

A Tritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind

Textual and Historical Introduction

A Tritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind first appeared in Swift's authoritative *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*, published by John Morphew on 27 February 1711, together with its companion piece *Various Thoughts, Moral and Diverting*, which immediately preceded it.¹ *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* had long been in preparation. During his previous stay in London (from November 1707 through May 1709) Swift had begun to consider the publication of a miscellany volume. In October 1708, he jotted down, on the back of a letter now lost and addressed to him at Lord Pembroke's in Leicester Fields, "Subjects for a Volume."² John Lyon, who became the aging Dean's guardian in 1742 and who is one of the "two main lines of descent for Swift's personal manuscripts,"³ took a transcript of this list, which he inserted in his copy of Hawkesworth's *Life of the Revd. Jonathan Swift, D. D., Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin*.⁴ It was first printed by John Nichols in his *Supplement* of 1779,⁵ and among its items *A Tritical Essay* occurs.⁶ These facts substantiate the original dating of *A Tritical Essay*, 6 August 1707, which was omitted in later editions, all the more so if the assumption is correct that *A Tritical Essay* is dedicated to Sir Andrew Fountaine, whom Swift had met a year earlier. It was finished and ready to be published when, in October of 1708, Swift began to draw up his list of pieces for inclusion.

¹ *Correspondence*, ed. Woolley, I, 282n5.

² *Correspondence*, ed. Woolley, I, 208n5; *Journal to Stella*, ed. Williams, I, 62n52. There are many more references to these "Subjects for a Volume" in Swift's correspondence in 1708 (*Correspondence*, ed. Woolley, I, 189n6, 212n1).

³ A magisterial account is that by A. C. Elias, Jr, "Swift's *Don Quixote*, Dunkin's *Virgil Travesty*, and Other New Intelligence: John Lyon's 'Materials for a Life of Dr. Swift,' 1765," *Swift Studies*, 13 (1998), 27-104 (pp. 37-40); THOMPSON AND THOMPSON viii-xii.

⁴ Dublin: S. Cotter, 1755. Sarah Cotter's was the only separate printing of this work. In London, the Hawkesworth *Life* appeared as part of Volume I of Hawkesworth's edition of Swift's *Works*, first published earlier in 1755. Lyon's copy is in the National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, today (shelfmark 48.D.39) (Elias, Jr, "Swift's *Don Quixote*, Dunkin's *Virgil Travesty*, and Other New Intelligence: John Lyon's 'Materials for a Life of Dr. Swift,' 1765," p. 28n1).

⁵ Not by Thomas Sheridan in *The Life of the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift* of 1784, as claimed by LINDSAY (p. 80 [SwJ 437]).

⁶ The list was subsequently reprinted several times, most recently by Ehrenpreis in Appendix B of *Dr Swift*, pp. 768-69. *A Tritical Essay* is also mentioned in Benjamin Tooke's table of contents, appended to his entry of *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* in the Stationers' Register (*Correspondence*, ed. Woolley, I, 285nn5 and 6). David Woolley's transcript of this unpublished list of contents is available in his own copy of the Scolar Press reprint of *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (Menston, Yorkshire, 1972), with a valuable Introductory Note by C. P. Daw, now at the Ehrenpreis Centre (EC 8069).

A Tritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind is a compendium of commonplaces culled from a very great variety of sources, among them, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, histories of philosophy and handbooks of mythology, collections of anecdotes, fables, and proverbs, and touching on a very great variety of subjects and themes, motifs and ideas. However, what is called a commonplace book, the most recent historian of the genre points out, “is anything but commonplace.” A commonplace book is a record of private memorabilia, of “well-known or personally meaningful textual excerpts,” as a rule “organized under individual thematic headings.”⁷ The keeping of a commonplace book for the noting of aphorisms and apophthegms, adages and axioms, maxims and mottoes, proverbs and puns, themes, theorems, and hypotheses, not to forget facts and cases as well as sacred formulae and catchwords of all kinds, was a tried and trusted educational method. Having originated in classical antiquity with Aristotle and Cicero, the practice was particularly recommended to young gentlemen during the revival of ancient learning in the Renaissance, and it continued to flourish throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸ His deep-rooted distrust of ‘authority and prejudice’ notwithstanding, the *spiritus rector* of the New Science himself, Francis Bacon, held the keeping of commonplace books “to be a matter of great use and essence” for the “retayning of Knowledge” in his *Advancement of Learning*,⁹ at the same time demonstrating the value and usefulness of such storehouses of material in his own fragmentary “collection of commonplace generalisations,” the *Colours of Good and Evil*.¹⁰ Later in the seventeenth century, Ben Jonson’s *Timber: or, Discoveries*, which appeared posthumously in the Folio of 1640, but which is generally ascribed to the years 1623-35, provides

⁷ A good account is by Earle Havens, *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: University Press of New England, 2001), pp. 7-11, 25-37, and *passim*.

⁸ See the valuable observations on the purpose, function, and structure of commonplace books, buttressed by a collection of impressive documentary evidence, in Peter Beal, “Notions in Garrison: The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book,” *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts: Papers of the Renaissance English Text Society, 1985-1991*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Binghamton, New York, 1993), pp. 131-47. More insightful remarks on the historical roots, on flower-collecting, the arrangement of authors and subjects as well as the organization of quotations and the question of language *inter alia*, including other European literatures, are provided in Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), particularly pp. 24-39, 101-33, and *passim*.

⁹ *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 118, 124.

¹⁰ See, in addition to Beal, “Notions in Garrison: The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book,” pp. 138-39, Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 219-24. See also *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. Kiernan, pp. 274, 311.

another notable example. Nothing makes the character of *Timber* as a commonplace book more evident than its subtitle: *Discoveries Made vpon Men and Matter: As They Have Flow'd out of his Daily Readings*.¹¹

Swift, too, kept a minute record of his daily reading during his great reading period at Moor Park in 1697/8, and the fact that many items in this list carry the addendum “abstracted”¹² indicates that he took excerpts and notes from them for his commonplace books. Swift’s commonplace books are no longer extant, but we have Deane Swift’s word for it that they were “lying before [him]” in 1754/5,¹³ having presumably descended to him via his mother-in-law Martha Whiteway, Jonathan’s cousin, friend, and secretary after 1733.¹⁴ Swift maintained his interest in commonplace books throughout his life even though he would advocate a more considered, cautious use later than in the earlier stages of his career.¹⁵ One of the pieces of advice he gave a young gentleman lately entered into holy orders in his *Letter* of 1721 was not to let his preaching be “overlaid by Commerce with Books.” “Whoever only reads,” he warned, “in order to transcribe wise and shining Remarks” was apt “to trust to that Collection in all his Compositions,” rather than their own reason. At the same time, the Dean was fully aware of this widespread habit. Commonplace books, which he described as “Extracts of Theological and Moral Sentences, drawn from Ecclesiastical and other Authors, reduced under proper Heads,” had long been in use “by industrious young Divines,” he said, and he admitted to having “seen several” himself.¹⁶

We suggest that *A Tritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind* may best be seen as a commonplace book, instead of regarding it as the production of a mindless essayist, who exerts himself at compiling a piece by stitching together extracts from his commonplace book, and in an ostensibly haphazard order, too. In *A Tritical Essay*, this argument continues, Swift “illustrates the horror of

¹¹ *Ben Jonson*, eds C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, VIII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 557-59; XI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 210-13. Another remarkable example is John Milton’s “Commonplace Book,” which was discovered only in 1874 and in which “he recorded or had his amanuenses record notes on his general reading from the Horton period or earlier to about 1665 or even later” (edited and annotated by Ruth Mohl for the *Complete Prose Works, I: 1624-42*, ed. Don M. Wolfe [New Haven: Yale University Press, and London: Geoffrey Cumberlege; Oxford University Press, 1953], 344-513).

¹² REAL [1978], pp. 128-29.

¹³ *An Essay upon the Life, Writings, and Character, of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (London: Charles Bathurst, 1755), p. 276. The titles listed by Deane Swift are identical with the ones marked “abstracted.”

¹⁴ Ehrenpreis, *Dean Swift*, pp. 806-7, 875-76.

¹⁵ See David Allan, *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 52-55.

¹⁶ *Prose Works*, IX, 75-76.

unthinking dependence upon ‘Stale Topicks and Thread-bare Quotations,’”¹⁷ fastening on the incompetence of a mechanic writer who boastfully mistakes his indiscriminate jumbling of cliché-ridden subject matter for original, orderly, and perspicuous writing. Sooner or later, such a view is bound to arrive at the verdict that *A Tritical Essay* is a satire whose “sole object” is “the triteness of the materials in their unvarnished condition,” or, similarly, “an exercise in the parody of utter banality.”¹⁸

This explanation will not do. After all, it is not the maxims, thoughts, and ideas themselves that Swift attacks; in fact, he would have accepted many of these commonplaces as true, however trite or hackneyed they may have appeared to him, or to his contemporary readers, after their long march through the centuries. The mere fact that many of these commonplaces were indeed commonplace, plagiarized and transmitted from one source to another and echoed *ad infinitum* does not mean that they were also repeated *ad nauseam*. In the majority of cases, the commonplaces compiled for *A Tritical Essay* have ancient and respected pedigrees, intellectual spoils, it is true, but often also invested with the authority and wisdom of the ages. There seems little, or no, point in satirizing the giants of intellectual history who had first propounded and disseminated them. But there was, perhaps, a point in presenting the collected wisdom and learning of the ages as a gift to a professed “*Lover of Antiquities*,” Sir Andrew Fountaine. By 1707, Swift and Fountaine were close friends, so close in fact that “Dr. Swift, in 1708, used to lodge with Sir A[ndrew] Fountain, when he was in London,” making merry, as he teased Dean Stearne in a letter of June 1708, “at the expence of your wine.”¹⁹ A joker like Sir Andrew would have appreciated an ironic present like *A Tritical Essay* – an old subject of mighty importance whose thoughts and observations were entirely new – with the gleam of mischief in his eyes that its author had wished for. Not coincidentally, it was introduced by a letter, a fact which was not without symbolic significance. “*Friendship is that great Chain of Human Society*,” the diplomat, historian, and traveller James Howell noted in his frequently reprinted *Epistolæ Ho-Elianæ* (1645), “and intercourse of Letters is one of the chiefest Links of that Chain.”²⁰

A Tritical Essay is hardly a satirical mirror image of *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, then. It is a *jeu d’esprit*, and a companion piece in the sense that A

¹⁷ C. P. Daw in the Introductory Note to the Scholar Press reprint of *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*, unpaginated.

¹⁸ Ehrenpreis, *Dr Swift*, p. 192; J. A. Downie, *Jonathan Swift, Political Writer* (London, Boston, Melbourne: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 116.

¹⁹ *Correspondence*, ed. Woolley, I, 191 and n2.

²⁰ *Familiar Letters, Domestick and Foreign*, 8th ed. (London, 1713), p. 89.

Description of the Morning and *A Description of a City Shower* are companion pieces: both have divergent contexts, objectives, and functions.

The Reception of *A Trritical Essay*: Translations²¹

Van Effen, Justus. “Essay dans le gout le plus moderne sur les facultez de l’ame.” *Le Conte du Tonneau ... traduit de l’Anglois*, 2 vols (in one) (The Hague: Henri Scheurleer, 1721), II, 144-57.

Wailly, Léon de. “Irréfutable essai sur les facultés de l’ame.” *Opuscules humoristiques de Swift* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1859), pp. 245-51.

Wailly, Léon de. “Irréfutable *Essai* sur les facultés de l’âme.” *Jonathan Swift, Propositions, résolutions & prédictions (opuscules humoristiques)* (Strasbourg: Circé, 1992), pp. 105-15.

Bégot, Monique. “Irréfutable essai sur les facultés de l’âme.” *La Bataille des livres et autres textes* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 2003), pp. 105-15.

Wolf, Georg Christian. “Versuch einer neuen und wohl eingerichteten Schreibart, von den Kräfte[n] der Seele.” *Des berühmten Herrn D. Swifts Märchen von der Tonne*, 2 vols (in one) (Altona: auf Kosten guter Freunde, 1729), II, 120-30.

Fróes, Leonardo. “Um Ensaio Trítico sobre as Faculdades da Mente.” *Panfletos Satíricos* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 1999), pp. 352-60.

²¹ This bibliography records only the holdings of the Ehrenpreis Centre; it does not pretend to be complete.