

Introduction

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the status of literary studies was high in the eyes of the educated public. The discipline, in both the wider and the more specialist senses, enjoyed an atmosphere very different from that of the present. English literature was bidding to replace the classics as the foundation of a well-stocked and educated mind, literate, knowledgeable, culturally alert and critically intelligent beyond the technical skills of reading books, whatever these are. The humanist ideal of a knowledge of books and humankind circulated in a residual and perhaps not entirely confident way, but as a gratifying echo of ancient ideas of the complete rounded person, fit to govern or lead society, or to subject its leaders to critical scrutiny, or perhaps even to give a new look to running an empire, were there an empire to run. I leave to one side the various competing claims between historical scholarship and a number of rival critical outlooks and persuasions, except to say that each of these in themselves claimed some public or cultural recognition, because the idea of the ‘centrality’ of literary studies for the formation of the civilized mind was more readily acknowledged than it would be now.

It is hard to imagine today that, in this general basking of favour, eighteenth-century studies in particular had an unusually privileged and prestigious place, in the long aftermath of disparaging Romantic reassessments. The rediscovery of Pope had been one of the catalysts for the revival. The overdue rehabilitation of a great poet seemed to carry with it a whole era which, in the perspective of many, had long been thought of as an ‘Age of Pope’. The aura of cultural predominance surrounding ‘the reputation and writings of Alexander Pope’, in James Reeves’s contemptuous phrasing, goes back to his own time.¹ It is a product not only of Pope’s consummate poetic mastery, as Reeves was unwilling to acknowledge, but also of a reputation-management on Pope’s part which, in Reeves’s hostile, but not wholly inaccurate, perspective, might be the envy of a professional publicist. Pope’s friend Swift, arguably a more versatile figure of wider literary

and public achievement, seemed happy not to compete, notably professing his own inferior importance as ‘only a Man of Rhimes’ to the great master of ‘serious Couplets’. The stereotype was not universally accepted in the eighteenth century. The poet Shenstone and Johnson’s friend Hester Thrale thought Swift the better poet, and Adam Smith seemed to regard Swift and Pope as of comparable stature in their alternative achievements as poetic innovators.²

The historic nineteenth-century downgrading of Pope (with the notable exception of Byron, and perhaps Shelley, who paid Pope the finest tribute of imitation, by writing, in *Peter Bell the Third*, a brilliant Romantic *Dunciad*) was not influentially challenged until the 1920s and 1930s, by the authoritative voices of T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, and a gushing biography by Edith Sitwell. What the poets started, the critics influentially took over. This was the prelude to the unprecedented academic flowering of Pope studies in the middle decades of the twentieth century, a process reflected, and stimulated, by the great Twickenham Edition (1939–69), directed in England by John Butt, and completed by Maynard Mack in America. The corresponding edition of Swift’s *Prose Works*, by Herbert Davis (1939–74), is almost exactly coeval, but unlike the Twickenham Edition, it comes without historical or explanatory commentary, possibly a reflection of Swift’s less prestigious standing in the academic stock-market of the day. On the other hand, an important annotated edition of Swift’s *Poems* appeared in three volumes in 1937 (second edition 1958), two years before the first volumes of Twickenham or Davis, and remains one of the standard resources. But Pope received the grander share of full-scale editing. Nowhere was the sense of Pope’s dominant position manifested more clearly than in the prevailing reputation of Swift’s poems, which, with rare exceptions (including again Byron), from Swift’s lifetime to the twentieth century, were thought not only inferior to Pope’s but negligible in themselves. It suited the tidiness of literary history to affirm that Pope was the great poet of his age, and Swift the great prose writer.

The assumption of Pope’s primacy was fostered by Pope himself, and Swift subscribed to it. Swift admired the majesties of Pope’s couplet style as a pinnacle of the art, and was shy of attempting such grandeurs himself. Over three centuries, the taste for Swift’s low-key verses has, however, been rising. More than the parallel revival of Pope, it was promoted by poets rather than critics: not only by Shenstone, and Byron, but by later poets from Eliot and Yeats to Geoffrey Hill and Derek Mahon. Some poets, including Yeats, James Reeves and Ted Hughes, thought Swift a poet greatly superior to Pope, for whom they expressed strong dislike. T. S. Eliot, also an admirer

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of Pope, whose *Waste Land* took much of its inspiration from *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*, was even more deeply and intimately engaged with Swift's verse, of which he repeatedly expressed an evidently unfulfilled desire to write a study. His own poems are saturated with Swiftian phrasings and cadences. The pastiche of the *Rape* which Eliot drafted for the *Waste Land*, and which Pound advised him to discard because of its failure to measure up to Pope's versification, is notably permeated with Swiftian imagery and sentiment and some unPopeian rough cadences. Although he called Swift 'the colossal Swift, the greatest writer of English prose, and the greatest man who has ever written great English prose',³ Eliot cared for Swift's poetry too much to subscribe to any simple view of Swift's place as the great prose writer to Pope's great poet. There is piquancy in the idea of Swift as a poets' poet and Pope as favourite of the critics.

There is no need to take sides. The fact I return to is that when I began in the late 1950s and 1960s, not only was the Augustan age academically in the ascendant, but Pope was its central luminary. The Yale English Department, which I happened to join much later, was in those earlier years the intellectual capital of Augustan studies in the English-speaking world. Its members included Maynard Mack, Martin Price, W. K. Wimsatt Jr., Aubrey Williams and James M. Osborn, as well as Cleanth Brooks, perhaps as great a concentration of versatile skills in this field as has ever been assembled, ranging from scholarly editors to New Critics, often united in the same person (as notably in Mack and Wimsatt, and indeed Brooks).

Of these, only one, Martin Price, had written a book on Swift (it was his doctoral dissertation, under the supervision of Mack), although Mack himself, and Wimsatt, and some others, delivered essays or incidental comments on Swift over time. The 1950s were a mildly conservative era, disposed to consolidation after the upheavals of a great war. Pope seemed to combine virtues of authority and stability, recognizing unruly forces but coming to terms with them by feats of poetic containment which seemed to presuppose an uncomplacent confidence in an essentially stable order of things. Swift was a more disturbing figure, in some ways more passionately authoritarian in a law and order way, but also radically unsettling and unpacified in his vision. It is interesting that it was in the relatively non-combative post-war conservatism of the 1950s that a more moderate and tolerant Swift emerged into academic orthodoxy. It was as though the bleak Swift of *Gulliver's Fourth Voyage* was too disruptive to swallow, and a softer *Gulliver's Travels*, benignly disposed to humankind, and unsympathetic to Gulliver's own misanthropy, had to be affirmed in preference. It is teasing to imagine what Swift would think of a well-intentioned and conciliating

accommodationism seeking to tame him into a *bien pensant* parson of tolerant leanings, a benignly conformist maverick playing second fiddle to an urbanely Establishment Pope.

It was in this Pope-centred context that I first started to teach university courses in eighteenth-century literature. I felt constrained to begin my lectures with Pope, as the more ‘Augustan’, rather than with the significantly older Swift, in a reverse chronology that viewed him as an untypical or adversarial figure, to be defined by his divergence from what was in effect an anachronistic norm. Swift was twenty years older, but the prevailing understanding of the period was that Pope set the tone, even though Swift’s great masterpiece, *A Tale of Tub*, was published five years before any poem had appeared from the young and unknown Pope. (It is a corresponding, if not altogether symmetrical, irony that Swift, though three years older than his friend Congreve, thought of himself as twenty years younger, and as belonging to a later literary generation.)⁴

Pope seemed easier to teach, a favourite of the academy, and a familiar figure in the literary environment. He was not ‘difficult’, while Swift’s writing seemed discursively baffling and temperamentally conflicted. The *Tale* was at least as obscure as Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Beckett’s novels, which significantly derive from it, and I assumed that if I started chronologically with such an intractable work, it would be a deterrent to inexperienced readers. I was slow to realise that the intellectual climate was changing in ways that also transformed this pedagogic terrain. The comfortable stabilities Pope had been thought to stand for in the 1950s and 1960s were no longer a matter of received value in the 1970s and 1980s.

A small sign of this was that the old complaints about the metronomic monotony of the heroic couplet, however insensitive one might think them, had resurfaced in some force. These remain at large, often impervious to the delicacy and energy of Pope’s writing, and a barrier to readers. It took me some time to discover, mainly through the example of a younger colleague (who, like many others, subsequently abandoned English studies for the law), that a work of disruptive and destabilizing vitality like *A Tale of a Tub* might now, in spite of its obscurities, be a congenial, as well as a chronologically appropriate, way of introducing eighteenth-century writers to modern readers. My own long-held perception, that the *Tale* was proleptic of many works of a modern sensibility which Swift himself enjoyed excoriating, was something I had been hesitant to articulate explicitly. It implied concepts that seemed at that time far-fetched to the official academic way of thinking, such as the idea that an author might have deep temperamental affinities with the intellectual disorders he was

attacking; that later writers, including Joyce and Eliot, might throw light on earlier ones, like Swift and Pope; and that through continuities which include not only formal ‘imitation’, but the many forms of parodying and unparodying, anti-genres naturally resolve themselves into the genres they mimic. A history of the novel that includes anti-novels, for example, is now comfortably assimilated into literary history.

A Tale of a Tub’s extraordinary achievement as a parody of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* or Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself*, before either of these books existed, made of it, in my view, not only the brilliant satire that it is in its own right, but the most creatively innovative of all the future books it was presciently deriding. It could be said to have realized the imaginative potential of what Swift was rejecting. By entering into the undisciplined energies of a modernism he hated with such self-implicating force, Swift revealed an imagination partly given over to that disruptiveness of the mind which he both anatomized and knew he shared, even as he wrote to exorcize it.

What I did not realize is that, even without this seemingly counterintuitive perspective, the natural mood of the culture was becoming more receptive to the instabilities and unpredictable disruptiveness of Swift’s style, and correspondingly less charmed with Popeian assurance and his feats of poetic containment. The pedagogue within, who had been telling me that I had to make sense of things through a disappearing version of the Augustan mind, of which Pope was the defining figure, needed neutralizing. Not that I regard the word ‘Augustan’ with the opprobrium it carries in neo-learned circles, whose zealous admonitions against it seem deserving of a capacious Dunciadic yawn. It is a usefully flexible term, well-understood by literate readers in appropriate contexts, and no looser than other labels. Contrary to reigning mythologies, the cultural aspirations it points to were well understood by Swift, Pope and their contemporaries. A pedagogic fatwa was decreed against the term in the 1970s in an implausible fit of classical knowingness, apparently sparked by a belated ‘discovery’ that the Emperor Augustus had not been universally popular. The faithful of the village lined up in awe of the priest’s Latinity. If there is anything wrong with an ‘Augustan Age’, it is not ‘Augustan’, but the idea of an ‘Age’ of anything or anyone, harmful only as a simplification that belies variety, and, like other simplifications, not altogether useless.

In a recent volume, *Swift’s Angers*, I sought to pay tribute to Swift’s own writings, with an eye on the longer evolutionary perspectives that are part of his importance as a major English writer of his time, rooted in a great European tradition that stretches from antiquity to the present.

In the present book, I have studied some of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries, from an extended period I can easily resist calling an ‘Age of Swift’, while wishing to claim that such a description would have no less legitimacy than used to be accorded to an ‘Age of Pope’. Pope is in fact the subject of two of my main chapters, a figure so inseparable from Swift in friendship and allegiance, as well as in strong (and both complementary and antagonistic) differences of personality and style, that it would not be unnatural to think of either writer under the rubric of an ‘age of the other.

There is no essentialist purpose in the present book, however, and no desire to propose that Swift was a more (or less) determining influence than Pope, or that such competitive claims have much insight to offer, except as aberrations of literary history which have themselves become part of literary history. Rather than counterbalance one ‘age of’ with another, I have chosen to collect these accounts of English writers, from Rochester to Austen, under a title that conveys a Swiftian presence. The intention is not to report influences, but to register the experience of reading eighteenth-century writers from a lifelong sense of Swift’s pervasive existence among them, a sense also possessed in their own way by the writers I discuss, except when, like Rochester and sometimes Congreve, they wrote earlier and helped to shape Swift’s own style.

Nearly all of them wrote in the shadow of Swift’s personality, and were variously exposed to the sheer presence of his writings and the memorable stamp of his fictions. None matched the range of his style or shared its characteristic edge. His rebellious angers and authoritarian conformism, his lordly urbanities and his almost populist dislike of cant or pretension, the incandescent crackle of his comedy, were inimitable but unignorable. The animating presence of Swift is evident not only in writers he disliked (Mandeville) or who disliked him (Johnson), but traceable in writers with whom one might be least likely to associate him, like Chatterton (or Christopher Smart, whose *Jubilate Agno* blessed ‘*the Lord Jesus for the memory of GAY, POPE and SWIFT*’).⁵ The authors discussed in this book are testimony to this penetration. Their Swiftian engagements are not systematic or mainly imitative. Nor do they necessarily involve a transmission of literary forms, in the way that the couplet and its prose counterparts are often referable to Pope (though they do not originate with him). But they all reflect a direct or indirect absorption in Swift as a person, writer or thinker.

Swift seems not to have mentioned Rochester, or been significantly mentioned by Jane Austen, perhaps for comparable reasons of cultural *pudeur*. David Farley-Hills, a historian of Rochester’s reputation, remarks that ‘it

is strange that Swift makes no reference to him, because his work shows Rochester's influence', and some poems by Rochester were attributed to Swift.⁶ Naming was of importance to Swift, but so was not naming, as in the case of Mandeville, or of Defoe, whom Swift made quite a production of not knowing. I have discussed elsewhere the comedy Swift made of his inability to remember Defoe's name, or the fact that Defoe never appears in Swift's correspondence or library, despite the extended journalistic confrontations of the two men, or the teasing question of whether *Robinson Crusoe* might be alluded to in *Gulliver's Travels*.⁷ Mandeville seems similarly to have escaped any allusion, despite the intricate adversarial bonds between him and Swift. These writers each had their own disreputability in Swift's eyes, that of Rochester being the libertine character, which the circle of Pope and Swift suspiciously viewed as somewhat alien, both generationally and by caste.⁸ Though Swift was no novice in bawdy scurrility, he clearly drew a generational line between himself and the poets of the Restoration, including his friend Congreve, who was actually younger than himself in years. Even Swift's fulsome early poem to Congreve shows an ambivalence about the raffishness of the London of the 1690s.

The writers in this book whose personal or literary relations with Swift might appear to be closest often exhibit contradictory features, as well as likenesses. Pope, his close friend, treated the world's disorders as containable by his eloquence and mastery, rather than, in Swift's manner, as unruly beyond rescue. Swift's two successors as England's greatest prose ironists, Gibbon and Austen, would perhaps not have written as they did without Swift's example. Gibbon, however, is closer to Pope in his peculiarly Augustan poise in the face of the human enormities he reports. Austen, whose severity of vision, and whose impressive command of ironic indirection, have been brilliantly characterized as 'regulated hatred', seems to have thought Swift too objectionable to mention with any frequency, but has been shown to have learned more from his style than her decorous surface suggests. Paradox surrounds all the relations between Swift and the authors discussed in these pages. Their convergences often have a subtle fortuity of deep knowingness, and the hostile engagements, like that of Samuel Johnson, are marked by an exceptional inwardness of self-involvement. Johnson's tendency to tormented misprision of Swift is commensurate with a lifelong sense of identification with the rejected elder. Johnson's biographer Hawkins carried Johnson's hostility to crude, cantankerous lengths, but retained and parroted the obsession.

The volume begins and ends with mock editions, a genre itself mocked in *A Tale of a Tub* with such pre-emptive inwardness that it became, in an

unparodied or outparodied form, an inaugural text for three centuries of a self-conscious writing we sometimes call Romantic irony, and of a novel form which Swift, if he was aware of it, would not think of attempting. Though he would not call it a 'novel', the *Tale* marks a decisive moment in the evolution of novelistic and modernist preoccupations with fictional realism, and of their antithesis (and antidote) in author-centred narratorial management. In one of the later authors treated in this book, Thomas Chatterton, in whom the traces of Swiftian allegiance are variously and surprisingly visible, and who also sported a coyly attenuated version of Restoration raffishness, the mock edition was taken to its ultimate veristic lengths, namely of 'forgery'. Swift would not go there, any more than to the novel, though it should not be forgotten that he was such a master of the literary hoax that his readers, like those of Richardson, or the consumers of a modern soap opera, were taken in, sometimes to his own discomfiture. Austen, an infinitely more nuanced case than Chatterton, seems to have been as prudently reticent about Swift as Swift was about Rochester. She is nevertheless a writer whose subtle and elusive play of narrative voices, and whose exploitation of what we have come to call free indirect style, seem to go back beyond Fielding to the virtuosities of Swift's *Tale*.⁹ Free indirect style, as practised by these writers, is a register of voice-management that intervenes, with an incessant and volatile insistence, between outright authorial perspective and the point of view of other characters. It is fiction's perpetual negotiation between the effaced author of Richardsonian or Flaubertian aspiration, and the narrative management of a declared and ostentatious master of ceremonies like Fielding or Thackeray. Johnson was one of the writers who returned obsessively to these questions in his Shakespearean criticism and elsewhere. Early in his career, he concocted reports of proceedings in Parliament, which were taken (to his subsequent distress) as authentic. They were appositely set in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia.

PART I

The legacy of A Tale of a Tub

CHAPTER I

*The typographical ego-trip from 'Dryden' to Prufrock***'Without one grain of Satyr intermixt'**

This discussion is concerned with some paradoxical and adversarial continuities between Swift, Sterne and some post-romantic and modernist sensibilities, which have been a long-time preoccupation of mine, but in a context I had not previously understood: that of the mock-editorial phenomenon, in which works of fiction, whether satirical or not, take the form of editions of themselves, with footnotes and marginal scholia, pretended gaps in the manuscript and other features of learned communication. The role of the editorial pretence, as an authenticating device, often destabilized or undermined, has received acute attention, in relation to Swift and to eighteenth-century novelists.¹ The features I discuss typically have a strong visual presence, and involve a wide range of typographical and other non-textual features of book-making, whose playful or parodic functions become part of a primary mode of self-expression and are integral to meanings we used to think of as the province solely of textual content. That the angle of vision I am proposing no longer has the novelty it once had is largely due to the teaching of James McLaverty, Thomas Keymer, Christopher Flint and a few others.

The subject I hope to re-examine from this perspective was broached in an early book of mine called *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader*, which opened with the purely textual observation that the Preface to Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, perhaps the most inventively and relentlessly satirical work in the language, carries the somewhat surprising declaration that "'Tis a great Ease to my Conscience that I have writ so elaborate and useful a Discourse without one grain of Satyr intermixt' (*T*, Preface, p. 29).² There follows an extraordinary passage about the fertility of satire, by comparison with panegyric, to the effect that there are only a few things that can be said in the latter mode, while the subjects of satire are inexhaustible (a classic