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Parody of John Dryden’s SONG TO APOLLO in Jonathan Swift’s A DESCRIPTION OF THE MORNING

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When Jonathan Swift’s poem “A Description of the Morning” first appeared in The Tatler no. 9 (April 30, 1709), emanating from Will’s Coffee-house, it was accompanied by introductory remarks stating that the poem’s author, “Mr. Humphrey Wagstaff,” seeking to avoid the clichés of sonnets, had adopted “a Way perfectly new, and describ’d Things exactly as they happen: He never forms Fields, or Nymphs, or Groves, where they are not, but makes the Incidents just as they really appear” (Donald F. Bond 80). Whilst the reliability of the introduction has been challenged, and projection of a “fallen city” and “Creation” inferred (Roger Savage 171–94; David M. Vieth 303), a tendency to imitate the notion that the poet “describ’d Things exactly as they happen” remains, despite the warning against “Imitators” that follows “Wagstaff”’s poem. Hence, A. B. England, considering the poem “highly experimental,” finds each of its objects to be without “an overriding moral or philosophical purpose” (14), and C. N. Manlove, finding “little of significance” in the poem, concludes that “Swift’s purpose […] was simply empirical” (466). Gary Roberts similarly assumes that “Swift seems merely to describe,” categorizing the work as “realism” (43, 39), and Ingo Berensmeyer finds it indicative of “urban realism” in the mock georgic (240, 247–48).

There are grounds, however, for reframing Swift’s “perfectly new” eighteen-line poem as a parodic dialog with the seventeen-line “Song to Apollo,” “cautiously” attributed to John Dryden (Dryden Plays, n. 478–79), in Dryden and Nathaniel Lee’s version of Ὀλίσπος Τύραννος. Swift’s 1709 verse to Anne Finch, “Apollo outwitted. To the Honourable Mrs. Finch, under her Name of Ardelia” (Swift Works, 114–16), demonstrates his identification with the persona of Apollo, a mask he would also don in later years. In addition to the poem’s contextual association with Will’s Coffee-house, over which Dryden was the “presiding genius” (William Harrison Ukers 574), stylistic evidence suggests that “Description of the Morning” is Swift-as-Apollo’s ironic appropriation of Dryden’s song, inverting panegyric into a hell vision. The satire unveils the City of the Sun as that of Destruction (Isaiah 19:18), analogous to plague-ridden Thebes and its other, war-torn Athens (Froma I. Zeitlin 130–67).
Swift is known to have been disgruntled during his visit to London, the setting of the poem, because his mission to gain the return of the First Fruits to the Irish clergy was thwarted (John Stubbs 238, 250–52, 273). Opposed to repealing the Test Act, Swift also disagreed with the Whigs for incurring debt to war with France (Eugene Hammond 295–99). His contempt of the immorality he perceived among all levels of London society is amply documented in his pamphlets from the period (Swift Prose, 1–63).

The first line of the poem deflates London pretensions by inverting the glorious approach of the Apollonian chariot of the dawn into the mundane “Hackney-Coach / Appearing” (Bond 80), framed by the Drydenian “Now.” The invocation of the Drydenian muse contradicts the apparent contemporaneity of the poem, exacting an allegorical doubleness through which Apollo assimilates London to antiquity, raising the intertextual frame of Dryden’s translations, as in “Now the green Lizard in the Grove is laid” (Pastoral II [7]), “Now take your Turns, ye Muses, to rehearse” (Pastoral VIII [87]), or “Now sing we stormy Stars, when Autumn weighs” (Georgics I [419]) (Dryden Poems, 79, 122, 169). Dryden’s recourse to “now” is so frequent as to be a signatory cliché of his work, by imitation of which Swift efficiently heralds his parodic intent.

Love of Dryden’s Phoebus, through whose regenerative force, in the second line of “Song to Apollo,” “every Beast is rouz’d in his Den” (Dryden Oedipus, II.i.153), finds a mocking echo in Swift’s third line, “Now Betty from her Master’s Bed had flown,” the concupiscent “Betty” corresponding, alliteratively, to “Beast,” and her “Bed,” assonantly, to “Den,” “now” with the pluperfect again invoking Dryden (as in “And now the setting Sun had warn’d the Swain” [Pastoral VI (121)]) (Dryden Poems, 111). Bird is mapped onto “Betty,” who “had flown” from her lover, as Dryden’s “Birds” suffer the god’s “absence” (II.i.154), the third-line correspondence between the two works affording Swift a sardonic inversion of the sacred into illicit sex. The trinity allusion is proleptic of the apocalyptic seventh line, in which the motion of Dryden’s “God who flings / His Thunder round, and the Lightning wings” (II.i.158–59) is parodied as “Now Moll had whirl’d her Mop with dextrous Airs” [7].

The morning of Swift’s Londoners contradicts the “perfectly new” luminosity of those for whom Phoebus is beloved, adumbrating doom. The shadows cast by the folds of the bed “Betty” hastily discomposes are microcosmic, like the parings near the “Master’s Dore” [5–6]. The stereotypically demonic connotations of blackness associated with Swift’s “Smallcoal-Man” [11] and the “Chimney-sweep” [12] transmute the Apollonian “fire” by which Dryden’s “Prophet” awakens, now infernally (Dryden and Lee Oedipus, II.i.163–65). The recurrent “Now,” by which Swift “privileges motion over stasis” (Roberts 39–40), instantiates a journey to hell, an inglorious Orphic descent, the accompanying “Cadence deep” and “shriller Notes” [11–12] of which parody the evocation of the “God of Songs, and Orphenian Strings” in the mid-section of “Song to Apollo” (II.i.160). London’s City of the Sun is ironically that of thieves in the night, the “Furies” that ignite the “groans” of Dryden’s “Prophet” (II.i.166–67) forecasting Swift’s “Brickdust Moll” who “had scream’d
through half a Street” [14], the long distance of the scream translating the depths of immorality, whilst the burdened “Flock,” “let out a’ Nights to steal for Fees” [15–16], like the lagging “Satchel”-laden “School-boys” [18], casts judgment on London powers, and their inferiors, as the antithesis of the “Prophet” who would “bend with the load, / Tho’ he burst with the weight of the terrible God” (Dryden and Lee Oedipus, II.i.167–68).

The indirection of Swift’s parody is a telling indictment of Londoners’ inability to recognize their own sin, as Thebans are blind to the murderer within.

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