## Reconsidering "a Swinish Multitude": John Aitken's Poem, *The Swinish Multitude's Push for Reform:*A Poem in Three Cantos (1816)

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Im, Bora. "Reconsidering 'a Swinish Multitude': John Aitken's Poem, The Swinish Multitude's Push for Reform: A Poem in Three Cantos (1816)." Studies in English Language & Literature 44.2 (2018): 187-203. The Romantic period saw the outbreak of the French Revolution and the French Revolutionary War. Those two important historical events led British radicals to confront the conservatives about the implications of the Revolution and social / political justice. Edmund Burke's pamphlet, Reflections on the Revolution in France, became the target of the radicals' bitter criticism. In other words, contemporary political discourses were centered on Burke's Reflections. In this article I would like to focus on the famous phrase in the Reflections, "a swinish multitude," which stimulated the British radicals enormously and led them to compose various pamphlets. Due to the provoking concept, Burke was attacked both in prose and verse. I also would like to read John Aitken's poem The Swinish Multitude's Push for Reform: A Poem in Three Cantos, which is an elaborate criticism of the phrase, the "swinish multitude." (Chonbuk National University)

Key Words: Edmund Burke, a swinish multitude, John Aitken, the lower orders, the 1800s

I

The French Revolution and the subsequent conflict, the French Revolutionary War led European countries to reconsider their own social and political state seriously. They came to re-examine the validity of monarchy and aristocracy. Among those

nations, Britain saw extremely lively discussions about the legitimacy of the Revolution, monarchy and aristocracy between the conservatives and the radicals / moderates. Edmund Burke was in the middle of the political discourses. Burke's pamphlet titled, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, with its conservative and anachronistic theories, led the radicals to compose various pamphlets.

Almost every sentence written in Burke's *Reflections* stimulated the radical philosophers. But we might say that a phrase in the *Reflections*, "a swinish multitude" particularly attracted attention from the radical theorists. Thomas Macknight, a contemporary pamphleteer, writes about the implications of the concept, "a swinish multitude":

In an Address from the Swinish Multitude to the Hon. Edmund Burke, he was accused of the grossest unfairness and selfish indifference to the sufferings of the lower orders. How horrible, his assailant exclaimed, to apply the appellation of swinish multitude to a poor and oppressed people! What a hoggish honor! What a sublime and beautiful compliment! (Macknight 337)

As Macknight observes, Burke was "attacked both in verse and prose" (Macknight 338). For example, James Parkinson composed *An Address to the Hon. Edmund Burke* as well as *Pearls Cast Before Swine, by Edmund Burke, Scraped Together by Old Hubert.* There was a penny magazine called *Pig's Meat; or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude* (Lewis 95).

In this essay I would like to examine social and political implications of Burke's concept "a swinish multitude"; I will focus on the impact of the concept upon the contemporary political discourses. In the following discussion, I want to read John Aitken's poem, *The Swinish Multitude's Push for Reform: A Poem in Three Cantos* as a poetic response to Burke's idea, the "swinish multitude."

П

Edmund Burke coined a famous phrase in his conservative pamphlet, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was published in 1790: "a swinish multitude" (76). As I discussed in my essay titled, "Yet never, Burke! thou drank'st Corruption's bowl': Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Disagreement with Edmund Burke," Burke's *Reflections* triggered the pamphlet war: a lot of political pamphlets were composed for and against Burke's *Reflections* (Im 23). In this section I would like to focus on the concept "a swinish multitude" as it shows the contemporary British conservatives' attitudes toward the lower orders or the British public. To explore the concept "a swinish multitude," it will be fruitful to consider the nature of heated dialogues between the *Reflections* and those pamphlets produced in response to the former.

The pamphlet war was certainly a war in that two rivals - the conservatives and the radicals - were engaged in hostile contention by means of armed forces, that is, their own language (Boulton 76). If it was a war it was a very strange conflict, in which both rivals mingled with each other consciously or unconsciously at the very moment when they attacked each other. The result of the mingling was to shake the base of their own arguments or underline their adversaries' discourse, which was not their original intention at all. Tom Furniss's reading in his *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* sheds much light on the issue of the mingling (Furniss 68-70).

The pamphlet that stimulated Burke to compose the *Reflections* was a dissenting minister Richard Price's sermon, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1790) (Hole 56). Price stated triumphantly:

Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting AMERICA free, reflected to FRANCE, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates EUROPE! (Price 40)

Price's reference to the light reminds us of Burke's discussion of it in his earlier work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the sublime and Beautiful* (1757): in the treatise Burke regards the light as "a cause capable of producing the sublime" (79). It was not Price alone who highlighted Burke's discourses shown in the *Philosophical Enquiry*. Burke also highlighted Price in the *Reflections*. Burke includes Price's text in the pamphlet:

What an eventful period is this! I am thankful that I have lived to it [. . .] I have lived to see THIRTY MILLIONS of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice; their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects. (*Reflections* 34)

As Furniss aptly points out, Burke "introduces into the textual body the very contagion he is trying to expel" (Furniss 134) by quoting Price's text.

Burke does not only introduce Price but also sympathizes with his revolutionary cause unwittingly. Burke describes the above passage as an outbreak of rapture. He analyzes it as follows:

A cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination. The preacher found them all in the French Revolution. His enthusiasm kindles as he advances; and when he arrives at his peroration, it is in a full blaze. (*Reflections* 34)

Yuval Levin interprets the above passage as a bitter criticism upon the French Revolution and its theatricality:

At once connected with the spectacles of an actual revolution, these habits create a hunger for radical political action - a hunger that leaves people dissatisfied with normal life and thus disinclined to seek stability. (Levin 126)

Levin suggests that people needs theatrical spectacles and that the Revolution satisfied the human instinct. As Levin points out, Burke in the above passage from the *Reflections* criticizes the Revolution as an event stimulating cheap curiosities.

This passage, however, apart from its context, seems to be uttered by a radical polemist who is dazed at the greatness and magnificence of the Revolution and its supporters (Lock 67). Burke seems to forget the context on purpose and indulge himself in Price's revolutionary sermon, which "is in a full blaze." This strange war of intermingling in the 1790s was possible because the philosophical scope of its epicenter, the *Reflections* was ample: for example, the pamphlet could stand its own contradiction or its radical impulse. And it had emotionalism that was to be attacked and then appropriated by other radical philosophers. It also established its own unique interpretation of the Revolution as a dramatic moment. Along with them almost everything that was to be said about the British monarchy, the British constitution, the established Church, and social hierarchy was explored in it (Bruyn 57). But there was one thing that was missing in it: the mob. As Butler points out, Burke in the *Reflections* "pays little attention to the masses, except for one insulting expression, when he alludes in passing to the mob as a swinish multitude" (Butler 67).

I suppose that Kevin Gilmartin's recent observation is the full acknowledgement of the mob's absence in Burke's *Reflections*: "Burke was a far less representative man of the right" (Gilmartin 8). Gilmartin argues that Burke did not acknowledge "the pivotal role of mass ritual and spectacle, and above all public displays of royal splendour in the consolidation of popular loyalist opinion" (Gilmartin 42) because of his contempt for the anti-theatrical celebrations, or the plebeian counter-theatre or crowd rituals mimicking the actions of its the crowd's betters.

Burke's phrase, "a swinish multitude" is indeed a passing remark: when he mentioned it his real interest was in other thing, that is, to insist on the necessity of the indissoluble union of the nobility, the clergy and learning. He was saying that learning must be the exclusive property of the nobility and the clergy and should not be enjoyed by "a swinish multitude":

Learning paid back what it received to nobility and to priesthood, and paid it with usury, by enlarging their ideas and by furnishing their minds. Happy if they had all continued to know their indissoluble union and their proper place! Happy if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor, and not aspired to be the master! Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude. (*Reflections* 67)

The anger of the radicals / moderates who saw the phrase, "a swinish multitude" is understandable. The phrase shows the established prejudice entertained by the upper class against the lower orders.

After introducing the concept, "a swinish multitude," Burke did not discuss it any more; he did not even tell his readers whom he meant by the phrase. Thus whether Burke spoke of a supposed particular multitude or of the common people in a general sense was still a controversial issue in 1797 (Herzog 509). But the 'swinish multitude' itself seemed to know almost instinctively whom Burke was referring to and what he meant by the phrase. One of the "swinish multitude," Daniel Isaac Eaton, defined the meaning of the phrase in his pamphlet titled *The Remonstrance of the Swinish Multitude, to the Chief and Deputy Swineherds of Europe*, which was published on 26 October:

We are charged with rebellion, ingratitude, dissatisfaction, disobedience to our swineherds, and thirsting for innovation; in a word, we are represented as animals devoid of common sense; ripe to commit the blackest treasons. These are the reports which are cruelly raised, and industriously circulated, to stigmatize and blacken our general character. But when our conduct is considered, they must appear infamous forgeries, diabolical fabrications. (55)

In other words, as the anonymous writer admits, the "swinish multitude," was poor people who had or were thought to have all the heinous characteristics such as treasonable quality, "ingratitude," "dissatisfaction," "disobedience," brutishness and

the lack of common sense.

So, Burke's passing phrase of just three words made the lower orders or those who willingly included themselves in "a swinish multitude" think over their own identity and write about it. And with dizzying speed, it emerged as one of the day's cant phrases. Eaton's *Politics for the People or a Salmagundy for Swine* and Thomas Spence's *Pig's Meat: or Lessons for the Swinish Multitude* were two major responses to the phrase in periodical form. The influence of the phrase was not only reflected in the full title of those journals but also in the readers' letters to the editor of *Politics for the People*, which were signed variously "Gregory Grunter," "Pigabus," and "Gruntum Snorum" (Smith 80).

The phrase naturally produced a new, mocking denomination for the ruling class, swineherds, as evinced in the title mentioned above, *Remonstrance of the Swinish Multitude, to the Chief and Deputy Swineherds of Europe*. But it was not the end: the ruling class was itself transformed into "a swinish multitude" in James Gillray's cartoons, "More Pigs than Teats" (1806) and "The Pigs Possessed" (1807). Darren Howard explores the pigs imagery as follows:

The problem of animal difference, however, ultimately proves insoluble in the political discussions of the 1790s. Burke, Wollstonecraft, and the other political theorists of the 1790s rely to various degrees on implicit fictions in their prescription for social stability. [. . .] The debate over rights thus reveals itself to be a debate between competing fictional visions of humanity. By studying the centrality of animals to those visions, we can see that they are based on the most necessary fiction of all: the fixed and absolute difference between humans and animals. (Howard 167)

Here Howard argues that the image, "a swinish multitude," is based on the "fictional visions of humanity," that is, the fiction that there is the difference between humans and animals. It is true that, as Howard discusses, Burke made a clear distinction between humans and animals in regarding the multitude as non-human animals. But

my suggestion is that even though Burke distinguished between humans and animals, his distinction boosted the idea of the absence of distinguishing qualities between them, as Gillray's cartoons show.

The image, "a swinish multitude" combined with wartime discourses to produce the theme of the pigs of England being forced to fight the pigs of France and other European countries. Eaton writes in *The Remonstrance of the Swinish Multitude* as follows:

In such distressful bondage are we held, that the World daily sees the swine of Russia and Turkey, Prussia, Germany, France, and Great-Britain, worrying each other with a rancour as inveterate as if they were animals of different species; and all this in pure passive obedience to our swineherds, for all must allow, that we, the swine of Great Britain, have no right to esteem ourselves superior, in the scale of beings, to the swine of France, or any other country. (56)

Burke inspired the lower orders of Britain to see the world through pig imageries. Here Eaton criticizes the ongoing French Revolutionary War and describes the people of those countries involved in the conflict - Russia, Prussia, Turkey, Germany, France, and Britain - as the pigs that obey their governments, or swineherds, passively. The description is extremely humorous and vivid. Eaton criticizes the European warmongering governments as oppressive organs.

As Olivia Smith points out, "by vividly defining a large part of the population as brutish and inarticulate, Burke provoked them into speech" (Smith 81). The word "vividly" is important here: it contains the reason for the phrase's popularity. Smith writes further: "The concreteness of the image is what allows it to be refuted" (Smith 82). The vividness was achieved probably because, as F. P. Lock observes, "the style of the *Reflections* conforms to the canons of classical rhetoric, which placed a high value on vivid description, regarded as a powerful persuasive tool" (Lock 21).

The vividness and concreteness of the phrase, "a swinish multitude," stimulated

the radical imagination of the lower orders. And its shortness left much place for something to be said by them: I think there would never have been such enthusiastic responses from them if Burke had destroyed its compactness by superfluous words of explanation. Short and concise expressions stir up our imagination. Burke did not attempt to explain the meaning and scopes of the concept, "a swinish multitude": he just presented the phrase and led the lower orders to explain it themselves.

So far I explored the political and social implications of the controversial concept, Burke's "a swinish multitude." In this section I would like to examine a poem written in response to the concept, titled *The Swinish Multitude's Push for Reform:* A Poem in Three Cantos composed by John Aitken. The author, Aitken seems to have been a minor poet, as no record exists of him. But Aitken was possibly a productive poet: the title page of the poem, The Swinish Multitude's Push, tells that he is the author of The Plebeian's Alarm as well. The poem, The Swinish Multitude's Push was published in Glasgow in 1816.

As implied earlier in this essay, many authors responded to Burke's *Reflections* in the form of pamphlets or tracts. But poems were not written in response to the phrase "a swinish multitude." That is the reason why Aitken's poem, *The Swinish Multitude's Push*, is extremely important for our discourses. Aitken begins the poem:

Ye learned Lords and Nobles great,
That rule this sad ill-fated State,
On wha depend on an Empire's fate,
Haud for a wee.
This lang while back ye've gane a gate
That's yexed me

Your conscience never count's a crime, For spreading woe frae clime to clime, Mair than a Bardie does to rhyme A bletherin' sang; Ye're sae accustomed tilt, by time,

Thought's lost the fang. (Aitken 2)

Aitken criticizes the "learned Lords and Nobles great / That rule this sad ill-fated" Britain. Aitken contrasts the "learned Lords and Nobles" with the lower orders or the "swinish multitude," who is not learned at all. But the poet implies that the "swinish multitude" has discontentment with the upper class, the "learned Lords and Nobles." Thus we might suppose that the word "great," modifying "learned Lords and Nobles" is used ironically, suggesting that they are not great.

Aitken describes Britain as a "sad ill-fated State." Indeed Britain in the 1800s was a "sad ill-fated State" as the life of the lower orders was miserable. Patricia Comitini argues as follows:

Alongside the upper class fears of depopulation, crime, and political discontent of the lower orders, there was also a fear of social and economic transgression by the poor which took form in common methods of revolt such as arson and rioting. (Comitini 97)

There was a serious decrease in population in the 1800s because of the ongoing French Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic War. Even though the two wars were fought on the Continent, Britain was deeply involved in the conflicts and lost many of its people in the battles (Blanning 82). As Aitken writes, the lower orders of Britain were living in a "sad ill-fated State" as the government sent them to the battlefields to be killed; it also did not trust them and regarded them as potential criminals.

In the lines quoted above, Aitken laments that the "learned Lords and Nobles" spread "woe frae [i. e. from] clime to clime." The French Revolutionary War virtually initiated by the warmongering government of Britain aggravated economic woes of the country; and the victim of the economic crises was the poor people of Britain (Harling 50). Hilary Havens rightly observes:

The economic disparity between the few who dictated government policies and the masses that suffered from the consequences only exacerbated the resentment that erupted in street riots protesting the rising cost of bread and the nefarious practice of crimping. (Havens 102)

The war resulted in the food shortage, which in turn led to mass riots (Emsley 98). Aitken criticizes the "learned Lords and Nobles" and shows that the "swinish multitude" is ready to heighten its voices over a social barrier.

Aitken continues to criticize the present state of Britain and the wrongs done by the "learned Lords and Nobles":

For Lordsake, Sirs! then candid weigh
The wrangs that ding us sae aglee
Ne'er pledge your word, syne raise a plea,
An' mak' excuses,
That sinks the man, till oh! he's wee,
And truth abuses. (Aitken 6)

Aitken writes that the "learned Lords and Nobles" do not pledge their word at all and make excuses for their faults. Thus the plight of the poor does not get better and the truth is lost and abused. Even though the lower orders made a plea for their environment and bad condition, it was forgotten and discarded. David Eastwood elaborates the state:

It is that the most serious threat to the conservative order in Britain would have come from a radical politicization of the plight of the poor, from food rioters in England following their French counterparts into the temples of Jacobinism. (Eastwood 162)

As Eastwood argues, the British radicals in the age of the French Revolution attempted to politicize the poor state of the lower orders in order to solidify and

fortify their position; and we might suggest that it is such politicization that Aitken in his poem, *The Swinish Multitude's Push* executes with caution.

In the following lines, Aitken's voice is very strong. The poet refers to Burke and the swine.

But aiblins, ye may think like Burke, We're made for nocht but just to wurke, Or roun' your Honours' tails to lurke, And grumph like swine; If mair we wish, it's deem'd a quirke O' the warst kin.' (Aitken 6)

To "think like Burke" is to think of the lower orders as the "swinish multitude," not human beings. Indeed, Aitken states that the poor people are "made for nocht [nothing] but just to wurke [work]." For the "learned Lords and Nobles," Aitken believes, the lower orders exist just for the national revenue and the taxation.

The poor people of Britain suffered from high rents, and burdensome taxes. George Lewis, a contemporary Independent minister of Caernarfon, complained as follows:

Tithes for the maintenance of the established clergy are so heavy. The common people find it extremely difficult to procure the necessities of life. The oppressed poor of Britain are too poor to pay their Passage and cannot raise the fare even if they are to sell all they have. Not one in twenty had the means of conveying himself and his family to a land of Plenty. (Horn 40)

As Aitken writes, the lower orders lurk round "your Honours' tails," suffering from the heavy taxation; they are invisible but extremely valuable to the "learned Lords and Nobles" as a source of funds. Here we need to focus on the word, "tails," which suggests the similarity between the "learned Lords and Nobles" and animals.

In the lines cited above, Aitken shows that the lower orders are usually regarded

as a herd of "swine" that "grumph." Burke's animal imagery stimulated the public imagination greatly:

Animal imagery was commonly appropriated by radical satirists following Burke's famous description of the "swinish multitude." The original phrase arose from Burke's somewhat prophetic sense that there was a greater potential danger in the anarchic nature of the populace than in the moral nature of a corrupt aristocracy. (Orr 56)

Aitken, one of the "radical satirists" enjoyed the fruitfulness of Burke's animal metaphor. The satirical pig imagery enriches the following passage as well:

At fine grac'd bows we may seem blunt, And grate your feelings when we grunt -Let dangers ca,' we show a front Ye're blythe to see; It braves destruction, while ye strunt, And pouch your fee. (Aitken 6)

The poet shows how the upper class thinks of the lower orders: Aitken claims that "we may seem blunt." The poor people were generally regarded as ignorant and "blunt" by the upper middle class in the 1800s. As Gary Kelly points out, "middle-class emulation of their betters and desire for upward social mobility led to increasing disdain for the lower orders and sharper distinctions between the professions, the commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie and mere tradespeople" (Kelly 4).

Aitken writes that "[we] grate your feelings when we grunt." The word "[we]" implies the poet ironically admits that he is one of the "swinish multitude." Here once again the poet shows attitudes of disdain on the part of the upper middle class towards the lower orders: as Aitken suggests, the former thinks that the latter "grunt[s]" like complaining pigs. The poet implies that the complaint of the lower

orders is not considered seriously and is regarded as the noisy grunting of the pigs.

We can see that Aitken's anger and anguish visibly go deep in the following lines:

Aye staunch we've stood, it maun be granted, Ne'er turn'd our backs when help ye wanted; When Gallia's Chief armed legions planted, In warlike form, We sallied forth, with hearts undaunted, And braved the storm. (Aitken 6)

Here Aitken claims that the lower orders, including the poet himself, willingly sacrificed themselves whenever there was a national crisis. Aitken says that the lower orders of Britain are once again faithful to their own country in the present war, or the French Revolutionary War waged against Gallia, i. e. the French Republic. In the lines quoted above, the poet writes about what the poor people of Britain had done for their country, and what the latter neglected to do. Aitken's poem, *The Swinish Multitude's Push* was a channel through which the "swinish multitude" announced their grievances forcefully.

## Ш

Burke must not have known that his phrase the "swinish multitude" could have a great influence on the contemporary radicals and/or moderates. As I mentioned earlier, the famous concept led the radicals to know the way the upper middle class thought of the lower orders; the radical philosophers publicly and ironically admitted that they were one of the "swinish multitude." Not all the radical philosophers were from the lower class, but calling themselves the "swinish multitude," they were willingly united with the poor people of Britain in order to improve their living

conditions and realize the parliamentary reform.

Macknight wrote in his pamphlet as follows in protest against the phrase, the "swinish multitude":

Here is a great statesman and philosopher, hitherto renowned for his humanity and philanthropy, deliberately stigmatizing the humbler classes of the people as swine. He was not satisfied with deserting the cause of the people, but he must insult them by applying to them the epithet "swinish." (Macknight 337)

The radical theorists creatively used the insulting epithet, "swinish" to solidify their political positions and raise their voices. Even though Burke was bitterly criticized due to the phrase, the "swinish multitude," it helped the British radicals share their political views actively.

Aitken's poem, *The Swinish Multitude's Push* needs to be understand in the context of the political atmosphere of the 1800s. In the poem, Aitken attempted to announce the unfairness of Burke's phrasing and correct the socially and politically prejudiced attitude of the upper middle class towards the lower orders. Burke's *Reflections* and Aitken's *The Swinish Multitude's Push*, along with other pamphlets, enriched the political discourses in the Britain in the 1800s.

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