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A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

TO

THE STYLE OF

JONATHAN SWIFT

by

LOUIS TONKO MILIC
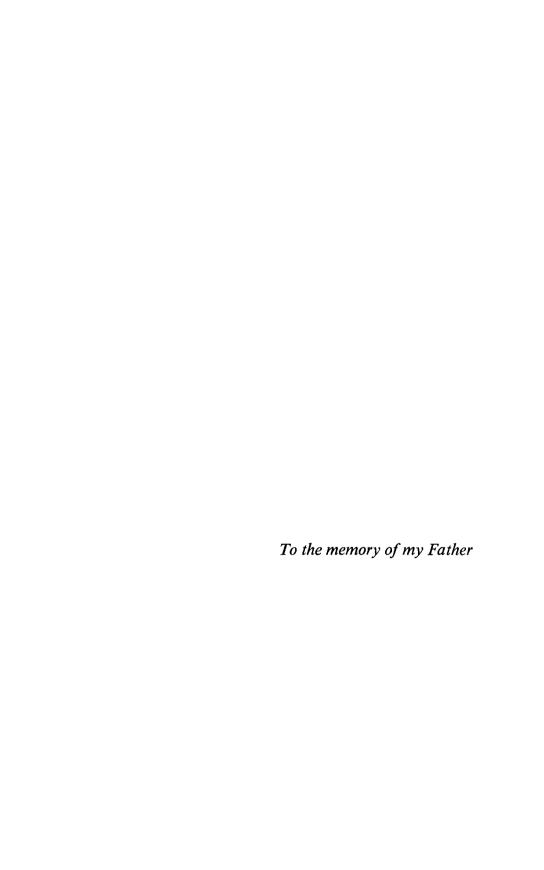*Columbia University*

To the memory of my Father

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

I have always loved Swift's work. The playfulness, the irony and ultimately the seriousness engaged me in that order. His toying with language, especially in the third book of *Gulliver's Travels* and in particular the language frame (so reminiscent of a computer programmed to "generate" English sentences), struck me as the perception of a man to whom the mysterious relation between symbol and thing was intuitively clear. The effectiveness of his own writing, the author's obvious ranking of grammatical propriety below the conveyance of meaning, reinforced my admiration for his intelligence. Then I became aware of his reputation as a purist and aware also of his occasional pronouncements about propriety and decorum in language. It seemed impossible to reconcile these formalistic tendencies with my earlier estimate of the man, though the idea of the master ironist pulling his reader's leg did not fail to occur to me. But there was no escaping the paradox: Swift the writer and Swift the rhetorician were two different persons.

To account for this division, I speculated that except for the superficial traits of composition the writer wrote without the approval of the rhetorician; almost in spite of him, wrote the way he would because he could not help it. In other words, I postulated the possibility of a writer's style as an unconscious reflection of his mind and personality. In the case of Swift, these influences were bound to be so forceful and constant that they would permeate all his writing more or less uniformly, except when the rhetorician was in the writer's seat, as in the *Proposal for Correcting ... the English Tongue*. If this hypothesis was correct,

the uniformity of the style might be detected by a close examina-
tion of those features over which the rhetorician had been unable
to exert his influence, namely, the grammatical structure. It is not
surprising that Swift consciously respected his own literary judg-
ment. But it is surely curious that he thought of himself as Swift
the rhetorician and equally strange that his contemporaries and
a long line of commentators down to the present day have shared
this mistaken opinion.

The regularity with which Swift's style has been accepted at
his own valuation of praiseworthy writing moved me to wonder
whether these critics, in commenting on his style, has said any-
thing which could be observed and verified. I found almost nothing
but adjectives: *clear, simple, direct, masculine, hard, round, salty,
nervous, lucid,* and the like evasions. There was agreement that
Swift's style was good but the agreement was uninformative and
the criticism without interest. It seemed to me that these readers
had formed partial responses to his work on the basis of passages
that impressed them. I wondered whether it might not be pos-
sible to discard the picture of Swift the rhetorician and address
myself to the writer's work exclusively. This I proposed to do on
the basis of my assumption about the unconscious nature of a
mature writer's style. The style, I suggest, contains a uniform and
constant diffusion of his mind and personality, expressed through
certain grammatical categories which may be measured objec-
tively.

These categories are grammatical, rather than lexical, because
the rhetorician has his eye on the diction and is always to be
found issuing pronouncements about it or fussing with it after
the writer has laid the words on the paper. An author's favorite
expressions, in any case, are dear to him and after he has made
them up, he is likely not only to use them but to persuade his
friends to do likewise: Swift was very proud of his belittling
prefix "hedge". The opportunity to use such favorites may not
always occur, of course; the same is true of his vocabulary at
large. This is in a large degree dictated by the context and the
genre of composition. Any study of vocabulary, therefore, is likely
to result in a predictable but useless variability. Grammatical

categories are not affected in the same way. During his period of apprenticeship, a writer develops a certain variety of structures, strictly his own, which he continues to use and re-use with scarcely any change during the period of his mature writing. It is like his handwriting, unmistakably his but almost beyond his power to modify to any significant extent. In his grammar lies the key to his style, provided the proper categories for investigation can be developed.

That finding these should be easy is hardly to be expected. The writing process is still very mysterious; very little is known about it and it seems unlikely that the solution should be simple. But that at least a preliminary solution can be found seems to me inevitable. Such a solution would comprise an objective description of these submerged characteristics of the style in quantitative terms, precise enough to enable the student to identify the writer. Thus, I would expect to be able to separate Swift from Johnson and even from Addison.

The use of quantitative methods, supported by the use of an electronic computer, and with an apparatus of figures, tables and charts, raises an issue of some importance. For though it has become unnecessary to apologize for the quantitative approach – it has shown its usefulness even in fields to which it formerly was strange – the implication that the artist's work can be compassed in measurable quantities needs to be faced.

It is not my belief that everything of importance about a writer's performance can be identified, much less measured. I am even willing to admit that the measurable may turn out to be peripheral or secondary, though I would hope that this were not so. But I would say in my defense that the process of measuring is not autotelic: its ends are literary, bound to a fundamental interest in the writer and his work. And the mechanical process is always preceded by a knowledge of the text and accompanied by a devotion to its literary qualities. Moreover, in this method, before anything is counted or measured, the same critical intellectual process, the same sort of intuition, takes place, as in the usual literary study.

As my reader knows, measurement is nothing new in literary

work. Every responsible scholar who makes a statement about the density of metaphor in Shakespeare or the number of military characters in his plays, makes some kind of numerical estimate about his material. Even a reference to likelihood, casually or seriously made, implies a numerical probability. The substitution of precise for approximate statements of quantity cannot be considered a very serious failing.

Nor should it be inferred that I have reduced the writer to the status of a mere unconscious producer, with no control over his mind's intention and effect. In an important sense Swift the writer is always under the influence of Swift the stylist, a happy derivative of Swift the rhetorician. In certain aspects of composition, the unconscious writer rules, but I have no wish to deny him his autonomous conscious role in the selection and design of his work. It is this conscious forceful being who is after all the subject of any Swift study.

Appropriately enough, this study opens with a review of the criticism elicited by Swift's style from his time to ours. The many senses in which the word *style* has been used during that period lead to an attempt at definition in the second chapter. After a formal statement of my own assumptions and the procedure which is based on them, I proceed to the examination of the style itself, moving from the most clearly observable phenomena to those which require the most delicate nicety of technique. The sum of my observations about the style of Swift and his literary peers is tested by reference to the case of a contested work, *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*, which has been admitted into the canon, ejected from it, and finally relegated to a limbo of dubious attributions by successive editors of Swift. It is my hope to add a measure of certainty to the status of this piece.

But whether I succeed in carrying conviction on this point or not, I shall feel that I have succeeded in my aims if I have collected a body of verifiable information about Swift, as well as about those who are his companions in this research, and if by my proposed method I have forwarded by even one step the study of style and the study of Swift.

The stress on method is evident in my title "A Quantitative

Approach to the Style of Jonathan Swift". I have not hoped to give a full or a conventional literary description of Swift's style. My intention has been deliberately partial and quantitative because only within those limits could I hope to accomplish what I had set out to do.

I. THE REPUTATION OF SWIFT'S PROSE STYLE

The style of Jonathan Swift has always attracted attention and
the reputation of his prose, purely as language, has had a comfort-
ing stability. Not all reputations fare so well. Many authors, dur-
ing their lives and later, fluctuate in public esteem like com-
modities on a financial exchange. But Swift and especially his
prose have maintained the status of blue chips. This is not to say
that their level has always been the same, but it has always been
high in the opinion of most readers and critics.[1] Though Addison
in one period, Johnson in another, and doubtless others at
various times, have achieved the topmost place, Swift has always
been among the leaders, and during the twentieth century his
prose has surely received more praise than any other in English.
The most cursory inspection of anthologies, histories of literature,
manuals and guidebooks, not to mention specialized studies of
English prose, must surely lead to such a conclusion. An anthology
of English prose which did not award Swift a major place would
be inconceivable today.[2] It is probable that no great prose writer

[1] See Donald M. Berwick, *The Reputation of Jonathan Swift, 1781-1882*
(Philadelphia, 1941), passim.
[2] A survey of some twentieth-century collections will support this posi-
tion. Henry S. Pancoast, ed., *Standard English Prose*, 2d. rev. ed. (New
York, 1905), gives Swift 24 pages, compared with 15 for Addison, 13 for
Dryden, 25 for Johnson, 26 for Burke and Carlyle, 28 for Arnold, and
53 for Macaulay. Herbert Read and Bonamy Dobrée, ed., *The London
Book of English Prose* (London, 1932), in selections of a page or two, give
4 to Swift, Gibbon, Hazlitt, Johnson, Milton, Newman and the Bible, but
only one to Addison. In *An Oxford Anthology of English Prose*, ed.
Arnold Whitridge and John Wendell Dodds (New York, 1937), Swift re-
ceives 38 pages, Addison 10, Johnson 23, Gibbon 5, Hazlitt 40, Carlyle

has been more widely read.[3] In the words of Herbert Read, "the continued vitality of [his] style is a great consolation to the theorist",[4] even though that vitality may be nourished largely in the nursery.

But critics since Swift's day have not been content merely to praise his prose style: they have in a variety of ineffective ways attempted to characterize, describe and analyze it. For the most part, they have gone about it with directness and assurance.

Lord Orrery sounded the dominant themes for most of his successors: clarity, propriety, simplicity. Because he had known Swift personally and because he was first in the field, his comments carried great weight. Nothing, however, could have been more damaging to an accurate understanding of Swift's literary style than his Olympian praise:

His style was masterly, correct, and strong: never diffusive, yet always clear; and, if we consider it in comparison with his predecessors, he has outdone them all, and is one, perhaps the chief, of those few select English writers, who have excelled in elegance and propriety of language.[5]

Orrery did not offer to particularize these points of praise because he felt secure that they would not be challenged. In this aspect of Swift's reputation, as in others, Orrery's word became almost the gospel.[6] Before Johnson, one writer and critic after

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75, and Arnold 62. In a recent anthology, *Eighteenth-Century Prose, 1700-1800*, ed. D. W. Jefferson (Harmondsworth, 1956), which consists of short extracts, Swift is represented by six pieces, more than Addison, Fielding, Hume, Goldsmith, Gibbon or Johnson. It is surely significant, too, that these editors all select different passages.

[3] Apart from the Bible (a translation), there is generally only one book which it is possible to suppose that everyone in the English-speaking world has read and that book is *Gulliver's Travels*. It must be admitted that *Robinson Crusoe* is a contender for the honor and at one time *Pilgrim's Progress* would have outstripped both.

[4] *English Prose Style* (Boston, 1955), p. xiii.

[5] John, Earl of Orrery, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (London, 1752), p. 234.

[6] Orrery's book was extremely popular and influential. Berwick (p. 7) wonders whether the nineteenth-century view of Swift as inhuman could have developed if Orrery's book had not been published.

another dutifully echoed Orrery's laudatory generalities, with barely noticeable variations and scarcely any difference of opinion.[7] Only two detractors, Goldsmith and Hume, dared to deviate from the tradition, and they raised interesting issues.

Goldsmith, in a passage in which he compares Swift to Charles D'Avenant and a certain Trenchard, both political pamphleteers of the period, takes a position far from the main road:

They were followed by Dean Swift, who, though in other respects far their superior, never could arise to that manliness and clearness of diction in political writing for which they were so justly famous.[8]

Goldsmith adds that all three were exceeded by Bolingbroke, whose style was excellent, though he did not understand the subjects he wrote on. It is questionable whether Goldsmith's implied definition of style has much to contribute to this investigation. But the slurs on both the clarity and the manliness of Swift seem to require explanation. Why did Goldsmith wish to deny to Swift what everyone so readily granted him? Like Johnson, he may have transferred a dislike of Swift the man to his works; or he may, at least with respect to the "manliness", have been alluding to the theory of Swift's physical impotence.[9] At any rate, since Goldsmith does not offer any elucidation of the unmanly diction, the comment may be disregarded in its substance and merely recorded as an instance of the perverseness of impressionistic descriptions of style.

Scarcely any more importance attaches to Hugh Blair's comment, which returns to Swift the manliness that Goldsmith would have denied him, but Blair is at least in the center of the tradition:

He is esteemed one of our most correct writers. His Style is of the

[7] "On one point ... most commentators agree. The excellence of Swift's dry, severe, concise style, his superb control of word and tempo, are only once questioned in the pre-Johnsonian era – and then by the Scotchman, David Hume" (Berwick, p. 16). Goldsmith must be added to this minority, but he was an Irishman. Among those who continued in Orrery's wake were Delany, Deane Swift, Beattie, Shenstone and Gray.
[8] Oliver Goldsmith, The Bee, No. VIII, in The Works of Oliver Goldsmith, ed. P. Cunningham (New York, 1881), III, 138.
[9] This was first suggested in print by Orrery, p. 113.

plain and simple kind; free from all affectation, and all superfluity; perspicuous, manly, and pure. These are its advantages. But we are not to look for much ornament and grace in it.[10]

By the time of Blair, praise of Swift's style included references to his lack of ornament and elegance, qualities which the writings of Johnson and Gibbon were thought to contain.[11]

Although Gibbon in his *Decline* did not try to write like Swift, he formed his style on those of Swift and Addison:

By the judicious advice of Mr. Mallet, I was directed to the writings of Swift and Addison; wit and simplicity are their common attributes: but the style of Swift is supported by manly original vigour; that of Addison is adorned by the female graces of elegance and mildness.[12]

It may be that this tribute to Swift's manliness is only the consequence of Gibbon's love of antithesis, but the praise of simplicity and vigor is by now standard.

A self-consciousness about Scotticisms and a great interest in language doubtless made Hume a severer critic than an English Hume might have been, and it is understandable that he castigated Swift in defiance of the English.[13] Some of his criticisms, however, merely anticipate the Johnsonian formulation:

I know your affection for *wherewith* proceeds from your partiality to Dean Swift, whom I can often laugh with, whose style I can even approve, but surely can never admire. It has no harmony, no eloquence, no ornament and not much correctness, whatever the English may imagine.[14]

[10] *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres,* 4th ed. (London, 1790), II, 144. This book was first published in 1783.
[11] According to the findings of William Kenney, the preferred quality of prose during the late eighteenth century was energy. Addison was considered especially deficient in this, his style being variously called "weak", "feeble", "enervated", whereas Johnson's was "vehement", "forcible", "nervous". In this context, Johnson's praise of Addison must be recognized as lukewarm ("Addison, Johnson, and the 'Energetick' Style", *Studia Neophilologica,* XXXIII (1961), 103-114).
[12] *The Memoirs of the Life of Edward Gibbon,* ed. G. B. Hill (London, 1900), p. 122.
[13] A discussion of the interesting question of Scotticism may be found in the apparatus of *Boswell's Life of Johnson,* ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford, 1934-1950), I, 439, fn. 2 and Appendix G, p. 549.
[14] *Letters of Hume,* ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1932), II, 194.

The most interesting item in this list of aspersions is that dealing with correctness. For the most part, Swift was accepted as a model of propriety, although a number of grammarians took exception to some of his constructions.[15] Hume's keen awareness here may have originated from his study of English as "a dead language", a procedure that often yields a higher notion of correctness than is common among vernacular speakers.[16]

Despite their literary eminence, neither Hume nor Goldsmith had much personal effect on the course of Swift's literary reputation. But Johnson's measured praise of Swift's style revealed that a change of critical ideals of prose style had taken place, a change which must entail the consequent revaluation of Swift as a stylist:

In his other works [aside from *A Tale of a Tub,* which Johnson considers unique and above Swift's other productions] is found an equable tenour of easy language, which rather trickles than flows. His delight was in simplicity . . . He studied purity; and though perhaps all his structures are not exact, yet it is not often that solecisms can be found: and whoever depends on his authority may generally conclude himself safe. His sentences are never too much dilated or contracted; and it will not be easy to find any embarrassment in the complication of his clauses, any inconsequence in his connections, or abruptness in his transitions.

His style was well suited to his thoughts, which are never subtilised by nice disquisitions, decorated by sparkling conceits, elevated by ambitious sentences, or variegated by far-sought learning. He pays no court to the passions; he excites neither surprise nor admiration; he always understands himself, and his reader always understands him: the peruser of Swift wants little previous knowledge; it will be sufficient that he is acquainted with common words and common things; he is neither required to mount elevations nor to explore profundities; his passage is always on a level, along solid ground, without asperities, without obstruction.

This easy and safe conveyance of meaning it was Swift's desire to attain, and for having attained he deserves praise, though perhaps

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[15]   Hugh Blair, Horne Tooke and others may be found mentioned in Sterling A. Leonard, *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, 1700-1800* (Madison, 1929), pp. 251 ff.

[16]   This tendency is equally observable in foreign students of English, whose knowledge of formal grammar is usually superior to that of native speakers. The point about English as a dead language is made in the material referred to in footnote 13.

not the highest praise. For purposes merely didactick, when something is to be told that was not known before, it is the best mode, but against that inattention by which known truths are suffered to lie neglected it makes no provision; it instructs, but does not persuade.[17]

From 1781 to the latter end of the nineteenth century, this conception of Swift's style as *merely* pure, simple and clear stands out against a generalized background of praise in the older tradition.[18] To Johnson, Swift's virtues as a writer are virtues of little consequence, virtues it was not worth cultivating. But even Johnson, for all his reservations, felt that these virtues were generally recognized and had achieved the force of a received opinion.

With an irony that Swift might have appreciated, the low point in the reputation of his style coincided with the notable edition of his works produced by Walter Scott in 1814. The Augustans were no longer admired or even much read.[19] The great period of English prose was now seen to be the Jacobean, and the special heroes of the Romantic period were Taylor, Hobbes, and Barrow.

Coleridge, though willing to do justice to Swift, was fully in accord with this trend, against what he considered to be the prevailing opinion: "From the common opinion that the English style attained its greatest perfection in and about Queen Anne's reign I altogether dissent." [20] Though Hooker and Taylor could not be matched, in a lower sphere Swift might be recognized: "Swift's style is, in its line, perfect; the manner is a complete expression of the matter, the terms appropriate, and the artifice concealed. It is simplicity in the true sense of the word." [21] The

[17] Samuel Johnson, "Swift", in *Lives of the Poets,* ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1905), III, 51-52.
[18] "Much the same sentiments [about the excellence of Swift's style] have been repeated time and again since ... The idea of 'proper words in proper places' becomes a shibboleth in the history of Swift criticism; and the student eventually grows to welcome even the slightest defection from the common opinion" (Berwick, pp. 47-8).
[19] "Addison and Swift are now not at all read; Johnson and Gibbon very rarely; – yet Swift is the best writer that ever was, in his peculiar style." Robert James Mackintosh, ed. *Memoirs of the life of ... Sir James Mackintosh* (London, 1835), II, 475, entry dated 1830.
[20] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Select Poetry and Prose,* ed. Stephen Potter (London, 1933), p. 319.
[21] *Ibid.*

term "perfect" is new but will continue to be seen in this context. Simplicity, true or other, has hardly had a moment's respite.

The reviewer of Scott's edition in 1816 espoused less elevated but similar ideals: "Junius and Johnson [were] the first who again familiarized us with more glowing and sonorous diction – and made us feel the tameness and poorness of the serious style of Addison and Swift." [22] Although Jeffrey admits that Swift was the most vigorous writer of his time, he goes further than Johnson in denigrating his style:

> Of his style, it has been usual to speak with great, and, we think, exaggerated praise. It is less mellow than Dryden's – less elegant than Pope's or Addison's – less free and noble than Lord Boling-broke's – and utterly without the glow and loftiness which belonged to our earlier masters. It is radically a low and homely style – without grace, and without affectation; and chiefly remarkable for a great choice and profusion of *common* words and expressions.[23]

However out of fashion Jeffrey's comment may seem today, it is recognizably in accord with the critical tendency of his epoch and it has an interior consistency. But De Quincey's perverse and capricious argument, though it proceeds from the same aesthetic source, seems to court illogic in order to discredit Swift's merits. Arguing that Swift's style was not a model of excellence, De Quincey proposes three points: Swift's merit is merely "ver-nacularity", or lack of artifice; whatever excellence he had was shared by his contemporaries (Defoe, Dampier); like them, he wrote on subjects specially suited to his simple, dull, unadorned style. But if he had had to emulate Taylor or Browne, his real limitations would have appeared.[24] After this, the trend to detrac-tion more or less ends and the standard view proceeds unhampered till modern times.

In retrospect, all these commentators, praisers and detractors alike, have some things in common. They seem to agree in the terms they apply to Swift's style (*simple, clear, vigorous*), though

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[22]   Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review,* XXVII (September 1816), p. 8.
[23]   *Ibid.,* p. 56.
[24]   Thomas De Quincey, *Tait's Magazine* (September 1847), in *Collected Works* (London, 1890), XI, 17-18.

none go to any trouble to specify the extension of these figurative
terms [25] or even to illustrate with examples. It is difficult not to
conclude that they agree mainly because of their preconceptions,
their willingness to accept the prevailing opinion without trying
to verify it by a detailed examination of the style itself. The per-
petuation of the tradition that Swift's style was simple, clear,
vigorous, by means of a self-hypnotic unconscious plagiarism can
be explained by reference to three factors.[26]

The difficulty of discussing style except as synonymous with
diction is evident in nearly all these writings. That this is a con-
sequence of the classical division of styles according to the level
of the words is equally self-evident. Consequently, the vaguest
references to certain abstract qualities (for example, simplicity)
satisfied all concerned. When a more individual judgment was
required, some metaphors could be invoked (grace, manliness).
But the necessity of specifying qualities which were difficult to
isolate was circumvented by the simple proceeding of identifying
the style that one approved of with the ideals of style then current.
Swift's style was called simple, clear and vigorous in part because
there was general agreement that Swift's style was good and be-
cause simplicity, clarity and vigor were good qualities for a style
to have. When these qualities were no longer valued so highly and
Swift's style was no longer quite so well thought of, denigratory
variants of these qualities were applied: *homely, common, plain,
poor*. At no time was an attempt made to discover what simplicity
in style consisted of or how it could be illustrated with quotations

[25]   Descriptions of style almost by necessity use terms figuratively. A *low*
style, for example, is not such by virtue of anything it contains but only
by comparison with some imagined scale. If a *simple* style were one which
consisted of simple sentences, that would be a literal description. But since
a simple style is intended to be compared to other simple ("once-folded")
things, as distinguished from complex (or "braided") things, it may be seen
that the metaphorical extension is considerable. When the terms used in-
volve such non-literary conceptions as limpidity, masculinity, energy, nerv-
ousness, the interpreter's task is beyond aid.
[26]   Sometimes the plagiarism could be overt. William Monck Mason, in
The History ... of St. Patrick (Dublin, 1820), presents as his own a con-
densed version of Johnson's comment in *The Life of Swift* (ed. cit., p. 51)
on the variety of Swift's style (pp. 431-2). Berwick quotes this without
comment (p. 82).

from the pages of Swift's works. This was felt to be unnecessary because the whole issue had been settled by Swift himself. In a variety of places in his works, Swift had allowed himself to express his ideals of style: "that Simplicity, which is one of the greatest Perfections in any Language",[27] "Their Stile is clear, masculine, and smooth, but not Florid; for they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary Words, or using various Expressions",[28] "They are expressed in the most plain and simple Terms",[29] "I should be glad to see you the Instrument of introducing into our Style, that Simplicity which is the best and truest Ornament of most Things in human Life . . .",[30] "I rather chose to relate plain Matter of Fact in the simplest Manner and Style . . .",[31] "Two Things I will just warn you against . . . flat, unnecessary Epithets; and . . . old, thread-bare Phrases . . ."[32] The fact that personal ideals of style need not coincide with actual practice regularly escapes all those who consider an author the best critic and final authority on his own work. Ideals of style are goals toward which the writer is striving, not accurate descriptions of his practice. Moreover, as will be shown, the mechanism of style-production is mainly unconscious and beyond the reach of any voluntary modification resulting from the application of abstract ideals. In view of these factors, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that most of the criticism of Swift's style until the twentieth century has been of very little value.

In the late nineteenth century, the impressionistic descriptions take on more color but they make no especial contribution to the understanding of Swift's style. To be sure, the themes of simplicity, clarity and vigor continue to be heard but the combinations give the appearance of novelty. There is the beginning of an awareness that the old tradition of generalities is useless, but the new material

[27] *Proposal*, in *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1939-in progress), IV, 15. All citations of Swift, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition (hereafter called *Works*).
[28] *Gulliver, Works,* XI, 121.
[29] *Ibid.,* 120.
[30] *Tatler,* 230, *Works,* II, 177.
[31] *Gulliver, Works,* XI, 275.
[32] *Letter to a Young Gentleman, Works,* IX, 68.

comes from the same old bin. Samuel Butler, surely a disciple of
Swift in spirit, with typical perversity dismisses the necessity of
taking pains with style: "I never knew a writer yet who took the
smallest pains with his style and was at the same time readable." [33]
But he admits that the writer should be concerned about the
reader's convenience. Though he points out that a terse style may
be more fatiguing than a diffuse one,[34] a point applicable to an
understanding of Swift, he concludes more or less in the usual
fashion: "Swift is terse, he gets through what he has to say on
any matter as quickly as he can and takes the reader on to the
next." [35]

Twentieth-century criticism begins tamely enough with a few
comments by G. A. Aitken in *The Cambridge History of English
Literature*. Aitken re-introduces the notion of perfection, dormant
since Coleridge but soon to have a great vogue, in addition to the
usual reference to clarity and precision. He also borrows some
terms applicable to the person of Swift to describe the style, which
he calls forceful and grave.[36] This kind of transfer or interchange
between the qualities of the man and his work, though practiced
in a small way by Goldsmith, Gibbon and their contemporaries,
is now to provide a device for seeming to talk about style without
actually doing so. For example, Brownell comments on the lack of
warmth he perceived in Swift's character.[37] His comment departs
from convention when he notices that Swift's "simplicity is more
highly organized than superficially appears".[38] This observation
represents such a break with tradition that it is easy to understand
why it passed unnoticed. It is far from rejecting the attribute of
simplicity, but it is a start toward understanding.

Herbert Read's study of English style, which appeared midway
between the World Wars (not a period of great sanity), supports

[33] *Samuel Butler's Notebooks,* ed. Geoffrey Keynes and Brian Hill (London, 1951), p. 290. A conjectural date for these comments is 1897.
[34] *Ibid.,* p. 66. In the context in which it occurs, this point seems unrelated to the Ciceronian-Senecan opposition.
[35] *Ibid.,* p. 287.
[36] "Swift" in *The Cambridge History of English Literature,* ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, IX (Cambridge, 1912), 128.
[37] William C. Brownell, *The Genius of Style* (New York, 1924), pp. 112-3.
[38] *Ibid.,* p. 112.

a claim for Swift's rank as a stylist of unrivalled power and in-
terest with a compound of references to simplicity, clarity and
purity illustrated with examples. His main statement is remark-
ably sweeping and the appositive in the second sentence remark-
ably obscure:

Swift is the only one of [those] prose writers in whom we may confi-
dently expect no organic and inevitable lapses. The prose style of Swift
is unique, an irrefrangible instrument of clear, animated, animating
and effective thought. English prose has perhaps attained here and
there a nobler profundity, and here and there a subtler complexity; but
never has it maintained such a constant level of inspired expression.[39]

Behind the "irrefrangible instrument" and "animated, animat-
ing" thought are two things: a desire to claim a measure of perfec-
tion for Swift and an inability to do so with existing means of
description. If the result is obscurity, there is at least a gain over
the easy "simple" explanation. The use of telling examples is a
step toward objective description. All in all, however, the yield is
not substantial in facts about Swift's style. For some of these it
will be necessary to examine the results of more professional
scholars. The findings of those who take up style on the way to
something else are alike in their failure to produce anything
concrete.

A herd of impressionistic images elbow each other in the criti-
cal biography of Swift by W. D. Taylor, the tenth chapter of
which purports to be (but is not) entirely about Swift's style:
"it is hard round crystalline", "like an athlete sweated down to
sinew and muscle who knows how to reach his goal"; "it is the
nervous style".[40] This is not very informative, and one concludes
after reading that Taylor had a high opinion of Swift's style but
no very good idea of how to express it. But to read the comments
of the novelist Maugham is to wonder whether he is talking about
another writer altogether. Maugham is explaining how he trained
himself to become a good writer by practising on A Tale of a Tub:

The prose of Swift enchanted me. I made up my mind that this was

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[39]   English Prose Style, p. xiii.
[40]   W. D. Taylor, Jonathan Swift (London, 1933), p. 255.

the perfect way to write . . . [But] it is a tiresome allegory and the irony is facile. But the style is admirable. I cannot imagine that English can be better written. Here are no flowery periods, fantastic turns of phrase or high-flown images. It is a civilized prose, natural, discreet and pointed. There is no attempt to surprise by an extravagant vocabulary. It looks as though Swift made do with the first word that came to hand, but since he had an acute and logical brain it was always the right one, and he put it into the right place. The strength and balance of his sentences are due to an exquisite taste . . . I found that the only possible words were those Swift had used and that the order in which he had placed them was the only possible order. It is an impeccable prose.

But perfection has one grave defect: it is apt to be dull. Swift's prose is like a French canal . . . Its tranquil charm fills you with satisfaction, but it neither excites the emotions nor stimulates the imagination. You go on and on and presently you are a trifle bored. So, much as you may admire Swift's wonderful lucidity, his terseness, his naturalness, his lack of affectation, you find your attention wandering after a while . . .[41]

And so, allowing Swift to bore him, Maugham takes up Dryden whom he proceeds to describe impressionistically.

But it may be unfair to expect critical responsibility from an admitted amateur critic. On the other hand, when a writer presents himself with the credentials of an expert and writes a book called *Style*, as F. L. Lucas does, it may be just to expect something more than mere imagery. However, only imagery is provided:

Luckily for us, the style of Swift himself was a good deal more than proper – or improper – words in proper places. Into its ruthlessly swept and garnished body there entered the spirits of scorn and hate and pride and indignation, but also of courage and independence, of frustrated affection and even of something like compassion.[42]

It cannot be supposed that these "spirits" can actually be detected as formal elements in the style; one must assume that Lucas put them there. He proceeds to lament Swift's lack of those images that charm rather than wound: "That is partly why, to me, he is

[41] W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing-Up* (New York, 1957 [1938]), pp. 20-1.
[42] (London, 1955), p. 126.

on the whole an unattractive writer – bleak, monotonous, and
depressing, though impressive, like a Pennine moorland – not
like the Highlands." [43] As is easily seen, Lucas's fondness for
imagery is betrayed in each of these comments; he does not so
much criticize Swift's prose for what it is as he rebuilds it as he
would like it to be, most plainly when he denies that he is doing
so, as in this final comment:

It is idle to wish, as Swift trots like a lean gray wolf, with white
fangs bared, across his desolate landscape, that he were more like a
benevolent St. Bernard; he would cease to be Swift. Being what he
was, he made a striking addition to the infinite variety of the world;
but one Swift seems to me quite enough. And his style is of interest
as showing both what trenchancy the presence of imagery can give,
and how much charm and colour its absence takes away.[44]

The vagueness of this kind of criticism is not mitigated by the
false concreteness of animal or landscape similes. Nothing is told
that is of any value. It is not because it is subjective that it is
valueless but because the subjectivity is irresponsible, general and
misty.

After a string of disconcerting generalities,[45] it is a welcome
surprise to find in Wilson Knight's criticism of Swift's irony
several concrete references to the actual details of style: "Swift's
narrative may seem colourless [in *A Tale of a Tub*], but the mate-
rials within are not. The plainness consists rather in continual
emphasis on noun and verb with rejection of the *qualifying* ad-
jective." [46] In fact, Swift's satire operates in a simple description of
action: "Having the right nouns ready, he has only to attach
the verb." [47] Swift's "fine use of the active verb" [48] is everywhere
evident, the best point being made in action statements. In *Battle
of the Books,* he relies on "concrete nouns and active verbs with

[43] *Ibid.,* pp. 209-210.
[44] *Ibid.,* p. 210.
[45] "Swift's prose is noted for control and reserve. He is a master of lu-
cidity and understatement." G. Wilson Knight, "Swift and the Symbolism
of Irony", *The Burning Oracle* (London, 1939), p. 115.
[46] *Ibid.,* p. 117.
[47] *Ibid.,* p. 119.
[48] *Ibid.,* p. 122.

scarcely an adjective to assist".[49] It is good to come finally to nouns
and verbs and adjectives, even though Knight has no figures to
assist his observations. Does he mean that Swift uses nouns and
verbs and fewer adjectives than average? Are active verbs merely
transitive verbs? How many is *scarcely* and are qualifying ad-
jectives descriptive or limiting? Obviously there can be no answer
to these questions because Knight's reference to these grammatical
details is the result of subjective impression and not of exact study.
Still the realization that style must be talked about in terms of its
actual mechanisms constitutes a significant advance, however un-
satisfactory the immediate results. At least there is an awareness
that Swift used verbs, nouns, and adjectives rather than simplicity
and purity and clarity as the vehicles of his expression.

Interest in the particulars of style, however, does not make much
progress in the work of those who might be called theoretical
students of style — those who take up the matter of Swift's style
incidentally or as subsidiary to some larger purpose, those at any
rate who are not considering style as a practical matter. It is neces-
sary to look to those who have an axe to grind if we are to find
much regular or systematic reference to grammatical categories
and to particular words or expressions. These are the students of
Swift's canon. Their purpose is the attribution of some new work
to Swift (or the rejection of an accepted or dubious work) by
internal evidence.

Despite the appearance of exactness produced by the citation of
relevant passages and the sometimes extensive parallels offered as
evidence, most scholars are suspicious of the method of internal
evidence and resort to it only in desperation. The general distrust
of internal evidence usually attaches to the method itself but it
actually arises in all probability from the practices of those who
have used it. That this distrust has some basis can be shown by
considering the demonstrations offered in connection with the
few canon problems in Swift bibliography.

About Swift's major productions there is now scarcely any
doubt. To be sure, Johnson questioned whether Swift could have

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[49] *Ibid.,* p. 130.