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Rochester's World and Life View

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The Paradox of Rochester's Nihilism: Imperfect Enjoyment Against the Search for a Miracle

Is, or is not, the Two great ends of Fate,
And true, or false, the Subject of debate,
That perfect, or destroy, the vast designs of Fate.

—John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester
"Upon Nothing"

He was the best they had, and he was the worst. He craved the sensual, and he scorned it. He loved life, and he was constantly preoccupied with death. He was John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester.

John Wilmot was one of the most controversial men that lived in the 18th-century Restoration period. He was the talk of many, and he remained a mystery even to himself as he alternately sought to satisfy his sensual nature and his spiri-

tual. He had a gift for turning out sharp, witty verse, and through this versifying he expressed the paradox of his beliefs. He was well known for his brazen sexual-connoted lyrics, but few remembered him for his view of man as an impotent, decayed machine always on the verge of death. The religion of sensual pursuit was a cruel master for Rochester, for it turned his life into a sparring match between the god of nihilism and unfulfilled humanity, and the search for a miracle to save him from his beliefs.

John Wilmot was born in April 1648. He was the son of a strict, religious mother and a carefree, dissolute father. This parental differentiation was to set the stage for the struggle of defining his life and beliefs. His father was gone much of the time, and as a result he was under the care of his mother during his early years. His mother had high ambitions for her son and John was sent to Wadham College, Oxford, at the age of thirteen. Wadham had upheld many of the strict ethics of the previous Protectorate period, but with the return of Charles II to the throne, the Puritanical bands loosened somewhat. The students, along with the general populace, were ready for a little fun and excitement in their lives.

Oxford was also becoming one of the centers for the new philosophy and science. "It was into this kind of society that Rochester came at the age of thirteen, after a life in the country under the strict discipline of his mother."¹ He began to enjoy the pleasures indulged in by the other Oxford students. He never did complete his schooling at the college, although he was an apt and capable student.

He decided to take a tour of the continent at age fifteen to round off his educational experience, and he was introduced at many of the great courts of the day. Rochester returned to England at age seventeen and presented himself to the court of Charles II. It was generally expected, although he was poor, that Rochester would receive some preferment, as his father had aided the Royalists in the

war.

This era was an unpleasant one for England. The country was in a financial slump because of bad crops and a drought. It was one of England's worst seasons. Rochester's financial status did not restrain him, however, from participation in high society. During this time he courted a rich heiress named Elizabeth Mallet. With his usual impetuosity, Wilmot tried to abduct the woman of his affections, was caught, and was thrown in the Tower for three weeks. At the start of his prison sentence, the Plague broke out, and the already grimy, bawdy city of London was in chaos.

The fact that Wilmot was put in the tower for three weeks probably saved his life. He pleaded for pardon to the king, and was soon released. Then he joined the court, and quickly became known for his place in the "Court Wits." This group consisted of men such as Sedley, Dorset, and Etherege. They were notably and proudly degenerate men who defied all conventions of respectability. They wrote lewd poetry, drank heavily, played pranks, and were often seen in the company of women of ill repute. During this time, Wilmot married Elizabeth Mallet and established her in the country, although he lived in London most of the time.

Rochester lived to be only thirty-three years old. The thirteen years between his introduction at court and his death were spent in alternate fits of vice, and contempt for those very same vices. His position in the court was erratic, as Charles II would banish and forgive him in turn. Rochester moved quite freely in the court, and never hesitated to satirize the king and his mistresses. The king was often his companion in misdeeds, so Rochester had an assured position.

Charles loved his jokes too much to tolerate Rochester's absence for long, for with his passing from the court passed that edge of wit and trickery that Charles loved in him.²

Rochester was very sensual. He had

also inherited or learned from his father the sad ability to be exceptionally witty when he was drunk. His friends, therefore, sought to keep him perpetually witty, and he recounted at the end of his life that for five years straight he was never sober. His preoccupation with women, liquor, and foolery was a subject of conversation in the city, as well as the topic of much of his poetry. He and his "merry company" were well known among the prostitutes of London.

By a strange and melancholy paradox the finest lyrical poet of the Restoration was also its worst-natured man. Infamous in a lax age for his debaucheries, the Earl of Rochester was unfaithful as a subject, shifting and treacherous as a friend, and untrustworthy as a man of honour, so cruel his pursuit of sensual pleasure, that this figure seems to pass through the social history of his time, like that of a devil.³

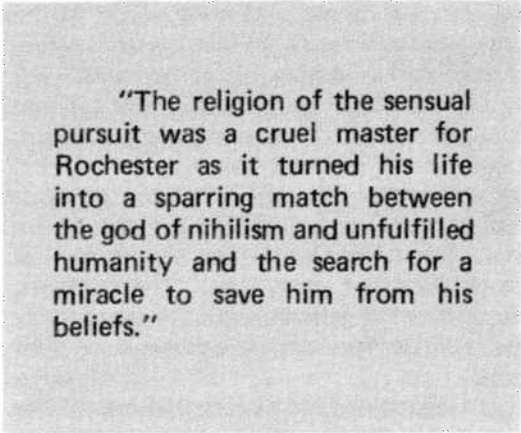
The antics of the "Court Wits" in public did nothing to increase their popularity with the more reserved members of society. Rochester especially suffered from adverse public opinion, and was often viewed as a corrupt coward. One of the fatal "Court Wit" pranks was the infamous Epsom Wells brawl.

They were tossing some fiddlers in a blanket for refusing to play, and a barber, upon ye noise, going to see what ye matter, they seized upon him, and, to free himself from them, he offered to carry them to ye handsomest woman in Epsom, and directed them to the constables house, who demanding what they came for, they told him a whore, and he, refusing to let them in, they broke open his doores and broke his head, and beate him very severly. At last, he made his escape, called his watch. . .one came behind Mr. Downs [a companion of Rochester's] and with a sprittle staff cleft his skull.

Ye Ld Rochester and ye rest
run away. . . .⁴

The "Court Wits" espoused a view of life that was "live for the moment, and take care of your own skin." Rochester lived a lusty and vice-ridden life along with the worst of them, but he was also a capable poet and an ingenious thinker.

Rochester had by far the most powerful and original mind of all the Court Wits. Alone among the Wits, he had a rich and sensitive perception of the unpleasant realities which lay behind the ornamental facade of the aristocratic society to which he belonged.⁵



"The religion of the sensual pursuit was a cruel master for Rochester as it turned his life into a sparring match between the god of nihilism and unfulfilled humanity and the search for a miracle to save him from his beliefs."

Rochester led a strange life divided between the two shadows that he envisioned. One side of the vision was the pursuit of sensual pleasure. He enjoyed this to the fullest, and made it the expression of his life; but he could never rid himself of the haunting face of the other vision. Tired and impotent men and women, decayed bodies and souls, and men filling out their years in machine-like motions haunted his "good times." There was always a dark cloud hovering over Rochester's wild gaiety.

The result of Rochester's split view was that much of his writing was not just an expression of surface pornography. It became a vehicle for him to express his

fears about the condition of the world and its people. This double vision shows up not only in his more familiar works, such as "Satyr Against Mankind," but also in his sexually explicit poetry. The sexuality of these poems does not ultimately glorify sexuality, however, for death, decay, and impotence keep cropping up in his poems. There is no escape for man. "The fact of the matter is that Rochester's writings deal less with orgasm than with its obstruction; less with sexuality than with the failure of sexuality."⁶

Rochester's expression of fear about sexual impotency takes on a more universal note when we notice that

Rochester's portrayal of impotence implies that it is not so much the temporary result of particular circumstances as the inevitable condition of all human existence: a comprehensive metaphor of man's failure to realize his desires in the mortal world.⁷

The spirit of the Restoration started out on a merry note. With the abolition of strict Puritan laws and ideals, the people began once more to enjoy themselves, and hope for a better future. The bawdy, promiscuous court of Charles II was tolerated and looked upon with humor and envy by some people. Rochester's earlier works reflect much of these activities. As the age progressed, however, things did not eventuate as many had expected. Rochester's writings were a mirror of these times. His writings were not quite the flip pornographic statements that many took them for.

The sombre desperate mood in which his poetry seems usually to have been composed was aided by the general disillusionment of the time. So much had been expected of the restoration and so little had come of it; so much had been expected of the war with Holland, and it had brought only disgrace.⁹

There were other factors that influenced how Rochester wrote. They were

the view of the age toward poetry, the new science, and the new philosophy. Rochester had come into close contact with the new science and philosophy during his college years, and these were to affect his view of life.

The tasks confronting the Restoration poets were not to produce "great poetry" or to revive the achievements of the Elizabethan age, but rather to keep poetry alive in an age of skepticism, rationalism and materialism and to begin the difficult process of remaking it in forms appropriate to the climate of opinion produced by the new science and the new philosophy.¹⁰

Rochester attempted to strike out satirically at the imbalance that he felt in life. He saw man as on a level with animals, mechanical and decayed. The only way to outsmart everyone else and yourself is to become so immersed in a particular lifestyle that you become twice the person that others are, and you forget your own questions.

[He] saw the world as a place for players and actors to prance upon the stage, a place where all the chief actors were bawds, cheats, charlatans and impostors. In such a world, Rochester felt he could satirize them through his deeds and words, and become like them by excelling them in all their vices. He lived as a caricature of them all.¹¹

Rochester was afraid of many things. He dreaded the end of the night, the end of the drunken haze, and the sagging of the flesh. He knew it would come sooner or later. He feared that "There would come a time when he was no longer able to plunge himself into endless revels to forget the overwhelming question."¹²

Rochester deals with man as impotent and decayed. He also includes a third aspect of man in his writings. This view is that man is a machine and on the level

of animals.

In a frightening extension of Descartes's view that animals are simply machines, Rochester at times posits the vision of man himself as the ultimate machine. In this connection it is interesting that he specifically draws a parallel between human and animal behavior on several occasions.¹³

His attitude toward man in relation to animals is shown in his poem "Satyr on Mankind":

who acts at the level of the unfeeling animal. Rochester tries to offer a bit of hope to mankind through the act of pursuing sensual pleasures, "But the promise held out rests primarily with the possibility that a disintegrating machine can be patched together again for another few performances."¹⁷

Rochester has no real way to come to grips with his dark vision. Few others in Charles II's court even knew that there was a further point to look to. It did Rochester little good to realize this, though, for, "In

"The background, movements of the time and the three aspects of man that Rochester dealt with in his poetry brought him to the one main thread running throughout his works: imperfect enjoyment. He advocated and lived a theory that he knew was not the answer."

Were I (who to my cost already
am
One of those strange prodigious
Creatures Man)
A Spirit free, to choose for my
own share,
What case of Flesh, and Blood, I
pleas'd to weare,
I'd be a Dog, a Monkey, or a
Bear,
or any thing but that vain An-
imal [Man].¹⁴

Another excerpt from "Satyr on Mankind" further illustrates this view:

Huddled in Dirt, this reas'ning
Engine lies
Who was so proud, so witty and
so wise.¹⁵

Many of Rochester's other poems express the same theme, as when ". . . mechanical exertions replace natural lovemaking."¹⁶ The theme of impotence and decay relates well to man as a worn-out machine

life, as in art, he desired to know and enjoy, and death and imperfect fruition haunted him."¹⁸

His background, the movements of the time, and the three aspects of man that Rochester dealt with in his poetry produced the principal motif that runs throughout his works: imperfect enjoyment. He advocated and lived a theory that he knew was not the answer. He said that the only meaning in life was the pursuit of pleasure and the sexual appetite, and yet he kept searching for a deeper meaning. He wrote blatantly sexual poems, and through them told of his own emptiness, as well as that of his theories.

Thus in instance after instance Rochester's poetry is characterized, not by the exaltation of sexuality as commonly assumed, but by an unequivocal demonstration of the latter's transience and futility. . . . Often a poem

dramatizes the separateness of each bodily part and the body's consequent inability to function successfully as a whole. By a variety of images and techniques, the ideal of totality is invoked merely to be subverted in the next moment.¹⁹

The concept of imperfect enjoyment involves life as the pursuit of the sensual, but it can never be perfect. There is enjoyment in life, but it is never complete. The sharp edge of fear always runs through Rochester's thoughts. Rochester was a rake and a pleasure-seeker, but he saw more than most of the courtiers beyond the gay moments in the court. He was a man who could write,

But we, poor slaves to hope and
fear,
Are never of our joys secure;
They lessen still as they draw
near,
And none but dull delights en-
dure.²⁰

With these words we begin to sense Rochester's involvement in a tired circle. Through his writings he rejects the example of his own life, and shows its emptiness and folly. "Rochester reveals an underlying repulsion against all worldly and sensual things as these repeatedly betray initial expectations."²¹ He tells the court that their actions are nothing. Impotence, decay, and the fleeting moment will do all men in.

"A bitter moralist, he attacks humanity, and especially his own class for its fatuous dependence on reason, its wretched hypocrisies, and indefensible brutalities."²² He can see what he is caught up in, and the problems causing it, but he can only lash out in satire as an answer. His works amaze us because we have rarely seen ". . . a body of writings so obsessed with its vision of impotence and decay."²³

Rochester takes his dark vision and turns it to a twisted religion of nihilism. Life is nothing. Man is to take and enjoy what he can, wherever and however often he can, before the inevitable blackness

engulfs him. What man does has no effect on anything, so all is permissible. Death will soon come to defeat each person.

Consistently the poems reflect a conversion of the spiritual and philosophical phenomena into concrete objects and actions: a kind of counter "transubstantiation" which exposes the wine as nothing but water after all. Hence incarnation is despiritualized into fornication and religious rituals are acted out in sexual terms.²⁴

Rochester's nihilism was strongly influenced by Thomas Hobbes' "Leviathan." From this work Rochester drew the insight that ". . . all names except those that signify sense impressions, parts of speech or relations between words"²⁵ are names of nothing.

Rochester in a flash of vision sees Nothing as the oldest of powers . . . the fountain head of all the mummeries of religion and statecraft. He is the only poet of the time who grasped the nature of the moral crisis of western civilization in the age of Descartes, Hobbes, and Pascal and this is the subject of his greatest poem "A Satyr Against Mankind" with its terrible picture of the fate of "rational" man in the soulless "Universe of death" produced by the new materialistic philosophy.²⁶

Perhaps Rochester still had something of the thirteen-year-old naive boy in him, however, which remained untouched by his alliance with the vice-ridden Restoration period. He believed in the message of nothingness, but in the back of his mind he kept hoping for a miracle that would save him from this bleak destiny:

Reason had only one business:
so to govern sense as to invigorate
desire. Once he had desired a
miracle; it seemed miracles did
not happen. Yet, almost hope-
less, almost despairing, almost
unaware of his own persistence,

the Lord Rochester, hurling himself down the way of sensation, went on looking for a miracle.²⁷

Rochester seems to be the ultimate representation of the different societal groups that have struggled with the question of meaning. Men down the ages have fallen prey to their sinful nature, and as a result have had to live a mentally crippled life such as Rochester's. The two sides of man's nature, the evil and the good, will always be with man. The end product sounds much like Rochester.

The restless victim, cynical, desperate and self-indulgent, alienated from, yet attracted to, God and the peace that comes with moral living. On his deathbed Rochester confessed that he held "a secret value and reverence for an honest man and loved morality in others."²⁸

The final turn in Rochester's life was his repentance shortly before his death at the age of thirty-three. When he was thirty-one, his body, worn out from the dissolute life he had led, collapsed, and he was ill for two years before he died. While he was ill, he spoke at length to a minister named Burnet, and finally announced his repentance for the life he had led. Whether his conversion was genuine we can not judge. Many think that it was sincere.

So the war went between the Puritan mother, with her gift of railing, and the fuddled "good fellow," his father. . . .

At last the body worn out, the fight ended from exhaustion, and the victory was his mother's.²⁹

In submitting to the decision that had haunted him all his life, Rochester finally found the answer to the questions with which he was afraid to be left alone. But if the answer that he got was these lines by man the mechanical actor,

Leave this gawdy guided Stage
From custome more than use
frequented;
Where fooles of either sex and
age

Crowd to see themselves presented,³⁰
or if it was the life-renewing miracle that he had long sought, none know the way that Rochester chose to go.

Footnotes

1. Graham Greene, *Lord Rochester's Monkey, Being the Life of John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 30.
2. John Redwood, "Lord Rochester and the Court of Charles II," *History Today*, May 1974, p. 344.
3. Edmund Gosse, "Edmund Gosse on Rochester," in *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Farley-Hills (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1972), p. 249. Reprinted from *The Seventeenth Century*, p. 424 (1880).
4. K.E. Robinson, "A Glance at Rochester in Thomas Durfey's 'Madam Fickle,'" *Notes and Queries*, June 1975, p. 264.
5. Vivian De Sola Pinto (ed.), *Poetry of the Restoration, 1653-1700* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 7.
6. Carole Fabricant, "Rochester's World of Imperfect Enjoyment," *Journal of English and German Philology*, July 1974, p. 339.
7. Fabricant, p. 348.
8. Rochester in Fabricant, p. 350.
9. Greene, p. 74.
10. De Sola Pinto, p. 12.
11. Redwood, p. 347.
12. Greene, p. 108.
13. Fabricant, p. 345.
14. De Sola Pinto, p. 77.
15. De Sola Pinto, p. 78.
16. Fabricant, p. 344.
17. Fabricant, p. 344.
18. Charles Williams, *Rochester* (London: Arthur Barke Ltd., 1935), p. 186.
19. Fabricant, p. 343.
20. Rochester in Fabricant, p. 339.
21. Louis Untermeyer, *Lives of the Poets* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 350.
22. Untermeyer, p. 212.
23. Fabricant, p. 350.
24. Fabricant, p. 338.
25. De Sola Pinto, p. 8.
26. De Sola Pinto, p. 8.
27. Williams, p. 205.
28. Peter S. Prescott, "Rake's Progress," *Newsweek*, September 23, 1974, p. 92.
29. Greene, p. 74.
30. Rochester in De Sola Pinto, p. 28.