

“Such Opinions Cannot Cohere”: Swift’s Inwardness

Sophie Gee

Princeton University

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SAW THE RISE of the modern journalistic essay. There were personal essays written before 1700, of course, most significantly by Montaigne, Bacon, and Browne. Eighteenth-century periodical essays were influenced by these seventeenth-century models and used the authority of personal opinion both to reflect and to influence the supposed sensibilities of a large group of readers. The speaking voices in early eighteenth-century essays tend to be at once personal and impersonal: the intimate, quotidian, occasionally even confessional style we encounter in the *Tatler*, the *Spectator*, and elsewhere is paradoxically a sign of a large, anonymous audience. In 1711 Joseph Addison summarized the intimate impersonality of the new periodical essay in the *Spectator* when he referred to “the Pains I am at in qualifying what I write after such a manner, that nothing may be interpreted as aimed at private Persons.” His topics were oriented to the preoccupations of an aspirational urban middle class and eschewed gossip, politics, and high society: “my Paper has not in it a single Word of News, a Reflection in Politics, nor a Stroak of Party; ... there are no Fashionable Touches of Infidelity, no obscene Ideas, no Satyrs upon Priesthood, Marriage and the like popular Topicks of Ridicule; no private Scandal, nor any Thing that may tend to the Defamation of particular Persons, Families, or Societies.”¹ Addison wanted to replace the public’s appetite for reading about famous people they didn’t know with a newly awakened desire to read about a contemporary, urban selfhood they could recognize.

¹ Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 262 (December 1711). Republished in Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Spectator*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).



In this article I examine the contribution that early eighteenth-century essays made to the evolving history of eighteenth-century interiority—the turn towards writing about private, interior experience. The essay, like the novel, was experimenting with the representation of people’s intellectual and emotional lives, and like the novel the essay’s ability to achieve access to interiority helped to transform what the experience of one’s inner life was actually like. Early eighteenth-century essays were precocious, ahead of novels, in describing sympathetic identification and enabling it to develop among people who were increasingly attuned to their private selves and wanted to find a way to share these solitary recesses of knowledge and feeling with others. In this article I discuss three early essays by Jonathan Swift. I argue that Swift resisted Addison’s Whig journalism precisely because of its confidence in speaking about and on behalf of people’s personal, individuated selves. I suggest, moreover, that ambivalence and anxiety about describing selfhood and the life of the mind were preoccupations even among progressive eighteenth-century Whig essayists, and indeed an important concern of almost all literary writing in the period.²

The first issue of the *Tatler* appeared on April 12, 1709, and the paper continued until January 1711. The *Spectator* started in March 1711 and ran until 1712. The essays, addressing aspects of civic, social, and cultural life in London, were sophisticated, polished, and metropolitan, often written under the guise of various eccentric urban personas but never giving way to real eccentricity or abandoning the suave, controlled style that readers would recognize as belonging to Richard Steele and Joseph Addison. The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* are justly famous for having nurtured an essayistic critical style in which it was possible to be intellectual without being scholarly, vigorous without being contrary, and to engage deeply with a contemporary issue without bogging down in factional argument. As Richard Squibbs puts it in an article about the evolution of the familiar essay from Addison and Steele to Emerson, writers forged an alignment of “strong individualism with universal humanity.”³

The conventional account of the two periodicals is that they supplied reading matter for the newly emergent “public sphere.” A useful reminder of what the public sphere was in theory is provided by Brian Cowan, who substantially revised our understanding of what it was in practice: “Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere originated in what he thought was an increasing ability to distinguish between the private subject and public life. The public sphere constituted the forum in which private subjects came together to exercise their reason: it was an ‘Öffentlichkeit von Privatleuten’—a public of private subjects.”⁴ The argument I make in this essay is indebted to scholars like Cowan, as well as Paul Kelleher, Markman Ellis, and Anthony Pollock, who have shown that the interaction between private subjects and public life in periodical essays, coffeehouses, and other key sites of public sphere life was much less harmonious and unproblematic than Addison and Steele encourage us to assume.⁵ But the traditional account of the early

² Claude Rawson has noted the intersections between Swift’s skepticism and Montaigne’s, suggesting that the two great writers shared similar ambivalences about their own authority and consistency in point of view. My suggestion is that ambivalence and anxiety carried into the eighteenth-century essay, even for writers who are not conventionally seen as skeptical. See Rawson, *God, Gulliver and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination, 1492–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³ Richard Squibbs, “Civic Humorism and the Eighteenth-Century Periodical Essay,” *ELH* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 390.

⁴ Brian Cowan, “Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 345.

⁵ Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the Coffeehouse* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Paul Kelleher, “Reason, Madness and Sexuality in the British Public Sphere,” *Eighteenth Century* 53, no. 3

eighteenth-century periodical essay is worth repeating because it summarizes what a particular group of essayists, including Addison and Steele, were attempting, sometimes through coercive rhetorical strategies. They wanted a literary form that would liberate readers and writers from dependence on overtly religious and political language for describing personal and collective experience. Robert de Maria writes: “the periodical essay par excellence is not bound as much by partisan politics as by a less tendentious involvement with the public sphere of private individuals. The periodical essay, like all serial publication, is part of the evolution of the professional writer from his or her role as a creature of the court or parliament to his or her reliance on publishers and, through them, on the reading public.”⁶ Addison and Steele valorized the interior lives of their readers while locating the individual subject as part of a community, and they authorized subjective experience as a source of valuable collective knowledge. Their essays conjured a vision of thinking subjects living in benignly self-regulating, consensual communities as the ideal basis on which to build a progressive modern state. There’s no question that this is what Addison and Steele wished the state to be like. My argument is that it’s also what they wished human minds to be like, in the face of much evidence to the contrary. In other words, Addison and Steele deploy prose style to solve the major ethical challenge that literary interiority posed: subjects being authorized to describe thoughts and feelings that were often erroneous, disorderly, discontented, antisocial.

During the first third of the twentieth century, the Princeton Renaissance scholar Morris Croll wrote a series of influential essays about the “Attic or Baroque style in English prose.” Croll’s thesis was that seventeenth-century secular prose adopted a new “Attic” style, which was developed in opposition to inflexible Ciceronian imitations that dominated sixteenth-century prose and was suited to the personal essay rather than to oratory. Its stylistic signature was a roughness and sense of spontaneity that communicated the reality of a mind in thought. Croll offers wonderful descriptions of what it feels like to encounter the speaking voices of the great seventeenth-century personal essayists in the period of Montaigne and Bacon, arguing that their style “renders the process of thought and portrays the picturesque actuality of life with equal effect and constantly relates the one to the other.”⁷ In perhaps his best and most famous formulation: “their purpose was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking.”⁸ Croll eventually settled on the term “Baroque” rather than “Attic” to describe the new essayistic style because, in the words of his posthumous editor, “Baroque” connotes “exactly the suggestions he wanted of the human mind struggling bravely with resistant masses of thought, and producing in the effort masterpieces of asymmetric design.”⁹ One implication of Croll’s arguments, crucial for understanding the eighteenth-century essay, is that the form depicts individual minds in the process of struggle—and that in spite of the struggle they are able to create masterpieces of intellectual coherence and emotional power.

(2012): 291–315; Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004); Anthony Pollock, *Gender and the Fictions of the Public Sphere, 1690–1755* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Anthony Pollock, “Neutering Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere,” *ELH* 74, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 707–34.

⁶ Robert de Maria, “The Eighteenth-Century Periodical Essay,” in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 528.

⁷ Morris Croll, “Attic Prose: Lipsius, Montaigne, Bacon,” in *Attic and Baroque Prose Style: Essays by Morris Croll*, ed. J. Max Patrick and Robert O. Evans (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 184.

⁸ Morris Croll, “The Baroque Style in Prose,” in Patrick and Evans, *Attic and Baroque Prose Style*, 210.

⁹ John Wallace, “Foreword to Essay Five,” in Patrick and Evans, *Attic and Baroque Prose Style*, 203–4.

Adopting a similar position to Croll's (though not citing him), Stanley Fish's 1971 article subtitled "The Experience of Bacon's Essays" complicates the argument by suggesting that Bacon's prose style reflects an attempt to understand, and thereby resist, the thinking mind's tendency to ensnare itself in false logic. The terse aphoristic style and seemingly fragmentary arguments of Bacon's *Essays* reflects his "awareness of the individual mind's limitations and of the provisionality of all stages preliminary to the final one."¹⁰ Here we see the paradox of the familiar essay as it enters the eighteenth century: on the one hand, its seductive promise of providing individual minds with access to their own interior states and those of others and, on the other hand, the discovery of the mind's internal tumult and need for repair. This is the paradox that Jonathan Swift addresses in his early essays. My argument is that Swift's stylistic dissimilarity to Addison's and Steele's essays of the same period should alert us to the fact that the essays of Swift, Addison, and Steele were in self-conscious debate about the nature of interiority and its relation to the essay form.

The pairing of Richard Steele and Joseph Addison is so familiar that their collaborators are mostly overlooked, but Swift himself was among them. It was Swift, not Addison, who helped Steele to negotiate the first issuing of the *Tatler* in April 1709 with the printer John Nutt, who had also printed Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* in 1704 and its subsequent reprints. (Nutt didn't register the copyright for the *Tatler* until May 1710, evidently thinking it wouldn't succeed.) Steele's speaking persona in the first issues of the paper was Isaac Bickerstaff, a name taken from Swift, who had used the character in a literary hoax of 1708, when Bickerstaff had predicted the death of the superstitious almanac maker John Partridge. The *Tatler*, in other words, is closely connected to the trenchantly political, polemical style and sensibility for which Swift was famous after *A Tale of a Tub*, the publication with which the newspaper shared its publishing lineage. The Bickerstaff hoax was itself political, intended to lampoon the superstitions of high Tory Jacobites and Low Church dissenters, as part of Swift's attempt to carve out mainstream professional success in the Whig-dominated political climate of 1705–10.

Reading the essays that Swift wrote at around the same time that Steele, and then Addison, were reinventing the form, we encounter a radical contrast. Swift is agitated and immoderate, often spiteful, always writing in a verbose, self-undermining style that doubles and redoubles back on itself until its sense is all but lost. Swift's essays communicate their author's conviction that, as Fish writes of Bacon, "the mind has the role of villain"—but unlike Bacon, Swift appears to consider humiliation and punishment, not rehabilitation, the appropriate responses to cognitive wrongdoing.¹¹ The mind's villainy was, in Swift's view, at once alarming enough to impel him to write essays exposing its pernicious effects and profound enough to make it impossible for those essays to produce reformation or redress. To be sure, Swift's prose style emerges out of Restoration satires by Marvell, Dryden, and others, which emphasized witty, adversarial writing as a means of signaling political relevance and engagement in public affairs. As Nigel Smith has shown, Royalist and Restoration satires themselves depend on radical satires of the 1640s, which in turn were influenced by the Marprelate tradition. But, importantly, Swift extends and distorts the models he inherits. The adversarial mode of the seventeenth-century satirists ultimately

¹⁰ Stanley Fish, "Georgics of the Mind: The Experience of Bacon's Essays," *Critical Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1971): 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

serves a different purpose for Swift: a way to insist on the presence, indeed the necessity, of incoherence in Enlightenment intellectual culture.¹²

Swift's skepticism about the correction of disorderly thought is conventionally, and correctly, interpreted as part of his Tory satire, coupled with his didactic tendencies.¹³ Swift impersonates enthusiasts and madmen in *A Tale of a Tub*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and elsewhere to attack modern, Whig-inflected political and cultural beliefs. Swift adopts disorderly speaking voices to expose the intellectual and literary unsophistication of his enemies and suggest that Whig prose style fosters incoherence. This understanding, however, obscures the important point that Swift's "mad" speakers are not merely impersonations adopted for ironic and satirical effects. They express, rather, his anguish about claiming to know the self or to understand one's own interiority. The idea that minds could be analyzed and selves understood, a source of optimism and hope for contemporary Whig intellectuals (and a fundamental tenet of the most powerful cultural form in the period, the novel), was for Swift an alienating, even a dangerous proposition—not merely a politically unacceptable one.

The Swift essays I discuss here are "A Tritical [*sic*] Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind" (1707), *Tatler* 230 (1710), and "An Argument to prove, That the Abolishing of Christianity in England, May, as Things now Stand, be attended with some Inconveniencies, and perhaps, not produce those many good Effects proposed thereby" (1708, published in 1711). All three essays were composed during the period after the first publication of *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), when Swift was obsessively fashioning a literary and political persona for himself, still hoping to be offered a position in the English church. As Michael Seidel has observed, "Swift's satire overwhelms its subjects by becoming them," another way of saying that Swift's technique involves occupying another mind as a means of attacking it.¹⁴ "A Tritical Essay" is Swift's parody of debates in natural philosophy about the nature of matter and the existence of the vacuum and features a philosopher-speaker who defends the position that the universe has been designed rationally and is evidence of divine Providence. The word "tritical" signals Swift's attitude to the philosophers he ventriloquizes by being a composite of "trite" and "critical," described by Valerie Rumbold as "a satirical synthesis of modern intellectual pretensions." The most direct target of the parody appears to be Matthew Tindal's *The Rights of the Christian Church Asserted* (1707; Swift owned the

¹² The Restoration satires from which Swift's prose style emerges are discussed in Nigel Smith, "Satire: Whose Property?," in *Literature and Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 295–319; Nigel Smith, "Literary Innovation and Social Transformation in the 1670s," in *Religion, Culture, and National Community in the 1670s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 85–98; Stephen Bardle, *The Literary Underground in the 1660s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Bardle follows Smith in the view that the Restoration fostered a vigorous underground (i.e., nonconformist) satirical community, led by George Wither, Ralph Wallis, and Marvell. See also Nicholas von Malzahn, "Adversarial Marvell," in *The Cambridge Companion to Andrew Marvell*, ed. Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174–93.

¹³ There is a long tradition of this critical position. Earlier examples are the positions taken by Herbert Davis and Irwin Ehrenpreis. More recent articulations include Claude Rawson, ed., *Politics and Literature in the Age of Swift: English and Irish Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Michael Suarez, "Swift's Satire and Parody," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 112–27 (Suarez emphasizes the "constructive" or educative aspect of Swift's satire—his attempt to teach and reform his readers); Valerie Rumbold, "Locating Swift's Parody: The Title of *Polite Conversation*," in *Reading Swift: Papers from the Fifth Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real (Munich: W. Fink, 2008), 255–72. Rumbold's edition of *Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock-Treatises for the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) contains important notes and editorial commentary on "A Tritical Essay" and *Tatler* 230.

¹⁴ Michael Seidel, "Systems Satire: Swift.com," in Richetti, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, 237.

third edition).¹⁵ It's also a parody of the Baconian essay, the most influential model for theological and scientific writing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹⁶ Swift's essay is digressive, difficult to follow, and without a coherent argument, either about the Faculties of the Mind or the nature of matter. Swift's speaker recycles clichés from natural theology: "Nature does nothing in vain; if we were able to dive into her secret Recesses, we should find that the smallest Blade of Grass, or most contemptible Weed, has its particular Use." Each paragraph begins with a gesture toward argumentative order and progression and ends in diffusion and disarray.

The philosophers satirized are those who attempted to replace the Epicurean model of a universe free from divine intervention, "a fortuitous Concourse of Atoms," with a rational one, subject to discernible laws. The thinkers included philosophers and theologians such as William Bates, Joseph Glanvill, Ralph Cudworth, Thomas Burnet, Archbishop Tilotson, Charles Blount, and Robert Boyle, all of whom Swift read. There are important distinctions to be drawn among these figures, but their point of intersection, from Swift's point of view, is that they all favored a more tolerant, rational, reformed religion than he did. In the title of Swift's essay, "upon the Faculties of the Mind" alludes to the Scholastic doctrine of faculty psychology. This had been elaborated by Swift's patron Sir William Temple in "Of Ancient and Modern Learning" and had provided a basis for Bacon's system of knowledge in *The Advancement of Learning*, where he identified memory, imagination, and reason as the three parts of man's understanding. Swift's opening sentence alludes to another Renaissance commonplace: "Philosophers say, that Man is a Microcosm or little World, resembling in Miniature every Part of the great," a comparison Bacon makes in his playful *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, bound with the *Essays* in the 1691 edition that Swift is likely to have read.¹⁷

Swift's essay continues its imitation of modern Baconian prose with phrases such as these: "Nature does nothing in vain," "a wise Man is ever less alone, than when he is alone," "All Rivers go to the Sea, but none return from it," "Men, now-a-days, worship the rising Sun, and not the setting." But alongside the judicious epigrams other observations messily overflow from the speaker's argument, revealing a mind in chaos. "But what I blame the Philosophers for . . . is chiefly their Pride; nothing less than an *ipse dixit* and you must pin your Faith on their Sleeve"; "I value the opinion of the judicious Few, a *Rhymer*, a *Dennis* or a *Walsh*; but for the rest, to give my Judgment at once; I think the long Dispute among the Philosophers about a *Vacuum*, may be determined

¹⁵ See Rumbold's headnote to the text in her edition of *Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock-Treatises*, in *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, 18–19. The second line of Swift's essay "And, in my Opinion, the Body Natural may be compared to the Body Politick" is a direct paraphrase of Tindal's claim. See Rumbold, *Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock-Treatises*, in *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, 22.

¹⁶ Many critics have discussed Swift's relationship to Bacon and the new learning, the most complete summary of which can be found in Brian Vickers, "Swift and the Baconian Idol," in *The World of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), 87–128. See also Gregory Lynall, "Meditations and Mechanisms: Swift and Robert Boyle's *Occasional Reflections on Several Subjects*," in *Swift and Science: The Satire, Politics and Theology of Natural Knowledge, 1690–1730* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17–49. For a larger discussion of new scholarly methods in the Renaissance and early Enlightenment and Swift's relation to them, see Hugh Ormsby-Lennon, "Commonplace Swift," in *Reading Swift: Papers from the Third Munster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real (Munich: W. Fink, 1998), 13–44. Also see Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Ann Blair also discusses the scholarly issues Swift raises in "A Trritical Essay" in her *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Discussed in Dirk F. Passmann and Heinz J. Vienken, *The Library and Reading of Jonathan Swift: A Bibliographical Handbook* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 2003), 125–26.

in the Affirmative, that it is to be found in a Critick's Head. They are, at best, but the Drones of the learned World, who devour the Honey, and will not work themselves; and a Writer need no more regard them, than the Moon does the Barking of a little senseless Cur." The voice here is no longer Bacon's but Swift's, tangling itself in phrases that make the argument hard to follow and the parody almost impossible to locate. The idea is that modern natural philosophy and pseudo-scholarship lead to confusion, not Enlightenment, but because the parody is inexact, Swift shows only that his speaker, rather than the thinkers he doesn't really resemble, is confused.

Swift knew this, since his gifts as a parodist were considerable. Incoherence, then, is more important to him here than stylistic imitation or strong argument. About the nature of incoherence, Swift's speaker is uncharacteristically lucid. In the first paragraph he laments that reason following from a false premise ends in chaotic confusion:

Thus Men are led from one Error to another, til with *Ixion* they embrace a Cloud instead of *Juno*; or, like the Dog in the Fable, lose the Substance in gaping at the Shadow. For such Opinions cannot cohere; but like the Iron and Clay in the Toes of *Nebuchadnezzar's* Image, must separate and break in pieces.

Each of the three images in this passage depicts cognitive disorientation that follows from someone mistaking the nature of a representation. In one a goddess-shaped cloud is mistaken for a real goddess, in another the reflection of a dog is mistaken for a real dog, and in the third a statue that appears to be precious metal turns out to be cast with clay feet. In each example, the error comes from confusing a representation with an original, and in each example, an error of cognition arises out of a misleading physical passion (lust, greed, or avarice). "Incoherent Opinions," to reuse Swift's words, come from a mind's inability to reason accurately about its perceptions.

Swift's representation of modern scholarship as incoherent is of course part of his attack on Whig intellectual culture. He despised commonplacing and other habits of modern textual commentary, which were sponsored largely by Whig intellectuals.¹⁸ But embedded in Swift's politics is a deeper skepticism of an individual's capacity to lay claim to intellectual authority, his insistence on the limits of personal reason. Related to this, and reflected in the mental chaos of "A Tritical Essay," is Swift's commensurately bleak view of the essay writer's capacity for self-correction. "A Tritical Essay" implies that the essay as a critical form can neither register nor ameliorate an individual's failures in perception and disposition to incoherence—Whig writers such as Addison and Steele operate under the delusion that it does. The essay is, after all, purpose-built for the expression of personal opinion, a word that Swift uses here and throughout his writing to connote necessarily spurious knowledge formed from eccentric authority and grounded in individual perception. Swift's resistance to opinion goes beyond the caution that Addison, Steele, and others exercised with respect to expressing personal views or "interest." It's an objection to the very idea of an individual's ability to manage his or her own conscience. The word "opinion" is repeated nine times in the essay, always pejoratively, including in the phrase "in my opinion," in the opening sentence, where it's intended to alert us to the speaker's self-deceiving bloviating. In the remainder of this article, I'll discuss why Swift found the essay an especially congenial form

¹⁸ For important work on changes in scholarly practice in the early eighteenth century, see Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. "The Structural Transformation of Literary History," 15–53. See also Kristine Louise Haugen, *Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), esp. "The Public Intellectual," 100–123.

to represent minds in disarray and why, for Swift, mental disrepair is a condition that can't be undone and *shouldn't* be undone. The implication of this is that anyone who tries to mend disrepair (as Addison and Steele would do and as Bacon had done) is blameworthy.

There are a number of reasons for Swift's resistance to self-repair and they're linked. The first relates to his political beliefs. Everyone knows that Swift was a Tory, so outspokenly so that we tend to forget that he was first a Whig. The break came decisively in 1710, when Swift threw in his lot with Robert Harley and the rising Tory administration in the last years of Queen Anne's reign. The irony of his doing so is that the publication of *A Tale of a Tub* in 1704 had probably already ensured this self-sabotage.¹⁹ But when he was writing "A Tritical Essay" and then helping Steele to set up the *Tatler*, he was Whiggish in his associations and choice of patrons, hoping that they were his best shot at a clerical position in England and, ultimately more decisively, that the Whig administration would intervene in the proposal to repeal the Test Act for clergy in Ireland. The sacramental test act made Anglican communion the central idiom of religious worship. Its attributes were a focus on the authority of the church and its clergy, the presence of ritual in faith, and the limiting of the eccentric authority of individual worshipers. It both regulated and limited the individual's relationship with his or her own conscience.

Swift was an orthodox Anglican, opposed to crypto-Catholic High Church leanings as well as to Low Church dissent. He resisted toleration and all other attempts to reform the hierarchy and authority of the established church. The theology of Swift's orthodox position has to do with salvation: individuals cannot experience revelation in themselves; Christ's presence among humankind and his promise of salvation depend on the preservation of temporal institutions invested with divine authority. Individual minds, to the orthodox eighteenth-century Anglican, were not authorized to experience revelation, nor was it possible for Christ to be directly present in an individual; it was only through the church and its ordained, conforming ministers that Christ could manifest himself. For Swift and other strictly orthodox believers, individuals were not authorized to make their own determinations about religious matters, and the idea that an individual's reason, responding to empirical evidence, might constitute sufficient grounds to affirm (or deny) faith was unacceptable. As anyone who has read Swift will have noticed, the seventeenth-century phrase "right reason," denoting faith based on reason, is nothing short of a contradiction in terms.²⁰ In Swift's view the very attempt to be rational exposes every person's basic mental tumult; resistance to reason, living in response to the body's desires and demands, exposes the same incoherence. The effort by many writers of familiar essays to reconcile the life of the mind with empirical experience and the life of the senses was, then, ideologically and epistemologically unsound. The turn to interiority that essays made possible was obviously alluring to Swift, as much as to his contemporaries, but it was dangerously anarchic.

¹⁹ Ian Higgins reminds us that Swift's work was frequently the target of censorship and that Swift believed Queen Anne's objections to *A Tale of a Tub* cost him preferment in the English church. See his "Censorship, Libel and Self-Censorship," in *Jonathan Swift and the Eighteenth-Century Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 181.

²⁰ For accounts of Anglican orthodoxy in early eighteenth-century England and Swift's position in relation to it, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Within the Margins: The Definitions of Orthodoxy," in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33–53; as well as Marcus Walsh, "Swift and Religion," in Fox, *Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, 161–76. See also Louis A. Landa, *Swift and the Church of Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954); Roger D. Lund, "Swift's Sermons, 'Public Conscience,' and the Privatization of Religion," *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 18, no. 3 (1996): 150–74.

At the risk of sounding like Swift myself, I'll digress on the subject of an important critical departure from Croll's thesis about Attic prose and its relationship to interiority. Debora Shuger, the eminent historian of Renaissance rhetoric, has argued that Attic prose was not peculiarly associated with protoscientific, rationalist thought but was also "the preeminent style of sacred prose" in late Renaissance England.²¹ Her research reveals that Croll's distinction between the philosophical mode of the personal essay and the persuasive mode of classical oratory is a false distinction in the case of seventeenth-century religious prose, where the attempts to move and to reason are simultaneous and interdependent. Her work shows, furthermore, that the plain style shouldn't exclusively be associated with minds attempting to represent their own internal personalities, given that "eccentric self-revelation" was not a goal of orthodox Christian discourse or of the great Anglican preachers of the late Renaissance. Shuger, rather, finds that the anti-Ciceronian plain style emerged out of "orthodox Protestantism, not Stoic rationalism."²² The prose style most influential to the development of the eighteenth-century essay is, in other words, as much intended for religious writing as for secular philosophy and is historically associated with Anglican resistance to self-disclosure as much as with the contemplative mind in conversation with itself. One of the most important implications of Shuger's argument is that Swift's insistence on the individual's inability to rely on his or her own reason ties him to, rather than excludes him from, a major tradition in plain English prose style, although he pushed his arguments to a more extreme position than mainstream Anglican theologians did.

Tatler 230, appearing toward the end of the paper's run, was one of a handful of issues of the paper to which Swift contributed directly. Written by Swift in the persona of Isaac Bickerstaff, "From My Own Apartment" (one of Steele's formulas; the essay has a headnote by Steele himself), the issue consists of a letter within a letter, prefaced by a brief introductory note by Bickerstaff: "The following Letter hath laid before me many great and manifest Evils, in the World of Letters which I had overlooked." In the fake letter to Bickerstaff, Swift excoriates the use of vulgar or colloquial language among English writers. In some ways the issue is obedient to the rules of Steele's Whig satire—namely, that it attempts no direct attack or overt harm to anyone. So the letter of complaint begins: "There are some Abuses among us of great Consequence, the Reformation of which is properly your Province; although, as far as I have been conversant in your Papers, you have not yet considered them." What makes this opening plausibly house style is that the language of revolution and dissent is tamed into making a complaint about bad language: "the great Depravity of our Taste; and the continual Corruption of our Style." Moreover, vocabulary that's historically associated with political, religious, and civic disintegration is being used to recuperate *dissent itself* as a source of consensus and regeneration. It was precisely by arguing about issues like the use of colloquial language that Steele hoped his readers would settle into harmonious Whiggish happiness. To be sure, as in most *Tatler* essays, we catch a glimpse in these opening sentences of a mind in crisis, but the crisis is very mild and of short duration and little consequence.²³

²¹ Debora Shuger, "Morris Croll, Facius Dlyricus and the Origins of Anti-Ciceronianism," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 3, no. 4 (1985): 271.

²² *Ibid.*, 272.

²³ Swift's sally against the cult of politeness in *Tatler* 230 is one of a number of attacks launched at Whig-driven language reform and civility. Kate Loveman discusses the context of Swift's raillery against Whig culture in "Swift's Bites: Eighteenth-Century Raillery in Theory and Practice," in *Reading Fictions, 1660–1740: Deception in English Literary and Political Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 153–74. See also Ann Cline Kelly's *Swift and the English Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

In Swift's treatment of the topic, however, the corruption of language bothers his speaker a great deal. It mirrors a disintegration we observe in the letter writer's logic as he pursues his argument, complaining with a vehemence disproportionate to the mildness of the *Tatler's* frame satire and interpreting bad usage as a personal betrayal, which is delusional. He tells us that "for many years" he has attempted to stop the introduction of neologisms into the language but has been "plainly born down by Numbers, and betrayed by those who promised to assist me." These are the laments Swift uses elsewhere to describe his political disappointments and feelings of persecution. We suspect, indeed, that the imagery of fragmentation that Swift's speaker draws on is what attracted him to the topic in the first place; brokenness, not the possibility of repair, is his interest here. "The first thing that strikes your Eye, is the *Breaks* at the End of almost every Sentence; of which I know not the Use." Abbreviating polysyllabic words and "dismissing the rest" is described by Swift thus: "as the Owl fattened her mice after she had bit off their Legs, to prevent them from running away." His complaints exhausted, the writer ends his letter abruptly, and without remediation. "What Remedies are to be applied to these Evils, I have not Room to consider; having, I fear, already taken up most of your Paper. Besides, I think it is our Office only to represent Abuses, and yours to redress them." As Ian Higgins has argued, the essay is important politically as Swift's "hostile linguistic critique" of Whig-instigated language reform and the evolution of modern politeness.²⁴ But it also reflects Swift's deeper sense that reform could not be grounded in the authority of individual reason.

The most important detail of Swift's last essay written for Steele is its date, September 28, 1710. Swift had returned to London from Ireland that year to fight for retaining the Test Act, which is why he was around to write for the *Tatler* at all. In March 1710 the Whig party had entered a political crisis after staging an unpopular show trial of High Church Tory Henry Sacheverell for his sermon attacking nonconformists and other "false bretheren." Swift's last *Tatler* essay was written during the month of the Whigs' dismissal from office, a moment at which Steele's own Whiggish literary fortunes were also precarious. A couple of weeks later, Swift met with Robert Harley to plead the cause of the Irish clergy and soon learned that the queen had consented to retaining the act.²⁵ Swift's transfer of allegiance from the Whigs to the Tories was compelled, at first, by his obsession with a matter of doctrine. The deeper explanation for the evolution of his politics is his reverence for centralized, hierarchical, traditional sources of authority. He supported Queen Anne because she was a Stuart, he resisted the Hanoverian succession for the same reason, he disliked all attempts to dissipate centralized control, to break self-consciously with the past and create participatory government. One of the most telling details about Swift is that he was willing to be a Whig when he thought the Whigs might protect the Test Act, and that he changed allegiance when he realized that they would not. At bottom, the greatest ideological difference Swift had with the Whigs was the idea that individual authority might exceed institutional authority, especially with respect to religion.²⁶

²⁴ Ian Higgins, "Language and Style," in Fox, *Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, 152. Higgins reads Swift's writings on language as explicitly anti-Whig, designed to attack Whig cultural optimism after 1688.

²⁵ See Walsh's summary of the episode in "Swift and Religion."

²⁶ Roger Lund argues that Swift's sermons should be read in the context of the early eighteenth-century "struggle to preserve the public function of Anglican Christianity. Indeed, if we take them seriously as significant documents in the debate concerning the public role of the Church of England, Swift's sermons, like those of his High-Church colleagues, provide a powerful challenge to Habermas' account of the development of the public sphere and the inevitable privatization of religion in eighteenth-century England." Swift's interest in retaining

It's important to point out that Swift's difference from Addison and Steele doesn't reside in his emphasis of continuities between secular prose and the sacred life. His resistance doesn't take the form of being anachronistically "religious" in defiance of Addison's and Steele's modernizing secularism. On the contrary. The progressive ideology of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* itself reflects Addison's and Steele's Whig Christianity. As Jacob Sider Jost has argued, the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* offered a prose-based solution to the problem of salvation, suggesting, per the mainstream latitudinarian view, that "moral formation over time" was more likely to ensure salvation than "Catholic absolution" or "Calvinist election." In Jost's argument, Addison and Steele regard heaven as "personalized, customized, an extension of the unique qualities of the individual self as developed in earthly existence," in which enterprising individuals could be guided by the personal essay. While Swift, too, ostensibly swam in what Jost describes as this "Anglican cultural stream" he in fact departed vehemently from it when it came to the matter of moral self-improvement and self-regulation.²⁷

It was distrust of self-regulation in relation to belief that compelled Swift to write one of his most famous essays, "An Argument against Abolishing Christianity" (as it has become known). The essay is written in the voice of an overcautious Freethinker and from the outset confuses its readers as they try to decide how the speaking voice relates to Swift's real view. The familiar stance is present from the beginning, namely, Swift's cherished sense of being marginalized and misunderstood as he makes his case: "I am very sensible what a Weakness and Presumption it is, to reason against the general Humour and Disposition of the World." The speaker voices his concerns with exaggerated overcaution, enabling Swift both to reveal his own position and to conceal it. "I know not how, whether from the Affectation of Singularity, or the Perverseness of human Nature; but it so unhappily falls out, that I cannot be entirely of this Opinion [that Christianity should be abolished]." The speaker's position here is in fact Swift's own, but his nervous understatement is meant to expose his ideological unsoundness. Swift's point is that only a madman could hesitate about a measure that would abolish religion. In reality, of course, a Freethinker would have argued that the repeal of the Test Act would enlarge the possibility of religious worship, not confine it. Swift both hijacks his paradigmatic speaker's real views by replacing them with his own and uses the chance to ventriloquize the language of Freethinking to attack that, also. The words "singularity," "perverseness," and "opinion," which the Freethinker uses to excuse his objections to toleration, enable Swift to take another swipe at personal authority. It is exactly because human minds are singular, perverse, and beholden to opinion that individual reason must never prevail against institutional power. Being able to understand one's own thoughts and feelings engenders the confusion and disorientation of personal opinion. And being able to understand one's thoughts and feelings is also a necessary evil, a step toward affirming the need for centralized, institutional authority.

the authority of the established church borders on "fanaticism," in contrast with his lack of interest in other aspects of mainstream theology. Lund, "Swift's Sermons," 153.

²⁷ Jacob Sider Jost, "The Afterlife and the *Spectator*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 613.

Interiority and its discontents, indeed, supply the prevailing motif for the essay. In its religious, political, and literary culture, Britain is suffering from an excess of interiority:

Is not every Body freely allowed to believe whatever he pleaseth; and to publish his Belief to the World whenever he thinks fit. . . . Would any indifferent Foreigner, who should read the Trumpery lately written by *Asgill, Tindall, Toland, Coward*, and forty more, imagine the Gospel to be our Rule of Faith, and confirmed by Parliaments?

This essay retains a greater coherence than either of the other two, because Swift's polemical energy, consciously directed toward a specific political goal, imposes structure and organization on the argument. But ultimately we recognize the underlying fear of individual minds in contemplation that we saw in "A Tritical Essay," the same fear of the anarchic power of individuals being empowered to access their own internal states. His acerbic rhetorical demand "who should . . . imagine the Gospel to be our Rule of Faith?" is one of the most important phrases in the essay, reminding us that only the "system of gospel," as Swift calls it, can supply grounds for faith, never personal reason on its own. Swift's speaker concludes:

Whatever some may think of the great Advantages to Trade, by this favourite Scheme; I do very much apprehend, that in six Months Time, after the Act is past for the Extirpation of the Gospel, the Bank and *East-India* Stock may fall, at least, *One per cent*. And, since that is Fifty Times more than ever the Wisdom of our Age thought fit to venture for the *Preservation* of Christianity, there is no Reason we should be at so great a Loss, merely for the Sake of *destroying* it.

The lacerating, explosively unstated irony depends on a speaker who is unable to perceive the implications of his own psychotic but internally coherent musings. The speaker of the closing lines in this 1708 essay is the same person as the Gulliver who talks to his horses in the final paragraph of book 4 of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and the Projector who assures us, at the end of "A Modest Proposal" (1729), that he cannot gain from the scheme, as his wife is past childbearing. This is the paradigmatic image of the man who thinks for himself that Swift is both obsessed with and appalled by—the individual enchanted by the power of his own imagination, believing his powers of reason to be absolutely lucid and authoritative.

One of the most interesting things about the personal essay is that it has remained true to its formal origins as a representation that overtly solicits the reader's trust in the accuracy of its claims. Unlike fiction, the more attended-to form that was evolving at the same time, essays didn't attempt to release the reader from reality into realism, into a safe space in which they were able to "suspend disbelief." Eighteenth-century essays demanded an engagement from their readers that assumed a continuity between the social worlds described in the essay and the world to which the reader belonged. The essay's claim to participate in the reality it represents is what made it such an important form for Addison and Steele. The whole idea of the essay, for them, was to create sympathy, permit communication, and cultivate a space in which people could discover what they thought and manage the consequences of their own interior lives. In this project they were motivated by political and ideological considerations that they didn't always confess to, and weren't always aware of. But one point of ideology to which they were explicitly committed was that individuals have permission to make mistakes, and that they have the ability to repair their mistakes.

The fact that the essay is the literary form with the closest and most porous claim to “reality” is also what made it appealing to Swift. It enabled him to depict minds in disrepair and to make the case that neither individuals nor the essay as a form had the power or the authority to correct internal turmoil. In his view, such authority resided elsewhere: in divine sovereignty and its temporal manifestations in kingdoms, monarchs, and established churches. The problem was, however, that such sources of stability were beyond the reach of most people’s daily experience—especially the independent Kingdom of Ireland that Swift thought should exist but that didn’t. Internal chaos was effectively a permanent, nonreparable condition, one that Swift would come to insist on in increasingly anguished, angry tones while Addison, Steele, and their followers demonstrated the opposite: the restorative, redemptive power of essayistic lucubration. A