



Final Solutions, Modest Proposals and Shortest Ways

Rawson Claude

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Final Solutions, Modest Proposals and Shortest Ways

Claude Rawson

Yale University

One thing which we often leave out of account, as we discuss all the customary features of satire, its rhetoric, its morality, the various forms of irony, is the fact that satire is aggressive and hurtful.

At one time, it aimed to kill or to maim. It was believed to have the power, and therefore sometimes had it. The Greek poet Archilochus, the warriors of pre-Islamic Arabia, the old Irish bards, used their poems as lethal weapons, or sometimes less than lethal: the Irish bards caused blisters, from which we derive the notion of "blistering" attacks. The death curse was the most common form. It survives, we are told, in a variety of tribal cultures, and we witness it daily in that most tribal of groups, the schoolchildren of the English-speaking world. Take the nursery rhymes and school chants collected by Iona and Peter Opie: "Guy, guy, guy / Poke him in the eye, / Put him in the fire / And there let him die". These verses on Guy Fawkes are the model for endless rhymes about living enemies, and the short form in modern English cursing is "Drop dead". We often say "He ought to be shot", as Swift might say "I would hang them if I could". Nowadays, we don't mean it, and we suppose Swift didn't mean it, literally: but he did not *not* mean it either. It is this territory, between killing and not killing that the art of satire inhabits.

Robert C. Elliott's book *The Power of Satire* tells the story of how satire has over the centuries moved from magic to art, from killing to elegant shaming and the stylish insult. It has softened and become "civilized", and critics admire the irony and the wit, sometimes overlooking the aggression. I want to look today at a special case, at the theme not of an individual killing but of mass-killing, and to see what happens when that kind of project gets mixed up with obliquities of satire as well as with the ugly pressures of real life.

The three phrases of my title are or have become euphemisms for mass-killing. "Final solution" is the phrase we commonly associate with Hitler and the extermination of the Jews; "modest proposal" is the term Swift used in 1729 for a fictional project to kill Irish babies and sell them for food; and the *Shortest Way with the Dissenters* is a famous pamphlet of 1702 by Defoe.

Defoe was parodying, or supposedly parodying, the speeches and writings of High Church Anglicans against the religious Dissenters. His satire pretends to advocate massacre, and it was mistaken for the real thing — by both sides. The High Churchmen, whom Defoe was attacking, thought he was on their side and were pleased with the tract; the Dissenters, whom he was defending, thought he was a High Churchman and were terrified. Defoe was put in the pillory for his pains.

How did Defoe's parody become mistaken for the real thing? The usual explanation (chiefly associated with Ian Watt and Wayne Booth) is that Defoe was no good at irony (unlike Swift) but very good at impersonation, at creating fictions, and that in the *Shortest Way* we have an early sign of what later made him a good novelist. There is one flaw in this argument, which is that the High Churchmen whom Defoe was impersonating did *not* advocate the extermination of the Dissenters: they advocated restricting their freedoms and their civil rights, not massacre.

So how can it be impersonation? It pretends to be an extermination proposal. It parodies works which are not, but it was taken for an extermination proposal. How did this come about? Can anything be learned from works which are: from Sade (to whom I shall return briefly at the end) or from Céline and Hitler, who of course wrote in a real-life context more hideous than anything that could be contemplated by Defoe or Swift, not only in the scale of the operation, but in the fact that it was historically enacted.

The business of proposing extermination, though the deed itself is regrettably common in human history, seems normally to pose certain difficulties for the proponent. Any such proposal is almost certain to be received as intolerably nasty and inhumane, unless hedged with qualifications or partially concealed by ambiguous formulations which could bear an alternative construction. Tones of sweet-reasonableness often set in which somehow give the impression that the author is too moderate really to be saying the worst, or if he is saying the worst, that this is because things have become so bad that even a moderate person will feel that he must, reluctantly go along with a really radical cure or final solution. This feeling is one which Swift intuitively sensed in *A Modest Proposal*, though he caricatured it with a highly visible grotesquerie.

The alternative is an opposite strategy of rhetorical exaggeration, of extravagant overstatement which carries within itself an element of self-mockery or of playful exuberance, implying that the author himself knows he is going a bit far, in a special form of what nowadays is called camp. There is a good deal of this in the three anti-semitic tracts which Céline wrote just before and just after the beginning of the Second World War, the first of which is *Bagatelles pour un Massacre*. The word "Bagatelles" partly conveys this effect, though it has to compete with the obsessional ponderousness of this 400-page lucubration. Céline's defense by heavy pseudo-Rabelaisian exaggeration may have been only half-aware, but it succeeded with some readers. Gide was disarmed at the time, saying that no one who wrote with such exuberance could mean what the work was actually saying, so that Céline must be mocking it. You will not be surprised to learn that modern persona-criticism has since moved in with the view that it is not Céline who is writing but a persona called Céline at whom Céline is laughing. Céline himself after the war laughed at one such critic, thanking him for so cleverly letting him off the embarrassing hook of anti-semitic accusations, and saying he could never have thought of this ingenious way of retrieving his reputation. For Gide, Céline had nothing but contempt. The example makes clear two things: the defense works to some extent, and it is not expected to work all the way. The author signals that he does not wholly mean the outrageous things he says, but is equally concerned to suggest that he does not *not* mean them. Céline's case is parallel to Defoe's in reverse: what was meant in the main to be taken straight is now taken as ironic, while the *Shortest Way*, meant as ironic, was taken straight.

Swift-studies reflect the pattern of Céline's critical fortunes. What critics find uncomfortable in *Gulliver's Travels* is comfortably domesticated by the suggestion that Swift is attacking his own ostensible position or laughing at it. The Swift of *Vive la bagatelle* is hardly on a par with the author of *Bagatelles pour un massacre*. But when he says of detested opponents that all their madness makes him merry, that in a jest he spends his rage, and that he would hang them if he could, he is partly practising the kind of trick Céline used: he may not mean that he would hang them if he could, but he does not *not* mean it either, and we should not suppose his merriment to be either hearty or self-critical.

Swift is an ironist highly self-aware, and subtle as Céline (or Hitler) are not. We do not associate him with the literal enactment of his many expressions of a desire to hang, shoot or otherwise eliminate beggars, bankers, judges, politicians or expensive Irishwomen, although we know that the desire had a powerful emotional reality for him. There is also much evidence that he deliberately cultivated the kind of stylistic indeterminacy that leaves the reader uncertain as to the exact degree and focus of his aggressions, though the fact of aggression is abundantly clear. Céline's fulminations have a single-minded obsessiveness in which only the crudest saving discrepancy between the full horror of what is said and some alternative possibility makes itself felt, and we feel it only as a relatively perfunctory rhetorical allowance. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* appears by contrast as a model of sweet-reasonableness. Extermination is not openly proposed. Getting rid of the Jews can easily be

taken to mean exile or expulsion to Palestine or to Africa; curing or eradicating the Jewish disease may imply neutralising their alleged power for harm by any means ranging from expulsion to the total removal of civic power or civil rights (the latter was what Charles Leslie and the High Fliers insisted was all they wanted to do to the Dissenters, and Defoe seized on one of the most common of Hitlerian metaphors when in the *Shortest Way*, he speaks of "purging" the "poison'd Spirits ... from the Face of the Land," rooting out "the Contagion" and curing "the Disease," in contexts which occasionally are expressly non-lethal and in others sometimes open to a non-lethal reading). Hitler and Céline both expend more effort on insisting that the Jews menace the non-Jews with destruction than on menacing the Jews, a strategy which was likewise used by the High Fliers about the Dissenters, with rather more justice (since their claim not to have advocated massacre at all was evidently largely true).

The essential point which emerges is that advocacies of extermination are things which are very difficult even for extremist authors to utter without obliquity or disguise. Céline's apologists say nowadays that he nowhere advises or desires extermination openly. My reading of Céline suggests that they must understand the words advice, desire, extermination and openness very differently from me. Still, there are people who think this, not congenital imbeciles but the next best thing, liberal literary critics rehabilitating illiberal authors. And in Hitler's case, there really *is* not I think any outright suggestion of massacre in *Mein Kampf*, whatever he may later have issued in the form of unpublished directives.

The uncertainty which attends all these questions reveals itself if we perform the gloomy task of reading Hitler and Céline within a short space of time, and with the hindsight knowledge of what Hitler did after they had both written. It is Céline who will appear as the insistent, hysterical, obsessional near-lunatic, while Hitler emerges as the politician of the extreme right, a confirmed and avowed racist, unabashedly nasty in the ways these words imply, but within those rather unsavoury limits safe enough, level-headed, practical. The record of history tells its own story, of course. But on the basis of literary evidence alone it is surely from Céline and not from Hitler that we might have predicted the massacres which Hitler set up. Hitler had, we know, the opportunity as Céline did not. I suspect that the ranting and paranoid Céline, with his not unSwiftian quality of practical compassion for the poor and the underdog, would not have killed a single Jewish fly. But that is not my point.

My real point is that the directness of any advocacy of massacre appears not to be identifiably commensurate with real literal intention, and secondly that such intentions naturally disguise themselves by many obliquities and equivocations of style. This is probably because authors of such proposals have a perfectly natural sense that the more crudely and directly these proposals are uttered, the more likely they are to be discounted or dismissed. I suspect that Defoe the parodist also knew or sensed this. He may or may not have felt genuinely that this is what the High Fliers were getting at, though he said again and again that he did, and those High Fliers who welcomed the *Shortest Way* must stand as a partial confirmation that he was right.

What Defoe sensed, then, was that a proponent of extermination would express himself obliquely. Whether he knew it or not, that seems to have been the secret of his power, and what turned his tract into a realistic hoax. Almost half the *Shortest Way*, before one gets to some deadly proposals, proceeds through hints that bear an alternative construction: it speaks of ridding society of the dissenting disease (by conversion, or punishment, or expulsion, or whatever, much as in *Mein Kampf* Hitler spoke of getting rid of the Jewish disease without mentioning extermination); or of destroying sedition, or heresy or dissent rather than of killing the seditious, or heretics, or dissenters. Defoe boasted later that he had put into "plain English" the threatening speeches of the High Churchmen, and he claims that he was right since High Churchmen took his pamphlet straight and approved of it. But putting into "plain English" is hardly impersonation, if the original was in "dark English". In this sense the

theory that Defoe the novelist was entering into the manner of his characters won't stand up. I want to suggest that he didn't in fact put them into "plain English", as he claimed, and that he achieved his effect *not* by making the extermination proposal "plain" but precisely because he did not. In that sense Booth or Watt may be right to say that he was a successful impersonator, but not quite in the way they meant.

Putting things into "plain English" is not impersonation but interpretation. It breaches parody by that fact. It can be a self-conscious feature of Augustan irony, and in that sense belongs outside Defoe's normal wave-length. We more readily associate it with Swift, the author of *Mr. Collins's Discourse of Free-Thinking Put into Plain English... For the Use of the Poor*, or with those flights of mock-heroic rant in Fielding which are suddenly brought down to reality by a pointed reformulation "in plain English" or "in vulgar language".

As soon as you put someone else into plain English, you are managing rather than mimicking the discourse. In a way it's a warning to the reader not to be taken in, that he's reading a joke, or a story, and not witnessing real life. It's the opposite of what Flaubert and other novelists have valued as fictional "illusion". The hoax is a crude example of such "illusion". It is closely bound up with the history of major fiction: think of the people who wrote to Richardson asking him to spare Clarissa or who wrote to Dickens asking him to save Paul Dombey. We also know this from modern soap operas, but we should not scorn it as merely the reactions of naive or inexperienced readers. Diderot reported that when he read Richardson he kept crying out to the heroine not to believe her deceiver.

The hoax is deeply suited to the novel. I suggest that it is deeply inappropriate in satire. The novel aims to convince you of its own fictional world, satire aims to tell you something highly immediate about the world *outside the fiction*. Satire requires the opposite of fictional illusion: Defoe's satire against High Churchmen failed because people believed it. Swift, on the other hand, knew that "illusion" was what he had to avoid. The *Modest Proposal*, like Defoe's *Shortest Way*, is a parody which advocates extermination, but no one has ever taken it straight, partly because it is far more explicit. Where the *Shortest Way* goes on a long time without mentioning its murderous project, the *Modest Proposal* takes about a page before you know that the speaker is not a sensible, moderate economist but a wild fantasist who advocates mass-cannibalism and whose reasonings no one will take seriously in a literal sense. Swift went one step beyond mass-murder in signposted extravagance, partly I suspect in order to make doubly sure that no one would take him straight, because his entire satiric purpose would disappear if he were.

This is even more striking in *Gulliver's Travels*. The opening chapter is highly "realistic", like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and perhaps even a parody of Defoe: "My father had a small estate in Nottinghamshire: I was the third of five sons". Some readers were taken in: an old man who looked for Lilliput on his map, an old captain who knew Captain Gulliver and claimed the author gave the wrong address, that he lived in Wapping and not in Rotherhithe. Swift enjoyed this. But if everyone read *Gulliver's Travels* in this way the whole point would be lost. So in the revised edition of *Gulliver* published in 1735 Swift inserted additional clues to make sure he wasn't taken straight. One such clue is the petulant prefatory letter to Gulliver's cousin Sympson, which signals a strange and unsettling state of mind and has the effect of undercutting the sober accents of the ensuing narrative opening. Another is the change in the frontispiece portrait of Captain Gulliver, which in 1726 "realistically" gave his name, residence and age, "Captain Lemuel Gulliver of Redriff. Aetat. Suae LVIII", but in 1735 prominently advertised him as "Splendide mendax", "magnificently untruthful", a liar.

Swift was in fact fond of hoaxing, as his mock-astrological Bickerstaff papers of 1708 and 1709, or his *Last Speech and Dying Words of Ebenezer Elliston* (1722), show. But he was very careful not to let this get into his serious satiric writings, and not only because of the risk

that the satire might be missed or misunderstood (readers of Swift's time were more easily taken in, both by fiction and by irony, than we are likely to be to day).

Swift's cultural conditioning would not have made him care greatly for realist "illusion" or the wide range of sympathy (both in the presentational and the judgmental sense of that term) which we tend to associate with the novel. He inherited a classical, partly Platonic, dislike of impersonation, and a gentlemanly recoil from the raw unmediated presentation of quotidian doings or the intimacies of emotional experience. His recoil from such things was shared by Fielding, one of the few genuinely "Augustan" sensibilities to practise the novel-form in a substantial way, but whose novels stand as a pointed critique of the overparticularity and the hothouse immediacy which he disliked in the novels of Richardson especially: Defoe and Richardson belong to an alternative, non-Augustan tradition, neither steeped in classical culture nor rooted in a gentlemanly or patrician ethos, but more firmly in the main line of evolution of the novel as we know it today.

When Swift in the *Sentiments of a Church-of-England man* exposed those who wished to destroy their opponents from the face of the earth, he was castigating both the High Churchmen supposedly parodied in Defoe's *Shortest Way* and the extremists of an opposite faction, who made a point of priding themselves on Moderation: a claim to which, Swift said, "the Rights of both Parties are equally entituled". We may sense, in this plague on both your houses mood, that what the extremists are also "equally entituled" to is the punishment both propose for each other. Rooting out from the face of the earth (a phrase much played on in the *Shortest Way*) was what Swift himself, in moments of enraged annoyance, proposed in those exact terms for beggars, bankers, Members of Parliament and expensive Irishwomen, and what the Houyhnhnms proposed for the Yahoos: it is also what God set out to do to mankind in *Genesis* 6. The sensible ecumenism of genuine moderation proposed by Swift in the *Sentiments* and by Martin in *A Tale of a Tub* hardly gets a chance to state itself, except by implication through its opposite; and in the *Tale*, Martin's one brief expression of it is subverted by the ironic context: "Martin had still proceeded as gravely as he began: and doubtless, would have delivered an admirable Lecture of Morality, which might have exceedingly contributed to my Reader's *Repose, both of Body and Mind* ..."

The ecumenical sentiments Martin expresses with Swift's undoubted approval resemble those which, from a different perspective, Defoe was proposing in one of his many sequels to the *Shortest Way*, a work called *The Shortest Way to Peace and Union*. The felt and sustained earnestness with which Defoe in that work insists on discouraging "the Extrems on either Side" and desires that "in the Middle might be found, that blessed Path of Peace and Union" (down to accepting a Church of England magistracy and the blocking of political power for his own Dissenters) contains much that Swift would accept. But its tone differs hugely not only from the crackling deflations of the *Tale* but even from the sober propositions to the same effect in the *Sentiments*. Swift's imagination was never at home in that live domain of accommodation, compromise and moderation in which he believed in theory and which Defoe (I think) carried in every fibre of his being, both in the domain of imagination and in every branch of practical life.

Whether or not there is a correlation between this and the broadly non-extremist novelistic imagination as we know it in him or in Richardson or in Fielding, in Dickens or in Flaubert or in Conrad, I do not know. That a literary medium given over as no other to the sustained and protracted exploration of the shades and nuances of behaviour and feeling, and in its nature inimical to those polarising conceptions of reality which see all experience as ultimately referable to opposing absolutes (of good and evil, Ancients and Moderns, Houyhnhnm and Yahoo, or whatever), should have reached its fullest development in the two centuries which witnessed the rise of political and social institutions at least nominally dedicated to tolerance and a large measure of individual freedom, may or may not be a mere coincidence.

But I find it hard to imagine Swift as ever deriving much pleasure from any novel. And it is a fact of history that his highly-charged and uncompromising renderings of evil, including the evils of extermination and the extremisms of tyranny and of anarchy, have tended especially to appeal to writers deeply alien to the tradition of the liberal novel and sometimes actively hostile to it; writers, from Sade to the Surrealists, who adopted ideologies in themselves wholly opposite to Swift's though equally absolute and polarising in their cast of mind and mode of expression. Sade probably derived from *A Modest Proposal* many features of violent and anti-moral action which we would not dream of ascribing to Swift, but which Swift imagined with a deep unsettling inwardness in the very process of rejecting them. We have only to think of Sade's serious proposals for selective extermination, on the grounds that destruction is one of nature's ways of preserving her equilibrium, that national economies can be helped in this way, that murder gives pleasure or profit, as cannibalism and infanticide do, to see how much direct literal application there is in his work of notions which Swift praised and entertained in reverse form, for repudiation.

How or why such a thing came about, or why the surrealist André Breton (as I once pointed out elsewhere) called Swift the "véritable initiateur" of that Black Humour which deals in whole imaginative freedom with forbidden things, must be a subject for speculation. The fact is that Swift, with *A Modest Proposal*, opens Breton's famous *Anthologie*, and the second author extracted is Sade, only then to be followed by the predictable flood of nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures. Sade stands in some ways as an intermediary between Swift and some of these later writers, though others, we know, went to Swift directly. It could doubtless be argued (and the claim seems to me implicit in Breton's *Anthologie*) that for Swift to repudiate certain Sadean feelings as he did, he must first have traversed Sadean territory in the imagining of them. One cannot imagine Sade making much of the *Shortest Way with the Dissenters* had he read it, but *A Modest Proposal*, for all its comparative extravagance and its "unrealism" as fiction is something else again, and much easier for Sade to rewrite straight. He did.