

# Jonathan Swift

*Edited by*  
**Nigel Wood**

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Longman Critical Readers



JONATHAN SWIFT

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# JONATHAN SWIFT

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NIGEL WOOD

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## General Editors' Preface

The outlines of contemporary critical theory are now often taught as a standard feature of a degree in literary studies. The development of particular theories has seen a thorough transformation of literary criticism. For example, Marxist and Foucauldian theories have revolutionised Shakespeare studies, and 'deconstruction' has led to a complete reassessment of Romantic poetry. Feminist criticism has left scarcely any period of literature unaffected by its searching critiques. Teachers of literary studies can no longer fall back on a standardised, received methodology.

Lecturers and teachers are now urgently looking for guidance in a rapidly changing critical environment. They need help in understanding the latest revisions in literary theory, and especially in grasping the practical effects of the new theories in the form of theoretically sensitised new readings. A number of volumes in the series anthologise important essays on particular theories. However, in order to grasp the full implications and possible uses of particular theories it is essential to see them put to work. This series provides substantial volumes of new readings, presented in an accessible form and with a significant amount of editorial guidance.

Each volume includes a substantial introduction which explores the theoretical issues and conflicts embodied in the essays selected and locates areas of disagreement between positions. The pluralism of theories has to be put on the agenda of literary studies. We can no longer pretend that we all tacitly accept the same practices in literary studies. Neither is a *laissez-faire* attitude any longer tenable. Literature departments need to go beyond the mere toleration of theoretical differences: it is not enough merely to agree to differ; they need actually to 'stage' the differences openly. The volumes in this series all attempt to dramatise the differences, not necessarily with a view to resolving them but in order to foreground the choices presented by different theories or to argue for a particular route through the impasses the differences present.

The theory 'revolution' has had real effects. It has loosened the grip of traditional empiricist and romantic assumptions about language and literature. It is not always clear what is being proposed as the new agenda for literary studies, and indeed the very notion of 'literature' is questioned by the post-structuralist strain in theory. However, the uncertainties and obscurities of contemporary theories



*General Editors' Preface*

appear much less worrying when we see what the best critics have been able to do with them in practice. This series aims to disseminate the best of recent criticism and to show that it is possible to re-read the canonical texts of literature in new and challenging ways.

RAMAN SELDEN AND STAN SMITH

The Publishers and fellow Series Editor regret to record that Raman Selden died after a short illness in May 1991 at the age of fifty-three. Ray Selden was a fine scholar and a lovely man. All those he has worked with will remember him with much affection and respect.

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## Abbreviations

References to Swift's works include either the volume and page number of the *Prose Works* (PW) edited by Herbert Davis, 14 vols (Oxford, 1939–68) or, in the case of the poetry, the line numbers of the *Complete Poems* (CP) edited by Pat Rogers (Harmondsworth, 1983).

The following abbreviations appear in the text:

- CH     *Swift: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Kathleen Williams (London, 1970).  
Corr.   *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols (Oxford, 1963–65)  
ELH    *Journal of English Literary History*

Whenever he was en route from one place to another, he was able to look at his life with a little more objectivity than usual. It was often on trips that he thought most clearly, and made the decisions that he could not reach when he was stationary.

(Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*)

# Introduction

When reviewing Sir Walter Scott's edition of Swift (1814), Francis Jeffrey, the editor of *The Edinburgh Review*, accounted for the sudden decline in favour recently shown the Augustan wits by re-creating a pre-Romantic image of authorship:

[‘Almost all’ of their writing was] what may be called occasional productions – not written for fame or for posterity – from the fulness of the mind, or the desire of instructing mankind – but on the spur of the occasion – for promoting some temporary and immediate object, and producing a practical effect, in the attainment of which their whole importance centred.

(*ER*, vol. 27, no. 53 [September, 1816])<sup>1</sup>

Jeffrey discounted any pretensions to Art that embraced ‘a practical effect’ and an ‘immediate object’. As did Scott, he also equated the savagery of Swift’s satiric means with disturbed, even pathological, motives.<sup>2</sup> Praise might be heaped on his rhetoric, its mix of vehemence and complexity, yet it displays also a lack of the true artistic *ethos*: sagacious, sincere and all of a piece throughout – derived from a vocation, not the pretextual occasion. This distrust of Swift’s work takes us to the very edge of definitions of the artistic, as his writing can often appear the very opposite of aesthetic and can now require plentiful footnotes.

Conversely, there is some point to using the adjective ‘Swiftian’. Quite unlike the (syntactically) balanced inexorability of Johnson as Rambler or Pope’s urbane couplets, the eighteenth-century canon now accommodates Swift as the anarchist and even post-modern jester, one who strikes at the root of all easy faiths and comfortable fictions. Martin Battestin found in his verse an ‘arch repudiation of the Augustan idea of poetry itself’, whereby the pursuit of *la belle nature* ‘seemed morally irresponsible because calculated to conceal, even to deny, the truth of things as they are’.<sup>3</sup> Such a verdict could hardly be used of any other of his contemporaries. Pope, his life-long friend, seemed genuinely engrossed by his ventriloquism:

Jonathan Swift

O Thou! whatever title please thine ear,  
Dean, Drapier, Bickerstaff, or Gulliver!  
Whether thou choose Cervantes' serious air,  
Or laugh and shake in Rabelais' easy chair, . . .

(*The Dunciad* [1742], l: 19–22)<sup>4</sup>

This does not prevent Pope using the familiar second person, and, as he stated in a letter to Swift of 6 January 1733/34, actually identifying a 'self' in the midst of these masks: 'Your method of concealing your self puts me in mind of the bird I have read of in India, who hides his head in a hole, while all his feathers and tail stick out.'<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey found him the puppeteer (and thus perhaps also the puppet) of contingency, yet Pope finds a 'method' in concealment and an eventual consistency in such evasiveness.

Sorely afflicted by the vicissitudes of fortune, Swift increasingly regarded himself as a protean set of selves. When imagining others' verdicts on him, he strove to gain the impersonality that did not deceive at the same time as revelling in the mystery of a split personality. In his *A Panegyric on the Dean, In the Person of a Lady in the North* (c. 1730; pub. 1735), the fashionable Lady Acheson simply cannot quite read Swift:

. . . My grateful muse  
Salutes the Dean in different views;  
Dean, butler, usher, jester, tutor; . . .

(ll. 37–8)<sup>6</sup>

There is gratitude here, but it also may be empty praise. Swift has the Lady know him as a collection of external features and servile functions. Similarly, his English friends' concern at his demise, in both *The Life and Character of Dean Swift* (1733) and its expanded and revised version, *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.* (1739), is composed of knowledge and also a concern that is both transient and, understandably, jostled by necessary diurnal activities. Grub Street wits cloy the town with elegies, which alternately 'curse the Dean, or bless the Drapier' (*Verses*, l. 168), but whether anybody can catch hold of the real, unified, ego is part of the anxiety, and perhaps triumph, projected by the whole performance. It is left to 'One quite indifferent in the cause' to draw his 'character impartial' (ll. 305–6), but the more the statements are convincingly judicious and lapidary, the less the imagined death is seen to provoke deep sentiment.<sup>7</sup> As Edward Said has noted (in this volume, p. 42), in delivering his own *ethos* to History at the poem's end, Swift is also reaching for 'the fictive element of language' to subsume 'a [future] real event'. It is as if the author cannot ignore the transitive demands of the Real, yet

also has a diminished confidence that the external world supplies Truth and lasting consolation.

Assembling a collection such as this could have as its aim a form of collective biographical witness and disclosure, the location of a Swift off-stage and 'known perhaps for the first time, yet the premature reduction of his writing to some generalized consistency has its own flaws. Jeffrey is perceptive in acknowledging that works such as *Gulliver's Travels* or *The Drapier's Letters* are embedded in a precise historical moment, and that they may therefore address a particular set of audiences. Swift must be allowed to change his priorities if not his mind. 'Bickerstaff' is, after all, separated from 'Drapier' by some twenty years, and, if we are not careful, we may be led to expect the Church of Ireland Anglican in all of his work, and read accordingly. If there is a logic or bias in this Reader, then it might lie in representing how a wide variety of criticism has faced three associated and common problems in interpreting Swift's writing: (a) how to comprehend the ways in which Swift's overt Tory sympathies could give rise to such unclassical and adventurous prose; (b) how his perspective on the body, often figured in the female, could avoid being merely prurient and auto-erotic; and (c) how works so transitive and politically aligned could at the same time question some of the most perennial concepts taken to define human identity, society and the spiritual.

This collection is an attempt to represent several current ideas not only about Swift's art and literary personality but also about its wider contexts. Inevitably, it is selective, for Swift has been the occasion for not only varied and committed criticism but also radical disagreement about the fundamentals of all literary comment. In short, theoretical alignment is often sharpened in reading Swift's work, indeed, is sometimes found necessary in providing a coherent account, and I have tried to represent some of the bases for this powerful sense of engagement, without, I hope, offering comment that is too partisan.

### **'His Delight was in Simplicity'**

In his 'Life of Swift' (*Lives of the Poets* [1779–81]), Samuel Johnson found *A Tale of a Tub* an exception to Swift's other work. Here there was exhibited 'a vehemence and rapidity of mind, a copiousness of images, and vivacity of diction', whereas more normally there was a 'delight . . . in simplicity', where 'his few metaphors [could] seem to be received rather by necessity than choice'. While he 'studied purity', however, not all of his 'structures' were 'exact'.<sup>8</sup> This has now



something of the force of calculated euphemism, for the simplicity Johnson noted is rarely regarded now as just a matter in Swift's work of 'exact' structures and denotative lexis. Certainly, the almost forensic deployment of language, admitting of no interpretative uncertainty, was a frequently stated aim. One of the very few of his works actually to have first been published bearing his own name on the title-page was his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), and the validity of a serious attempt to fix the language has often been misrepresented. Swift calls on the then Prime Minister, the Earl of Oxford, for an academy to ascertain the meanings of words 'for ever': 'For I am of Opinion, that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing; and we must give over at one Time or other, or at length infallibly change for the worse' (PW, 4: 14). The goal of a 'zero degree' of communication is one of the most defining aspirations of the Enlightenment,<sup>9</sup> yet it would be rash to enlist Swift too readily in the project on a philosophical basis. He has this academy 'most at Heart', admits that some augmentation may from time to time be necessary and hopes that 'some Method should be thought on' to bring this to pass. Quite *how* it could be brought about is never clear. Swift is precise about his aims, the principal one being stability in culture (good news to any presiding politician), yet how one prevents usage or 'Practice' adulterating this native idiom we must assume is down to a branch of government, and a most illiberal one at that. The reader also never quite gets to inspect the father's will in the *Tale* that offers the three sons such 'full Instructions' about the wearing of the new coats that it will ensure their freshness 'as long as you live . . . so as to be always fit' (PW, 1: 44) nor an example of the Brobdingnagian laws in Book two of *Gulliver's Travels*, which are expressed 'in the most plain and simple Terms, wherein these People are not Mercurial enough to discover above one Interpretation' (PW, 11: 136).<sup>10</sup> The truths embodied in these commandments, as Terry J. Castle is insistently aware (in this volume, pp. 239–54), are numinous and so eventually uninterpretable.

This reticence accounts for the great interest shown in Swift's 'grammophobia', that is, his steadfast distrust of textual authority (writing) in that it removes power from the vocative context (oral, direct, personal and intended) and delivers meanings to the critic. When confronted by heroes of the modern historical account in Glubbudubdrib, Gulliver is alarmed at how often we had been 'misled by prostitute Writers' to praise those whom, on meeting, we would have condemned, and also how often 'great Enterprizes and Revolutions in the World' had been precipitated by 'contemptible Accidents' (PW, 11: 199). This is anarchy and it is the Real for Swift.

The Houyhnhnms have no writing because they have no need of it. In the human world, on the other hand, true meaning and instinct invariably work against each other. The hope that, in 1712, the Earl of Oxford might have been able to protect the sacerdotal status of language was indeed a pious one, and, by 1726, the emphases had changed. The fallible promises of politics had provided fools' gold for the exiled Swift, for, at the same time as he feared texts, he also revered and desired the true one. When shown the Academy at Lagado, Gulliver reveals the apparently harmless diversions at the School of Languages, including a 'Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever' on the grounds that, 'since Words are only Names for *Things*', one could simply bypass the treacherous verbal realm by carrying the objects of discourse with one and producing them when needed. The 1712 *Proposal* would appear here to have been reduced to absurdity, yet the ultimate aim of Swift's appeal to the Tory administration had been political and moral stability, a continuity with the traditional mainstream, validated by historical precedent and so found viable. From this perspective, empiricism is yet another mechanical operation of the spirit. Even the academicians yield to 'the Women in Conjunction with the Vulgar and Illiterate' who overturn such forces of modernity by claiming 'the Liberty to speak with their Tongues, after the Manner of their Forefathers' (*PW*, 11: 185). The project is risible, and the scene depicted of heavily-laden projectors savage burlesque, but it is not clear whether it is so because it depicts just amnesiac radicalism or because it shows how words should retain an history in their use, a semantic ingredient free of the particular locutionary context – or a mixture of both.

Put bluntly, what does Swift find in words that is ignored by the Projectors? What is the supplementary essence that stands distinct from exact and unambiguous mimesis? Words are not things, but they are not also the breath of mere inspiration, as the Aeolists' enthusiastic witness to God (from Section VIII in the *Tale*) renders language as on a par with belching. The semantic space between rhetoric and some basic linguistic transparency implies a questioning of denotation itself. For Derrida, this fear of textualist play is superfluous, as 'language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique'.<sup>11</sup> The consequent emergence of a new range of symbolic possibilities is evident in many of the canonical ironic texts for which Swift is now famous. Limiting signification depends on a tacit, but still relative, consensus as to what the discourse is about to communicate, and this pre-emptive horizon of 'agreed' rules or codes presupposes a common humanity, that bedrock of civilized rituals and distinctive spiritual aspirations that constitute humankind. Did Swift, in adopting his various meretricious and modern personae,

discover a kinship with them he dared not otherwise acknowledge? In the work of both Louise K. Barnett and G. Douglas Atkins (in this volume) Swift realizes (despite himself?) the inevitability of linguistic nominalism and abhors its consequences: the blurring of distinction, hybridization and interpretations so rootless that they are merely an indulgence in verbal play. This insight is also truth, however, as Swift also dramatizes the clash between the moral principle that unequivocal meanings should exist and his desperation that, in reality, he cannot be sure that he has ever found them. Perhaps the Teller of the *Tale* and Gulliver exist in all storytellers.

For deconstructive readings to be fully persuasive, however, we need to lift Swift out of his immediate literary and moral context – in short, to discover elements of the text not directly linked (and sometimes counter to) what the conscious Swift thought he was accomplishing. Marcus Walsh's understanding of the Restoration debate about orality presents a plainer picture of Swift's conscious and deliberate undertaking, which uncovers a sophisticated contemporary hermeneutical faith in immanent meanings which in no way removes an individual voice from the text. Walsh locates Swift in Martin's position in the *Tale* and certainly not in those projections of the Modern consciousness, the Teller and Peter. Certainly, there is a 'Swift' confident of a bold simplicity that might be free of contingency. One thinks of those 'simple topics told in rhyme' that would appear to encapsulate 'No thought, no fancy, no sublime' in his verse epistle 'To Mr. Delany' (ll. 11–12; 1718, pub. 1765), and those plain style Birthday Odes to Stella that derive comfort from the assumption that the body may 'thrive and grow / By food of twenty years ago' (ll. 55–6, 'Stella's Birthday [1727]' [pub. 1728]). Martin Price's seminal analysis of Swift's rhetorical strategies identified such simplicity as a carefully laboured creation, and placed it against a later, more Romantic notion of artless inspiration, akin to the transient modishness found in genteel conversation.<sup>12</sup>

As with all reconstructive readings, however, the view that Swift was in full control of his rhetoric amounts to no more than a belief that meaning is always validated only by reference to intention. This eventually places complex and ironic works such as the *Tale* and *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708) on a semantic par with the relatively 'simple topics' of *The Sentiments of a Church of England Man* (1711) and his *Project for the Advancement of Religion and the Reformation of Manners* (1709). It also ignores the clear influence on Swift of sceptics such as La Rochefoucauld<sup>13</sup> and also the vitality of performance kindled by anarchy noted by several commentators, most eloquently by Claude Rawson.<sup>14</sup> Swift was fascinated as well as appalled by the loss of meaning in the process of communication.

One of the most uncomplicated rhetorical questions in *Mr. C[olli]ns's Discourse of Free-Thinking, Put into Plain English, . . .* (1713) would seem to exclude all but the most literal understanding of literary texts: 'For what Authority can a Book pretend to, where there are various Readings?' Swift proceeds, however, to offer a more sophisticated riposte to Anthony Collins's own *Discourse of Freethinking* (1713), a work he felt was a 'brief compleat Body of Atheology' (*PW*, 4: 33, 27). Where the Deist Collins had stressed a most dispersed authority – divinity discoverable by interpretation – and the openness of texts to dissenting ingenuity, Swift perceives a liberal tyranny: the encouragement of free speech and thought means the devaluation of truth and a surrender to modishness. It should not follow, indeed, must not follow, that, because there are 'various Readings', books 'become utterly useless' (*PW*, 4: 33). Always to a degree abstract, meaning, therefore, exists as beyond our power to express it totally. Simplicity should be the most plaindealing method, yet the paradox remains that Swift rarely rests content with it. Even if the same thesis can at last be deduced from them, a double negative does not always amount to the same as a positive statement.

### **'Whenever He Offends against Delicacy, He Teaches It'**

John Hawkesworth's six-volume *Works of Jonathan Swift* (1755) provided the first conspectus of Swift's full achievement, and also the first thoroughgoing defence of his satiric 'indelicacy'. Confronted by the apparent obscenity of the Yahoos and ladies' dressing-rooms, he regarded such importunate physicality as themes rather than direct evidence of Swift's inner life. Consequently, the satiric force of his work was rendered as no more than shocking techniques to realize more orthodox ends and certainly not compulsive self-revelation. Yahoos may disgust, yet the image is always an instructive one, provoking the realization that 'virtue is the perfection of reason' (*CH*, p. 153). The iconoclasm of poems that would seem to have inherited the spirit of anti-female insult from the Restoration is no more than a pedagogical device. 'Strephon and Chloe' may have been found coarse, but 'with no better reason than a medecine would be rejected for its ill taste'. 'A Beautiful Young Nymph going to Bed' always has a reader consider the dangers of 'picking up a prostitute' (females would probably not have been allowed to read the poem), and 'The Lady's Dressing-Room' is strategically repulsive because 'whenever he offends against delicacy, he teaches it; he stimulates the mind to sensibility, to correct the faults of habitual negligence' (*CH*, pp. 154–5). This jolting of the complacent reader has, however, a savagery

about it that cannot quite be erased in the service of promoting piercing moral insight. Swift knew that his tactics were divisive. He had good reason to suspect that, once his authorship of *A Tale of a Tub* were known, it would prevent necessary preferment, especially at the court of Queen Anne, even if Swift believed it helped (in its inimitable way) the Anglican cause. The depiction of the Lilliputian Empress's pique at his saving of her apartments from fire by urination in Chapter V (first voyage) of *Gulliver's Travels* is usually taken as a reflection of this undue courtly delicacy, yet, while this necessary distasteful act actually preserved the palace and thus rescued an edifice that 'had cost so many Ages in erecting', can we find her determination not to live there again so mysterious? The net effect of this action is the same as if the fire had done its own work regardless, as she becomes 'firmly resolved that those Buildings should never be repaired for her Use' (11: 56). Real christianity, in *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, is only of actual benefit in a moral Utopia; otherwise, it 'would be to dig up Foundations; to destroy at one Blow all the Wit, and half the Learning of the Kingdom' (PW, 2: 27). It is only of Job's comfort that such Wit and Learning is presumably meretricious.

Can truth be communicated in the polite idiom that would render it acceptable? Or is it destined always to be a parlour game, wherein such honest attempts at reformation end up only as 'a Ball bandied to and fro, . . .', according to the *Tale's* 'Preface' (PW, 1: 31). Even a commentator later friendly to Swift, Dr William King, in 1704, could, or would, not decipher the high moral purpose in the *Tale*: 'He takes the air upon dung-hills, in ditches, and common-shoars, and at my Lord Mayor's dog-kennel' (CH, p. 33). Sir Richard Blackmore found the main flaw to be excessive wit, whereby 'Vertue and Sobriety of Manners' were treated with 'Raillery and Ridicule' (CH, p. 52). Not for these commentators the sophistication of discounting the signifier for the sake of an ethical purpose. Wit, where verbal or accidental resemblance can take the place of real identity, dangerously moves between the germane and the indecorous, and, in so doing, can uncover a truth in jest. When Pope found 'True wit' to be 'nature to advantage dressed' he was at pains to dissociate it from conceitful profligacy, the 'glaring chaos and wild heap of wit' that forsakes the judicial faculty and is thus the foe of formal constraint and order (*An Essay on Criticism* [1711], ll. 297, 292). Nature is hardly ever dressed to advantage in Swift's writing.

There have been many followers of both King and Blackmore where Swift's scatology is concerned. In terms so diametrically opposed to Hawkesworth's, Swift is the misanthropist – and so is kin to Gulliver at the conclusion of his travels. It is as if the ironic

fault-line between outrageous surface and moral depth running through the writing can be for many readers aggressively unstable. Swift is from this perspective actually the peeping-tom at beaux stripped and women flayed in the *Tale* (section IX), a Strephon who is surprised and thus repelled by the fact that Celia shits ('The Lady's Dressing-Room' [1732] or 'Cassinus and Peter' [1734]), and a Gulliver who would prefer to disown imperfect humankind completely in pursuit of the Utopian rationality of horses. It is not that F. R. Leavis, for example, does not discern Swift's superegoistic moral purpose in his reading of *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* and *A Modest Proposal*, it is just that he still finds the net effect to embrace an 'intensity [that] is purely destructive'.<sup>15</sup> It is a form of cruelty, as Claude Rawson has on several occasions noted, a matter rather more of 'mental atmosphere and ironic manipulation' than 'official ideological views'.<sup>16</sup> If so, then the very surplus of figurative energy begins to dissolve the barriers between what is stated – the only natural produce of 1720s Ireland that could sustain the people *is* human flesh – and what is implied – the immodesty of the proposal could only emerge from the econometric discourse deployed by a persona, here the Modest Proposer. When, in 1959, Norman O. Brown perceived an 'excremental vision' in Swift's work, he unflinchingly found him an analyst of 'an universal human neurosis' and not just a neurotic himself: 'we are not even disturbed by the thought that his individual neurosis may have been abnormally acute, or by the thought that his abnormality may be inseparable from his art'.<sup>17</sup> To be thoroughly civilized *is* to be anal and repressive. The impulse towards abstraction involves a fastidious blindness to the distractions of the erotic and the earthly – and yet, the repelled and also fascinated reader is held in an ironic double-bind: there is just enough truth in the perception that we are so ambivalent about anality because, as Freud understood in 1912, 'The excremental is all too intimately and inseparately bound up with the sexual'.<sup>18</sup> *A Tale of a Tub*, in its own terms, might simply signify a meaningless distraction (see the tub pitched into the sea to distract the Hobbesian Leviathan in the 'Preface' [l: 24]), but there was a less innocent meaning: an immersion in a sweating-tub was a favourite device to cure venereal disease (see John Webster's *The White Devil* [c. 1612], ll. i. 91).<sup>19</sup> In Thomas B. Gilmore, Jr.'s contribution to the volume this intersection of sexual horror and compulsive voyeurism is an indication of how relevant a reading of Swift is to any 'civilized' reader. Higher and lower are fated to meet alarmingly and, worse still, to suggest each other.

Several of the essays chosen for this collection touch on how Swift sought to explore this syndrome. In Carole Fabricant's piece,

'viewing', in its most literal sense, is both problematic and necessary. It is problematic for some of the reasons mentioned above, as perspective can often be a matter of the will, and it is necessary because it is a duty not to let distance lend enchantment to the view. Recalcitrant realities impinged upon Swift most insistently during, as he often regarded it, his later years of Irish exile, and the most effectual method to counter humankind's penchant for romantic delusion was to shock in the most visceral way. In a sense, this is to follow Hawkesworth and others and find a Swift always in control of his semiotic material, each signifier eventually anchored to its intended signified, but several of the later essays question this assumption. In Stallybrass and White's examination of references to the 'Grotesque Satiric Body' they uncover many associations of festive hybridization with the 'unnatural' incursion of the marketplace and popular customs, a whole sub-culture of transgressive rituals that provided an affront to the pious hopes of the Enlightenment: that Mankind was perfectible and could be responsive to reason.

In the above, there is little doubt that representations that are gender-specific have been set aside. Swift would appear to turn to a disrobing of polite femininity a little too often. When Gulliver is brought up close to the gigantic Brobdingnagian Maids of Honour in Chapter V of Gulliver's second voyage, their pretensions to beauty are forcibly deconstructed and, although they appear naked in his sight, the acuity of his senses renders the scene anything but aesthetic. A mole would appear 'as broad as a Trencher, and Hairs hanging from it thicker than Pack-threads' and the Maids urinate in his presence, 'to the Quantity of at least two Hogsheads'. It is only once this distasteful context has been established that Swift proceeds to offer some erotic material in the scene – only it is by now far from that: 'The handsomest . . . , a pleasant frolicksome Girl of sixteen, would sometimes set me astride upon one of her Nipples' (*PW*, 11: 119). This nipple is disproportionately so, and is unpleasantly translated into some raree-show display. The very next paragraph relates the monstrous spectacle of witnessing a Brobdingnagian beheading. Corinna, as 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed' (1734), dismantles herself, removing hair, eyebrows, teeth and false breasts in the process, and it is decency, in 'Strephon and Chloe' (1734), that 'must fan the lover's fire', not Beauty which is merely 'supported by Opinion' (ll. 222, 224). Beauty in Brobdingnag and Covent Garden can only be skin-deep. The wonder is, to Swift, that such daily agonies of reconstruction take place. Is Beauty only a trick of the light, a matter of perception, and derived only from the deft application of cosmetic powers?

In the essays here by Penelope Wilson, Margaret Anne Doody and Carol Houlihan Flynn Swift's relations with women are discussed both in biographical and symbolic terms. For Wilson, the critical men's clubberly of Augustan criticism almost replicates the very blindspots evident in the writers themselves. Sexual difference is exploited as grounds for moralistic comment about forbidden fruit. Doody places Swift among his Irish women friends and other imitators, and uncovers a common set of themes related to dirt and disorder, as if writers such as Mary Leapor or Laetitia Pilkington, in answering Swift's overt iconoclasm of the ideal female, actually found the emphasis liberating. Flynn, in her comparative study of the body in the work of both Defoe and Swift, is insistently aware of the latter's misogyny and how it incorporates pervasive patterns of imagery to do with consumption and desire. At the same time as regretting the 'disorderly nature of women', he is acutely aware of his own 'personal fears of dissolution' – both of vital male energy and individual identity. The question remains, for Swift particularly among the Augustan satirists: wherein can the pure or rational be found? Are we merely just Yahoos under a suit of clothes?

**'But Where is the Sense of a General Satire,  
if the Whole Species be Degenerated?'**

In the third number of *The Intelligencer* (1728), Swift turned to his own status as a satirist, and wondered about his motivation and political persuasion. Was the writing of raillery merely a matter of 'Humour', an uncontrollable bias of mind that precluded his turning out to be a lyricist, or did it issue from a deliberate programme of reform with certain realizable political and cultural goals? He concluded that a satirist obeyed a dual allegiance: the 'less noble' issued from 'the private Satisfaction and Pleasure of the Writer' (but did not involve '*personal Malice*'), whereas the other instinct derived from 'a *publick spirit*, prompting Men of *Genius* and *Virtue*, to mend the World as far as they are able' (PW, 12: 34). What is so disarming about this is Swift's own quest for self-knowledge. Not for this writer the sanctimonious comfort of the gladitorial satirist, drawing only on the strong antipathy of good to bad, but rather an unsparing anatomy of the being behind the rhetoric. One of the sermons ascribed to Swift from 1744 onwards, 'The Difficulty of Knowing One's Self', displays deep scepticism about how the inner relates to the outer, 'for a Man can no more know his own Heart than he can know his own Face, any other Way than by Reflection'. If one can stand it, one can only examine one's heart 'with a steady Eye' by an effort to 'contract his



Sight, and collect all his scattered and roving Thoughts into some Order and Compass' (PW, 11: 356). What if, however, one saw all? Again, with reference also to the deeply ambiguous figure of the woman, Swift might eventually be some Cassinus or Strephon, unable to avert his gaze and yet unable quite to live on with the added knowledge that there is a difference between necessary fictions and a darker, and more amorphous, reality. Conversely, one could read much of Swift's *œuvre* as immensely realistic, too. Yeats sensed that Swift was 'a practical politician in everything he wrote',<sup>20</sup> in that his moral sense was rarely divorced from quotidian reality and also needed to be (somehow) demonstrable to common understanding.

Swift's public spirit is most obviously commemorated in his Irish writings. Lauded as the Hibernian Patriot in the title of the London edition of *The Drapier's Letters* (1730), Swift became, whether he always wanted it or not, a defender of Irish rights and an opponent of English economic individualism. In 1784, Thomas Sheridan recorded the 'Drapier's' triumphant return to Ireland in 1726 as a 'kind of triumph, where he was received and welcomed on shore by a multitude of his grateful countrymen',<sup>21</sup> and yet Swift can hardly have relished all of this fraternal attention. Not published until 1882, his two poems written while waiting for the Holyhead ferry, *Holyhead. September 25, 1727* and *Ireland*, are text-book studies in anomie and deracination. Anxious for the health of his dearest friend, Stella (Esther Johnson), in Dublin, Swift felt a 'rage impatient' to make the crossing to 'the land I hate' (*Holyhead*, ll. 27–28). In Swift's own political mythography, Ireland was a place that almost willed its own despoliation by the English:

Remove me from this land of slaves,  
Where all are fools, and all are knaves;  
Where every knave and fool is bought,  
Yet kindly sells himself for naught; . . .

(*Ireland*, ll. 1–4)

From his first Irish tract, *The Story of the Injured Lady* (1707), to one of the last to be published, *A Modest Proposal* (1729), Swift imaged Ireland as a victim from which he quite strenuously strove to distance himself. As the Drapier, the bluff unintellectual tradesman, he found not only a persona to catch the Irish popular imagination, but he also mined a deep seam of his own materialism that pre-dated the situation of 1724/25. In opposing William Wood's scheme to debase the Irish coinage for short-term (English) profit, the *Letters*

promote through a shopkeeper's unlettered wisdom that same identity of sign and essence that often coloured Swift's linguistic philosophies.<sup>22</sup>

If Ireland were so undeserving, then it seems strange that Swift should have so frequently striven to defend its interests. Similarly, any glance at his poetry would convince us that his Irish 'exile' provoked a stream of pithy occasional verse, from Stella's Birthday Odes to bantering exchanges with Lady Acheson and Patrick Delany. In Robert Mahony's comprehensive study of Swift's Irish reception,<sup>23</sup> it is now clear that the Irish needed a champion in the 1720s and so helped create one out of, in Oliver Ferguson's phrase, this 'patriot-in-spite-of-himself'.<sup>24</sup> Drapier's letters appeared well after Swift's death and monuments were readily funded to maintain the Dean's standing in Irish culture quite apart from his standing in any purely literary canon.

Investigations of Swift's politics usually sketch a gradual move away from some formal alignment with either the Whig party (up to 1710) or the Tories (sometimes seen as more or less supplying guiding principles until death or increasingly as merely a nexus of friends). The degree to which Swift's 'publick spirit' can be identified directly with eighteenth-century political causes is much in doubt. Parties were not organized on clear manifesto lines. Certain interests seemed perennial, such as trade and the growing financial markets (predominantly Whig) versus land (mainly Tory) and, in some quarters, the Stuart cause (Jacobitism), and/or freedom of conscience (increasingly Whig from 1710) versus an adherence to the established Church (Whig, in that they brokered the Revolution Settlement in 1689, but very much the Tory position throughout the 1720s). What is significant for the work of interpretation in all this is how Swift regarded traditional authority. Allegiance and passive obedience are required by a legally instituted sovereign ruling by consent of parliament. The motives for the Glorious Revolution had, therefore, had to be taken at face value: James II had abdicated rather than that his subjects had rebelled successfully.<sup>25</sup> The Settlement was, however, hardly a direct act of God, even if Swift saw it as a necessary bulwark against papist tyranny. Liberty was guaranteed by consensus and a free surrender of the individual will, but it was also achieved in a secular spirit of negotiation and compromise.

Gradually, and with some force when in 'exile', Swift developed a self-image of the embattled outsider, of threat to centralizing power. The contrast with Pope was illuminating: he had a genius that could transcend faction, but, on the other hand, Swift felt on 20 September 1723 that he was

sunk under the prejudices of another Education, and am every day perswading my self that a Dagger is at my Throat, a halter about my Neck, or Chains at my Feet, all prepared by those in Power, [and so] can never arrive at the Security of Mind you possess.<sup>26</sup>

Here there is no attempt at rational assessment, and Power is here no beneficent protection. Again, in correspondence with Pope on 1 June 1728, he is at pains to draw a distinction between his being a Patriot, a title which he did not deserve, and a satirist, who acts 'owing to perfect rage and resentment, and the mortifying sight [in Ireland] of slavery, folly, and baseness about me'.<sup>27</sup> Instead of stressing the labels that usually accompany the description of a writer's 'publick spirit', it may be more accurate, using Warren Montag's valuable term, to find Swift's mode of thinking 'spontaneous philosophy',<sup>28</sup> where the pursuit of method is an undesirable victory of the body over the soul. One is saved by common understanding and a sense of right educed from common forms. To *search* for truth is inevitably self-defeating.

On the one hand, it is quite clear that Swift was a committed writer – the pungent metaphors and precisely calculated interrogation of his readers make that plain – but on the other, there is a curiously deep and *emotional* scepticism at all programmes of reform. The disappointed romantic has nothing left to sustain her/him once a favourite Utopia fails to match reality. William Warburton may not have been the most percipient of Swift's early readers, yet his resistance to such gloom in his *Critical and Philosophic Enquiry into the Causes of Prodiges . . .* (1727) has found many supporters: where is the 'Benefit of Mankind', for 'where is the sense of a general Satire, if the whole Species be degenerated?' (CH, p. 72). Has Swift all along been a Gulliver returned from the Houyhnhnms, with no time for Yahoo-humans and their insufferable pride? If so, where does the critique stop, if at all, and where are its foundations?

Like Pope's freedoms when he modelled his idiom on Horace's during the 1730s, Swift discovered a flexibility and a style in filtering his prose through personae – and personae which were not just a means to avoid legal redress. As Deborah Baker Wyrick observes (this volume, p. 72), Swift's pseudonyms 'are more complete divestitures than is anonymity'. For example, the Drapier laid claim to an identity in the public mind quite aside from the more historical Dean Swift, even when the pretence of anonymity was known only to be a rhetorical device. Wyrick also notes how Swift could thereby 'maintain his absence from the text, [could] defer responsibility for his words, and [could] prevent meaning from being tied to – or closed by – the speaking or writing subject'. Swift's views on the

Wood scheme were given authority and conviction by the Drapier, his freely-chosen textual identity, and not directly from the actual author, whose reception would derive from a reader's prior knowledge of Swift himself. The complex ironic gesture of disowning one's words actually leads to the assembly of non-mimetic fictions, including personae that, as Everett Zimmerman explores in his contribution to this volume, were at the same time part of his larger purpose: to dissociate his writing from aesthetics itself. To observe this fully, it is perhaps essential to work alongside, but not be confined to, 'literary' definitions of satire (or either the essay or proposal). Hence it is that, as Dustin Griffin has usefully noted,<sup>29</sup> the voices within the texts we now deem satirical are rarely 'monological' in Bakhtin's sense, that is, experienced in a clear hierarchy either as regards the integrity of a supposed 'speaker' or in terms of the actual satiric design. The semantic divide in irony between intended and stated meaning is often erased.

Just as the high and the low collide so often in Swift's writing, so the surface rhetoric and the intention behind it so often form a symbolic impasse, not only in a reader's attempt to master its interpretation but also as Swift's fullest expression of frustration and dislocation. The Modest Proposer is as wearied as the historical Swift by suggesting practical schemes to solve Irish poverty; when secretary to the venerable but decidedly unwitty Sir William Temple, Swift writes one of the wittiest prose works of the century (*A Tale of a Tub*) which would appear to display the horrors of too much wit, and Gulliver ends up abhorring the sin of pride in humankind much as Swift did in so much of his writing. It is as if the writing is less sternly moralistic than desperately revelatory. Swift and his readers are often implicated in the errors displayed for our disapproval, an aversion therapy that can be radically unsure of its eventual direction. In terms of the 'publick spirit' that we can trace in many of Swift's more straightforward avowals of faith, he is a particularly shrewd analyst of a reader's defence mechanisms and calculates exactly how to pierce them in the service of traditional Anglican certainties. In terms, however, of a writer's 'private satisfaction and pleasure' the picture is less clear. In the verses on his death, Swift felt he was 'born to introduce' irony, and, indeed, 'refin'd it first, and showed its use' (ll. 57–58). The 'impersonal' verdict on him in the poem locates his vein as 'ironically grave' (l. 315). I have already mentioned Leavis's verdict (above p. 9) that such irony was a trope that allowed a fiercely destructive tone. This nervousness at the heart of most readings of irony can be regarded as a legacy of the stylistically complex means to a more paraphraseable goal: the carefully contrived entrapment of the otherwise negligent reader.

This is eventually to prise meaning away from the implicit *effect* the writing actually has on a reader.

In Paul Ricœur's *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975; trans. 1978)<sup>30</sup> this potential contradiction at the heart of irony, between a meaning discerned once the rhetoric is discounted and a meaning discerned to be within the rhetoric, is true of all metaphor: a pull towards the specific and local set of meanings generated in the sentence-unit and a counterbalancing impulse towards a reflection of the world, which is also the motive, for example, for consulting a dictionary. The former bias is what Ricœur names an 'interaction theory' of language, where the sense of any one unit of meaning is primarily determined by its syntactical (or, in narrative terms, strategic) position within a closed system. Travelling, in *Gulliver's Travels*, loses its more general semantic power once we realize that most of the signs created out of Gulliver's loss of identity (and wisdom?) are not derived from a more general experience of anyone travelling, but are specific to how this particular text constructs a meaning for the term. In the latter 'substitution theory' of language any reference is primarily derived from how a reader brings a knowledge of the world to an understanding of any one sentence. The system is not closed; we are meant to construe a Modest Proposer out of our recognition of Restoration and early eighteenth-century econometric discourses, and a Drapier out of our knowledge of Irish drapers and similar small shopkeepers. Complex irony thus exploits the duality of metaphor.

It therefore does not do to be too positivistic about Swift's writing. He proceeded on the assumption that his readers were conversant with current events, yet his comments were rarely just about such events. At moments of especial force one was forced to comprehend the many in the one, the universal in the historical, and sense the urgency in the scatological or shocking. For E. D. Hirsch it is irony pre-eminently that disturbs any writing's claim to final meaning:

Possible irony is not a special case, only a particularly telling one . . . that exemplifies the potential plurisignificance of all word-sequences. Irony is particularly convenient because its presence or absence changes nothing in the text except its fundamental meaning.<sup>31</sup>

Any study of Swift that reduces his writing to 'official', probable meanings may well be in tune with his historical context, his 'public spirit', yet at the cost of the more individual aspects of his work, and, I would argue, fatally misunderstands the full expressiveness of his irony. This eventually may also simplify the very specific circumstances in which he wrote: the clash between private and public which were only on very isolated occasions ever ignored.

For Northrop Frye, in his exhaustive mapping of literary genres, 'ironic myth' stands in a parodic relation to romance: 'the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways', and so, realism in the service of fantasy *and* the reverse. What is more, this amalgam is curiously flexible. The inventiveness of the creation of an alternative world can be comic satire, but, minus much of this, irony could be simply 'the non-heroic residue of tragedy, centering on a theme of puzzled defeat'.<sup>32</sup> Frye understands this dialectic in ways that, I suspect, the more impatient critic does not. Swift does not come right out and say what he means and we should be glad that this is so.

In collecting together these pieces on Swift I am now aware of just what I have had to leave out. As with many of the *Readers*, however, the act of selection has been an attempt to represent the state of a very complex art. When Swift is especially attractive to students, I suspect it is when they respond both to the comedy as well as the tragedy in his work. The study of satire today can often be a matter just of lengthy footnotes and learned scholarship. So much has to be assembled, it would seem, to gain even a preliminary understanding of how Swift stood in relation to his culture and his public image. There is no avoiding this, and many of the essays you will find here attempt this necessary, though rewarding, task. How one does this can illustrate much about Swift's own society, of course, but I have tried to include contributions that also engage with our own theoretical grasp of basic interpretational issues: how are we supposed to read irony? *How* does the historical Swift appear in his satiric work? To what extent can or should our own contemporary awareness of gender difference bear on that of the early eighteenth century? And finally, though not as an afterthought, are we supposed to be *entertained* by satire? The more we read Swift's work, especially during his latter years, the more we may be convinced that he anticipates so much of this critical mood – and that this intractable and complex state of mind is very much a part of what he communicates.

## Notes

1. In *Swift: The Critical Heritage*, ed. KATHLEEN WILLIAMS (London, 1970), p. 317.
2. For example, 'Almost all his works are libels; generally upon individuals, sometimes upon sects and parties, sometimes upon human nature. Whatever be his end, however, personal abuse, direct – vehement, unsparing invective, is his means' (CH, p. 317). Scott was more forgiving, yet he regarded

Gulliver's fourth voyage with some pain: 'The source of such a diatribe against human nature could only be, that fierce indignation which he has described in his epitaph as so long gnawing his heart' (CH, p. 292). The epitaph was cut in a black marble tablet, set seven feet above his final resting place in St Patrick's Cathedral. Swift wrote his own final verdict on himself (in Latin) which mentions the final end to the savage indignation that had lacerated his heart in life. The full text can be found in PW, 13: 149–58.

3. MARTIN BATTESTIN, *The Providence of Wit: Aspects of Form in Augustan Literature and the Arts* (Oxford, 1974), p. 216.
4. The text of Pope's verse used in this Introduction is that of the Oxford Authors edition, ed. PAT ROGERS (Oxford, 1993).
5. *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. GEORGE SHERBURN, 5 vols (Oxford, 1956), III: 401.
6. The text of Swift's verse used in this Introduction is *Jonathan Swift: The Complete Poems* (New Haven, CT, 1983).
7. Swift was anticipating his epitaph as early as c. 1714 when he penned his poem, 'The Author Upon Himself' (published finally in the *Works* of 1735). The comparison, however, with his later acts of self-assessment is striking. Here Swift name-drops at will and clearly hopes to create the impression of one who is beginning to have some measure of influence. In the last line, when he 'decently' retires from the public arena, 'by faction tired' (ll. 74, 71), it was only to a friend's house (Rev. John Gere) in Letcombe Bassett in Berkshire. He was not to know it, but, with the death of the Queen just a couple of months later, the retirement came eventually to be not just forced but also long-lasting.
8. *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. GEORGE BIRKBECK HILL, 3 vols (Oxford, 1905), III: 51–2.
9. The most recent (and reliable) account of this linguistic aspiration and its opponents can be found in TONY CROWLEY, *Language in History: Theories and Texts* (London, 1996), pp. 54–98.
10. Patrick Delany, in his *Observations upon Lord Orrery's Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (1754), gave the most complete account of Swift's linguistic philosophy. His style observed the 'power, and propriety of words', which still had to be annexed to a 'strength and harmony arising from their arrangement' (CH, p. 137).
11. JACQUES DERRIDA, *Writing and Difference*, trans. ALAN BASS (Chicago, 1978), p. 284.
12. See MARTIN PRICE, *Swift's Rhetorical Art: A Study in Structure and Meaning* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL, 1953), especially pp. 15–35.
13. The full title of Swift's 'Verses on the Death . . .' includes 'Occasioned by Reading a Maxim in Rochefoucauld', which is then reproduced: 'In the adversity of our friends, we find something that doth not displease us'. François, duc de La Rochefoucauld (1613–80) published his *Reflexions ou Sentences et Maximes Morales* in 1665, and was immediately regarded as part of the Jansenist zeal for confirming the doctrine of the fallibility of human nature. La Rochefoucauld suffered at the court of Louis XIII, and in 1653, at the age of forty, eventually found himself exiled from the court, his main family castle, Verteuil, burnt to the ground, and with no hope of a public career. His writings stem in the main from his time at the salon of Mme de Sablé – independent, objective and taking succour from literature and like-minded friends rather than the hopes of preferment. Swift published his own

- maxims in *Thoughts on Various Subjects* (complete in 1735, but published in instalments in both 1711 and 1727), and in 1725 he confessed to Pope that he found his 'whole character' in La Rochefoucauld (*The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. HAROLD WILLIAMS, 5 vols [Oxford, 1963–65], III: 118).
14. Most interestingly in CLAUDE RAWSON, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and Our Time* (London, 1973), pp. 1–59.
  15. F. R. LEAVIS, 'The Irony of Swift', in *The Common Pursuit* (London, 1952), p. 75.
  16. RAWSON, *Gulliver*, p. 33.
  17. NORMAN O. BROWN, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (rev. edn, 1970, Middletown, CT; orig. pub. 1959), pp. 179–201.
  18. In his *On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love* (*Contributions to the Psychology of Love II*), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. STRACHEY et al., 24 vols (London, 1953–74), XI: 189.
  19. The Webster text used here is that of René Weis, *The Duchess of Malfi and Other Plays* (Oxford, 1996).
  20. W. B. YEATS, 'Introduction' to *The Words Upon the Window-Pane* (1934), in *Yeats: Selected Criticism and Prose*, ed. A. NORMAN JEFFARES (London, 1964), p. 477.
  21. THOMAS SHERIDAN, *The Life of the Reverend Jonathan Swift . . .*, 19 vols (Dublin, 1801), I: 261.
  22. See my own account in NIGEL WOOD, *Swift: Harvester New Readings* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 105–18.
  23. ROBERT MAHONY, *Jonathan Swift: The Irish Identity* (New Haven, CT, 1995).
  24. OLIVER FERGUSON, *Jonathan Swift and Ireland* (Urbana, IL, 1962), p. 185.
  25. The overall context is best summarized in J. A. DOWNIE's *To Settle the Succession of the State: Literature and Politics, 1678–1750* (London, 1994), especially pp. 31–62. The best studies of Swift's politics during this period are J. A. DOWNIE, *Jonathan Swift: Political Writer* (London, 1984), see especially pp. 73–86, 135–63; DAVID NOKES, *Jonathan Swift, A Hypocrite Reversed: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 266–91; IAN HIGGINS, *Swift's Politics: A Study in Disaffection* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 1–37; and DANIEL EILON, *Faction's Fictions: Ideological Closure in Swift's Satire* (Newark, DE, 1991), pp. 94–122.
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  27. *Correspondence*, III: 289.
  28. WARREN MONTAG, *The Unthinkable Swift: The Spontaneous Philosophy of a Church of England Man* (London, 1994), especially pp. 1–41.
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  30. PAUL RICŒUR, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. ROBERT CZERNY, with KATHLEEN McLAUGHLIN and JOHN COSTELLO, SJ (London, 1978), especially pp. 101–33.
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