

# *Combating the Iron-Gloved Angel*

## *Swift and Maritain v. Descartes*

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At first glance, Jonathan Swift and Jacques Maritain seem to have little in common. The former was a staunch Protestant, Anglo-Irish, and a satirist who flourished in the eighteenth century. The latter was decidedly Catholic, French, and a philosopher who flourished in the twentieth century. A second glance should remind us of some telling similarities—Swift’s satire has a philosophical vein, and Maritain observes that when “dealing with the great idols of the day, . . . it is one’s duty toward what is highest in the world to use the knife.”<sup>1</sup> A third glance, or perhaps extended look, reveals a deep point of kinship: each was a lifelong antagonist of René Descartes. Swift attacked Descartes in *A Tale of the Tub* (the earliest important work of his youth), in the crowning work of his maturity, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and in *A Modest Proposal*, his last important work.<sup>2</sup> Maritain caused something of a scandal by attacking Cartesianism in *Three Reformers*, at the beginning of his career; he sustained the attack in the mature essays of *The Dream of Descartes*; and it has a decisive if muted presence in his other writings including his final major work, *The Peasant of the Garonne*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the resemblance in their

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Tale of a Tub*, in *A Tale of a Tub, with other Early Works: 1696*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957); *Gulliver’s Travels, 1726*, ed. Herbert Davis, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959); *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public*, in *Gulliver’s Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.; The Riverside Press, 1960), pp. 439-46.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955); *The Dream of Descartes, together with Some Other Essays*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944); on the responses to *Three Reformers*, see Richard Farfara, “Angelism and Culture,” in *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*, ed. Deal Hudson and Matthew Mancini (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), p. 175n10.

attitudes toward Descartes goes very deep indeed, each of them making quite similar accusations against Cartesian thought: they associate it with irrationality and with self-absorption; they accuse it of distorting the functions of the intellect; of leading to violence and tyranny; of anxious pride.

### Madness

We begin with the most startling accusation—that Cartesian “rationalism” is irrational. At first blush, the charge sounds like the sort of ad hominem mounted by those who themselves have no rational arguments available. But Maritain grounds the charge of irrationality in Descartes’s own diary as reported by Adrien Baillet, Descartes’s seventeenth-century biographer. In this account, Descartes himself claims that the great inspiration for the line of thought that occurred to him while famously isolated in the stove-heated room during a snowstorm was a series of dreams. His diary for 10 November 1619 records, according to Maritain, that “he was filled with Enthusiasm, he discovered the foundations of the Admirable Science, and at the same time his vocation was revealed to him in a dream.” Actually, he records a series of three dreams, notable for violent winds, loud bursts of noise, sparks, and oracular advice.<sup>4</sup>

Descartes thought the oracular dream to be a revelation about the future. He interpreted it (in Baillet’s words) to mean that the Spirit of Truth wanted “to open for him . . . the treasure of all the sciences.” Descartes reported that he had a forecast of these dreams from the “genius” (spirit) that had been intensified in him, the “enthusiasm which had been burning in him for the past several days.” The next day Descartes vowed to make a pilgrimage to Loretto, a shrine of the Virgin Mary—a vow he is said to have fulfilled five years later. Maritain observes with quiet irony that to the next few generations of Cartesians, the founding of modern rationalism upon the “inspiration” and “enthusiasm” of a series of dreams was an embarrassment, as was Descartes’s religious pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup>

Two centuries earlier, Swift anticipated Maritain’s accusations, satirizing Cartesian irrationality in language and imagery similar to those in Descartes’s dreams: *inspiration, enthusiasm, wind and spirit, violence, burning within*.<sup>6</sup> For example, in Section 9 of the *Tale of a Tub* (A Digression on

<sup>4</sup> Adrien Baillet, *Vie de monsieur des Cartes* (1691), passages summarized and quoted by Maritain in *Dream of Descartes*, pp.14-15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>6</sup> I know of no direct evidence that Swift read Adrien Baillet’s biography of Descartes, though it was published in French in 1691, five years before the composition and nine years before the publication of *Tale of a Tub*, and in an English translation, which I have not seen, in 1693: *The Life of Monsieur Des Cartes* (London, 1693).

. . . Madness), a Modern Hack, the ostensible author, makes a bizarre argument against denigrating Jack's "sect," the Presbyterians. Simply because it was founded by a person such as Jack (John Calvin or John Knox), "whose Intellectuals were overturned, and his Brain shaken out of its natural position, which we commonly suppose to be a distemper, and call by the name of *Madness* or *Phrenzy*" is no basis for disdain, says the Hack.<sup>7</sup> After all, he argues, the initiators of great novelties have generally been mad for one reason or another: he goes on to instance founders of new empires, new systems in philosophy, and new religions. His discussion of novelties in philosophy is calculated to bring Descartes to mind: along with Epicurus, Diogenes, and others, Descartes is one who advances "*new* Systems with such an eager Zeal, in things agreed on all hands impossible to be known." Such men are locked up in madhouses in our time—"mistaken" to be crazy by all except their followers, for the innovators

generally proceeded...by a *Method* very different from the vulgar Dictates of *unrefined* Reason.... For what Man in the Natural State, or Course of Thinking, did ever conceive it in his Power to reduce the Notions of all Mankind, exactly to the same *Length, and Breadth, and Heighth* of his own? Yet this is the first humble and civil Design of all *Innovators* in the Empire of Reason.<sup>8</sup>

This talk of *method* that reduces all learning to novelties issuing from the geometry of the lone, mad philosopher's mind is almost explicitly Cartesian.<sup>9</sup>

Such remarks allusively accusing Descartes of irrationality are not the limit of Swift's attack on him in *Tale of a Tub*. In Section 8, the Hack discusses the Aeolists—all those of whatever discipline or task who rely on inspiration, including preachers and philosophers—in details and language reminiscent of Descartes. As in Descartes's principle that all learning can be had by starting from intuition and his method, the Aeolists believe that all arts and sciences are refinements upon a grain of wind, "enlarged by certain *Methods* in Education," which should be "freely communicated to mankind." In images reminiscent of one of Descartes's dreams, the Aeolists conclude that "Learning is nothing but Wind"; their learning is communicated "by Eructation," which, when the "Winds and Vapors" issue forth, "distorted the Mouth, bloated the Cheeks, and gave the Eyes a terrible kind of *Relievo*."<sup>10</sup> (Unlike the one in Descartes's dream, this "wind" is internal, not external.)

<sup>7</sup> *Tale of a Tub*, sect. 9, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, sect. 9, pp. 104-05; some emphases added.

<sup>9</sup> Michael R. G. Spiller, "The Idol of the Stove: the background to Swift's Criticism of Descartes," *Review of English Studies*, 25 (1974), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Tale of a Tub*, sect. 8, pp. 96-97.

Other passages accusing Descartes of irrationality occur, as we shall see, in *Gulliver's Travels*, Part III, and in *A Modest Proposal*.

### Self-Absorption

These accusations that Cartesianism is rooted in irrationality are linked in the minds of Swift and Maritain to their second line of attack, which is, as might be expected, upon the famous Cartesian turn to the self as the source of authority, the turn that is at the heart of much modern thought. Both accusers point out that Descartes's turn causes a neglect of nature, of external reality. Both accusers appear to have in mind the famous story of Descartes's discovery of the truth within himself, a discovery made at night, during a snowstorm, in a warm room—alone.<sup>11</sup>

In Part III of *Gulliver's Travels*, self-absorption is a hallmark of the governing class on the flying island of Laputa, who are, as Gulliver says, quite “singular in their Shapes, Habits, and Countenances. Their Heads were all reclined either to the Right or the Left; one of their Eyes turned inward, and the other directly up to the Zenith.” These folks are “so taken up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the Discourses of others, without being roused by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and Hearing....” The Laputans's upward-turned eye signifies that they look to the stars and planets, imitating Galileo and Descartes in their astronomy; their inward-looking eye signifies that, after the manner of Descartes, they look inward for the truth.<sup>12</sup> There they find triangles and other geometric figures, which they impose upon their food. What they cannot see, unless aroused by their flappers (who bat them on the eyes and ears with balloons made of pigs's bladders), are the plain things in front of them: each Laputan nobleman is “in manifest Danger of falling down every Precipice, and bouncing his Head against every Post.” Most importantly, Laputan nobles do not easily register the presence of other people: the King of Laputa is so absorbed in a mathematical problem that he does not see Gulliver standing before him for an hour or more; one noble Laputan wife would rather be

<sup>11</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vol. 1, p. 116

<sup>12</sup> For the influence of Galileo upon Descartes, see “Idol of the Stove,” pp. 22-23, and Peter Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare: An Introduction to Transcendental Sophistry* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 29-30. Redpath's book, which came to hand after I had completed most of this essay, outlines in more extensive detail than I many of the same points about Descartes.

beaten daily by the footman with whom she runs off than stay with her husband, who scarcely knows she is there.<sup>13</sup>

Maritain's accusation turns on the same axis as Swift's: Descartes ignores external reality to seek the truth within the self. In striking concert with the quasi-religious themes that Swift associates with Cartesianism in *Tale of a Tub*, Maritain points out that, in order to proceed with philosophic inquiry, Descartes uses the strategies of mental prayer: he "closes his eyes," "stops up his ears," "shuts off all his senses," "even effaces all images of corporal things from his thought." Descartes's practice is the opposite of one who seeks to apprehend being through the senses first and then to grasp it by intellectually processing the evidence presented by them:

Descartes, making use of the artificial and violent procedure of voluntary doubt, introductory to the revelation of the *Cogito*, has the pretension, in a flight of pure intellect, of rising to the plane of the intellect without passing through the gate of the senses, the way fixed for us by nature.<sup>14</sup>

One consequence of discounting the evidence of the senses is to seal off "thought as thought" in an "impenetrable world, shut in and fixed upon itself." The knower can be sure that the external world has any correspondence to the world of thought only because God guarantees the relationship. "This turning toward the inner self and the mind...fixes this gaze upon the intellect itself and it denies to that perception we have of the world through our senses any validity in knowledge."<sup>15</sup> The resemblance to Swift's Laputans is remarkable.

### **Misunderstanding How the Intellect Works**

The turn to the self is, according to both Maritain and Swift, a dimension of Descartes's confusion about how the intellect works. The set of issues bound up with this question comes readily into view if we follow Maritain's exposition of the differences between the pre-modern and the Cartesian understanding of man, of how learning occurs, and of intellectual power.

According to the traditional view, man is a creature whose soul, integral to his being, is the form of his body; because of the integration of body with an intellectual soul, man is, on the scale of creatures, "the transitional form between the corporeal world and the spiritual world."<sup>16</sup> Descartes, as is widely

<sup>13</sup> *Gulliver's Travels*, pt. III, chap. 2, pp. 127-28, 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>16</sup> *Three Reformers*, p. 55.

acknowledged, views man as a duality, his soul inhabiting his body, using it as a tool, “an angel inhabiting a machine and directing it by means of the pineal gland.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the tradition looks upon man as one creature in a complex of beings, diverse in kind, some above and some below him on a hierarchical scale. Descartes looks upon man as a spiritual creature inhabiting (not informing) a body, which in turn inhabits a physical domain characterized by extension only.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the tradition looks upon human learning as an activity in which, humbling itself before the external, the mind begins with the evidence of the senses, then gradually comes to know the world through experience, abstraction, and discursive reasoning—activities best carried out in a community of learners, both predecessors and contemporaries—who can correct and encourage one another.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Descartes looks upon human learning as intuitive and mathematical, the learner gazing into his own “autonomous and self-sufficing” mind, which is only tenuously connected to the body and not reliably informed by its senses. Gazing into his mind, Descartes finds “the pure type...of those innate and self-evident ideas” that he believes to be the seeds of science. Then, working alone, he combines and recombines these ideas in different patterns, a kind of addition and subtraction, a process Maritain terms “those series of coupled evidences to which he reduces reasoning.” This mathematical process substitutes for discursive thought, for the syllogism.<sup>20</sup> Maritain characterizes this view of the human intellect as itself an intellectual sin, the “sin of *angelism*.”<sup>21</sup>

In Maritain’s judgment, this view of the relationship among human nature, nature, and the mind has, contrary to Cartesian expectations, the effect of *reducing* the power of the intellect in three ways. First, instead of a diversity of sciences required by the interplay of the intellect with a diversity of creatures and by the intellect’s work upon the variety of evidence acquired through the senses, Cartesian science, says Maritain, “finds *in itself* a plurality of ideas, ready made, irreducible, irresolvable, each clear by itself, each the object of primary intuition, intelligible elements to which everything that knowledge has to do with must be reduced.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, as Maritain observes

<sup>17</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, p. 179; see *Three Reformers*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>18</sup> *Three Reformers*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>19</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, pp. 48-49; *Three Reformers*, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, p. 52. For Descartes on intuition, see Rule Three in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: pp. 13-14; on mathematics as the most powerful mode of understanding, see his Rule Four in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: pp. 19-20; on the duality of human nature, see René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part Four, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> *Three Reformers*, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72; emphasis added.

rather fiercely, in the Cartesian view, “human science must be *one*, with the oneness of the understanding; there can be no specific diversity of sciences.”<sup>23</sup> The second way in which Descartes reduces the power of the intellect results from his insistence on clear and distinct ideas and his mathematization of thought, positions that have the effect of making him antipathetic to theology and metaphysics. This antipathy manifests itself in two ways: (1) he dismisses of all that is mysterious, including metaphysics and theology, from the claim to be worthy of attention, thereby reducing the range of what the mind can explore, cutting it off from important dimensions of Being; (2) Descartes imposes mathematics, “the law of an inferior discipline,” on metaphysics.<sup>24</sup> Yet another way in which Descartes reduces the power of the intellect, says Maritain, is to make “human reason and its ideological content the measure of what is,” with the result that reason “lose[s] its hold on reality,” for it cannot take its measure by anything outside itself.<sup>25</sup>

Jonathan Swift mocks the same characteristics of the Cartesian intellect—intuitionism and, as we shall see later, mathematization—by bringing into view the ease with which such an intellect comes to conclusions and the inability of such an intellect to come to terms with external reality. This mockery is a central theme in his portrayal of the Houyhnhnms, the talking horses in *Gulliver’s Travels* Part IV, whose “grand maxim is, to cultivate *Reason*, and to be wholly governed by it.”<sup>26</sup> But the Houyhnhnm concept of reason is neither Classical nor Thomistic, as this formulation might lead one to believe. Rather, Houyhnhnm reason has the core feature of Cartesian reason: intuition. As Gulliver reports, reason is not in the Houyhnhnms’s experience “a Point problematical as with us, where Men can argue with Plausibility on both Sides of a Question.” That is so because their reason does not assimilate evidence from the senses and then work syllogistically toward understanding; nor does it make errors that can be corrected by testing against the experience and logic of others. Instead, Houyhnhnms’s reason is intuitive, striking them “with immediate Conviction,”

<sup>23</sup> *Three Reformers*, p. 64; emphases in original. Cf. *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, Rules Three and Four, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: pp. 113-20.

<sup>24</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, p. 92; see pp. 72-79, 175. Descartes agrees that geometry and arithmetic provide at least an easy place to start: see Rule Four in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 15-20.

<sup>25</sup> *Three Reformers*, p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> *Gulliver’s Travels*, pt. IV, chap. 8: p. 267. The Houyhnhnms appear to fit the textbook definition of human beings: “rational animals.” For a review of the controversy over these creatures and over Swift’s view of human nature, see James L. Clifford, “Gulliver’s Fourth Voyage: ‘Hard’ and ‘Soft’ Schools of Interpretation,” in *Quick Springs of Sense: Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Larry S. Champion (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1974), pp. 33-47.

in part because they, unlike Europeans, are not troubled by passions. Dispassionate and relying on ready-made categories, the Houyhnhnms have difficulty grasping the concept of "*Opinion*, or how a Point could be disputable; because *Reason* taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain."<sup>27</sup> Learning is, as in Maritain's description, easy for the Houyhnhnms.

The Houyhnhnms, accordingly, have no philosophy, a lack that Swift might almost have designed into them to illustrate Maritain's point about Descartes's antipathy to metaphysics. Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master laughs when told of European disputes in natural philosophy. Why, he asks, should a rational creature be concerned about the conjectures of others? Moreover, the master adds in an appropriately Cartesian manner, even if true, such "Knowledge, if it were certain, could be of no Use."<sup>28</sup> A life of pure reason, life without controversy, appeals greatly to Gulliver, who strives mightily to become a Houyhnhnm, even to the point of imitating a horse's gait.

Gulliver himself, however, suffers the consequences of the Houyhnhnms's inability (the negative term is necessary) to think philosophically. The Houyhnhnms, unable to deal with the mystery of human nature, cannot puzzle out what he is. He looks like a Yahoo, one of the despicable creatures whose every physical feature is human but whose behavior is altogether governed by appetite. And he is, on his own testimony, a European, one of those creatures about whom Gulliver has told his master stories illustrating the worst features of human wickedness. The Europeans are clearly and distinctly Yahoos to the Houyhnhnm master's mind, for they exhibit behavior analogous to the anarchic behavior of the appetitive Yahoos. Consequently, the Master places both creatures in the same category: Yahoo. On the other hand, Gulliver has the power of speech, a modicum of rationality, courteous behavior, and cleanly habits. Confronted with a creature that does not meet any of their ready-made, either/or categories ("rational animal" or "Yahoo"), the Houyhnhnms are unable to assimilate information from the evidence before them (Gulliver's appearance and behavior). Nor can they deal with it logically in such a way as to develop a fresh definition for a creature new to their experience.

As a result of their puzzlement, they force Gulliver to leave their island, which he considers paradise.<sup>29</sup> He must return to the miseries of

<sup>27</sup> *Gulliver's Travels*, pt. IV, chap. 8: p. 267. Cf. Descartes' disparagement of philosophical opinions in Rule Three, in *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 13-14.

<sup>28</sup> *Gulliver's Travels*, pt. IV, chap. 8: p. 268. Descartes does insist that philosophy be useful: *Discourse on Method*, Part Six, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: pp. 142-43.

<sup>29</sup> Changes may be on hand for the Houyhnhnms, however. Although, as noted, the Houyhnhnm Master disparages "opinion," the Grand Assembly of the Houyhnhnms engages



life among Europeans, whom he considers Yahoos, because he has absorbed the categorical thinking of the Houyhnhnms. As in the Cartesian Science Maritain describes, Houyhnhnm reason is reduced in power; it cannot deal with a mystery, the mystery of human nature: better to eliminate it from experience.<sup>30</sup>

### Mathematics, Extension, and Violence

In the criticisms leveled by Swift and Maritain, the independence of the Cartesian mind from external reality is linked, through the doctrine of intuition, to Descartes's tendency to reduce the degrees of certitude to one—mathematical certitude. As presented by both Maritain and Swift, this adherence to mathematical certitude, combined with Descartes's conviction that external reality is mere extension, leads to another accusation against him: the violent consequences, both upon thought and upon external reality, to which Cartesianism gives rise.

In Maritain's view, such intellectual violence occurs because, "drunk with mathematics," the Cartesian mind performs "Cartesian analysis." That is, such a mind engages in "cutting up and leveling down," thereby ignoring and destroying "the originality and diversity of natures, and violently bring[ing] everything back to...simple principles."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Cartesianism views external nature (including the human body), reductively, as "perfectly clear to our human perception, being nothing but geometrical extension, perfectly subject to our spirit in cognition before being perfectly subject to in practice."<sup>32</sup>

As a result, Maritain finds, the Cartesian intellect seeks not to understand but to conquer nature, for, having received all its knowledge by infusion from God, it can have no other posture toward the external world. The good of the soul is thereby reduced from contemplation of the divine "to the domi-

in its first genuine debate over the question of what to do about Gulliver and about the Yahoos; they experience wonder and disagreement, both evidently for the first time. Moreover, the Houyhnhnm Master conceals the whole truth about the Grand Assembly's decision from Gulliver for a while, an omission in tension with the Houyhnhnms' supposed ignorance of the concept of lying (Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, pt. IV, chap. 9: pp. 271-73; chap. 10: pp. 279-80). Perhaps they are on their way toward a more complete rationality than they have exhibited heretofore.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. the first paragraph of Descartes' Rule Two in *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: pp. 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> *Three Reformers*, p. 73. See the extensive discussion of how external reality is to be approached: Rule Fourteen, in *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: pp. 56-65.

<sup>32</sup> *Three Reformers*, pp. 74-75.

nation of the physical universe.” The “Cartesian angel,” the intellect, wearing its own mechanical body, is, in Maritain’s evocative phrasing, “iron-gloved, and extends its sovereign action over the corporeal world by the innumerable arms of Machinery!”<sup>33</sup>

Cartesian science, then, is not concerned to grasp the substance and causes of the physical world, but to “spread over the physical world...an immense network of quantitative relations and of theories which save sensible appearances,” all in order to subject nature by hard work to our pleasure and safety. The Cartesian angel, the intellect, in collusion with the occultism of the Renaissance, is guilty, says Maritain, of “spiritual concupiscence,” a “mystical covetousness of the earth.”<sup>34</sup> The desire to possess and control the earth leads to tyranny over it.

Swift depicts the violent effects of Cartesian mathematization in his treatment of the Laputans in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part III. Their intellects—like one of their eyes, turned inward—contemplate geometric patterns and music. They impose these patterns upon external objects. They reshape food, for instance: at one dinner, they present Gulliver with “a Shoulder of Mutton, cut into an *Æquilateral Triangle*, a Piece of Beef into a *Rhomboides*, and a Pudding into a *Cycloid*. The second Course was two Ducks, trussed up into the Form of Fiddles.” Bread is cut “into Cones, Cylinders, Parallelograms.” When fitting Gulliver for a suit of clothes, the tailor takes his customer’s height with “a Quadrant, and then, with Rule and Compasses, described the Dimensions and Out-Lines of [his] whole body.” The clothes do not fit at all, but that does not matter, for, gazing inwardly upon mathematical forms, no one notices anyway.<sup>35</sup>

This habit of imposing their self-absorbed will upon the external world takes a tyrannical, indeed violent, turn in their dealings with the people who live below the flying island, which can move over a limited set of islands below. The Laputans support their kingdom by extorting taxes from the peoples who live below. If a city rebels or refuses to pay, the Laputans cause the island to hover over the landscape, cutting off the sun and rain, causing dearth and disease; and they sometimes throw down “great Stones.” Faced with the loss of their crops and with destruction, the earthbound folks usually submit or pay up. If they do not, the Laputan King lets “the Island drop directly upon their Heads, which makes a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-64.

<sup>34</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, pp. 101-02. For Descartes’s relationship with Rosicrucianism, see *ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>35</sup> *Gulliver’s Travels*, pt. III, chap. 2, pp. 161-62.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pt. III, chap. 3, p. 138.

The Cartesian soul, gazing only upon itself to find truth and value, resorts to tyrannical violence, crushing human communities when its will is opposed.

Swift presents the most telling illustration of the violence resulting from the mathematical Cartesian soul in *A Modest Proposal*. The putative author is Swift's most famous Projector, i.e., someone with a grand plan to rescue humanity from danger and pain. In this case, the Projector's proclaimed motivation is pity for the Irish. "[M]elancholy" at the sight of destitute children and mothers—beggars, many of them resorting to prostitution—he wishes to save the children from abortion and infanticide and the mothers from the shame of illegitimate pregnancy, "which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast."<sup>37</sup>

These pity-laden phrases drop from view, however, in the Projector's discussion of the elements of his scheme. In the same early paragraphs, the pitiable child and mother are recast into farm animals, "a child just dropped from its dam." The Projector seeks a "fair, cheap, and easy method" of making the children "sound and useful members of the commonwealth." He finds the "other projectors" to have been "grossly mistaken in the computation."<sup>38</sup> The Cartesian analytical method—which turns logic into a version of addition and subtraction,<sup>39</sup> which works, Maritain says, by ignoring the nature of the subject and by breaking it down into its parts—then emerges sharply into focus:

The *number* of souls in Ireland 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, although I apprehend there cannot be so many under the present distresses of the kingdom, but this being granted, there 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.<sup>40</sup>

I have emphasized the mathematical and dehumanizing diction in order to highlight Swift's implication that the supposedly compassionate Projector is a madman whose pity, working through mathematical analysis, treats the Irish poor as though they were animals—units of production and sale—on what we would now term an industrial farm. And what do we do with such animals? Why, eat them of course: "I have been assured by a very knowing

<sup>37</sup> *Modest Proposal*, in *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, pp. 440.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 439-40.

<sup>39</sup> Rule Eighteen, in *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 71-76.

<sup>40</sup> *Modest Proposal*, p. 440.

American of my acquaintance...that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout."<sup>41</sup> The Projector goes on in this vein, amply illustrating Swift's and Maritain's view that Cartesian Science, treating the external world as extension, issues in violence.

### **Pride, Progress, and Anxiety**

Such violence toward nature and toward their fellow human beings seems to arise from a fifth characteristic criticized by both Maritain and Swift. What would make one believe that reshaping natural objects according to formulas in one's head or that treating peasants and their children as farm animals is morally acceptable? The answer, from both Maritain and Swift, is Pride, the vice Maritain discerns at the center of Descartes's character: "The pride of human knowledge appears thus as the very substance, solid and resistant, of rationalist hopes. Pride, a dense pride without frivolity or distraction, as stable as virtue, as vast as geometric extension, bitter and restless as the ocean, takes possession of Descartes to such an extent that it would seem the universal form of his interior workings and the principle of all his suffering."<sup>42</sup> Both writers claim that Descartes's procedures put him, and those influenced by him, *above and outside* of nature, including the rest of the human race. As noted, Maritain calls this "flight of pure intellect" *angelism*, a term he uses throughout his writings to indicate Descartes's prideful attempt to make human thought independent of intercourse with men and things.<sup>43</sup>

The episode by the German stove is representative, according to Maritain, of Descartes's belief that the "first condition of an intellectual amongst men...is to flee them."<sup>44</sup> In the same vein, Descartes is a "savage ravager of the past," that is of his intellectual heritage. He disparages all learning prior to him—all science, all philosophy, all theology, all poetry—because he wants to be an independent mind in every sense of the word and because he does not perceive that intellectual progress is made by deepening and extending the understanding of previous generations through dialog with them: "he does not understand the essential function of time in bringing human cognition to

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441.

<sup>42</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> *Three Reformers*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

maturity.”<sup>45</sup> Outside of time, outside of the community of learning, Descartes, as we have seen, also places himself outside of nature. His understanding hangs “immediately upon God, *rising above* and measuring all material nature without receiving anything from it.”<sup>46</sup> His rationalist followers seem to agree with Descartes’s self-assessment, promoting the image of him as outside of time and space, a savior-hero, overthrowing the past. They “delight in picturing him as the breaker of fetters suddenly come down from heaven[,] to sunder the chains of dogma[,] and to set reason free; one who[,] confronting as a demigod an age still under the yoke of authority[,] derives all his strength from himself alone.”<sup>47</sup>

Similarly accusing them of pride, Swift too presents Descartes, and those influenced by him, as self-consciously and willfully above their fellow human beings and above or outside of nature. Rejoicing like the Laputans in being above his fellow creatures, the Spider in *The Battle of the Books* builds its geometric web, which, like Descartes, he spins out of himself, “in the highest Corner of a large Window.”<sup>48</sup> The Battle in the story breaks out because the Moderns want the Ancients to lower their peak on Mt. Parnassus so that the Moderns’s peak will be higher.

Along the same lines, in *The Tale of a Tub*, the Grubstreet Hack muses upon the need to be above the audience, “in a *superior Position of Place*” (emphasis in original). He reflects upon three traditional means—the pulpit, the ladder, and the stage-itinerant—associated respectively with Presbyterian preachers, orators (such as politicians or those condemned to hang), and mountebanks. Why must the speaker gain such a position of superiority? Because, the Hack speculates in full Cartesian (and Hobbist) mode, words are made of air and are therefore “Bodies of much Weight and Gravity.” It follows that they “must be delivered from a due Altitude,” or else they cannot be aimed well and will not fall hard enough upon the hearers. In order to assure that listeners will receive these weighty words, “Nature...hath instructed the Hearers to stand with their Mouths open, and erected parallel to the Horizon, so as they may be intersected by a perpendicular Line from the Zenith to the Center of the Earth.” If “the Audience be well Compact,” ev-

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Swift, “A Full and True Account of the Battle Fought Last Friday between the Ancient and Modern Books in St. James’s Library, attached to The Tale of a Tub,” in *A Tale of a Tub and Other Early Works, 1696-1707*, pp. 147, 142-43. The episode of the Spider and the Bee in *Battle of the Books* is an almost perfect allegory of the contrast between Cartesianism and traditional thought.

everyone will catch a share of something in his open mouth.<sup>49</sup> Given the Hack's talk about eructation (noted earlier), we can have little doubt as to what these people are ingesting.

The sort of pride spoken of to this point is self-regarding. Governed by an inflated vision of his own worth, the Cartesian seeks to be alone or above other men and nature because he believes his mind places him there. But, as Swift and Maritain see it, Cartesian pride has another dimension: even while seeking to flee men, the Cartesian seeks their applause, seeks glory. The Projector in *A Modest Proposal* puts forward his scheme with a view to helping Ireland. He lists at length the advantages of the proposal that will accrue both to the nation and to the poor in the future. He has in view another prospective event, however—his own glorification: "...whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth would deserve so well of the public as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation."<sup>50</sup> Here we come upon the sixth feature of Cartesianism criticized by both Swift and Maritain: that in the Cartesian soul, pride and aspiration for personal glory are commingled with two other characteristics: progressivism and anxiety for the future.

As perceived by both Swift and of Maritain, Cartesianism is willing to betray or violate the permanent good, the essential good—human nature itself, justice, the peaceful round of ordinary life—in order to strive for a future practical good that will supposedly preserve safety or increase comfort, and bring glory to the prideful Cartesian. In *Tale of a Tub*, for example, the Grubstreet Hack is in a state of frantic desperation about the place of the moderns, principally himself, in relation to the ancients. He writes a Dedication to Prince Posterity, pleading with Posterity to value the works of the moderns over those of the ancients, even though the writings of the moderns—his fellow Grubstreet hacks—are so ephemeral that he cannot find any of them to read. As a result, the Hack can offer no "Particulars" about the books to justify the honors he is sure they deserve from Posterity, who, it should be noted, does not yet exist.<sup>51</sup>

Later, in Section 5 ("A Digression in the Modern Kind"), the Hack sounds a different note than in his earlier concern about the reputations of the Moderns in posterity. Worried about his own reputation in the present, not the future, he deploys a variation of the Baconian paradox, claiming it "fit to lay hold on that great and honourable Privilege of being the Last Writer. I claim an absolute Authority in Right, as the freshest Modern,

<sup>49</sup> *Tale of a Tub*, sect. 1, p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> *Modest Proposal*, p. 439.

<sup>51</sup> *Tale of a Tub*, p. 21.

which gives me a Despotick Power over all Authors before me.”<sup>52</sup> The most recent writer is perforce the best writer *because* he is the most recent writer: as in his worry about the evanescent reputations of the Moderns, the inherent quality of his work is not an issue. The Hack is so desperate for recognition and despotic power that he lays claim to them based on temporal occurrence, freshness. He does not seem to notice that any writer who publishes a day, or even an hour, after he does will be able to usurp his throne. Fifteen minutes of fame indeed.

The Hack’s willingness to sacrifice consideration of inherent literary value for the sake of future recognition has a parallel, though not an exact one, in the practical life of Balnibarbi, an island nation subject to Laputa in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part III, where anxiety about the future arises from faith in technological progress that sets aside the traditional good.<sup>53</sup> Lord Munodi, one of the few sane Balnibarbians, guides Gulliver through his nation and Lagado, its principal city, including the Grand Academy, Swift’s parody of a research institution. Melancholy over what is happening to his nation, Munodi explains to Gulliver that, influenced by a stay in Laputa, the Cartesian flying island, certain Balnibarbians began to dislike the traditional way of life to which they were returning. They “fell into Schemes of putting all Arts, Sciences, Languages, and Mechanics upon a new Foot.” To that end, they established the Grand Academy, in which Projectors can “contrive new Rules and Methods of Agriculture and Building, and new Instruments and Tools for all Trades and Manufactures.”<sup>54</sup> Their aim is technological progress that will bring about a material paradise, in which one person can do the work of many, in which structures will last forever, and in which crops will bloom all year round.

These novel techniques do not bring about the material prosperity anticipated, however. On his way through Lagado, Gulliver notices that the houses are “very strangely built, and most of them out of Repair” and that the countryside bears no crops, despite the busy activities of the populace, “whose Countenances and Habit expressed so much Misery and Want.” Misery and want are accompanied in the population by anxiety, the psychological damage consequent upon excessive concern about the future: “The People in the Streets walked fast, looked wild, their Eyes fixed, and were generally in Rags.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Sect. 5, p. 81.

<sup>53</sup> *Gulliver’s Travels*, pt. III, chap. 4, pp. 172-78.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-75.

Jacques Maritain sounds similar notes about Cartesian self-glorification, emphasis on the future, and bustle, though less pervasively than Swift.<sup>56</sup> Pride, as we have seen, at the core of rationalism, according to Maritain, who observes that Cartesian Science, because it springs from the God-infused knowledge within us, would soon, in Descartes's view, be able to "exhaust" reality. And, according to Maritain, Descartes *is* proud, not only because he provides the source and theoretical power of Science, but also because of the practical effects of his work, effects to be seen in the future. His work will eventually provide human happiness, after two or three centuries—an earthly, not a heavenly, bliss but conditions of life much better than those of the seventeenth century.<sup>57</sup> The originator of Science, like the Balnibarbians, "has no time to lose, he is a man in a hurry (like all moderns). If he can only snatch some tens of years from death, the great work on which the happiness and perfection of humanity depend will be done."<sup>58</sup>

This outline of the charges Swift and Maritain level at Descartes—irrationality, self-absorbed intuitionism, a violent posture toward nature and human nature, pride mingled with anxiety—should not mislead us into thinking that the two critics are alike in all their thoughts. Swift, to take one important example, thoroughly dislikes St. Thomas Aquinas, placing him on the side of the Moderns in *The Battle of the Books*. Nevertheless, that two thinkers of such magnitude—one flourishing at the beginnings of the Cartesian triumph over Western thought, the other flourishing in our time, when the incoherencies of modernism are becoming increasingly apparent—that two such disparately placed and culturally formed thinkers arrive at strikingly similar criticisms, expressed in such cogent arguments and images, should give our pervasively Cartesian culture pause.

<sup>56</sup> Maritain's rather tendentious description of Descartes indicates the former's belief in the latter's pride: "the head superbly heavy and vehement, the low forehead, the discreet, stubborn, fanciful eye, the mouth proud and earthly": *Three Reformers*, p. 53.

<sup>57</sup> *Dream of Descartes*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>58</sup> *Three Reformers*, p. 62.