

Swift's Travels

Eighteenth-Century British Satire and its Legacy

EDITED BY

Nicholas Hudson and Aaron Santesso



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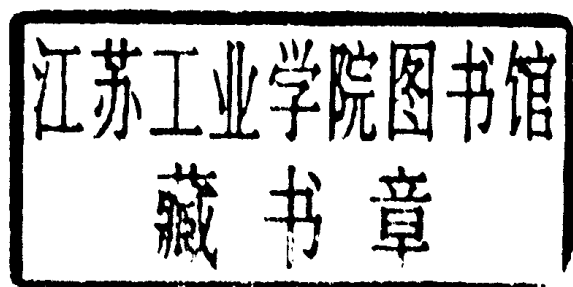
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521879552

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First published 2008

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Swift's travels : eighteenth-century British satire and its legacy /
[edited by] Nicholas Hudson, Aaron Santesso.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-87955-2 (hardback)

1. Swift, Jonathan, 1667-1745-Criticism and interpretation. 2. Swift, Jonathan,
1667-1745-Criticism and interpretation. 3. Satire, English-History
and criticism. 4. English literature-18th century-History and criticism.
5. Swift, Jonathan, 1667-1745-Influence. 6. English literature-Irish influences.
I. Hudson, Nicholas. II. Santesso, Aaron, 1972- III. Title.

PR3727.S965 2008

828'.509-dc22

2008023229

ISBN 978-0-521-87955-2 hardback

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SWIFT'S TRAVELS

As the greatest satirist in the English language, Jonathan Swift was both admired and feared in his own time for the power of his writing and hugely influential on writers who followed him. Swift transformed models such as utopian writing, political pamphleteering, and social critique with his dark and uncompromising vision of the human condition, deepening the outlook of contemporaries such as Alexander Pope, and leaving a legacy of Swiftian satire in the work of Hogarth, Fielding, Austen, and Beckett, among others. This collection of essays, with its distinguished list of international contributors, centers on Swift, the genres and authors who influenced him, and his impact on satirists from his own time to the twentieth century.

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For Claude Rawson: teacher, scholar, friend

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Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the encouragement and support of Linda Bree, without whom this volume would not have been produced. Thanks are due also to the University of Nevada Department of English, Esra Mirze, and Deb Taniwa. Partial funding for the volume was received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Finally, we thank the contributors to the volume for their patience, co-operation, and support.

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Introduction

The essays in this collection concern "Swift's travels" both forward and back across the literary tradition. Together they build a picture of a kind of satire that we might recognize as traditionally British, and as having achieved a dark apogee in the satires of Swift. Behind Swift's achievements, however, lie a range of precedents and influences that not only make his own literary journeys and achievements clearer, but also, viewed through the lens of Swift's reinterpretations and reformulations, cast the British satirical tradition itself in a different light. Swift entered into a literary arena marked in many ways by a self-conscious sanity – utopian speculation, the rational calculus of Thomas Hobbes, political and religious dissent, satiric reflections on fops and ladies, the classicism of John Dryden. In transforming so much of this rationality into a supremely controlled madness, Swift redirected his age, and inspired the uncertainty, instability, and anger of those works that followed in his shadow. Pope, Fielding, Austen, Beckett – none could forget Swift, and all wrote in a satiric Brobdingnag ruled by one giant. Even today, the name of Swift conjures a particular mode of satire – acerbic, unrelenting, unbounded. "A modern-day Jonathan Swift"¹ remains an honorific title for any writer of bitter truths and dark comedy.

This collection thus differs from other books on eighteenth-century satire, not in making Swift its central focus, but by moving outward from that mysterious and hostile center to offer a new understanding of British satire in general as a mode more radical, more troubled, and more ambitious than previously imagined. In developing this method, the editors and contributors have been inspired by perhaps the best living scholar on eighteenth-century satire, and perhaps on British satire itself. Claude Rawson's writing has consistently circled back to Swift, whom he portrays as a figure of virtually archetypal importance in understanding the subtleties of satiric language and the darker paradoxes of human nature itself. But in his own scholarly travels, Rawson has taken in a wide

orbit of authors from classical times to the present – Lucian, Rabelais, Montaigne, Pope, Fielding, Johnson, Wilde, Shaw, Céline, Mailer, and Laing, to name only a few. The methodologies of Rawson's writing will be recognized in many of the following essays. These include a sharp awareness of the unresolved polarities at the heart of Swiftian satire, a keen ear for the modulations of narrative voice, a sensitivity to what is not only said but implied in satire, and above all a belief that there is something abiding in the revelations of satire, something which seems rooted in human experience. The essays in this book treat diverse aspects of satire in various different ways. But the reader will recognize the common admiration of the contributors for Claude Rawson and what he has taught us about satire.

The book is divided into three parts – “Swift and his antecedents,” “Swift in his time,” and “Beyond Swift.” The first part concerns models in Renaissance and seventeenth-century literature which Swift drew upon for his satiric purposes, beginning with the speculative utopian tradition examined by David Rosen and Aaron Santesso. As these authors observe, Swift's satire recalls the social allegory of More's *Utopia*, although “the organizing system is brutally absent” (12). Swift's utopias, nowhere more clearly than the Flying Island, are disconnected from the transcendental authority that underwrote the vision of humanists like More. In Swift's age, idealized visions (even highly skeptical ones like More's) inevitably disintegrate into a harsh and uncanny “afterlife of allegory” (23). Jonathan Lamb also begins with Swift's reworking of a speculative political tract. In this case he recasts Hobbes's political trope of the “Leviathan,” the state ordered under the authority of a Sovereign, who bestows order, ownership and meaning on the Commonwealth. But as Rosen and Santesso had observed, the higher authority that would legitimize even an absolutist state has vanished in Swift's world. Swift's Grub Street authors claim, like Hobbes's Sovereign, to possess authority over a community of readers, but Swift's society is more like the State of Nature, a chaos of individuals without language, without meaning, without property. Authors, words, and things never transcend their status as insignificant objects.

Ian Higgins's “Killing no murder” traces Swift's satire back to another genre: the political pamphlets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The justification for killing and even genocide that characterized a vicious edge of political writing during the English Revolution and its aftermath became the subject of parodies like Defoe's *The Shortest Way with Dissenters* and numerous parts of Swift's writing, most famously *A Modest Proposal* and the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift, however, raises

the following question: how close can parody come to espousing actual murder and genocide? Higgins follows Claude Rawson in detecting in Swift, and in others like Céline, an implied sympathy for genocide, "a diffused aggression,"² born from Swift's genuine rage against humanity and what Orwell called his "Tory anarchism" (39). "Swift's generalizing imaginative satires," writes Higgins, "sometimes appear to be rehearsals for the invective found in the more dangerously focused polemic" (50). Swift's "literalism," his impatience with "the sanitizing or protective operations of fiction,"³ is also a theme in Harold Love's "Satirical wells from Bath to Ballyspellan." Those who satirized Bath, Tunbridge Wells, and England's spa towns before Swift, such as Lord Rochester and Francis Fanes, often used these places as springboards for mythological fantasies and erotic comedy. Swift brings these settings down to earth, excoriating "the trivial, wholly self-centered life of the London beau monde," and "almost gleefully" joining in with the "engrained heartlessness" (68) that often characterizes this world. While performative and tinged with grief, this heartlessness reveals what Rawson has judged "a certain violence and immoderation of character"⁴ that separates Swift from his more moderate predecessors. Whereas previous ironists like Dryden, as Steven N. Zwicker argues, sought positions of moderation and reconciliation, Swift rejects any middle ground, preferring instead to sharpen those contradictions and conflicts that others sought to resolve. Dryden's effort to balance the merits of the ancients and moderns, for example, is reduced in *The Battle of the Books* into "the clatter of ill-fitting armour and the rustle of self-promotion" (87). To cite Rawson again, Swift confronts the reader with "a sense of irreconcilable opposition between two absolutes."⁵

These themes – reductive realism, aggression, immoderation, the juxtaposition of opposites – reappear in part II, which is devoted to Swift himself. Like Jonathan Lamb, Barbara M. Benedict surveys the clutter of bare, insignificant *things* in Swift's satire, a materiality that aggressively dissolves people into objects, souls into clothes, essences into surfaces. "Through his satirical deflation of the Scriblerian mode of literalistic description," writes Benedict, "[Swift] demonstrates that language can construct and de-construct not only things, but human bodies, and thus identity itself" (105). Sheer "thingness" relates paradoxically to "Swift's shapeshifting," as David Womersley calls a related technique, the blurring and reversal of oppositions, the desiccation of language and identity. Swift's friends had to beware of his own personal habit of showing affection through scorn, friendship through irritable indifference. Surely, there is no more scabrous portrait of the "Fair Sex" than

Corinna in "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed." Yet even if we "spew" at the end of this poem, as Swift expects we will, the poem is not without its edge of sympathetic anger on Corinna's behalf against male brutality and self-righteous moralism. Perhaps Swift even personally identified with Corinna's wounds, as Womersley suggests.

For Swift, like Corinna, thought of himself as a wounded outcast, an exile in Ireland. It was a position that called up some of his most complex and subtle modulations of irony. A central irony of Swift's long sojourn in Dublin, Pat Rogers argues, is that so much of his writing from this period was set in London. What does the predominance of London in much of Swift's major poetry tell us about the Dean of St. Patrick's and the psychology of an exile? Certainly there is a sense of loss and alienation underlying much of Swift's work, as well as a yearning to address a larger audience and larger human themes than the parochial world of Anglo-Ireland seemed to accommodate. The acidity of Swift's satire derives from the reader's keen awareness that it is *personal* – never more so than in "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift," examined in subsequent essays by Howard Erskine-Hill and James McLaverty. In the difference between the early "Bathurst" edition of this poem and the later "Faulkner" edition, Erskine-Hill finds, above all, a profound and self-effacing candor on Swift's part, the product of his vulnerability and alienation as a self-styled exile. It was a frankness too strong for even his friends Pope and William King, who directed Bathurst to censor large portions of the manuscript. What Swift restored in the Faulkner edition were political allegiances dangerously close to Jacobitism, deep and even humiliating reservations about the durability of his literary reputation, and a Christianity that falls curiously short of full piety. Furthermore, Swift's willingness to name names, or at least to leave broad indications about whom he meant, would appear to contradict his own, perhaps ironic, boast in the "Verses" that "he lash'd the Vice but spar'd the Name,"⁶ as McLaverty points out. Both he and Pope (who made a similar claim about himself) pillory their satiric targets with a bluntness curtailed by few considerations besides the possibility of lawsuits. Of the two writers, surprisingly, Swift may have been more constrained by tact and political caution, yet he joined with Pope in creating a satire characterized by unprecedented personal invective.

Pope was the greatest satirist in the immediate orbit of Swift, and his work also opens part III, "Beyond Swift." These essays explore the continuing legacy of the themes examined in parts I and II, the shadow cast by Swift from his own time to the twentieth century. Nicholas Hudson focuses on the formation of the "middle class," an ideological

construct of enduring significance that framed and shaped the work of the Scriblerians. These men generally derived from modest social backgrounds, and Pope's satire is marked by a desire for acceptance by the elite combined with an awareness of his own marginal status as the Catholic son of a linen draper. This awareness gives rise to various rhetoric postures, some aggressive, but generally Pope's satire is characterized not by irreconcilable polarities, as in Swift, but rather by "oscillations of mood."⁷ This is also the phrase that Rawson used to describe Fielding's literary musings on social rank – yet Tom Keymer finds a dark, unsettling irony in Fielding's writing that is in some ways comparable to Swift's. Fielding indulged an "uneasy relish" (207) in gallows humor, the kind of gruesome witticisms sometimes made by judges in condemning criminals to hang, and collected in popular jestbooks. In Fielding, therefore, we find a version of the polarized irony typical of Swift: "On one hand [Fielding] enjoys, and invites readers to enjoy, a comedy of victimization . . . On the other he distances himself, with defensive irony, from the supercilious malice of the bullies and tormentors involved" (207).

Swift's influence can indeed be found in unexpected places, as in the writing of Jane Austen, the subject of essays by Peter Sabor and Jenny Davidson. Austen could share Swift's aggression and irreverence, as Sabor indicates in his examination of her annotations of Goldsmith's *History of England*. In these private notes, Austen unleashes her own satiric impulses, pouring forth pro-Jacobite sympathies mixed with a relish for the disgrace of the Stuarts' enemies, even to the point of ribald innuendo. Rawson's own excellent studies of Austen's novelistic narrative have identified precisely this asperity beneath the decorous formality of Austen's prose. As argued by Jenny Davidson, we can indeed compare the strategies of *Gulliver's Travels* and Austen's novels, for Austen's narrative modulations recall "Swift's remarkably unstable first-person voices" (235). She detects in "Austen's voices" versions of an "oblique mode of operating" (243) and an "indeterminate quality" (244) that keeps the readers of both Swift and Austen unsettled and off balance.

And yet the durable legacy of Swift is less his subtle control of narrative technique than his somber illumination of the human condition. A master of language, he is nonetheless among the most visual of British writers, for his satires typically direct us to see the world in unconventional and often unwelcome ways. There is, not surprisingly, a pictorial analogue for Swift's vision, as explored by Ronald Paulson. Paulson pursues a long-standing theme in Rawson's studies of Swift's satire, the theme of cannibalism, through the visual art of Hogarth, Goya, and Domenico Tiepolo. In