

Genealogie der Moral (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, originally published in 1887) and rearticulated by Michel Foucault in texts like "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" ("What Is an Author?," 1969) and "Nietzsche, généalogie, histoire" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 1971). Highlighting some of the affinities between Swift's satire and genealogical inquiry suggests productive new research strategies for analysts of *A Tale of a Tub*, as well as for those studying the scope and limits of genealogy itself. Specifically, the *Tale* can be read as a (proto-)genealogical investigation of Christian mores and institutions; here Swiftian satire functions not just as a vehicle for moral evaluation but also as a device for understanding how history unfolds – a way of modeling the fundamentally *interpretive* character of the substitutions and transformations that, for Nietzsche as well as Swift, drive historico-cultural change. What is more, Swift's techniques in the *Tale* can be aligned with techniques more broadly associated with the genre of Menippean satire. The Menippean dimensions of Swift's work suggest a wider generic and rhetorical context for the practice of genealogical inquiry, as pursued both by Nietzsche and by Foucault.

For his part, Nietzsche holds that:

etwas Vorhandenes, irgendwie Zu-Stande-Gekommenes immer wieder von einer ihm überlegenen Macht auf neue Ansichten ausgelegt, neu in Beschlag genommen, zu einem neuen Nutzen umgebildet und umgerichtet wird; dass alles Geschehen in der organischen Welt ein Überwältigen, Herrwerden und dass wiederum alles Überwältigen und Herrwerden ein Neu-Interpretieren, ein Zurechtmachen ist, bei dem der bisherige "Sinn" und "Zweck" nothwendig verdunkelt oder ganz ausgelöscht werden muss. (329-30)¹

Given this view of how things (laws, customs, institutions) change over time, we would do well to adopt an interpretive model that is sensitive to the crucial role played by interpretation itself in the historical process. That model, for Nietzsche, is genealogy and it strives to account for the way

die ganze Geschichte eines "Dings," eines Organs, eines Brauchs kann dergestalt eine fortgesetzte Zeichen-Kette von immer neuen Interpretationen und Zurechtmachungen sein, deren Ursachen selbst unter sich nicht im Zusammenhange

1 Walter Kaufmann translates this passage as follows: "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated" (Nietzsche, *Morals* 513).

Swift, Nietzsche, and Genealogy

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Considerable critical attention has been devoted to both the formal ingenuity and the sociocultural contexts of Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, first published in 1704. For instance, Frederik N. Smith bases his stylistic analysis of Swift's satire on the claim that its author possessed a "peculiar awareness of how language can inhibit or be the means of reaching an understanding of reality" (6). Smith goes on to describe the *Tale* as a self-reflexive "anti-novel" of the same ilk as Samuel Beckett's *Watt* or John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (125). In a similar vein, Marilyn Francus argues that Swift's "linguistic education" – in particular, his familiarity with John Locke's ideas about language – made Swift especially sensitive to abuses of language and thought. Read against the backdrop of Lockean theory, Swift's *Tale* suggests that "[w]hen language users cannot or will not see the multiplicative signification of words, metaphors disintegrate, and stupidity, if not outright madness, sets in" (Francus 94). Furthermore, critics like Michael DePorte, James A. W. Rembert, and Everett Zimmerman have explored the ideological underpinnings as well as the philosophical milieux of the *Tale*. DePorte discusses how the elusiveness and ambiguity of the text led some contemporary readers to charge Swift with impiety; indeed, beneath the surface of the satire (particularly the allegory of the coats) DePorte detects a profound meditation on the nature and scope of God's power (82-84). Meanwhile, Rembert contextualizes the *Tale* as a satire on scholastic methods of disputation (96-97), and Zimmerman shows how Swift draws on the traditions of biblical exegesis to construct a narrator engaged in an ongoing "hermeneutics of self" (39-60).

These formal and contextual approaches to the *Tale* throw light on the motives, methods, and objects of Swift's satire. Yet commentators have overlooked important analogies between Swift's satiric techniques and the genealogical mode of inquiry pioneered by Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *Zur*

zu sein brauchen, vielmehr unter Umständen sich bloss zufällig hinter einander folgen und ablösen. "Entwicklung" eines Dings, eines Brauchs, eines Organs ist demgemäss nichts weniger als sein progressus auf Ziel hin, noch weniger ein logischer und kürzester, mit dem kleinsten Aufwand von Kraft und Kosten erreichter progressus, – sondern die Aufeinanderfolge von mehr oder minder tiefgehenden, mehr oder minder von einander unabhängigen, an ihm sich abspielenden Überwältigungsprozessen, hinzugerechnet die dagegen jedes Mal aufgewendeten Widerstände, die versuchten Form-Verwandlungen zum Zweck der Vertheidigung und Reaktion, auch die Resultate gelungener Gegenaktionen. (330-31)²

In *A Tale of a Tub*, the history of Christianity likewise appears as a continuous sign-chain of new interpretations. This interpretive flux is governed not by readily discernible causal mechanisms but by fashion, and it "evolves" not in the form of progress toward a goal but through an overcoming of earlier interpretations by later ones.³ Thus the real story of Peter (Catholicism), Martin (Anglicanism), and Jack (radical or dissenting Protestantism) begins when their father dies and the three brothers "came up to town and fell in love with the ladies" in the *grande monde* (Swift 35). In Swift's allegory of the coats, history and fashion are at once coeval and isomorphic; the distinguishing trait of both domains is the lack of a principled basis for explaining why certain effects derive from certain causes. Indeed, to become a slave to fashion is to open oneself to random series of actions and reactions – to serial movements along a sign-chain whose nodes can be indexed as "old" and "new" but not as "cause" and "effect." Hence when shoulder-knots become all the rage, the three brothers scour their

2 In Kaufmann's version: "the entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom can...be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion. The 'evolution' of a thing, a custom, an organ is thus by no means its *progressus* toward a goal, even less a logical *progressus* by the shortest route and with the smallest expenditure of force – but a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions" (Nietzsche, *Morals* 513-4).

3 Note here a parallel with the project of genealogy as described by R. Kevin Hill: "History, according to genealogists, is not teleological (as it is for Hegel). They cannot identify a goal of a historical process, and then go on to show how it gradually emerged from its embryonic beginnings. Rather, they chart the processes that, by contingent confluence, produce a contemporary result. Hence the metaphor: no individual is the goal of a family history. Rather, a family is a vast fabric of relationships, and any one individual represents only one among many confluences of past lines of descent" (1).

father's "will" to see if this addition to their coats is sanctioned *jure paterno* (Swift 39). The brothers resort to a quasi-anagrammatic interpretation of the will, scrambling the syllables of individual worlds until they are able to spell (or almost spell) S,H,O,U,L,D,E,R,K,N,O,T,S. What Swift portrays as the very first (Christian) interpretation is marked by a subduing of the interpretandum to the purposes of the present; before there ever was a fidelity to the text, history begins as a mode of interpretation that actively transforms what it pretends merely to read, and in turn that transformation stems from the interpreters' will to power. Swift's account of the primal scene of interpretation is thus animated by the same investigative ends informing genealogical inquiry, as described by Nietzsche and as further elaborated by Foucault in "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire":

La généalogie ne prétend pas remonter le temps pour rétablir une grande continuité par-delà la dispersion de l'oubli; sa tâche n'est pas de montrer que le passé est encore là, bien vivant dans le présent, l'animant encore en secret, après avoir imposé à toutes les traverses du parcours une forme dessinée dès le départ. Rien qui ressemblerait à l'évolution d'une espèce, au destin d'un peuple. Suivre la filière complexe de la provenance, c'est au contraire maintenir ce qui s'est passé dans la dispersion qui lui est propre: c'est repérer les accidents, les infimes déviations – ou au contraire les retournements complets – les erreurs, les fautes d'appréciation, les mauvais calculs qui ont donné naissance à ce qui existe et vaut pour nous; c'est découvrir qu'à la racine de ce que nous connaissons et de ce que nous sommes – il n'y a point la vérité et l'être, mais l'extériorité de l'accident. (152)⁴

Like the genealogist, Swift interprets cultural (in this case, religious) practices as interpretive practices in their own right; like the genealogist, too, Swift focuses on issues of mastery or power in order to denaturalize "the contingent structures

4 Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon translate this passage as follows: "Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore the unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. [Rather, the purpose of genealogy] is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents" (Foucault, "Genealogy" 81; cf. Foucault, "Qu'est-ce? 73-79 and "What" 101-105). For an account of the differences between Foucault's understanding of genealogy and the French thinker's own earlier approach to interpretation as "archeology," see Rudi Visker (30-73).

we mistakenly consider given, solid, and extending without change into the future as well as into the past" (Nehamas 110).

Other incidents in the *Tale* warrant comparison with Nietzschean/Foucauldian genealogy as a way of interpreting interpretation, as meta-interpretation. For example, the three brothers resort to ever more elaborate exegetical maneuvers to justify adding red satin (40-1), silver fringes (41-2), and embroidered images of saints (43) to the coats bequeathed to them by their father. The history of the Christian faith is in effect the collective bad faith displayed by Peter, Martin, and Jack on these interpretive occasions. Yet a rethinking of the very idea of a good-faith interpretation – the idea of an interpretation based on fidelity to a text rather than on the interpreter's will to master and transform that text – is one of the hallmarks of both Swiftian satire and genealogical analysis.⁵ Along the same lines, as part of Swift's own patently (even rabidly) anti-Catholic interpretation of Christianity, Peter becomes a "projector and virtuoso, wherein he so well succeeded that many famous discoveries, projects, and machines, which bear great vogue and practice at present in the world, are owing entirely to Lord Peter's invention" (50). On the basis of his arbitrary determination that he is sole heir to his father, Peter reshapes religious practice, and alters the course of Christian history, by inventing purgatory, penance and absolution, the confessional box, holy water (or the "universal pickle"), papal bulls, and the doctrine of transubstantiation (51-59). Swift's satire recasts the history of Catholic institutions as a series of autotelic inventions; this is a proliferation of rituals linked only by the power that Peter has assumed in order to make the rituals proliferate. When the narrator presents these institutions paratactically, in the form of a catalogue, the text flattens out any cultural or historical differences between them, suggesting that Peter's innovations on biblical tradition are all "impositions" of the sort that genealogists make it a point to study: "alle Zwecke, alle Nützlichkeiten sind nur geworden ist and ihm von sich aus den Sinn einer Funktion aufgepägt hat" (Nietzsche 330).⁶ Furthermore, whereas Swift focuses on specifically Catholic interpretations/impositions in this section of the *Tale*, taken as a whole the satire

5 In the words of Alexander Nehamas, "[g]enealogy is interpretation in the sense that it treats our moral practices not as given but as 'texts,' as signs with a meaning, as manifestations of a will to power that this interpretation tries to reveal" (108).

6 Kaufmann translates: "purposes and utilities are only signs that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function" (Nietzsche, *Morals* 513).

suggests that *all* historical changes can be construed as manifestations of a will to power – as more or less imperious substitutions of events-as-signs for other events-as-signs.

Yet it is not just the content of Swift's text that affiliates the *Tale* with Nietzschean genealogy. Formally speaking, both Nietzsche and Swift use allegorical techniques to indicate the irreducibility of interpretation. Put otherwise, the form of their texts dramatizes the way interpretation goes all the way down, unanchored by any non- or pre-interpretive context that would halt the movement of reading along the sign-chain of history. Stacking interpretive frames one upon another, the authors' allegorical forms necessitate textual exegesis even as the allegories themselves thematize what it means to interpret. Nietzsche proposes his account of the slave and noble classes not only as an explanation of the origin of the concepts of good and evil, but also as an allegory in terms of which contemporary moralities can be assessed as active (formed in accordance with "noble" values) or reactive (formed in accordance with "slave" values).⁷ Likewise, Swift's allegory of the coats functions both as a (satiric) explanation of the origin of Christian institutions and as a heuristic scheme for assessing current-day Catholic, Anglican, and radical Protestant practices. In both cases, readers must work to confer on textual occurrences their allegorical as well as their literal significance; we must plot particular events and ideas against a second, concurrent structure of events and ideas (the origin and nature of ideas of good and evil; the origin and nature of Christian religious practices).⁸ Thus, although one author wrote before and the other after the death of God, both Swift and Nietzsche make interpretation the medium as well as the focus of their genealogical inquiries.

Indeed, the parallels between Swift's and Nietzsche's techniques suggest that the two writers draw on a shared rhetorical tradition, a common generic

7 As Nietzsche puts it, "Der Sklavenaufstand in der Moral beginnt damit, dass das Ressentiment selbst schöpferisch wird und Werthe gebiert.... Während alle vornehme Moral aus einem triumphirenden Ja-sagen zu sich selber herauswächst, sagt die Sklaven-Moral von vornherein Nein zu einem 'Ausserhalb,' zu einem 'Anders,' zu einem 'Nichts-selbst'; und dies Nein ist ihre schöpferische That" (*Genealogie* 284-85). In Kaufmann's version: "The slave revolt in morality begins when resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values.... While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself,' and this No is its creative deed" (Nietzsche, *Morals* 472).

8 Here I am adopting Northrop Frye's definition of allegory: "We have allegory when the events of a narrative obviously and continuously refer to another simultaneous structure of events and ideas, whether historical events, moral or philosophical ideas, or natural phenomena" (12).

context enabling their strategies for polemicism and critique. Although literary critics have already noted that much of Swift's work can be placed in the genre of Menippean satire, students of genealogical inquiry need to explore whether this genre is also a source of techniques that Nietzsche refined and radicalized rather than inventing. Joel C. Ralihan describes Menippean satire in broad terms as "an unsettling or subversive combination of fantasy, learning, and philosophy" (3).⁹ In Northrop Frye's classic account, the genre spans texts by authors as various as Petronius, Apuleius, Rabelais, Swift, and Voltaire and

deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior. The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent.... The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the [the figure of the] *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines. (*Anatomy* 309)¹⁰

The targets of both Swiftian satire and genealogical analysis are mental attitudes and not specific people or even identifiable groups – however much the fascists tried to contort Nietzsche's allegory of nobles and slaves to fit it onto a Procrustean bed of antisemitic doctrine. Swift targets attitudes of religiosity that have come to mask themselves as true religion; Nietzsche focuses on time-bound definitions of morality that have passed themselves off as the essence of what it means to be good. What is especially noteworthy in this context, however, is the self-subverting way in which both writers critique the historical process by which customs and mores get lifted out of history, misconstrued as natural and immutable. This is where a genealogy of genealogy itself might begin to uncover

9 Ralihan notes that *Menippean satire* was not used by the ancients as a generic term. This usage did not gain currency until the publication of Justus Lipsius' *Satyra Menippea* in 1581.

10 Although I shall not attempt to develop the analogy here, Ralihan's more recent characterization of the genre might be profitably compared with the plurality of personae and styles that Nietzsche adopts in his last work, *Ecce Homo*: "The genre is an indecorous mixture of disparate elements, of forms, styles, and themes that exist uneasily side by side, and from which no coherent intellectual, moral or aesthetic appreciation may be drawn. [There is a] juxtaposition of seemingly serious material and a comic, fantastic setting, the alternation of passages in wildly different styles; the toleration of digression; and the combination of the moral and the erotic" (Ralihan 34).

the genealogist's own Menippean roots. Menippean satire is a mode of discourse that mocks all claims to truth as tokens of bias; undercutting its own authority, replacing the monologic discourse of reasoned argumentation with the polyphony of self-parody, Menippean satire reconceptualizes truth itself as truth-from-a-particular-perspective. Hence the genre revolves around a central paradox, given that it tries "in words, [to deny] the possibility of expressing the truth in words" (Ralihan 11).

This, too, is the genealogist's paradox. To be sure, insofar as all satire works to offset what R. Kevin Hill calls "inflationary interpretations," it and genealogy share broadly similar aims. Like every satirist (and not just the Menippean ones),

The genealogist is concerned to undermine a historical and inflationary interpretations of mundane facts about human life. These interpretations typically appeal to structures, norms, entities, etc. which stand above both nature and history. If norms [can be shown to be] produced by struggle and veiled by mystification, they will be the expression of someone's pragmatic interests. Inflationary interpretations conceal these interests and the ways that the practice in question promotes them. (Hill 2)

Satirists and genealogists both aim to deflate, to recast the ideal and transcendent as partial and limited—as matters of pragmatic interest that, in more bombastic styles, might be figured as the dictates of Truth, Beauty, or Justice. More than this, however, the genealogist is in the position of the specifically *Menippean* satirist, who does not just satirize but also refuses to spare his or her own discourse from the lash of satire. In rhetorical terms, genealogists must engage in two projects at once. On the one hand, they must tell a story about the way institutions, norms, and customs emerge in time yet work to obscure their own conditions of emergence. Genealogical inquiry, as we have seen, assumes that the history of the social order involves not gradual progress toward a goal, but rather a chain of unpredictable (indeed, quantized) shifts in which power imposes new interpretations on existing customs, norms, and institutions, which themselves derived from impossible-to-predict reinterpretations of still earlier customs, norms, and institutions. On the other hand, though, genealogists must also situate their own stories in time. If it is to avoid slipping back into the condition of forgetfulness against which it was designed to militate, the genealogist's story must foreground its status as *an* interpretation, one narrative among other possible narratives of how the past has led to the present. What is needed, more precisely, is a narrative that strives not to tell the Truth but to give an account of how certain things have come to be held as true. Further investigation into the self-subverting techniques of Menippean satire may thus shed new light on the

rhetorical and conceptual requirements of genealogy, a radically self-questioning strategy for posing questions about the past, the present, and their interrelations.¹¹

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11 I am grateful to the anonymous reader who suggested that I revise an earlier version of this essay by considering the bearing of Menippean satire on my discussion of Swift, Nietzsche, and genealogy.

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