2008

Augustan American Verse

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Recommended Citation
The narrator of Henry Brooke’s *The New Metamorphosis* remarks that Michy, the poem’s hero, is off to “Antigua, Jamaica / Barbado’s, Bermude, or the Lands of Tobacco,” as if these places were interchangeable, but Michy discovers the perils of ignoring local conditions when he loses his entire investment. Brooke’s spirited work is one of numerous poems written from about 1700 to around 1770 by poets who considered themselves loyal British citizens living in the colonies. However, “the colonies” is a term somebody living in England might have used. The colonists themselves usually identified with a specific colony. For example, the title page of Ebenezer Cook’s *Sotweed Redivivus*, playing off the common subtitle of almanacs, says the poem is “calculated to the meridian of Maryland.” And Richard Lewis set his greatest poem on the road between Patapsco and Annapolis. The Schuykill Swains (Thomas Godfrey, Nathaniel Evans, Francis Hopkinson, and others) locate their meditations next to the river with that name.

**POETRY AS PERFORMANCE**

Colonial Augustan poets sought to produce “polite” verse and participate in what they considered the great tradition of British belles lettres. Colonial poets often
said they were imitating Alexander Pope, Virgil, and Horace. Joseph Addison, John Dryden, and John Milton were also frequently mentioned. A reader acquainted with James Thomson, Abraham Cowley, Samuel Butler, and John Purnefret's "The Choice" will find much familiar in colonial poetry—so much so that later critics have often complained that colonial verse is derivative. Consider the opening to Robert Bolling's "To Miss Nancy Blair of Williamsburg in Virginia":

Say, why like a little fawn
Bounding o'er the dewy lawn
Seeking where its dam hath stray'd
Dost thou fly me, little maid?

(Bolling 1764a, 92)

Since nothing in these lines (or subsequently in the poem) is peculiarly American, poems such as this have often been dismissed as unoriginal. The poem could have as easily been written in London as in Williamsburg—but that was exactly the point. Bolling wanted to fit in with British poets, and his many publications in Great Britain confirm his success on his own terms. Moreover, time and again, poets asserted their writing adhered to the principles of an "approved Judge," as Lewis puts it in the preface to The Mouse-Trap, his translation of Edward Holdsworth's Muscipula. For this reason, translation and imitation held a very high place on both sides of the Atlantic. Alexander Pope's fortune was made not from An Essay on Man or The Rape of the Lock but from his translations of Homer, and James Thomson was called the English Virgil for The Seasons. The first belles-lettres work published in Maryland was The Mouse-Trap. Lewis calls his work a "Performance," and the text appears with the Latin original and Lewis's English rendition on facing pages, so the reader could judge the performance (Lewis 1728, 63–64). Similarly, Bolling's imitation of Horace prints numbers in the margins corresponding to numbered sections of its model, while Thomas Cradock's Maryland Eclogues are glossed with passages from Virgil (Bolling 1762; Cradock 1983). The many verse paraphrases of psalms published in magazines and newspapers have this aspect of performance, as their writers surely believed readers familiar with the original.

Poetry as performance implies an audience, conceiving writing as a social act appropriate to the intercourse of everyday life. Elizabeth Fergusson inscribed a poem on a fan and sent it to her friend Juliana Ritchie, as well as Ritchie's witty reply (Stabile 2004). Sarah Kemble Knight did not think it improper to intersperse short lyrics in her prose travel narrative. Cook argued economic policy in Sotweed Redivivus, and William Smith's proposal to the New York House of Representatives, Some Thoughts on Education (1752), concludes with a lengthy poem.

Whatever the audience, virtually every colonial Augustan thought that, in the words of Joseph Breitnall, poetry's function was to "gladden and instruct the World" (Rose 1740, 12). In The Sugar-Cane, James Grainger asserts that "instructing
the reader” is the “nobler end of all poetry” (Grainger 1764, 2). Poetry’s didactic function is also asserted when Cook likens *Sotweed Redivivus* to a hornbook. Martha Brewster claimed that she “had but a single Aim / My Self and nearest Friends to Entertain,” but this was not the case even for her own collection, which includes such instructive poems as “An Essay on the Four Ages of Man” and “On the Last Judgment” (Brewster 1758).

Conversely, Mather Byles’s encomium to Milton, “Written in *Paradise Lost,*” does not stress instruction:

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Now Hell is open’d, and I see the Flames
Wide-waving, blazing high, and flutt’ring dance:
Now clanking Chains amaze my listn’ing Ears,
And hideous Spectres skim before my Sight
Or in my wild Imagination Stare.
(Byles 1744, 26)
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One might think a Congregational minister and grandson of Increase Mather would address the epic’s doctrinal aspects (such as its Arianism), but Byles stresses the aesthetic and affective, as does Nathaniel Evans in his definition of true poetry:

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There is a pleasing *Je ne scay quoi* in the productions of poetick genius, which is easier felt than described. It is the *voice of nature* in the Poet, operating like a charm on the soul of the reader. It is the *marvellous conception,* the noble *wildness,* the *lofty sentiment,* the *fire and enthusiasm* of spirit, the *living imagery,* the *exquisite choice of word,* the *variety,* the *sweetness,* the *majesty* of numbers, and irresistible *magic of expression.* (Evans 1772, vii)
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Evans’s enthusiasm strongly suggests the influence of Longinus. Distant though this is from a Popean emphasis on wit and reason, it shares with the poetics of that influential Augustan a central tenet: originality is not an important criterion for judging poetry. In fact, even Byles and Evans believed that poetry ought to say “what oft was *Thought,* but ne’er so well *Express,*” as Pope expressed it in *An Essay on Criticism.*

Augustan poets thus found themselves in a bind: they were to instruct, yet they were to tell readers what they already knew. John Parke’s introduction to *Lyric Works of Horace* quotes Addison’s remarks on Pope to elaborate this notion: “As for those [precepts] which are the *most known,* and the most *received,* they are placed in so beautiful a light, and illustrated with such apt allusions that they have in them all the graces of *novelty,* and make the reader, who was *before* acquainted with them, still more convinced of their truth and solidity” (Parke 1786, xviii). Those poets who claimed originality tended to say that they were applying what was already known to a new place. Grainger explained that the “*novelty*” of his poem on the subject of cultivating sugarcane would “enrich poetry with many new and picturesque images” but adds, “the general precepts are suited to every climate” (Grainger 1764, 1).
Similarly, Cook's calculating his satires to Maryland's meridian implies universal principles locally applied.

Though some had delved into Longinus and expected to be amazed, typically Augustan readers delighted in predictability. Most agreed with Samuel Johnson that poetry's "great pleasure" stems from "the known measure of the lines and the uniform structure of the stanzas, by which the voice is regularized and the memory relieved" (Johnson 1925, 47). The "sweetest Numbers," Jane Colman Turell wrote in her verse tribute, "On the Incomparable Mr. Waller," come from the "justest Standard of our English Verse" (Turell 1735, 83). In other words, readers took pleasure in recognizing what they read. Social performance, then, meant satisfying an audience's expectations and comporting oneself in a pleasing way in print.

The reader, time and again, was thought to sit in judgment. In Some Critical Observations upon a Late Poem, Entitled, The Breeches, William Smith professed to be surprised that the author allowed his name to appear: "I could scarce have believed any Man so foolishly ambitious, as to imagine he could recommend himself to the Publick by so mean a Performance" (Smith 1750, 5). William Dawson's preface to Poems on Several Occasions concludes with these words: "It is therefore my sincere Request to the candid Reader, that he will peruse the following Poems with the utmost Strictness and Severity; and if he finds them unworthy of his Approbation, the Author takes this Opportunity of being the first in giving his Vote, that he never hereafter publish any more" (Dawson 1920, iv).

How much of this is merely conventional modesty and how much a real fear of negative opinion is hard to reckon. Still, colonial writers often acknowledged that they felt the burden of living up to the standards of British high culture. Poems in the translatio studii genre project a future glory for the colonies; even the poems that depict Britain as a fading kingdom took for granted the glory of Britain's not-so-distant past. The difference between the colonies and the mother country is the foundation of the satire in Cook's Sot-weed Factor (1708) and an engine that drives nearly every work on local themes.

Poets often commented on the poverty of their surroundings. The speaker of Bolling's "To My Flute" spoke for many when he said he felt "exil'd" in a "solitude / Dull seat of boors and planters rude" (Bolling 1764b, 101–102). George Webb's celebration of genteel culture in Batchelors-Hall is prefaced with the comment "every rude essay towards wit and politeness ought to be encouraged in so young a country as ours" (Webb 1731, 4). A shepherd in Nathaniel Evans's "Daphnis and Menalcas" worries that poets in the colonies will "ne'er feel the muse's fire": "O Pennsylvania!" he continues, "shall no son of thine / Glow with the raptures of the sacred nine?" (Evans 1772, 1). No doubt Evans's performance is supposed to dispel these fears, but while a London poet might fear that he or she lacks the poetic impulse, that same poet would never say it may not be available on English soil. Even poets asserting that the colonies were a fine place for the arts felt the sting of negative assumptions from across the Atlantic. In Some Critical Observations,
for example, William Smith complains that “the unhappy Prepossession of some Europeans” was that “all Americans are Fools, or little better” (Smith 1750, 5).

Like their European contemporaries, Augustan poets in the colonies believed the “polish’d Arts” could help control “wild Passions” and “humanize the Soul,” as James Sterling asserts in the prologue to The Tragedy of the Orphan and Lethe (Sterling 1760a). Writers like Sterling and Lewis wrote works that model politeness with the aim of creating high culture and improving moral development. Lawrence E. Klein has pointed out the political implications of Shaftesbury’s gentlemanly calls for politeness, but Shaftesbury’s full name and title—Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Baron Cooper of Pawlett, Baron Ashley of Wimborne St. Giles, helps demonstrate that gentility was within the pale of existing class system (Klein 1994).

Alternatively, Cradock’s Eclogues depicts a much more mobile society:

Our haughty Lord, tho’ now so wondrous great
Once on Tobacco, and on Hogs did wait:
First toil’d like me, was next an Overseer;
So by Degrees grew what you’ve found him here.
(Cradock 1983, 151)

Still, such a person was likely to have European prejudices. One of the card-playing women in Sot-weed Factor says to the other,

D——m you, says one, tho’ now so brave,
I knew you late a Four-Years Slave;
What if Planters Wife you go,
Nature design’d you for the Hoe.
(Mulford 2002, 570)

Four years was a typical term of indenture. Likewise, an unsigned poem in the Maryland Gazette entitled “The Tale of the T[ur]d” narrates the tale of a baker who tries to make excrement palatable. But no matter how he dresses it, it still stinks. The moral, says the author, is that “all the Power of Art or Education” will not “intirely wash away the Dirt of the Journey-Man’s palm.” As a matter of fact, relatively few eighteenth-century American poets did not have dirty palms in their immediate ancestry. Thus, colonial Augustan poetry provides the drama of writers attempting to take paradigms of gentility and culture that emerged from one society and transplant them in a very different society. Shaftesbury jockeyed for the rights of a class that already had considerable privilege. The colonies, on the other hand, featured “gentlemen” without an estate and centuries of breeding assuming those same rights.

Devoted to reproducing British high culture, colonial Augustan poets often wrote verse that, to a twenty-first-century eye, seems to offer glimpses of the “authentic” awash in a sea of convention. Modern readers may prefer these lines from
Annis Boudinot Stockton, describing her vigil watching over her husband during his fatal illness—

While through the silence of this gloomy night,
My aching heart reverberates every groan;
And watching by that glimmering taper's light,
I make each sigh, each mortal pang my own.

—which feel heartfelt, over the consolation with which the poem ends—

Yes, the Redeemer comes to wipe the tears,
The briny tears, from every weeping eye.
And death and sin, and doubts, and gloomy fears,
Shall all be loss in endless victory.
(Stockton 1995, 101)

—which feels merely conventional. Similarly, we can be pardoned for admiring the intense longing and loneliness of Brewster’s “A Letter to My Daughter, Ruby Bliss”—in which the speaker expresses grief over her daughter’s leaving home—more than its advice on pleasing subservience. But as we experience these feelings, we should be aware that the writers would insist that our priorities are backward, and that their religious and domestic pieties are no less heartfelt than the expression of strong emotion.

Moreover, as John Markland’s Typographia makes clear, sometimes the poet's view of himself as performer overshadows anything said. Typographia, a poem celebrating the introduction of printing in Virginia, invokes Pindar and his “fiery-footed steeds impatient of the Rein” (Markland 1730, 6). This allusion and the rhyming lines of irregular length show the influence of Cowley’s Pindarique Odes (1688).

The ode eventually turns to praising William Gooch, saying of Virginia’s lieutenant governor that “His calm, yet awful Look / Majestic, yet serene / The very Pow’r of Prejudice remov’d” so that “Ev’n Party-Rancour dy’d away, / And private spleen”; in fact, all “Factions end, and Murmurs cease” (Markland 1730, 9–10). While Gooch seems to have done a good job placating differing interests, he did not actually end all factions, prejudice, and spleen. Two years later, he would pen a pamphlet supporting his tobacco purity act, aimed at planters who burned tobacco in protest and refused to follow the law.

There is a sense that even Markland feels he went overboard. “I have said nothing herein,” he says in the preface, “which, I am confident, will not be readily asserted to, by all who have the Happiness to live under the present Administration, in this Colony.” But then he qualifies:

Unless, perhaps, this Exception be taken, that where a disinterested and unprejudic’d Patriotism (for I will not be asham’d of the Word) of a Governor to his People, and a reciprocal Affection and Obedience of them to Him is to be describ’d, the Author of this Piece may have wanted a Scale of Thought and Comprehension equal to the Heights of the Merits of the One, or the cordial Duty
of the other; and that on such a Subject it were better to be silent, than to say too little. (Markland 1730, iii–iv)

Well, if there are those who take exception to Markland’s claim that Gooch removed all spleen, then that would seriously undermine that claim, would it not? But such an analysis misreads the poem. To understand Typographia (and much of Augustan colonial poetry), we have to remember that Markland understood himself on a social stage. His narrator performs two things: first, the Cowleyan Pindarique ode; second, patriotism. The Pindarique, generally understood as hyperbolic, demands that the subject be the highest, and thus the governor must be ideal. Markland felt his role as a patriot likewise demanded unqualified praise.

**TRANSCENDENT VALUES AND CONTRACTARIAN LOGIC**

David Shields suggests dividing Augustan colonial poetry into two camps: men of wit and men of sense. Colonial poets can also be divided into those poets who supported the “court” party (royal and proprietary interests) and those who supported the “country” party (merchants, lower houses of state legislatures, and others who felt the court hindered their interests); those writing for a specific coterie and those seeking wider publication; and so on. Perhaps the most salient difference is between those works that extol transcendent values versus those that explore contractarian logic.

*Typographia* provides a convenient starting point:

... with contending Zeal
The *Prince* and *People* strive,
The *Prince* to make his *People* thrive,
Their Grievances to heal;
And all their good and adverse Fortune shares;
*They* in Return to *Him*,
Pay mutual Rev’rence and Esteem,
And all his Pow’r, his Honour, Happiness, is theirs.
(Markland 1730, 7)

Although the mutuality between ruler and ruled may seem like a contract, Markland’s rhetoric suggests that he is thinking along the lines of the Great Chain of Being, a network of relationships that parallel each other in type but not in scope: God is to the universe as the king is to the empire, as the lord is to his men, as the father is to the family. Everyone serves the other out of a sense of duty and love. Providence guarantees the system. Such a concept sanctions existing social and political relations, since they are created by God and mirror his ways.
A contractarian like Cook might ask, “Yes, but where is the surety?” There is in Markland’s idea no earthly system of penalties to redress a breach of faith, and, to a committed contractarian, only a fable of balanced interests. The system functions only in an ideal world of selfless labor. Contractarian logic assumes that everybody is out to make the best deal for themselves even if it is at the expense of their trading partners. In fact, the possibility of betrayal underlies all contracts, and, partly for that reason, contractarian Augustan poets were often disgusted utilitarians.

The opening of Lewis’s descriptive poem “A Journey from Patapsko to Maryland, April 4 1730” shows the uncomfortable fit between transcendent values and colonial conditions. The sun rises on a small plantation, where

Safe in yon Cottage dwells the Monarch-Swain,
His Subject-Flocks, close grazing, hide the Plain;
For him they live—and die t’uphold his reign.
Viands unbought his well-till’d Lands afford,
And smiling Plenty waits upon his Board;
Health shines with sprightly Beams around his Head,
And Sleep, with downy Wings, o’er shades his Bed;
His Sons robust his daily Labours share,
Patient of Toil, Companions in his Care
(Lewis 1988, 561)

Critics have praised the poem for its portrayal of the Maryland landscape, a claim bolstered by contemporary comment on the poem. Edward Kimber calls Lewis’s description “just and fine” (Kimber 1998, 52). When the poem appeared in the Pennsylvania Gazette, it was prefaced with the assertion that the “Picture” the poem presents “would suffer no disadvantage by an immediate comparison with the Original.” However, these writers only praise Lewis for his beautiful natural description. Kimber’s Itinerant Observations in America, in contrast, addresses issues like the different rates of exchange in the colonies and, in fact, does a better job than Lewis of describing real conditions.

A literalist Maryland reader of 1730 would surely ask, “If this is supposed to be a real plantation, where is the tobacco? Where are the slaves, overseers, and indentured servants?” By the 1730s Maryland was in the midst of a fundamental economic and social shift. The low price of tobacco and the large-scale importation of slaves transformed a rather atomic society based on smaller plantations to a more centralized one of large plantations. Because tobacco is a labor- and land-intensive crop, only large landholders could take advantage of economies of scale. While indentured servants were cheaper than slaves, their terms of indenture were up after a set number of years, whereas slaves—and all their children—were owned for perpetuity. Further, tobacco exhausted the soil, so tobacco fields had to be rotated and large tracts of land lie fallow. Finally, the price of tobacco fluctuated but was generally
low. In order to make a significant profit, a planter had to sell a lot of tobacco. All these factors produced an economic logic of larger plantations worked by slaves; smaller family farms like the one described in Lewis’s poem were constantly in danger of failure.

Lewis’s ideal plantation is subject to none of these strains. It is self-sufficient with “unbought” viands and does not have to worry about market fluctuations: its inhabitants do not appear to buy or sell. It produces wool and venison, useful products, instead of the stinking weed. Further, it is presided over by a “Monarch-Swain” and his willing servants who all follow the rules of self-sacrifice and obligation outlined by Markland. The sons dutifully share the father’s toil.

In the colonies, there was an endemic problem of labor, since a great deal of work was performed by slaves and indentured servants. With no remuneration, slaves had incentive only to work enough to escape punishment. Indentured servants, too, had little motivation. Although terms of indenture varied, typically servants had already received the lion’s share of their payment (transportation to the colonies). After their term, they might receive a new shirt, a pair of shoes, and a nominal payment or some acres of land. Small wonder, then, that the main advertisers in colonial newspapers were large landholders placing notices about escaped slaves and servants.

Thus, there was an unfortunate dynamic of employers trying to extract as much work as possible out of laborers who had little motivation to work. This comedy is well within the ken of contractarian writers like Cook and Bolling, but against the nature of transcendentalists like Lewis. Lewis dealt with the problem of labor by positing a farm very unlike the majority of farms in the colony and placing it outside the economic system. In this ideal landscape, even the sheep willingly give their lives for their monarch, just as in Lewis’s poem extolling the social good of shipbuilding, “To Mr. Samuel Hastings,” envisions the trees taking “Pleasure” in giving up their place in the forest in order to “fly to distant Lands o’er deepest Floods” (Lewis 1730). By making commodities free agents happily participating in an economy that literally destroys them, Lewis erases the laborers who cut down the trees and the farmhands who slaughter the sheep.

The labor problem taxed the ingenuity of poets writing colonial georgics, provoking, for example, grammatical convulsions in Charles Woodmason’s “The Indigo” (1757). This is how he describes chopping down trees: “Arm’d with destructive Steel thy Negroes bring / With Blows repeated let the Woodlands ring” (Mulford 2002, 500). The mood here is imperative, as the speaker instructs a planter on preparing to plant indigo. Untangled, the sentence says, “Have your Negroes bring destructive steel so that the woods ring with its repeated blows.” Unlike Lewis, who turns commodities to agents, Woodmason turns agents to commodities, as the lines literally portray slave labor as the planter’s passive tool. The steel does the real work; the slaves just bring it to the woods. Poetic license thus effaces the entanglements of self-interest typical of human society.
More typically, poets fell back on the Great Chain of Being. Sterling's "Verses Occasioned by the Success of the British Arms in the Year 1759," for instance, openly acknowledges what Lewis and Woodmason elide:

The Planter there amidst his swarthy Slaves,
Proscribes the Ground where yet the Forest waves;
The Slaves obedient to their new Lord's decree,
The keen edg'd ax apply to ev'ry Tree . . .
(Sterling 1760b)

The key word in the passage is "Lord," which suggests feudal and religious subservience. As the poem progresses, the speaker worries about the trees' "Groans" and not the conditions of the slaves' obedience; it is all justified in the end, though, when order is brought to the wilderness. As the planter surveys his plantation, "all in cheerful Plenty smile": everyone benefits from attending to the planter's cares.

Similarly, Cradock's tenth eclogue concerns Worthy, a jilted planter. Seeing the master brooding over lost love, everyone on the plantation likewise broods: "His faithful Overseer his Task forgets/And every Slave at his misfortune frets." This empathy seems odd when considering the predatory master-slave relationship indicated later in the poem, when Worthy wishes he had been born an overseer so that he could have assuaged his hurt feelings with a "Convict-Girl" or "Black Bess," even though he admits he finds that latter's appearance "hideous" (Cradock 1983, 199).

Nowhere is the labor problem more manifest than in book 4 of Grainger's The Sugar-Cane, which deals with slavery. The book begins by giving advice for how to choose the best slaves (for instance, it counsels that slaves from certain parts of Africa will commit suicide rather than accept servility) and how to accustom them to hard work. It then addresses the slaves directly, asking them to compare their relatively healthy toil to the lot of Scottish miners. Such an imprecation can only act as apostrophe, of course, since slaves were denied education. Grainger is trying to argue his way out of an obvious discrepancy—if people prefer death to labor, then the transcendent contention that all benefit seems ridiculous. Grainger would have the slaves think like Lewis's trees and sheep, willingly giving their lives to a system bent on destroying them.

**Henry Brooke's The New Metamorphosis**

Henry Brooke's The New Metamorphosis (1702) depicts the collision between transcendence and contract in a particularly telling way. Shields calls the work
Hudibrastic, and certainly the poem, like *Hudibras*, is a mock epic that mixes noble diction and ribald action. However, instead of Butler’s racy iambic tetrameter, Brooke uses anapestic tetrameter with frequent iambic substitution in the first foot. As a result, the poem unfolds with all the dignity of that other poem in the same meter—the nursery rhyme about the old woman living in a shoe. *Metamorphosis* has a balladic air, a reduction and inversion of Homer’s dactylic hexameter. However, Brooke’s target is not Homer but the characters’ failure to maintain transcendent values.

The poem’s endnote explains that a young merchant went to the New World to make a fortune by trading but “carried nothing home with him, but a bald Eagle,” and then invented the story to explain how he had lost everything (Shields 1988, 24). The poem begins by describing the young man’s parents. True epic heroes have divine ancestors and legendary hometowns; Peltander and Membrana live in Southwark (notorious for its prostitution, jail, and asylum), ironically described as famous for “eminent Schools / Of faith and good pay the Kingsbench and the Rules.” Peltander excels in the “liberal Arts / Of scraping and saving.” Lest any reader take this to mean he is merely careful with money, the narrator later calls Peltander a “Miser” (Shields 1988, 20–23).

Every night Peltander throws himself on a bed of straw and the “fleabitten breast” of his consort, whose name puns off “member,” which can mean penis. As a result of “tumbling together and heaven knows what”—actions true epics omit—Michy, the poem’s hero, is born. Brooke means to emphasize that Michy is the offspring of the spirits of penny-pinching and lust. His name is a further irony. Shields says it is a nickname for Michael, though probably Brooke wants his readers to compare the biblical prophet Micah, who blames troubles on a “harlot,” uses the bald eagle as an image, and rails against false merchants, faithlessness, and untrustworthy sons.

After Michy grows up, Peltander and nineteen of his kinsmen “pawn’d all to the skin” raise twenty pounds, which they give to Michy to invest. After “dropping some tear for his gold, or his Son,” Peltander sends him off to buy tobacco cheaply in the colonies and sell for a profit elsewhere. Michy squanders his money on the eagle, a cheap horse, and dissipation. To cover his tracks, he claims that, after he made his money, he got drunk, visited a prostitute, and refused to pay her. She complained to Venus, who converted Michy’s tobacco to an eagle (Shields 1988, 21–23).

It is hard to see how this tale, even if it were believable, could restore Michy’s reputation. The story, indeed, is more reflective of the contractarian logic that Brooke associates with the colonies. Michy is called on to be a factor, a middleman who does not, himself, produce anything. In fact, the narrator tells us that to raise capital, Peltander and his family acted as middlemen to their own possessions, for pawning only sells what has already been sold and produces nothing new. Peltander and his nineteen relatives hope to make money by taking advantage of the different exchange rates in the British Empire’s economic sphere.
When he arrives in the colonies, Michy reverts to type, following his lusts and pinching pennies. His dealings with the prostitute exemplify contractarianism:

A Minion of Venus presents in his way,
And Michy was frail, and consented to stray.
The time and the place and the sum were agreed,
And my Gallant had all his affections cou'd need;
But his Mistress (poor heart) for demanding her pay,
Was dismis’d with a kick, and my Spark slunk way
(Shields 1988, 23)

Because the poem does not consider the real state of prostitution—where women are forced into the trade through poverty, addiction, and abuse—it can conceive of prostitution as a contract, whereby a woman rents out her body for a price. The passage’s irony comes from blending the rhetoric of contract with that of romantic courting. And this is precisely the rhetoric of prostitution. Any male who has ever found himself in the wrong section of town in the evening can attest to the fact that prostitutes do not say, “I will endure your sexual advances for money, you disgusting pig”; instead, they say something like, “Hey, good looking! Want to be my boyfriend?” The john pretends to believe that the prostitute is attracted, and she pretends to enjoy his attentions. This false sympathy is also at work in more socially respectable selling, especially among those salesmen working for commission. It is a fiction that everyone engages in but no one believes.

When Michy breaks his contract with the prostitute, he loses the fruits of his other contract. Of course, Michy’s broken contract with Venus’s minion is a fiction; his real act of faithlessness is as steward of the money of his father and nineteen kinsmen. It might seem that the piece’s moral is to fulfill your contracts, yet Brooke’s note to his poem calls it a “Fable without a Moral” (Shields 1988, 24). The poem is without a moral because Brooke does not believe there should be contracts at all. To see this more clearly, it helps to state plainly what the poem ironically portrays. A father should fear for his son’s safety as he watches him leave for a long and potentially perilous venture, but Peltander is at least as interested in the fate of his investment. Entrusted with capital from his relatives, a son should resist the urge to squander it. If he seeks female companionship, it should be the disinterested kind based on real affection. At every juncture, characters pursue self-interest to the detriment of others. Even the relationship between Peltander and Membrana seems based on fulfilling personal desire, and the story’s satire stems from the characters’ lack of selfless action.

In all, Metamorphosis depicts a man who grows up in a world where everyone pursues self-interest but covers it up in a genteel and transparently false rhetoric. He travels to an overtly mercantile world where contracts are made plain, and when he breaks his contracts, he loses everything. These contracts are only necessary
because of the debased nature of the people described. At nearly every juncture an alternative, more noble system of value would be preferable.

EBENEZER COOK

Since the narrator of Cook's *Sot-weed Factor* is unnamed, perhaps we ought to call him Michy, since his tale entirely concerns the stretch of the story Brooke disdains to tell. The poem opens with its speaker lamenting that “Fate” has “Condemn’d” him with “Friends unkind and empty Purse,” forcing him to come to Maryland and trying to make his fortune by acting as a factor in the tobacco trade (Mulford 2002, 563). There are any number of reasons that a person from early eighteenth-century Britain might have an empty purse, including restrictions on his religion, economic deprivation, and unpopular political beliefs. From the evidence of the poem, it seems a fair guess that profligacy depleted the narrator's purse and presumption alienated his friends. At any rate, from the speaker’s point of view, the poem opens with two broken contracts: the first, between the goodwill (and, presumably, loans or advantageous economic liaisons) one might expect from friendship; the second, between the speaker the world. The speaker assumes that the world owes him something; when he does not get it, he feels condemned.

The first time the factor sees Maryland's planters, he remarks that they have a "Hue as tawny as a Moor: / Figure so strange, no God design'd / To be a part of Humane Kind" (Mulford 2002, 564). Although Cook and his fellow Marylanders considered themselves British citizens, to the English speaker they are the Other. When he subsequently compares the planters to the kin of Cain, he inadvertently uses an argument used to justify slavery (dark skin was asserted to be the mark God put on Cain), while continuing the theme of broken contracts with the well-known biblical story of brother killing brother.

A “surley Peasant” soon asks him “from whom [he'd] run away,” assuming that the factor is an escaped indentured servant. The narrator is angered that the world does not recognize his innate nobility. This comedy is repeated when the factor is told by a planter that he is welcome “whether you come from Gaol or a Colledge” (Mulford 2002, 564). The planter offers him a homely meal and lodging, which the factor accepts with bad grace; his scorn for his food is obvious to his host, who comments on it as the two share rum.

The native brew is too strong for the factor, and he goes off to bed, meeting up with “one who pass’d for a Chamber-Maid,” though the factor notices her “sluttish Dress.” She explains that she is an indentured servant who had come to the colonies
because she was "Kidnap'd and Fool'd" and thus she "hither fled, / To shun a hated nuptial Bed." The factor supposes that she had been caught "supping e'er the Priest said Grace," that is, copulating before wedlock (Mulford 2002, 565). Cook may mean that the servant was tricked by a Lothario and disowned by her family or, perhaps, offered the choice of a disgusting husband or indentured servitude. Whatever the story, it implies broken and unfair contracts drove her to her situation. Her blushes indicate moral conscience, but our narrator no more feels pity for her plight than he feels gratitude for his free meal.

After an uncomfortable night, the factor borrows a horse and, with the planter's son for a guide, rides to Battle-Town. On the way, they argue over the origin of Native Americans. The son opines that the Native Americans are descended from the Chinese, while the factor offers the equally improbable hypothesis that they are wayward Phoenicians. The factor stops the narrative to comment that "when that both had talk'd their fill / We had the self same Notion still," and that the controversy was as irresolvable as religious debate. This discussion is then juxtaposed to raucous arguments at the country court. The lawyers' histrionics contrast with the civil discussion about race, though it is important to realize that little is at stake in the former disputation. The factor dismisses the lawyers' arguments as "nonsense, stuff and false quotation" (Mulford 2002, 568). His words pretty much describe the substance of his dispute with the planter's son. Together, the two examples show that human unreasonableness turns "reason" into a rhetorical exercise.

After court, the factor again drinks too much and looks for a place to sleep. Finding the beds at the inn taken, he happens upon an upper room used to store grain and settles into "quiet sleep" (Mulford 2002, 569). When he awakens, he discovers his shoes, hat, wig, and stockings have been stolen. The factor considers this another example of Maryland depravity, but the reader may take another message. When the factor removes himself from the hullabaloo of Battle-Town, he finds peace but also the Hobbesian truth that people band together not because they like each other but for mutual protection. The isolation that permits quiet sleep also assured the thief that he could escape undetected.

After a furious and fruitless search, the factor wakes up his host, who finds he must immediately race outside because the factor neglected to feed his borrowed horse, and "not content all Night to stay / Ty'd up from fodder, [the horse] ran away." Like the drunken merchants, the horse is simply pursuing its appetite. The factor comments that he thus lost "both Horse and Man" (Mulford 2002, 569–570). Of course, the planter's son is hardly his "man"—his manservant—at all; the factor's sense of superiority causes him to mistake generosity for subservience.

Seeing the factor's plight, another planter invites him to his house. The factor buys new clothes, goes to the house, and drinks until midnight. He sleeps until noon, wakes up to a sumptuous meal, again drinks excessively, and passes out under a tree. He wakes up at night and makes his way to the fireside, where he sees a group of women playing cards. One woman cries, "Dealing's lost is but a Flam, / And [she]
vow'd by G—d she 'd keep her Pam" (Mulford 2002, 570). Having received the most valuable card in the game, she is not about to give it up just because of a bad deal. This foreshadows the factor's later troubles and again points to the violations of contractarian logic the work satirizes. Card games are but agreements among the players about the relative values and rules, and a player insisting on keeping something valuable despite the rules is demanding a private interest impossibly against the interests of others.

The speaker wakes up the next day and goes into town to conduct his business. Finding a Quaker businessman, he trades his “English Truck” for “ten thousand weight / Of Sot-weed good and fit for freight” (Mulford 2002, 571). In doing this, he has participated in the mercantile economy, for what is “Truck” to one group may be valuable to another; tobacco, for instance, was plentiful in the Maryland but not grown in England. English mercantile economics differ from free-market capitalism, because the Board of Trade tried to ensure that the various participants did not compete by producing the same commodities. George Lillo’s popular British play The London Merchant (1731) states the transcendent abstraction used to justify mercantilism. In the play, an idealized merchant explains that Providence has “bestowed some good peculiar to itself” in every place in the world. “It is the industrious merchant’s business to collect the various blessings of each soil and climate,” he argues, and to distribute the excess commodity of one country to another that does not produce it. Intercourse among nations enriches all and “promotes humanity” by “diffusing love from pole to pole” (Lillo 1731, passim.).

This, however, is not what the factor finds when he makes his deal. He has his commodities put aboard the Quaker’s ship and waits for the tobacco to be brought to him. Unfortunately, he neglected to obtain any surety, and the Quaker sails off without delivering the tobacco. The factor made an advantageous deal without anticipating what the Quaker’s interests might lead him to do. The London merchant says that he is in the cooperative endeavor of diffusing love, but the Quaker is in the competitive endeavor of maximizing profits.

Having found his goods taken from him, the factor seeks redress in a Maryland court. Although he heaps abuse upon his lawyer, he actually wins his case, only to be compensated in “Country pay”: for example, “Pipe staves, corn, or Flesh of Boar,” commodities plentiful in England. It is a fitting irony. Throughout, the factor asserts his own point of view without considering others; in the end, he is compensated by an agreement that only serves the other person. Disgusted, he returns to England and hurls a curse, wishing upon the colony’s traders “the Fate they well deserve,” which is to be “From Trade, Converse, and Happiness exil’d” (Mulford 2002, 572). In short, he wishes to banish Marylanders from participating in a Lillo-esque world that did not exist.

Thus it is that nearly every incident in Sot-weed Factor revolves around contractarian logic, and this is also true of Cook's other long narrative, A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia (1731). The poem tells the story of Nathaniel Bacon's
insurrection against William Berkeley, the governor of Virginia. Cook's poem casts the battle as between a "testy knight" (Berkeley) and a "waspish squire" (Bacon). Fairly early in the poem, the narrator comments, "Promises are scarce worth mind­ing" and not "binding" when "Grounded on mental Reservation / Or made without Consideration" (Wroth 1934). Even more than Sot-weed Factor, A History of Bacon's Rebellion is a comedy of double-dealing, full of noble declama­tions followed by acts of duplicity, pride, and cowardice.

In the narrative, Native Americans take over a colonial fort and, besieged, send six negotiators to arrange a peace. However, Berkeley has them killed. The Native Americans reckon that ten colonial lives are equivalent to one Native American life. After they kill sixty colonists, they again attempt to negotiate, but Berkeley's court views negotiating with savages as beneath its dignity, and besides, some "for Honour or for Pay / Made Sword and Pistol their Vocation" (Wroth 1934, 312–313).

Disgusted by his government's inability to resolve the matter, Bacon raises his own force and begins a series of raids on the Native Americans. Berkeley gets him to stop partly by promising him a seat in the state legislature, only to jail Bacon when he comes to town. Bacon escapes by claiming his wife is sick, promising to return after the illness. He quickly raises forces to fight Berkeley.

Eventually, the governor sends a captain of a merchant ship, Thomas Gran­tham, to meet with Bacon's men (Bacon by this time has died of illness). Grantham "long had traded in the Parts / [and] Knew Planters Tempers and their Hearts" (Wroth 1934, 324). He points out that the governor summoned troops from En­gland to help quell the insurrection; further, while everybody is fighting, crops are rotting in the fields, and this could ruin both planters and merchants. When he also promises a pardon from the governor, the insurgents relent. After everybody returns to work, many of the insurrectionists are hung. Thus, peace is possible only when everybody's self-interest is taken into consideration, and the rebels, like the factor, learn the fatal lesson that any contract needs a surety.

It is easy to see why Cook has so often been looked upon as a moralist, and certainly his poems lampoon moral failings. However, there are deep ambiguities that trouble straightforward moralist readings. For example, it seems self-evident that the factor's parting shot, that no Maryland woman is "Chast," is false, yet some of Maryland's residents would have said the claim is only slightly exaggerated. In Cradock's Eclogues, for example, Cut-Purse brags that he has cuckolded his overseer, and Scape-Rope says he has done the same thing to his master. Lest a reader mistake these claims for braggadocio, Cradock comments that such is "common among the lower Tribe of Planters' wives" (Cradock 1983, 165). So, when the factor meets the half-dressed woman, is her verbal modesty meant to seduce, or should we credit her story? Should we believe the allegation by one of the card players that the other is a prostitute?
It is not the case that everything Cook’s unreliable narrator says is false. The narrator is sometimes mistaken, sometimes accurate, sometimes exaggerated; sometimes he makes dubious statements that echo the opinions of other people, and the truth of some of what he says is ambiguous. Brooke’s Southwark engendered base people who act in ridiculous ways; it is as clear where Brooke’s sympathies lie as it is in Cradock’s eclogues. Brooke and Cradock give negative examples, and we can understand a better system of values simply by inverting the assertions. Cut-Purse and Scape-Rope are proud of their adultery, and they ought to be ashamed of it. But in Cook’s major satires, firm ground is harder to come by, and what ought to be morally, self-importantly noble sentiments will not suffice. This tawdry world where everyone will always pursue self-interest is all we have, Cook seems to be saying, and the only way to make our way in it is by making careful contracts with sureties. If we do so, then, as in the end of A History of Bacon’s Rebellion, everybody can get to work for prosperity’s sake.

Instead of a Hobbesian view, perhaps a closer model would be that of Bernard Mandeville, whose Grumbling Hive (1705) and its revision and extension, Fable of the Bees (1714), dismiss moral injunctions, arguing that conspicuous consumption is the wheel that turns trade, however much it is spurred by luxury, vanity, and vice. The vast industry needed to satisfy moral failings consequently leads to employment, wealth, funding for the arts, and everything that makes a country great. A similar argument is made in Sotweed Redivivus, Cook’s sequel to Sot-weed Factor. In the preface, Cook remarks, “It’s industry, not a nauseous Weed, / Must cloth the Naked and the Hungry feed” (Steiner 1900, 36). The poem proper debates various plans to increase prosperity. Significantly, though Cook finds tobacco nauseous, he does not advocate eradicating it (though he would diversify agriculture), because he knows that people become planters to make money, not to diffuse universal love by trading healthy commodities. The poem assumes that economic planning can occur only with negotiation among the various interests, and Cook’s consistent theme is how often promises are not worth minding. Sotweed Redivivus ends with a planter literally standing on shifting sands, looking hopefully outward as a stream rolls away from him—suggesting that nothing is certain in this world except human desires and the urge to satisfy them.

**ROBERT BOLLING’S “NEANTHE”**

Bolling’s “Neanthe” (1763) is written in the same jaunty Hudibrastic way as Cook’s major poems and shares their contractarian concerns. Set in Pungoteague on the Chesapeake Bay, it begins by introducing a planter who lives solely for “lucrative
Pursuits” until his “frail Nature” leads him to pursue pleasure (Lemay 1982, 113). The poem thus ironically defines virtue as self-denial for financial gain. The narrator explains the planter’s descent into pleasure was inevitable:

Ah! Pleasure is invincible;
Let Virtue mutter, what she will!
Why then against her keep the Field?
God can but damn us; tho we yield.
(Lemay 1982, 114)

Given the pervasive irony of “Neanthe,” the reader is initially encouraged to take these lines as evidence of the narrator’s flawed viewpoint.

Following his desires, the planter seduces a maiden, promising that he will marry her if she becomes pregnant. When she does, she “from her Contract wou’d not flinch: / He scorn’d to be behind an Inch,” and marries her one day before a baby girl, Neanthe, is born. The planter’s faith in honoring the contract earns him the narrator’s epithet, “The honest man of Pungoteague” (Lemay 1982, 114). As in Metamorphosis, there is an ironic mixing of the rhetoric of contract and that of courting.

Neanthe’s parents’ “rigid Industry” and “close Economy” enable them to “scrape together an Estate” and earn their neighbors’ esteem due to their comparative wealth. They judge Neanthe “no small Catch.” Like Michy in Metamorphosis, Neanthe is the product of her parents’ appetite. The narrator asserts she is “Possess’d of every native Grace.” She has a red, freckled face, oily black hair, a nose like a potato, bushy black eyebrows, red eyes, sharp teeth, a moustache, large breasts, and a protruding belly. She is about four feet tall and three feet around. She has two other outstanding qualities. The first is her competence with food:

None on the shoals, like her, cou’d nab
Or, brought to table, scoop a Crab:
The Cockle none detect, like her,
Or daintier Cockle-broth prefer:
The bloated Oyster none so well
Extort from the reluctant Shell
(Lemay 1982, 114–115)

A child of appetite, Neanthe is particularly good at getting every last morsel of meat from shellfish, a skill those around the Chesapeake Bay pride themselves in to this day. Bolling undoubtedly knew that doing this involves a great deal of cracking, sucking, and slurping.

Neanthe’s other conspicuous quality is her “divine and powerful Scent” that gives men “such keen Twitches, / They scarce contain’d them in their Breeches.” She is quite eager to meet men under the hedgerow, quickly “compose her Haunches,” and satisfy their mutual desires. She seems perpetually in heat. She tells her lovers that she “wou’d do any thing, but wed,” asserting a very male control over her own
sexuality. Dolon of Anacock and Euphenor of Matsapreak, on the other hand, want “to give Neanthe Chains,” that is, to marry her and assume ownership of her body. (Lemay 1982, 116–117). Is it any wonder she despises marriage? As the embodiment of desire, she demands free expression.

It cannot be said that Dolon and Euphenor want to marry Neanthe so that they can copulate with her. They “freely” had their “Solace” with Neanthe. Presumably, other young men in Pungoteague also wanted Neanthe chained up for their personal pleasure, but they would be disqualified due to their social standing. Dolon and Euphenor are “Lads of Worth” who are “Blest by Fortune in Descent / In Bloom of Youth and opulent.” Dolon’s family has made its fortune by selling bullfrogs, while Euphenor’s family plunders shipwrecks: they are the type of low gentry mentioned by Cradock. The pretension to English gentility is further mocked by the speaker’s assertion that Dolon and Euphenor have an “antient Friendship,” which in England might mean the two families have been friendly for centuries but in Pungoteague probably means something like a decade (Lemay 1982, 116–117).

At any rate, like Palamoun and Arcite in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, their similar desire for Neanthe causes their friendship to end. The two meet, and Dolon claims he has talked to a wizard who knew a method of discerning “For whom the Gods allot the prize,” a kind of contest. Dolon explains their actions will be emblematic, like that of a man sticking pins in a voodoo doll:

For tis a mode, well known of old  
Whoe’er a chard wou’d well unfold  
(To quell a foe, or Mistress win)  
He must, in Emblem, act the Scene  
To send the first across the Styx,  
He, with a pin, his Image pricks  
(Lemay 1982, 118)

This last line begins a series of sexual puns. The two men are to shoot firelocks (a kind of gun) at the moon. The discharge (the fiery emission, not the bullet) that comes closest to the moon wins:

Against that Sister of the Sun [i.e., the moon]  
Present the Muzzle of your Gun  
If thence a greater Flame arise  
Than from between my shaggy Thighs  
(In Turn when I prepare to blaze  
Against her with my rival Rays)  
Neanthe’s yours I will agree,  
Mine, otherwise, the Fate decree.  
(Lemay 1982, 119)

It is really an ejaculation contest. Since both men’s attraction to Neanthe is entirely sexual, why shouldn’t the most sexually capable man get the prize? It is
worth noting that Neanthe is not consulted in the matter. Dolon and Euphenor treat Neanthe as a commodity and not, as she asserts, a free agent.

After Euphenor shoots, Dolon inserts a rocket in his buttocks and shoots it off, which of course goes much higher than the firelock’s detonation. Euphenor is initially despondent but soon discovers the ruse. Outraged at “the Breech of Faith,” he attacks Dolon (Lemay 1982, 120). Here the contractarian logic is most evident—Euphenor is willing to accede when he thinks he has lost fairly but outraged when he learns the terms of a contract are not met.

The fight is full of gouging and low blows. “You English wou’d abhor that Plight,” explains the narrator, “Who strain no Tackling, gouge, or bite,” but such is the practice in Pungoteague, who have had their “Manners mended” by the Irish. That is to say, colonial manners do not match those of higher British culture. The conflict is unbridled and open, so much so that Euphenor kills Dolon, appropriately enough, since it was Dolon’s faithlessness that caused the dispute in the first place. When Neanthe hears the news, she begins to resemble Emelye of The Knight’s Tale, because it turns out she had been in love with Dolon all along. His death will leave a “Gap, unfilled,” a “tremendous Void.” Although surely Lemay is right that her grief is filled with sexual puns, just as surely we are to see that she indeed feels something for him. She laments, “Ah, had he farted less . . . / He might his Wishes have possess’d / And I, with him, had lived most blest” (Lemay 1982, 121, 124). Unable to contemplate living without her lover, she hangs herself in despair.

This turn of events is startling, because the reader had been led to believe that Neanthe had no tie to any man. However, it suddenly becomes clear that she inherited her father’s fidelity as well as his appetite. Under the conventional morality of Cook’s factor, of course, sexual promiscuity is equated with faithlessness (his final curse, after all, yokes these two); however, under contractarian logic, the two are reconcilable, since she never promised constancy to her lovers. Her Dido-like death in effect proves that she is the factor of her own body and not the commodity of others.

The poem concludes with a strange elegy to Neanthe that praises her beauty, wit, eyes, singing ability, and wisdom; she is a “Maid” as never seen before but in Greece (Lemay 1982, 126). Ironies attend the praise: she dances like a “Paphian queen,” an epithet of Aphrodite that often implies illicit sexuality; her “Syren’s Throat” also suggests sexuality, and the comparison to Helen is equally ambiguous—is Helen the innocent victim she portrays herself as in the Iliad or the scheming harlot of the misogynist tradition?

All these are typical Hudibrastic ironies. What is truly odd is that very little in the elegy has anything to do with Neanthe. Readers had not been given any evidence of her wit (or lack of it), her dancing, her singing, and so forth. One might have expected some ironic comment on her smell and expertise with food, but the elegy does not mention these things.

Because the elegy was probably the most frequently published sort of poem in the eighteenth century, it is perhaps inevitable that there were some parodies.
Benjamin Tompson's *Grammarian's Funeral* (1708), for instance, describes how the different parts of speech mourn the passing of a great teacher of grammar, though the poem seems more an exercise of wit than a work of satire. More satiric are Nathaniel Gardner's *Gentleman's Lamentation for the Loss of His Dog Bacchus* (before 1760) and Joseph Green's *A Mournful Lamentation for the Sad and Deplorable Death of Old Mr. Tenor* (1750). Both lampoon sentimental attachment to inappropriate objects (a dog and a species of currency), yet the poems praise actual qualities of the departed: Old Tenor “gave the rich their costly wine / The poor their flip and toddy,” and when Bacchus heard church music, he “rais’d his notes above the rest” (Green 1750). *The Funeral Sermon, on Michael Morin* (Anon. 1748) satirizes inappropriate rhetoric. Morin’s actions, such as chasing cows out of the churchyard with a pitchfork and breaking up a dogfight, are asserted as heroic. The reader is supposed to see that Morin deserved an elegy more along the lines of the humble epitaph of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”

The satire in “Neanthe” runs much deeper than in the other mock elegies. It is not that the poet is trying to put the deceased’s life in the best light; aside from some sexual puns, it has *no* relation to the life of Neanthe. While certainly elegies were written to comfort the bereaved, they also had a social value of promoting desirable traits. The elegy at the end of “Neanthe,” however, commends the subject for actions she never performed and for personal qualities she never had. Since Neanthe was a product of her surroundings, it would seem that nobody in Pungoteague has these qualities. The narrator pointedly remarks that Neanthe’s parents hired a poet to write the elegy, which speaks to the motivation behind many such productions: the desire for economic advantage from the survivors (and, in the case of governors, replacements) through fulsome praise.

So, “Neanthe” would have us see, it is not just that rhetoric of elegies can be exaggerated, but that the entire enterprise is, or can be, false. And this takes us back to the poem’s initial assertion about the universal triumph of self-interested pleasure over selfless virtue. Even the polite, respectful, and religious performance of an elegy, it would seem, can ultimately be traced to a desire to satisfy personal desires. The greatest irony of the poem is that the assertion that pleasure trumps all human values is, ultimately, *not* ironic.

**Richard Lewis’s “A Journey from Patapsko to Annapolis”**

In “A Journey from Patapsko to Annapolis, April 4 1730,” Lewis imagined an ideal plantation that better fit the patterns of English pastoral poetry than the actual
conditions of colonial Maryland. Such an ideal existence is fitting only for farmers and not for the speaker, whose greatest meditations happen not on the plantation in Patapsco or in the town of Annapolis but in a world where he is virtually the only person. Likewise, in “Hastings,” the speaker arrives at his most profound vision in a midnight reverie that happens apart from the labor the poem celebrates. These poems enact metaphorically the actual composing process of Muscipula, which was written, Lewis tells us in the introduction, during respites from his “very fatiguing Employment” as a teacher (Steiner 1900, 65).

While Lewis’s contemporaries praised “A Journey from Patapsko to Annapolis,” they also recognized that it demonstrated an unusual freedom. When the English publication the Bee printed the poem, the editor took pains to assure readers that the poem did not express apostasy or atheism: “Doubts which arise in the Author’s Mind... are no more than what we could prove (if it was necessary) have perplex’d and disturb’d the Minds of some of the wisest of Men. These Doubts and Apprehensions are finely express’d, as are those Reflections by which he gets the better of them” (quoted in Carlson 1937, 310). Cradock, however, was not so sure. Although in a note to his Eclogues, he expressed sympathy that Lewis was “very poor,” he also scornfully remarks that Lewis “was a fine gentleman, and laught at Religion with the rest” (Cradock 1983, 169). “The rest,” the eclogue makes clear, are the “Sons of Reason”—Cradock names the Deist thinkers Matthew Tindal, Anthony Collins, Thomas Morgan, Thomas Woolston, and Shaftesbury. For Cradock, Deism had very little to do with teleology or the quietism of Pope’s affirmation, “Whatever is, is Right” in An Essay on Man. It had everything to do with the kind of rationalism that scoffed at sacred mysteries, undermined faith, and viewed organized religion as a sham.

“A Journey from Patapsko to Annapolis” made even sympathetic readers nervous because of the uncertainty it finds in everyday experience. Consider, for example, the poem’s many descriptions of sunlight. Early in the poem, “lightsome Beams” fall on “Foliage,” and “trembling shine in many-colour’d Streams.” This light is more complex than, for instance, Pope’s “unchanging Sun” (in An Essay on Criticism) that “Clears, and improves whate’er it shines upon, / It gilds all Objects, but alters none” (Pope 1969, 46). While both poets say that heavenly illumination beautifies the world, Pope’s sun transcendentally reveals what is there and is itself immutable; Lewis’s sun rays are modified by the earth and characterized by constant change. Lewis several times remarks on refracting light, and, near the poem’s center, clouds eclipse the sun.

The unstable light acts as a metaphor for a point of view that finds traditional verities precarious. For example, about halfway through the poem, the speaker ascends to the “Summit of a Mount” to behold the prospect. He observes a river that “reflects” the plants and trees on its banks like a “smooth Mirror.” The speaker remarks he is “well pleas’d” with the sight. Anyone familiar with descriptive poetry will recognize the passage’s symbolic meaning. The speaker has labored so that he can
survey the grander scheme of things from a better perspective. The reflecting stream is an analogue of the reflective mind. The outer world is perfectly transmitted into the speaker's thoughts, which pleases him. However, he is soon disquieted when a hawk swoops down to seize a fish:

The Stream, disturb'd, no longer shews the Scene
That lately stain'd its silver Waves with green;
In spreading Circles roll the troubled Floods,
And to the Shores bear off the pictur'd Woods.
(Lewis 1988, 564)

As the stream bears the image of death to its surroundings, the agitated reflection mirrors the speaker's agitated thoughts. The sudden, apparently random death troubles the speaker's confident notions of natural serenity. He now cannot look at the natural world without recognition of what Tennyson would later call "nature red of tooth and claw." Allegorically, this unavoidable fact will always disturb his reflections.

This view differs markedly from the simpler, more confident hopes of Lewis's contemporaries. For example, when Lewis's speaker finds himself in a violent thunderstorm, he "beholds with Grief" the way that the storm's actions "deform" the "noon-tide Beauties of his Life" (Lewis 1988, 566). In contrast, when Mather Byles, in "The God of Tempest," sees "wild Confusion" and "harsh Disorder" in a storm, he has no moment of lost hope because he believes the storm presages apocalypse: the speaker prays to Christ to hasten and "come in Flame" in order to "break all Nature's frame" (Byles 1744, 6–7). Likewise, when contemplating the stars, Lewis's speaker meditates on his own insignificance when compared with the universe's immensity. He worries that metaphysics may just be the product of "Self-Love," and that immortality is a simply "fancied Feast" (Lewis 1988, 567). Contemplating the same stars, the astronomer in Francis Hopkinson's Science "learns th' important Laws by which they move; / Sits in the Center, wrapt in Thought profound" and comes to understand the "Cause" that determines the changing seasons (Hopkinson 1762, 11). Like Byles, Hopkinson finds that meditation leads to greater certainty without a detour through doubt. Indeed, in 1740 "Enroblos" published a poem in American Weekly Mercury that he says is based on a "Hint" from "Journey," though it is actually a fairly close imitation, including quoting lines from Lewis's mockingbird description (Lemay 1972, no. 557). Enroblos attempts to defuse the controversial aspects of "Journey" by citing scripture for support, doubting reason's ability to explain what we would today call natural selection, and placing its speaker in a specific political context that, the speaker asserts, removes doubt.

For all the uncertainties "Journey" entertains, the Bee was right that the poem is about the restoration of hope. The poem's final line indicates the ultimate way that doubt can be removed. The speaker prays to God that he may learn to "know myself, and honour Thee" (Lewis 1988, 568). Self-knowledge will allow the speaker to find
the innate ideas placed in his mind by the Creator, the epistemology at the heart of Deist rationality. This direct connection to the supreme being and faith in personal reason irked readers like Cradock because it did not admit outside authority into the equation: the speaker does not read the Bible, consult a minister, or wait for Sunday to arrive (April 4, 1730, was the Saturday after Easter) and go to church. Instead, he meditates on the natural world and his own nature, and reasons it out.

Still, this is hardly laughing at religion. In fact, making fun of anything is contrary to the politeness Lewis’s writing modeled (for instance, he takes pains in the notes to The Mouse-Trap to explain that the poem does not ridicule the Welsh). In other realms of human experience, he shows a great respect for authority: he envisions a patriarchal family farm in “Journey,” and the prefatory poem to The Mouse-Trap counsels Marylanders to protect proprietary privilege. On its most fundamental level, “Journey” is performing the role of Gentleman Thinking. It claims the freedom of thought claimed by Shaftesbury while modeling how such liberty should lead to greater piety and humility. Unlike Shaftesbury, however, the speaker has no estate at Wimborne St. Giles to return to. Lewis, as Cradock reminds us, was very poor yet still a gentleman. His works tend to protect a privilege that does not seem to have benefited him very much, and in this respect he seems very much like the patriarch’s sheep and Hastings’s lumber.

The speaker’s gentility is based solely on his education, his manners, and his ability to think. Outside of settlements, the speaker finds he can attain greatness of mind by dint of his own intellectual abilities, and he takes his place in a meritocratic, perhaps egalitarian, republic of thought. It is a lonely republic, to be sure, but a fine place for unfettered speculation. Still, as the poem’s title indicates, at day’s end, he will enter the town and perforce comply with all its social and political dealings. Yet he still will be Gentleman Thinking. While a contractarian like Cook offers a more obvious critique of the world, he does not suppose another is possible, and so seeks to alert us to humanity’s fallen nature and mend what he can. While Lewis’s social and political views are conservative, his habit of mind, with its tendency to doubt, meditate, and imagine something better, has a latent radical edge to it. And when mainstream poets started to apply Lewis’s skepticism to colonial political arrangements, the Augustan age in British America began to end.

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