Such Modest Proposals, And So Many

Most schoolchildren in the English-speaking West read Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in high school or college. Since its publication in 1729, *A Modest Proposal* has become a staple of English literature, the most recognizable satirical example of hyperbole. *A Modest Proposal* is often read by students of history, politics, and economics for similar reasons. It is a genre unto itself—the "modest proposal" essay—and is treated as such in many online media publications (Salon, Slate, Jezebel, TNR, The National Review, and… well, all of them, irrespective of political alignment).

John Swift, proposer of modest proposals (Wikipedia Commons)

For those people who missed Swift's original satire, here's a quick summary. In the early 18th century (really from the 17th-20th century), the Irish, colonized and exploited by England, suffered from extreme poverty. Meanwhile, a growing overseas empire and industrialization helped expand the British middle class, and drove appetite for consumer goods. Swift offers a solution to both issues—the middle class should cultivate an appetite for the flesh of Irish babies, which will alleviate the suffering of poor Irish families.

A Modest Proposal is not modest, nor is it sincere. Swift does not expect people reading it to take his argument at face value, though it is likely that he earnestly hoped his writing would help raise awareness and empathy for poor Irish civilians. The type of person (a person like Swift's fictional narrator) who would suggest developing a market for baby flesh—breaking humanity's taboo on cannibalism for sustenance,

satisfaction, or profit—would be an immoral monster. But Swift's ambition isn't simply to shock with *A Modest Proposal*, he designs the essay to deliver horror logically, to examine a particular way of thinking about problem solving. The essay derives much of its power through fusing "thinkable" (the expansion of markets and generation of wealth as a way of alleviating human suffering) with "unthinkable" (that market expansion, in *A Modest Proposal*, is Irish babies).

Because *A Modest Proposal* communicates its point so effectively, it is widely emulated. A favorite of New York Times Op-Ed columnists and contributors, (as well as bloggers) and many other media publications (as described ealier), the "Modest Proposal" of today is (unlike its inspiration), often quite modest in terms of its ambitions, and respect for the sensibilities of English-language readers. These not-immodest contemporary proposals have lost almost all connection to the original sense of Swift's intentionally outrageous essay, and function simply as a way of grabbing readers' attention. They're a kind of bait-and-switch, where naming the essay in a way sure to draw parallels to Swift's essay serves as the "bait," and a justification for maintaining the status quo is the "switch."

- Writers propose modestly, today, when writing modest proposals

One (out of countless) example of a failed "modest proposal" directly inspired by Swift is this Obama-era 2010 think piece that whimsically offered to improve U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts by firing everyone in the CIA and replacing them with out-of-work investigative journalists. Elements shared with Swift's *Modest Proposal*: (1) offers to solve two social problems in one stroke, (2) is an unethical and bad idea, (3) clearly forwarded for rhetorical impact rather than as a serious suggestion. Elements it lacks: (1) offers some truly transgressive idea for the sake of exaggeration,

amusement, and illustration [journalists *are* intelligence gatherers, and better at intelligence gathering than the CIA].

Even unconventional proposals (like Noam Chomsky's 2002 "modest" proposal that the U.S. arm Iran and let them attack Iraq) fall short of actually breaking taboo. In the case of Chomsky's satirical essay, a much worse thing happened than the invasion of Iraq by a U.S. supplied Iran—the U.S. invaded Iraq itself, destabilizing the area so completely that open warfare in Iraq is ongoing. In fact, Iran has contributed mightily in the struggle against ISIS, in terms of soldiers and material. Chomsky's vision for possible horror was totally insufficient for the satirical form, and is now a reality in Iraq.

The best or purest recent "modest proposal" to be found is tagged and searchable as a "modest proposal," but not explicitly titled as such. It is a Clinton-era essay from 1999 by David Plotz that proposes to end school shootings by arming all schoolchildren. Plotz doesn't spend the time exploring the idea—how useful this would be for the gun industry, and (presumably) would assist the U.S. economy in ways that would create more prosperity, thereby reducing the type of family conditions that often lead to dissatisfaction, mental illness, and murder—but it's similar in tone and feel to Swift's satire. It's also pretty close to a stance actually supported by the NRA in the wake of Sandy Hook. Still, a decent attempt.

What's stopping writers and thinkers from going beyond Swift's rhetorical form? It's not as though the world is essentially more just or equitable than in Swift's time—on the contrary, knowing what we do about history, a compelling argument can be made that things are worse now then when Jonathan Swift was writing. Sure, there have been advances in technology and science. There have also been catastrophes on an almost-unimaginable scale, such that if one does not learn about them at school, one is inclined to believe that they are hoaxes. The Great Leap Forward, the Holocaust, Holodomor, the genocide

of Native American populations in the Americas, the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons, and many other horrific tragedies of the industrial age required the invention of new legal and ethical categories for which Swift and his contemporaries did not have words.

Granted, Not Everyone is a Satirist

One possible reason so many authors and thinkers invoke *A Modest Proposal* without using the most powerful component of its energy (taboo-busting hyperbole) is that most writers don't consider themselves satirists. They don't write to satirize, they write (a column, for example) to advance a serious policy with serious people. In this case, serious writers could be interested in referencing *A Modest Proposal* to show that they're well-read. They could also hope to use a portion of *A Modest Proposal*'s energy to highlight the desirability of their position (which is not eating babies) while affiliating the competing argument with calamity.

Here's another factor to consider. Pundits and the political/media commentary class tend to come from the ranks of the wealthy, influential and powerful. This offers an incentive for employees of the wealthy and powerful (those working for Jeff Bezos at *The Washington Post* or the Sulzberger family at *The New York Times*, for example) to be careful with what they write, and how they write it. One will find criticism of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* within their own pages, because those media institutions practice journalism (and do so well). Nevertheless, that criticism rarely takes on a *disrespectful* tone, or one that is strident or moralistic. There are limits.

The Sulzbergers are great patrons of the Democratic Party, and (an assessment based on regular readership of *The New York*

Times) tend to pull for mainstream icons of the Democratic Party including the Clintons and the Kennedys—political families accustomed to chummy relationships with large media organizations. This is just one prominent example from an industry rife with patronage and nepotism, on both sides of the political spectrum. Nepotism and favor happens to be visible to many people who keep track of politics or consume journalism in a way that it isn't visible in physics or rocket science. Nepotism and favor are also differently useful in politics and journalism. When a political or authorial brand passes from one generation to the next, having a prominent father or mother who can parlay influence into access can make or break a young career in either. Is it any wonder that within two groups who depend on each other for power there tends to be little incentive to write hard-hitting satire that might undermine the position of either?

Social media also makes bold satire difficult by particularizing audiences, and opening satirists up to personal attacks (as well as the potential consequences of those attacks). Although satire is not supposed to care about being criticized, certain topics cannot be satirized without being criticized as offensive. There is a higher standard for satire today, that takes more into account than an essay's subject (for example, the author's personal connection to the topic at hand). Besides, media institutions can be destroyed by the wealthy and powerful.

The final criticism of *A Modest Proposal* and similar satires could be that hyperbole as a rhetorical device has been overcome by the horrors of the 20th century. Satire, no matter how well-intentioned and effectively written has yet to prevent the worst human impulses. From this perspective, if satire isn't effective, maybe it's better not to write it.

But I'd tend to disagree with that idea. Here's an example I wrote of a satirical piece that emulates the intent behind

Swift's argument in *A Modest Proposal* without imitating the structure. In this case, a man seeks to assuage his fears about terrorism, and in so doing, becomes a terrorist. As a matter of course, the piece (built as a how-to) describes terrorist activity. It's not great satire, but neither is it awful—and certainly on par with, say, most of what passes for satire in mainstream media today outside Clickhole and The Onion. If it were to go viral and be read by everyone in the U.S., would fewer people become terrorists? Maybe!

Or, to put that better—if it were good enough to go viral, it would almost certainly have a deterrent effect against domestic terrorism, because that's what great satire does, it makes bad but appealing ideas clichéd, it exposes the ephemerally attractive as flawed and stupid. Anecdotal evidence suggests that clever mockery can do more to make an argument against a given issue or idea stickier and more effective than earnest straightforward appeals. Common sense suggests the same.

Ultimately, what does it matter if satire is ineffective or inefficient? Who said efficiency was the standard of value? Probably a British capitalist eating Irish babies.

Writers Invoking *A Modest Proposal* Should Be Less Modest

Without innovative, bold, confrontational writing, satire ends up excusing unethical or hypocritical behavior. It is satire's job to attack the status quo in those ways that the status quo has grown oppressive to humans—regardless of whether or not that attack is successful. Selectively, yes, and constructively, satirists and writers hoping to improve society must do so sometimes through offensive and/or

provocative literature.

Absent real satire, the landscape for substantive discussion shrinks until it has been reduced to two agreeable gentlefolk bowing before one another, respectfully begging one anther's pardon for being so bold as to ask whether the other might be willing to favor them by proceeding through yonder open door.

A Modest Proposal is not extreme, save in comparison with almost all of its recent published descendants. That there are fewer sincere satirical calls for evaluation in political, social, or economic terms at the same time that there are many essays pretending to do so is a commentary on the general comfort many well-educated people feel with the status quo. It's also a comment on how effective publishing has become at supporting writing that most people find satisfying. That's almost as bad as a President Trump. And not quite as bad as raising Irish babies to feed the aesthetic tastes of the affluent.

The Unusually Literal World of Bowe Bergdahl

Military hyperbole is at the heart of *Serial's* second season. Sarah Koenig has gambled that she can take a simple premise—man walks off a base in Afghanistan, is captured by the Taliban—and make it representative. Of the war, of the world, of human nature. The season has discussed how Army private Bowe Bergdahl came to leave his post in Afghanistan, was captured by the Haqqani network (a savage affiliate of the Taliban), and the military's efforts to rescue him. Its focus

was procedural as well as institutional, describing the military's bizarre, byzantine, and unrecognizably convoluted legal and social skeleton. The season's sixth episode, "5 O'Clock Shadow," extended that focus to the military's extreme linguistic habits.

It's difficult to imagine a world without metaphor or hyperbole. Try it—try visualizing a day wherein everything everyone said to you and everything you said to someone else, was understood as a verifiable truth claim. Conducted properly, the exercise results in confusion, absurdity, and a bewildering breakdown of communication. While metaphor and hyperbole aren't necessary for communication, we rely on these linguistic devices to describe thoughts or emotions that involve some discomfort, and as most people's lives involve discomfort—in work, in love, or in one's fragile ambitions—metaphor, analogy, and hyperbole become a kind of language within a language.

This is doubly true in the military. When one considers the context, it's not surprising—the military, and especially the Army (or Marine) infantry consists of a more or less constant indoctrination into the ideas that (1) a soldier is part of a collective, with limited value as an individual and (2) one should expect to get hurt very badly or die, and that so long as this occurs within a military-sanctioned action against one's enemies, that injury or death is desirable. Citizens of countries that have Western humanism and individualism at their cultural heart will find these thoughts incomprehensible at best—and those citizens who become soldiers of their humanist nation's militaries therefore take this linguistic tendency to speak in metaphor and hyperbole to dramatic extremes.

In “Five O’Clock Shadow,” Koenig made much of Bergdahl’s disillusionment when a prominent and high-ranking sergeant in his unit claimed that soldiers had joined the military to “rape, kill, pillage, and burn,” a claim that was not immediately disputed by others present. Apparently, Bergdahl took the sergeant’s statement at face value, and statements like it. This became evidence to Bergdahl that his unit’s leadership was unscrupulous.

Most people with military experience—and especially experience in the combat arms, where euphemism and hyperbole are most necessary for psychical well being—understand that the military is filled with hyperbole. The easiest example of this (described by Army veteran Nate Bethea for *Task & Purpose’s* Serial Podcast) is a popular way of saying that one is angry with a peer or subordinate: “I’m going to cut off his head and shit down his neck.” The correlation between American soldiers or officers promising this horrible and primitive manner of execution and actual executions carried out? A perfect 0.

Establishing that people don’t mean everything they say, in or outside the military, is one important component to see how Koenig understands Bergdahl. Another point is that the military itself is filled with double standards that could be (and in the case of Bergdahl, were) interpreted as hypocrisy. Hence Bergdahl’s conclusion that the official fixation on unit uniform standards (or standards in general) was arbitrary and unreasonable—a fixation with which every soldier in post-9/11 combat has had to struggle. The same sergeant was quoted in “Five O’Clock Shadow” as viewing unshaven soldiers in the same light as the Vietnam-era unit that committed the My Lai massacre. To Bergdahl, this was another confusing example of

hyperbolic rhetoric, but to the sergeant, the statement was intended to be taken at face value.

Bergdahl concluded that the military's priorities were honorable and decent, and that it was his unit's leadership that was intentionally or foolishly misinterpreting rules, regulations, and intentions in Afghanistan. Bergdahl concluded this because he apparently had difficulty interpreting metaphor and hyperbole, and was unable to reconcile the difference between ideal and real. This quintessentially human struggle, in Bergdahl's case, appears to have been insurmountable.

The seventh and eighth episodes of Serial elaborate on Bergdahl's literal-mindedness, and assign it a definition that fits it into the spectrum of mental illness: schizotypal personality disorder, a form of schizophrenia. In other words, Bergdahl's behaved like a crazy person because… he was a crazy person.

I have argued elsewhere that Bergdahl should never have been in the military to begin with, and that due to his uniquely unsuitable temperament, those officers responsible for adjudicating Bergdahl's case should view his crime with mercy and compassion. These episodes make it very clear that Bergdahl was never fit to serve in the Army infantry—from a social standpoint, as well as from a literary and linguistic one.