

Puritanism and Anglicanism

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The Restoration must be understood as a psycho-historical reaction to the Civil War and Interregnum, which had been the realization of the most powerful nightmares of an age for which notions of revolution and democracy were more or less inconceivable. The idea that a coalition of dissenters would dare to cut off a king's head would probably never have occurred to a single European except in his wildest fantasies. Yet, it happened in 1649, much to the surprise of many actually responsible.

To those who lived during the Restoration, the Civil War thus connoted social instability predicated on dissent to an extent that must never be repeated. They reacted fairly accurately to what had occurred in that they saw that the ideologies fueling the radical revolution (one more radical than most Americans would countenance) were in many cases not deeply skeptical about their claims to religious knowledge. Indeed, it was the very clarity of a certain tradition of Reformed apologetic that gave it the power of a revolutionary instrument. Some of the arguments in this tradition were effectively late-Aristotelian in nature: the rational mind of the believer had unmediated access to the rational mind of God, and this permitted the critique of purely artificial and arbitrary forms of civil power, like kingship. For this kind of believer, the only true monarch was God, and no Stuart could act in contradiction to the politics thus suggested without deserving to be unseated.

The Restoration, however, tended to parody dissenting epistemology when it treated its certainties as the basis of a fanaticism resulting from arbitrary and grotesque infusions of spiritual power. Such forms of religious knowledge were attacked as superstitious, idolatrous, and “enthusiastick.” To protect the restored Church of England, then, the skeptical strategy proved most useful—it was the ideal instrument for embarrassing dissenters' claims to have better or fuller knowledge than the Anglican hierarchy, who were by contrast depicted as “moderate,” while the dissenters—and of course Catholics, whom all despised—were seen as “fanaticks.”

Neoclassical language is consequently full of a metaphorical dichotomy between a somatic, embodied form of knowledge (what the natural philosophers call “solid” philosophy) and a pneumatic, impossible, and finally absurd kind of knowledge claim.

The somatic metaphor (denoting the “actual” foundations of knowledge within the Restoration scheme) drives the possibility of Restoration satire to the degree that it helps to enact one of the terms of satiric utterance, namely the urge to convert the satiric object into a body—a fleshy, ugly object—and to wreak satiric vengeance upon it (the process of “animalization”). Satire in this mode is like the fable: the fable is that mode of language that suggests the possibility of a somatic exemplification of knowledge. In fact, the Restoration is one of the high points in the history of the English fable.