

because I felt that the results would not justify the space necessary for a full discussion. Norris is concerned not with teeth but with *Greed*—the title, as George Kurman (Western Illinois Univ.) aptly pointed out, that Erich von Stroheim gave to his film adaptation of the novel. McTeague, a slow-witted giant with no degree in dentistry, is utterly incapable of psychodontic or sociodontic ruminations of the sort that characterize his more sophisticated spiritual descendants of the sixties. However, the chorus of indignation soon made it clear that I had touched a raw nerve in the teeth of many Americanists. I committed at least a tactical error in failing to mention this classic of American naturalism and to justify my omission. William Stone's thoughtful analysis, moreover, has persuaded me that the great gold tooth in Norris' novel has deeper symbolic roots than I had originally suspected.

I would like to take this occasion to thank all those colleagues who were sufficiently amused and persuaded by my article to take the trouble to write. I have learned much from their comments, and I am encouraged by the fact that they regard their examples as an affirmation of my basic argument. Verily, they have given me an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

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Swift's Scatological Poems

To the Editor:

Thomas B. Gilmore, Jr. ("The Comedy of Swift's Scatological Poems," *PMLA*, 91, 1976, 33–43), though he deals, and deals well, with a larger number of these poems than I do, seems to give much the same reading of them as the article of mine that he cites ("On Swift's 'Scatological' Poems," *Sewanee Review*, 75, 1967, 672–89). Like him, I stress their "comedy." I call attention to the "pastoral-romantic clichés" of Strephon and Chloe's wedding and of Cassinus and Peter's conversation (more likely to have been derived, as I suggest, from Ovid, than, as Gilmore does, from "Classics 101"—I doubt that such courses were offered at Cambridge in the eighteenth century). I try to maintain, in Gilmore's words, that in these poems Swift wishes to convey "an attitude that accepts waste as a natural part of life. . . . It is part of the human comedy, as innocent and harmless as the rustics who drop it; and it is easily cleaned off," an attitude "eminently in keeping with the good sense that he never tired of recommending," rather than the picture (such as Aldous Huxley's or Norman O. Brown's) of a "Swift neurotically wallowing in excrement or howling scatological imprecations against mankind" (p. 41).

For the sake of differentiation, perhaps, Gilmore takes issue with a couple of points I make: my "pious

hope that Cassinus"—Strephon, as well—"will eventually come to accept his humanity, recognize his fallen state as the common lot, and learn to bless God's miraculous creation of beauty from dung." Impossible, Gilmore declares. Cassinus "does not show the faintest glimmer of the intelligence necessary for such changes." Gilmore speaks of "the utter impracticability of Swift's advice for Strephon." In any case, "The desirability of Greene's hope is dubious. Cassy is a comic gem. . . . The conversion of this bundle of pastoral-romantic clichés to a sensate, thinking being, apart from the heavy demands it would place even on God's wondrous powers, would only result in another ordinary person" (p. 39).

Well, it is true that Cassinus and Strephon themselves will not change, since they have no existence outside the poems. I did not expect my "pious hope" to be taken as an exercise in the "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" fallacy. Rather, it was shorthand for "Let us hope—as we may assume that Swift hoped—that some young people, prey to delusions like those of Cassinus and Strephon, may, through the reading of the poems, or in some other way, in time attain a more sensible set of values, and as a result lead somewhat happier lives than seem in store for Cassinus and Strephon at the time of the conclusions of the poems." Is this hope excessively pious? Or impossible to attribute to Swift? Or one that places too "heavy demands . . . even on God's wondrous powers"? (I wonder how Swift would have responded to this last remark.)

I suppose I share in Gilmore's strictures on criticism which "in its concentration on Swift's moral purposes . . . scants or ignores the comic aspects of the scatological poems," and Milton Voigt's censure, quoted, or adapted, approvingly by Gilmore, of "the emphasis placed on what these critics take to be Swift's didactic intention [which] has throttled the comedy, the literary fun, the merriment and complexity" of the poems (p. 34). (Though, on rereading it, I think my article points up the fun as effectively as Gilmore's.) If the implication is that a reading of the poems should ignore, or play down, their "didacticism" or "Swift's moral values," or that those moral values are somehow irrelevant to, or even separable from, the comedy, it seems to me that we are again in the presence of an error that has plagued too much recent (and earlier) Swift criticism. Neither as a Christian clergyman, nor as someone familiar with the elements of classical and Renaissance literary theory, would Swift have conceded that there is any justification for comic satire—for these poems *are* satire, biting satire, as well as comedy—*except* "didacticism": the possibility of correcting what is being ridiculed. "My satire points at no defect," wrote Swift, "But what all mortals may correct." To find comedy in the stumbling of an incurable cripple or the babbling of a congenital idiot is impermissible. To sug-

gest, as Gilmore seems to do, that the Cassinuses and Strephons are irredeemable; that their redemption is even beyond God's powers; that Swift is mocking them only for the fun of seeing them squirm (or if they are too insensible even to squirm, of inviting the rest of us to enjoy the spectacle of their absurdity and resulting misery); that he would feel the "desirability" of their redemption to be "dubious" (presumably as detracting from the fun of the spectacle) is to make Swift a sadistic monster. In fact, of course, Gilmore, at the end of his essay, refutes what he says, or seems to say, here. If Swift "never tires" of recommending good sense, then he is presumably recommending it to the Cassinuses and Strephons of this world. Why should he waste his time doing so if the recommendation is "utterly impracticable"? This is to make Swift considerably less than a practitioner of "good sense" himself.

Gilmore usefully insists that the reference to "gaudy Tulips" at the end of *The Lady's Dressing Room* is "distinctly ironic" (p. 40). The gaudy Celia, like other things in this imperfect world, is considerably less than the perfection of beauty. But wouldn't Gilmore (and Swift) agree that, esthetically, she is at least some improvement over "dung"?

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To the Editor:

Thomas B. Gilmore, Jr., in "The Comedy of Swift's Scatological Poems," has called needed attention to the comic aspects of these poems and provided significant new insights through his detailed close readings of them. Useful as his analysis is, I must express two reservations about his methods and conclusions.

The first reservation is that this is simply more of the same old New Criticism, treating the poems as objects created by an idealized poet fully in control of himself and his art, a well-balanced, judicious Swift with a "settled distaste for all romantic unreality." Maurice Johnson urged critics several years ago to begin considering Swift's personal involvement in his poems: "his own identity and his poetry seem inseparable" ("Swift's Poetry Reconsidered," *English Writers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John M. Middendorf, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971, p. 240). For no other of Swift's poems is there greater need to consider the poet together with his work than for the scatological poems. Other writers (Rabelais, Dryden, Pope, the novelists later in the century) have used scatology, but not so often as Swift or with such intensity. The recurrence and vehemence indicate a certain uneasiness, like an adolescent's preoccupation with sex. Swift protesteth too much, and that protesting becomes an involuntary part of the meaning and effect of the poems. I am not advocating a return to psycho-

analytic criticism—there simply is not enough reliable data to make such an exercise worthwhile. But I am maintaining that purely objective criticism will not do for works that give so much evidence of personal involvement by the poet. It creates artificial structures and themes which, in the end, lead to misunderstanding of the poems and of the author.

My second reservation concerns the failure to distinguish between comic elements and comic tone. The poems do have comic elements; that Swift intended them to be comic works seems very likely. Unless the comic elements are unified by a fairly consistent comic tone, however, the poems may not be comic on the whole and surely cannot be "comic masterpieces." Of the five poems Gilmore discusses, only *Cassinus and Peter* sustains its comic tone evenly enough to be deemed wholly successful; significantly, its presentation is detached, consisting mostly of dialogue. The other scatological poems are less detached and less successful. Swift may very well have intended *A Beautiful Young Nymph* as a comedy of exposure, and parts of it (ll. 1–28, 57–70) work very well. But other lines—"Her Shankers, Issues, running Sores" (l. 30), "With Pains of Love tormented lies" (l. 39), and "faintly screams" (l. 42), for example—produce a sympathetic response in any sensitive reader and do not fit with the comic parts. What comedy there is certainly "harsh comedy," as Gilmore says, but too much of the poem is not comedy at all. Readers have responded to the poem in such various ways because Swift was unable to unify the poem and elicit a single effect.

The Lady's Dressing Room in all likelihood was intended to describe a comic situation; the use of climax in the central scene and the allusive similes (ll. 69–118) are indeed effective in doing so. But the lists and details early in the poem are too intense in tone to match the lightness of the latter part. The sounds in the lines convey a harshness that is not "dispassionate, almost tolerant," as Gilmore contends. Listen, for example, to "Allum Flower to stop the Steams, / Exhal'd from sour unsavoury Streams" (ll. 27–28), or "Fowl'd with the Scouring of her Hands" (l. 38), or "Begumm'd, bematter'd, and beslim'd" (l. 45). The choice and arrangement of words and sounds are, of course, Swift's, not a persona's, and their effect is definitely not the "training laughter" Gilmore hears. Something besides comedy is going on here. Deeper feelings of the author are showing through and, by working against the comedy, they detract from the successfulness of the poem.

Had *Strephon and Chloe* ended at line 218, it would have been a successful, light comic piece, using contrasts between the literary and the real, the figurative and the literal, nicely to create a meaningful humorous situation. But the final 96 lines of heavy-handed ser-