

and all the torture it would brand on body and mind. He loathed cruelty. He was enraged by the attempts of one nation to impose its will on another which we call imperialism. He exposed, as never before or since, the crimes committed in the name of a strutting, shouting patriotism... Above all, he hated war and the barbarisms it let loose. War, for him, embraced all other forms of agony and wickedness. *Gulliver's Travels* is still the most powerful of pacifist pamphlets" (Michael Foot: *Debts of Honour*, Picador, 1980, pp207-8).

Foot sees Swift not only as a revolutionary iconoclast sounding the trumpet of anarchistic revolt against establishment values but also as a defender of the poor against the growing ethos of laissez-faire capitalism. He knew what crawling self-seekers politicians could be, but he knew too that politics was concerned with the great question of rich and poor. *A Modest Proposal* (1729), in which Swift offered as a satirical solution to the problem of Irish poverty that the Irish should sell their own children to be eaten, was, in Foot's view, the 'most tremendous curse on the money lenders since Jesus of Nazareth drove them from the temple' (op.cit. p209).

Whatever Swift's political allegiances were in England, when he returned to Ireland it was always a different story altogether. It was as if he lived two different lives. In a letter to Pope, he wrote: "What I do is owing to perfect rage and resentment, and the mortifying sight of slavery, folly and baseness about me, among which I am forced to live". Thus he threw himself into the struggle on behalf of the slaves, namely the Irish, and against the tyrants, the English.

Even before the appearance of *A Modest Proposal*, he had taken up the cause of freedom in the *Drapier's Letters*, a series of seven anonymous pamphlets attacking the proposed introduction of 'Wood's ha'pence' into Ireland. In 1722 an English ironmonger William Wood was granted a patent from the British government for the right to manufacture a new coin in Ireland that was made of an inexpensive metal –

copper. Wood stood to make a huge profit from the new coins.

The Irish Parliament was not consulted about the scheme, and the general belief in Ireland was that the introduction of this cheap form of currency, which would be useless outside Ireland, could harm the country's already weak economy. Swift was dismayed and responded in the pamphlets which first appeared in 1724 under the name of M.B. Drapier. "If Mr Wood's project should take", he wrote, "it will ruin even our beggars". In the second letter he wrote: "Am I a free man in England, and do I become a slave in six hours, by crossing the Channel?" In the fourth he called upon the Irish people to act and take control of their own destiny: You are and ought to be as free a people as your brethren in England". This fourth letter contained a sentence that would echo loudly down the following centuries: "Government without the consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery".

The letter was considered seditious and a reward of £300 was offered by the Lord Lieutenant John Carteret for the discovery of the author, but it was never claimed, even though thousands – including Carteret – knew who he was. The letter was sustained by other pamphlets and by ballads which were sung through the streets, and it brought the agitation to the highest pitch. In 1725 Wood's Halfpence was cancelled and Swift was hailed as a hero. On his return from a visit to England in 1726 bonfires were lit and church bells rung in his honour.

In his essay on 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' (reprinted in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*), Edward Said describes Swift as 'the most devastating pamphleteer of his time'. In another essay, 'Humanism's Sphere' (reprinted in the same volume), written a few months before he died, Said suggests that it is possible following the example of Yeats to read Swift in a revisionist way, 'as a demonic and tigerish a writer as has ever lived', and he continues: "Yeats magnanimously envisioned Swift's internal world essentially in a ceaseless conflict with itself, unsatisfied, unappeased, unreconciled in an almost Adornian way, rather than as settled into untroubled patterns of tranquility and unchanging order"

Orwell sees it a bit differently: "We are right to think of Swift as a rebel and iconoclast, but except in certain secondary matters, such as his insistence that women

should receive the same education as men, he cannot be labelled 'Left'. He is a Tory anarchist, despising authority while disbelieving in liberty, and preserving the aristocratic outlook while seeing clearly that the existing aristocracy is degenerate and contemptible".

Swift was clearly a complicated man of many masks. Although a religious man in a professional sense, he was not overburdened with piety. "Life", he wrote to Pope, "is not a farce; it is a ridiculous tragedy, which is the worst kind of composition". His apparent misanthropy doesn't say much for divine providence. In another letter to Pope, he confessed: "Principally I hate and detest that animal called man; although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth".

This acute awareness of human weakness and hypocrisy is, of course, the primary source of his comic genius. In the preface to *The Battle of the Books* (1704) he wrote that "satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own". In some ways he was not a public intellectual in Said's sense but rather a public anti-intellectual, satirising the intellectual pretensions of 'atheists and sophists'. But in his condemnation of poverty, injustice and tyranny, Said is right: Swift used his savage satire responsibly to 'wonderfully mend the world'.

He was not a humanist in the sense of being sceptical about a god. He was also a reactionary thinker who was pessimistic about human progress. His greatest admirers cannot claim that he was a true revolutionary, and they might even have difficulty in proving that he was a democrat. Nor was he an advocate of the restoration of land to the ancient Irish. His form of dissidence was the continuous condemnation of injustice and a demand for an equality of rights for the abominably oppressed people, and these are surely two very important tenets of Humanism.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. Said, Edward: *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Palgrave, 2004
5. Smyth, Jack: *Jonathan Swift*; in the *Ulster Humanist*, Vol3 No7. □