Respond to the following statement. Your answer should take the form of a structured critical essay. You should base your response on at least TWO texts studied on the module.

“Every man is conscious, that he neither performs, nor forbears any thing upon any other motive than the prospect, either of an immediate gratification, or a distant reward” (Samuel Johnson, Sermons).

George Orwell saw four great motives for writing: “Sheer egoism”, “Aesthetic enthusiasm”, “Historical impulse” and “Political purpose”. Clearly, with his views on human motivation, Samuel Johnson would have related most naturally to the first of these examples, even believing it encompasses the other three. Such an interpretation of personal incentive – the idea of writing as means to gain reward, whether that be a higher reputation, increased bank balance or forgiveness in the afterlife – could seemingly be applied to any writer, without the potential to be disproved. After all, the motivation behind a work is known only to the person by whom it was written. Instead the means to combat such a pessimistic view of art and life is to highlight motivations outside of personal gain. Rather than trying to disprove its existence, arguing that a writer’s drive cannot possibly be simplified to one such base source as reward. Literature, as with human nature, is far too complex and multifaceted to not be a consequence of “any other motive”(Johnson). As a result, no matter how significant the prospect of reward might be to a writer, it cannot be a solitary motivation. Satire as a form provides obvious motivations outside of gratification. These most notably include to encourage a new way of thinking and, more simplistically, to insult. Swift, in A Full And True Account Of The Battel Fought Last Friday, Between The Antient And The Modern Books In St James’s Library (hereby referred to as The Battle of the Books), attempts to outline his own views
on the conflict between ancient and modern literature, fuel professional feuds and attempt
to explain the concept of satire. Even literature so focused upon gratification as The
Imperfect Enjoyment, by the Second Earl of Rochester, John Wilmot, can be argued as
writing to reveal, mock and simply entertain acquaintances. It is obvious that any
motivation highlighted can be labelled a search for reward, no matter how strenuous the
link, but the presence of such a search and other motivations, whether positive or negative,
can coexist.

Edmund Gosse, in reference to Rochester, wrote that “Nothing is more disgusting
than obscenity in cold blood.”(qtd. in Berman, 355), prompting Ronald Berman’s response
that “Nothing, on the other hand, is more revealing.”(Berman 355). In The Imperfect
Enjoyment, Rochester writes of his narrator – a character who is assumedly himself, or one
with a similar lifestyle – possessing an “all-dissolving thunderbolt below”(ll.10) which
became “Shrunk up and sapless like a withered flower”(ll. 45). If written of his own
experiences, this becomes a poem of self-deprecation, mocking a personal incident for the
humour of close friends likely to have known of his misfortune already. If portraying
someone else, possibly a person his inner circle would have been aware of, then the effect
is simpler; a group sharing in the comedy and tragedy of a contemporary’s calamity. The
personal motivation to impress friends or gain favour within court may well be present, but
his exposure of the mechanically unreliable male form, and the animalistic reality it
creates, makes such simple aims seem arbitrary. Ellenzweig suggests he is “Arguably
laying bare an emergent logic of class, a logic that will eventually displace earlier
rationales of social rank and status.”(705). While this is, if intentional, debatably an
objective founded on questionable logic – for a man of high title if not political influence –
it displays the impact Rochester’s poetry had. While serving a simple and idealistic intention of entertaining, as satire often does, it also fulfils a more significant political role.

“Reputed a brilliant scholar” (Ballaster, 204) it seems logical to suggest Rochester was consciously attempting to inject realism into restoration Britain and its literature. Calling his penis a “rakehell villain” (ll. 57) that “When vice, disease and scandal lead the way / With what officious haste dost thou obey” (ll. 52-3) highlights the body’s ability to fail the mind. Here the mind is specifically linked to love, as it was “when great Love the onset does command” (ll. 59) that the body failed. Such a comparison raises the poem from the crude form enforced upon it by the perception of language such as “cunt” (ll. 18), but they are equally effective in their creation of a realistic, humanistic situation. The combination of shocking language, vivid description and sexual disappointment make *The Imperfect Enjoyment* comedic and perfect for circulation amongst close friends. But the introduction of a loving relationship between the two characters gives a tragic sense to the events; a veteran of many meaningless, unhygienic sexual encounters meets a women he wants to ‘make love’ to, only to see his body fail him. The wish that “ten thousand abler pricks agree / To do the wronged Corinna right for thee” (ll. 71-2) sums up the mixture of tragedy and comedy that necessitates the poet be given far greater credit than trying to write for an audience who might further the poet’s position. Sent to the tower in 1665 and exiled to France in 1673 and 1675 (Ballaster, 205), it appears Rochester was not one to write for the benefit of social or political gain. His stark realism and prowess for creating shock is his means by which to portray his lifestyle, supplying “dialogues which take place in a Restoration darker than the one we think we know.” (Berman, 355). Rochester disproved Johnson’s theory on motivation by writing out of a need to express, expose and
entertain. Certainly he gained in posthumous reputation, and certainly he wrote because he might gain personally, but it was far from a sole motivation.

Rochester, by satirising the sexual prowess associated with libertines, writes satire as a means to encourage an alternative consideration of initial perceptions. He is pushing the questioning of a stereotype he himself has helped to build; joking, with those who he might have received a circulated manuscript, about the outsider perception of their lifestyles. In doing so, however, he also mocks those who perceive their lives to be lived in the libertine style. His poetry manages to make fun of both the perception of the life and the life itself. Here, therefore, he is fulfilling what Swift deemed the intention of Satire in his author’s preface of *The Battle of the Books*. For Swift, “Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own”(1). Both he and Rochester encouraged and challenged their readers to perceive literature differently. Swift emphasises the importance of depth in literature, and of being unemotional and impersonal in criticism. But he is also matching Rochester’s self-deprecation, as the very criticisms present in his preface could be applied to himself. Effectively he is warning against the critic who elevates himself above the work he criticises, as he will be struck down by his betters. However Swift, representing modernists as a spider, describes its means of survival as “one insect furnishes you with a share of poison to destroy another”(9), through the voice of a bee representing the ancients. As a result he is taking the elevated view he earlier belittled and mocking the very criticism he is giving. He is accusing modern critics of producing poison by poisoning, the poison being their criticism and their act of writing their poison, while what they critique is assigned the lowly position of insect. Such a style opens up the writer to ridicule through misunderstanding. It is an intellectual querying of the very concept of authorship, a non-conformist mode which limits positive criticism but
increases a work’s scope and impact. Tinkler writes that “Bentley, the supporter of the Moderns, was a professional man who understood the legitimacy of the authenticated document very well and successfully pursued the route of professionalism toward social mobility. In the struggle for power Swift was on the losing side.”(472). This suggests that Swift, like the exiled and imprisoned Rochester, sought literary excellence at the expense of personal gain, seeing the opportunity to develop satire and increase the checks on literary and social criticism as too great to pass upon. That does not preclude either from personal criticism – Rochester died on venereal disease at 33 – or give them moral superiority of other writers, but it does allow their reasons for writing to be categorised across Orwell’s four points.

In A Satire Against Reason and Mankind, Rochester wrote that “Our sphere of action is life's happiness, / And he who thinks beyond, thinks like an ass”(ll. 96-97). Isolated, this seems to correspond with Johnson, the idea of living for individual pleasure. But by expressing such an opinion, Rochester is attempting to persuade others to live as such, even insulting those who do not. Much like Swift’s instruction to critics, this outward reach toward the readership, directly declaring a means by which to live, subverts the idea of writing for individual purpose. Most likely, Rochester is attempting to convey the necessity to act to improve life as a whole, or at least one’s own life. This instruction can be carried out by any method and for any end which suits the individual. His exact motivations are obviously unknown, but such a motivation as “life’s happiness”(Rochester), in contrast to Johnson’s “reward” and “gratification”, suggests Rochester wrote with more than one intention; working toward the happiness of life, rather than his life. Swift theorised that “Fear and Hope are the two greatest natural motives”(qtd. in Speck.62). While these can incorporate and inspire self interest, as could Rochester’s
“life’s happiness”, they are certainly not limited to it. In *The Battle of the Books*, Swift’s “Hope” is that the ancient writers he portrays gain greater respect and the modern writers he belittles, less. He wrote that “Homer appeared at the head of the cavalry, mounted on a furious horse, with difficulty managed by the rider himself, but which no other mortal durst approach” (Swift, 15). Here the horse is epic poetry, a form only Homer can master. Such elevation of a literary figure brings little personal credit to Swift, he is merely trying to poetically explain and justify his opinion. The description of Aquinas as “of mighty bulk and stature, but without either arms, courage, or discipline” is equally devoid of self-interest, though more debatable. Attacking a respected theological voice of the Christian faith is, however, the opposite, in Christian England, of acting for reward. Akin to Rochester’s satire of the very section of society he is distributing his manuscript amongst, Swift, upon his own impulses and reasoning, developed a variety of ideas and opinions, but not limited to the aim of self-interest.

To Orwell “All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.” Writing, therefore, cannot be limited to one motivation or desire. Personal gain has an impact on writing, but as seen in the work of Rochester and Swift, satire is especially a form which is produced from countless influences. Within this number are many unknown, but also the desire to inspire a new way of thinking, to make readers question what is currently in front of them, as well as what might be in the future. They also seek to convey opinion and revelation. The shocking language and blunt imagery of Rochester and the damning insults and exalted praise from Swift, seek to put across an important opinion that the writer deems to
be generally overlooked. For Rochester, that is the layers to libertinism and the limits of man. The ugly, unreliable mechanics he describes produces an image of restoration England that shares the same dark negativity Swift seeks to impose upon modern writers. They critique, insult, glorify and mock for purposes mostly unknown and often irrelevant to the work it produces. But they are, unquestionably, not writing for merely “the prospect, either of an immediate gratification, or a distant reward.”(Johnson).
Works Cited and Referenced


