

Introduction

“*The Dearness of things*”: the body as matter for text

All humane things are subject to decay.

Dryden on Flecknoe¹

The undertaker, after three days' expectance of orders for embalment without receiving any, waited on the lord Jefferies, who pretending ignorance of the matter, turned it off with an ill-natured jest, saying, “That those who observed the orders of a drunken frolick deserved no better; that he remembered nothing at all of it; and that he might do what he pleased with the corpse.”

Johnson on the death of Dryden²

Once Locke reduced, almost inadvertently, thought to matter in an attempt to address the more insistent materialism of Hobbes, it was inevitable that the body would intrude upon the most sanguine attempts to render form and meaning out of substance. The body had always complicated the very human desire for spiritual certainty. Idealists for centuries scourged it, refined it, shed it altogether in attempts to link it into larger patterns of coherent meaning. But after Hobbes, after Locke, and in spite of Descartes, the body, at least in eighteenth-century England, would not go away easily. It became instead matter difficult, perhaps impossible, to idealize – matter in the way. The epistemological bind of the age, the confinement of thought to matter that could only be patterned self-consciously, made knowing the body at best problematic. The urban bind of the age, the confinement of too many bodies into crowded, diseased cities, made not knowing the problem of the body impossible.

When Defoe and Swift employed strategies to contain or escape from the body, they reflected the struggle against materiality that characterized their age. Both writers understood the difficulties of knowing a self trapped in a world of sensation. If it is possible to “see” matter at all, it

¹ John Dryden, “Mac Flecknoe,” *The Works of John Dryden: Poems 1681–1684*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Berkeley CA, 1972, p. 54, line 1.

² Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, 3 vols., ed. George Birkbeck Hill, New York, 1967, I, p. 391.

becomes impossible to see beyond it into larger patterns of organization that keep dissolving when stared at long and hard. Whether considered as a vehicle of perception, an instrument of sexuality, or a part of a larger political structure, the body intrudes as material that can only be managed through language self-consciously, often ironically, and always energetically employed.

Although I am going to confine my argument to the works of two major Augustans, I would like to introduce the dilemma they share with the work of a later figure, one known as the last Augustan. In his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81), Johnson was still grappling with the problems that Defoe and Swift clarified so much earlier for their century. I bring in Johnson for a personal reason. In reading the “Life of Dryden,” I began thinking about the matter of this book. The farce that informed Dryden’s undignified death became for me the point of speculation that has become this book. But in broader terms, the “death” touches upon the themes that dominate the century, concerns about corporeality that Defoe and Swift return to obsessively in their work. Johnson dwells relentlessly on the fact of the body in his *Lives of the English Poets* as he persistently reduces spirit to body, literary aspirations to carcass. His account of the death of Dryden particularly insists upon materiality as it undercuts traditional attempts to transcend the matter at hand.

Dryden’s fate points to one Defoe and Swift confront in their fiction: the dilemma of the writer contained by matter that must be controlled. Defoe’s most desperate writer, H.F., trying to order the materials of the plague year, becomes subsumed by the pit itself, while Swift’s “poet” as well as his self-reflexive hack end up implicated in materials they are unable to order, and resign themselves to emptying their veins into a corporate audience hungry for similes. The story of Dryden’s death is a sensational one, what H.F. would call a “speaking sight,” a spectacle of the body typical of the eighteenth century, when private fears became public theatre in the street. And the story is a dubious one, an undetermined narrative impossible to ascertain, but equally impossible to ignore. In their assaults on the body, both Defoe and Swift become, at times, ironically indirect, hiding behind anecdotes that trail off, materials that might be false or forged. Just so does Johnson disclaim his “wild story,” which comes from “a writer of I know not what credit.” But in spite of his skepticism, Johnson tells his story, for it exploits a dilemma he understands too well, the problem of being contained in a body that mortifies spirit and turns ritual into farce.

Johnson particularly attends to the physical fact of Dryden as disorderly material in the way. His very carcass presents an immediate problem of disposal that reproaches the viewer. Although his corpse is put into a velvet hearse, to be accompanied by eighteen mourning

coaches, such a display is not enough. “What,” cries the drunken Lord Jeffreys, shall Dryden, “the greatest honour and ornament of the nation, be buried after this private manner!” Proposing a spectacular funeral at Westminster Abbey, he falls on his knees to beseech Dryden’s widow for the body. Presented with the sight of the nobleman and his company on their knees, she faints away, and when she recovers her speech, cries “No, no!” Jeffreys interprets her words his way: “my Lady is very good, she says, Go, go!” and he carries off the corpse to an undertaker in Cheapside.

If the corporeality of the laureate has not already been made evident, it becomes impossible to deny once removed from its domestic space. To the bewildered undertaker, it becomes a nuisance, for once Lord Jeffreys sobers himself, he disclaims his plan to honor Dryden as the result of a “drunken frolick.” While the widow and son remain inconsolable, the body itself, “subject to decay,” goes off, becoming so offensive that the undertaker threatens to set the corpse itself before the widow’s door.

Friends of Dryden rescue his body, but not his dignity, for after a belated service in the Abbey, Mr. Charles Dryden sends a challenge to Lord Jeffreys, but receives no satisfaction. His Lordship leaves town, leaving Mr. Charles Dryden robbed of the “satisfaction of meeting him, though he sought it till his death with the utmost application.” As Farquhar, one of Johnson’s sources, suggested, the funeral itself, thwarted duel notwithstanding, was spoiled enough by the mock heroics of the situation: “The quality and mob, farce and heroics; the sublime and ridicule” mix “in a piece.”³

Johnson confesses that he “once intended to omit” the dubious story, since only in a letter of Farquhar’s can he find any evidence of the “tumultuary and confused” circumstances surrounding Dryden’s funeral. He includes it nonetheless, adding a nervous speculation about the change of manners for the better. Johnson is talking to himself, I suspect, when he affirms gruffly, one eye on his own posterity, that a young drunken lord of his own age “would be jostled out of the way, and compelled to be quiet” if he dared to violate “the pompous regularity of a magnificent funeral.” He would in fact “be sent roughly away, and what is yet more to the honor of the present time, I believe that those who had subscribed to the funeral of a man like Dryden, would not, for such an accident, have withdrawn their contributions.” “A man like Dryden,” a man “like” Defoe and Swift, Johnson sniffs the air and hopes it has changed, but the idea of the body going off remains. It is an idea that dominates the literature of the century, one expressed frequently in forms that afford some relief in the telling.

The dislocation that Dryden’s body inspires, the disorder that Defoe’s

³ Birkbeck Hill notes that Farquhar “ridiculed the mixed ceremony”: the pomp of ceremony “was a kind of rhapsody, and fitter, I think, for Hudibras than him.” *Ibid.*, I, p. 392.

H.F. declares “*very, very very* dreadful,” becomes of necessity articulated. The complicated drama of the missing body, a melodrama turning to farce as rapidly as laureateship turns to mortified material, includes the problem not just of corporeality, but of crowded corporeality in a tragic world that quickly turns bathetic as soon as the grounds of mortality are taken into account.

Dryden going off is not going, at least in the version Johnson supplies, to heaven. He is not even going to Westminster Abbey without a struggle. When Johnson reduces his poet’s end to a slightly ridiculous, overfed body, he is not reducing hack to matter (as Dryden himself did to the portly Thomas Shadwell), but cutting down the pretensions to spirit of one of his favourite poets. For Johnson, only Milton and Pope can share the greatness that was Dryden’s, and Pope – we learn from Johnson – died of overeating lampreys cooked in a silver saucepan. Such satiric reduction tells much of their subjects, poets all trying to order the demands of the flesh, the call of appetite. That Johnson allows them no out suggests an intransigence that comes with the territory. For the body becomes for Defoe and Swift – and Johnson – material that resists literary transformation and can only be used if it is recognized as all there is, as Mandeville would say, what we “*really are*.”⁴ With pains the matter of the body can be made literary material, but the transformation is of necessity costly and often ironic, taking account of a metamorphosis that cannot occur without a struggle.

This cost dominates the work of both writers. Swift alludes to it in the notes for his essay on “Maxims Controlled in Ireland.” First on his list of “Maxims Examined” is the “*Dearness of things Necessary to Life*” (*PW*, XII, p. 309). His scribbled maxim approaches most economically the problem that the body presented – and still presents. “Dearness” cuts both ways, suggesting expense and esteem, cost and affection. In his complicated sexual strategies, Swift approaches dear things (he frequently addressed Stella and her companion Dingley as “md,” my dears) only to run away from the expense of spirit and body they represent. In his larger political struggles, attempting to solve more grossly apparent problems of the poor bodies that fill his Irish tracts, Swift reveals an exasperated desire for riddance – on a grand scale – of the urban problems impossible to ignore. He exposes at the same time his own soul lacerated by a hard, unyielding need that he forces upon his reader. When he, like Defoe, looks

⁴ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. Philip Harth, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 77. Two recent studies dealing with the body examine not so much what we *are*, but more precisely what and how we are *not*. In *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*, London, 1984, Francis Barker argues for the “absence” of the ultimately subjected body in the seventeenth century, while Frederic V. Bogel in *Literature and Insubstantiality in Later Eighteenth Century England*, Princeton, 1984, finds that assertions of materialism mean that we begin in the latter half of the eighteenth-century to fear that we don’t really matter. See also Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York, 1985.

to things "Necessary" to life, by necessity he attempts to pare away at desire that always remains suspect. His final solution, remarkably close to Defoe's, is to run from the problem altogether, hiding out on (nearly) deserted islands.

Defoe, always conscious of the physical burdens of the consuming bodies he imagines, repeatedly makes "dear" his characters' fictional solutions. Like Swift, he calls attention to the expense of an economy that he dreams of managing. Unlike Swift, he enters into the fictional consciousness of characters, particularly feminine characters, whose fortunes invalidate the "necessary" schemes he makes up on the run. Both writers reveal a consciousness of their dilemma, an urgency bordering on despair, and ultimately a dependence upon the literary process itself as a means to clarify, if not solve, their most physical circumstances.

This study will look at three specific ways in which Swift and Defoe, speaking for their age, addressed the problems of the body. Locked into unidealized substance that resists form, the passive receiver of sensation receives information which cannot be ordered. The need to idealize, to perceive providential patterns that would inform matter with meaning, is undercut consistently by the opaque, illusive nature of a reality that resists perception itself. Any meaning must be made by immersion into the matter itself, a process that produces an even more radical uncertainty of expression. Defoe makes the epistemological struggle his subject; Swift makes his assault on the problem his meaning.

The body for both writers takes on larger cultural meanings as it reflects not just problems of personal identity, but problems of sexual connection. Sexuality leads into childbearing and into death, into new "useless mouths," new "burthens in the belly" that cannot be experienced without pain. Both men reflect a fear of sexuality that they attempt to contain through their attempts to order a physical economy. But the problem of sexuality lies in its resistance to order, its irrational assertion of desire over "reason," and yet paradoxically of material over spirit. Both writers are particularly attentive to the problem of feminine sexuality. While seeking ways of containing the appetite in his tracts and in his fiction, Defoe creates characters driven by desire and necessity to express themselves through bodies that eventually betray. Swift's own struggle against appetite drives him to demystify "the sex," while containing it through teasing nursery games that he controls. Sexuality eventually becomes something that one can only run from, as both writers place their male characters on isolated islands to secure them from desire.

Bodies beget bodies, growing in a physical economy difficult to manage, "useless mouths," more material getting in the way. Defoe and Swift address the problem of the city filling up with bodies, proposing in their

tracts and fiction radical solutions to reduce the strain that too many bodies put on their economy. Defoe looks to the plague itself as a purge of the body politic, carrying off need with the bodies in the way, while Defoe and Swift employ the “cannibal” to “eat up” the superfluous material that implicates them in the struggle against corporeality. The vision they present is ultimately political, disclosing a keen, often bitter awareness of the intransigence of materials that may be impossible to manage. When they create a world in which one bites or is bitten, where cannibalistic strategies are necessary for severely diminished survival, they are taking measure of a society dedicated to the consumption not just of goods, but of flesh, a society crowded with need that will not go away.

The problem of the body becomes one of the central concerns of the eighteenth century, dominating the work not just of Defoe and Swift, but of – to name a few – Smollett and Sterne, Fielding and Richardson, Boswell and Johnson, Pope and Hogarth, Burney and Thrale. I concentrate here on Defoe and Swift, both writing about the same subject at the same time, to emphasize the interconnections between two writers often viewed as dissimilar in their visions. In his study, *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams separates the “urbane” and “conventional” Swift isolated in “polite literature” from a Defoe able to see the “darker reality” of the “actuality” that was London.⁵ The distinction Williams makes may be too neat. “Polite literature” hardly insulates its writer from reality, particularly when it is produced with the rude, impolite energy Swift refuses to repress. Both Swift and Defoe were able to see “darker realities” of their culture. The problems they encountered every day in the streets, problems that the gentry might try to ride over in their soft cushioned chairs, problems that lace and silk couldn’t cover up, remained material that they forced upon their readers. Using as much as possible their own language, the language of the burthen in the belly, of the offensive materials in the way, of the cannibal devouring its kind, I would like to attend to their vision of bodily confinement and bodily need. Both writers saw, consciously and clearly, material issues of sexuality and poverty that we still have not yet been able to solve, we moderns equipped with our own optics, our own conscious language, our own schemes of interpretation. In their insistence upon the materiality of things in their refusal to idealize that which could not be incorporated into providential patterns or political structures without a struggle, Defoe and Swift speak loudly enough to be heard in their own words.

What I propose in this work is a revision of the century’s sexual and political considerations. It is generally agreed that the modern world was taking on its familiar, alienating form in this period. Notions of com-

⁵ Williams, *The Country and the City*, Oxford and New York, 1982, p. 144.

munity were breaking down, religious and political certainties had long given way to nervous assertions of an individualism that separated private from public desires. Both formally and informally, agencies of obligation and responsibility were being reorganized under various pressures that hierarchical, capitalistic, and patriarchal structures exerted upon men and women squeezed by circumstance. What interests me is the degree of *consciousness* that victims and victimizers alike demonstrate of the structures of their changing society. Over and over Swift and Defoe reveal an awareness of the brutal, frightening inequities in their social, sexual, and political system. Awareness, however, would not seem to extend into political analysis that could be separated from a materiality too difficult to transcend or solve. In the work of Defoe and Swift we can see that the problem of *being material* – material resistant to schemes providential and scientific – determined practical and fictional strategies that take on a certain poignant consistency when they are viewed as attempts to work within a condition both confining and decadent. For all things were seen as subject to decay, including schemes to exert authority in both sexual and political economies devised to make use of material that threatened men and women alike. A sense of frustration informs many of the attempts to rationalize, utilize, and eventually get rid of the bodies that bind.

The discourse is neither unreflecting nor uncaring in its expression of an often thwarted desire to overcome a materiality that threatens to become all that there is. By virtue of their energetic exertions, Swift and Defoe achieve a fleeting degree of liberation. In demanding that attention be paid to the dearness of things necessary to our lives, they achieve, in the moment of discourse, grace.

1

Dull organs: the matter of the body in the plague year

'Tis a speaking Sight, says he, and has a Voice with it, and a loud one, to call us all to Repentance; and with that he opened the Door and said, Go, if you will.

A Journal of the Plague Year, p. 61.

He look'd into the Pit again, as he went away, but the Buriers had covered the Bodies so immediately with throwing in Earth, that tho' there was Light enough, for there were Lanterns and Candles in them plac'd all Night round the Sides of the Pit, upon the Heaps of Earth, seven or eight, or perhaps more, yet nothing could be seen.

A Journal of the Plague Year, p. 62.

One of the central concerns of the *Journal* is epistemological. Defoe's narrator, the curious, skeptical H.F., spends much of his time trying to interpret the phenomenon of the plague year. He addresses problems of perception – how can he see anything at all – and problems of interpretation – how can he understand what he is trying to observe. In his compulsion to make sense of the materials in his way, he demonstrates the problem of his age, the difficulty of reconciling a yearning for large patterns to the resistance the materials themselves bring. H.F. stands as a man of religious faith crossing warily over into the age of enlightenment, a man who consults his bible to plan his course but demonstrates at the same time that providential patterns cannot quite hold the plague in place. His struggle to find meaning in the plague pit itself reveals his difficulty. H.F. as measurer of the pit, seeking enlightenment from the “speaking Sight . . . tho' there was Light enough,” can only see so far into material that keeps shifting out of comprehensible shape.

H.F. reflects an uncertainty shared by Defoe's contemporaries, moderns lost in a Lockean world difficult yet necessary to read. Even as he cannot understand the materials of the plague year, H.F. can no more resist its unwieldy matter than Locke's model of the understanding can resist its simple ideas, no more “than a mirror can refuse, alter or obliterate

ate the Images or *Ideas*, which, the Objects set before it, do therein produce.”¹ While Locke did not insist that the understanding was entirely passive, he did demand that attention be paid to the difficulty of making sense out of experience. External sensation might illuminate the understanding as light entering the dark room of understanding through little windows, but once the “picture” enters the dark room, it may not “stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion” (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, xi, 17, p. 163). Instead, the mind “exerts several acts of its own,” combining simple ideas into compound ones, bringing two ideas together for comparison, and, most dangerously, “separating them from all other *Ideas* that accompany them in their real existence,” creating unstable abstractions (*Essay*, II, xii, 1, p. 163). In his attempt to inquire reasonably into the matter of existence, Locke just as reasonably dismantled a structure of thought that observers like H.F. depended upon, and left them with a material world in flux. Pictures once perceived will not “stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion,” but wander in and out of focus. Thought becomes a matter of seeing, while the soul, possibly, becomes matter itself: “It being, in respect of our Notions, not much more remote from our Comprehension to conceive, that GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to Matter a Faculty of Thinking, than that he should superadd to it another Substance, with a Faculty of Thinking” (*Essay*, IV, iii, 6, p. 541).

Locke appears not to have experienced the confusion he inspired in contemporaries who seized upon the radical implications of his ideas. For him the possibility of error could be avoided as long as the mind could flood itself with light, for light is “that which discovers to us visible Objects.” The cause of obscurity, on the other hand, “seems to be either dull Organs; or very slight and transient Impressions made by the Objects; or else a weakness in the Memory” (II, xxix, 2–3, p. 363). It all sounds reasonable enough, but for an observer like H.F., obscurity, rather than clarity, confusion rather than distinct understanding, dominate the experience of the plague year. “Enlightenment,” suggests Lester King in his study of eighteenth-century medical theory, enables us “to see things in a clearer light.”² Yet seen most clearly in the plague year are the bodies, opaque material that obscure any meaning larger than their corporeal presence. “Twas Mr. Locke,” Shaftesbury argued, rejecting his tutor’s philosophy, “that struck at all fundamentals, threw all order and virtue out of the world, and made the very ideas of these (which are the

¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford, 1979, II, i, p. 118. I am indebted to John Richetti’s *Philosophical Writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, Cambridge MA, 1983; Ernest Tuveson’s *Imagination as a Means of Grace*, New York, 1974; and John Yolton’s *John Locke and the Way of Ideas*, Oxford, 1968, in this discussion.

² *The Road to Medical Enlightenment: 1650–1695*, London, 1970, p. 11.

same as those of God) *unnatural*, and without foundation in our minds.”³ H.F.’s journal represents such a world fundamentally disordered as it records his attempts to see with dull organs past and through material that envelops a most tenuous spiritual reality.

It is difficult to situate Defoe’s place in this process. His own ability to enter into the struggles of his narrators provides him with the tools to build a “realistic” novel that thrives upon his subjectivity. Yet he hides behind flawed narrators who protect him from any truth that their narrative might seem to uncover. This is partly, I think, because Defoe is unable to separate himself from the authorities that his fictions rather unsystematically subvert. The laureate of capitalism entices his readers to celebrate the exploits of thieves and whores and pirates. Once he has won their confidence, however, he retreats. In opaque and often undetermined endings, he abjures whatever truth he has discovered in his fictional exercise. In the same way, perhaps the most accessible writer of prose fiction, a plain dealer depending upon the accessibility of his plain style, creates a narrator frustrated by problems in perception and articulation. His problems make vivid, concrete, and convincing the “journal” of a plague year that exists improbably in an imagined-to-be-real history. Just as he undermines, and then covers over, the flaws in a political and social system that he is determined to support, in his *Journal* he subverts the possibility of knowing the “*very, very, very* dreadful” particulars of an experience that in spite of its obscurity becomes clarified – until he undoes the clarification. Through it all Defoe manages to jump free of either position as he doggedly continues to create fictions that *could be* real.

H.F.’s flawed perception becomes the matter of Defoe’s text, a record repeatedly interrupted by the narrator’s problems of interpretation. We can see H.F. attempting to “see things in a clearer light” when he tries to comprehend the meaning of the great plague pit at Aldgate. Immediately before recording his visit to the plague pit, H.F. begins to tell the story of the three men of Wapping, a history which “will be a very good Pattern for any poor Man to follow,” but suddenly, just about ready to deliver an exemplary moral tale, he breaks off, “having yet, for the present, much more to say before I quit my own Part.” H.F.’s refusal to continue a moral tale, a pattern that he won’t “vouch” for in its particulars (p. 58), is significant here, introducing a consistent trope in the *Journal*. Over and over H.F. offers enlightenment only to back away, insisting instead upon the impossibility of applying patterns to discrete, contradictory particulars, those Lockean pictures that fail to “stay there” and remain orderly.

Taking up his “own part,” H.F. leaves his “very good pattern” to run

³ Tuveson, *Imagination*, pp. 51–2. See also John Dussinger, “‘The Lovely System of Lord Shaftesbury’: An Answer to Locke in the Aftermath of 1688?” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42, 1 (1981), pp. 151–8.