
Introduction

There is one Thing which the judicious Reader cannot but have observed, that some of those Passages in this Discourse, which appear most liable to Objection are what they call Parodies, where the Author personates the Style and Manner of other Writers, whom he has a mind to expose.¹

The rhetorical flow of this sentence figures the process by which attention to parody has been overwhelmed by attention to satire in the study of Swift's prose. We are all, we eagerly assume, 'judicious Reader[s]', and, consequently, we can convert the parodies easily and accurately into attacks on the satirical objects whom the author 'has a mind to expose'. This assumption that parodic language is a transparent medium for the conveyance of satirical meanings has its problems, however. The history of the reception of Swiftian satire is one of disputed interpretations, and few of these disputes have been of the kind where a dialectical attrition of opinions has led gradually to a narrowing consensus. Fashions come and go, but we are no closer to agreement on whether the Houyhnhnms are paragons or monsters, whether *A Tale of A Tub* attacks or defends Anglican piety, or whether the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity* is for or against nominal Christianity. If, as *A Tale's* apologist seems to suggest here, parody is merely the vessel carrying satiric meaning and satire is simply and obviously punitive, then it is hard to escape the conclusion that Swift is a failure as a satirist.

Yet such a patently perverse conclusion must be resisted, and the means of resistance lies latent in this statement. The apologist is seeking to make something complex and dangerous appear simple and inoffensive, but the matters of parody and personation which he glosses over are the points at which the authoritative transfer of satirical meaning becomes vexed. Critics have not, on the whole, attended much to these modes, assuming that Swift's powerful genius overpowers his demotic sources, but it is in parody rather than satire that the multiplication of dissonant possibilities begins. The use of parody decentres the voice of satirical authority (Juvenal's voice, for example) and replaces it with a parodied voice (Gulliver's, the *Tale-teller's*, any Modern discourse's) which exhibits error but must be converted

¹ *A Tale*, p. 7.

to produce truth. This conversion takes place across a silence, in a zone of uncertainty, where the judicious reader has to imagine authoritative meaning and where correctness of conversion is not signalled positively. The foolish intervention of injudicious readers in this process cannot be legislated against, and it remains possible that even a judicious reader (whoever that might be) can still get it wrong. Furthermore, because the satirist only leaves traces of his determinate convictions in the parody, it is not finally possible to prove that his whole self supports any particular judgement or pattern of judgements. The irreducible problem remains that the reader who wishes to turn parody into satire must convert ironies, and ironies (particularly the Swiftian variety) show a stubborn tendency to retain their openness.

I do not, therefore, propose to *solve* Swiftian satire in this book. I take that to be an impossible and misguided task. Instead, I intend to focus on parody, the mode Swift pre-eminently employs, with a view to understanding the terms of the play of signification and irony better. We can make a start by reading against the rhetoric of the passage quoted at the beginning of this section. While attempting to subordinate the problems inherent in parody in the interests of proclaiming the author's pious intentions, it also figures parody's basic themes and, consequently, the basic themes of this study. It betrays concern for the construction of authority and the author (personation), for the forensic role of the 'judicious Reader', for the textual function of parody in the realm of discourse ('Style and Manner'), and for the inescapability of a cultural-historical context, where actual 'Writers' need to be exposed. It is neither fanciful nor anachronistic to suggest that deconstruction occurs on all these levels, for parody is always an ironic and critical strategy which explores the cultural and textual terms of construction of discourses. Like deconstruction as a hermeneutic strategy, parody does not repudiate the texts on which it operates, but rather animates them in order to distort them, point out their limitations, and divide them against themselves. It is not simply destructive in the way 'pure' satire is destructive: Pope destroys Sporus/Lord Hervey in the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* with a single-mindedness similar to that of the ancient satirists who actually killed their victims with their curses,² whereas the corrupted minds and cultural/textual practices exposed in *A Tale* are deconstructed, which is to say that they are attacked from within their own terms of construction in an engagement no less hostile than Pope's but far more intimate.

This intimacy leads to the most unsettling aspect of Swiftian parody. While Pope and Juvenal (and the Swift of poems such as 'The Legion Club', for that matter) stand grandly apart from the vicious imbeciles they grandly expose, Swiftian parody weakens the barriers it transgresses. It both

² See Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).

employs and identifies textual and cultural subversiveness, and it can easily become subversive of itself. *A Tale* was received as a witty and destabilising attack on precisely those religious and philosophical propositions Swift claimed it had been written to support, and the persistent evasiveness of 'The Apology' suggests that the author himself was guiltily aware of the dangers of parodic reflexivity. Though it was an opinion current in the satiric theory of the age,³ it is no more than a pious and enabling fiction to insist that truth is incontrovertible and therefore impervious to the attacks of ridicule, while error's deformities need only be repeated by the parodist to be exposed. There is a wildness and openness to subversive (or deconstructive) implications which, though formally denied, pervades Swiftian parody and involves it in the madness it seeks to expose.

For the purposes of this book, the madness Swift involves himself in is the burgeoning textuality of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century political and cultural dispute in England. To keep the project within a reasonable compass, it has been necessary to concentrate on the writings of Swift's 'English' period, before the death of Queen Anne, when Swift still imagined that his Irish birth was essentially an accidental misfortune to be redressed by a glittering career in the central, English culture. This allows us to distinguish between the very different characters of Swift's English writing and his later Irish concerns. The most remarkable recent book-length interpretations of Swift's works – Rawson, Steele, Fabricant, Wyrick, Eilon⁴ – have tended to treat Swift's *œuvre* as of a piece, and consequently have been promiscuous in their attention to fragments of various texts from different periods. In the context of pursuing 'the character of Swift's satire',⁵ this approach has been both valid and remarkably fruitful. It has, however, tended to suppress any sense of the differences between particular texts and periods. Consequently, the parodic intertextuality has been blurred into a vague compendiousness which can contain anything from the condition of books in an English library of the 1690's to the condition of Irish peasants

³ See P.K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) for a survey of this opinion; a notable formulation of this theory, undervalued in Elkin's book and of particular relevance to my concerns, lies scattered through the Third Earl of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* (1711).

⁴ C.J. Rawson, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and our Time* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), Peter Steele, *Jonathan Swift: Preacher and Jester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Carole Fabricant, *Swift's Landscape* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), Deborah Baker Wyrick, *Jonathan Swift and the Vested Word* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), and Daniel Eilon, *Faction's Fictions: Ideological Closure in Swift's Satire* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991). This is obviously a selective and subjective list, which focuses on interpretative works concerned primarily with Swift's published prose rather than his biography or poetry.

⁵ Though indicative of the impetus of much modern criticism, the phrase is most notably Rawson's; see his essay 'The Character of Swift's Satire: Reflections on Swift, Johnson, and Human Restlessness,' in Rawson (ed.), *The Character of Swift's Satire: A Revised Focus* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983).

in a famine of the 1720's. If it is a monolithic 'Swift' that we seek to interpret, then this act of comprehension is a necessary critical manoeuvre, but if we seek the parodic function of individual texts we need to situate them in their culture and textuality. *The Battle of the Books* and the *Modest Proposal* disseminate in different ways in differently defined cultures; *A Tale* and *Gulliver's Travels* do not share identical cultural loyalties. As I have argued elsewhere, Swift's English writing is more playful, occasional, and textual than his more committed and savage Irish work.⁶ It plays parodically and *almost* freely in the textual forms and cultural concerns of late seventeenth-century England, lacking the satirical weight of political and moral conviction evident later, but attaining a brilliance of verbal wit and a complexity of irony which have not been equalled.

Thus the English Swift is more of a parodist, the Irish Swift more of a satirist. I do not wish to go any further with this distinction here, but it is important for the reader to appreciate that, for the purposes of this study, the 'normative' text of Swiftian parody is *A Tale* rather than *Gulliver's Travels*, and that the normative context is late Stuart English cultural dispute rather than early Georgian Irish cultural dispossession. *A Tale* exemplifies the ironic scepticism and centrifugal textual playfulness to which the discoveries of post-structuralist criticism apply most vividly, and what is true of *A Tale* is not always or simply true of the more committed and less carnivalesque texts. This book's trajectory, therefore, is towards *A Tale*, and its aim is to learn how to equip ourselves theoretically and historically for the act of reading its brilliant parody. The approach is not chronological, and, in fact, we move backwards rather than forwards in time, from the stabler ironies of 1713 towards the elusive brilliance of the 1690s. This retrograde movement is not only critically useful (a movement from the relatively simple towards the complex); it has the added benefit of freeing us from expectations about Swift's literary development so that we can see intimations not only of what subsequently happened (the late masterpieces), but also of artistic and ideological potentialities within the early work which later achievements and positions have tended to obscure.

We commence with theoretical orientations, using the language of deconstruction to help us see the way parody undermines (or erases) constructions of textual authority. From there we move into cultural history, so that we get an idea of the rhetorical and textual forms of the intertextuality in which the early parodies operated. This entails some extensive redefinition of cultural terrain, the most notable aspect being a turning away from the received reading of cultural history, based on metaphors of progress, towards a revision of the age's intellectual enterprises in terms of restoration

⁶ Robert Phiddian, 'The English Swift/The Irish Swift', Paul Hyland and Neil Sammells, eds, *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 32–44.

and the return to order. I do not seek to assert the historical truth (whatever that may mean) of this concentration on the reactionary elements of late Stuart culture, but rather to identify their importance in public language and forms of thought, and to see how cultural projections presented themselves as returns to fundamental and original truths rather than as novelties or improvements. In the third and subsequent chapters we move from these theoretical and historical generalities to focus more narrowly on the detail of textual skirmishing in Queen Anne's reign, looking at the function of parody in Swift's *Abstract* of Collins' *Discourse of Free-Thinking*, the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*, and the Bickerstaff Controversy. The fifth chapter concludes with an investigation of the problem arising most insistently from these readings – the blank at the centre of the parodies where the Modern author has attempted to assume the voice of authority and failed. This erasure is the starting-point for the subsequent chapters on *A Tale*, which seek both to follow and to animate the process of parody in that brilliant and infuriating text. We look at the way it envelops a multitude of voices in its complex ironies while leaving us incapable of imagining Swift's authentic utterance. In the end, we do not discover a monolithic 'Swift', heroically disclosing truth or himself, but the disturbing possibility of various Swifts, whose self-shroudings and incompatible self-fashionings cannot be subdued any more satisfactorily than his parodic texts can be tied down to determinate meanings. I do not expect to prove Swiftian parody soluble, but intend rather to cast light on some of the ways in which it is brilliantly and disconcertingly readable.

1

Theoretical orientations

Three theories of quotation

If one were looking for a theory of quotation to describe the practice of Swiftian parody, it would be difficult to better this:

We now know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.¹

Swift's parodic writing is restless, allusive, and eccentric, its status easily imagined as 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash', and as 'a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture'. Swiftian narrators, 'those eternal copyists', are displaced from the authoritative centres of their texts, leaving a space that Swift fills only fugitively and problematically with his presence. They are sublime, comic, and profoundly ridiculous figures, who 'can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original', and whose 'only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them'. Moreover, they are figures in both senses of the word, being tropes and verbal constructs as much as they are independent human characters.

Barthes continues his unconscious description of Swiftian parody by turning to the reader's role:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing... In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *dis-entangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a

¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image - Music - Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-48 (p. 146); see Roland Barthes, *Essais Critiques IV: le Bruissement de la Langue* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), pp. 61-68 (p. 65).

stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.²

It may be an exaggeration to suggest that what happens is as absolute as 'a systematic exemption of meaning', but in works such as *A Tale of A Tub*, the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*, and *Gulliver's Travels*, there is no immanent 'Author' of certain authority to impose limits on the text and close the writing. There is a wandering sense of 'Swift', and moments (or traces) of concrete, determinate satire which indicate 'theological' meanings. Even in the wildest work, *A Tale of A Tub*, there is the description of Jack's later career, which, though it also has its cross-purposes, is essentially a clear and direct attack on Dissent. However, Barthes' distinction between deciphering (which most interpreters attempt) and disentangling (which is about as much as we can hope to achieve) is exactly right. To read Swiftian parody is to range over textual space without piercing it, to disentangle threads of quotation, allusion, and suggestion which, in turn, entangle us. These threads seldom lead to any simple solution, but are prodigiously productive of paradoxes and possible solutions. Barthes may not have compassed his revolutionary aim of describing all writing, but here he goes very close to Swift's bewildering practice:

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.³

It is not our concern here whether this constitutes an accurate – or even a useful – description of *all* writing. What interests us here is the precision with which it describes parody. The perception of parody – the recognition of quoted threads and the process of disentangling them – takes place in the reader. Furthermore, this perception is not a simple teleological process like allegory which, at least ideally, teaches us to see through the letter of the text to a determinate understanding.⁴ Rather, it is a process of 'entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation' with a miscellany of texts and their traces. There is no single and unified origin of sense or meaning, and no single role designated for the reader.

The only significant distortion engendered by the application of Barthes' theory to Swiftian parody is derived from its mood. Barthes liked to think of himself as a radical (if chic) intellectual, and, in the revolutionary locus of

² Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, p. 147; *Bruissement*, pp. 65–66.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 148; p. 66.

⁴ On allegory and its relationship to parody, see Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), particularly pp. 132–55.

Paris in 1968, he could make his joyous declaration of the rights of readers against the oppression of author-ity with gay abandon. No such innocent liberation characterises Swiftian parody, which engages in the multiplicity it discovers as if it were a malign, as well as a comic, chaos. The hostility of Swiftian parody towards its pre-textual materials, towards its readers, and towards itself is palpable. The possibility of a judgemental sense of authority is not realised in the parody, but, even in the most playful passages, it hovers, insisting that language should not be abused in this way. An immanent hostility to uncontrolled engagement in textuality is realised in this other theory of quotation, which, though it seems to describe a state of textual integrity almost exactly opposite to the practice of Swiftian parody, enjoys the status of being Swift's own (presumably) unironic opinion:

I would say something concerning Quotations; wherein I think you cannot be too sparing, except from Scripture, and the primitive Writers of the Church. As to the former, when you offer a Text as a Proof or an Illustration, we your Hearers expect to be fairly used; and sometimes think we have Reason to complain, especially of you younger Divines; which makes us fear, that some of you conceive you have no more to do than to turn over a Concordance, and there having found the principal Word, introduce as much of the Verse as will serve your Turn, although in Reality it makes nothing for you. I do not altogether disapprove the Manner of interweaving Texts of Scripture through the Style of your Sermon; wherein, however, I have sometimes observed great Instances of Indiscretion and Impropriety; against which I therefore to give you a Caution.⁵

This avuncular warning against the incontinent use of quotation comes from the *Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately entered into Holy Orders* (1720), a text published anonymously but definitely written by Swift.⁶ It discusses sermons in particular, but it is clearly interpretable as presenting an ideal for all sober discourse. The main problem in reading it as a general advocacy of the rhetoric of a small, clean, straightforward world is that the theory in it does not fit the most memorable of Swift's own writings.

There is, of course, no logical reason for requiring Swift to agree with a literary theorist 248 years his junior. Indeed, the shape of such an absurd idea reminds one of the narrator's amusing solecism in *A Tale of A Tub* when he criticises Homer for being unaware of Modern occult 'learning': 'his Account of the *Opus magnum* is extremely poor and deficient; he seems to have read but very superficially, either *Sendivogius*, *Behmen*, or *Anthroposophia Theomagica*'.⁷ However, in his parodic practice Swift seems much closer to

⁵ *PW*, IX, p. 75.

⁶ Its original publication in Dublin, and its inclusion in both an expanded *Miscellanies* in 1721, and in Faulkner's semi-authorised edition of Swift's *Works* in 1735, offer strong evidence for its authenticity. The clinching evidence, however, lies in the interventions Swift clearly made to improve the text for the Faulkner edition. My thanks go to Mr David Woolley (whose letter this note clumsily summarises) for relieving my concerns in this matter.

⁷ *A Tale*, p. 127.

Barthes' precepts than to his own. His parodic writing is a comprehensive – though, I assume, not a conscious – reversal of the *Letter's* sober programme, even to the extent that he is profligate concerning quotations from a multitude of sources, *except* the Bible and the Church Fathers.⁸ From these central sources of authority he claims very little language or imagery, while he borrows prolifically from other, less prestigious forms of writing, often using his audience and his pre-texts at least as unfairly as 'you younger Divines' who 'having found the principal Word, introduce as much of the Verse as will serve your Turn, although in Reality it makes nothing for you'. The parodies are shot through with infidelities of the spirit in quotation, and all kinds of misappropriation.

If we continue with Swift's strictures against incontinent (Barthesian) quotation, the reversal of his own practice is even more precisely articulated. Strict terms are made for the admissibility and form of quotations even from the Church Fathers, who 'I think...are best brought in, to confirm some Opinion controverted by those who differ from us',⁹ and whose opinions may otherwise be presented as the preacher's own, in his own words. Modern authors are neither to be quoted nor named, and the use of Greek and Latin is forbidden the pulpit. Then the question of commonplace books is addressed:

The Mention of Quotations puts me in mind of Common-place Books, which have been long in use by industrious young Divines, and, I hear, do still continue so; I know they are very beneficial to Lawyers and Physicians, because they are Collections of Facts or Cases, whereupon a great Part of their several Faculties depend: Of these I have seen several, but never yet any written by a Clergyman; only from what I am informed, they generally are Extracts of Theological and Moral Sentences, drawn from Ecclesiastical and other Authors, reduced under proper Heads; usually begun, and perhaps, finished, while the Collectors were young in the Church; as being intended for Materials, or Nurseries to stock future Sermons.¹⁰

Restricted by the patrician pretence that he has never actually seen one of the beastly things, Swift is obliged to pretend to speculate on what a clergyman's commonplace book might contain. He suggests with deft accuracy:

You will observe the wise Editors of ancient Authors, when they meet a Sentence worthy of being distinguished, take special Care to have the first Word printed in Capital Letters, that you may not overlook it: Such, for Example, as the *Inconstancy of Fortune*, the *Goodness of Peace*, the *Excellency of Wisdom*, the *Certainty of Death*; that

⁸ See Charles Allen Beaumont's slender volume, *Swift's Use of the Bible: A Documentation and a Study in Allusion* (Athens Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1965), which manages to find and analyse just about all there is in sixty-eight pages.

⁹ *PW*, IX, p. 75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

Prosperity makes Men insolent, and Adversity humble; and the like eternal Truths, which every Plowman knows well enough, although he never heard of Aristotle or Plato.¹¹

From this sturdy pragmatism, he proceeds to judgement:

If Theological Common-Place Books be no better filled, I think they had better be laid aside: And I could wish, that Men of tolerable Intellectuals would rather trust to their own natural Reason, improved by a general Conversation with Books, to enlarge on Points which they are supposed already to understand. If a rational Man reads an excellent Author with just Application, he shall find himself extremely improved, and perhaps insensibly led to imitate that Author's Perfections; although in a little Time he should not remember one Word in the Book, nor even the Subject it handled: For, Books give the same Turn to our Thoughts and Way of Reasoning, that good and ill Company do to our Behaviour and Conversation; without either loading our Memories, or making us even sensible of the Change. And particularly, I have observed in Preaching, that no Men succeed better than those, who trust entirely to the Stock or Fund of their own Reason; advanced, indeed, but not overlaid by Commerce with Books. Whoever only reads, in order to transcribe wise and shining Remarks, without entering into the Genius and Spirit of the Author; as it is probable he will make no very judicious Extract, so he will be apt to trust to that Collection in all his Compositions; and be misled out of the regular Way of Thinking, in order to introduce those Materials which he hath been at the Pains to gather: And the Product of all this, will be found a manifest incoherent Piece of Patchwork.¹²

Swiftian narrators are definitely not 'Men of tolerable Intellectuals' and they have little or no 'natural Reason' to trust to. They are plainly not 'improved by a general Conversation with Books', but rather degenerate by imitating other authors' imperfections. They quote indiscriminately and injudiciously, and are 'misled out of the regular Way of Thinking' by a determination to introduce all the materials they have gathered, regardless of sense. This is most comprehensively true of *A Tale*, which, at least if it is considered as the narrator's text, could not be better described than as 'a manifest incoherent Piece of Patchwork'. Its narrator even embraces this commonplace book theory of literary production and ingenuously admits its purpose:

In my Disposure of Employments of the Brain, I have thought fit to make *Invention* the *Master*, and to give *Method* and *Reason*, the Office of its *Lacquays*. The Cause of this Distribution was, from observing it my particular Case, to be often under a Temptation of being Witty, upon Occasions, where I could be neither *Wise* nor *Sound*, nor any thing to the Matter in hand. And, I am too much a Servant of the *Modern Way*, to neglect any such Opportunities, whatever Pains or Improprieties I may be at, to introduce them. For, I have observed, that from a laborious Collection of Seven Hundred Thirty Eight *Flowers*, and *shining Hints* of the best *Modern Authors*, digested with great Reading, into my Book of *Common-places*; I have

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹² *Ibid.*