# Is Critique "Universal"?

## Swift's *Drapier's Letters* and the Possibility of Universal Public Reason

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The relationship between "free speech" and censorship has always remained extremely fraught, perhaps most interestingly in the controversies regarding the cartoons of Prophet Mohammed, from the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten's depictions in 2005 to that of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in January, 2015 with the contradictory arguments on behalf of the values of free speech and the demand to be protected from violent "hate speech." This controversy is more complex because it deals with icons that have different currencies in different cultures and can create tensions in multicultural societies. The volume that punctured the easy reading of a clash between the so called Christian and Islamic civilizations, with the values of secular liberalism and blind religious faith lying on respective sides, into the debate and instead undid the very presumptions upon which the supreme value of "critique" nestled is *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*. Talal Asad's essay "Free Speech, Blasphemy and Secular Criticism" in this volume traces the Christian association between free speech and truth to Cynic philosophers of the 4$^{th}$ century BC and argues how it metamorphoses into the secular critique Post-Reformation, that is not perfectly commensurate with a different configuration between truth and speech for an individual believer in Islam. He argues that for Kantians "freedom for philosophical critique even became a condition of forestalling political revolution" and that Kant "replaced the model of the "republic of letters" with another model:

the "court of reason." (50) What this article seeks to take from this volume is the always already divergent framings of "freedom of speech", "norm" and "truth" and the tension they produce in their interplay in the language(s) of the public sphere. It deals with Jonathan swift's *The Drapier's Letters* (1724-25), the iconic text coterminous with the emergence of a public domain of critical discussions in the Ireland during the currency debates that vigorously resisted the state mandate without rebelling against it, that subscribed to the fine balance between the private obedience of a citizen and the intellectual freedom of a rational agent and thereby claims to be an exemplary "critique" to tap these ambiguities within its seamless texture.[1] While most contemporary commentators like Asad have stressed upon the extent to which civic freedom of the functionaries of the state is sacrificed at the cost of the rational freedom of critique that curtails its potency as a mode of public discourse, this article intends to underscore the degree of risk that is intrinsic to both its operative register and the self-fashioning it entails. It proposes to take the question of critique beyond its universalist claims to show how the productive tensions within it can help us assess its credibility as a mode of public discourse.

The long eighteenth century in Europe in wide critical opinion, the most famous of them being that of Jürgen Habermas, marks the emergence of this sphere. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* he locates the bourgeois forum in the historical crossroads of the rise of modern state and capitalist activities. Through the development of the print media and coffee houses, "the genuine domain of private autonomy [that] stood opposed to the state" (12) is arguably created, enabling private individuals to come together as a public and debate authority of the state on various issues. The template of reason he theorizes is hinged on Kantian "public use of reason", formulated in the famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1784) that is by definition communicative as it addresses the entirety of the rational reading public and points

towards a liberation that would be achieved together in a forum free from the compulsion to follow strictures laid down by an authority. Habermas points out that the presupposition of any rational "speech act" is the context-transcending power of reason that guarantees mutual understanding, even to the extent of altering the claims of the speech act. According to him, what holds the rational exchange is not the validity of its content but the warranty of equality it offers to all participants on the level of form. This idea of a consensual norm conferring "binding force" to the any speech situation is taken further in his subsequent works that culminates in his claim: "The transcendental moment of universal validity bursts every provinciality asunder" (Habermas, 1987, 322) This moment is inherent as a regulatory ideal in any speech as Samantha Ashenden and David Owen suggest in "Introduction: Foucault, Habermas and the Politics of Critique", *Foucault contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory* :

> Thus, the use of language to manipulate others into compliance is parasitic on the orientation of speech acts to mutual understanding in which the redeemability of the claims offered in the speech act is presupposed. Moreover, in so far as Habermas' account of how mutual understanding and consensual agreement are possible connects the communicative use of language to the redeemability of speech act offers and, thus, to the provision of reasons, it establishes the relationship of language in its original mode to a communicative concept of rationality. (Ashenden & Owen 4)

Hence any truth claim of the discourse is structurally posterior to its claim to mutual understanding and formal equality.

But Judith Butler criticizes the universal norm of Habermas as a "prelapsarian contention" in "Sovereign Performatives", *Excitable Speech* (1997) precisely because "(t)he anticipated universality, for which we have no ready concept, is one whose articulations will only follow, if they do, from a contestation of universality at its already imagined borders." (91) Censorship then becomes foundational to any universal postulation of the speakable:

> The border that produces the speakable by excluding certain forms of speech becomes an operation of censorship exercised by the very postulation of the universal. Does every postulation of the universal as an existent, as a given, not codify the exclusions by which that postulation of universality proceeds? In this instance and through this strategy of relying on *established conventions of universality*, do we unwittingly stall the process of universalization within the bounds of established convention, naturalizing its exclusions, and preempting the possibility of its radicalization? (Butler 90, emphasis in the original)

Here Butler's argument foreshadows that of Asad on the alterities within the norm of free speech that it cannot recognize, in the form of various restrictions on the circulation of expressions in secular societies, copyright, patent, trademark and so on that are activated every time a claim of free speech is made. And their mode of determining the borders of freedom in speech is not altogether different from that of blasphemy even though operated by a very different sensibility. Butler also points out "*the promising ambivalence of the norm*" that is exposed every time the norm fails to reach out to the universality it claims in an anticipatory manner, through the warrant of consensus (Butler 91, emphasis in the original). The text I have

chosen interrogates the limits of this warrant, the tension at the heart of public discourse among freedom of speech and its claim to truth and the normative boundaries within which it has to be circumscribed to be speakable, as a linen draper from Dublin takes upon himself the role of an enlightened rational agent.

Herein Foucault, the other thinker famously engaged with the implications of Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" becomes important as he examines concrete historical relations between self and truth mediated by power. The famed debate between Habermas and Foucault on the question of critical reason becomes central to the understanding of public discourse. This debate has generally been tilted to Habermas as his engagement with Foucault in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987) was published after Foucault's death and went without an answer. Nancy Fraser in "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions" has lauded Foucault for his empirical findings enabled through his genealogical method that suspends the notion of legitimacy to inspect its formation and limits, and criticized it in relation to Habermas' take on modernity that has the "adequate normative perspective" (Fraser 286). Foucault has also been accused of crypto-normativity for his inability to provide easy alternatives. But clearly reveals his agenda in "What is Enlightenment?", *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*:

> I mean that this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take. (316)

He employs the genealogical method to show the historical limits of certain games of truth, which thereby can enable the self to escape the domination of it in a precise way. His course on *parrhesia*, which for Asad also was the entry point in one's understanding of the relationship between truth and free speech, in College de France collected as *The Government of Self and Others* (2011) in two volumes forces us to confront the historical nature of our contemporary modes of thinking about free speech, dispels any assumption of it being the only mode and critically examine the constraints that enables this freedom. It traces the development of *parrhesia* in Greek and Hellenic antiquities with continuities through various forms to recent times. As Foucault explains its etymology and clusters of meanings associated with it: "You recall that, etymologically, *parrhēsia* is the activity that consists in saying everything: *pan rēma*. The *parrhēsiastēs* is the person who says everything. *Parrhesiazēsthai* is "telling all." (*The Courage of Truth* 9) It is at once a form of "veridiction", or a mode of truth telling that is different from prophecy or wisdom or *techne* (technical expertise). It is a form of game of truth with specific rules. It is an *ethos* or particular mode of self formation in practice. Unlike the prophecy, the truth telling in *parrhēsia* is transparent and spoken in an individuated human voice; unlike the wisdom of the sage, it is without reserve and specified to a context; unlike the expertise *(techne)* of the teacher, it involves "risk" and cannot be passed on to others. This *parrhēsiastic* pact foregrounds the elememt of 'risk' involved in the speech committed to truth that puts the *philia* (friendship, collaboration) of its participants at stake: "For there to be *parrhēsia*, you recall—I stressed this last year—the subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking] this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, a risk which concerns his relationship with the person to whom he is speaking." (11) This mode of speech is exactly the

opposite of rhetoric, where no commitment to the truth of its content is made but a conviction is forged on the mind of the listener.

The idea of free speech in Foucault is therefore primarily hinged upon risk and not mutuality of understanding as in the case of Habermas. However, he mentions that as a game of truth which can develop only when the speaker's courage of telling the truth is matched by the interlocutor's greatness of soul in listening to it, especially when he is a political superior. Yet, it is impossible to think of *parrhēsia* as a mode of tacit consensuality, as the truth-teller may invite vengeance and punishment from a tyrannical sovereign, to the extent of risking his life. In fact, the idea of *parrhēsia*, as it emerged in Euripides as the privilege of all well born citizens, became increasingly associated with two kinds of dangers, with the decline of Athenian democracy. The danger of public disorder through indiscriminate speech and the risk of retaliation structured it as a situational pact. In Socrates it was conjoined famously with the notion of *epimeleia heaoutou* (taking care of oneself, application to oneself), that saw the emergence of the specifically ethical *parrhēsia*, or *parrhēsia* as an *ethos*, a mode of cultivating and customizing the self. In the death of Socrates, according to Foucault, the three aspects of taking care of oneself, being committed to truth and risking death for it came together. In the same volume, through an extensive discussion of the Cynic modes and ways of life, Foucault argues that ancient Cynicism takes to the extreme the relationship between forms of life and truth-telling, found across ancient philosophical schools:

> So Cynicism is not satisfied with coupling, or establishing a correspondence, a harmony or homophony between a certain type of discourse and a life conforming to the principles stated in that discourse. Cynicism links mode of life and truth in a

> much tighter, more precise way. It makes the form of existence an essential condition of truth-telling. (172)

This idea of the scandalous form of life as the site of truth is famously exemplified in Lucian's famous "market for lives", where different philosophers sell life formulas in open market: "The first to appear is Diogenes, who is selling the Cynical life and offers it at a good price (two obols). He presents himself by saying that he is *'alētheias kai parrhēsias prophetēs'* (the prophet of truth and *parrhēsia*, of truth and frankness)" (168). According to Foucault, the other important feature that distinguishes ancient Cynicism from other philosophical schools is how its vocabulary is made up of borrowed philosophical terms absorbed after an overhaul of their currencies. It is important to remember that Foucault does not demarcate *Kynismus* (ancient Cynicism) and *Zynismus* (modern Cynicism) as Tillich, Heinrich or Sloterdijk does with positive values in the ancient practice and negative ones in the modern, and found considerable continuities in them. Rather satire for him remains a site down the ages where truth can appear as scandal and meanings can be reset. Further, Foucault understands the relationship between *parrhēsia* and other modes of truth-telling to be a historically shifting grid of varying configurations where consensus and transgression can possibly co-exist as would be shown in this article.

*The Drapier's Letters*, a series of seven pamphlets written between 1724 and 1725, are widely recognized as instrumental in forming public opinion in Ireland against the minting of inferior copper currency by William Wood. These pamphlets were important in forming the nascent idea of an Irish nationhood and are addressed in the form of letters, the staple form of Enlightenment communicative discourse. Yet they bring to the fore the element of "risk"

involved in speaking truth to the power that undercuts the consensuality of Habermasian abstract communicative reason. The act of admonition may easily become one of insolence and invite prosecution and this risk of being censored to the extreme binds them more strongly with truth. If Kantian public reason at the moment of its metamorphosis from *parrhēsia* to critique dissociates itself from "politics as well as faith", what is the source of the risk immanent in it? (Asad 50)

At the beginning of the *Letter I*, "To the Tradesmen, Shop-keepers, Farmers and Common People in General of Ireland", Swift alludes to the response received by his earlier pamphlet on the Irish affairs "A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufactures." (1720):

> About three years ago, a little book was written, to advise all people to wear the manufactures of this our dear country: It had no other design, said nothing against the King or Parliament, or any man, yet the POOR PRINTER was prosecuted two years, with the utmost violence, and even some WEAVERS themselves, for whose sake it was written, being upon the JURY, FOUND HIM GUILTY. This would be enough to discourage any man from endeavouring to do you good, when you will either neglect him or fly in his face for his pains, and when he must expect only danger to himself and loss of money, perhaps to his ruin.
>
> (38)

Swift's act of writing through the fictitious self of M.B. Drapier becomes an act of *parrhēsia* due to this awareness of risk and failure: "However I cannot but warn you once more of the manifest destruction

before your eyes, if you do not behave yourselves as you ought." (38). Habermas makes a distinction between justification and application crucial to his theory; the former transcending context and the latter being bound to it in *Justification and Application* (1993) and argues that the valid norms are abstract and universal in so far as they "can be applied without qualification only to standard situations whose salient features have been integrated from the outset into the conditional components of the rule as conditions of application" (13).

Do Swift's pamphlets qualify to exemplify such "standard situations"? They do not; as the imposition of any proclamation on Ireland was the royal prerogative of the king of England and a standard situation in that period. M.B. Drapier's answer to the question of precedence may alert one to the impossibility of finding justice in "normative rightness", as Habermas does:

> There is nothing hath perplexed me more than this doctrine of precedents. If a job is to be done, and upon searching records you find it hath been done before, there will not want a lawyer to justify the legality of it, by producing his precedents, without even considering the motives and circumstances that first introduced them, the necessity or turbulence or iniquity of times, the corruptions of ministers, or the arbitrary dispositions of the prince then reigning.
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> ("Letter to the Nobility and Gentry of the Kingdom of Ireland" Letter III).

This speech act claims to subvert the "conditional components of the rule" by exploding the notion of "standard situations" through the very Habermasian template of communicative rationality yet perhaps cannot claim an elevation to the level of "norm" as the discussion would reveal shortly.

It is true that William Wood's patent for minting copper halfpennies for Ireland and English colonies of America had a lot of political foul playing at its back and Swift's indignation against it was compounded by his hatred for the whole Walpole Ministry in power that sent him to political exile in Ireland. And Swift was politically representing the elite Anglo-Irish Protestants and not the mass of Irish Catholics, as is constantly emphasized in the pamphlets about their abiding loyalties to the King and the Parliament and summary dismissal of any charge of a Papal association. However, it is important to note how M.B. Drapier, the persona of a linen draper of St. Francis Street, Dublin that Swift adopts to write the letters maneuver the royalist vocabulary to counter the notion of Ireland as a "dependent nation":

> I have looked over all the English and Irish statutes without finding any law that makes Ireland depend upon England, any more than England does upon Ireland. We have indeed obliged ourselves to have the same king with them, and consequently they are obliged to have the same king with us. For the law was made by our own Parliament, and our ancestors then were not such fools (whatever they were in the preceding reign) to bring themselves under I know not what dependence, which is now talked of without any ground of law, reason or common sense. (65)

He changes the currencies of loyalty and rebellion to such an extent that the people of England, if they breach the sovereignty of Ireland through any arbitrary imposition may themselves become rebels:

> […] I am so far from depending upon the people of England, that if they should ever rebel against my sovereign (which God forbid) I would be ready at the first command from His Majesty to take arms against them, as some of my countrymen did against theirs at Preston. ("A Letter to the Whole People of Ireland" Letter IV, Project Gutenberg ebook)

M.B. Drapier, the persona Swift adopts to write the pamphlets remains loyal to the same king, but in his capacity as King of Ireland and not King of England. This change of currency of the royalist vocabulary aligns the risked truth telling of the letter with *parrhēsia.*

The voice of M.B. Drapier changes its intonations according to the audience, it is addressing. In the first letter, addressed "To the Shop-keepers, Tradesmen, Farmers and Common-People of Ireland" after explaining at length why the readers should refuse to accept the coins, the tone of a sermon is adopted to hammer the point home:

> IN short; these Half-pence are like the *accursed Thing*, which as the *Scripture* tells us, the *Children of Israel* were forbidden to touch. They will run about like the *Plague* and destroy everyone who lays his Hands upon them. [emphasis in the original] (45)

When the Drapier addresses the "nobility and the gentry" the tone is more constrained and legally nuanced, as has been already shown in his opinion about precedents. The fifth letter, "To the Right Honourable the LordViscount Molesworth, at his House at Brackdenstown, near Swords", addressed to Robert Molesworth (1656–1725), a prominent Whig statesman and

political writer, reveals a personal and relaxed tone, which shows how his pamphlets are woven in the terms of his own trade:

> (S)ome Months ago, considering with myself, that the *lower and poorer Sort of People* wanted a *plain, strong, coarse Stuff, to defend them against cold* Easterly *Winds; which then blew very fierce and blasting for a long Time together*; I contrived one on purpose, which sold very well all over the Kingdom, and preserved many Thousands from *Agues*. I then made a *second* and a *third* Kind of *Stuffs* for the *Gentry*, with the same Success; in so much, that an *Ague* hath hardly been heard of for some Time (73, emphasis in the original).

This inmixing of various registers is also a reflection of the amorphous nature of public discourses that escapes Habermas's theorization.

The drapier confides how in the days of his apprenticeship in London, he became acquainted with:

> (T)he Writings of your Lordship, Mr. *Locke*, Mr. *Molineaux*, Colonel *Sidney*, and other dangerous Authors, who talk of *Liberty as a Blessing, to which the whole Race of Mankind hath an original Title; whereof nothing but unlawful Force can divest them.*(76, emphasis in the original).

The relationship between M.B. Drapier and Jonathan Swift is more than a question of literary characterization or legal implication. That Swift was not hiding behind the character of the Drapier is revealed by the sixth letter, dated 26 October 1724 that is chronologically fifth but

only numbered so by Sir Walter Scott among the influential editors of Swift, followed in the edition of Temple Scott and subsequently in the Project Gutenberg version, that is designed as a private letter to Alan Brodrick, Lord Midleton (with a misspelt title) "To the Lord Chancellor Middleton", the only letter purported not to be by M.B. and signed by "J.S.": "…in this I confess myself to think with the *Drapier*", "(whether the real Author were a real *Drapier* or no is little to the Purpose)" ("To the Lord Chancellor Middleton Letter V", Project Gutenberg ebook). It is matched by the tantalizing hint of communication between the Dean and the draper in the fifth letter, "*A Letter To the Honourable the Lord Viscount Molesworth, at his House at Brackdenstown, near Swords"*, published on 31 December, 1724: "The *Dean* further observed, That I was in a Manner left alone to stand the *Battle;* while others, who had Ten thousand Times better Talents than a *Drapier,* were so prudent to lie still; […]" (79).

Carole Fabricant and Robert Mahony points out in their edited volume *Swift's Irish Writings : Selected Prose and Poetry* (2010) that William Whitshed, Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas tried to prosecute the writer of the Fourth Drapier's Letter (whom many understood to be Swift) and Mr. Harding the printer. It was stalled only because of the grand juries, who instead returned a presentment against "all such persons as have attempted . . . to impose the halfpence on us." (219)

M.B.'s association with radical Whigs makes it impossible to reduce the whole series to anti-Walpole pamphleteering and conflate his persona with that of the Tory political sympathies of Swift. More interestingly the figure of the Drapier, can be understood to be a highly creative amalgamation of truth telling and formation of a self through which it is told. Here *parrhēsia* true to its classical lineage emerges not merely as a mode of telling truths but as an *ethos* of public discourse, where extreme vulnerability is underwritten the apparent consensuality of a

public letter, when a draper becomes a writer of broadsheets: "The Provocation must Needs have been great, which could stir up an obscure, indolent *Drapier*, to become an *Author."*(78) As Fabricant and Mahony observe in the "Introduction":

> Not surprising, then, that the most memorable affirmation of human liberty we come away with from the *Letter to Molesworth* is not the invocation of the "universally agreed Maxim, that *Freedom consists in a people being governed by Laws made with their own Consent,"* but rather, the image of the Drapier riding his nag around the grounds of Lord Molesworth's estate and (along with the nag) becoming intoxicated with the "Air of Freedom breathing round [him]." (xxvi)

M.B. signs off with the promise that he has already sold off the liberty loving nag and is ready to settle down with Hobbes, Filmer and Bodin, the absolutist political thinkers in Yorkshire as a "free honest English farmer" with some regret for his failed campaigns for liberty and a lot of pragmatism, if the Lord wishes so. This points out how the notion of discursive freedom needs to be supplemented with means of living to sustain it:

> In the mean time, I design quietly to look to my Shop, and keep as far out of your Lordship's Influence as possible; and if you ever see any more of my Writings on this Subject, I promise you shall find them as innocent, as insipid, and without a Sting, as what I have now offered you. (83)

It is time to turn back to Kant, or rather the commentary of Foucault on Kant and the defining motto of Enlightenment, suggesting a "way out" of the self incurred maturity:

> Significantly, Kant says that this Enlightenment has a *Wahlspruch*: now, a *Wahlspruch* is a heraldic device, that is, a distinctive feature by which one can be recognized, and it is also a motto, an instruction that one gives oneself and proposes to others. What, then, is this instruction? *Aude sapere*: "dare to know," "have the courage, the audacity, to know." Thus, Enlightenment must be considered both as a process in which men participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally. (Foucault, 1997, 306)

This courage at the heart of the critique is certainly genealogically linked with the risk involved in *parrhēsia* and contrary to Asad's characterization of critique as politically sterile, it involves a highly political formation of the self, etched with risk that is supplemented in its faith in universal collective action. The political engagement with the present does not happen in the occluded realm of an anticipatory or ideal consensuality but rather in the tenuous interplay between the reality and a "courageous exercise of freedom" (303). He finds the paradigmatic instance of such transgression that critique takes a form in Baudelaire "(I)n which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it." (303). However, Swift's art does not only exemplify the transgressive potential of an aesthetics of truth as Baudelaire does. His use of fictive strategies to examine the limits of the promise of public reason in a sense also enacts its intrinsic failure to be a truly

universal one, as in the end M.B. Drapier is shown to be retreating to his personal desire for happiness, sustained through a private reason.

**Note:**

[1] The edition primarily used is *Swift's Irish Writings: Selected prose and Poetry* (eds. Carole Fabricant & Robert Mahony, London & New York:Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). In this volume the sequence of the *Letters* is as in Faulkner's edition (1735). For those letters not part of the selection, the Project Gutenberg ebook is used. The Project Gutenberg ebook adheres to the edition of Temple Scott- *The Drapier's Letters*(ed. Temple Scott, London: George Bell & Sons, 1903), that follows a more chronological order.

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