

MATERIALITY AND OMISSION: SWIFT'S NARRATOR AND THE TALE OF A TUB

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In *A Tale of a Tub*, Jonathan Swift creates a narrative voice which is literate, educated and well-versed in the writings and material philosophy of the literary community of Grub Street; however, his dependence upon the worldly presents both a limitation and an inspiration for the discussion and omission found in 'A Digression concerning the Original, the Use and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth'. The narrative voice of the Hack writer is unable to extend his language and understanding past the materiality of the world, causing him to perform his own typographical creation *ex nihilo* when faced with the inexplicable and immaterial. This act of omission is a supposed defect in the manuscript, or an inability to speak on the differentiation of spirit and the individual; rather, as I will assert, it is an answer in and of itself, the Hack both denying the answer and providing it at the same time.

This discussion addresses 'A Digression On Madness', specifically the text, or lack thereof, which appears to be either a fault in the manuscript or a refusal to speak on the part of the Hack, and is dually interpreted as such in the notation of the Reverend William Wotton. I disagree with this interpretation and assert that the Hack writer's use of typographical symbols in place of text is an act to transform the inexplicable into material, to present the unrepresentable. He attempts to capture an idea and place it on paper; however, its abstract nature does not permit easy encapsulation by words. As the body of the 'Digression' is an examination of the forms of madness, including philosophers who are mad 'because they seek to explain the inexplicable' (Starkman 31), the Hack does not openly acknowledge the textual play he has engaged in, once again falling victim to his own irony.¹ Because of the inexplicability of madness, the Hack must use other means to make the idea present to his readers and physically manifest within the world.

The Hack repeats this act of attempted omission at two other points in the text, namely in the description of why the Ladder provides an

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adequate symbol of Faction and in the analysis of the apparently indistinguishable nature of Jack and Peter, where once again the Hack is put upon to impart the inexplicable. The first omission, not even in the text proper, takes place in the Introduction. Before the narrator has even entered his text, he is without words. His chosen space of abstraction is the discussion of the material object, the Ladder, as representative of the space of enunciation for Faction and Poetry. The text stops just as Swift's narrator is about to explain the value of the Ladder — which is the last space in which individuals facing the gallows might speak and distinguish themselves — leaving the reader with a '*Hiatus in MS*' and a series of asterisks (Swift 90). The second instance, the descriptions of the individualization of Jack and Peter by their followers, addresses much more subtly the concept of individuality and character. Again, the Hack is left without words. Both of these omissions are tied to the point in '*A Digression On Madness*' at which the Hack writer typographically throws up his hands, faced with a metaphysical question too immaterial for his vocabulary to encompass.

In discussing *A Tale of a Tub*, critics are faced with a wide array of materials to consider and explicate. Swift's density and play of language, his sartorial,² philosophical and religious critique,³ or his attack on modern learning,⁴ have all garnered critical interest. As such, many scholars have effectively explored the questions of material language and the limitations of Swift's narrator. Further to this, there are historical analyses of the strong words directed at the clergy, and interpretations of the '*Digression on Madness*' as a defining moment of the *Tale*'s central principles of rhetoric and language (see Quinlan, Levine). As Harold Kelling states:

It is the prefatory material and the sections ironically called digressions which makes it clear that rhetoric is the subject, which carry on the direct discussion of rhetoric, and in which the conventional structure of an oration is followed. (199)

Similarly, John Bullit considers the omissions in the context of the Oratorical Machines, and declares that

the progress of the logical proof — as well as the 'hiatus' in the manuscript with its accompanying footnote — support the conclusion that Swift is using an elaborate method to satirize all elaborate methods. (166)

Bullit applies his argument directly to the passage in the ‘Digression on Madness’ which concerns the present discussion, though without any explanatory clarity: ‘The hiatus which follows [the statement on “The present Argument”] is footnoted so that the satire against “metaphysical cobweb problems” is given a direct and immediate application’ (166). He does not explain the hiatus, other than to say it is a critique on the consideration and unravelling of complex problems, which provides little explication for the reader. David Bywater also points to the ‘Digression’ as being a satirical critique, saying:

The satire of the [Digression] is directed not specifically against philosophical atheism, but against philosophical speculation whatever its ostensible purpose, and especially against those philosophically based refutations of atheism that the Anglican clergy had been turning out by the yard since the Restoration. (591)

Richard Nash, in ‘Entrapment and Ironic Modes in *Tale of a Tub*’, looks to Swift’s narrator proudly dodging the question, and considers the text to provide the answer in its absence:

At the (not insubstantial) risk of sounding like a post-structuralist reincarnation of the narrator, I wish to claim that the paragraph...is among the richest of any Swift ever wrote. It is manifestly a joke in which the narrator, after much anxious preamble, compliments himself on the subtle achievement that is not there; his solution is clear in the most literal sense that one cannot see it. (429)

The problem with Nash’s argument is that one can in fact ‘see it’ — the page is not left blank nor the text absent. Other examinations of the power of reductionism and the use of allegory are given by Warren Montag, who describes Swift’s ability to arrive ‘at unthinkable truths: the primacy of appearances and surface, the exteriority of essence, the artificiality and, even at the extreme, the historicity of human institutions’ through his use of the coat allegory (93). So, while the Digression on Madness has garnered much attention, there is still a limited argument on the purpose of the omission, the abandonment of the argument by either the author or narrator or both and the lack of ability

to use such rhetoric and language to encapsulate and explicate the idea of personality, character and individuality.

A Tale of a Tub, while professed to be centred on religious doctrine and the formation and maintenance of varying branches of Christianity, deals more with rhetoric, language and reason, as Swift's narrator adheres to the concrete and absolute materiality of the world. Swift creates a narrative voice of a Hack writer from Grub Street to illustrate the tale, someone who admittedly has a

quill worn to the pith in service of the State, in *pros* and *cons* upon *Popish plots*, and *meal-tubs*, and *exclusion bills*, and *passive obedience*, and *addresses of lives and fortunes*, and *prerogative*, and *property*, and *liberty of conscience*, and *Letters to a Friend*. (93–94)

He has lacked true dedication to his work until now, as he is willing to equate exclusion bills with defence of 'Popish plots' and with general correspondence; the common theme of the written materials is their inclusion of either legal language or rhetoric. The narrator has never composed a metaphysical or philosophical discussion before, never approached the abstract or immaterial, so there is rhetorical reliance from the very beginning upon worldly, material language. Types of oration are categorised based on the location from which they are spoken, as society

thought fit to erect three wooden machines, for the Use of those Orators who desire to talk much without Interruption. These are, the *Pulpit*, the *Ladder*, and the *Stage-Itinerant*. (87)

Further to this spatial correlation, he presents the material allegory of faith as the bequeathing of coats from a father to his sons; the universe is a suit of clothes, as is man himself. The Hack is limited by the materiality of his writing experience and focus, as he is challenged to attempt to speak about larger ideas and terms in language that is allegorical rather than philosophical.

The 'Digression on Madness' acts as a social and metaphysical critique both by the author and the Hack on different levels. To begin with the examination of the digression, one must remember the earliest preface by the Hack writer: "'Tis a great ease to my conscience that I have written so elaborate and useful a discourse without one grain of satire intermixed' (83). The narrative voice intends his work to be taken directly, in a straightforward and clear manner. One can assert with

certainty that Swift could never have intended the same. The Hack discusses Madness historically, socioculturally and — inevitably — physically. He is of the belief that madness is inspired by a foreign vapour and can inspire acts of heroism and foolishness, creating both the geniuses and outcasts of society. Bywater points to the Hack's discussion of individuation as a means of parody and critique:

So Swift's Author is eager to define the 'sole Point of Individuation' between his political, philosophical, and religious madmen, though his 'clear Solution of the Matter' is lost; in his note Swift expresses a wish that 'all Metaphysical Cobweb Problems were no otherwise answered'. The absurdly philosophical theory of vapors is, I think, rather a parody of More than an admiring imitation. (592)

While not stated directly, the Hack's use of royalty, religious leaders and philosophers to discuss madness implies the ties between monomania and genius or 'madness', while his talk of vapours is Swift's critique of philosophers who have sought to answer this question. When brought to the question of the individual spirit, the innate character that drives action and inspires greatness or folly, the Hack is left only with a series of asterisks. He does not go any further: he declares after this brief interlude that 'this I take to be a clear solution of the matter' (143). He has come to comfortable conclusions for his understanding of the world; happiness is self-delusion, the church is wholly artificial, and the external, visible and present aspect of both humanity and the known world is preferable to the internal, inexplicable or immaterial:

I do here think fit to inform the reader that such conclusions as these, reason is certainly in the right, and that in most corporeal beings which have fallen under my cognizance, the *outside* hath been infinitely preferable to the *in*; whereof I saw a woman *flayed*, and you would hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse. (145)

The only differentiation the Hack provides between madness and heroism is a matter of timing — the luck of a fortuitous moment to be overtaken by the ghost that inhabits the brain and clouds the senses. He is unable to explore the matter of individuality, the core of one's

character, because it is invisible and inexplicable, impossible to pin down with text and rhetoric.

His imaginary trip through the madhouse provides social critique of the value that lies therein, as one can find individuals with the expected characteristics and traits of consummate generals, lawyers, businessmen, philosophers and self-inflated middle class all within the confines of individual cells. Throughout this digression, as with the rest of the *Tale*, the Hack has provided the reader with absolute statements, firm declarations and strong opinions on his subject matter. There are only three exceptions in the *Tale* when he cannot speak, which are all related to individuality, namely the descriptions of the 'ladder', the discussion of character in madness or the individuating aspects of Jack. Each sees a moment of separation, a chance to discuss the ideal of personal definition or character, and all three times the author is without words and leaves the text incomplete.

The space left by the Hack writer in the 'Digression on Madness' is a troubling passage, as it strikes a balance between the extraneous natures of the digression itself by leaving an omission at the key moment of the argument. In a passage about the drive of certain individuals to influence, alter or overthrow their society, the key question is not 'why?' but rather 'why him?' The central element that drives one man to greatness and another to foolishness is the character of the individual, how they are inspired, how they are driven to act. It is on this point that the Hack is apparently silent, leaving mere symbols in the place of words. The notation describes this as a defect in the manuscript, one which is apparently intentional and, according to the interpretation of the Reverend William Wotton, is

very frequent with our author either when he thinks he cannot say anything worth reading, or when he has no mind to enter on the subject, or when it is a matter of little moment; or perhaps to amuse his reader (whereof he is frequently very fond of) or lastly, with some satirical intention. (90 n.)

This is an interesting interpretation, as three omissions within the text are hardly frequent and none of which are 'of little moment'. They may instead be seen as either a refusal to enter the subject or a denial of possible speech. Upon the specific omission within the Digression on Madness, the annotation reads:

Here is another defect in the manuscript, but I think the author did wisely, and that the matter which thus strained his faculties was not worth a solution; and it were well if all metaphysical cobweb problems were no otherwise answered. (143 n.)

This statement is made despite the fact that a solution has been provided; as the text itself states, ‘And this I take to be a clear solution of the matter’ (143). If the annotation is right, then the Hack is undertaking deception, which would seem logical as the omission itself is marked with the phrase ‘Hic multa desiderantur’ (143) — ‘here much is wanting’. These two phrases seem to contradict one another totally, as there is either a solution, or a lack, but not both. Nash points to this as an instance of Swift’s ingenuity:

He is not just making the best of the bad situation he has created by bungling his argument; rather, he suggests that there can be no material explanation such as the narrator has been promising, and the reader should recognize (as the narrator does not) that such a flaw undermines his entire materialist system. (429)

While there is a flaw in the limitations of the Hack’s language, as he is pursuing a subject that is the ‘most abstracted that [he] ever engaged in’ (143), he does provide an absolute statement and answer, just as he has throughout the text, regardless of the interpretation provided in the footnote.

Throughout *A Tale of a Tub*, the Hack deals with questions of internal faith, metaphysical debate or ethereal understanding in a very material, physical manner, something that creates problems when faced with the concepts of madness. From the very beginning, the inexplicable world is repeatedly reduced to material and allegorical terms, as allegory supplants philosophy and the abstract is bound up in the Hack’s physical universe. The internal, the character and spirit of a person, is disregarded in favour of the external and superficial, demonstrated in the understated comments about a woman being flayed and the effect it had upon her person. As Nash points out:

For an eighteenth-century audience, however, accustomed to the theory that corporal punishment could bring about a reformation in character, the sentence carried an added force. They would anticipate

the disfiguring effects of the operation, but would hope that it might ‘alter her person’ for the better. Such a possibility never occurs to the narrator, because to him ‘person’ is synonymous with ‘body’. For him, flogging is an experiment not in social reform, but in anatomy. (425–26)

The question of character, of individuality or personality arises and the Hack makes an attempt to quantify and qualify the conditions or causes of madness or heroism. He attempts this through physical descriptions of the angle by which the ‘vapour’ enters the brain, or the area of brain that it affects, both of which promptly fail the narrator. He is attempting to find a physical difference, a material distinction. Next, he describes a ‘numerical difference in the brain’, a slightly further abstracted idea reliant on maths, yet this is also insufficient for an answer as the Hack continues to attempt explanation (143).

If these methods had answered the question at hand, the Hack would be at liberty to stop, consider his work completed, and move on with his digression; however, their insufficiencies push him to seek further abstraction and philosophies beyond his material world. He now turns to an argument which is ‘the most abstracted that ever I engaged in; it strains my faculties to their highest stretch’ (143). When thus pressured and faced with the seemingly indomitable task of dealing with spirit or the differentiation of the individual, the Hack cannot speak to personality, character or immaterial concepts. Facing such foreign abstraction, such philosophy and ethereality, the Hack stops and leaves the argument unsaid. The text includes the phrase ‘here much is wanting’, and then the Hack declares that the problem is solved and any questions have been sufficiently answered. In this passage, Clark asserts that the phrase in the text, ‘Hic multa desiderantur’ is actually wordplay, and a challenge to the Moderns:

Indeed, the Modern, struggling with just this question, is reduced to what is perhaps the most helpless hiatus in his treatise; and in perpetrating the gap, Swift produces one of his finest puns. ‘Hic multa desiderantur’ marks the hiatus, in accordance with editorial usage, asserting ‘Here much is missing’. Yet the words, in the most literal sense, baldly expose the inadequacy of the Modern’s materialistic philosophy, which can account for nothing: ‘Here much is to be desired’. (Clark 48)

Clark's argument that the text is actually a pun and questions the Modern philosophy is a notable assertion; yet he fails to address the statement that follows, as the Hack declares the solution provided. Clark's suggestions and his discussion of materialistic philosophy do raise an interesting point, however. The constant attempts by the Hack throughout the *Tale* to provide answers and assurances to the inexplicable appear to fail him utterly when it comes to the concepts of genius and spirit. Throughout the *Tale*, the Hack has made very definitive statements, and such a declarative answer is claimed in the omission, as the Hack states 'I take this to be a clear solution of the matter' (143). This is not to say that he has answered his question, or managed to deal with the abstract concepts that troubled him, but rather that 'this' is a clear solution, meaning the omission itself.

The line of asterisks on the page left by the Hack writer fit perfectly with his intent throughout the text of making the immaterial into the physically present and visible; the typographical symbols provide a visible form for the wholly inexplicable concepts of greatness and individuality. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the asterisk, it is

The figure of a star (*) used in writing and printing. **a.** as a reference to a note at the foot or margin of the page, **b.** to indicate the omission of words or letters, **c.** to distinguish words and phrases as conjectural, obscure, or bearing some other specified character, **d.** as a dividing mark, or for similar typographical purposes.

The Hack's use fits most elements of the definition: these symbols indicate an omission of text but also point to the conjectural and obscure nature of the discussion, while the asterisks mark a separation in the page; humorously, these asterisks mark the gap in a text unable to address division and separation. Rather than attempting to use words, the Hack has left space, but not an absence of text: the page is filled with asterisks. Levine, in his discussion of the Digression, points to the abstention from text as the writer being at an utter loss: 'In the last pages the ascendant Critic is left writing upon Nothing — that is, quite frankly spinning the words out of his inner void' (217). But in place of words, there is a physical symbol for the absence of explanation, the absence of tangible or material proof. The asterisks themselves become the material presentation of the inexplicable. The Hack provides an absolute answer once again, by providing what appears to be no answer at all. This is also tied to the presence of the phrase '[h]ic multa desiderantur', 'here much

is wanting' — a phrase directing attention to a lack of one sort or another. The initial reading of this would be its direct link to the lack of text and thereby lack of argument provided in the manuscript, though this would then suggest disharmony in the text which, immediately following the omission, makes the declaration that a clear solution is provided. I propose there is no discontinuity on the part of the text, which provides precisely what it promises and declares to be present.

The text is heavily laden with the language of the material, bound to the concepts of worldly presence and tangible superficiality. Such a narrator cannot comprehend or explain abstraction such as the definition of character or the individual. This being said, there is no absolute answer that could possibly be given by the most philosophical and abstract minds that would be sufficient to describe and define the power of the individual. So, the Hack's argument is left with two things: one, the typographical symbol for an absence of text or discourse; two, a definitive statement that such an argument is 'wanting'. The two phrases together provide the centre point of the *Tale* itself: philosophy, faith and human understanding are not born of simplification, superficiality or structure, but rather out of digression and open discourse that can admit fault and lack. The apparent contradiction, in classic Swiftian style, is indeed the answer.

This reading of the central omission then provides a key to the other two spaces in the text, in the address on the Ladder and the character of Jack. Neither case seems directly abstract in the same fashion as the concept of madness, and there is certainly less consternation on the part of the writer in the comments leading up to these omissions; however, the sense of lack and absence is still felt. In discussing the symbolic value of the Ladder, the Hack absents his answer and the phrase '*Hiatus in MS*' is inserted (90). It is this point at which Wotton makes his editorial comment that defects in the manuscript are frequent at points of little moment. The text is interrupted mid-sentence, so the reader cannot disregard or overlook the break; yet, the timing of this first incursion upon the tale comes so early on and does appear of no consequence, so one is predisposed to believe Wotton's reductive statement about the purpose (or lack thereof) of the omissions. The final omission is the description of the near indiscernability between Jack and Peter, with no lead up or answer to the defect in the manuscript. While the asterisks are interrupted momentarily to include the Latin phrase '*Desunt non-nulla*' or 'not missing nothing' (159), this is still the most understated of the omissions. The text barely takes note of the pause, with no internal reference to the lack of words, other than the Latin phrase itself, and barely a discernable hiatus in thought. Each of these omissions seems to

be without reason or intent, especially to Rev. Wotton, until they are read in the context of the Hack's central textual absenteeism. The contiguous thought-pattern and the common area of discussion tie these sections beyond their typographic-filler. Each time, when faced with the question of individualism and personality, the Hack, bound by his materialist vocabulary and understanding, is stopped in the face of the metaphysical. In the 'Digression on Madness' he admits his attempts at abstraction, his struggles with concepts beyond his limits of understanding and his eventual admission that 'here much is wanting'. While the other two sections lack that sense of defeatism, they provide the same result: when faced with the question of what makes us who we are, the Hack, steeped in the interchangeable voices of Grub Street, has no sense of individual nature or personality. Man's understanding of himself is, as stated in the Digression on Madness, lacking.

Swift's tendency towards complexity and irony is only magnified in a text narrated by a voice relying on the material and the visible, rather than upon the abstractions of faith and philosophy. The 'Digression concerning the Original, the Use and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth' acts as a central point of critique, analysis and discourse on the truth of human knowledge and faith, which is of course that 'hic multa desiderantur'.

NOTES

¹ This textual duplicity is pointed out by Quinlan, who asserts: 'Much of the humor of this work resides in the failure of the hack to perceive the duality implicit in his own statements — the metaphorical significance of his literal terms and the literal meaning of some of his metaphors. He also falls victim to his own unconscious puns' (517).

² Herbert Davis examines the materiality and dramatization which Swift uses in his presentation of the brothers and the coat-allegory: 'In his handling of the allegory of the three brothers, for instance, he is inclined to dramatize their actions rather in the manner of the contemporary stage, and their language and gestures remind us of the world of Sir Novelty Fashion and Lord Foppington. And the symbol of the coats, meaning "the Doctrine and Faith of Christianity", is full of obvious dangers, though it not only lends itself to the necessary dramatization but also may be neatly reversed and elaborated into a satire on the real religion of the fashionable world' (38). Davis points to the narrator's reliance on materiality, but fails to address the omissions in the text.

³ Webster discusses Swift's relation to other contemporary or prior satire against puritan beliefs and practices, demonstrating Swift's awareness of these works and philosophies in 'The Satiric Background of the Attack on the Puritans in Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*' and 'Swift's *Tale of a Tub* Compared with Earlier Satires of the Puritans' while Bywater explores Swift's challenge to the Anglican Clergy in 'Anticlericism in Swift's *Tale of a Tub*'.

⁴ Starkman explores Swift's reliance on the Ancients and the ongoing debate between Ancients and Moderns in philosophical and religious thought.

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