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SWIFT'S *MODEST PROPOSAL*:

THE BIOGRAPHY OF AN EARLY GEORGIAN PAMPHLET

BY GEORGE WITTKOWSKY

There is an almost complete absence of sustained scholarship on the subject of Swift's *Modest Proposal*. The lesser works even of most major writers in English have been investigated with Gestapo-like thoroughness. Even the minor works of minor writers have received loving attention. And yet toward the *Modest Proposal*, a major work by a major English writer, scholars have been definitely coy. One searches in vain for a serious critical article on this pamphlet. No book on Swift which I have read has dignified it with a separate chapter. The usual practice in such books is to write a sentence or two of superlative praise: the rest, for the most part, is silence. The agnostic comment of Bertram Newman may be taken as the theme-song of most critics. Before the *Modest Proposal*, he says, "comment is dumb; . . . there is nothing with which to compare it."¹ Leslie Stephen, who happens to have written some of the most perceptive of all comments on the *Modest Proposal*,² really devotes to the subject less than two pages; while Churton Collins spares only one sentence.³ Although Taine observes that it deserves quotation almost as a whole, because he knows nothing like it in all literature, all he adds by way of critical comment, after extensive quotation, is the remark that beside the *Modest Proposal*, the cries and anguish of Pascal are faint.⁴ Taine's compatriots, Legouis and Cazamian, in their distinguished study of English literature, do not even mention it. Quintana asserts that in this tract Swiftian irony "attained its most perfect expression";⁵ that it is "not only the greatest of Swift's Irish tracts; it is also the best introduction to his satiric

¹ Bertram Newman, *Swift* (Boston, 1937), 345.

² Leslie Stephen, *Swift* (London, 1903), 166-7.

³ John Churton Collins, *Jonathan Swift* (London, 1893), 223.

⁴ H. A. Taine, *History of English Literature*, translated by H. Van Laun (New York, 1872), II, 147-9.

⁵ Ricardo Quintana, *The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford, 1936), 255.

art.”⁶ Yet if Quintana’s five scattered references to the *Modest Proposal* were brought together,⁷ they could be printed on one page.

And yet this neglect, possibly unparalleled in English literary studies, can be simply explained. Critics of the *Modest Proposal*, with few exceptions,⁸ have regarded this tract as satire directed against conditions in Ireland rather than against a set of theories and attitudes which rendered such conditions possible. In a moment of crisis, President Grover Cleveland once growled that the country was facing a condition, not a theory. Swift, on the other hand, in writing the *Modest Proposal*, was contemplating theories as well as a condition. Why have scholars ignored or dealt inadequately with the theoretical background of the *Modest Proposal*? Simply because the economists themselves, until very recently, have ignored or treated lightly economic thought before Adam Smith. With the exception of a lone scholar here and there, they seem to have regarded economic theory before the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* as a sort of Miltonic chaos, “a vast vacuity.” Mercantilist theories about labor, with which we are chiefly concerned in this chapter, remained, for many generations, particularly obscure. Furniss, who has done much to clear up this obscurity, has offered a cogent explanation for its existence. He points out that there have been semantic barriers. “Habitual use of words in certain meanings,” he says, “closes the mind to the reception of their connotations.”⁹ It is hard for two people with different points of view to reach an agreement on terms. This difficulty is magnified when we try to comprehend the theories of a remote age, “cut off still more completely by a revolution in economic, political and social institutions.” Under such circumstances, it is “a positive disadvantage” if a common language has served to convey the thought of both periods. “This semantic barrier,” Furniss says, “is the source of most of the difficulty of understanding the position of labor in the eighteenth century.”¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24, 43, 255, 346, and 355.

⁸ These exceptions occur in incidental remarks, several of which are quoted in subsequent notes. No writer on Swift, however, has written a serious *critique* of the *Modest Proposal*.

⁹ Edgar S. Furniss, *The Position of the Laborer in a System of Nationalism. A Study in the Labor Theories of the Later English Mercantilists* (Boston and New York, 1920), 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

Since most political economists ignored mercantilist theory, it is not surprising that writers on English literature have followed their lead. And if one regards the *Modest Proposal* simply as a criticism of conditions, about all one can say is that conditions were bad and that Swift's irony brilliantly underscored this fact.

A comment by Sir Henry Craik on the Irish Manufacturers tract of 1720 will go far toward explaining why the *Modest Proposal* has received such short shrift. Swift's idea of excluding English goods was, he writes, "faulty in political economy," *concerning which the age knew little*. "Swift cared nothing for it. He anticipated its maxims only to ridicule them."¹¹ With Craik's first proposition one can easily agree. In fact, this tract was written at a time when Swift knew little about contemporary economic theory. But Craik goes further: he assumes not only that Swift knew little about political economy in 1720—or later—but that there was then no such body of knowledge. Yet Craik is one of the most perceptive of all writers on Swift!

But the recent work of scholars like Furniss, Heckscher, and Johnson has blasted the notion that the theories of the early economists are unworthy of study, and the rise of so-called "neo-mercantilism" in Europe during our own generation has stimulated interest in the writings of "the predecessors of Adam Smith." So it may be said that, in a sense, the rise of Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler has made inevitable, sooner or later, a re-examination of the works of Jonathan Swift.¹² On no work by Swift will the new economic scholarship throw more light than on the *Modest Proposal*.

My analysis of this Swiftian masterpiece must be preceded by an exposition of certain economic terms and tendencies of the Age of Mercantilism. At the risk of over-simplification, I shall divide the discussion of theories of labor in the eighteenth century into four parts. The first, which might be called "The Theory of the Utility of Poverty," will deal with the tendency to regard

¹¹ Sir Henry Craik, *The Life of Jonathan Swift* (London, 1882), 342.

¹² Joseph Lecler, in an article entitled "Libéralisme Economique et Libre Pensée au XVIIIe Siècle: Mandeville et La Fable des Abeilles," *Études* (Paris, March 22, 1937), 624, opens with this statement: "Par un singulier retour des choses, notre époque voit reflourir, en politique économique, les idées anciennes de protectionnisme et réglementation."

labor, including child labor, as a commodity; the second, which could appropriately be headed "Political Arithmetic," with the application of statistics to problems of population and labor; the third, to which the title "The Able and the Impotent Poor" is applicable, will be concerned with a vital modification of the early mercantilist position that people are the riches of a nation; the fourth, for which the title "Project Concerning Population" comes to mind, will deal with a special type of project.

Fundamental is the tendency to regard labor as a commodity. Under the then dominant bullionist theory, it was assumed that in the exchange of goods between nations, it was impossible for both countries to profit; that for one nation to gain or (as the early economic writers phrased it) to maintain "a favorable balance of trade," it was necessary for it to sell manufactured goods in exchange for raw material. (The phrases used in contemporary tracts were "artificed goods" or "wrought goods.") In other words, the maintenance of "a favorable balance of trade" depended on the exportation of the products of the combined laboring force of a nation. Implicit in this theory was the assumption that the economic good of the state overshadowed the welfare of the individual. It was a philosophy of economic statism which regarded labor as a commodity. Naturally, such a point of view led to several brutal conclusions. It led, in the first place, to the conclusion that the wealth of a nation depended on a numerous population or—as contemporary writers had it—that people are the riches of a nation. It led to faith in an economy of low wages. The more people are paid, to use Heckscher's pithy restatement of this view, the less they work.¹³ This was the philosophy which Furniss had in mind when he coined the expressive phrase, "the doctrine of the utility of poverty."¹⁴ Thomas Mun had written in 1664 that "penury and want do make a people wise and industrious."¹⁵ In his essay on "Charity and Charity Schools," published for the first time in the edition of *The Fable of the Bees* which appeared in 1723, Mandeville said that "in a free Nation where Slaves are not allow'd of, the surest Wealth consists in a Multitude of laborious Poor," who should serve as nurseries of

¹³ Eli F. Heckscher, *Mercantilism* (London, 1935), II, 165.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

¹⁵ Thomas Mun, *England's Treasure* (London, 1684), 182.

fleets, armies, and industry.¹⁶ Not only should they be poor: "To make the Society happy and People easy under the meanest Circumstances," he argued, "it is requisite that great Numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor."¹⁷ Heckscher points out that the logic of such a position is belief in "wealth for the nation, but wealth from which a majority of the people must be excluded."¹⁸ It must be remembered that this grim mercantilist outlook was a comparatively recent development and that memories of a more humane philosophy lingered in the minds of men who had read the sermons and tracts written a generation or so earlier.¹⁹ But, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, the view that poverty was caused primarily by low wages had fallen into disrepute.²⁰ Writers and statesmen were exasperated by idleness in the face of the great need for industrial labor.²¹

Particularly important for an understanding of the background of the *Modest Proposal* is a consideration of the prevailing attitude toward child labor. It has been observed that no aspect of mercantilism is more peculiar from the modern point of view.²² "In the mercantilist view no child was too young to go into industry."²³ In his essay on charity, Mandeville scorned "the Enthusiastick Passion for Charity-Schools."²⁴ He spoke of the "unreasonable Vein of Petty Reverence for the Poor," arising from "a mixture of Pity, Folly and Superstition."²⁵ In his description of England

¹⁶ Kaye edition, I, 287.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 288.

¹⁸ Heckscher, *op. cit.*, II, 165.

¹⁹ John Bellers, who perhaps is not a fair example, because he was much more humane in his philosophy than most, in his *Essay About the Poor*, published in 1699, spoke eloquently for the laboring people. I have no evidence that Swift read Bellers. It is important, however, to remember that before the tribe of Mandeville and Defoe others had written about the humble in a more humane spirit.

²⁰ Dorothy Marshall, *English Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1926), 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²² Heckscher, *op. cit.*, II, 155.

²³ *Ibid.*, II, 155. Heckscher also makes this comment: "Whereas from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward . . . measures were taken to limit child labour by law, under mercantilism the power of the state was exerted in precisely the opposite direction." *Ibid.*, II, 155.

²⁴ *Fable of the Bees*, Kaye edition, I, 268.

between 1724 and 1726, Daniel Defoe mentions (with what strikes Heckscher as approval) sections like Taunton where children of four or five could earn a living.²⁶ The first point, then, to keep in mind about the position of labor in the Age of Swift is that the somewhat more humane attitudes of an earlier day had all but disappeared and the laborer had come to be regarded as a commodity.

This somewhat general exposition of the position of labor in the early eighteenth century should be followed by a discussion of the rise of the science of statistics. This calls for a brief survey of theories regarding population. The great name among writers on population is, of course, Thomas Robert Malthus, who proclaimed in his *Essay on the Principles of Population* that people increase by geometrical proportions, sustenance by arithmetical proportions only. Before Malthus, two main streams of English opinion are discernible. During the latter part of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, writers on the subject were influenced by fear of overpopulation.²⁷ Sir Walter Raleigh, for example, feared that the world would not only be full but overflowing were it not for abstinence, artificial sterility, hunger, pestilence, and crime.²⁸ Bacon sounded a similar warning.²⁹ But a reversal in point of view coincided roughly with the rise of mercantilism. Thus Sir William Petty wrote that "Fewness of people, is real poverty."³⁰ Sir Josiah Childs and Charles Davenant expressed similar views.³¹ Swift was familiar with the writings of all three. It is remarkable, comments Furniss, that the fear of too small a population should have existed in the midst of poverty. Moreover, it is important for us to realize how influential these mercantilist theories of population were—both in England and elsewhere. One writer observes that if we "turn over the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 311.

²⁶ Heckscher, *op. cit.*, II, 156.

²⁷ C. E. Stangeland, *Pre-Malthusian Doctrines of Population* (1904), 110.

²⁸ Sir Walter Raleigh, *History of the World*, Bk. i, ch. viii, sec. 4.

²⁹ Francis Bacon, "Essay Concerning Seditions and Troubles," *Works* (Boston, 1860), XII, 127.

³⁰ Sir William Petty, *Economic Writings*. Edited by C. H. Hull, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1899), II, 393-4.

³¹ Furniss, *op. cit.*, 30.

dusty and numberless volumes in which the chaos of European legislation is comprised," we shall find that all governments have encouraged young people to marry and parents to raise families.³² The unpredictable Bernard Mandeville, on the other hand, followed the minority view and argued amusingly that there was a real danger of excessive population and that this excess would be unavoidable were it not for physicians and apothecaries, wars by sea and land, wild beasts, hangings and drownings.³³ On this general position, at least, Mandeville and Swift were in agreement, as we shall presently see.

The new fear of lack of adequate population arose partly from the theory that people are the riches of a nation, partly from a change in actual conditions, and partly from a new and faulty science of statistics.³⁴ The chief factual elements which encouraged the belief that England was facing a shortage in population were three-fold. The plagues of the seventeenth century had decreased the population³⁵ at the same time that both expanding foreign trade and insistence on the necessity for exporting "artificial" or "wrought" goods increased the demand. So great was the shortage at one time that criminals in Wales were pardoned on condition that they work in mines.³⁶

But the student of Swift's *Modest Proposal* will be chiefly concerned with the third factor: the rise of the science of statistics and its application to problems of population, particularly in

³² Stangeland, *op. cit.*, 120, quoting Filangieri, *Science of Legislation* (London, 1792), 19. It is curious to what extent the dominant mercantilist point of view went. Late in the century, after Swift had done his work, Frederick the Great wrote Voltaire that he "regards men simply as a herd of deer in the park of a great noble, which has no other function than to people, and fill the enclosure." Quoted by Stangeland, *op. cit.*, 131.

³³ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (London, 1739), III, 280.

³⁴ The change in conditions and the rise of the science of statistics account, in a large measure, for the tenacity with which writers clung to the theory that people are the riches of a nation. So perhaps the second and third factors should be regarded as fundamental.

³⁵ Guy Chapman, *Culture and Survival* (London, 1940), 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50. Chapman observes that "the ceaseless complaints of economic pamphleteers in the early eighteenth century, that the poor are lazy, idle and dissolute, point rather to the inability than to the unwillingness of labour to respond to the offers of *capital*." *Ibid.*, 31.

Ireland. Wesley C. Mitchell has called attention to the unsatisfactory nature of statistical knowledge on population in the eighteenth century.³⁷ For example, during Adam Smith's lifetime, Dr. Richard Price was demonstrating that the population of England had declined since the Revolution of 1688, while Arthur Young was pointing out that it was rapidly rising.

Political Arithmetic, which has been called "the taproot of modern statistics," originated "in the scientific spirit fostered in England . . . by the Royal Society."³⁸ It may be said to date from the publication by John Graunt in 1662 of a small book entitled *Natural and Political Observations*. This early attempt to analyze population statistically has been characterized as crude and defective, but "informed by the spirit of modern science."³⁹ The name "Political Arithmetic" was given to the embryonic science by Sir William Petty, who is of particular interest to us not only because he increased the popularity of Political Arithmetic, but especially because he applied the new methodology to Ireland. In 1652 this Englishman was appointed physician general of the army in Ireland and was directed to make a survey of the forfeited estates of Irish landlords. Thus he became somewhat familiar with the Irish scene. In 1672 he published his *Political Anatomy of Ireland*, in which he made his first attempt to set up as an authority on statistics. In laying the foundation for a discussion of Petty's probable influence on Swift, it is important to observe that he was the first to apply the statistical method to Ireland. Observe also the callous excuse he gave for using Ireland as a guinea-pig. In his preface to *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* he wrote:

As Students in Medicine, practice their inquiries upon cheap and common Animals, and such whose actions they are best acquainted with, and where there is the least confusion and perplexure of Parts; I have chosen Ireland as such a Political Animal, who is scarce Twenty years old.⁴⁰

Petty's writings, important though they were as forerunners

³⁷ Wesley C. Mitchell, unpublished lecture notes.

³⁸ Walter F. Willecox, "Statistics," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1937), VII, 357.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁴⁰ Petty, *Economic Writings*, Hull edition, I, 129.

of modern statistics, were nevertheless excessively faulty.⁴¹ Men like Petty were, as Davenant phrased it, "Beginners of an Art not yet Polish'd."⁴² One effect of the rise of political arithmetic was the intensifying of the tendency to regard human beings as commodities. Petty not only gave figures concerning the value of property, but even attempted to estimate the "value" of the population, as part of the aggregate national wealth.⁴³

We can now turn to another aspect of the theoretical background of the *Modest Proposal*. It is important to understand the distinction once made between the "able" and the "impotent" poor. The Elizabethan Poor Laws, enacted when Englishmen still felt a sense of responsibility toward the unfortunate, divided objects of public charity into three groups: the aged and impotent, children, and persons able to work but unemployed.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the mercantilists, who had first proclaimed that people are the riches of a nation, later qualified this maxim by asserting that only the portion of the population which was usefully employed was the national wealth.⁴⁵ Hence during the Age of Mercantilism writers tended to think of the aged, very young children and other unemployable persons as "the impotent poor," and to classify those capable of performing useful labor, whether children or adults, as "the able poor." Meanwhile the prevailing English attitude toward charity had undergone a profound change. In

⁴¹ Hull says that they were based on "a few scattering bills from Paris and Dublin, haphazard returns from various tax offices, a guess here or there," and that Petty himself realized the incompleteness of his data. *Ibid.*, I, lxvi.

⁴² Charles Davenant, *An Essay upon the Probable Methods of Making a People Gainers in the Ballance of Trade* (London, 1699), 3.

⁴³ Heckscher, *op. cit.*, II, 190.

⁴⁴ Although Ireland did not actually have a law providing directly for the poor until well into the nineteenth century, earlier statutes nevertheless make the distinction between "able" and "impotent" poor which we find in English and Scottish legislation. Sir George Nicholls, *A History of the Irish Poor Law* (London, 1856), 12 ff. A law passed in the early seventeenth century entitled "An Act for the Erecting of Houses of Correction, and for the Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds," etc., spoke, for instance, of palmists, bear wards, common players of interludes "and common labourers being able in body, using loytering, and refusing to work for such reasonable wages as is taxed and commonly given." *Ibid.*, 27 ff. The provisions of the Elizabethan Poor Law referred to are found in 43 *Eliz. C. 2*. See Marshall, *op. cit.*, 23.

⁴⁵ E. A. J. Johnson, *Predecessors of Adam Smith* (1937), 281.

the late seventeenth and in the eighteenth century, as Dorothy Marshall points out, the religious aspects of poor relief all but disappeared.⁴⁶ Moreover, throughout the eighteenth century the poor rates were going up, despite the great increase in national prosperity. This the writers on economic questions could not understand. Consequently, “a new bitterness superseded the old sense of responsibility towards the Poor”⁴⁷—a bitterness which will be familiar to readers of Defoe’s *Giving Alms No Charity*.

Grimly the tracts of the time harped on the distinction between the “able” and the “impotent” poor. Charles Davenant, whose pamphlets found a place on Swift’s shelves, referred to King’s division of all Englishmen into two principal classes, the 2,675,520 heads who increase the wealth of the kingdom and the 2,825,000 heads who decrease it. The sick and impotent, beggars and vagrants, Davenant says, “are nourish’d at the Cost of Others; and are a Yearly Burthen to the Publick.”⁴⁸ It would be difficult to find a more striking commentary on the prevailing attitude toward “the impotent poor” than Petty’s remark, after giving figures concerning losses from the plague, that he regretted that the plague unfortunately made no distinction between “the bees and the drones,” but destroyed “promiscuously.”

Although the *Modest Proposal* contains remarks about several categories of impotent poor, it deals chiefly with one category—children too young to work. It is therefore important that we note the provision in the Irish law passed during the reign of the first George, which classified unemployable children as impotent poor. The act declares that since there are everywhere numbers of helpless children who are forced to beg in order to live and who, unless some care is taken of their education, will become “*not only unprofitable but dangerous to their country*,”⁴⁹ therefore power is given to the ministers to bind out these children to tradesmen, provision being made to prevent cruel treatment.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Dorothy Marshall, *op. cit.*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁸ Davenant, *op. cit.*, 49–50.

⁴⁹ Dorothy Marshall remarks: “Despite the growth of the Charity School movement, charity to children in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant enabling them to earn their own living at the earliest possible moment, no matter how laborious their life might be.” *Op. cit.*, 24.

⁵⁰ Nicholls, *op. cit.*, 40, citing *2nd George 1st, C. 17*.

Finally, we must consider a special aspect of the mercantilist enthusiasm for projects. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as we have seen, the "lust for enterprise and adventure" caused an epidemic of what Dr. Johnson defined as "wild, unpracticable schemes" to break out in England. The enthusiasm of a commercially reckless era for enterprises chartered to enable ships to sail against the wind, to cure venereal diseases, to empty buildings euphemistically called "necessary houses," and to import jack-asses from Spain to improve the breed of British mules reached a climax with the bursting of the South Sea Bubble in 1720. But I am concerned here particularly with a species of projects having as their objects the solution of problems of population and labor, which Swift satirized in the *Modest Proposal* with even fiercer irony than he had employed earlier in tracts and poems aimed at commercial projects and in his attack on both scientific and commercial projects in the Lagado portions of *Gulliver*.

Despite the callous attitude of the period toward poverty, the age was unable to escape from problems which it brought about. Consequently, during Swift's lifetime, England and Ireland were flooded with literature dealing with theories about population, labor, unemployment and poor relief. Furniss observes that a major portion of this literature discussed projects for increasing England's population.⁵¹ One of the most astounding types of project born of this commercial, speculative age, so insistent on placing the economic welfare of the state ahead of that of the individual, involved the idea of running the poor through a joint-stock company. Indeed, not all of these schemes for a joint-stock company came from ruthless advocates of "business first." Sir Josiah Childs, one of the most humane of the writers roughly identified as "mercantilist," was among the first to advance such a scheme. The underlying plan behind most of these enterprises was to incorporate a company to manage all the poor, "impotent" and "able" alike, and to manage them for a profit.⁵² Thus did the

⁵¹ Furniss, *op. cit.*, 36. "The Labour of the Poor is the Treasure of the Rich, was a proverb freely quoted, but it was feared that the poor might cease to labour, and so destroy the trade upon which English prosperity was built." Dorothy Marshall, *op. cit.*, 34.

⁵² Dorothy Marshall, *op. cit.*, 43.

commercial pattern of the age fasten itself even upon schemes for solving problems of poverty. Thus did the poor, formerly regarded as fellow-countrymen, come to be regarded as “a distinctive species, a sect apart.”⁵³ For the most radical of such projects, however, perhaps the laurel goes to Sir William Petty. This political arithmetician, fanatically wedded to the notion that people are the riches of a nation, said that if the people of Scotland and Ireland could all be removed into England, the three nations would all become richer.⁵⁴

Few pamphlets relating to the poor laws are more interesting today than the anonymous *Letter to a Member of Parliament*, published in Dublin as a pamphlet in 1723. In executing these laws, says the pamphleteer, in language which awakens echoes in our own age, the justices should find work for the honest and industrious. He therefore suggests that the deserving among the unemployed be put to work improving grounds, keeping open the course of rivers, draining fens, discovering mines, and increasing manufacture.⁵⁵ He makes an additional suggestion which looks

⁵³ “Of all the many proposals made for the employment of the Poor, the idea of running them for a profit is one of the most interesting. It marks most definitely the fact that the Poor from being fellow-countrymen had become a distinctive species, a sect apart. That the Poor, because they were poor, should be collected in colleges or cities, the sole qualification for which was unemployment and poverty, casts an illuminating light on the mentality of the early eighteenth century.” *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁴ Petty, *Economic Writings*, Hull edition, I, 285 ff.; II, 563 ff. Despite his attempt to be jocular about his suggestion, one feels that Petty thought well of it. He writes: “And here I beg leave . . . to interpose a jocular, and perhaps ridiculous digression, and which I indeed desire Men to look upon, rather as a Dream or Revery, than a rational Proposition; the which is, that if all the *moveables* and People of *Ireland*, and of the Highlands of *Scotland*, were transported into the rest of *Great Britain*; that then the King and his Subjects, would thereby become more *Rich* and *Strong*, both *offensively* and *defensively*, than now they are.” *Ibid.*, I, 285. The emphasis is, of course, upon the good of the state, not the individual.

⁵⁵ “For I take much more pleasure in being their Advocate than their Accuser. They shall pave your Streets, drain your Bogs, make your Rivers Navigable, mend your Roads, build your Bridges, adorn your Churches, watch you while you Sleep, fight your Battles, and carry you on their Backs.” But, the writer adds, when they have done this, “let them not go Naked themselves; when they have ploughed our Land, let them not be like the muzzled Ox that may not taste the Corn, and when they have lost their Limbs, or shed their Blood in Defence of our Country, let us not leave their Widows and Children uncared for to die in ditches.” *A Letter To a Member of Parliament, Concerning the Employing and Providing for the Poor* (Dublin, 1723) [Seligman Collection], 14–5.

forward toward the day of labor unions and various types of benevolent and mutual aid societies for laborers. I am wondering, he says, if in great industrial towns where there are more poor than can be provided for by ordinary means, laborers "may not be cast into such Companies, and subjected to such Rules, as may make them maintain their own Poor." These proposals will strike liberals today as intelligent and good. At the same time, it must be remembered that to a man with Swift's deep suspicion of "projects" of all sorts, they must have appeared highly chimerical. Moreover, the fact that later in life Swift himself was active in the administration of institutions of charity and actually worked out a system by which he made small loans to needy laborers, does not preclude the notion that Swift was capable of satirizing such a scheme, for Swift was a complex character, capable of remarkable inconsistencies, as illustrated by the circumstance that he often villified the very people whom he did so much to defend against injustice and oppression. It is therefore appropriate that we consider other schemes similar to the Dublin proposal of 1723.

A somewhat similar plan was suggested by Sir William Fownes in 1725.⁵⁶ Sir William is concerned with the problems of idle children. Vividly he describes the contemporary scene: "strolling Women loaden with Children . . . most of which have either Husbands, or Fellows . . . sculking, idle, drunken. . . ." Meanwhile youth of both sexes loaf, sculking about gentlemen's stables and houses, "running often on pimping Errands from Taverns."⁵⁷

In 1729, the year when the *Modest Proposal* was being written, David Bindon, Irish economist, proposed a scheme for supplying the poor with money at a low rate of interest. Since the common people have nothing of value to pawn, Bindon points out, they are forced to borrow at usurious interest.⁵⁸ Every city in Ireland

⁵⁶ Sir William Fownes, *Methods Proposed for Regulating the Poor* (Dublin, 1725) [Seligman Collection].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9. Fownes' description of migratory labor in eighteenth century Ireland reminds one of John Steinbeck. Complaints have been made, he writes, of trouble caused by "marching Gangs of Women, Children and youth" who leave their cabins, gardens, cows, or goats for months "whilst they follow the Harvest-Labourers." *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁸ David Bindon, *A Scheme For Supplying Industrious Men with Money to carry on their Trades, and for better Providing for the Poor of Ireland*, 2nd edition (Dublin, 1729), 19.

should erect a "Lombard." Dublin, for example, could erect one with a fund of ten thousand pounds, to be lent on security of household goods, jewelry, and other chattel. These loans could be used to set poor people up in business.⁵⁹

I am, of course, suggesting that the *Modest Proposal* is, among other things, a burlesque on projects concerning the poor. Does the suggestion that the proposals just mentioned must be considered as background for Swift's tract seem somewhat far-fetched? If so, consider a rather special group of such proposals. Observe that most of the authors of these proposals (unlike Swift) regard as axiomatic the proposition that people are the riches of a nation; and, more important still, *observe the titles*. This group includes: *An Essay or Modest Proposal, of a Way to encrease the Number of People, and consequently the Strength of this Kingdom*,⁶⁰ probably written in 1693; the *Modest Proposal for the More Certain and yet more Easie Provision for the Poor*,⁶¹ written in 1696, in which a remedy for base money is sought and workhouses advocated; and a broadside entitled the *Humble Proposal of G. M. for Making England Flourishing & Happy*,⁶² which deals with poor rates and education for the children of the poor.

Several significant facts emerge from a brief consideration of these tracts on population and poverty. First, Swift's *Modest*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12–13. It is to be noted that the tract contains a considerable amount of statistical material.

⁶⁰ Kress Collection.

⁶¹ The full title is: *A Modest Proposal For the More Certain and yet more Easie Provision for the Poor. And Likewise for the better Suppression of Thieves, Diminishers And Corruptors of the Coyn, and other Lewd Livers. Tending much to the Advancement of Trade, Especially in the most Profitable part of it. The Manufactures of the Kingdom* (London, 1695/6) (Seligman Collection). It advocates the establishment of two public houses in every county of England or "division of London," each unit to consist of two or three thousand families; and the provision that one house should be used as a hospital and workhouse, the other as a workhouse and prison. The writer anticipates the objection that the plan will be a needless burden on the public, "in loading it with the Charge of so many children." The answer to this objection is predicated on the assumption that people are the riches of a nation. "I think it is a fault not to encourage the increase of Lawful Children, especially when they are likely to be train'd up in all Frugality and Industry." *Ibid.*, 12. This training, he adds, will cause little or no expense, and yet will be "a mighty Advantage to the Public." *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶² [Kress Collection], 17.

Proposal was offered to a public accustomed to the sight of "humble petitions" and "modest proposals," displayed on the book-stalls of London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, dealing with economic problems, particularly with problems concerning population, labor, unemployment, and poverty.⁶³ Second, the tracts on population ordinarily hewed to the doctrinal line drawn by the advocates of increased numbers. Third, these tracts were characterized, more often than not, by emphasis on the economic good of the Leviathan-state and disregard for the individual. Fourth, and most important, it seems clear that Swift's *Modest Proposal For preventing the Children of POOR People From being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For making them Beneficial to the Publick* was not merely a characteristic Swiftian bit of phraseology: it was obviously a burlesque on the titles of certain types of economic tracts.

Since Swift's title is so clearly charged with economic implications, we shall not be surprised to find, upon analysis, that the tract itself touches on contemporary economic problems in virtually every line. In it Swift discussed economic statism, the Navigation Acts, the mercantilist concept of the balance of trade, the maxim that people constitute the riches of the state, the rival theory that there is a danger of overpopulation, the Swiftian proposition that general economic laws do not necessarily apply to Ireland, the poor rates, projects concerning population, "political arithmetic," the tendency to regard children as commodities, and the impotent poor, particularly bastard children. The spotlight is thrown on the last four items.

It is possible to consider separately the various strands which were woven into the tapestry of the *Modest Proposal* and to follow, in a general way, the hand of the weaver as he deftly worked at the masterpiece.

⁶³ Other "humble petitions" and "modest proposals" include Thomas Thwaites' *A Proposal humbly dedicated to the King, Lords, & Commons of Great Britain; setting forth the manner how we may very profitably employ our now idle, changeable, young, weak, feeble, and aged poor* (London, 1725); and the *Proposal for maintaining of the poor, and discouraging of vagabonds, and vagrant and sturdy beggars* (Edinburgh, 1726). Observe, however, that "humble petitions" and "modest proposals" sometimes dealt with economic problems of other types. For example, *An Humble Proposal To the People of England, For the Encrease of their Trade* (London, 1729), ascribed to Defoe, contained a plea for the protection of the wool industry.

Consider first the general problem of population. In the fourth book of *Gulliver* Swift had revealed a passing interest in this problem. The wise horses were described as being anxious to avoid an increase in population. Each couple tried to limit its offspring to two. "This caution is necessary," Gulliver remarked, "to prevent the country from being overburthened with numbers."⁶⁴ Thus Swift enunciated his opposition to the prevailing tendency to call for increase in numbers; but he revealed, at this time, no passionate convictions on the subject. Beginning, however, in 1728, perhaps a few months before he began the *Modest Proposal*, he suddenly became intensely concerned with theories about population and related problems. In *An Answer to a Paper Called "A Memorial"* he declared that Ireland had more people than she needed under prevailing conditions; that it would be well if many emigrated, since "where the plough has no work, one family can do the business of fifty." It is error, he continued, to assume that people are the riches of a nation.⁶⁵ On May 17, 1729, he wrote to Chetwode about "the universal complaints and despair of all people."⁶⁶ Ball says that at about this time Swift was occupied by consideration of Irish poverty to the exclusion of almost every other subject.⁶⁷ In August Swift wrote Pope about the miseries of Ireland, saying that he had a mind, for once, to let him know the state of affairs there, "and my reason for being more moved than perhaps becomes a clergyman."⁶⁸ During 1729, too, Swift and Sheridan were discussing Irish conditions, including population and unemployment, in *The Intelligencer*. Hardly a tract written by Swift in 1729—and it was a year of tracts—failed to deal with these same subjects.

Swift's new concern with economic theory was a result, in part, of the pamphlet warfare between Swift and John Browne, and this exchange induced Swift to study contemporary economic doctrines closely for the first time and to declare general economic laws suspect. *Maxims Controlled for Ireland*, his most ambitious formulation of this point of view, was probably written a few months before

⁶⁴ Case edition, 291.

⁶⁵ Swift, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, VII, 114.

⁶⁶ Swift, *Correspondence*, Ball edition, IV, 81.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, 81.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 88–9.

the *Modest Proposal* and contains, in one paragraph, the germ of several ideas which he was to develop in his famous satirical pamphlet. In this paragraph he considers one of the maxims of contemporary writers which he singles out as being particularly inapplicable to Ireland: the proposition that people constitute the riches of a nation. Swift points out that Ireland actually has many more people than she can support, since there isn't enough trade to supply anything like adequate employment; and that, as a consequence, only one child out of six is employed, the other five lying "a dead weight upon us, while half the population support themselves by begging and thievery." He then flies in the teeth of received opinion by suggesting that emigration would really be a boon. Then, as though adding an afterthought, and with a characteristic Swiftian twist, he makes the grim suggestion that since the poor suffer so much, he is really pleased when he hears of deaths among them.⁶⁹ Swift writes:

I confess myself to be touched with a very sensible pleasure, when I hear of a mortality in any country parish or village, where the wretches are forced to pay for a filthy cabin, and two ridges of potatoes, treble the worth; brought up to steal or beg, for want of work; to whom death would be the best thing to be wished for on account both of themselves and the public.⁷⁰

How did this grim, hyperbolic observation, the sort of remark thrown off so easily by Swift, become the barb with which the master of irony tipped his most lethal shaft? How did the grim remark become the macabre "project"? George Brandes has remarked that a creative artist does not choose a certain subject but that "a nerve in him is touched, vibrates, and reacts."⁷¹ What caused the vibration which led the artist Swift, toying with thoughts of the advantages of death to the poor of Ireland, to fasten on the notion of proposing that Irish children should be cooked and eaten? In a study dedicated to the proposition that too much attention has been paid to so-called "literary" sources,

⁶⁹ Leslie Stephen points out that in *Maxims Controlled* Swift remarks on the lamentable contradiction presented in Ireland to the maxim that the "people are the riches of a nation" and that the *Modest Proposal* is "the fullest comment on this melancholy reflection." *Swift* (London, 1903), 165.

⁷⁰ Swift, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, VII, 71.

⁷¹ George Brandes, *William Shakespeare* (New York, 1927), 433.

too little to contemporary tracts,⁷² I find myself, in this instance at least, resorting to a “literary” source. During the year 1729 Swift and Thomas Sheridan, his boon companion and loved confidant, were editing jointly a weekly periodical called *The Intelligencer*. The seventeenth number, written by Sheridan, dealt with the poverty of Ireland. The great intimacy between Swift and Sheridan and the circumstance that they did all of the work on the journal themselves⁷³ leave little doubt that Swift was familiar with an arresting passage in Number Seventeen, in which Sheridan suggests ironically, as writers like Browne had suggested seriously, that Ireland is really wealthy. As a final argument, Sheridan refers to the large number of beggars, since “it is a common Observation that Riches are the Parent of Idleness, Sloth, and Luxury,” which, in turn, produce beggary.⁷⁴ Then, to give his argument a final punch, he tells the story, related, he says, by the Elizabethan chronicler, Fynes Moryson, in his account of Tyrone’s Rebellion, of the widow of Newry who, having six small children and no food, shut the doors of her home and died from despair, after which her children were found eating her flesh.⁷⁵ Then Sheridan passes on to an account of the punishment meted out by Sir Arthur Chichester, then Governor of the North of Ireland, to *twelve women who made a practice of stealing children, whom they eat*. The passages from Moryson, which occur in an account of Tyrone’s

⁷² It would be possible to account for the “vibration” by resorting here, as I have in general elsewhere, to contemporary economic writings. In the second part of Arthur Dobbs’ *An Essay On the Trade and Improvement of Ireland* (Dublin, 1861), 443, the writer, referring to the treatment of children by the poor, wrote: “They exercise the greatest barbarities upon children, either their own or those they pick up, by blinding them or breaking and disjointing their limbs when they are young to make them objects of compassion.” But while Swift *might* have read this statement by Dobbs, which appeared in 1729, he was almost certainly familiar with the “literary” source to which I refer.

⁷³ Swift wrote to Pope on June 12, 1732: “Two or three of us had a fancy, three years ago, to write a weekly paper and call it an *Intelligencer* . . . ; the whole volume . . . was the work only of two, myself and Dr. Sheridan. If we could have got some ingenious young man to have been the manager, who should have published all that might be sent to him, it might have continued longer, for there were hints enough. But the printer here could not afford such a young man one farthing for his trouble, the sale being so small, and the price one half-penny.” [Emphasis supplied.] Swift, *Correspondence*, IV, 307.

⁷⁴ *The Intelligencer*, Reprinted in London (1729), 191.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

Rebellion, are sufficiently striking in the present context to warrant quotation:

Sir Arthur Chichester, Sir Richard Moryson, and the other Commanders of the Forces sent against *Brian mac Art* aforesaid, . . . saw a most horrible Spectacle of three Children (whereof the eldest was not above ten Years old,) all eating and gnawing with their Teeth the Entrails of their dead Mother, upon whose Flesh they had fed 20 Days past, and having eaten all from the Feet upward to the bare Bones, roasting it continually by a slow Fire, were now come to the eating of her said Entrails in like sort roasted, yet not divided from the Body, being as yet Raw.⁷⁶

The famine was so great, continues this Elizabethan Daumier, that:

the common Sort of the Rebels were driven to unspeakable Extremities (beyond the Record of most Histories that ever I did read in that kind). . . . Capt. Trevor and many honest Gentlemen lying in the Newry can witness, that some old Women of those Parts, used to make a Fire in the Fields, and divers little Children driving out the Cattle in the cold Mornings, and coming thither to warm them, were by them surprized, killed, and eaten, which at last was discovered by a great Girl breaking from them by Strength of her Body.⁷⁷

Some soldiers, Moryson says, "found the Children's Skulls and Bones, and apprehended the old women."⁷⁸

Although I find no direct, testimonial proof that Swift read either Moryson or the reference in *The Intelligencer* to Moryson, nevertheless the probability that he read Number Seventeen and that he either turned to Moryson or discussed the relevant passage with Sheridan, and that he did so about the time he was writing the *Modest Proposal*, is overwhelming. If we are willing to believe that Sheridan and Swift, linked by the closest ties of friendship and editorial association, both hit, *about the same time*—and independently—upon the notion of emphasizing the plight of Ireland by using startling material dealing with the eating of children, then we must recognize here the existence of one of the most remarkable coincidences in the history of literature. It seems reasonably safe to assert that Swift got the basic idea of *A Modest Proposal* from Fynes Moryson.

⁷⁶ Fynes Moryson, *History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1735), II, 282-3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 283.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 283.

But Swift needed a literary frame. This he found in contemporary tracts dealing with economic projects, particularly those concerned with population and unemployment. Swift's opposition to this commercial rash, springing from his early hatred for traders and from his contempt for visionary schemes, we have already examined. In truth, the entire chapter on "projects" may be regarded as background for this aspect of the *Modest Proposal*. More than one tract written in 1729 proclaimed his rising impatience with "speculative people," "schemes," and "abortive projects." In the *Answer to Several Letters From Unknown Persons* he asserts that "there is hardly a scheme proposed" for improving Irish trade which does not show stupidity and ignorance.⁷⁹ In the *Letter Concerning the Weavers* he says: "I am weary of so many abortive projects for the advancement of trade, of so many crude proposals in letters sent me . . . of so many contradictory speculations."⁸⁰ In *A Letter to The Archbishop of Dublin Concerning the Weavers* he asserts that although "speculative people" may "busy their brains as much as they please," the only way to save Ireland is to renounce luxury.⁸¹

Many signs indicate that Swift deliberately and consciously employed as his prototype the contemporary tract plugging a favorite "project" and, at the same time, wrote a burlesque on the breed of projectors,⁸² much as Pope used the epic scheme as a device for satirizing contemporary society even as he wrote a burlesque on the epic. The very title of Swift's tract, as I have already indicated, was lifted from similar language in titles of tracts advancing "projects" for the solution of problems of popu-

⁷⁹ Swift, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, VII, 123-4. Swift continues, in the same sentence: ". . . I laught with contempt at those weak wise heads, who proceed upon general maxims, or advise us to follow the example of Holland and England. These empirics talk by rote, without understanding the constitution of the kingdom."

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, 138.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, VII, 136. Temple Scott's note is relevant. He writes: "In this letter, so characteristic of Swift's attitude towards the condition of Ireland, he aims at a *practical and immediate relief*. The causes for this condition discussed so ably by Molesworth, Prior and Dobbs in their various treatises are *too academic* for him. His 'Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture' well illustrates the kind of practical reform Swift insisted on." [The emphasis is supplied.]

⁸² Mason, *op. cit.*, 375, wrote: "The cold, phlegmatic style of a political projector, who waves the consideration of all the finer feelings of humanity, or makes them subservient, as matters of slight moment, to the general advantages proposed in his plan of financial improvement, is admirably well satirized."

lation. Somewhere in his biography, Boswell said to Johnson: "So, sir, you laugh at schemes of political improvement?" To this Johnson replied: "Why, sir, most schemes of political improvement are very laughable things." Something of the same spirit entered into *A Modest Proposal*.

Swift's technique in the *Modest Proposal*, like his choice of a title and of a model, can be traced to the influence of contemporary economic literature. It is the technique of the political arithmetician and, since the use of this technique contributes most to the special flavor of the tract, it should be carefully examined. In this connection, I turn to the stimulating but misleading comments by Edmund Wilson on Swift's statistical style. He is comparing Swift's use of figures with Marx's. Karl Marx, he says, is the greatest ironist since Swift: the logic of the "modest proposal" can be compared with Marx's defense of crime in which he argues that crime takes care of the superfluous population. Moreover, Wilson says, Marx shares with Swift the ability "to get a certain poetry out of money." He finds in Swift "*a kind of intellectual appetite for computations and accounts and a feeling sensuous for currency.*" In *The Drapier's Letters*, for example, "we seem to see the coins, hear them, finger them." Swift describes "the base discs, with their flat little ring, by which the English are trying to perform the sleight-of-hand trick of cheating the Irish." Alas, however, comments Mr. Wilson, "with Marx the idea of money leads to something more philosophic."⁸³ No one has sensed more keenly or described more vividly the importance of the statistical element in Swift's prose.⁸⁴ Yet we must not permit Wilson's

⁸³ Edmund Wilson, "Karl Marx: Poet of Commodities," *New Republic*, CII 46-7.

⁸⁴ One of the best comments along this line comes from the introductory note to the *Modest Proposal* in *Eighteenth Century Prose*, edited by L. J. Bredvold, H. K. Root, and George Sherburn (New York, 1935), 159. The authors speak of a "period when essays on trade or on 'political arithmetic' were beginning the modern science of political economy. With a somewhat ominous simile Swift seems to be saying, 'You love to figure populations, needs, and productivity with dispassionate science as if men and women were nothing but so many cattle . . . and yet you call me a misanthrope. Perhaps you are right: the proper way to consider these wretches who are reduced to the state of brutes may be as mere animals. But let me show you what you sound like!' His modest proposer putters about with his estimates and figures, while between the lines Swift reads us a tremendous lesson on the necessity of Christian charity as a supplement to 'political arithmetic.'"

brilliant critical virtuosity to give us the wrong slant on Swift's attitude toward "computations." In *A Modest Proposal*, for instance, he is no more enamoured of statistics than he is enamoured of the idea of eating baked Irish babies. Swift writes about "computations" not in the spirit of poetry but with a sense of irony. He had presumably read Graunt, Petty, Childs, Davenant, and Browne.⁸⁵ His scorn for their statistics was natural, like his scorn for projects. The same impulses which led to the satire on science in *Gulliver*, resulted in a hearty dislike for one of science's youngest offspring, the infant school of political arithmeticians. In the second book of *Gulliver's Travels*, written before he had set pen to paper on either the *Drapier* or the *Modest Proposal*, Swift describes the King of the Brobdingnagians, here apparently the voice of Swift, as laughing at Gulliver's "odd kind of arithmetic (as he was pleased to call it) in reckoning the numbers of our people by a computation drawn from the several sects among us in religion and politics."⁸⁶ A little later Swift puts into the *Drapier's* mouth these words:

The highest Points of Interest and Liberty have been often sacrificed to the Avarice and Ambition of particular Persons, Upon the very Principles and *Arithmetick* that I have supposed.⁸⁷

It is natural that Swift's interest in Political Arithmetic, hitherto slight and spasmodic, should become intensified about 1729 when he suddenly became greatly concerned with economic theory. The controversy with John Browne did much to bring about such an intensification because Browne hurled at Swift a mass of computations designed to convince him that economic conditions in Ireland were improving. In *An Appeal to the Reverend Dean Swift*, after reminding Swift that people were the riches of a nation, Browne expressed surprise that Swift should "disguise our Number of Inhabitants" and offered him data concerning Irish population. The following characteristic excerpt from this tract is the sort of thing which probably led not only to the attack in *Maxims Controlled for Ireland* against the proposition that people are the

⁸⁵ See Harold Williams, *Dean Swift's Library, passim*, on Graunt, Childs, Davenant; *Works*, Temple Scott edition, IX, 280–81, on Petty.

⁸⁶ Case edition, 133.

⁸⁷ *Drapier's Letters*, David edition, 147.

riches of a nation, but also to a heightened contempt for the embryonic science of statistics. Browne supports his argument about improvement in the condition of Ireland by pointing out that there are 374,286 homes paying quit-rent, besides colleges and hospitals, which, he says:

at an Allowance of six Souls to a House, may be equivalent in this Calculation to 42,381 Houses, and that makes the Number of Houses in all 416,667; to which if we allow a Medium of 6 Souls to the House, our Inhabitants must be about 2,500,000; and considering the prolifick Constitutions of our Country Folk, you will agree with me that six to a House is not an extravagant Allowance.⁸⁸

Now set beside a typical statistical passage from Petty an equally characteristic burlesque of political arithmetic from *A Modest Proposal*. The passage by Petty is taken from a chapter in *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* entitled, mark you, "Of the Value of the People." Petty writes:

Now if the annual proceed of the stock,⁸⁹ or wealth of the nation, yields but 15 millions, and the expense be 40, then the labour of the people must furnish the other 25, which may be done, if but half of them, viz. 3 millions, earned but 8 £.6s.8d. *per ann.*, which is done at 7d. *per diem*, abating the 52 Sundays, and half as many other days for accidents.⁹⁰

Now listen to *A Modest Proposal*:

The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couples whose wives are breeders, from which number I subtract thirty thousand couples, who are able to maintain their own children, . . . here will remain an hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand for those women who miscarry or whose children die by accident, or disease within the year. There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born: The question therefore is, how this number shall be reared, and provided for.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Sir John Browne, "An Appeal to the Rev. Dean Swift," from *A Collection of Tracts Concerning the Present State of Ireland* (London, 1729), 131.

⁸⁹ Swift reveals in *A Modest Proposal* and elsewhere familiarity with the jargon employed by the early economists in speaking of "the stock" or the "wealth" of a nation.

⁹⁰ Petty, *Economic Writings*, Hull edition, I, 132.

⁹¹ Swift, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, VII, 208–9.

Two points should be made about this passage from *A Modest Proposal*. In the first place, it springs from a spirit of bitter mockery, not from the delight in calculations for their own sake which Mr. Edmund Wilson feels that Swift so often displays. Moreover, in satirizing the statistical approach to human problems, Swift has concentrated his fire here, as at many other points in the *Modest Proposal*, on figures dealing with human breeding.⁹² Obviously certain features of political arithmetic offered better material for artistic treatment than others. No feature was more vulnerable to ironic attack than statistical references to breeders. Consider two such references. John Graunt, whose works were represented on Swift's shelves, in explaining why christenings exceeded burials in the country, but not in London, asserted that "if there be sixty breeders in London, there are more than sixty in the country."⁹³ Arthur Dobbs, an Irish economist, discussing methods of computing the population of Ireland, and writing in the year 1728, said:

Thus, for instance, suppose a million of inhabitants in Ireland in 1691, when the war ended . . . ; we may reasonably suppose 500,000 of these females, the war having destroyed fewer of these than of the other sex; 240,000 of these above 14 and under 46, of an age capable to bear children. Suppose 40,000 of these barren, there would then have been 200,000 breeding women in the kingdom, each of these might have a child once in two years, so the births each year might be 100,000;. . . By this computation the nation might double in sixteen years. . . .⁹⁴

In his satirical statistical discussions of human breeding Swift delivers some of his most devastating strokes against contemporary attitudes toward labor and poverty. True, he says, a child "just dropped from its dam" may be supported by its mother's milk, plus a bit of additional food not costing over two shillings, for a year."⁹⁵ Again, he asserts: "I calculate there may be about

⁹² Bredvold, Root, and Sherburn, *op. cit.*, 160, say: "Note how throughout the essay Swift, in order to hold a mirror up to the brutal attitude of men towards fellow men in distress, speaks of human offspring in terms of so many cattle."

⁹³ John Graunt, *Natural and Political Observations Upon the Bills of Mortality* (Oxford, 1665), 61-2.

⁹⁴ Arthur Dobbs, "An Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland," in *A Collection of Tracts and Treatises . . . of Ireland* (Dublin, 1861), II, 414-15.

⁹⁵ Swift, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, VII, 208.

two hundred thousand couples whose wives are breeders.’⁹⁶ Moreover, he proposes that “of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed.”⁹⁷ Indeed, references to breeders and to Swift’s grim proposal for solving the problem of excessive breeding constitute the chief *leit-motif* of the *Modest Proposal* and supply the suggestion for the ultimate irony of the concluding sentence of the tract in which Swift declares that he has no personal interest in the proposal.⁹⁸ “I have,” he protests, “no children by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and my wife past child-bearing.”⁹⁹ The theme of human breeders is thus pursued throughout the *Modest Proposal*, even to the last lancing stroke.

Another point should be made about the influence of political arithmetic on the *Modest Proposal*. The early statisticians supplied Swift with a technique superbly adapted to his genius. I have in mind not only Swift’s tendency to build up a mass of detail and overwhelm the reader with its cumulative effect, but also, and more particularly, his habitual use of what has been called “the surprise attack.” Mr. F. R. Leavis,¹⁰⁰ in a most perceptive analysis of Swift’s style, says that the most important thing in Swift—the “disturbing characteristic of his genius”—is his peculiar emotional intensity,¹⁰¹ which exhibits itself constantly “in negation and rejection.” Indeed, Swift’s is the “most remarkable expression of negative feeling and attitudes that literature can offer.” He

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, VII, 208.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, VII, 209.

⁹⁸ There are, as this last instance indicates, other references to the “breeder” motif besides those in which he satirizes political arithmetic. He pretends, for instance, to be troubled by the suggestion of an American friend that the flesh of young maidens is preferable to that of boys, his anxiety arising from the realization that girls “soon would become breeders themselves.” *Ibid.*, VII, 211. One of the advantages of the proposal, he argues, would be the reduction in the number of the Papists who are “the principal breeders of the nation.” *Ibid.*, VII, 213. Another advantage would ensue from the circumstance that “the constant breeders” would be rid of the necessity for supporting their children. *Ibid.*, VII, 213.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, VII, 216.

¹⁰⁰ F. R. Leavis, “The Irony of Swift,” *Scrutiny*, II (1934), 364–79.

¹⁰¹ Mr. W. B. C. Watkins has developed this same theme, comparing Swift’s passion with that of the Elizabethan dramatists, in an essay which ranks among the most illuminating of all comments on Swift. “Absent Thee from Felicity,” in *Perilous Balance* (Princeton, 1939).

aims "to defeat habit," using the technique of surprise. This element of surprise results from the "dispassionate delivery of his intensities," from the "dissociation of emotional intensity from its usual accompaniments." In *A Modest Proposal*, Leavis suggests, "the matter-of-fact tone induces a feeling . . . of assent, while the burden . . . compels feelings appropriate to rejection." The contrast generates a tension—"a remarkable disturbing energy." Swift's prose creates the same effect of surprise and the accompanying atmosphere of tension which the metaphysical poets are so successful in attaining.

Leaning heavily on Mr. Leavis' interpretation and applying it particularly to one aspect of Swift's prose style, I should like to amplify my earlier remark that political arithmetic supplied Swift with a technique peculiarly appropriate to his genius. In the following characteristic passage, note how the matter-of-fact tone "induces a feeling of assent," while "the burden" generates "feelings appropriate to rejection":

Of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to sheep, black-cattle, or swine.¹⁰²

Again, Swift writes:

I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child . . . to be about two shillings *per annum*, rags included, and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child.¹⁰³

At another point Swift writes of "a round million of creatures *in human figure*," whose substance, pooled, "would leave them in debt two millions of pounds sterling." The phrase which I have emphasized (which strikes me as one of the most telling in the *Modest Proposal*) is obviously soaked in the spirit of political arithmetic.

Especially helpful in an analysis of the influence of political arithmetic on the style of the tract is Mr. Leavis' stimulating suggestion that Swift's technique bears a resemblance to that of the metaphysical poets. It was Dr. Johnson, I believe, who spoke of the metaphysical poets as "pursuing a thought to its last ramification." Observe how Swift pursues his modest proposal to its last statistical ramification. He coolly observes that a child will make

¹⁰² Swift, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, 209.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, VII, 210.

two dishes at an entertainment for friends; that when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will suffice; that, seasoned with a little pepper or salt, such a dish will be "very good boiled on the fourth day, *especially in winter*"; that he has reckoned "a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and in a solar year if tolerably nursed increaseth to 28 pounds"—on the average.¹⁰⁴ A little further in the tract, continuing to play with his macabre conceit, and returning to his burlesque of the application of the statistical method to human problems, he dispassionately calculates that if one thousand families in Dublin would be "constant customers" for the flesh of babies, "besides others who might have it at merry-meetings, particularly weddings and christenings," the city would consume annually about twenty thousand carcasses, and the rest of Ireland—"where probably they will be sold somewhat cheaper"—the remaining eighty thousand.¹⁰⁵

Political arithmetic, in short, supplied Swift with a subject for satire and, at the same time, with a technique which was highly appropriate to his method of writing. Professor Child remarks somewhere that Robin Hood is the creation of the ballad-muse. Similarly, may it not be said that *A Modest Proposal* is, in part, at least, the creation of whatever muse presides over the spirit of political arithmetic?

We have considered the *Modest Proposal* as burlesque project and as burlesque political arithmetic. It is, in the third place, an attack on the general tendency of the age to regard people as commodities. Indeed, this attitude is implicit in the attack on projects and statistics. It becomes explicit when Swift tells of the assurance given him by the merchants that a child under twelve "is no saleable commodity" and that even when they reach this age, they will not yield more than three pounds and a half-crown at most—not enough to defray their expenses, since "nutriment and rags" cost at least four times as much.¹⁰⁶ Again, consider this paragraph:

Infants' flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March, and a little before and after, for we are told by a grave author, an eminent French physician, that fish being a prolific diet, there are more

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, VII, 210.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, VII, 214.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, VII, 209.

children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent, than at any other season; therefore reckoning a year after Lent, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of Popish infants, is at least three to one in this kingdom, and therefore it will have one other collateral advantage by lessening the number of Papists among us.¹⁰⁷

The discussion of this third facet of Swift's attack on contemporary economic tendencies is an appropriate place in which to consider evidence that Swift, as he wrote the *Modest Proposal*, was turning over in his mind the theories of the political economists. Take the fundamental postulate of the mercantilists that the good of the individual must be subordinated to the economic welfare of the state. Awareness of this assumption is revealed by the ironic title. The proposal is designed "For preventing the Children of Poor People From being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, *And For making them Beneficial to the Publick.*" Again, he suggests ironically that an argument could be made against eating the flesh of girls, since "it would, I think with humble submission, *be a loss to the public*, because they would soon become breeders themselves."¹⁰⁸ Thus Swift on economic statism.

Consider a second point. Nothing is more characteristic of the economic doctrines of the day than reiteration of the fundamental bullionist concept of "the balance of trade." When mercantilists mention "the balance of trade," we can almost see their eyes gleam with a deep, religious light. Turn to our tract. Swift is considering the advantages of his proposal. He estimates that whereas the maintenance of a hundred thousand children two years old and over would cost at least ten shillings apiece annually, under his scheme "the nation's stock" will be augmented fifty thousand pounds a year, "and the money will circulate among ourselves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture."¹⁰⁹

Closely related to the concept of the balance of trade were the Navigation Acts. These statutes may be described as mercantilism in action. Swift had repeatedly attacked these laws before he wrote the *Modest Proposal*. In this tract, he continues the onslaught. Can one doubt that he had this legislation in mind when he argues that his proposal cannot possibly offend the English

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, VII, 210.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, VII, 211.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, VII, 213.

since "this kind of commodity"—the flesh of infants—"will not bear exportation, the flesh being of too tender a consistency to admit a long continuation in salt," although, he adds, "*perhaps I could name a country, which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it.*"¹¹⁰ Here the emphasis is Swift's, and here the Irish hatred of the Navigation Acts reaches supreme bitterness.

Finally, the *Modest Proposal* recognized and ridiculed the distinction made during the Age of Mercantilism between "the able" and "the impotent" poor. Some are concerned, Swift writes, about "that vast number of poor people, who are aged, diseased, or maimed." Swift asserts that he, however, is not worried, since they are daily dying and rotting, "by cold and famine, and filth and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected."¹¹¹ Swift likewise realized that the distinction between the "able" and the "impotent" poor sprang from the unwillingness of the age to spend money on charity, and from the fear of higher poor rates. My plan, he says, would cover not only children of professed beggars, but all infants of a certain age, whose parents, because of their poverty, "demand our charity."¹¹² Again, he says that the proposed plan would provide for children so that, "instead of being a charge upon their parents or the parish," they will contribute to the feeding of many thousands.¹¹³

An important corollary of the mercantilist distinction between the "able" and the "impotent" poor is the harsh attitude of the age toward beggars. Both the distinction and the harsh attitude spring from the somewhat inconsistent desire of the age to raise to a maximum the number of people employable industrially while reducing to a minimum those whose condition in life made them objects of charity and, hence, causes of increased poor rates. Most of the harsh social and economic philosophy of the day comes from those concerned with the industrial progress of the state. By contrast, the attitude of the landed Tory, especially the English landed Tory, was both liberal and humane. But the poor rates touched the pocket-nerves of these Tory proprietors. Moreover, the landed squire discovered that industrial laborers could pay rents, while beggars could not. Consequently the landlords some-

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, 216.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, VII, 212.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, VII, 207-8.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, VII, 208.

times joined the industrialists in denouncing beggars, whom they blamed for defaults in rents and increases in the poor rates. The landlords in Ireland were particularly inclined to be harsh in their outlook. Thus the author of *A Letter to a Member of Parliament*, writing in 1723, voicing the point of view of the landed classes, pointed out that the industrial laborers pay the king his taxes and the landlord his rent, while the beggar, on the other hand, "eats your Meal, and drinks your Milk, and pays you nothing for it. Instead, he fills you with children."¹¹⁴

A Modest Proposal opens, we should remember, with a harrowing account of these numerous beggars. In the second paragraph we learn that Swift's proposal will be aimed at making their children "sound useful members of the commonwealth."¹¹⁵ Further on, the selfish landlords are cracked on the head when Swift mentions a variation on his scheme proposed by "a true lover of his country" who argued that, many gentlemen of Ireland having destroyed their deer, "the want of venison might be well supplied by the bodies of young lads and maidens."¹¹⁶ Again, when Swift comes to the enumeration of the advantages of his schemes, he suggests, with obvious reference to the anxiety of the landlords about their rents, that "the poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law may be made liable to distress," thus enabling landlords to collect their rents.¹¹⁷

Thus it is evident that Swift relied upon the literature of contemporary economic controversy for title, technique, and theme. Looked at it from the point of view of the student of political economy, *A Modest Proposal* is a tract dealing with current mercantilist theories which happened to cross the threshold dividing the turbulent early Georgian world of pamphlet controversy from *belles-lettres*. Looked at from the angle of the literary critic, it is a superb work of art which happens to be saturated with economic theory.

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¹¹⁴ Swift, *A Letter to a Member of Parliament*, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, VII, 7-8.

¹¹⁵ Swift, *Works*, Temple Scott edition, VII, 207.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, VII, 211.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, VII, 213.