

*Introduction: not Timons manner*

Swift's angers beset our thinking about him. They permeate his conflicted feelings about Ireland. They were vivid to Yeats, who was variously 'haunted' by Swift, and who recreated Swift in his own fervid self-image. They were much in T. S. Eliot's mind when he spoke of 'the colossal Swift, the greatest writer of English prose, and the greatest man who has ever written great English prose'.<sup>1</sup> Eliot more than once expressed his unbounded admiration of *Gulliver's Travels* by describing Swift's satire as 'terrible'.<sup>2</sup> It is the angers that loom largest in Eliot's critical utterances, though Eliot's own poems show the imprint of a more tartly sardonic Swift, and imitate some of the lighter cadences of Swift's poems, on which Eliot never wrote at length, though he more than once said he intended to. The poems show, as indeed does Swift's prose, the self-undercutting containment to which Swift always subjected these angers. Eliot, who shows perhaps the most intimate responsiveness to Swift's writing of any of the great poets who have honoured Swift (they include Byron and Yeats), understood the sardonic undercutting, as Yeats did not, but Eliot's critical comments, unlike his poems, take little account of the levity in which Swift enveloped nearly all his most serious and heartfelt writings. The Swift of the 'terrible' angers and the Swift of the sarcastic levity are, however, complementary and indissoluble. That Eliot never registered the intimacy of the connection may be a byproduct of the fact that, in spite of the many scattered expressions of his deep admiration for Swift, he never seems to have allowed himself to write at length on the subject.

The angers, of course, were all too real, but Swift was temperamentally equivocal about their display. Even when we may suppose them to have been at white heat, as in *A Tale of a Tub*, the brilliant aggressive vitality is designed, for all the intensity of its sting, never to lose its cool. The contemptuous energy with which he mimicked the forms of 'modern' egocentrism and the self-promoting typographical antics of what we now like to call 'print culture', is a billowing performance of indignant impersonation,

in which the force and incriminating accuracy of the aggression never shows loss of authorial composure. A feature of these angers, as Sterne smirkingly sensed, was that they were partly self-implicating. Swift was spared from seeing the Shandy phenomenon in its fully fledged published form, but he intuitively repudiated it as part of the impending 'modern' menace. The loathing he expressed for its posturing self-promotion went with an unnerving intimation that it was part of a radical human self-regard to which he himself, like his readers and humanity at large, were by definition predisposed. The closeness of Swift's temperament to the things he attacked is a defining feature of his writing, and one of which he was edgily self-aware. He evokes it with a minutely inward participation, which later writers from Sterne to Norman Mailer, all of whom he would have disavowed, were to adopt, or unparody, as a workable model for their own egocentric enterprises.

In his poems, as in his prose, Swift shrank from a 'lofty Stile' which might give the angers away. 'In a Jest I spend my Rage', he said, preferring to 'encounter Vice with Mirth', not primarily out of some allegiance to satiric good-humour or Horatian urbanity, but because displaying rage would make him vulnerable: 'I Shou'd make a Figure scurvy' (*Epistle to a Lady*, 1728?, 218–19, 168, 142). The refusal extended to all forms of the 'Heroick Strain' (136), erotic and panegyric, as well as epic or indeed satirical. Although the poem in which he expressed these stipulations was ostensibly a polite refusal to pay compliments to a lady 'in the Heroick Stile', one of the main thrusts of the poem is to disavow Juvenalian majesties of satiric indignation. We know in practice that he seldom went in for grand unguarded denunciations, perpetrating his aggressions on his victims as well as his readers in a more intimately needling way, making them, as he says in the poem, 'wriggle, howl, and skip', and setting their 'Spirits all a working', rather than pounding them with indignant tirades which might only expose his own lack of composure (180, 207). But he also says of his satiric adversaries that 'it must be understood, I would hang them if I cou'd' (169–70).

This was the mood in which he wrote, some three years earlier, that his forthcoming 'Travells' were erected upon a 'great foundation of Misanthropy (though not Timons manner)' (Swift to Pope, 29 September 1725). 'Great foundation of Misanthropy' is a knowing jokiness, mock-pompously coded to a complicit correspondent, and whose inflated phrasing is not a sign of *not* meaning what it says. The disavowal of Timon's manner seems, as in the poem, a disavowal of rant, a withholding of 'manner', not matter. But Swift's irony is aggressively mercurial. It does not mean the opposite of

what it says, as irony is supposed to do, but acts with elusive indirections designed both to cover himself and wrongfoot his readers. Readers often oblige. When Swift added two months later that, 'I tell you after all that I do not hate Mankind, it is vous autres who hate them because you would have them reasonable Animals, and are Angry for being disappointed' (26 November 1725), the learned of the twentieth-century academy concluded that 'after all' Swift did not 'hate Mankind'. He said so. Older, and perhaps younger, readers might think Swift was not exactly expressing a benevolent view of the human race, and that he was indeed 'angry' when he contemptuously said he was not angry because he expected nothing from mankind. The disavowal of anger is another form of the same coded irony which in the earlier letter mock-pompously proclaimed his 'great foundation of Misanthropy'. The sentences disavowing anger are followed by: 'I am no more angry with [Walpole] than I was with the Kite that last week flew away with one of my Chickins and yet I was pleas'd when one of my Servants shot him two days after.' As in the poem, he would hang [Walpole] if he could.

The interplay between what are sometimes called Swift's 'intensities', and the edgily playful guardedness which undercuts without neutralising them, is the pervasive, and indeed defining, feature of Swift's style. It underlies the enraged lightheartedness of *A Tale of a Tub*, and the 'madness' of the misanthropic Gulliver, deranged and ranting, but not, on the facts of the story, wrong as to the substance of his grievances, though distanced from his author by a touch of unhinged indignity. Swift understood as well as Rochester or Oldham that ranting indignation is self-disarming, and could be used to release outrageous utterance while keeping the author free of the taint of excessive utterance. The undercutting of excessive inculcation is itself undercut by the realities it reveals. This is as evident in the almost tribal imprecations of Swift's late poems against Irish politicians as it is in the fictional device of putting his castigation of humanity in the mouth of a deranged Gulliver, whose manner can be disowned without significant attenuation of the substance.

Any grandiloquent denunciations that are allowed into Swift's writings tend usually to be over the top, advertising the assurance that the author himself is mockingly aware of excess. Swift studiously avoided all the forms of high talk favoured by the Augustan masters, Dryden, whom he despised, as well as Pope, whom he admired and loved. He kept aloof from the stater forms of the 'heroic' couplet, while remaining fully appreciative of Pope's mastery of the form, and of its claim to poetic primacy. Though virtually all his poems are ironically protected by an element of parody, he

never attempted in verse that loftiest form of parody known as the mock epic, as though fearing that the original majesties might rub off on the mockery (as both Dryden and Pope would have wanted them to). His only extended mock heroic, *The Battle of the Books*, is flattened by the medium of prose, and by competing subheroic parodies of journalism and scholarly editing.

It is only for posthumous publication that Swift released the single unmediated declaration of 'savage indignation' which underlies the mythologised image of him as a Titanic Juvenalian castigator. Even in the 'obituary' for himself in the *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift* (1731–9) there is no hint of this. The poem is largely written in the flip tetrameters of his best-known mature style, of which Eliot called Swift a 'master'.<sup>3</sup> In so far as it is not itself undercut by a touch of self-mockery, the rare grandiloquence of 'Fair LIBERTY was all his Cry' (347) is attributed to an 'impartial' obituarist, not the narrator himself. It is not until the epitaph for his memorial tablet, which Swift dictated in his will, that the boast of being 'Libertatis Vindicator', along with the reference to his 'saeva Indignatio', make their bald appearance, for posthumous display alone, and at the impersonal distance of an ancient language on a marble monument. As the chapter on 'Savage Indignation' argues below, this impersonality seems to conceal a desire to release the boast which Swift's natural style throughout his life had been instinctively disposed to suppress. Having proclaimed, in the *Epistle to a Lady* and elsewhere, his preference for Horatian banter over Juvenalian basting, he for once adopts in the epitaph a note of Juvenalian grandeur, not only proclaiming the trademark *indignatio* of Juvenal's first satire (*facit indignatio versum*, l. 79), but accentuating it beyond his Roman original by adding the adjective *saeva* (savage), which Juvenal did not use in this context. Nor does Juvenal in Latin, or Swift in English, speak of this indignation lacerating his heart, though Swift's posthumous Latin confesses that it was doing so before his death.

Yeats evoked *Saeva Indignatio* when he wrote, in 'Blood and the Moon' (1928), of 'Swift beating on his breast in sibylline frenzy blind', in a fit of fervid exaltation which would probably have seemed more deranged to Swift than the mad Gulliver whom he created as an ironic cover. Both Yeats and Eliot, in their different ways, emphasise a 'heroic' or 'terrible' Swift, a perspective which requires adjustment in the context of Swift's own deep stylistic instincts, but not, I think, the revisionism to which it has been subjected in the university culture of the last half-century, which has preferred an equable Swift, 'ironic' and therefore not 'angry'. Swift's kinsman and biographer Deane Swift might seem to have been thinking

of such readers when he wrote in 1755 of 'these mighty softeners; these kind pretenders to benevolence; these hollow charity-mongers'.<sup>4</sup> But the kinsman's point, on the contrary, is that Swift would have been affronted by those who took a softer view of human nature than that of Gulliver's 'Last Voyage', and who were thus censuring Swift's harsh portrayal of the Yahoos rather than rehabilitating his kindliness.<sup>5</sup> What Deane Swift felt called upon to do was to 'justify all the sarcasms of the Doctor', not pretend they were tolerantly intended.

Like Swift's kinsman, Yeats and Eliot, as well as most readers before the Second World War, understood Swift's 'sarcasms' as an expression of anger, not as a dilution of it. They would not assume that when Swift said 'I hate and detest that animal called man', he was neutralising the sentiment by a jokey inflation, any more than when he said, eight weeks later to the same person, 'I do not hate Mankind', he was literally contradicting himself. The irony in both passages is a slippery and guarded obliquity, not a declaration of philanthropic goodwill. When he said 'I would hang them if I cou'd', he did not mean it 'literally', any more than we do when we say someone 'ought to be shot', but he was not wishing them a long, happy life and all the democratic freedoms, as latter-day revisionists like to believe. What earlier readers, admiring or hostile, sometimes overlooked was the volatile indirection with which Swift modulated the expression of his angers. Swift's ironies may be playful, aggressive and destabilising. They serve to intensify or sometimes soften, and almost always to distance, a literal reading, rather than to contradict it.

Swift's epitaph, then, is perhaps the only occasion on which Swift did not shrink from the 'lofty Stile', either in anger or self-exaltation. Swift's posthumous reputation has often been coloured by the epitaph's exceptional resonance. It has elicited the poetic engagement, at what T. S. Eliot might call the 'first intensity', of the two greatest English poets of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Yeats and Eliot belong to a line of poets, rather than critics, from Shenstone and Byron to Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Derek Mahon, who have championed Swift as a poet, sometimes preferring him to Pope. Pope's reputation had tended, with exceptions, to be fostered by critics rather than poets.<sup>7</sup> When Yeats turned Swift's epitaph ('the greatest epitaph in history') into an English poem, he produced a spare and vibrant piece of Yeatsian mythologising which, for all its verbal closeness to the original, Swift would never have written.<sup>8</sup> The translation not only introduces self-dramatising features ('Swift has sailed into his rest', 'Imitate him if you dare, World-besotted traveller'), but also strikes an unSwiftian note even when it is most literal.

Savage indignation there  
 Cannot lacerate his breast.

The clarion note of public monumentalism is somewhat alien to Swift's Latin original, though the words, in a literal prose rendering, have a similar sense: 'Where savage indignation can no longer lacerate his heart.'

Almost four years after Yeats's death, the 'familiar compound ghost' in T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding* (1942), which is a composite incarnation of several poets including Yeats and Swift themselves, offers a self-consciously different perspective on Swift's epitaph, to which John Hayward drew Eliot's attention during the composition of his poem. Describing 'the gifts reserved for age', the ghost speaks of

the conscious impotence of rage  
 At human folly, and the laceration  
 Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.  
 (*Little Gidding*, 135–7)

The personal vulnerability of this differs sharply from the defiant declarativeness of Yeats's version, and is in its way closer to the mood of Swift's own epitaph, though Swift would not have permitted himself such a confessional idiom either. The particular declarativeness of Swift's own epitaph contains within it, however, the pathos of having felt unable to indulge in such self-appraisal, let alone self-praise, in any of his lifetime writings. It is not that Eliot writes like Swift, but that he has perceived an intimate defensive painfulness which Yeats's heroic accents do not capture.

Yeats understood more fully than Eliot the importance of Ireland in Swift's writings, and wrote vividly about it. He dramatised the subject beyond the reticences Swift imposed on himself, occluding Swift's self-divisions behind a glow of heroic fervour. As in Swift's other writings, the impulse of 'savage indignation' was usually curbed not only by Swift's shyness of the figure scurvy, but by conflicted loyalties, to Ireland, which he served without feeling he belonged to it, and to England, to which he felt he belonged and was rejected by, and whose domination of Ireland he opposed.

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Around 1708 Addison gave Swift a copy of his *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, inscribed (among other compliments) to 'the Greatest Genius of his Age'.<sup>9</sup> There is nothing surprising about the description, except its date. Though Swift was in his early forties, he was still at that time a clergyman

on the make, impatient for ecclesiastical advancement, political influence and literary recognition. His great triumphs and tragedies lay in the future. The only considerable work he had published was the subversive *Tale of a Tub*, which he never acknowledged, though he fumed inwardly when it was attributed to others. Even the *Tale* seems to have been better known for foul-mouthed irreverence than for its brilliance or imaginative daring, let alone its ferocious insight into the gaping idiocy, not yet visible to the naked eye, of an emerging 'modern' culture, whose culminating expression, a quarter of a millennium later, was to be the curdled Shandean posturing of Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*.

Swift's best-known writing still lay twenty years ahead, the astonishing product of his late fifties and sixties: *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *A Modest Proposal* (1729), and the wonderful poems of the 1720s and 1730s, overshadowed by his prose and by the hegemony of the Popeian couplet over official canons of taste (to which Swift modestly deferred), but admired by poets, more than by critics, for their mastery of a mode of 'serious' light verse which shaped the styles of Byron, Eliot and Auden. Nor had Swift yet established himself as the Hibernian Patriot, a dominant and ambivalent figure in the long line of Anglo-Irish defenders of Irish liberties which includes Burke, Charles Stewart Parnell and Yeats.

If Swift had died in 1708, or even in 1713, he would be remembered as a significant minor figure. He enjoyed a brief period of political influence as a Tory pamphleteer and hanger-on of the short-lived ministry of Harley and Bolingbroke. He was a founder-member of the literary coterie known as the Scriblerus Club, which also included Pope, Gay, Thomas Parnell, Arbuthnot and Harley himself. But he had failed to get preferment in the English Church, and had to settle, in 1713, for a lifetime of exile as Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. He attributed the failure partly to disapproval at court of the unacknowledged *Tale of a Tub*. The rest of his life was spent in the political wilderness, in a country where he felt he had been 'dropped' by a mere accident of birth. It was there that he earned his place in history as an activist of Irish interests and where, over time, he wrote the books which entitle him to Addison's prophetic praise.

Addison's dedication reads in full 'To D<sup>r</sup> Jonathan Swift, The most Agreeable Companion The Truest Friend And the Greatest Genius of his Age'. Allowance must be made for the inflated style of such courtesies, but the compliment still seems excessive, even in 1708. Three years later, Addison repeated the compliment in print in the *Spectator* (No. 135, 4 August 1711). The two men were friends and collaborators for several years, before a political and personal estrangement (mostly from Steele) set in during

Swift's attachment to the Tory ministry. In a letter of 29 February 1707/8, Addison asked Swift to postpone a visit from the morning until 'about two in the After-noon when I may hope to enjoy your Conversation more at leisure which I set a very great value upon', and when Mr Steele 'will Dine with us'.<sup>10</sup> The reason for the postponement was that Addison, at this time Under-Secretary to the Earl of Sunderland, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, had been directed to wait on his boss. It's hard to gauge all the social nuances, but Swift was nowhere near important enough to be thus deferred to on the strength of his social or political standing. It is clear that the 'companionship' of this intensely ambitious and morosely discontented parson was indeed in some way compelling, and that it must have revealed the brilliance which had not yet become fully manifested in his known publications, since his authorship of the *Tale* was not public knowledge. On 10 July Swift wrote to Ambrose Philips of the 'Triumvirate of M<sup>r</sup> Addison Steele and me', a species of benign celebrity swagger Swift later displayed about his relations with Tory grandees, but also, as with the latter, genuinely reflecting a substantial personal and professional connection.<sup>11</sup>

Addison's letter is the forty-first item in a correspondence which, over the whole span of Swift's life, includes more than fifteen hundred letters. Swift was also in his forty-first year, however, and the score suggests his relative unimportance at that date. Neither he nor anyone else evidently thought his correspondence interesting enough to preserve, and a few of the letters are between third parties anyway. From the earliest date, Swift's letters offer an exceptional insight into the preoccupations, reticences and self-divisions which are determining features, often unacknowledged, concealed, or deflected by irony, of his published writings. Swift's own first surviving letter, No. 2 in the series, is a remarkable piece of self-analysis. Addressed to the Rev. John Kendall on 11 February 1691/2, it reports the comment of a 'person of great Honour in Ireland' who told Swift that his 'mind was like a conjur'd spirit, that would doe mischief, if I woud not give it employment'.<sup>12</sup> The words have become a familiar starting point for descriptions of Swift's character. The particular interest of Swift's acceptance of their accuracy lies less in the memorable reference to his 'conjur'd spirit' than in an acknowledgement of energies of mind that would not lie down unless strictly channelled.

Like Samuel Johnson after him, Swift was recognising a truth about himself which he saw more broadly as a perversity of the human condition itself, consisting in mental aspirations or stresses that can never be satisfied or resolved, only allayed or kept at bay by ad hoc disciplines and



temporary palliatives. No possibility of 'cure', still less of a spiritual resolution, seemed available to either man. The built-in psychological restlessness which Johnson saw as the natural condition of human unhappiness, calling for a compassionate fellow-feeling, Swift viewed as a radical unruliness, of which his own 'conjur'd spirit' was a personal expression. This was understood as potentially susceptible of every viciousness and folly, and therefore as needing to be tenaciously held down. The potential for freewheeling mental excess and moral depravity is the psychological basis of Swift's satirical vision of the human condition, and one which implicates him, along with the reader and all third parties, in that condition. The view animates his almost unique character as a satirist who, instead of soliciting his reader's solidarity in a conspiracy of the right-minded against the bad, inculcates not only the reader but also himself in the diagnosis of universal turpitude. The compassionate Johnson, by this standard, has been described, without disparagement, as a satirist *manqué*, always softening or retreating into a majestic commiseration at the point where a potentially encompassing inculpation looms.

The letter about Swift's 'conjur'd spirit' also offers a fascinating glimpse of feverish writing habits: 'in these seven weeks I have been here, I have writt, & burnt and writt again upon almost all manner of subjects, more perhaps than any man in England'. There's a clear recognition that writing is a means of assuaging, not just expressing, uncontrollable pressures which, in his mature thinking, he came to identify with the radical human restlessness. The brilliant unruliness of *A Tale of a Tub*, a mimicry of unbridled self-expression, is both the severest critique, and also an act of buoyant creative participation in the gaudiest of indisciplines. He was to write much of this book, where he wrote the letter, at Moor Park, the home of Sir William Temple, his unsatisfactory patron, whose essay 'Upon Ancient and Modern Learning' (1690) triggered a late English phase of the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns. The *Tale*, written to defend the cultural rule of law represented by the classical tradition against the filthy modern tide of engulfing self-sufficiency and self-assertion, was, by a cruel but understandable paradox, immediately seen as subversive, in religion, as in other matters. Without it, however, *Tristram Shandy*, *Finnegans Wake*, *Watt* and *Pale Fire* would not exist as we know them. These works are simultaneously an extension of Swift's parody and an unparodying, and testify to the inwardness of Swift's imaginative rapport with what he rejected. He did not, of course, foresee them literally. What he did was to look at the venial garrulousness of Dryden and reimagine it as a monster of egomania in the manner of Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*. But the energy with

which, in his somewhat neurasthenic apprehensions of the future course of modernism, he excoriated that self-indulgence, also produced one of the very best works in the rejected mode, bringing out its potential with an energy and inventiveness that were also a source of great achievements in others.

In that sense, the *Tale* was a triumphant expression of the 'conjur'd spirit', one he could never own up to, which nevertheless (in his own not altogether unfounded view) permanently damaged his career in the Church, and which it grieved him to see attributed to, or claimed by, others, including his cousin Thomas Swift. It was to this cousin, also attached to Temple's household, that he wrote, some three months after the letter to Kendall, another letter offering a remarkable insight into his writing habits (3 May 1692). Swift was trying to write poems: not, in these early years, the witty verses from which Byron, Eliot and Auden learned many things, but celebrative 'Pindarick' odes in the style popularised in England by Cowley. It's not his style, and he would soon grow out of it, but he didn't know this yet. These poems, and the letter, show a commitment to poetry which, despite occasional disclaimers, he never abandoned. He is envious of a recent 'Copy of verses' by Thomas, 'which tho indeed they are not so correct as y<sup>r</sup> others, are what I could not do under 2 or 3 days'.<sup>13</sup> He reports that he finds it hard to write 'of a sudden', is given to finding it 'exceeding silly stuff', and is undergoing a combination of writer's block and the feverish writing and blotting and rewriting that he described to Kendall:

I esteem the time of studying Poetry to be 2 hours in a morning, and that onely when the humor sits, which I esteem for the flower of the whole Day, and truly I make bold to employ them that way and yet I seldom write above 2 stanzaes in a week I mean such as are to any Pindarick Ode, and yet I have known my self in so good a humor as to make 2 in a day, but it may be no more in a week after, and when all's done, I alter them a hundred times, and yet I do not believe my self to be a laborious dry writer, because if the fitt comes not immediatly I never heed it but think of something else.

The conjur'd spirit surfaces in those words, and also the recognition of self-regard, of being 'overfond of my own writings', and of not wanting anyone to know:

I would not have the world think so for a million, but it is so, and I find when I writt what pleases me I am Cowley to my self and can read it a hundred times over, I know 'tis a desperate weakness, and has nothing to defend it but it's secrecy.<sup>14</sup>