

A Note on the Nashe Problem

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The unsettling nature of Thomas Nashe's language is generally recognized. Some have praised his rhetorical virtuosity while others have emphasized his failures as a rhetorician. 'The Nashe problem', although perhaps less popular in recent criticism, is an important feature of his work. In short, the problem is that Nashe's work seems to say nothing of substance or convey any stable message to the reader. Critics have often thought Nashe 'has nothing meaningful to say' (Baker 35) and proceeded to either circle the rhetorical void he created or to push the question aside and dive into the madness of his prose. 'Regardless of their subject', writes Alex Davis in his study of Renaissance historical fiction, 'the vehicles of Nashe's metaphors constantly threaten to develop an interest independent of their supposed referents' (190). His persona in writing is equally puzzling. He is inconsistent to the point of incoherence and tends to draw attention to the artificial nature of language. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, his prose has remained controversial and fruitful for generations of critics. I want to examine a number of interpretations of Nashe's *Anatomy of Absurdity* and *The Unfortunate Traveller* and suggest that extravagant readings, even if they can be shown to be misguided, may nevertheless be useful to modern critics if one remembers that Nashe's intention was probably to confuse his readers as much as it was to entertain them.

In *Anatomy of Absurdity*, the young Nashe sought to produce a work of criticism. It is a patchwork text constructed from various classical sources and appears to present solid moral instruction. Among other reasonable advice to his readers, Nashe states that 'that which we thinke, let us speake, and that which we speake, let us thinke; let our speeche accorde with our life' (1966a 46). This advice is interspersed with insults against those who embrace excess in

any form. Those who are not virtuous are reprimanded, those who moralize to excess are put in their place, those who neglect their studies are deemed lazy, those who pursue studies because of vanity or in useless subjects are pathetic. Nashe deliberately complicates matters by confessing to wearing a ‘satyricall disguise’ (6), peppering his prose with irony. Arthur Kinney notes in a very flattering reading that Nashe is always aware of the way in which the slippery meanings of words may be abused, ‘this underside of human corruption’ (306).

Fortified by ironic claims to transparent meaning, the *Anatomy* seeks to unmask absurdity. Nashe famously says in a statement of purpose, laden with his heavy euphuistic style, that he is

about to anatomize Absurdity, am urged to take a view of sundry mens vanitie, a survey of their follie, a briefe of their barbarisme, to runne through Authors of the absurder sort, assembled in the Stacioners shop, sucking and selecting out of these upstart antiquaries, somewhat of their unsavoury duncerie, meaning to note it with a *Nigrum theta*, that each one at the first sight may eschew it as infectious, to shewe it to the worlde that all men may shunne it. (9)

G. R. Hibbard’s classic introduction to Nashe’s work claims that Nashe was writing an ‘anti-satire’ against the austere economy of Puritan rhetoric and wanted to ‘turn the weapon against those who had been using it for narrow and sectarian ends and to make it serve a more liberal and humanistic cause’ (13). True, Nashe appears to advocate de-Italianizing Englishmen, simultaneously calls himself a ‘friend’ of poetry and poetry ‘a more hidden and divine kinde of Philosophy, enwrapped in blinde Fables and darke stories’ (ibid). But Nashe’s art is not only about pointing out a glitch in Puritan rhetoric. Careful reading, he seems to say, may actually unveil hidden treasure as well as absurdity.

The strangeness of Nashe’s *Anatomy* has prompted modern critics to discuss the work’s fragmented and ambiguous nature. One of the more persistent questions relating to its ambiguity is how to tell whether Nashe’s ironic failures as a rhetorician were intentional. Devon Hodges remarks succinctly that the author and his work, criticism and criticized, or

‘subject and object merge’ (40) in Nashe’s prose. In other words, despite Nashe’s admission to playing the fool and self-consciously adopting the rhetoric of a buffoon in order to achieve his goals, there is little difference between jesting and earnest argument. The explicitly stated pursuit of ambiguity gives the author an air of recklessness not unlike the kind employed by the Martin Marprelate authors Nashe would battle against not long after the *Anatomy*. He is willing to expose himself, or so he seems to say, and take his targets down with him if necessary. In fact, Nashe’s claims to transparent meaning and intention hide him as effectively as a satyr player’s costume. His desire to unmask absurdity may be sincere, but in Nashe’s text, recognized as ‘a kind of protocriticism’ (37) by Hodges, the author’s satirical disguise remains intact precisely due to his obviously flawed earnestness.

It is quite possible that Nashe fell victim to his own clever rhetoric in this early work. In an often-cited essay on the influence of the Marprelate Controversy on his rhetoric, Travis L. Summersgill states bluntly that Nashe’s goal was simply to get published (152) and he might have simply overreached himself. According to Hodges’ line of argument, Nashe’s choice to write an anatomy and his attempt at revealing the truth behind poetry could not succeed even in theory. As a trope of failure, failure to attain meaning while dissecting the work of others, Nashe’s anatomy ‘was a subversive form of representation that, by negating fictions of totality, communicated the primacy of disorder and chaos’ (49). That is, the goal of attaining hidden meaning by perpetually postponing completing the work’s satirical reading on the reader’s behalf leads nowhere and the rhetorician dooms himself to failure or an ever increasing fragmentation of truth and meaning. Following Nashe’s editor Ronald B. McKerrow’s insight into Nashe’s oeuvre, Hodges determines that he had to fail because of his error. Whether this was intentional or an accident caused by his chosen genre of the anatomy is another matter.

A reading of Nashe as a flippant satirist who wanted to confound his readers in order to get published is at odds with those who see in Nashe’s rhetoric someone who was

propounding a worldview in which human life is chaotic, absurd and essentially meaningless. Changes in the overall approaches of modern criticism might go a long way to explain the discrepancy—the unsettling of formalist and historical modes of criticism from the fifties and sixties to the eighties on which the apocalyptic interpretations build naturally highlights the radical free play of the signifier inherent in Nashe’s text. But the question that needs to be answered is whether such play was an accident of what Irvin Ehrenpreis calls ‘organic form’ or whether one should adopt what he disparagingly terms ‘a totalitarian mode of criticism’ which maintains that the design ‘must suggest a divine symmetry, or else it must be ironically contrasted to social chaos’ (26). What further complicates Nashe’s prose and his literary persona is that it can be argued that his approach to failure was consistent. Thus one has to at least entertain the notion that his failure was intentional. This is revealed when one compares the *Anatomy* with *The Unfortunate Traveller*.

Summing up a number of critical remarks, Raymond Stephanson concludes that ‘the general consensus ... is that *The Unfortunate Traveller* is an interesting artistic failure’ (22) and reads the story as a grand challenge to epistemology, not unlike Hodges’ reading of the *Anatomy*. By this he means that ‘the world and human experience in *The Unfortunate Traveller* are disorderly and ineffable from the beginning, and the work’s view of life is largely a statement about a *lack* of inherent form or meaning in the universe’ (24). He continues by saying Nashe’s ‘willful distortions of language, his bizarre verbal antics, are all calculated to reflect the problem of form and meaning, to challenge any system of meaning or any concept of “reality” and break it down’ (ibid). According to a more recent take on Nashe’s method by Wendy Hyman that follows Jonathan Crewe’s reading, the *Traveller* can be read as ‘a kind of protodeconstructionist’ (24) work due to its mingling of genres, literary registers, narrative voices and its bizarre rhetoric. Hyman does not actually advance the argument that Nashe should be read as a deconstructionist *avant la lettre* but instead concentrates on Nashe’s

resistance to courtly models of literature and ‘his ambivalent self-promotion as the progenitor of a radical, new idea of authorship’ (25).

Kinney ties the work to the radical skepticism of Cornelius Agrippa and makes a similar point:

Nashe is keenly suspicious of unified thought or of any normative practice of language before the sheer *randomness* of life. His ardent prose hammers at the confinements of a traditional syntax and forges strange compound words and neologisms to intensify the starkness of life, for, as he tells young pages in his preface to *The Unfortunate Traveller*, existence is merely a game of mumchance. Life, he means, is the reading of false (or loaded) dice thrown on the closed cover of the Acts and Monuments of life, denying the providential outlook that the Church Fathers proclaimed and that he tries, manfully, scornfully, to recover. Merely to be alive, he concludes in the preface, is to be unfortunate: that is his powerful, vaticinal theme. (333)

Hibbard spends considerably less effort on Nashe’s prefatory writing: ‘My reading of the whole business of Nashe’s dedications is that they were kites which he flew with no consideration of groups or parties, but in the hope of obtaining favour of some kind’ (122). In contrast, Kinney recognizes that there is something new afoot in Nashe’s text and its playful yet problematic language. Like *Anatomy*, the *Traveller* creates a range of possibilities for radically different readings which seem to be designed to trap the critic in a whirlpool of contradictory interpretations. Nashe might have meant to provoke such readings by dressing up his text in transparently duplicitous rhetoric. The specific target of his satires may be ambiguous, but by creating a platform for the readings Nashe encourages readers to pick a target. In doing so, he thrusts the responsibility of the choice on the reader.

Nashe was not wholly original in his plot to fool Renaissance audiences. Joseph M. Levine argues that Thomas More himself deliberately installed a fundamental ambiguity with a satirical twist into his work that has caused trouble for generations of More’s readers:

The quarrel, I think, has never really been about what *Utopia* says, but rather about what it means. More’s description of the ideal state is plain enough; but its purpose remains obscure. Whether we view it as medieval or modern, Christian or secular, communist or bourgeois, serious or frivolous, it seems to me that

much will depend on what we think were Thomas More's intentions in writing his work. ... More chose to publish his finished work as a whole and with deliberate calculation by posing a problem. He sets *Utopia* in a quarrel, ambiguously, but one must suppose intentionally. ... To assume that *Utopia* is the kind of social comment where clarity prevails is to assume the author's intention and not to prove it. Of two things only may we be reasonably sure: More's work *is* ambiguous in the form we have it (as the quarrels of the critics have shown) and *Utopia* is purposefully composed. Why may not More have intended ambiguity? (4)

Levine's argument is quite straightforward. If one demands monosemic meaning of the text and demands that it must contain the prompts to an interpretation that leads to a clear statement of purpose, one of the options in terms of authorial intention one might overlook is the author's intention to prompt an ambiguous response.ⁱ More, if one reads him in Foucauldian terms, was consciously trying to fashion himself into a kind of transdiscursive author. Or he wanted, as Levine seems to suggest, to provoke the reader to participate in the creation of the text's meaning. More could thus be seen as an early example of the kind of active reading more recently examined by Stephen Dobranski in relation to the emerging role of the author in print culture. Especially in cases of possibly libelous satire, who takes ultimate responsibility for the text's meaning, the author or the reader, matters. And there is no reason not to assume Nashe could have aimed his satire at precisely this issue in order to confuse and delight his audiences.

In More's case, Levine thinks the point of More's ambiguity is that both sides in the debate concerning *Utopia* 'agree about what the realistic *and* the idealistic alternatives are; we are left only with the problem of which to choose' (8). Real life and the political ideal are thus separated in a gesture that creates an indeterminate claim and an open-ended resolution. Like Macchiavelli, Levine argues, More too was aware of 'the essential depravity of human nature' (8–9). Levine argues further that the novelty of the work actually lies in More's realism and that *Utopia* is not 'a philosophical tract, but a rhetorical one meant to persuade by its literary skill' (13), skills meant to impress More's would-be patrons. Its novelty and realism lie in the fact that it is self-consciously fiction: 'it was *meant* to be read and understood as a deliberate

fiction' (18). Such a reading might, for some, reduce *Utopia* to a clever rhetorical trick designed to make readers run around in circles indefinitely, but the fact remains that the work still continues to generate controversy. Choices are made, claims advanced and controversies emerge, often without much regard to More's possible intention of leading readers by the nose in order to perpetuate an impossible debate.

However, there is one problem in *The Unfortunate Traveller* that cannot be reduced to a problem of interpretation, specifically in the preface mentioned by Kinney. The appeal to the common reader in the preface is made at the patron's expense. The author is quite rude to the patron and very gentle with the common reader despite his outrageous demands—Nashe wants his readers to defend the text with violence if necessary in the author's absence. The traveler's noble companion, the Earl of Surrey, is also subjected to authorial abuse when the protagonist assumes and eventually steals his identity. Acting out a heated exchange in a brothel, the protagonist refers to Surrey as 'my servaunt, or my master, which you will' (1966b 257). All are subjected to serve Nashe's prose, his patron as the paymaster and the characters of the story as abstractions that can be discarded and resurrected at will. As Hyman puts it, 'each narrative event exists because of the triumphant literary exercise it creates' (37). And in a shocking breach of decorum Nashe tries to extend this principle to the sensitive space of the dedication. He explicitly questions what he calls the 'blinde custome [of] methodicall antiquity' (1966b 201) which dictates that he has to dedicate his work to a worthy and protests by writing the dedication in a throwaway manner, insulting his patron in the process.

Thus the two authors of the tale, Nashe himself and the protagonist Jack Wilton, appear in a satirical guise in both the dedication and the narrative. In effect, Nashe's transgression consists of his attempt to leave on his disguise even when he addresses Southampton and his attempt at wit is not only dangerous but foolhardy. It was an actual break with decorum and good taste that required correction. The result of Nashe's excessive rhetoric was not a dramatic

breakdown of the conventional discursive and epistemological order of the age, but the quiet deletion of the offensive passage from the next edition of the work. If Nashe's other failures as an artist can be turned into successes through interpretation, this is the one undeniable failure that cannot be explained away.ⁱⁱ Even Kinney recognizes the problem.ⁱⁱⁱ

In an essay on Jonson's prefatory writing, Paul D. Cannan argues that many playwrights were experimenting with prefaces in print at the time. Their experimental rhetoric created what Cannan calls the 'almost schizophrenic' (186) contradictory nature of the prefatory statements of Nashe's age. Cannan claims that the contradictions in these statements stem from rhetorical conventions related to the manipulation of the modesty topos, the writer's formulaic apology for embarking on his task, but in Nashe's case the manipulation really amounts to a transgression. Nashe, who is delightfully amoral compared to Jonson, could in fact be named the Renaissance prefatory schizophrenic *par excellence*.

One way of approaching Nashe's trickery has been suggested by Jennifer Richards, who has studied how civil rhetoric evolved in early modern England among chiefly protestant readers of Castiglione and the literature of manners.^{iv} She notes the admiration of the plain-speaking husbandman over the dissembling courtier in modern scholarly work and elaborates on what the piercing eye of a careful reader might see in their claims of transparency:

[T]here are good reasons why such plain-speakers are not to be trusted, not least because there is no way of knowing whether the claim to be telling the truth, or the promise of transparency, however plainly put, is not also a rhetorical ploy which aims to occlude the interests of others. (5)

The recognition that 'straight-talking is not adequately honest' (6) by sixteenth-century authors and negotiations about what honesty (here the air of civility achieved through art) means in the first place called for new ways of speaking truthfully. The reader's judgment, even now, must be used to determine where the reader and the speaker stand and more often than not, says Richards, 'we are more likely to agree with early modern anti-court satirists' than courtly

honesty and its ‘profoundly dishonest’ (91), almost mannerist, rhetoric. Richards also points out that when Nashe’s famous quarrel with Harvey escalated, Harvey, much to Nashe’s annoyance, ‘failed—or pretended to fail—to understand the irony of his persona Pierce Penilesse, thus making him responsible for his creation’s parodic supplication to the devil. Nashe *is* Pierce Penilesse, Harvey implies’ (117). Nashe’s response was to reveal Harvey’s pretended ignorance, his courtly *sprezzatura*, and refuse further appeals to reasonableness as disingenuous.

This would perhaps provide the context for Nashe’s rhetoric, but a formal explanation may also be attempted to support the view that Nashe was an experimental writer who was exploring new transgressive modes of writing. Nashe’s use of metalepsis, pointed to in his manipulation of authorial personas, is particularly interesting.^v In an essay on Renaissance notions of metalepsis, Brian Cummings writes:

Metalepsis is a miniature language game: with a little patience the figure can be worked through, perhaps even with some pleasure in the ingenuity of the effort. But at other times metalepsis seems to question the possibility of ever figuring it out. Metalepsis is a borderline figure, one that sometimes goes beyond the bounds, or strains the understanding and the patience of the reader or auditor. (222–3)

What is hinted at by the metaleptic sign is a possibility of transference or substitution which can be deliberately open-ended and ambiguous. As Cummings observes in a quotable phrase, it ‘exists in a metaphorical hinterland’ (224) where it is difficult to know which substitutions are warranted and which are inappropriate. Rather, the device points to a fabric of interlinking meanings that can produce metaleptic chains of reasoning which in turn provide further possibilities for fictive rhetoric, because they release rhetoric and argument from the burden of monosemic meaning where *res* and *verba* have to meet.

Cummings notes that the Erasmian view of metalepsis as a trope of transference was clear on the fact that the trope itself does not signify a thing, but it enables the movement from the mode of signifying things in the world by words to signifying words by other words. That

is, in *De copia* Erasmus is exceptional in his emphasis on ‘how [metaphorical] language comes to be able to create figures in the first place’ (229). Cummings’s Erasmus suggests that when a transference into the realm of figures happens, signs begin to acquire meaning by way of referring to other signs.^{vi} Crossing the boundary from referentiality to figurality will be noticed if the shift is executed with enough flair. There are limits to figurality, however. Metalepsis, as a figure of reasoning that uses interlinked figures of substitution as its material, is a limiting case for satirical language, because it can be used to great excesses in order to produce a comic effect and bring about the kind of confusion Nashe creates. In other words, its excessive use can reveal the mechanisms by which its own substitutions take place and the extent to which figurative language can be abused.

Metalepsis as a sign that points to possible interpretations of fictions also enables the author to shift the responsibility of interpretation to the reader, sometimes via a figurative author, sometimes directly through a metaleptic command from the author himself. However, audiences who enjoy such language games, are willing to follow the author’s extravagant figurative reasoning and willing to assume responsibility for the text’s radical message as per the author’s instructions can be expected to withstand this tropical abuse only to a certain degree. How far they will allow themselves to be provoked, in turn, must depend on the kinds of rhetorical practices that can be safely subverted. Certain figurative derivations, that is, remain out of bounds—simply to suggest them might be reprehensible. One reading Nashe as a protodeconstructionist might be tempted to say that Nashe’s failure also shows that when new tropical innovations are attempted in satire, at least in the case of metaleptic satire, their novelty emerges from an explicit critique of the genre’s own figurality and artistry. But perhaps in his eagerness to innovate Nashe simply went too far too soon.

Was he, then, a failed poet, a nihilist who celebrated the absurd chaos of life around him, or simply a failed rhetorician and poet? Ehrenpreis writes of the ironical persona, the

satirist's conscious use of a transparent disguise he dons for the express purpose of contradicting himself: 'If an author moves us to fight against his doctrines, he may have lost as a rhetorician, but he has won as a poet' (60). One wonders if Nashe failed or if his audience in fact failed him. Nashe's use of metalepsis draws attention to itself as a figure of failure, so it can be said that as a rhetorician Nashe certainly uses failure as a strategic device. But his failure as a poet, the deleted preface to *Southampton*, elevates his failure beyond rhetoric. What one can read in Nashe's transgression is the adoption of an excessively rhetorical perspective that was judged unfit for Renaissance readers. The device, in effect, leads to the stylistic sin of satiety. The antimetaleptic author of the preface becomes an unnecessary rhetorical ornament whose only function is to complete the symmetry in Nashe's scheme of figurative authors within and outside the main body of the narrative.

Paired with figures of substitution such as metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy, metalepsis allows for an ambivalent linking together of figures. But in this case both authors become chiasmic tokens emptied of agentic power and so draw attention to themselves as figures—genuine authorial agency is confused and hidden from view. Nashe aggressively confronts the assumption that the author of the preface should not be a rhetorical ornament but that the voice of the actual author should be heard in genuinely sincere prose. Mocking the convention also highlights the ridiculous status of the patron and no doubt also carried with it an air of Martinist mockery unsuitable for the occasion. Whether or not Nashe made an error of judgment, the challenge to his audience was not met. Nashe's original audience might have not been so receptive to his abstractions. Gregory Smith notes in his classic anthology that Elizabethan critics 'have a genuine conviction of their inefficiency, and though they play with dogma, which in the immediate future became the creed of a militant criticism, they seldom forget that they cannot claim to be more than experimenters' (xxxvii). It is not surprising that later readers have seen in Nashe's prose issues varying from crises of authority to

epistemological cataclysms. Instead of making the choices Nashe demands his readers to make, we too might want to interpret him by only pointing out that choices have to be made or, alternatively, come to the conclusion that we do not want to see the Nashe problem resolved. This is not to say that literary analysis is helpless, but to note that Nashe may still have something to contribute to the history of modern critical thought if we are willing to focus on the ways he has been read in the past.

Notes

ⁱ Levine is more or less in agreement with Stephen Greenblatt's reading of More's *Utopia*, but he doubts 'that Greenblatt or any of the "new historicists" would be very comfortable with [his] distinction between history and fiction' (24, fn 71), a theoretical distinction Levine claims emerged from the systematic efforts of a number of scholars he traces from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century.

ⁱⁱ Thus Nashe's failure is also categorically different from the kind of intentional omissions Dobranski examines.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Just why Nashe appeals to a known patron of the arts, who was nevertheless a Catholic, an open supporter of the untraditional Essex, and badly in debt himself, is a nice question; apparently no money was forthcoming—as it hardly could have been from the impecunious Southampton—for the dedication was omitted from the second edition later the same year' (Kinney 498 fn50).

^{iv} As for reading strategies, the maxim behind the interpretation of texts that play with transparent masks was perhaps best summarized by Balthasar Gracián: 'He who observes with a piercing eye knows the arts of his rival, stands upon his guard, and discovers darkness through a veil of light. He unriddles a procedure which is the more mysterious in that everything in it is sincere' (12).

^v It could be argued that More's constructed indeterminacy traps the reader in a dialectical metaleptic and antimetaleptic play. Strictly speaking, antimetalepsis may not be a feature of classical rhetoric, as Gérard Genette argues, but it may be derived from Horatian sources. One can see in the epistolary style of the *Art of Poetry* a mingling of authorial roles despite its advice to keep one's character in line with one's actions. Shaftesbury, to cite one famous eighteenth-century reader of Horace, notes the self-conscious subversiveness of Horace's epistolary movement from poet to critic: 'It is this Manner alone which professes Method, dissects it-self in Parts, and makes its own Anatomy' (115). Nashe's willingness to convolute rules of decorum can already be seen in his *Anatomy* and it is not inconceivable that he would have read Horace as an author who breaks his own rules of simplicity and unity by writing as a poet and a critic.

^{vi} Cummings's remark pertains to metaphor in particular, but he groups metalepsis together with other metaphorical figures of substitution. He also notes that 'Erasmus is not saying, as deconstruction seemed to be saying when it became interested in metalepsis a few years ago, that anything can be substituted for anything' (230). He refers to de Man, Bloom and the Yale school earlier in the essay, but does not name names in this particular passage.

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