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Taboo and Transgression in  
British Literature from  
the Renaissance to the Present

*Edited by*

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and Lars Heiler

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CHAPTER VI

WORSHIPPING CLOACINA IN  
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY:  
FUNCTIONS OF SCATOLOGY IN  
SWIFT, POPE, GAY, AND STERNE

*Jens Martin Gurr*

*Nothing deflates human pretensions to grandeur more quickly... than  
the satirist's insistence upon biological processes.*

—Frontein, 301

The Taboo of Excretion in the Eighteenth Century

At one point in Nick Hornby's 2005 novel *A Long Way Down*, a number of characters debate taboos in film and, by implication, in literature:

"It's all part of life, isn't it?"

"People always say that about unpleasant things... I'll tell you what else is all part of life: going for a crap. No one ever wants to see that, do they? No one ever puts that in a film. Let's go and watch people take a dump this evening."

"Who'd let us? ... People lock the door." (253)

While it is certainly true that excretion has been a taboo in films, literature and virtually all other media—people generally do “lock the door”—, one period in Anglophone literature conspicuously throws open the doors to afford more or less detailed views of precisely those moments

[When] gentle goddess Cloacine<sup>1</sup>  
Receives all offerings at her shrine.

In separate cells, the he's and she's,  
Here pay their vows on bended knees . . . (Swift "Panegyric," ll. 205–8)

This is not to say that the eighteenth century miraculously lifted the taboo—it certainly did not, as is apparent from the air of transgression that accompanies many of these instances. But it appears as though the insistence upon the baser animal nature of humans served a specific function in this period: Out of sixty-eight entries for the keywords "scatology" or "scatological" for English and Irish literature in the MLA database since 1963, twenty-seven are related to the eighteenth century, with significantly fewer than ten entries each for the Middle Ages, the sixteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries; even for the twentieth century, there are only twenty-three entries. Although, strictly speaking, this only proves a greater scholarly interest in scatology in this period, one can reasonably assume that it also reflects the frequency of scatological themes in eighteenth-century literature. This observation raises a number of important questions: Why this high incidence of scatology in the eighteenth century? How does one say the unsayable, and why bother saying it in the first place? More precisely, what purpose is fulfilled by the taboo of excretion and what is the function of the transgressive insistence upon such bodily functions in a given cultural environment, here the cultural context of the Enlightenment in the British Isles? This essay thus follows a largely functional approach to the study of taboo in the period in question by attempting a contextual reading of selected texts by Alexander Pope, John Gay, Laurence Sterne and, most importantly, Jonathan Swift. This list might easily have been complemented by numerous other early eighteenth-century writers and texts, but for reasons of space, I shall confine my discussion to a number of key examples which will furnish enough material to make my point.

I will argue that, in addition to a number of more specific functions in individual cases, the blunt insistence on humans' inescapably excremental physiology with Swift and his contemporaries served as a drastic counter-image to the overly optimistic assessments of human moral and intellectual capabilities expounded in the philosophical and literary writings of the early Enlightenment. This is not meant to contradict the findings of Norbert Elias and others on the changing habits concerning such matters through the centuries as documented by Elias from conduct books and other sources (for matters scatological cf. Elias I: 174–94). What I mean to add is a more specific

contextualization for the surge of scatological references in the eighteenth century. Before discussing previous attempts to account for the ubiquity of scatological references in the period, however, one must ask why excretion is tabooed in the first place—historically in general and in the eighteenth century specifically.

Generally speaking, the taboo on excretion as well as a number of related taboos can be conceptualized in terms of Kristeva's notion of "abjection": "The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism" (Kristeva 12f.). Seen in this way, it is the taboo on excretion which separates humans from animals. Thus, a transgression of the taboo is regarded as a threat to human society and becomes a mark of social instability. A related explanation for the taboo nature of excretion and feces is provided by Mary Douglas's exploration of the connection between taboo, the human body and the social order as well as her view that excrements suggest the transgression of bodily boundaries as well as a threat to the social order (cf. 35, 115–21 *et passim*). Douglas here draws on Sartre's analysis of the symbolism of stickiness in *L'être et le néant* (1943, *Being and Nothingness*, 1956) and argues that purity comes to be virtually synonymous with order, while impurity represents disorder, instability, chaos (cf. also Persels and Ganim xiv). Given this close link between the body and society and the symbolic connection between physical purity and social stability, which has also been explored by Sallybrass and White (cf. 192 *et passim*), the specific form in which the taboo on excretion is negotiated is of significant diagnostic value in understanding a given culture: "Paying close attention to this [taboo], understanding the treatment of impurity and its concomitant 'danger' within a given society's conceptualization of its own nature, becomes critical to a full and accurate appreciation of that society" (Persels and Ganim xiv). Taking their cue from Foucault's notions of "censorship," "denial," and "repressive hypotheses" in the *History of Sexuality*, Persels and Ganim speak of a specific "aesthetic and linguistic code" that originates in the "social desire to silence literary and artistic representations of [the scatological]" (xv).

To complicate matters further, in studying the relationship between society and taboo, we have to bear in mind the inextricable connection between taboo and transgression and the fact that transgression is even constitutive of the taboo, as classically set

out in Bataille's *Lérotisme* (1957). It is in the very moment of transgression that the taboo is once more made explicit. Eggert appropriately points out: "As a consequence of the ambivalence of taboo and transgression, one can observe an ambivalence of a ban on representation and representation which nonetheless occurs—a taboo, after all, must be publicly marked as a taboo" (22, my transl.). It is the very act of transgression explicitly and deliberately marked as such which draws renewed attention to the taboo. Thus, in the period in question, too, circuitous euphemisms, dashes substituted for letters and the particularly drastic language used in cases when the texts *do* become explicit, in a good number of instances draw attention to the taboo nature of urination and excretion. A case in point is the famous dash in the notorious final couplets of "Cassinus and Peter," when horrified Cassinus entrusts to his friend Peter the shocking secret of how he has been disillusioned about the angelic nature of his beloved Cælia:<sup>2</sup>

And yet, I dare confide in you;  
So take my Secret, and adieu.  
Nor wonder how I lost my Wits;  
Oh! Cælia, Cælia, Cælia sh—(ll. 115–18)

Similarly, in "The Lady's Dressing Room," though it does talk about "excremental smell" in rather unflattering detail, the reference to feces as "[t]hings, which must not be exprest" (l. 109) only highlights the taboo. Finally, a further variation of this reference to the taboo nature of excretion in the very moment of transgression is to be found in characteristic euphemisms such as "to pluck a rose." This euphemism is employed for Chloe in "Strephon and Chloe," for instance, when we learn that "None ever saw her pluck a Rose" (540, l. 16).<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the very act of transgressing the taboo on excretion, these texts recall and thus paradoxically reinforce the taboo.

This intricate relationship between taboo and transgression and the multiplicity of strategies in representing both are also addressed by Eggert when he states that

[t]aboos are always connected to problems of representation and their negotiation: taboos have a genuinely aesthetic component ranging from the non-verbal symbolizations to a regulation of aesthetics.... Any research on taboos [therefore] has to attend to strategies and contents of symbolization; it cannot merely conceive of taboos as a

social phenomenon, but must also consider aesthetic traditions. (22, my transl.)

Seen in this light, the specifically transgressive nature of texts dealing with excretion manifests itself not only in content, but also in generic transgression: thus, Swift's scatological poems can also be seen as transgressive of established poetic conventions and sub-genres. In this vein, "Cassinus and Peter" has been regarded as a "burlesque elegy" (Aden 26), "Strephon and Chloe" can be seen as a "mock epithalamion" (Davis 195), while Pope's *Dunciad* is the archetype of the mock-heroic epic (for such transgressive variations of established genres cf. also Zimmerman 133).

### Madness, Misogyny, or Misanthropy?—Potential Functions of Scatology in Swift and Others

Swift's engagement with scatology alone, as a recent commentator states, has "engendered, and continues to maintain, a critical industry.... Few topics in Swift have been revisited as often" (Child 83). Aldous Huxley (93–106) was probably the first to draw attention to the centrality of excremental imagery in Swift, but he began the tradition of attributing this—in a vulgarization of Freudian criticism—to a perversion on the part of the author. Fortunately, this simplistic and reductionist branch of pseudo-Freudian criticism with its tendency to condemn the author and his pieces as "so perverse, so unnatural, so mentally diseased, so humanly wrong" (Murry 440) largely came to an end with the more subtle readings of later critics. A far more balanced psychological account of Swift's scatological pieces, for instance, is provided by Ehrenpreis (cf. 3: 688–95), though he, too, does not see them in the context of eighteenth-century philosophy.

Similarly, the superficially plausible reading of these texts as being misogynist has also long been shown to be untenable: In his classic 1959 essay "The Excremental Vision," Norman O. Brown already deplored a critical distortion in the tendency "to transform Swift's misanthropy into misogyny" (613). These poems, Brown argued, are not misogynist, but rather mock the attitude of those who naively raise women to the status of incorporeal angels. In a related vein, Ellen Pollak, for instance, understands them as attacks upon idealizations of women, speaking of "mock-petrarchan features of the poems" (181; cf. also Gilmore 33; Brown 617; Siebert 21). The

disillusioning effect of an insistence upon bodily functions is especially clear in "Strephon and Chloe," where Strephon is drastically brought to his senses when his idealized, angelicized beloved turns out to be all-too-human after all during the wedding night:

In Bed we left the married Pair:  
 'Tis Time to shew how Things went there....  
 The Nymph opprest before, behind,  
 As Ships are toss't by Waves and Wind,  
 Steals out her Hand, by Nature led,  
 And brings a Vessel into Bed....  
*Strephon* who heard the fuming Rill  
 As from a mossy Cliff distill;  
 Cry'd out, Ye Gods, what Sound is this?  
 Can *Chloe*, heav'nly *Chloe*—?  
 But, when he smelt a noysom Steam  
 Which oft' attends that luke-warm Stream;...  
 And though contriv'd, we may suppose,  
 To slip his Ears, yet struck his Nose:  
 He found her, while the Scent increas'd,  
 As mortal as himself at least. ("Strephon and Chloe," ll. 145–86)

This deflation of idealized conceptions of femininity also appears to be the function of the notorious "The Rose, Paris" chapter in Sterne's 1768 *Sentimental Journey*, prominently placed at the very end of vol. I. On an outing in the countryside, Madame de Rambouillet, "the most correct... of all women," desires to leave the coach:

I ask'd her if she wanted any thing—*Rien que pisser*, said Madame de Rambouillet—Grieve not, gentle traveller, to let Madame de Rambouillet p-ss on—And, ye fair mystic nymphs! go each one *pluck your rose*, and scatter them in your path—for Madame de Rambouillet did no more—I handed [her] out of the coach; and had I been the priest of the chaste Castalia, I could not have served at her fountain with a more respectful decorum. (63)

Here, the *frisson* of discussing in euphemisms and *double entendres* the act of urination and—by implication—defecation of a respectable woman surely also serves to deflate allegedly disembodied female beauty and propriety.<sup>4</sup>

However, even if it is agreed that these texts are not misogynist but that they deflate the idealization of women, it seems to me an insufficiently specific contextualization to read them exclusively

as anti-Petrarchan. What might account for the emergence of anti-Petrarchan poetry in the eighteenth-century? Zimmerman appropriately argues that these texts are "rendered more rational if the values they enforce are ungendered, the female body then standing for the human condition" (142). These poems—and the same is true of *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance—are just as unflattering and scathing about the male body: Strephon in "Strephon and Chloe" urinates and breaks wind, too (ll. 187–92), and Cassinus in "Cassinus and Peter" is as unkempt, greasy and unwashed as any female.

Thus, although simplistic readings of Swift's poems and other scatological pieces in the eighteenth century as expressions of their authors' diseased minds or of their misogyny have been discarded, many previous readings are devoid of any concrete contextualization, and most commentators remain curiously vague about just *what* might more convincingly be identified as the immediate target of their satire. Why, in other words, this outburst of scatology in the eighteenth century?

In the sense of the ancient reminder, often mistakenly attributed to St. Augustine, that "inter urinam et faeces nascimur," the insistence on man's animal nature in any age of course effectively deflates grand human pretensions, and the coupling of a concept, person or place with feces is easily recognizable as a form of denigration. The connection of unpleasant or hostile characters with excrement to express dislike, for instance, seems timeless and common across many cultures.

A case in point of this function of scatology as a form of denigration is the cloacal vision of London as one great sewer of material, intellectual and moral filth in Swift's "Description of a City Shower" (1710), Gay's *Trivia* (1716, enl. 1730) or Pope's *Dunciad* (1728, enl. 1743). In this vein, Swift's "Description of a City Shower" represents London as an infernally dirty and smelly sewer overflowing with excremental filth. As Gassenmeier has shown in a detailed contextual reading (261–78), this image of excremental London serves to counter contemporary celebrations of the city as a shining model of liberty, commerce and progress. A similarly cloacal image of London is to be found in the passage of Gay's *Trivia* concerned with the Goddess of the sewers, "*Cloacina*," "[w]hose sable Streams beneath the City glide" (II, ll. 115f.; for a reading cf. Meller 164f.). A final text indulging in the cloacal imagination of excremental London is Pope's *Dunciad*. Pope's satirical targets, the hack writers, poetasters, critics and cultural functionaries of contemporary London, are

here made to engage in degrading contests of tickling, noise-making and sewer-diving in "Fleet-ditch" (II, l. 259). Diving and splashing about in the excrement-filled sewer, the dunces are courted by "Mud-nymphs" (II, l. 308) and "Merdamante brown" (II, 310). This deployment of scatological imagery clearly serves drastically to denigrate opponents, suggesting their bestiality by associating them with filth (for a brief discussion of the *Dunciad* in this vein cf. Gassenmeier 282ff.).

Generalizing the purpose of such more specific attacks, Brown in his discussion of Swift's "excremental vision" regards "scatological imagery" as Swift's "decisive weapon in his assault on the pretensions, the pride, even the self-respect of mankind" (611). In his reading of *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, "[t]he Yahoos represent the raw core of human bestiality" (620). But much as Brown rightly rejects the simplistic psychoanalytical reading of Swiftian scatology as being an expression of the satirist's diseased mind, his reading of the poems as "anticipations of Freudian theorems about anality, about sublimation, and about the universal neurosis of mankind" (617) remains remarkably vague and devoid of any reasonable contextualization. Similarly, even Irving Ehrenpreis, who in his magisterial three-volume study of Swift reads *Gulliver's Travels* as "a radical comical criticism of human nature" (3: 455), merely regards the emphasis on bodily functions as a general rather than specific counter-balance to human intellectual pride: "On the one hand, the body is the spirit's tragedy; on the other, it is the spirit's farce. *Gulliver's Travels* [like the 'unprintable poems'] is designed to keep both these attitudes in sight at once, and to destroy the dignity of man in all his shapes by their constant juxtaposition." (3: 464) Thus, a survey of Swift criticism reveals that what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism" (*passim*), the general tendency to privilege bodily excess and the lower regions of the body including its waste products over the spiritual and intellectual, has frequently been explored (cf. for instance Stallybrass and White). The specific way in which much eighteenth-century writing uses the physical to deflate the claims of the spiritual and intellectual side of humankind, however, deserves further consideration. Rawson gestures toward a more directly contextual reading when he comments on Swift's scatology as follows:

Swift's scatology is undoubtedly aggressive [but the aggression may] be less against the bowels or the sexual parts than against that highly personalized representative of mankind, the reader: against his

squeamishness, his complacent normality, his shoddy idealisms and self-deceptions, his attachment to the human form divine, and his belief in the rationality of the human mind.... (Rawson 82)

But what, the question remains, is the immediate occasion?

Carole Fabricant, J. Paul Hunter and recently Paul W. Child have drawn attention to more concrete contexts. Far from being evidence of Swift's perverse mind, references to feces and the related olfactory sensations must be understood as unremarkable in an age when "travellers toward London consistently reported that they could smell it before they could see it—not because of the industrialization which historically lay just ahead but because of the primitive plumbing and open sewers that could only inadequately serve the physical needs of the teeming city" (Hunter 230). Further, this ubiquity of excrement and horrendous stench was by no means confined to London: Carole Fabricant, who has an entire chapter titled "Excremental Vision vs. Excremental Reality" (24–42), has pointed to Swift's more immediate local context, St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and its particularly nasty and smelly surroundings: "Excrement, then, was very much a fact of life for Swift; his landscape was literally as well as linguistically full of it" (30). Such facts of life, we are apt to forget, were very much inescapable in early eighteenth-century life and must have been overpoweringly present to all senses. Finally, in a recent essay on scatology in Swift, Child takes issue with a dominant strand in the criticism of these texts, which he summarizes as follows: "... Swift levels our proud pretensions, reminding us, in dark Augustinian fashion, that we resemble ordure more than we do angels. Mankind, mired in original sin, is 'excrementally filthy'" (84). In contrast to this rather vague reading of Swiftian scatology as being a general reminder of human baseness and animality, Child persuasively traces Swift's fecal imagery to the very concrete medical "fact that faeces was tool-in-trade of diagnostic and... therapeutic medicine" (93). He further argues that such excremental medical practices ideally lent themselves to "satirizing the medical profession, one of [Swift's] favourite targets" and that they provided "a narrative structure for his various attacks on modern projecting madness" (85).

The mere presence of an "excremental reality" as diagnosed by Fabricant, Hunter, and Child, however, hardly distinguishes the early eighteenth century from other periods similarly marked by such unpleasant facts of life. The question remains what function the insistence on the scatological might have played in early



eighteenth-century literature and culture. Why, again, this outburst of scatology specifically in the early eighteenth century?

### Concrete Contexts: The Intellectual and Moral Pretensions of Enlightened Anthropological Optimism

This is not the place for a survey of conceptions of human rationality and moral philosophy during the English Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> A few remarks on some key notions from early eighteenth-century treatises on moral philosophy and on the role of reason in this context, however, will be sufficient to recontextualize eighteenth-century scatology. There can be little doubt that late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century thinkers were more optimistic about the intellectual and moral capabilities of humans—both collectively and individually—than most previous generations. In his short account of *The Enlightenment Tradition*, Robert Anchor speaks of “the autonomy of man, the secularisation of knowledge and thought, the natural goodness and perfectibility of human nature, and belief in reason and experience, science and progress” as “the credo of the Enlightenment” (69f.).

It is true, of course, that rationality had for centuries been regarded as the distinct characteristic which elevates humans above animals. This distinction is again made as late as 1690 in Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where “reason” is defined as “that faculty whereby man is supposed to be distinguished from beasts, and wherein it is evident he much surpasses them” (394, IV, xvii, 1). The belief in rationality as the distinguishing feature of humanity and in the general capacity of humans productively to make use of it, was hardly ever more prominent than in the period in question, and though the entire tradition of regarding man as the “animal rationale” may be considered to be Swift’s target, it seems reasonable to assume this current vogue of optimistic assessments of human nature and human rationality as the more concrete and more immediate target. Thus, in a much-cited letter to Pope, Swift wrote about *Gulliver’s Travels*: “I have got Materials Towards a Treatise proving the falsity of that Definition *animal rationale*; and to show it should only be *rationalis capax*. Upon this great foundation of Misanthropy . . . the whole building of my Travells is erected” (Swift, “Letter to Pope, 29 Sept. 1725,” 585). In a later letter to Pope dated November 26, 1725, he writes: “I do not hate Mankind, it is vovs autres who hate them because you would have them reasonable Animals, and are Angry for being disappointed” (586).

That especially book III of *Gulliver’s Travels* is directed against the “New Sciences” inspired by Bacon and particularly practiced by the Royal Society, has long been established (cf. Real and Vienken 86 *et passim* and Nate 299). The rampant scientific enthusiasm of the early English enlightenment is documented in texts such as William Wotton’s *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, published in 1694, of which Swift is known to have possessed the second edition of 1697 (cf. Real and Vienken 174n). Wotton here enthuses: “Such Swarms of Great Men in every Part of Natural and Mathematical Knowledge have within these few Years appeared, that it may, perhaps, without Vanity, be believed, that . . . the next Age will not find very much Work of this Kind [left] to do” (qtd. in *ibid.* 89). In this vein, *Gulliver’s Travels* satirically lampoons human pretensions to intellectual respectability, rationality, perfectibility, and progress (cf. *ibid.* 110 *et passim*). It is hardly a coincidence that book III, with the Academy at Lagado (III, v and vi, 152–64) as the satirical representation of the Royal Society (cf. Real and Vienken 90; Nate 300), is particularly scatological in nature. The academy is closely associated with feces in the description of various experiments such as the attempt “to reduce human Excrement to its original Food,” for which the filthy scientist receives “a weekly Allowance from the Society, of a Vessel filled with human Ordure” (III, v, 153) or the experiment of the “great Physician” who attempts to cure trapped winds by means of “a large Pair of Bellows . . . conveyed eight Inches up the Anus, and drawing in the Wind” or by “[discharging] the Bellows full of Wind . . . into the Body of the Patient” (III, v, 154f.; cf. also *Battle of the Books* vii, 338 or ix, 354). Finally, a letter to Sheridan dated September 11, 1725, explicitly connects the bestial nature of the Yahoos in the particularly unflattering book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels* with overly optimistic assessments of human nature: “[E]xpect no more from Man than such an Animal is capable of, and you will every day find my Description of Yahoos [*sic*] more resembling” (583f.).

As far as early-eighteenth-century moral philosophy is concerned, a representative work in the tradition of enlightened enthusiasm about human nature is Francis Hutcheson’s influential *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty*, first published in 1725. That many of Hutcheson’s ideas were already current at the time of publication is already apparent from the title page of the *Inquiry*, where it is announced as a work “in which the Principles of the Late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain’d and Defended against the Author of the *Fable of the Bees*.” The reference is of course to Shaftesbury’s 1711

*Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, which—despite fore-runners in Latitudinarian theology and the Cambridge Platonists—is generally regarded as the founding text of the “moral sense” school with its anthropological optimism (cf. Gurr 29–50). Following Shaftesbury, Hutcheson maintains that humans naturally have a moral sense, which unerringly helps them to tell good from evil—and Hutcheson is Platonist enough to assume that to know the good is to will it:

[A]s the Author of *Nature* has determin'd us to receive, by our *external Senses*, pleasant or disagreeable Ideas of Objects, according as they are useful or hurtful to our Bodies; and to receive from *uniform Objects* the Pleasures of *Beauty* and *Harmony* . . . so he has given us a Moral Sense, to direct our Actions, and to give us still *nobler Pleasures*; so that while we are only intending the *Good* of Others, we undesignedly promote our own greatest *private Good*. (123f.)

In keeping with his belief that “there is a *universal Determination* to *Benevolence* in *Mankind*, even towards the most distant parts of the *Species*” (195, cf. also 215f.), he assumes that humans will generally act benevolently and altruistically: “It is plain that we have some *secret Sense* which determines our Approbation [of an action or thought] without regard to *Self-Interest*; otherwise we should always favor the fortunate Side without regard to *Virtue*” (112). Yet more optimistically, he maintains without much qualification that “The *human Nature* is a lovely Form” (131) and even goes so far as to claim that “a *natural, kind Instinct*, to see Objects of *Compassion*” (217) was the cause which induced Romans to attend gory gladiatorial contests and which made crowds flock to see public executions (cf. 217f.). His views are representative of the new moral optimism when he states: “I see no harm in supposing, that Men are *naturally* dispos'd to *Virtue*” (176).

The drastic insistence on human's fecal nature in *Gulliver's Travels* and the other scatological pieces of the period considerably gains in specificity of purpose if regarded as a reaction against such idealistic pretensions. In this vein, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)—which, as we have seen, drastically undermines faith in humankind as an *animal rationale*—just as fundamentally questions the belief in humans as amiable, benevolent, and altruistic. There is good reason, therefore, to regard it as not least a response to the cultural climate which produced Hutcheson's idealistic *Inquiry* published only a year before (cf. also Wedel 23, who merely mentions Hutcheson, however). Though

substantially finished before Hutcheson's *Inquiry* appeared in 1725, *Gulliver's Travels* can be seen as a reaction against the current of optimistic moral philosophy of which Hutcheson is merely one of the more prominent exponents.

In his comprehensive study of Swift, Ehrenpreis briefly outlines the satirist's view of the contemporary doctrine of natural benevolence as taught by Shaftesbury and others: “Swift believed that human nature had room for a moderate striving toward moral integrity, though sin and ignorance constantly drove this tendency back. . . . Swift distrusted the psychology of natural benevolence taught by Latitudinarian preachers, and he hastened to disown Shaftesbury's ‘free Whiggish’ *Letter concerning Enthusiasm*” (2: 288). As an adherent of the moral scepticism of his idols Montaigne, Pascal or La Rochefoucauld (cf. the resp. entries in Passmann and Vienken), Swift had no patience for the Whiggish liberalism implied in the beliefs of the moral sense school of Shaftesbury and his followers. Ehrenpreis does not, however, read Swift's satire in the scatological pieces in this context.

In a 1926 essay that is still worth reading, T.O. Wedel identifies “a revolution in ethical thought” (24) and describes as follows the new faith in human nature, in human reason and natural goodness, which had superseded the anthropological pessimism of the older Christian tradition: “The pessimism of Pascal has given way to the optimism of Leibnitz [*sic*]; the theory of self-love of La Rochefoucauld to the theory of benevolence of Hutcheson and Hume; the scepticism of Montaigne to the rationalism of Locke, Toland and Clarke” (ibid.). Thus, at a time when “Locke and the Deists had given man a new trust in Reason [and] the Cambridge Platonists and Shaftesbury were discovering in him a moral sense” (27), “Swift seems to have seen clearly enough that in assaulting man's pride in reason, he was attacking the new optimism at its very root” (31). Neither Wedel nor later critics, however, have consistently attempted to read the early eighteenth century's preoccupation with feces, excretion and other such drastic facts of life as a specific strategy in the demolition of this optimism.

## Conclusion

In sum, what *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift's scatological poems, Pope's rendering of a diving-contest in the excrement-filled London sewer, Gay's emphasis on cloacal London, and Sterne's Madame de Rambouillet

and her need to “p-ss” have in common is their insistent focus on the flip-side of the period’s virtually disembodied emphasis on human rationality and sentimentality. The insistence upon anal-ity, excrement, human stench, and bestiality can thus be read as a direct response drastically countering the period’s ideal of humans as remarkably non-corporeal, purely intellectual or purely sentimental beings. Whether we look at human nature as envisaged by the moral sense school of Shaftesbury or Hutcheson, the “man of sympathy” of Adam Smith and David Hume or the novelists’ “man of feeling,” or whether we consider the period’s widespread belief in mankind as an *animal rationale*—it is the seemingly boundless anthropological optimism in some quarters of eighteenth-century British philosophy and literature that can plausibly be regarded as the foil for Swift’s, Pope’s, Gay’s and Sterne’s insistence on the less than flattering physical nature of humanity. Such lofty pretensions of human rationality on the one hand and of human benevolence and moral perfectibility on the other hand, one can argue, are most effectively ‘deflated’ in the drastically literal sense of ‘letting out’ what really puffs up the human frame: trapped winds and excrements. By violating the taboo on excretion in their emphasis on such creaturely processes as defecation and urination, Swift and others blur the sacred boundary between human and animal and acutely point out the all-too-animal nature of humans. The implications of this drastic shift of emphasis for the period’s lofty intellectual and moral pretensions are rather akin to those of Mandeville’s insistence on egoism as the driving force of all human actions for the benevolent idealism of the moral sense school in the wake of Shaftesbury:

[These] notions, I confess are generous and refined: They are a high Compliment to Human-kind, and capable by the help of a little Enthusiasm of inspiring us with the most Noble Sentiments concerning the Dignity of our exalted Nature: What Pity it is that they are not true. (Mandeville 1: 324)

Some fifty years ago, John Traugott stated: “One of the complications of literary history is that the modern term ‘Enlightenment’ is applied to a period that produced so many satirists whose principal study was to denigrate the human reason” (17). This “complication” upon closer inspection ceases to be one: It is precisely the frequently excessive optimism in enlightened conceptions of human rationality and morality which, as a countermovement, provoked the

taboo-breaking denigrations of human reason and morality by Swift and Company.

## Notes

1. Cloacine or Cloacina, “Goddess of common Sewers,” also features prominently in Gay’s “Trivia,” cf. Gay II: 115ff., and in Pope’s *Dunciad*, cf. II, 89ff. and *Dunciad Variorum* II, 93ff. Cf. my discussion in this chapter.
2. Cf. also “Strephon and Chloe” (1731), ll. 77–78, 161f. and 175–78; or “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” (1731), where the vowel in the word “pist” [pissed] is replaced by hyphens (l. 62).
3. Cf. also “A Panegyric on the Dean,” l. 216, and the passage in Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* quoted below.
4. Cf. also the nauseating survey of Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” which also appears to counter naïve idealizations of non-corporeal feminine beauty.
5. For a review of such optimistic assessments of human reason and moral capabilities cf. Gurr 19–50.
6. The reference is to Swift’s “Letter to Ambrose Philips, 14 Sept. 1708,” 206f.

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