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The "Fable of the Spider and the Bee" and Swift's Poetics of Inspiration

by CHARLES H. HINNANT

The "Fable of the Spider and the Bee" raises questions and offers clues about Swift's critical opinions, a matter that has not received the attention it deserves. In the past Swift has often been praised as a great parodist and legitimately so, for he was able to imitate a variety of styles and methods. This led some older commentators to claim that his critical outlook was "negative" and antipathetic to formal theorizing. But William Ewald and Martin Price have recently argued that it was Swift who first perfected the satiric mask, and other modern commentators have shown that Swift did indeed hold a number of positive opinions about poetry. Nonetheless, very little has been done to establish the distinctive features of Swift's critical perspective. Only when his ideas are examined in relation to the prevailing critical traditions of his age can it be demonstrated that his aesthetic is not as fragmented or unoriginal as it may at first seem. The argument of this paper is that Swift, unlike most of his contemporaries, continued to assert the inspired origins of poetry; that in the "Fable of the Spider and the Bee" he adopted a model of inspiration which provided a recognizable alternative to the elevated "enthusiasm" of his early odes; and that this alternative was compatible with the view that the proper end of poetry is the imitation of nature.

Evidence of Swift's assertion of the divine origins of poetry can be found by examining the "Fable of the Spider and the Bee" in relation to Sir Francis Bacon's criterion for judging scientific discovery. To distinguish legitimate interpreters of nature from "men of experiment" and "men of dogmas," Bacon employed the three analogies of the ant, the spider and the bee: "The men of experiment are like the ant; they only..." 1

1. One example is George Saintsbury's argument that Swift's criticism is "general" in character and mainly "destructive" in intention (A History of Criticism [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1902], II, 452); J. W. H. Atkins describes Swift's criticism as "disappointing," and as having "little to offer in the way of constructive theories or appreciation" (English Literary Criticism: 17th & 18th Centuries [London: Methuen, 1951], p. 173).


collect and use; the reasoners resemble spiders, who make cobwebs out of their own substance. But the bee takes a middle course; it gathers its material from the flowers of the garden and of the field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own." The phrasing calls to mind Swift's fable, in which "Fields" and "Gardens" are the key words describing the area of the bee's activity. For both Bacon and Swift, the product of this activity is dependent upon an act of creation. The bee's transformation of his materials is not an arbitrary recombination of displaced elements, as in the "unlawful Matches & divorces of Things" that Bacon describes elsewhere as the product of the imagination. Rather it is the total metamorphosis that Swift's bee describes as the result of his desire to "enrich" himself with what he collects from flowers and blossoms "without the least Injury to their Beauty, their Smell, or their Taste." However, on the question of what constitutes the origin of the bee's transformative power, Swift parts company from Bacon. The purely natural capacity of Bacon's bee has become in Swift's fable a "gift" of "Heaven" and of "Providence." These terms suggest the conviction that the poet's power is in some way given, that it comes from a source external to the self. The presence in Swift's fable of specific references to the bee's "Flights," "Music," "Honey" and "Wax" appear to reinforce this conviction; historically, they recall an ancient emblem for inspiration which found its most influential formulation in Plato's *Ion* (534C). Nor is this association of the bee with inspiration necessarily fortuitous. In terms of the etymology encouraged by Plato, the inspired poet's "melos" or song is associated with the "meli" or honey of the bee ("melita").

Such associations are not, of course, inherent in emblems. But they are not merely read into them either. An emblem can become charged with precise "associations" when it provides the context for a specific argument. In Sir William Temple's *On Poetry*, for example, Swift would have found a much more explicitly poetic conception of the bee than in Bacon's *Magna Instauratio*. Although Temple's emblem has often been conflated with Bacon's, he interprets that emblem in a different sense. Intent upon attacking the tyranny of the "Modern" critic's "Rules" and "constraints," Temple sees in the analogy of the bee primarily a sign of the freedom poets must be allowed to possess: "They must range through Fields as well as Gardens, choose such Flowers as


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they please, and by Proprieties and Scents they only know and distin-
guish. They must work upon their Cells, with Admirable Art, extract
their Honey with infinite Labour, and sever it from the Wax with such
Distinction and Choyce as belongs to none but themselves to perform or
to judge.” The ant and the bee are not mentioned in this passage, and
the poet rather than the natural philosopher is the subject of the
emblem. In the Baconian scale of things, this is a misinterpretation, for
the natural philosopher is more fundamentally opposed to the poet than
to the collector or the dogmatist. But in recognizing the gulf that
separates the two emblems, we must be aware of oversimplifying the op-
position by assuming that the activities of Temple’s bee are a divine
“gift” rather than a natural endowment. The main emphasis of
Temple’s emblem falls upon the bee’s distinctive “proprieties and
scents.” To Temple, these proprieties and scents are natural instincts,
energizers that are meant to spur the poet to transform his materials ac-
cording to his own unerring internal standards. By comparison, the
natural instincts of Swift’s bee, instincts which allow him to blunder
into the spider’s web, appear to be far less reliable.

This distinction between natural instinct and divine gift may not
appear to be very significant when measured by modern standards. In
eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticism, natural genius and the
“furor poeticus” were often regarded as virtually indistinguishable. But
Swift employs the bee’s modesty concerning his natural powers as a foil
to the spider’s exaggerated pretensions. His bee appears naturalistic only
if we insist upon overlooking this contrast. The derisive comment of
Aesop, locating the spider’s natural “Genius” in his “Entrails (the Guts
of Modern Brains)” (p. 232) indicates how the spider’s claim is to be
viewed. In scorning to own “any Obligation or Assistance from with-
out,” Swift’s spider adopts the same attitude as Arachne who, in Book
VI of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, is transformed by Minerva into a spider
because she “denied the goddess was her teacher, / And took offence
when art was called divine.”

Swift’s specific interpretation of the fable of the spider and the bee
helps to explain his emphasis upon the divine rather than the natural ori-
gin of poetry. By incorporating the fable into a mock-heroic battle be-
tween all the parties in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, Swift
in effect combines Bacon’s figure of the natural philosopher with
Temple’s figure of the poet into a single image which combines some of
the traits of both while broadening their scope. Bacon’s well-known dis-
tinction between the reason that “doth buckle and bow the Mind unto

Spingarn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), III, 84. All quotations from Temple’s “Of Poetry” are from this
dition. For Temple’s opposition to the view that poetry is divinely inspired, see III, 74–75.
brary, 1958), p. 163. Ovid’s metamorphosis, which represents the contest between Arachne and Minerva
as a clash between warring views of inspiration, is a classical analogue to Swift’s fable.
the Nature of things” and the “poesie” that submits “the shewes of Things to the Desires of the Mind” effectively excluded the poet from any relation to factual reality. Temple’s distinction between the “Operations” of “Wisdom” and of “Wit” asserted the existence of a similar dichotomy between science and poetry (III, 73–74). Swift does not explicitly deny this dichotomy in the fable, but his conception of a creator who owes his power to “Heaven” asserts the essential unity of the arts and sciences. In place of naturalistic analogies that imply a basic antagonism between different modes of thought, Swift offers a paradigm that transcends these analogies and thus applies to all the disciplines in the battle of the books. The dualism that was implicit in the emblems of Bacon and Temple is replaced by a perspective that acknowledges different areas of intellectual endeavor yet still regards them as manifestations of the same divine “gift.”

This distinction between the inspiration of Swift and the natural power of Bacon and Temple must, however, be viewed cautiously; to determine the extent to which the former can be interpreted without reference to the latter it is necessary to distinguish Swift’s unitary perspective from the conventional view of the poet as an inspired singer. Rather than locating the origin of the poetic state in a system which opposes the conscious subject to an unconscious power, Swift preserves the active conscious self as the triggering force and guide (“a long Search, much Study, true Judgment, and Distinction of Things”) in the process of intellectual discovery. By taking care to emphasize the positive role of the active rational self in creative activity, Swift seeks to overcome the opposition between the rational and the irrational that is for him a prominent feature of Modern hypotheses concerning the creative process. The effort of theorists to reify different mental operations in mechanistic terms (“if the Morsure be Hexagonal, it produces Poetry; the Circular gives eloquence,” p. 277) is one manifestation of this phenomenon; so also is the attempt to attribute creativity to a unique, all encompassing power (the “great Genius” of the Moderns, p. 234).

In spite of Swift’s emphasis upon the role of conscious effort in the poetic process, his description of the bee does not deprive this process of its inspired character. He is just as inclined as a Boileau or a Pope to regard a writer without a special power as a writer without invention. The bee’s “flights” are the most important indication in the fable of the special inspiration a writer must possess. But Swift defines this inspiration in a way that seeks to mitigate man’s propensity for error and delusion. Although the bee is pictured, like the Muse, as winged and flying, it does not seek to lose itself in the soaring movement that Swift attacks in section VIII of *A Tale of a Tub* but rather ranges “thro’ every Corner


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of Nature.” The basic trajectory of its “flight” is thus limited and horizontal rather than limitless and vertical: a trajectory that does not move from earth to heaven like the afflatus of the Aeolists but rather awakens the poet’s energies through an immediate contact with the world around it.

Ironically enough, the closest modern parallel to this limited conception of inspiration is the final strophe of Cowley’s The Praise of Pindar: In Imitation of Horace his second Ode, B.4:

Lo, how th’obsequious Wind, and swelling Ayr
The Theban Swan does upwards bear
Into the walks of Clouds, where he does play,
And with extended Wings opens his liquid way.
    Whilst, alas, my tim’erous Muse
    Unambitious tracks pursues;
Does with weak unballast wings,
    About the Mossy Brooks and Springs;
    About the Trees new-blossom’ed Heads,
    About the Fields and flowry Meads,
    And all inferior beauteous things
    Like the laborious Bee,
    For little drops of Honey flee,
And there with Humble Sweets contents her industrie.  

Cowley is here explicitly associating the horizontal movement of his own “tim’erous Muse” with the bee’s flight. Although Swift eliminates the pejorative connotations of Cowley’s comparison, he too is describing a poetic state that is not a soaring flight “into the walks of Clouds” but a search for the “inferior” beauties of nature. The flowers and nettles of the field function as the objects of this search, objects which, though guiding and arousing the poet’s muse, are not distorted by it. And the bee is the emblem by which Swift, like Cowley, gives expression to this limited conception of inspiration.  

The movement in Cowley’s poem from the “walks of Clouds” to the “inferior beauteous Things” of the natural world parallels the shift in Swift’s own views. This resemblance is all the more remarkable inasmuch as Swift initially chose Cowley as his model and was guided in his early efforts by the Pindaric muse. No doubt the uncertain achievement of his youthful poems modified Swift’s view of poetry from his first confidence in its quasi-divine power. The satire upon enthusiasm in Book VIII of A Tale of a Tub reduces this power to the “obsequious Wind” and swelling Ayr” of the Aeolists. And yet it may be misleading to assume that Swift simply renounced the muse; Cowley’s The Praise of Pindar provides a recognizable alternative to the high-flown model he

11. The probability that Cowley’s imitation rather than the Horatian original provides the immediate context for Swift’s fable is suggested by the fact that Horace refers only to “thyme” in the brief passage in which he depicts the bee’s activities (Odes, 4.2, 11.27-32).
had originally adopted. In *The Battle of the Books*, Swift adopts this alternative when he affirms the existence of an inspiration that serves to diminish rather than to inflate man's sense of his own importance.

Swift's attempt to construct a poetic on the model of the bee is rather different from the mode of thinking implicit in the prevailing rationalism of his age, despite the fact that both Swift and Modern rationalistic critics opposed the traditional neo-Platonic conception of enthusiasm. The rationalist argument, which is mainly found in poetic theories based upon Aristotle, assumed that writers possess a natural genius, which gives force and energy to their work, and that the function of art, and particularly of the rules, is to guide this genius. But in *The Battle of the Books*, it is the destructive and self-preoccupied gestures of the spider which conform to this paradigm. The "native Stock and great Genius" the earthbound spider claims is exactly the innate capacity contemporary neo-Aristotelians claimed for the poet in order to distinguish him from the mere versifier. The "Art and Method" which the spider employs to construct an edifice from "Materials extracted altogether out of his own Person" is precisely what neo-Aristotelians meant by the rules—a special kind of procedure by which the poet's genius is shaped and directed to a rationally intelligible end.

This paradigm is the key to Swift's conception of his arachnid protagonist. Through the presentation of a spider who "spins and spits wholly out of himself," what has been accomplished is a basic reversal of the neo-Aristotelian argument. In the writings of seventeenth-century French commentators upon the *Poetics* and of English critics who stay close to that tradition, the imitation of nature is assumed to be the central task of the poet. This conventional and time-worn assumption is unexpectedly and humorously reversed in Swift's modern fable: a spider who employs "Art and Method" to construct an edifice out of his own "native Stock and great Genius" is revealed to be no more than what he appears to be. For this emblem of corrupted human nature, external reality could never take the place of the cobwebs that are spun out of his own "Dirt and Poison."

Swift's fable of the spider and the bee thus stands as far from the severe formalism and rationalism of neo-Aristotelian poetics as it does from the anti-formalism and irrationalism of older neo-Platonic theories of art. Swift seizes upon one of the basic postulates of neo-Aristo-


telianism, the notion that poetry is mimetic, but relates it to the Platonic notion that poetry is inspired. In terms of the Baconian paradigm, this means that the writer’s knowledge, while purporting to be the result of observation (the ant) or ratiocination (the spider), is actually the result of a quest with privileged moments of discovery. And the writer’s mode of composition—the process by which his knowledge is transformed into creation—is musical rather than architectonic in form. Instead of employing art and method to construct an edifice out of his own materials, the writer transmutes the materials of the natural world into a melos that defies common explanation and yet enforces a sense of “proper words in proper places.” To be sure, this activity is accompanied by “infinite Labor, and search, and ranging thro’ every Corner of Nature” (p. 234), yet this labor initiates rather than gives direction to the act of writing by a process of step-by-step reasoning; an author must work long and hard at his discipline, yet this effort is anterior to the moment of discovery. 14

The gift of the Muse then is twofold: knowledge and the power of transforming that knowledge into a “Music”; it is the “Curiosity” of the bee which provides the condition in which both are possible. The only way a poet can become a vessel of the muse, in Swift, is to forsake “well-trodden paths” in search of new subjects. The poet is thus motivated by what he searches for rather than by what he imitates, as Swift departs from the conventional neo-Aristotelian discipline emphasizing the imitation of rhetorical models and genres (ars, imitatio, exercitatio) in favor of an educational program that stresses a laborious and careful preliminary investigation. Swift thus portrays the writer as working according to an empirical and experimental process and this process in effect distinguishes him from the author who constrains himself to prescribed genres, styles and methods.

At this point, one might wonder what possible function inspiration might have if it merely imitates Nature’s existent order? What poet needs inspiration to copy ordinary reality? The conventional explanation is that inspiration is a “possession,” a “divine madness.” Yet this seems to justify an escape from reality of the sort that Swift treats ironically when he explores the failure of the poetic imaginative flight to sustain itself in A Tale of a Tub. But one can argue that Swift’s new “enthusiasm” entails a doctrine of human self-effacement. In order to discover the otherwise neglected and humble things around us, Swift believes that the writer must abandon the narcissistic “Pride” of the spider and approach factual reality with the modesty and openness of the bee. One can also argue that the poet’s encounter with reality does not preclude poetic fiction and fantasy. The flights of the bee activate his

14. For Swift, creativity is clearly associated with spontaneity rather than labor: “I do not believe myself to be a laboriously dry writer because if the fit comes not immediately I never heed it but think of something else” (The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift [London: G. Bell, 1910-14], 1, 8).
music, and this music provides the stimulus for poetic invention as well as imitation. The point is not that the writer finds himself facing a real or an imaginary object, but that, through the act of composition, a metamorphosis is possible. Whatever realistic details and events are to be represented are to be embodied as the traditionally inspired poet veils revelations in enigmas, allegories, fables and fictions. In this sense, when Swift speaks of the bee as an emblem of intellectual activity, he may be justifying his own capacity to invent another world, yet a world that has a more complex and ironic relationship than a literal copy to the world of actual fact. There has never been any question of the inventive nature of Swift's satirical art. But what has not always been sufficiently recognized is the extent to which the genesis of this art is inscribed in Swift's own view of poetry. The genuinely inspired poet does not suppose, like the spider, that wrangling, rage, scorn and invective are the true elements of satire. Although his ridicule never becomes pure fantasy, it veils its attack in fictions and fables. It lashes out against its subject, yet it reinvents the world against which it is railing.

Thus, in response to the original question posed by this essay—can a coherent and original poetic be found in the "Fable of the Spider and the Bee"—the answer must be yes. In fact, if we are to distinguish Swift's views from those of his contemporaries, we must look more carefully than we have in the past at the assumptions that are embedded in his poetry and prose. To see Swift's criticism as mainly negative or conventional is to ignore what is distinctive about his perspective and this would be an undeserved neglect of its real import.

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15. The necessary conjunction of truth and fiction in poetry is more explicitly affirmed in Swift's verse:

For, though the Muse delights in Fiction,
She ne'er inspires against Conviction.

(To Mr. Delany, ll. 105-106)

Unjustly Poets we asperse;
Truth shines the brighter, clad in verse;
And all the Fictions they pursue
Do but insinuate what is true.

(To Stella, ll. 57-60)