's statements concerning style,\textsuperscript{13} nor a model for his subsequent satires, it was clearly for him a pivotal work, and in it we can see him working out his ideas concerning language and its connection with understanding. What Swift does in the \textit{Tale} (and you can feel him beginning to wrestle with these ideas in the odes) is to create a loose, flexible satire that is remarkably unassertive and that is based on the interweaving of his style with that of his Modern. If words and sentences can lead us back to a writer's epistemology, then in \textit{A Tale of a Tub} the dichotomous configurations of style lead us back simultaneously to the Modern's and Swift's opposing epistemologies. One reason the work is so difficult is that these two outlooks are not kept clearly apart; a reading of the \textit{Tale} uncovers no easy opposition between Swift and a fully developed persona, but a crisscrossing of two styles and two ways of knowing. Swift forces us to recognize two conflicting styles and two conflicting approaches to life, that of the aloof, intellectualized, abstracting persona as against the earthy, sensate, experience-oriented approach that he recommends.

Like a typical modern, the persona makes much of arranging
knowledge into abstracts, summaries, and compendiums—"all disposed into great Order, and reducible upon Paper" (p. 127). Swift puns here on "reducible." Without ever developing a full-fledged persona, he repeatedly undercuts his own modernistic attempts to neutralize unpleasant realities by transforming them into abstract lexical or logical items. Throughout the Tale he reminds himself and us of these realities, which will not be denied. The only ballast for the high-flying intellectualism of A Tale of a Tub is the empirical, physical reality suggested by its imagery; this explains why such things as crusts or bread, corpses, and excrement appear with such frequency. If Gulliver's Travels is, as Hugh Kenner says, "a satire on mindless empiricism," then Swift's earlier book is a satire on mindless rationalism, a horrifying example of empirical data almost overridden by mere mental functioning.


2. Parts of the book were written later. For a discussion of the date of composition, see Guthkelch and Smith, pp. xlii–xlvi.


4. For helpful background concerning these issues, see Ehrenpreis, pp. 185–203.


12. See Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (New York, 1966), p. 76: "It should be borne in mind that we are dealing with a period [i.e., the seventeenth century] that antedates the divergence of linguistics, philosophy, and psychology. The insistence of each of these disciplines on 'emancipating itself' from any contamination by the other is a peculiarly modern phenomenon."

13. Perhaps the greatest impediment to a proper understanding of Swift's style is his own statements on style; his repeated emphasis on simplicity and propriety has misled readers from the eighteenth century on. See D. W. Jefferson, "An Approach to Swift," in *From Dryden to Johnson*, ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore, 1957), p. 230: "Swift's remarks on prose style, while of great interest, bear very little on the secret of his own greatness in that medium."