Lexical Fields

*I was laughed to scorn, for a Clown and a Pedant, without all Taste and Refinement.*

The seventeenth century was the age of the dictionary, and the emphasis on "hard words" in the dictionaries of Blount (1656), Coles (1676), and others, plus the publication of specialized dictionaries, like Blount's *Nomo-Lexicon: A Law Dictionary* (1670) and B. E.'s *New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* (1690), points to a special interest in the usages of certain professional groups or levels of society. *A Tale of a Tub* in prose, like *Hudibras* in verse, reflects the linguistic fragmentation of its time. As Wotton suggested in 1705, the style of the *Tale* is a shocking juxtaposition of high and low, literary and colloquial, proper and vulgar. And though in the "Apology" Swift ridicules Wotton's own improprieties, he himself scrambles vocabularies—but to ironic effect.

In particular, the *Tale* echoes a century-long theoretical and practical struggle between a Latinate, polysyllabic diction and an Anglo-Saxon, colloquial diction. For ironic purposes—and because he enjoyed language in all its reaches—Swift wrote his first prose work in a unique, bastardized style that jams Latinisms and colloquialisms up against one another. Even more than Donne, Burton, or Browne, he capitalized on the Romance and Germanic contradictions inherent in our language. Swift delights in parodying the jargons peculiar to religion, law, criticism, medicine, and philosophy, and in peppering these specialized, pedantic vocabularies with down-home colloquialisms. Much of his success in the *Tale* and elsewhere depends upon his keen sensitivity to what I call "lexical field"—a word's complex of related words, level of usage, and aura of tone and value. Shifting lexical fields is one of Swift's chief devices for humor and satire.
What Wimsatt calls "philosophic words" were appropriate to seventeenth-century philosophers, scientists, and others because they imply a belief in the unity and systematization of knowledge and an intellectual control of real phenomena, and because these attitudes were conveyed in an assured tone. "The scientific authority, the deliberation and certainty," says Wimsatt, "is backed up by a thump on the table." Browne's *Vulgar Errors*, which Swift surely had in mind as he wrote the *Tale*, is an extreme instance of this philosophic style. In this passage Browne takes up the popular belief that chameleons feed on air: "Whatsoever properly nouriseth before its assimilation, by the action of natural heat it receiveth a corpulency or incrassation progressional unto its conversion; which notwithstanding cannot be effected upon air; for the action of heat doth not condense but rarifie that body, and by attenuation, rather then for nutrition, disposeth it for expulsion." The Anglo-Latin "assimilation," "action" (twice), "corpulency," "incrassation," "progressional," "conversion," "condense," "rarifie," "attenuation," "nutrition," and "expulsion"—all suggest the order of scientific abstraction. "By their very removal from the ordinary," says Wimsatt, "the Latin words suggest the principles of things—a reason or an explanation." In this passage Browne's philosophic words are based on the intellectual concepts of cause and effect, increase and decrease, analogy and antithesis. Although his ideas about chameleons may be wrong, his language, at any rate, lends his argument credibility.

But if the seventeenth century fostered a Browne, it also fostered a Bunyan; and in *A Letter to a Young Gentleman* Swift cites *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a paragon of stylistic simplicity. Surely he would have admired a passage like the following: "And with that, a great darkness and horror fell upon Christian, so that he could not see before him; also here he in great measure lost his senses, so that he could neither remember nor orderly talk of any of those sweet refreshments that he had met with in the way of his pilgrimage. But all the words that he spake still tended to discover that he had horror of mind and hearty fears that he should die in that River, and never obtain entrance in at the Gate." Swift admits that he has been better entertained and informed by Bunyan than by many preachers of university erudition who "are apt to fill their Sermons with philosophical Terms, and Notions of the metaphysical or abstracted kind." In the passage from Bunyan there is not a word that could
not be understood readily by a man of small education and ordinary intelligence. Whereas in the single sentence from Browne there are 26 polysyllables out of a total of 52 words (50 percent), in the two sentences from Bunyan there are only 19 polysyllables out of 89 words (21 percent). And whereas in the passage from Browne there are 17 words of three or more syllables (33 percent), in the passage from Bunyan there are only 5 three-syllable words (6 percent). No principles of things here. Browne writes about the superstitions of the common people in a highly academic prose, whereas Bunyan writes for the common people in a direct, unadorned prose reminiscent of the Authorized Version. In *A Tale of a Tub* Swift embraced both styles simultaneously.

Hard words crowd every page of the *Tale*. The Modern wants to impress us with his learning, and he parades that learning in a difficult vocabulary. Erudite, polysyllabic, Latinate words from this lexical field lend the book its philosophical air:

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The *Tale* has about it the musty smell of university and laboratory. But the Modern’s big words expose him; he uses them mechanically, like a poet who has just discovered Roget. He shuffles fat Latinisms not as symbols for ideas but in lieu of ideas.

Then there is that “other” diction of *A Tale of a Tub*, those words more common to speech than to writing, more appropriate in the mouths of farmers, tradesmen, and fishwives than of scholars, preachers, and philosophers. Here is a sampling of words from the *Tale* that are found also in B. E.’s *New Dictionary of the Canting Crew*, the first dictionary of English slang:

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<th>bilkt (p. 75)</th>
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<td>Bully (pp. 19, 165)</td>
<td>Jakes (pp. 36, 163)</td>
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And there are innumerable other low words not in B. E., such as "Fart" (p. 112), "Gear" (p. 195), "grunting" (p. 203), "jog" (p. 188), "pop" (p. 181), and "Spittle" (p. 129). Words from this lexical field are mostly of Anglo-Saxon etymology, are of one or two syllables, and are dominated by abrupt consonants; some, like "snivel" and "Thwack," are onomatopoetic. Although the Tale is composed for the most part in a highly literate, bookish vocabulary, its many colloquialisms mean that we are always brought back, if fitfully, to ordinary speech.

Swift achieves the same effect with his clichés. Although in A Letter to a Young Gentlemen he warns against "old threadbare Phrases," he employs them throughout A Tale of a Tub:

> Time which has lain heavy upon my Hands (p. 30)
> the breadth of a Hair (pp. 43, 81)
> as good Luck would have it (p. 87)
> time out of Mind (p. 121)
> kickt out of Doors (pp. 122, 138, 171)
> when the Fulness of time is come (p. 148)
> stifled, or hid under a Bushel (p. 153)
> the Reason is just at our Elbow (p. 172)
> left him in the lurch (p. 204)
> it would run like Wild-Fire (p. 207)

Again the words are primarily monosyllabic and of Anglo-Saxon origin and are familiar to all of us. Clichés in the Tale introduce elements of spontaneous, everyday talk into the Modern’s style; but coupled with his highly self-conscious, learned vocabulary, they seem essentially like unwitting slips of the tongue. Just as the Modern literally goes blank at the heights of some of his most abstruse arguments, so he drops into clichés in the midst of his predominantly intellectual phraseology. Swift means for us to
realize that a speaker who uses clichés is not only falling back on everyone else's words but also on everyone else's ideas. On the other hand, it is difficult to pin Swift down, for on several occasions he himself—surely not the Modern—toys humorously with a cliche, as in "ought to be understood cum grano Salis" (p. 89) and "[Nature] put her best Furniture forward" (p. 173). And that Swift's clichés are not simply an ironic device is shown by their frequency in his correspondence, especially the Journal to Stella.

The following paragraph demonstrates the Tale's characteristic word-heaviness and its effect on the reader:

Tho' I have been hitherto as cautious as I could, upon all Occasions, most nicely to follow the Rules and Methods of Writing, laid down by the Example of our illustrious Moderns; yet has the unhappy shortness of my Memory led me into an Error, from which I must immediately extricate my self, before I can decently pursue my Principal Subject. I confess with Shame, it was an unpardonable Omission to proceed so far as I have already done, before I had performed the due Discourses, Expostulatory, Supplicatory, or Deprecatory with my good Lords the Criticks. Towards some Atonement for this grievous Neglect, I do here make humbly bold to present them with a short Account of themselves and their Art, by looking into the Original and Pedigree of the Word, as it is generally understood among us, and very briefly considering the antient and present State thereof. (P. 92)

Notice the words "Occasions," "cautious," "illustrious," "extricate," "Omission," "Discourses," "Expostulatory," "Supplicatory," "Deprecatory," and "Original." Swift is having fun here with Latinisms, most obviously in his string of "-tory" adjectives, which concludes, tellingly, with a word used in this sense for the first time in English. The sheer multiplication of words (especially adjectives and adverbs), plus the melodramatic parody of authorial apologia ("I confess with Shame") and ironic meticulousness ("Tho' I have been hitherto as cautious as I could")—all this gives the passage its superformal tone. Of course, Swift's real attitude everywhere shows through the bowing and scraping. "Our illustrious Moderns" and "my good Lords the Criticks" drip with sarcasm. And the contradictions inherent in the whole paragraph are caught in the Modern's unintentional (Swift's intentional) oxymoron: "I do here make humbly bold."

In the Tale Swift chooses to use his colloquial style sparingly, mostly for jarring loose some particularly offensive pedantry with
a well-placed word or phrase. But on a couple of occasions he quits his Latinisms altogether.

A Mountebank in Leicester-Fields, had drawn a huge Assembly about him. Among the rest, a fat unweildy Fellow, half stifled in the Press, would be every fit crying out, Lord! what a filthy Crowd is here; Pray, good People, give way a little, Bless me! what a Devil has rak'd this Rabble together: Z—ds, what squeezing is this! Honest Friend, remove your Elbow. At last, a Weaver that stood next him could hold no longer: A Plague confound you (said he) for an over-grown Sloven; and who (in the Devil's Name) I wonder, helps to make up the Crowd half so much as your self? Don't you consider (with a Pox) that you take up more room with that Carkass than any five here? Is not the Place as free for us as for you? Bring your own Guts to a reasonable Compass (and be d—n'd) and then I'll engage we shall have room enough for us all. (P. 46)

The distance between this passage and the passage on critics is as great as the distance between Browne and Bunyan. The sense of real speech is caught here in expletives like "Z—ds," "Bless me," and "with a Pox." And there are colloquialisms such as "filthy," "rak'd," "Rabble," "Sloven," and "Guts." The difference between the two passages can be measured: whereas polysyllables comprise 37 percent of the words in the passage on critics, here they comprise only 24 percent; and whereas in the first some 16 percent of the words are of three or more syllables, here a mere 4 percent are. The real difference, however, is in the quality of the diction. Both paragraphs set up a verbal relationship between people, but whereas the Modern treats the critics with a polysyllabic sycophancy (Swift's true feelings held under tenuous lexical control), the lowly weaver curses the blathering fat man (saying precisely what someone in that situation would feel like saying). The difference is crucial, for all of Swift's satire depends upon our being able to sense when his language is being used to mask ignorance and when it is being used as a means to understanding. One guideline we have is that polysyllabic, Latinate diction ordinarily represents Swift's satire of his speaker, whereas colloquial diction suggests that Swift is sincere.

Swift's definition of good style—"Proper Words in proper Places"—suggests the importance he put on context in the use of words. Yet his own satirical style could be more aptly described as proper words in improper places, or better, as improper words in proper places. A good example of Swift's sensitivity to context is to be found in one of his best-known sentences: "For, if we take an Examination of what is generally understood by Happiness, as it
has Respect, either to the Understanding of the Senses, we shall find all its Properties and Adjuncts will herd under this short Definition: That, it is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived” (p. 171).

The terms “Examination,” “Properties,” “Adjuncts,” “Definition,” and “Possession” were all picked from the same lexical barrel—one labeled Polysyllabic Hard Words. “Herd,” on the other hand, was picked from another barrel—one labeled Monosyllabic Low Words. Although Swift reaches into another lexical field for just one word, the colloquial tone and animal connotations of that word are enough to shake the credibility of the Modern’s pseudointellectualism. How different the effect if we substitute a synonym like “assemble”! Of course, “herd” does not work alone: its tone echoes words like “Tickling” and phrases like “Dupe and play the Wag with,” which appear immediately above; and in the definition that follows, we are expected to catch the pun on “Possession.” But the full force of this particular sentence depends on our responsiveness to Swift’s quite intentional use of an improper word in a proper place. It is as if Swift means to show that the pedantic Modern is a farm boy underneath, a new London dandy (like the three brothers) with the smell of cow dung still clinging to his shoes.

That Swift was aware of lexical field is shown not only by his remarks on language in A Letter to a Young Gentleman and A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue but also by some things he says in A Tale of a Tub itself. At one point he objects to “the Cant, or Jargon of the Trade” (p. 28), and elsewhere he uses formulas such as “which are vulgarly called” (p. 79), “to speak in Form” (p. 155), and “as the common Phrase is” (p. 192). In the preface he complains about the tenderness of modern wit, which “has its Walks and Purlieus, out of which it may not stray the breadth of a Hair” (p. 43). And in the “Apology,” his etymology of the word “Banter” demonstrates his serious attentiveness to level of usage: “This Polite Word of theirs was first borrowed from the Bullies in White-Fryars, then fell among the Footmen, and at last retired to the Pedants, by whom it is applied as properly to the Productions of Wit, as if I should apply it to Sir Isaac Newton’s Mathematicks” (p. 19). “Banter” is of unknown etymology, and in 1690 Locke uses it as an example of the formation of a new word: “He that first brought the word sham, wheedle, or banter in use, put together as he thought fit those ideas he made it stand for.” Swift’s etymology, though humorous, may
well be correct in suggesting that the word originated as a slang term, only gradually working its way up from vulgar to polite society. Every word has its proper lexical field, and although “banter” is appropriate in the company of other slang—low words like “sham” or “wheedle,” for instance—it is inappropriate amidst more polite, learned, or literary words. Yet while Swift the philologist objects to the incongruous use of colloquialisms, Swift the satirist saw here an opportunity for powerful ironic effect.

In each of the following passages one or more colloquial words or phrases serve momentarily to rip away the Modern’s learned rhetoric and let us hear Swift. I have eliminated the original italics and have italicized these colloquial words and phrases.

Nor have my Endeavours been wanting to second so useful an Example: But it seems, there is an unhappy Expence usually annexed to the Calling of a God-Father, which was clearly out of my Head, as it is very reasonable to believe. Where the Pinch lay, I cannot certainly affirm. (P. 72)

But Heroick Virtue it self hath not been exempt from the Obloquy of Evil Tongues. For it hath been objected, that those Antient Heroes, famous for their Combating so many Giants, and Dragons, and Robbers, were in their own Persons a greater Nuisance to Mankind, than any of those Monsters they subdued. (P. 94)

Martin had still proceeded as gravely as he began; and doubtless, would have delivered an admirable Lecture of Morality, which might have exceedingly contributed to my Reader’s Repose, both of Body and Mind: (the true ultimate End of Ethicks;) But Jack was already gone a Flight-shot beyond his Patience. (Pp. 139-40)

For, I have observed, that from a laborious Collection of Seven Hundred Thirty Eight Flowers, and shining Hints of the best Modern Authors, digested with great Reading, into my Book of Common-places; I have not been able after five Years to draw, hook, or force into common Conversation, any more than a Dozen. (Pp. 209–10)

The colloquialisms are in each case out of key with the accompanying words and phrases. The result is a sort of stylistic cacophony that exposes the Modern’s pretentious intellectualization. Swift is never willing to surrender authorship totally to his persona, and these heavy, at least partially imagistic, socially low words yank us suddenly back to his point of view. When we come upon one of Swift’s colloquialisms, we are forced to reevaluate what we have just read, put it into a more sensible perspective, and perceive that though words can be used to talk about reality, they are no substitute
for it. Swift's sympathies are not with the Modern's rationalizations but with everyday things such as pinches, robbers, arrows, and hooks.

The stylistic satire in the Tale is directed less at particular authors or works than it is at certain types of diction and the wrongheadedness they imply. Critics have in this sense been misled by Swift's own reference in the "Apology" to places "where the Author personates the Style and Manner of other Writers, whom he has a mind to expose" (p. 7). We must keep in mind that Swift is pointing here only to some few passages (he makes this clear), and that he is answering Wotton and Bentley, not offering a reader's guide to A Tale of a Tub. True enough, Cervantes, Browne, Marvell, Dryden, Rabelais, Lucretius, Shakespeare, Descartes, Milton, Wotton, Bentley, and the Authorized Version are all echoed in the Tale; but Swift's method is inclusive, he was writing (as he put it) when his reading was fresh in his head, and, surely, to track down his allusions and parodies would be the work of seven years, and then some. His satire is typically directed at groups rather than individuals: looking back from his letter to Pope of 29 September 1725 concerning Gulliver's Travels, I think it is wiser to say that even thirty years earlier Swift's ire was raised not by Counselor Such-a-One or Physician Such-a-One, but by the whole tribe of lawyers or physicians.

Swift objects to the exclusiveness of the jargon of law, religion, medicine, criticism, science, philosophy, and the occult. Cleverly, he compels us to face this problem by flooding the Tale with specialized terms peculiar to each of these professions: from lawyers we get "Fee-Simple" (p. 47), "Codicil annexed" (p. 87), and "Heirs general" (p. 90); from preachers and theologians "Antitype" (p. 40), "Vessel" (pp. 58, 158), and "Circumfusion" (p. 79); from physicians "Fistula" (p. 166), "Diureticks" (p. 185), and "Pilgrim's Salve" (p. 196); from scientists "annihilate" (p. 35), "Mechanick" (p. 101), and "Hermetically" (p. 126); from philosophers "Signification" (p. 57), "Forma informans" (p. 151), and "Vortex" (p. 167); from critics "Emblem" (p. 61), "Hieroglyph" (p. 98), and "Observanda's" (p. 148); and from the Dark Authors "Verè aedepi" (p. 114), "Arcanum" (pp. 114, 127), and "Opus magnum" (pp. 127, 187).

Although these different types of jargon are sprinkled throughout the Tale, Swift at certain points concentrates on parodying the style of a single profession. And it is in such passages that his sensitivity
to language stands out; in them he establishes a credible jargon for a profession while simultaneously undercutting that jargon with a few earthy colloquialisms of his own. And by satirizing the cant of a profession, Swift satirizes the profession itself—its methods, practitioners, and basic assumptions. Particularly apt are his parodies of the language of lawyers and the law, of theological discourse, and of contemporary medical treatises.

When Gulliver is asked by his Houyhnhnm master to explain something of English law, the question opens Swift’s spleen. Interestingly, he levels much of his criticism at the language of lawyers, who practice “the Art of proving by Words multiplied for the Purpose, that White is Black, and Black is White, according as they are paid”:28 “It is likewise to be observed, that this Society hath a peculiar Cant and Jargon of their own, that no other Mortal can understand, and wherein all their Laws are written, which they take special Care to multiply; whereby they have wholly confounded the very Essence of Truth and Falsehood, of Right and Wrong; so that it will take Thirty Years to decide whether the Field, left me by my Ancestors for six Generations, belong to me, or to a Stranger three Hundred Miles off.”29 It is the prolixity and ambiguity of legal style that rankle Swift most, and this is precisely what he had opposed years before in A Tale of a Tub. Even then he had seen the connection between lexical irresponsibility and moral irresponsibility.

Of course, the special accomplishment of the Tale is Swift’s neat way of sliding into a demonstration of the kind of thing he objects to.

For, as to the Bar, tho’ it be compounded of the same Matter, and designed for the same Use, it cannot however be well allowed the Honor of a fourth, by reason of its level or inferior Situation, exposing it to perpetual Interruption from Collaterals. Neither can the Bench it self, tho raised to a proper Eminency, put in a better Claim, whatever its Advocates insist on. For if they please to look into the original Design of its Erection, and the Circumstances or Adjuncts subservient to that Design, they will soon acknowledge the present Practice exactly correspondent to the Primitive Institution, and both to answer the Etymology of the Name, which in the Phoenician Tongue is a Word of great Signification, importing, if literally interpreted, The Place of Sleep; but in common Acceptation, A Seat well bolster’d and cushion’d, for the Repose of old and gouty Limbs: Senes ut in otia tuta recedant. Fortune being indebted to them this Part of Retaliation, that, as formerly, they have long Talkt, whilst others Slept, so now they may Sleep as long whilst others Talk. (Pp. 56–57)
The Modern is speaking here of the court, and so Swift throws in a number of legal terms: "Collaterals," "Claim," "Advocates," and so forth. But his parody goes beyond this, and he manages to give the passage much of the formality, redundancy, and circumlocution common to legal documents in his (or our) period.

Swift's objection in *Gulliver's Travels* to the jargon "wherein all their Laws are written" suggests that we look there for the target of his parody. Compare, for example, the style of the above excerpt from the *Tale* with this from *The Statutes of the Realm* for the year 1677, the sort of legal document Swift would have had easy access to while at Moor Park.

That all and every Judgment Order and Decree to be made as aforesaid shall be good and effectual both in Law and Equity to all intents and purposes and shall be obeyed by all persons concerned therein and shall bind and conclude all persons Bodies Corporate or Politicke notwithstanding any disability matter or thing to the contrary. And all such Builders and persons interested shall hold and enjoy their Estates Terms and Interests so decreed according to the tenour of such Order and Decree notwithstanding any other Estate Right Title or Interest in Law or Equity Trust Charge or other Incumbrance whatsoever, and that noe Writt or Error or Certiorari shall be admitted or allowed for the reversall or removeall of the same.

Note the run-on syntax, redundant doublets, and pervasive abstraction. Swift catches all of this. The sponginess of "Law and Equity to all intents and purposes and shall be obeyed by all persons concerned therein" is aptly parodied in "Circumstances and Adjuncts subservient to that Design, they will soon acknowledge the present Practice exactly correspondent."

Much of the ironic formality of the *Tale* derives from the Modern's meticulous legalese. Swift is familiar with the terms "Right of Presentation" (p. 47), "Scandalum Magnatum" (p. 53), "Wills . . . Nuncupatory" (p. 85), "Innuendo" (pp. 114, 169, 186), and "separate Maintenance" (p. 121)—all of which he could have picked up while a student of divinity. But these rather specialized terms are padded out with quasi-legal words and phrases like "Claimant" (p. 21), "form aforesaid" (p. 47), "positive Precept" (pp. 85, 87), "sufficient Warrant" (p. 113), "pursuant to which" (p. 121), and numerous "whereofs," "thereins," and "whereases." Of course, we are meant always to look past the Modern's wordy, circumlocutious style; in the bench passage, for example, the sheer weight of his words (to use a Swiftian metaphor) drags him down into nonsense.
Swift's point of view is likewise implied in the word "gouty," from another lexical field, and in the colloquial, monosyllabic analogy at the close of the paragraph. It is interesting that in this instance Swift and the Modern are both criticizing the law; but in addition Swift cleverly turns the Modern's style into a bad example of the style of documents of that profession. Yet somehow we are not bothered by the inconsistency. The effect is what Swift is after: the Modern says that lawyers and judges use courtrooms to catch up on their sleep—and his language shows why they do. Although the satire of *A Tale of a Tub* is not everywhere directed at the law, its pervasively formal, quasi-legal style is one of Swift's important satiric techniques.

In *A Letter to a Young Gentleman* Swift objects to the comparably dense style of some preachers. "I am apt to put my self in the Place of the Vulgar," he says, typically, "and think many Words difficult or obscure, which the Preacher will not allow to be so, because those words are obvious to Schollars." Swift's populist bias is apparent here: he is against polysyllables because they sail over the heads of vulgar (Swift uses the word in its unprejudicial sense) congregations. Although he lists many words he finds too "philosophical" or "metaphysical," a couple of them—"Ubiquity" (p. 154) and "Phoenomenon" (pp. 60, 165, 167)—he himself uses in the *Tale*. Indeed, much of the *Tale* is a prime example of the sort of aloof, pseudointellectual style the *Letter* demolishes point by point.

In a manner analogous to the passage on the bench, Swift in what follows is speaking of religious practices, and so echoes the language of religious discourse:

> It is from this Custom of the Priests, that some Authors maintain these *Aeolists*, to have been very antient in the World. Because, the Delivery of their Mysteries, which I have just now mention'd, appears exactly the same with that of other antient Oracles, whose Inspirations were owing to certain subterraneous *Effluviums of Wind*, delivered with the same Pain to the Priest, and much about the same Influence on the People. It is true indeed, that these were frequently managed and directed by *Female* Officers, whose Organs were understood to be better disposed for the Admission of those Oracular *Gusts*, as entring and passing up thro' a Receptacle of greater Capacity, and causing also a Prurieny by the Way, such as with due Management, hath been refined from a Carnal, into a Spiritual Extasie. And to strengthen this profound Conjecture, it is farther insisted, that this Custom of *Female* Priests is kept up still in certain refined Colleges of our *Modern Aeolists*, who are agreed to receive their Inspiration, derived thro' the Receptacle aforesaid, like their Ancestors, the *Sibyls*. (Pp. 156–57)
Note the terms “Aeolists” (twice), “Inspiration” (twice), “subterraneous,” “Effluviums,” “Admission,” “Oraculous,” “Receptacle” (twice), “Capacity,” “Pruriency,” “Carnal,” “Spiritual,” “Extasie,” and “Conjecture.” These Latinisms, along with academic formulas like “some Authors maintain,” “which I have just now mention’d,” and “it is farther insisted,” give the paragraph its learned air. But within this group of words the religious terms are undermined by other terms that have scientific, even bodily connotations: “subterraneous,” meaning this context not beneath the surface of the earth but within a man's bowels (found in Browne); “Effluviums,” meaning “flatulation” (found in Browne and Boyle); “Admission,” meaning the fact of being admitted into a human body (as opposed to a society or position); “Receptacle,” used here as a euphemism for “rump,” but hinting at “vagina” (cf. “receive” and its various religious connotations); and “Pruriency,” meaning the quality of itching, but also lascivious desire (seems not to have been used in this latter sense before Swift). Finally, in this learned context the word “Gusts” functions as an earthy synonym for “Effluviums” (the irony heightened by the epithet “Oracular”) and is a good example of Swift's subtle qualification of the Modern's rhetoric through a momentary shift in lexical field. As a matter of fact, in these few pages Swift toys unrelentingly with lexical field, locating synonyms for the word “Wind” in classical mythology (“Aeolus”), in religious enthusiasm (“Inspiration,” “Spirit,” and “Breath”), in scientific abstraction (“Effluvium”), in poetic diction (“Tempest”), and in low colloquialism (“Gusts” and “Belches”). By assembling so many hard words, Swift allows the Modern to masquerade as a seventeenth-century thinker; but by intermixing religious and decidedly nonreligious hard words, and by sliding irreverently from lexical field to lexical field, Swift manages to turn the mystery of belief into the smell of a fart and the excitement of an orgasm. The words “Inspiration” and “Extasie” carry all three connotations. So does Swift’s Latinate coinage “Aeolist.”

Although Wotton accuses the author of the Tale of a blasphemous “Game at Leap-Frog between Flesh and Spirit,” Swift has only exaggerated a tendency quite apparent in the religious style of his day. In fact, examples can be found on every page of Bentley's eight sermons delivered as part of the Boyle lectures at Cambridge in 1692.

Now, mutual gravitation or attraction, in our present acception of the words, is the same thing with this; 'tis an operation, or virtue, or
influence of distant bodies upon each other through an empty interval, without any effluvia, or exhalations, or other corporeal medium to convey and transmit it. This power, therefore, cannot be innate and essential to matter: and if it be not essential, it is consequently most manifest, since it doth not depend upon motion or rest, or figure or position of parts, which are all the ways that matter can diversify itself, that it could never supervene to it, unless impressed and infused into it by an immaterial and divine power. 

Answering the arguments of atheists, Bentley uses the principle of gravitation as a proof for the existence of God. In fact, both the Modern ("Mysteries") and Bentley ("divine power") are groping to explain an immaterial, apparently unexplainable force, and in so doing turn to the material, explainable operations and Latinate diction of contemporary science. Of course, whereas Bentley at least intends his physical analogy to document the power of God, the Modern (like the Aeolists) himself descends into the physical. Yet in a sense we may say that both passages debase the spiritual by mingling it with the material. The difference is only one of degree: even in Bentley one can find such terms as "attraction," "bodies," "corporeal," "motion," and "position"; Swift merely permits the potential physicality of such words from the religious writing of his time to flower into damning double entendres. His synonym for "Effluviums" is not "exhalations," as in Bentley, but "Gusts." Swift is mocking here not only the style of the dissenting preachers, but also the absurd conflation of religious argument with the physics of Boyle. And he satirizes the contradiction of disciplines through the juxtaposition of religious and scientific vocabularies.

As a final example of Swift's device of shifting lexical fields, let us turn to what is unquestionably the most famous passage in A Tale of a Tub. I have eliminated Swift's original italics and instead have italicized those words that stand out because of their decidedly colloquial connotations.

Whereof I have been farther convinced from some late Experiments. Last Week I saw a Woman flay'd, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse. Yesterday I ordered the Carcass of a Beau to be stript in my Presence; when we were all amazed to find so many unsuspected Faults under one Suit of Cloaths: Then I laid open his Brain, his Heart, and his Spleen; But, I plainly perceived at every Operation, that the farther we proceeded, we found the Defects encrease upon us in Number and Bulk: from all which, I justly formed this Conclusion to my self; That whatever Philosopher or Projector can find out an Art to sodder and patch up the Flaws and Imperfections of Nature,
will deserve much better of Mankind, and teach us a more useful Science, than that so much in present Esteem, of widening and exposing them (like him who held Anatomy to be the ultimate End of Physick.) And he, whose Fortunes and Dispositions have placed him in a convenient Station to enjoy the Fruits of this noble Art; He that can with Epicurus content his Ideas with the Films and Images that fly off upon his Senses from the Superficies of Things; Such a Man truly wise, creams off Nature, leaving the Sower and the Dregs, for Philosophy and Reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined Point of Felicity, called, the Possession of being well deceived; The Serene Peaceful State of being a Fool among Knaves. (Pp. 173-74)

Swift imitates here the manner of late seventeenth century writings on anatomy. The following excerpt from Thomas Willis's Of the Soul of Brutes bears an especially close resemblance to the passage from the Tale.

Anatomical observations plainly prove the contrary. Some time since, dissecting the dead Carcase of a Maid, dying of a sudden Leipothymy or swooning away, we found in the fleshy part of the Diaphragma a great Imposthume, with a bag full of filthy matter, and watery little bladders; yet she was not troubled ever with a Delirium or Phrensie. Some time since also when we had made an Anatomical Inspection of a Gentleman of the University, (of whom we have made mention in a late Tract) who dyed of a long spurious Pleurisie, it manifestly appeared, that a great Imposthume being ripened in the Pleura, and the intercostal Muscles, and broke inwardly, that a vast plenty of matter had flowed forth into the cavity of the Thorax, which gnawing the Diaphragma lying under, had made a great hole in it; nor was this man however in all his sickness Delirious, or Frantick. Wherefore, I think this Distemper scarce ever to be produced from such a cause: but that opinion seems to arise from hence, because often-times in a true Phrensie, together with a continual raving, the motion of the Diaphragma is wont to be hindred or perverted.40

We must realize that Willis is writing not for laymen but for other physicians, and that what may seem shockingly insensitive to us would have seemed simply matter-of-fact to those interested in anatomy. We would be as shocked today by the tone of an article in a medical journal.41 But Swift too was responding as a layman, and he recognizes the awful incongruity of talking about the dissection of a human being in such cool Latinisms as "Leipothymy," "Diaphragma," and "Imposthume." Does not "Leipothymy," after all, which Willis defines as "swooning away," mean in this case a sudden, unexplained death? And does not "Anatomical Inspection of a Gentleman" mean cutting up the corpse of a man and analyzing the pieces? Willis's diction tends to keep his cadavers at a distance, as
does his academic allusion to "a late Tract" and his argumentative method, which manages to transform a medical confusion into a rhetorical assertion.

In recounting his experiences with human dissection, the Modern, like Willis, tries to keep real phenomena under control of mind. He uses big words and a sterile tone in order to desensitize our consciences along with his own. And in the first part of the paragraph he does pretty well, piling up abstractions like "Proportion," "Wisdom," "Qualities," "Degree," and "Corporeal Beings." But as soon as the Modern turns to his real examples, these rationalizations give way to diseased cadavers. The generalized time frame becomes "Last Week" and "Yesterday." "Fallen under my Cognizance" is replaced by "I saw," "I ordered," and "I plainly perceived." And "most Corporeal Beings" turns into "a Woman flay'd" and "a Carcass of a Beau." Swift documents this switch from the abstract to the particular in part by sliding into a more personal tone (the greater frequency of the pronoun "I"), and also by moving his emphasis from the safe, fixed noun to the not-so-safe, active verb and its intensifying preposition ("fly off," "creams off," and "lap up"). But the chief sign of Swift's attitude toward the Modern's intellectualizations is to be found in his momentary shifts from polysyllabic Latinisms to monosyllabic colloquialisms. Such shifts set up ironies: the colloquialisms describe less dignified things ("the Sower and the Dregs") and less prestigious activities ("to sodder and patch up"), and clash mightily with the prevailing tone of the other words. The word "Carcass," used both by Willis and Swift, points up the difference between the two passages: Willis uses it in its neutral sense to mean simply the dead body of a man or beast; Swift uses it in this sense also, but with more than a side glance at its contemptuousness when applied to the human body. He wants us to catch the animalism in his use of the word "Carcass," and so he echoes it in the verbs "flay'd" and "lap up." In this passage Swift's low words undermine the Modern's attempts to gloss over unpleasant reality and divert a moral response to that reality. When in the last lines the Modern unwittingly acknowledges that he is a fool possessed, we have been prepared to agree with him.

But let us not overlook Willis's several shifts in lexical field. Amidst all the polysyllabic Latinisms, "ripened" and "gnawing" seem oddly out of place. So too the plain, literal phrases "bag full of filthy matter," "watery little bladders," and "had made a great hole
in it." Yet we should remember that Willis was writing prior to a time when the language of science had clearly and irrevocably split off from the language of everyday discourse, and his few Anglo-Saxonisms would not have struck other scientists as inconsistent. Swift, on the other hand, would have perceived in the incongruity of Willis's diction a horrifying insensitivity to human life. Indeed, I would guess that he would have seen how the casual literalisms only make the cold Latinisms more horrifying. Thus what Swift does is to assume the disparities he found in seventeenth-century English into his own style and then to heighten these disparities so as to draw attention to them. Swift's more frequent and more radical shifts of lexical field—and, typically, their self-consciousness—force upon us an awareness of the incompatible vocabulary as well as the incompatible views of what it is to be human. For Swift the incongruity of diction in the English of his day was a moral as well as a lexical problem. Conveniently, of course, that inherited lexical diversity provided him with one of his most powerful satiric weapons in the war against the immorals he saw everywhere.

"The vulgar dialect," Lord Orrery tells us, "was not only a fund of humor for Swift, but I verily believe was acceptable to his nature." In *A Letter to a Young Gentleman* Swift explicitly opposes the exclusiveness of professional jargon to the direct communicableness of everyday speech: "I know not how it comes to pass, that Professors in most Arts and Sciences are generally the worst qualified to explain their Meanings to those who are not of their Tribe: A common Farmer shall make you understand in three Words, *that his Foot is out of Joint, or his Collar-bone broken*; wherein a Surgeon, after a hundred Terms of Art, if you are not a Scholar, shall leave you to seek. It is frequently the same Case in Law, Physick, and even many of the meaner Arts." It is clear where Swift stands. He thinks of the speech of the common people as a kind of norm, a kind of practical touchstone against which one can measure the language of scholars. Language is not a matter of big words or rhetorical polish, but success of communication; and communication is more likely in the mouth of a farmer than in the mouth of a lawyer, a preacher, or a physician. Swift, who once admitted trying out his poems on his servants, acknowledges not only the clarity and directness of the speech of the common people, but also their assumptions about life.

Swift's words are values. The Latinate polysyllables that almost
run away with *A Tale of a Tub* imply a desire to subsume particulars under abstractions, an absolute faith in reason, and a moral insensitivity to human activities. Swift will have none of this. His proportionally sparse colloquialisms are enough to offer us an alternate perception of things, and they imply the significance of particulars, the danger of overrationalization, and the moral importance of every human activity. Swift's readers have been confused by the scarcity of positive values in his satire; but if nowhere else, those values are to be looked for in his use of colloquial English, which for him contains certain assumptions about what is good or worthwhile. The cultured few must never elevate themselves too far above the uncultured many, for in them, as in their language, is an earthy common sense.


2. William Wotton, *A Defense of the Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, in Guthkelch and Smith, p. 326: "This too is described in the Language of the Stews, which with now and then a Scripture-Expression, composes this Writer's Stile." Cf. John Oldmixon, *Reflections on Dr. Swift's Letter to Harley* (1712), Augustan Reprint Society, no. 15 (Ann Arbor, 1948), p. 29, who applies La Bruyère's comments on Rabelais to the *Tale*: "This a Monstrous Collection of Political and Ingenious Morality, with a Mixture of Beastliness; where 'tis bad 'tis abominable, and fit for the Diversion of the Rabble, and where 'tis good 'tis exquisite, and may entertain the most delicate."

3. "To instance only in the Answerer mentioned; it is grievous to see him in some of his Writings at every turn going out of his way to be waggish, to tell us of a Cow that prickt up her Tail, and in his answer to this Discourse, he says it is all a Farce and a Ladle: With other Passages equally shining" (p. 19).


5. I have borrowed the term from Stephen Ullmann, *Language and Style* (New York, 1966), p. 12, who uses it in a somewhat less restrictive sense: "A lexical field is a closely organized sector of the vocabulary, whose elements fit together and delimit
each other like pieces in a mosaic. In each field some sphere of experience is analyzed, divided up and classified in a unique way. In this sense, the vocabulary of every language embodies a peculiar vision of the universe; it implies a definite philosophy of life and hierarchy of values which is handed down from one generation to another." Winifred Nowottny, The Language Poets Use (London, 1962), p. 39, seems to mean much the same thing by her term "linguistic field."

6. Ronald Paulson, Theme and Structure in Swift's "Tale of a Tub" (New Haven, 1960), is the one critic to have discussed this technique in Swift. "The usual practice in the Tale," he says, "is for a respectable context to be set up, and one word placed in it which, reasserting its normal meaning, completely alters the significance of its context" (p. 60). I carry my analysis beyond Paulson's.


8. On Browne's influence, see Guthkelch and Smith, p. lix.

9. Thomas Browne, Pseudodoxia Epidemica (its real title), in The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago, 1964), 2:228. Swift's reference in the Tale to "the Camelion, sworn foe to Inspiration" (p. 159), may have been prompted by this passage in Browne.


13. Cf. Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), ed. Harold F. Harding (Carbondale, Ill., 1965), 1:481-82: "It is very remarkable, how few Latinized words Dean Swift employs. No writer, in our language, is so purely English as he is, or borrows so little assistance from words of foreign derivation." Blair must have been thinking of Gulliver's Travels rather than A Tale of a Tub.


15. The title of this book is itself a classic: A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew, In its several Tribes, of Gypsies, Beggars, Thieves, Cheats, &c. With an Addition of some Proverbs, Phrases, Figurative Speeches, &c. Useful for all sorts of People, (especially Foreigners) to secure their Money and preserve their Lives; besides Diverting and Entertaining, being wholly New (1690; rpt. London, 1906). B. E. defines a "sleeveless story" as "a Tale of a Tub, or of a Cock and a Bull."

16. Cf. alternate form "Chaps" (pp. 153, 189).

17. In A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue, Swift argues that English is "overstocked with Monosyllables" (A Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue, Polite Conversation, etc., ed. Herbert Davis and Louis Landa [Oxford, 1964], p. 11); and he praises the harmonies of Spanish, French, and Italian, while objecting to English, with its "Roughness and Frequency of Consonants" (p. 15).

18. Irish Tracts and Sermons, p. 68.

when it is brought into vivid contrast with the opposing qualities of violence and outrageousness of expression."

20. See Glossary under "Deprecatory."


22. Even the compilers of the OED were fooled, for they cite Swift's use of the verb "herd" as the first use in the sense "of things: to come together, to assemble"; rather, this is Swift's figurative use of the word in its older sense of the coming together of animals, here used derogatorily in reference to ideas. F. R. Leavis speaks of "that oddly concrete 'herd'" in "The Irony of Swift," rpt. in *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ernest Tuveson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964), p. 25.

23. See *A Letter*, pp. 65-68, and *A Proposal*, pp. 8-10. In *A Letter*, p. 68, Swift says: "And truly, as they say, a Man is known by his Company; so it should seem, that a Man's Company may be known by his Manner of expressing himself, either in publick Assemblies, or private Conversation."

24. Cf. Swift's note to p. 187, which reads, in part: "The curious were very Inquisitive whether those Barbarous Words, Basima Eacabasa, &c. are really in Irenaeus, and upon enquiry 'twas found they were a sort of Cant or Jargon of certain Hereticks, and therefore very properly prefix'd to a Book as this of our Author."


30. Swift was by this time surely acquainted with Sir Edward Coke's *Commentary on Littleton* (he mentions Coke in *The Drapier's Letters*), and he may have drawn something from Coke's fragmented allusiveness, footnotes and marginalia, incessant etymologies, or even his references to "our author" (cf. *Tale*, pp. 115, 187).


32. For this suggestion I am grateful to Professor Roger Manning, Department of History, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio. See Glossary under "Innuendo," "Nuncupatory," and "separate Maintenance."


34. The OED suggests that even the words "Capacity" and "Conjecture" were not rare in religious contexts.

35. In "Oracles" Swift would appear to be punning on "orifices." The words sound something alike, and both may be traced to the same Latin or even Indo-European root; see the prefix "5r-" in Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern, 1959). Cf. the OED definition of "oracle": "In Greek and Roman Antiquity: The instrumentality, agency, or medium, by which a God was supposed to speak or make known his will; the mouthpiece of the deity."


38. Swift's physical puns on "Corporeal" (p. 173) and "Motion" (p. 164) show what he is capable of doing with two of Bentley's words.

39. Both passages reflect the seventeenth-century fascination with air and space, and thus have at least a general connection with Boyle's *New Experiments Physico-Mechanical, Touching the Spring of Air and Its Effects* (1661).

40. Thomas Willis, *Of the Soul of Brutes*, in *Practice of Physick, Being the Whole Works of that Renowned and Famous Physician*, trans. S. Pordage (London, 1684), p. 182. In order to avoid confusion with the passage from Swift in which I have altered the original italics, I have deleted them here. Further proof of Swift's parody of medical writings is to be found in Thomas Sydenham, "Anatomic," in *Dr. Thomas Sydenham, His Life and Writings* (Berkeley, 1966); the unpublished draft of this work was written in 1668 and, except for the first sentence, was copied out in the hand of Sydenham's friend John Locke. Whereas Willis was a great advocate of anatomy, Sydenham thought it useless: "So I think it is clear that after all our porings and manglings the parts of animals we know nothing but the grosse parts, see not the tools and contrivances by which nature works, and are as far off from the discovery we aim at as ever" (p. 87); "For poring and gazing on the parts which we dissect without perceiving the very precise way of their working is but still a superficial knowledge, and though we cut into there inside, we see but the outside of things and make but a new superficies for ourselves to stare at" (p. 88). A remarkable number of words in these passages from Willis and Sydenham appear also in the central paragraph from "A Digression on Madness": "Tools," "cutting," "mangling," "Nature," "Outside," "Inside," "Carcass," and "Superficies."

41. Cf. this recent account of an autopsy: "After that operation the patient's renal disease was aggravated, and he died about six weeks later. At the post-mortem examination we found huge lymph nodes throughout the mediastinum. Microscopically, they resembled the biopsy specimen, with a little more hyalinization. The gross examination of the lungs revealed many areas of fibrous scarring, an indication of healed sarcoidosis. In addition, granulomas, some with Schaumann bodies, were seen, evidence that there was still some activity of the process within the lungs. In the spleen we also observed a few granulomas, some of which were hyalinized" ("Case Records of the Massachusetts General Hospital," *New England Journal of Medicine* 290 [28 February, 1974]:509).

42. This is a subtle yet powerful satiric tool of Swift's. Cf. Glossary under "close in with."

43. The *OED* shows that although the contemptuous implications of the word date back to the sixteenth century, it continued to be used in its neutral sense until about 1750. Cf. "Carcass" (pp. 46, 80, 123, 186). Cf. "dead carcase" in the passage from Willis and Swift's sermon *On the Trinity*, in *Irish Tracts and Sermons*, p. 166.


