Wordplay

*In order to allure them, he gave a Liberty to his Pen, which might not suit with maturer Years, or graver Characters.*

It should not surprise us that the age of Descartes, Charles II, the Royal Society, and the periwig would have spawned *A Tale of a Tub*, a work that sums up the serious play that is so characteristic of the period. Swift comes at the end of that generation. The man who wrote the *Tale* is the man who corresponded with Stella in a private language and with his friend Sheridan in a highly esoteric Anglo-Latin. Swift is everywhere a lover of words, but nowhere more than in his first prose satire. In the *Tale* he toys with hard words, archaisms, neologisms, puns, proverbs, foreign terms, clichés, slang, and every sort of verbal nonsense. What is odd is that despite his objection in principle to many of these things, in the *Tale* he surrenders to them. Verbal ingenuity is characteristic of all of Swift’s satire, but in the *Tale* he seems to enjoy such ingenuity for itself, and its frequency implies a downright playful attitude toward language.

Regarding his collation of the drafts of *An Enquiry into the Behavior of the Queen’s Last Ministry*, Irvin Ehrenpreis says that Swift “was struggling against a tendency to write in just the way he disliked.” I think an analogous struggle exists in *A Tale of a Tub*. If Swift despises neologisms and puns, for example, then why is he responsible for so many himself? His decision to write as a modern hack author allows him to play loose with the language in a way he could not otherwise have done. To view the style of the *Tale* simply as a parody of modernism’s abasement of language is to overlook the *joie de mot* at its heart. What comes clear in the reading is that the stylistic gusto of *A Tale of a Tub* belongs to Swift as much as that similar gusto of *Tristram Shandy* belongs to Sterne—or that of *Ulysses* to Joyce. Swift in 1696–97 may have been worrying about
the corruption of English, but in the *Tale* he loves corrupting it; this is one of the paradoxes that make the satire so difficult.

Amazingly little has been written on the lexical inventiveness of Swift.¹ Talk of his linguistic conservatism has kept us from acknowledging many of his linguistic games in the *Tale* and elsewhere. One critic goes so far as to tell us that "the chief characteristic of Swift's style is that it has little use for the recesses of language."⁵ Nothing could be further from the truth. Mocking stillborn language schemes like Wilkins's *Essay Towards a Real Character*, Swift demonstrates over and over what can be done with words when an author brings them to life. It is significant, for example, that according to one calculation, the first volume of Johnson's two-volume *Dictionary* contains some 1,761 references to Swift, a total that among prose writers puts him third behind Addison (2,439) and the Authorized Version (2,270).⁶ Similarly, the frequency with which he is mentioned in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is an indication of Swift's use of words in rare, old-fashioned, new, or peculiar ways.⁷ A sort of amateur lexicographer himself, Swift throughout his life seems to have recorded in his notebooks instances of proverbs, clichés, and odd usages he came across in books or conversation, and many of these found their way into his published satires. In the *Tale* the Modern's allusions to his use of a commonplace book may be a hint of Swift's actual practice, even at this early date.⁸

Swift is extraordinarily sensitive to language, and in *A Tale of a Tub* he plays untiringly on the multiple connotations of words and their recent or antiquated meanings. *A Discourse to Prove the Antiquity of the English Tongue* is a series of ridiculous jokes about etymology (e.g., Achilles = A Kil-ease), a subject Swift took very seriously in the *Tale*. In this work he likewise uses words in unconventional senses, coins words of his own, and puns continually. Swift is a "linguistic conservative" in that he feared the corruption of English and in that he was a master of the plain style; but his idea for an academy (which was not new) and his plain style (which is never as plain as it looks) are only one side of the coin. We ought to remember that although his style is indeed plain by comparison with Browne's or Milton's, by comparison with Defoe's, or even Addison's, it is subtle and complex. Outside of a couple of pieces like the "Apology" to the *Tale* or *The Conduct of the Allies
(and there are exceptions in both), Swift seldom says merely what he means. "Poetry," writes Winifred Nowottny, "is language at full stretch, bringing into maximal interplay the various potentialities afforded by linguistic forms in artistic structures." One could say exactly the same of A Tale of a Tub.

One clear sign of Swift's delight in words is the frequent use of neologisms in the Tale. In A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue he hits at "new conceited Words," and in his Tatler essay on language he says:

It is manifest, that all new affected Modes of Speech, whether borrowed from the Court, the Town, or the Theatre, are the first perishing Parts in any Language; and, as I could prove by many Hundred Instances, have been so in ours. The Writings of Hooker, who was a Country Clergyman, and of Parsons the Jesuit, both in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth; are in a Style that, with very few Allowances, would not offend any present Reader; much more clear and intelligible than those of Sir H. Wooton, Sir Robert Naunton, Osborn, Daniel the Historian, and several others who writ later; but being Men of the Court, and affecting the Phrases then in Fashion; they are often either not to be understood, or appear perfectly ridiculous.

But that neologisms make a language unintelligible to subsequent generations is not Swift's only objection. Surely he would agree with Locke: "These, for the most part, the several sects of philosophy and religion have introduced. For their authors or promoters, either affecting something singular and out of the way of common apprehensions, or to support some strange opinions or cover some weakness of their hypothesis, seldom fail to coin new words and such as when they come to be examined, may justly be called insignificant terms." Neologisms are dangerous because the ambiguity of their referents makes their meanings entirely personal and therefore incommunicable. And in Swift's mind there is always a connection between linguistic corruption and moral corruption. Although in the Tale the Modern complains of "the Narrowness of our Mother-Tongue" (p. 167), and although we may infer Swift's opposite theoretical position, his coining of words in the Tale, not entirely parodic, controverts his theory. "Lilliput," "Yahoo," and "Houyhnhnm," to cite only the most obvious examples from Gulliver's Travels, show that he was not averse to inventing new words for new realities.

Swift's reference in the Tatler to the dated modernisms of Sir
Language and Reality

Henry Wotton and others suggests we look to them for the sort of newfangledness he objected to. Wotton's uncompleted *Philosophical Survey of Education, or Moral Architecture* (1639), published posthumously by Izaak Walton in *Reliquiae Wottonianae* (1651), offers a number of bad examples. Short as the *Survey* is (eighteen pages in the most recent edition), six of Wotton's words are listed in *The Oxford English Dictionary* as first uses:

- unquietude (only use recorded)
- manurement
- washy
- serenetude (only use)
- insinuant
- proditorius

Compared with Swift's, as we shall see, Wotton's coinages are rather un inventive, formed as they are by the simple addition of a suffix to an old word. At any rate, there are in the *Survey* a number of other words current in Wotton's day but out of use by 1710, the date of the *Tatler* essay. On this evidence Swift's fear for contemporary English sounds real enough. By 1710 much of Wotton's diction would indeed have appeared difficult and even ridiculous.

Yet in *A Tale of a Tub* the Modern's coinages, recent words, and odd usages make him far more difficult and ridiculous than Wotton, although Swift cheats by putting in the Modern's mouth a number of words already out of vogue, or nearly so, by 1704: for example, “annihilate” (pp. 35, 43), used as an adjective, was being replaced by the past participle; an instance of “Expedition” (p. 145), in the sense of the action of expediting, last occurs in 1649; and Swift's use of “flesht” (p. 101), meaning “to initiate,” is the last recorded use of this word. “What I am going to say,” promises the Modern, “is literally true this Minute I am writing” (p. 36). He may be overestimating.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* lists over forty words in *A Tale of a Tub* that I take to be Swift's coinages. In addition, a surprising number of words are of quite recent origin, and he uses them too with an awareness of their novelty. Swift possesses a remarkable sensitivity to the age of words and is aware when an old word feels archaic, just as when a very recent word, or a neologism, has the feel of newness about it. “If any English man should now write or speak as our forefathers did about six or seven hundred years past,” says
Wilkins, "We should as little understand him as if he were a foreigner." Bentley goes further, asking in his Dissertation upon Phalaris: "For what Englishman does not think himself able from the very turn and fashion of the style, to distinguish a fresh English composition from another a hundred years old?" The pervasive concern in the second half of the seventeenth century for the relative antiquity of words meant that Swift could count on his reader's sensitivity in this regard, and in the Tale he intentionally uses new words, or constructs his own, for ironic effect. "Neologisms are dangerous," warns a recent critic, "because they may produce an illusion, that of being reality when only being 'terms.'" I suppose this is true. But given a subtle satirist and a responsive reader, neologisms can be both a way of parodying an overly inventive persona and an apt proof of the real author's real inventiveness with words.

The paragraph in the Tale on the structure of Restoration theaters shows how Swift's Modern uses a decidedly modern vocabulary in talking about a modern subject. After each seventeenth-century coinage or new usage I insert the date of its first citation in The Oxford English Dictionary:

I confess, there is something yet more refined in the Contrivance [1695] and Structure of our Modern Theatres. For, First; the Pit [1649] is sunk below the Stage with due regard to the Institution above-deduced; that whatever weighty Matter shall be delivered thence (whether it be Lead or Gold) may fall plum into the Jaws of certain Criticks (as I think they are called) which stand ready open to devour them. Then, the Boxes [1609] are built round, and raised to a Level with the Scene [1638], in deference [1660] to the Ladies, because, That large Portion of Wit laid out in raising Pruriences [1688] and Protuberances [1646], is observ'd to run much upon a Line, and ever in a Circle. The whining Passions, and little starved Conceits, are gently wafted [1704] up by their own extreme Levity [1704], to the middle Region [1626], and there fix [1626] and are frozen by the frigid [1643] Understandings of the Inhabitants. Bombastry [1704] and Buffoonry [1621], by Nature lofty and light, soar highest of all, and would be lost in the Roof, if the prudent Architect had not with much Foresight contrived for them a fourth Place, called the Twelve-Penny Gallery [1690], and there planted a suitable Colony, who greedily intercept them in their Passage. (P. 61)

Some of these words deserve special comment. "Pit," "Box," and "Scene" are relatively recent names for parts of the typical Restoration theater. As recently as 1690 playwright John Crowne had
introduced the term "Gallery" in the phrase "eighteen-penny
gallery." And the word "Contrivance" was apparently first used in
the sense of the adaptation of a means to an end in John
Woodward's *Natural History of the Earth* (1695), where the author
speaks of "Proofs of Contrivance in the Structure of the Globe," a
phrase Swift seems to echo. But even more interesting are Swift's two
neologisms: "Bombastry," perhaps an echo of "pedantry," is
developed from the earlier "bombast" and is reminiscent of
"Bumbastus," which Swift cites elsewhere (p. 152) as a humorous
nickname for Paracelsus; "Levity," a term from physics that
signifies an inherent property of a body that causes it to rise, is
used here for the first time in a figurative sense. In addition,
although "deference" goes back to 1660, Swift may be one of the first
writers to employ "in deference to," for *The Oxford English
Dictionary* records no incidence of the phrase before the mid
nineteenth century. And the transitive verb "waft," although dating
back to the previous century, began about this time to mean to carry
a thing (especially a sound, scent, or something similar) through
space, as in Pope's pastoral to "Summer" ("And Winds shall waft it
to the Pow'rs above"), a sense Swift bends to his own ironic
purpose. The important thing here is to observe in a general way
that many of Swift's words are chosen self-consciously from the
previous fifty years or so. The Modern has an authentic modern
vocabulary.

In the pages that follow I shall discuss the morphology of
neologisms and unique or original usages in the *Tale*, their satirical
effect, and what they tell us about Swift's attitude toward language.
These words fall into a wide range of types: (1) a few seem to have
been borrowed from nonliterary vocabularies; (2) a number are
foreign (usually Latin) words used in an English text for the first
time; (3) a number are compounds formed by the combination of two
or more extant words; (4) a few are old words used in a new sense;
and (5) a great many are new words formed by the addition of a
prefix or (usually) a suffix to an existing root. The transformations
are familiar, although their variety is remarkable, especially when
compared with Wotton's simple addition of suffixes. But whatever
transformation lies behind Swift's forty plus neologisms, what
stands out is his fascination with etymology. His coinage "Liftings"
(p. 129), for example, is probably his colloquial equivalent to the
Latinate "exhaltation," as elsewhere "Flowings" (p. 128) is substi-
tuted for the Latin "effluvia." On the other hand, Swift's lexical masterpiece—"Reincrudation" (p. 68)—is a high-sounding Latinism for the low process of being made crude again; although built on the recent and very rare (single instances only) "reincrude" and "reincrudescence," this new word refers ironically to a manner of writing and may also be a blasphemous allusion to the Incarnation. Swift's conglomerate is a full-blown parody of seventeenth-century virtuosos who could take anything, no matter how foul, and lexicalize it into a more sanitary abstraction. (Recall Wotton's "manurement.") To uncover the etymology of a Swiftian neologism is often to uncover a humor and satire that extend well beyond the word itself.

The simpler neologisms are much less interesting to us and less useful to Swift than the more complex types. In the first group, "separate Maintenance" (p. 121), a legal term, and "good for nothing" (p. 173) are both listed in The Oxford English Dictionary as first instances, although they are simply terms that Swift may have been responsible for importing from nonliterary sources. In the second group, terms such as "Opus magnum" (pp. 127, 187), "bonae notae" (p. 68), and "Amorphy" (p. 124) are foreign words that Swift first brought into English. In a couple of these cases he cannot resist the irony of using the term outside its usual context: "separate Maintenance" he employs in reference to the "Divorce" of the three brothers, and "Opus magnum," an alchemical term meaning "the conversion of baser metals into gold," in reference to the best way to read A Tale of a Tub!

In the third group, Swift's interest in etymology leads him into parodies of certain characteristic seventeenth-century word formations. With "Monster-mongers" (p. 131) he has taken an apparently fading sense of "monster," meaning a prodigy or a marvel, and combined it with an old word for "merchant"; the model is not new (cf. "fly-monger," "water-monger," and so forth), and The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that from the middle of the sixteenth century these compounds had discreditable connotations. Similarly, "Physico-logical" (p. 61) is based on a popular seventeenth-century model for scientific terms (cf. "physico-chemical," "physico-mathematical," and so on); Swift mocks this series of compounds, but at the same time his own compound has peculiar significance in the Tale, where the Modern's overblown logical arguments are consistently deflated by Swift's heavy physical imagery. Finally, the
most satirically poignant neologism (it is also a pun) in the Tale is "Micro-Coat" (p. 78), a comical takeoff on "Microcosm"; in reducing the Renaissance "microcosm" to the Restoration "Micro-Coat," Swift has polarized the difference between the two periods, a difference between man as little world and man as clothes. Swift's compounds force us to pay attention to their constituent elements, and those elements clash ironically with each other (e.g., "Physico-" versus "-logical") or with something else (e.g., "-Coat" versus "-cosm"). The dichotomies are simultaneously playful and serious.

In the fourth group of neologisms, Swift uses an old word in a new way, either employing it for the first time in a figurative sense or reviving its dead metaphor. "Abortion" (p. 206), which originated in its medical sense in the sixteenth century, was first used by Swift to mean "a failure of an aim or promise"; but notice how the sexual imagery of the previous section, plus the puns in this very sentence ("Going too short," "Labors of the Brain") keep us aware of the earlier medical meaning at the same time. Similarly, "astride" (p. 171) is used by Swift for the first time in a figurative sense, although again his irony insists upon our recalling the word's physical meaning—Fancy astride of Reason like a horse. Swift does just the opposite with the word "Protrusions" (p. 202), employing it in a more concrete sense than it had been employed before; whereas Browne and Boyle use it to mean the action of protruding, Swift uses it to mean that which protrudes, although here it is "Zeal" that protrudes! Swift makes fun of his own usage.

In two other cases he may for the first time be punning on a heretofore unknown physical sense of an old word: namely, "Bottom" (p. 190), where he seems to be implying the posterior, although in The Oxford English Dictionary 1794 is the earliest citation in this sense; and "Intercourse" (p. 60), where he seems to be implying sexual congress (cf. "Engine," "erected," and "Seminary" above), although 1798 is the earliest citation. But whether we accept these last two new usages or not, we ought to recognize that although Swift often gives words new meanings for satiric effect, he also seems to push literal senses into figurative, and figurative into literal, simply because he enjoys the richness of language. He seems driven to keep every old sense of a word alive while cultivating new ones.

The most frequent and most satirical transformation among Swift's neologisms is the addition of a suffix to an extant word. He is
responsible for first turning the action "claim" into the person "Claimant" (p. 21), the adjective "sedate" into the superlative "sedatest" (p. 138), and the noun "pederasty" into the adjective "Pederastick" (p. 41). As in this last example, Swift ordinarily uses suffixes in an ironic sense in order to heighten the derogatory tone of the root word. Thus in transforming "Banter," a word he disliked, into "Bantring" (p. 19), Swift suggests that this banter is of indefinite duration, and his elision (he hated contractions) is a sort of bantering of his own. In transforming "modern," which first appeared in this sense in 1670, into "Modernists" (p. 169), Swift personifies (a Modernist = one who practices modernism) that seventeenth-century bias he wrote the Tale to condemn. In transforming "yeoman" into "Yeomantry" (p. 181), Swift cheats a little on the conventional spelling ("-try" instead of "-ry") in order to establish an ironic echo of "Gentry"—the parallel lexically elevating yeomen to the level of gentlemen. "Spargefaction" (p. 110), built on the Latinate verb "sparge," meaning to sprinkle, follows the model of seventeenth-century coinages such as "rarefaction," "torrefaction," and "petrifaction"; but Swift's earlier equation of sprinkling and pickling, combined with the political sense of "faction," yields something like "pickling faction" (i.e., Catholics). And "Fastidiosity" (p. 124), one of the Tale's finest coinages, follows the transformation "curious" $\rightarrow$ "curiosity," the suffix used to convert an adjective into a noun indicating state or condition; Swift's neologism, itself a wee satire, echoes recent seventeenth-century concoctions such as "spirituosity," "virtuosity," and "coxcombity." Neologisms of this type mock what Swift viewed as the century's linguistically unsound practice of multiplying words by the addition of suffixes. But beyond this, the above neologisms show Swift using suffixes to imply an unfavorable attitude toward root words; his dislike for certain word formations, that is, often shows his dislike for the things those words stand for.

Swift's problem in the Tale is to create a persona who relies heavily on faddish words and his own coinages, while keeping that persona from compromising his own position. He succeeds brilliantly. Although he uses enough neologisms and relatively new words to give the feel of modernism to his work, the frequency and quality of those words very quickly prove the Modern a pedant. In fact, some of Swift's coinages are themselves little parodies of modernism's cut-and-paste jobs. And to Swift the building of new
words out of the scraps of old ones involves the destruction of old truths. "Reincrudation" is such an abomination because it attempts to conceal reality, because it is a made-up word that attempts to escape the inescapable filth at its center. Like "Micro-Coat" and "Fastidiosity," but more obviously, "Reincrudation" can be viewed as a sort of symbol of the struggle in the Tale between the unreality of the Modern and the reality of Swift, between the attempt to create a word world apart from experience and the attempt to use words to get back to the experiential world. The paradox is that while neologisms in the Tale parody the distortion of lexical wizardry, they likewise demonstrate what a lexical wizard can do. Swift simply never separates himself categorically from his persona, and, like his Modern, he shows a certain relish for neologisms and odd usages, as he does for puns.

It is difficult to explain our prejudice against puns. Herbert Davis speaks of "that dangerous practice," Denis Donoghue of "this subversive game." Swift himself ridicules puns in A Modest Defence of Punning ("We sit up at Supper Late in the Evening, which is false in the Superlative Degree") and teases Stella for slipping into unwanted puns. We all knock the pun for its cheapness while delighting in its ingenuity. Although some of Swift's puns undercut the Modern or modernism or something else, and are important to his satire, others have no clear purpose, or simply make us groan. In fact, many would not be caught on a first reading. I think Swift wrote the Tale in one of those rare moods we have all experienced at some time or other—when every word looms a potential pun. They average better than one per page. And Swift's open lexical form keeps his readers always attentive to possible puns and perhaps allows them to contribute a few of their own.

Arthur Koestler defines the pun as "two strings of thought tied by an acoustic knot." As such, the pun is an apt satirical device for Swift, who can use it to combine in a single word a thought of his own with a thought of the Modern's. Puns in A Tale of a Tub are of several types: (1) a few are based on a confusion between a name and the thing itself; (2) a large number are based on the inherent double meaning of a word; (3) a smaller number originate in the etymology of a word, the pun in this case dwelling in one syllable; and finally, (4) a special kind is the double entendre, a neutral word that takes on sexual connotation from its sexually charged context. Of course, context is what makes all puns, for the two strings of thought must
in each case be supported and encouraged by other words in the immediate vicinity. I shall discuss examples of each type of pun, tracing their morphology and pointing to their local effects, satiric purpose, and implications concerning Swift's attitude toward language.

Puns based on a confusion between a name and the thing itself are relatively rare in the Tale, although this sort of confusion is not, being closely related to Swift's habitual literalization of metaphor. The most important example of this type is in that beautifully ironic sentence, "But to return to Madness" (p. 174). Coming as it does after the central paragraph of the Tale, Swift's transition means two things: while the Modern casually informs us that he is returning to the subject of madness, he unwittingly suggests that he is returning to the condition of madness. But the irony here gives rise to further irony, as we ask ourselves, Has the Modern ever really left madness?

The second type of pun, that based on the inherent double meaning of a word, is by far the most common in A Tale of a Tub. Such is the nature of the puns on "Dark" (pp. 128, 208), meaning both profound and dim; "Revolutions" (p. 189), meaning complete changes and spinning; "Gravity" (p. 60), meaning seriousness and heaviness; "Hemp" (p. 101), meaning hashish and the hangman's rope; "Caballing" (p. 65), meaning a plotting and the mystery of the cabala; "Sheer wit" (p. 80), meaning absolute wit and transparent wit; "Vessel" (pp. 153, 156), meaning the human body and a large cask or barrel; "Inspiration" (pp. 154, 155, 159), meaning divine influence and flatulation; "Bulls" (p. 110), meaning papal documents and horned animals with hooves; and "knotty Point" (p. 170), meaning a difficult problem in philosophy and mere tangled laces. Another such pun is that on "Vision" (p. 171), meaning the action of seeing with the bodily eye, but also, as Swift defines the term in his Thoughts on Various Subjects, "the Art of seeing Things invisible." An especially outrageous pun of this sort—"all Man-kind appeared closed up in Bars of Gold Lace" (p. 84)—shows Swift playing on the pronunciation of a word. There seem also to be a couple of puns that rely on the reader's awareness of contemporary slang, namely, "Cackling" (p. 66), meaning both the chittering of a hen and farting, and "Academy" (p. 166), meaning both a university and a brothel. In addition, there are other possible puns, like "Naturals" (p. 29), meaning in an unimproved condition, but
perhaps hinting at "natural," a current word for a half-witted person; "Occasion" (p. 191), meaning simply situation, but perhaps suggesting "occasions," meaning the necessities of nature, a sense first used in 1698; and "Remains" (p. 70), meaning remainder, but perhaps ironically implying a corpse, a sense first found in Dryden in 1700.46

In each of the above cases the first meaning, usually the more appropriate in an intellectual context, is the Modern's, and the second, usually the literal or less complimentary meaning, is Swift's. And in every instance the second meaning serves to drag the Modern's high-flying intellectualism back to earth. By reviving the dead metaphors in these words, Swift forces us to see them in their usually older, more physical senses. As with the word "Dark," for example, while the persona in the Tale brags that moderns write profound books, Swift whispers that they write dim books, and so on. Swift's puns are often little doors into his thoughts on the Modern's various subjects.

For example, one of the most significant labels in the Tale—"Modern"—may well contain a powerful pun on an apparently obsolete sense of the word (frequent in Shakespeare) meaning everyday, ordinary, or commonplace.47 Similarly, when the Modern defines "Happiness" as "a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived" (p. 171), we are meant to see that "Possession" can be taken in two ways. Whereas the Modern says that happiness is to be continuously deceived, Swift says that to be deceived is to be possessed, and possession is madness.48 A comparable pun occurs at the end of the "Digression on Madness," where, after introducing his grand scheme for utilizing insanity, the Modern says: "which, perhaps, the gentle, courteous, and candid Reader, brimful of that Modern Charity and Tenderness, usually annexed to his Office, will be very hardly persuaded to believe" (p. 180). The tentative syntax, the melodramatic compliment to the reader, and that Beckettian "perhaps"—all weaken what the Modern has just said. But the final blow is landed by the quite casual pun on "hardly," which the Modern uses to mean "emphatically" and Swift to mean scarce-ly.49 You can hardly believe, warns Swift, this stuff the Modern just told you!

A third, more arcane and less prevalent kind of pun is that in which Swift uses the etymology of a word to set up a double meaning for just one syllable. Such is the pun "Ragousts" (p. 145),
which immediately follows a reference to modern foods “drest up in various compounds.” Other even more subtle puns are “Topography” (p. 35), which alludes to the shapes of clouds in the sky; "penetrating” (p. 39), which leads into a discussion of pens as weapons; and “Rotation” (p. 40), which refers to the Rota Club, a political club founded in 1659 to advocate rotation in government offices. Although some few of these etymological puns mock the thing the word names, Swift seems in this group mainly to be sporting with language, playing games his reader may not even notice.

The double entendre, the fourth type of pun in the Tale, depends upon a sexually charged context to turn ordinarily innocent words into obscene insinuations. In such contexts Swift’s words “Engine” (pp. 59, 164), “Machine” (p. 164), “Tongue” (p. 195), “Ear” (pp. 195, 200, 203), “Nose” (p. 201), “Sprout” (p. 202), and “Handle” (p. 203) are all Freudian jokes on “penis.” But to get the full effect of Swift’s double entendres we must look not at single words but at a whole passage. At the end of a paragraph full of words such as “propagate,” “Loppings,” and “Protuberancy,” we get this:

Lastly, the devouter Sisters, who lookt upon all extraordinary Dilatations of that Member, as Protrusions of Zeal, or spiritual Excrencies, were sure to honor every Head they say upon, as if they had been Marks of Grace; but, especially, that of the Preacher, whose Ears were usually of the prime Magnitude; which upon that Account, he was very frequent and exact in exposing with all Advantages to the People: in his Rhetorical Paroxysms, turning sometimes to hold forth the one, and sometimes to hold forth the other: From which Custom, the whole Operation of Preaching is to this very Day among their Professors, styled by the Phrase of Holding forth. (p. 202)

Although Swift’s subject is Puritan preachers and their effect on their congregations, he forces us to recognize the sexual connotations of this relationship, so that by the end of the paragraph, “Rhetorical Paroxysms” and “Holding forth” have both come to mean orgasm. Of course, the equation is never absolute, and Swift throughout pretends to be talking only about the language of these preachers; but the ambiguity of his own language is enough to damn the religious practices of the Puritans by associating their services with orgies. Yet we cannot escape paradoxes: Swift satirizes the seductive rhetoric of dissenting preachers, but it is the seductive-
ness of his own rhetoric that makes that satire possible; at the same
time, it takes two to have rhetorical intercourse, and in a double
entendre it is the reader himself who gives a perfectly clean word its
dirty meaning. Since words are like seeds, those scattered on a
fruitful ground "will multiply far beyond either the Hopes or
Imagination of the Sower" (p. 186). Swift's puns turn a good reader
into an irresponsible one. Thus we end up guilty of overreading
while Swift, like Sterne in Tristram Shandy, may pretend to a
transparent innocence.

Some puns have no satiric purpose whatsoever. Here Swift plays
on the double meaning of a word: anxious to try his dedication, the
Modern climbed "a prodigious Number of dark, winding Stairs; But
found them all in the same Story, both of your Lordship and them­selves" (p. 24). Here he fools with the etymology of a word: giving
Cicero's advice concerning English hackney-coachmen, the Modern
goes on, "For, to speak a bold Truth, it is a fatal Miscarriage . . . "
(p. 168). And here he makes a double pun on the etymology of a
word and an old superstition: discoursing on the gallows ladder, the
Modern says, "'Tis observed by Foreigners themselves, to the Honor
of our Country, that we excel all Nations in our Practice and Under­standing of this Machine" (pp. 58-59). Swift is out to have fun, and
this is proved finally by that single pun in the "Apology" in which
he accuses Wotton of "going out of his way to be waggish, to tell us
of a Cow that prickt up her Tail" (p. 19). Daringly, Swift in this
instance breaks into his serious argument with a joke, taking the
chance he may appear as waggish as Wotton. It is as if, having held
his own waggishness in check through the entire "Apology," Swift
on the last page cannot hold any longer and slips for a moment into
a parodic style more appropriate to the body of the Tale. 52

As Swift says in the Introduction to Polite Conversation, puns
"break, or very much entangle the Thread of Discourse." 53 His view
here is comparable to Freud's in Jokes and Their Relation to the
Unconscious: "the diversion of a train of thought, the displacement
of the psychical emphasis onto a topic other than the opening one." 54
But who in A Tale of a Tub keeps derailing us, the Modern
or Swift? To say that puns in the Tale are always serious ironies is to
say that Swift's relation to his persona is always antagonistic, which
clearly it is not. It is perhaps possible to say that the Modern moves
always in an elaborative, expansive direction, whereas Swift moves
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in the opposite direction, achieving an explosive compression of ideas in few words. But the neatness of such a juxtaposition is quite un-Swiftian. I think it is truer to our experience in reading the Tale to say simply that its style pulls simultaneously in two directions, in general toward a belabored wordiness, and in many particular instances toward an incisive brevity. When Swift packs his words close, what results are oxymorons like "oracular Belches" (p. 156) and, with even greater compression, neologisms like "Reincrudation" or puns like "Possession" or "Paroxysms." These terms are abstract and physical, serious and comic, exemplary and parodic at the same time. Both the Modern and Swift are in each of them.

Wordplay in A Tale of a Tub may suggest the Modern's verbal irresponsibility, but it is likewise one of Swift's most important and subtle ways of communicating to his reader. Thus while the surface ideas in the following passage are the persona's, the deeper effects are not. Complaining first of "a superficial Vein among many Readers of the present Age," the Modern goes on to argue that

Wisdom is a Fox, who after long hunting, will at last cost you the Pains to dig out: 'Tis a Cheese, which by how much the richer, has the thicker, the homelier, and the courser Coat; and whereof to a judicious Palate, the Maggots are the best. 'Tis a Sack-Posset, wherein the deeper you go, you will find it the sweeter. Wisdom is a Hen, whose Cackling we must value and consider, because it is attended with an Egg; But then, lastly, 'tis a Nut, which unless you chuse with Judgment, may cost you a Tooth, and pay you with nothing but a Worm. In consequence of these momentous Truths, the Grubaean Sages have always chosen to convey their Precepts and their Arts, shut up within the Vehicles of Types and Fables, which having been perhaps more careful and curious in adorning, than was altogether necessary, it has fared with these Vehicles after the usual Fate of Coaches over-finely painted and gilt; that the transitory Gazers have so dazzled their Eyes, and fill'd their Imaginations with the outward Lustre, as neither to regard or consider, the Person or the Parts of the Owner within. A Misfortune we undergo with somewhat less Reluctancy, because it has been common to us with Pythagoras, Aesop, Socrates, and other of our Predecessors. (P. 66)

Swift's characteristic slippages of meaning are the essence of the humor and satire in this passage. "Grubaean," a brilliant coinage, generally echoes the corruption of the whole passage, and more particularly offers a pun on "Worms," which ends the preceding sentence, and "Maggots," which occurs a few lines above. Swift's transformation is worth tracing:
To realize all of Swift's wit, the reader must dig out this transformation in reverse order. If he does, he finds that what began for the Modern as the kernel of wisdom has become for Swift the filthy Grub-Street parasite who feeds on the wisdom of others. Moreover, Swift does not leave it at this, but develops another pun on "Vehicle," meaning both a literary form and a gentleman's coach; in this context the words "convey," "shut up within," and "transitory" all assume double meanings. At any rate, Swift finally works his way back to the problem of the reader, who may be so "dazzled" by the outside of A Tale of a Tub's vehicle that he will be unable to consider the owner within. Swift has by the end of the paragraph made an extremely complex analogy—

\[
\text{Nut} : \text{Coach} : \text{Fable} :: \text{Worm} : \text{Gentlemen} : \text{Wisdom}
\]

—and thus the Tale itself, like a nut, may break a tooth, or like a gilt coach, blind our eyes to what is inside. What is at the start of the paragraph the Modern's criticism of the superficiality of modern readers has been transformed by the end into Swift's criticism of the superficiality of modern writers, of whom the Modern Author himself is the prime example. The situation is even more complicated than this, however, for the Modern professes a depth that he cannot deliver on, although Swift does, and thus in a sense fulfills his persona's unwitting claims.

Swift's characteristic handling of words permits him to twist the Modern's point of view into his own. The coinage "Grubaean," the pun on "Vehicle," and what we might call the bleeding of meaning throughout the whole passage—all this forces on us at least two points of view and a discomforting density of meaning. While
theoretically turning over the paragraph to his persona, Swift's verbal ingenuity carries it well beyond him. Swift objects here to shutting up ideas in types and fables, and despite his metaphors, he avoids that; he writes about ideas in an altogether different way, allowing connotation to beget connotation to beget connotation. Words in the Tale never come as mere static, explicit, ahistorical entities. Of course, Swift's powerfully resonant use of words, plus his apparent ease in the face of compounded ambiguity, put tremendous responsibility on his reader: "Unless you chuse with Judgment," he warns us. A reader must be able to spy Swift inside this gilt vehicle.

"Let us ask ourselves," says Wittgenstein, "why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep?" In A Tale of a Tub neologisms and puns demonstrate the paradox that while the Modern engages in a kind of anticreation, a kind of writing that destroys reality, Swift himself is truly creating, using the Modern's words in order to rub our noses in reality. Neologisms and puns both challenge the stricter boundaries of language, and in that sense can be dangerously destructive of it and the world it mirrors; yet in the very process of breaking language down, neologisms and puns force a reconsideration of words and their relation to reality. Thus while the Modern is turning reality into cool lexical abstraction, Swift, simultaneously, is destroying that lexical abstraction in order to reconstitute language on another, more direct, more realistic basis. Destruction in the Tale becomes a kind of creation.


5. Denis Donoghue, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 21. Cf. Strang, p. 1948: "For Swift the central linguistic issue was not how the language could and should be extended, but how the writer could make use of its resources; for him, questions about language and style have, in this sense, almost coalesced."


7. I echo the directions to the Dictionary's researchers, who were told in 1879 to "Make a quotation for every word that strikes you as rare, obsolete, old-fashioned, new, or used in a peculiar way" and to pay special attention to what might be first or last uses. See "Historical Introduction" (Oxford, 1884), l:xi. References to Swift are by no means confined to *A Tale of a Tub*: for example, check the words "cephalagic," "debellator," "eludible," "modernism," "prize-fighting," "Provincial," "tritical," "triumfeminate," "triumph," and "trumpery."


14. Cf. p. 99, where Swift speaks ironically of critics who "invented other Terms instead thereof that were more cautious and mystical."


16. According to the OED, these words from the Survey were by 1710 no longer in use: "Restance," "bewray," "Inurement," "roomage," "disauthorize," "disordinate," "at Suddains," and "Surprizals."

17. In addition, Swift deliberately introduces older spellings of words, as "Lanthorn" (pp. 36, 192), "Fasion" (p. 76), and "Rarieties" (p. 110). See Glossary under "Fasion."

18. See Glossary for a complete listing. I have attempted to verify the dates for the first usages by checking the words in seventeenth-century dictionaries.

19. The following words had entered the vocabulary of English within the ten years preceding the publication of *A Tale of a Tub*: "bigotted" (p. 122), "Briguing" (p. 65), "Chocolate-Houses" (p. 74), "cleanlily" (p. 192), "Critick" (p. 209), "Delicatesse" (p. 80), "Exchange-Women" (p. 140), "Inclemencies" (p. 56), "Innuendo" (pp. 114, 169, 186), "Spunging-house" (p. 204), and "Transposal" (p. 43). Since Swift seems to have written the bulk of the Tale in 1696 and 1697, this list represents words that were apparently no more than three years old when Swift was at work on his satire. See Glossary.

21. Compare the introductory remarks in the dictionaries of Thomas Blount and Edward Phillips. Blount, “To the Reader,” *Glossographia* (London, 1656), n.p.: “By this new world of Words, I found we were slipt into that condition which Seneca complains of in his time; When mens minds once begin to enure themselves to dislike, whatever is usual is disdained: They affect novelty in speech, they recal oreworn and uncouth words, they forge new phrases, and that which is newest is best liked; there is presumptuous, and far fetching of words.” Phillips, Preface, *The New World of English Words* (London, 1658), n.p.: “Whether this innovation of words, deprave, or enrich our English Tongue, is a consideration that admits of various censures, according to the different fancies of men. Certainly, as by an invasion of strangers, many of the Old Inhabitants must needs to be either slain, or forced to fly the Land; so it happens in the introducing of strange words, the old ones, in whose room they come, must needs in time be forgotten, and grow obsolete.”


25. Counter to Guthkelch and Smith, I have restored the reading of the fifth edition. See Glossary.


28. See Glossary.


30. Swift’s footnote will not let us escape the irony: “Alluding to the Word Microcosm, or a little World, as Man hath been called by Philosophers.” For a fine discussion of the clothes metaphor in the eighteenth century, see Paul Fussell, “The Wardrobe of the Imagination,” chap. 9 of *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford, 1966). “It is easy to forget now,” says Fussell, “that eighteenth-century costume is conceived with a powerful symbolic dimension” (p. 211).

31. Cf. “sedate” (p. 139), a word used first by Locke in 1693.

32. But he uses it on p. 207.

33. See Swift’s *Tatler*, no. 230. Cf. “thundring” (p. 118) and “fatning” (p. 169).

34. See Glossary under “Yeomantry.”

35. Note, too, that “Reincrudation” sounds like a lexical enhancement of “crud,” just as “Fastidiosity” sounds like an extreme fastidiousness.


37. Of Swift’s collecting for *A Modest Defence* and other pieces, Herbert Davis says: “We may well consider these activities as the natural occupation of one who had just finished diverting himself with *A Tale of a Tub*. For there he had shown all the
dangerous possibilities of indulgence in verbal wit, parodying and imitating the extravagances of the previous age, almost allowing the same devils to possess him for a moment in order to rid himself of them for ever; but perhaps not quite succeeding" (*A Proposal*, p. xli).

38. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3d ed. (Norfolk, Conn., 1953), pp. 106–9, argues that in the seventeenth century the pun was a less conscious, less refined affair than it was in the eighteenth century. Swift's punning may have a connection with Wilkins's theory of language; see Hugh Kenner, "Pope's Reasonable Rhymes," *ELH* 40 (Spring 1974): 74–88.


42. Cf. p. 95, where Swift puns on "Altitude" in the same two senses.

43. The whole sentence is: "For, Cant and Vision are to the Ear and Eye, the same that Tickling is to the Touch." Thus if "Vision" is the art of seeing something where there is nothing to be seen, then "Cant" must be the art of speaking when there is nothing to say.

44. And on its orthography; in his poem "The Grand Question Debated," Swift contracts the word "clothes" to "clo'es" (line 136).

45. See Glossary.

46. See Glossary.

47. For this suggestion I am indebted to my former colleague, Professor William McCollom, Department of English, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

48. Thomas Willis in the *Practice of Physick, Being the Whole Works of that Renowned and Famous Physician*, trans. S. Pordage (London, 1684), p. 202, speaks of madmen who are "as it were Demoniacks or possessed with the Devil."


50. In the "Apology" Swift defends his use of double entendres in a religious context.

51. On a couple of occasions Swift may be playing on the etymological association between "pen" and "penis," as with "Quill" and "Pith" (p. 70) and "Point" and "Feather" (p. 169). In *The Merchant of Venice*, 5. 1. 237, Shakespeare makes such a joke.

52. Another possible but far less obvious pun in the "Apology" occurs in the sentence used as the epigraph for this chapter: in "graver Characters" (p. 4; cf. p. 11) Swift seems to be punning on several meanings of "characters"—in the sense of his own or his readers' distinguishing "characteristic," and also in the sense of printed letters of the alphabet (with an additional pun on "graver"). He may also be making a subtle joke at the expense of Wilkins's *Essay Towards a Real Character*: at one point Wilkins says, "The Hebrew Character, as to the shape of it, though it appear solemn and grave. . . ." Unlike "waggish," however, this kind of supersubtle pun hardly ripples the serious surface of Swift's argument in the "Apology."


56. Cary Nelson, "Form and Claustrophobia: Intestinal Space in *A Tale of a Tub*," chap. 5 of *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (Urbana, 1973), p. 115, notes that "maggots" was also an eighteenth-century image for "crazy schemes." One definition in the *OED* is "a whimsical or perverse fancy."

57. An oxymoron like "oracular Belches." Swift may be thinking here of "grubby," meaning stunted or dwarfish, a word that first appeared some hundred years earlier. He may also be punning on "Grubaean's Ages."

58. Swift seems especially to be enjoying the ambiguity of the word "transitory," which is used also earlier in the paragraph and which here refers both to a moving vehicle and to the evanescence of those watching the vehicle.

