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## “Haranguing upon Texts”: Swift and the Idea of the Book

ABSTRACT. The quotation in the title is taken from Anthony Collins's *Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), cited by Swift in his *Abstract of Mr. Collins's Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), the two together offering an example of Swift's parodic method. This paper examines the “refunctioning” of the model text by Swift and suggests that the Collins text, though not producing one of Swift's most energetic and imaginative parodies, nevertheless posed radical questions about the nature of textual authority which deeply perplexed Swift. Specifically, Collins seems to sabotage the notion of priestly authority in matters of biblical exegesis, stressing the individual reader's right to generate his own meanings. Having previously attacked such notions in *A Tale of a Tub*, Swift sensed in Collins's *Discourse* the full horror of the Bible itself becoming uncanonical and spiritual authority replaced by anarchy. As Dryden had put it in *Religio Laici*: “The *Fly-blown Text* creates a *crawling Brood*; / And turns to *Maggots* what was meant for *Food*”.

That well-known dictum attributed to Plato, “When the State is at War, look to the modes”, may only have been half-serious in relation to music: “nome” is, after all, the name for a law and also for a certain type of musical composition.<sup>1</sup> For Swift, a tone-deaf moralist, the state of the English language in time of war is of greater importance than “Sounds inarticulate”, but nevertheless equally warranted a Platonic authoritarianism in its protection. A significant part of his war-work for the Harley-Bolingbroke Administration was his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), in which Swift warns Harley, before it is too late, of the enemy within: over-refinement, cant terms, and hasty innovations, all of which threaten to do to the English language what has already been done to French. The former is not yet poised on the edge of decay, but needs to be “refined to a certain Standard . . . for ever, or at least till we are invaded, and made a Conquest by some other State”.<sup>2</sup> In *Tatler*, no. 230, this Canute-like opposition to the high tide of linguistic corruption takes on the familiar immediacy of a private war against the dilution of standards by a whole genre of books. Swift here deplores the social elevation of the “Grub-street Book” from its low-priced sheepskin format to the dizzy heights of gilt-edged “*Royal Paper of five or six Hundred Pages*”, and asserts that a bibliography of its last seven years productions would cost one hundred pounds, but would not contain “*ten Lines together of common Grammar, or common Sense*.”<sup>3</sup> Swift thus posits a direct ratio between uncontrolled increases in the numbers of books

<sup>1</sup> *The Laws of Plato*, tr. A. E. Taylor (London, 1934), p. 83; see *Laws*, III, 700.

<sup>2</sup> *PW*, IV, 9 (my italics).

<sup>3</sup> *PW*, II, 174; all quotations from *PW* are incorporated into the text.

and linguistic decay. The chief reason for Swift's concern, both for the language and for literary standards, might be accounted for by a fear of supersession, the prospect of literary obsolescence, the anxiety of loss, the horror of obscurity, and the cancellation of history. The motive for urgent reform, as Swift pointedly infers about a fame-seeking Harley, is that "our best Writings might properly be preserved with Care, and grow into Esteem, and the Authors have a chance for Immortality" (IV, 9). Thus, a Society should be set up, rather like Plato's "Nocturnal Council" (a kind of Standing Committee on Public Safety, one of whose duties it was to receive reports from returning travellers), whose task will be to legislate upon new and old linguistic usage to ensure that

the old Books will yet be always valuable according to their intrinsick Worth, and not thrown aside on Account of unintelligible Words and Phrases, which appear harsh and uncouth, only because they are out of Fashion (IV, 15).

Collapsing spiritual modes are the confederates of political decline. The spiritually modish free-thinker within society may achieve the same result as the Continental war from without. In his Preface to the *Abstract of Collins's Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), but this time with a conscious irony, Swift states the same nexus: "a brief compleat Body of Atheology" is the best way to ensure "the continuance of the War, and the Restoration of the late [Whig] Ministry."<sup>4</sup> For Swift, his own literary culture was not based on the Platonic desideratum of peace, but on the Spartan (and Hobbesian) model of a "state of nature", in which human society is (like George Orwell's Oceania) engaged in an undeclared but nevertheless permanent warfare against its rivals. Not only was it a battle of the books, but it was a combat with no ascertainable end: the *Battle* is indecisive because Swift seems to have seen himself at a crossroads:

If Books and Laws continue to increase as they have done for fifty Years past; I am in some Concern for future Ages, how any Man will be learned, or any Man a Lawyer (IV, 246).

The hack author of *A Tale of a Tub* believes that the universe at present will not offer sufficient new matter to fill a whole volume. But it is Swift who points to our compensation: the substantive vacancy is happily filled by *interpretation* of the already known in every conceivable direction, roughly according to the hack's typology of readership ("the *Superficial*, the *Ignorant*, and the *Learned*"), all readings being "manifestly deducible from the Text" (I, 117–18). The rub here is that in demoting his antagonists to the level of a meteoric and semi-literate transience, Swift (typically) asks the same question of all writing, including his own: he states, in the *Proposal*, that "Those who apply their Studies to preserve the Memory of others, will always have some Concern for their own" (IV, 18). This is how he traps Harley's attention and self-interest, but also how he feeds into the *Proposal* his own anxiety about supersession.

The first problem, acute in a writer obsessed with the critical industry, is the fact of misprision, bleakly admitted by Descartes in his sixth *Discourse*, and with a Swiftian appeal to the present reader:

I have often explained some of my opinions to people of good mind, and who, while I was speaking to them, seemed to understand most distinctly, yet, when they repeated these opinions, I have noticed that they almost always change them in such a way that I could no longer ac-

<sup>4</sup> The full title is, "Mr. C - - - -'s Discourse of Free-Thinking, Put into plain English, by way of Abstract, for the Use of the Poor. By a Friend of the Author." (1713); *PW*, IV, 27–28.

knowledge them as mine; I am glad to take this opportunity to ask future generations never to believe that the things people tell them come from me, unless I myself have published them; and I am not in the least astonished at the extravagances attributed to all those ancient philosophers whose writings we do not have, neither do I judge on that account that their thoughts were extremely unreasonable, seeing that they were the best brains of their time, but only that they have been misrepresented to us.<sup>5</sup>

If even the best minds transmit an erroneous version of an author's text, then the mere critic is like a blind man who, in order to equalise combat with a sighted antagonist, takes him down into a dark cellar. Swift, of course, *assumes* that "people of good mind" are not exempt from misinterpreting. In almost all of his published works, he withholds the authenticating signature and voice of the Cartesian "author". He starts and ends his greatest book with the conviction that the mechanical transmission of his text via the publisher has led to his own unrecognisability: Gulliver says to Sympson, as Homer and Aristotle to their commentators in *Glubbudbrib*, "I do hardly know mine own work". Swift's introductory contacts with his reader, also for this special reason, express a "quarrelsome intimacy".<sup>6</sup> We are confronted at the outset, in the *Tale* and in *Gulliver*, with cautions about accidents which befall textual transmission, consequent reluctance to publish, the general reader's perverse tendency stubbornly to prefer belief over knowledge. The usual blame is fixed on time-serving and mercenary publishers, together with a confident assertion that the *general capacity* of the *individual* reader will, this time, prove the exception to the rule of misinterpretation, even though, in the case of *Gulliver*, there has taken place no "single effect according to mine intentions." Swift's real object, after all, and like Plato again, is victory over the *internal* enemy in the personal self. This must precede, and may lead to, social reform at large.

Swift is the first interpreter of his own text. He gets in first in the game of textual subversion. His chief characters are all monocular, unable to adopt alien categories and alien perspectives; but Swift shows how the anonymous future reader, knowing that history is only a story, must concentrate not on what is affirmed literally, but on what is believed, indirectly.

"Modern History" is the outstanding example of the transmission of lying texts in *Glubbudbrib*; the King of Brobdingnag has only a thousand books in his library, and there are no books at all in the pre-literate Houyhnhnm utopia. Books are a symptom, not the cause of the problem, however, and the full totalitarian implications of the Houyhnhnm civilization awaited their exposure in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Yet Swift's own time provides a startling example of a debate which centres on the questions: Who decides on the validity of textual authority? What is the role of the individual reader in relation to orthodoxy? What is the status of the single book most fundamental to a Christian society?

Following Rabelais, Swift's *Tale* and *Gulliver* provide the most devastating onslaught on the authenticity of The Book in literary history to date. It was, again, the anxiety of supersession that prompted Swift, through Gulliver, to see the *Travels* as only the most recent addition to a mounting vertical stack of travel books and dictionaries which "are

<sup>5</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, tr. F. E. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 84–85.

<sup>6</sup> Claude Rawson's phrase; see *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and our Time* (London and Boston, 1973), p. 12.

sunk into Oblivion by the Weight and Bulk of those who come last, and therefore lie uppermost" (XI, 292). But the paradox is that to choose to escape obscurity by *self*-assertion as author or textual commentator is the sure Swiftian sign of *amor sui*, the Augustinian sin of Pride in one's own unaided perceptions. The folly of authorship is the sin of solipsism, the belief that self is the only thing that really exists. The two themes are central concerns of Swift's reply to Anthony Collins's *Discourse of Free-Thinking*, an exposé of the folly of authorship and hermeneutics, as well as a near-perfect model of a particular kind of parody, which refunctions an earlier work in order to destroy it.

The *Abstract . . . of Mr. Collins's Discourse of Free-Thinking, Put into Plain English . . . for the Use of the Poor* (1713) is neither the best-known nor the most sophisticated of Swift's parodies, but it is central to any discussion of Swift's satirical meta-fiction, whose essential technique is to expose those texts which seek to blur the reader's awareness of a medium, or narrative personality, or identifiable voice, behind the authority of the printed word. Essentially, it is the trick played on Partridge. This self-advertising "cobbler, star-monger, and quack", astrological expert in others' Nativities, is made to predict and then fulfil his own death *in print*. As Bickerstaff implies in the *Tatler*, the man is synonymous with his fiction, so

tho' the Legs and Arms, and whole Body of that Man may still appear and perform their animal Functions; yet since . . . his Art is gone, the Man is gone.<sup>7</sup>

Swift, in this sense, de-constructs the phony *impersonality* of his target texts by dramatising voices, much as parts of the *Tale* are dramatised dialogue, driving back the formal dignity of the printed text into the disordered personality of an individual ego. There is some evidence that Swift habitually read all books in this vocalizing way. In *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, he wrote: "WHEN I am reading a Book, whether wise or silly, it seemeth to me to be alive and talking to me" (IV, 253). What is certain is that, when he came to read the despised free-thinking Collins's *Discourse*, he decided not to expose Collins's voice, but quite literally to stuff Collins's words back down his own throat with almost total silence from himself. In the preface, he carefully points out that his *Abstract* adheres "to the very Words of our Author" (IV, 28), and indeed the central parodic ploy in this piece is ostensibly to condense and simplify: it seems to be not much more than a 22-page précis of its 178-page model. "Model" is perhaps the wrong word, because whereas in most parody the reader is obliged to keep in mind the original model text and to discern the parody as a separate but parallel layer of meaning (the two together forming a new, third entity, a *Gegengesang*, as well as a *Beigesang*<sup>8</sup> simultaneously), in the *Abstract*, Swift's satiric signature is defined wholly through negative means, that is, by what it leaves out. What it leaves in is a highly concentrated version of the original text, a "mimic sophistry".

Swift's ground for dismay at free-thinkers publishing their works is the conviction that a man's conscience is free but that society shall determine the limits on the tolera-

<sup>7</sup> For the authorship of this article, see Herbert Davis's discussion, *PW*, II, xxvii. If not by Swift himself, Davis writes, "there can be little doubt that these early papers contain many hints and suggestions given by Swift to Steele, or directly worked up from Swift's conversation."

<sup>8</sup> I have borrowed these terms, and also some suggestions on the structural nature and function of parody later on in this paper, from Margaret A. Rose's excellent discussion in *Parody/Metafiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction* (London, 1979).

tion of public heterodoxy. Essentially, Collins's book argues, like modern Deconstructionists, that given the overwhelming evidence of disputed meanings on everything to do with Bible among the allegedly expert priests and commentators, the reader must be free to determine all meanings. He writes:

Men may chuse their own Priests, as they chuse their own Lawyers and Physicians. And if so, then one Man will chuse WILLIAM PENN, another DANIEL BURGESS, a third Dr. SWIFT or Dr. ATTERBURY, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

If, at this time, Swift was anxious to demonstrate his orthodoxy, and put as much distance as possible between himself and *A Tale of a Tub*, then for Collins to validate his argument with the example of Swift was a catastrophic misjudgment. Even so, Collins's *Discourse* flickers with a lesser satirist's irony. There is one passage that may have stuck in Swift's memory when he came to write the penultimate paragraph of *Gulliver's Travels*. Collins quotes a story from LeClerc's *Bibliothèque Choisi*:

*A Gentleman ask'd a Proprietor of New-Jersey in America (where there are few Inhabitants besides Quakers) Whether they had any Lawyers among them? Then, Whether they had any Physicians? And lastly, Whether they had any Priests? To all which the Proprietor answer'd in order, No. O happy Country! replies the Gentleman, That must be a Paradise!* (p. 108)

Swift was, I think, both interested in, and angered by, Collins's arguments. More obviously provoking was Collins's nomination of Dr Swift as a possible exchange missionary to Siam to spread the gospel of free-thinking, and also the inclusion of Swift's erstwhile patron, Sir William Temple, as a distinguished example of a free-thinker. The most attractive and therefore the most repellent argument of Collins's book to Swift was its remorseless denial of any priestly authority on interpretation of the book of books, the Bible itself. Collins's argument is essentially about *power*: he argues that the individual reader must be allowed to supersede the priests, who have, like Peter in *A Tale*, collectively reduced the Bible to a *mere* text. He sees the Bible as the only fountain of truth, certainly, but also as "a natural History of the Creation of the whole Universe" (p. 10), a kind of do-it-yourself manual of the arts and sciences, containing "Descriptions of magnificent Buildings, References to Husbandry, Sailing, Physick,

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking, Occasion'd by the Rise and Growth of a Sect Call'd Free-Thinkers* (London, 1713), pp. 110–11. All quotations are from the first edition, and are given in the text. In *Priestcraft in Perfection* (1709), Collins deplores the hieratic monopoly of the means of producing sacred texts. He writes:

If Men may be impos'd on so easily in such a Country as ours, how much more easily may they be imposed on in the more ignorant and dark Corners of the Earth, especially before Printing was invented when all kind of Literature was wholly in the hands of Ecclesiasticks.

If Priests are capable of venturing to forge an Article of Religion, [*i.e.* the twentieth article relating to the Church of England's power to decree Rites and Ceremonies] and Mankind are so stupid as to let them have Success, how can we receive Books of Bulk (such as the *Fathers* and *Councils*) that have gone through their hands, and lay any stress or dependance on their Authority? Ought we not rather to suppose, that where they have had an Opportunity, they have laid out their natural Talents in Alterations, Interpolations and Rasures of those Books, than that they have let us have any thing pure and unmixt as from the Fountain, where it has been in the least degree in their Power? (pp. 46–47)

Collins finally cites Chillingworth in his support: "Traditive Interpretations of Scripture are pretended, but few or none to be found: No Tradition but only of Scripture, can derive it self from the Fountain" (pp. 48–49).

Pharmacy, Mathematicks, and every thing else that can be named" (pp. 10–11). It is difficult to know how much of this is meant ironically. If, to Swift, some of Collins's swans were geese, his own version provides the *substance* of its original model but with a magnificently mischievous twist, implying that, if a consensus on Biblical exegesis is beyond the priest's capability (as Collins says it is), then even the atheistical universal genius might have a problem:

The *Bible*, which contains the Precepts of the Priests Religion, is the most difficult Book in the World to be understood; It requires a thorow Knowledge in Natural, Civil, Ecclesiastical History, Law, Husbandry, Sailing, Physick, Pharmacy, Mathematicks, Metaphysicks, Ethicks, and every thing else that can be named: And every Body who believes it, ought to understand it, and must do so by force of his own *Free Thinking*, without any Guide or Instructor (IV, 29).

What Swift leaves out of his model text might also give us pause. He omits Collins's claim that due to the dishonesty of priestly translations, and as a further example of the treacherous transmission of texts, Phebe (*Romans*, chapter 16) is given as a mere "servant of the church" and not, as in the original, a "*Deaconness of the Church*". There is no need here to elaborate on Swift's views on women. But Swift also misses out a piece of empirical evidence, crucial to Collins's argument, about the invalidity of any single textual authority in scriptural matters. Beneath both of the Swift and Collins texts lay a scholarly but nevertheless heated debate on textual corruption. Collins cites Daniel Whitby, Precentor of Salisbury Cathedral, who gravely and anxiously reported that the scholarly research of Dr John Mill had shown there to be more than 30,000 textual variants in the New Testament (p. 88). Swift omits the authors but repeats the reported remarks of Dr Whitby on Mill, that "*nothing certain can be expected from Books, where there are various Readings in every Verse, and almost in every part of every Verse*".<sup>10</sup>

Louis Landa maintains that the "political element" involved in Swift identifying Whiggism and atheism in the *Abstract* is "tenuous and ineffective" (IV, xviii). In a narrow, partisan sense this is undoubtedly true, but I think Swift saw in Collins's *Discourse* more than an excuse for a cheap opportunist joke against the Whig Junto, or a

<sup>10</sup> Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 89. Collins refers to Daniel Whitby's indictment of John Mill's edition of the New Testament in Greek (1707) in the former's *Examen Variantium Lectionum J. Millii . . . in Novum Testamentum* (1709). Collins's *Discourse* became the subject of Benjamin Ibbot's sixteen Boyle Lectures (1713 and 1714), and was answered by Benjamin Hoadly's *Queries* (1713), Daniel Williams's *Letter to the Author* (1713), Whiston's *Reflexions . . . on a Discourse* (1713), and by some anonymous controvertists, including "a Gentleman at Cambridge", who wrote in *An Answer to the Discourse* (1713) that Collins's radical hermeneutics could also be applied to the interpretations given by judges and lawyers to the written law and acts of parliament. Bentley's pseudonymous *Remarks upon a Late Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), a "species of hectoring eloquence" asserts that a "knowing and serious Reader", as opposed to "a Knave or a Fool" will distinguish the truths of Christianity no matter how many textual variants there may be. For a full discussion, see Adam Fox, *John Mill and Richard Bentley: A Study of the Textual Criticism of the New Testament, 1675–1729* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 105–15, 160–61. Irvin Ehrenpreis (*Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age, II: Dr Swift* [London, 1967], 588), remarks that Swift's *Abstract* "sounds hollow and mechanical without the tone of a besieged prophet to give it energy." But Whitby, at least, was frightened that Mill's work "seems quite plainly to render the standard of faith insecure, or at best to give others too good a handle for doubting", so much so that his Appendix is in Latin (for the learned), whereas his notes on the New Testament are in English (Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 106). For schematic analyses of Swift's *Abstract*, see John M. Bullitt, *Jonathan Swift and the Anatomy of Satire* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), pp. 97–102, and Martin Price, *Swift's Rhetorical Art* (New Haven and London, 1953), pp. 60–62.



method of demonstrating his own orthodoxy. Collins's *Discourse* was not a harmless piece of controversy but an example, albeit intellectually inept, of radical textual, and therefore by implication, social and political iconoclasm directed against the proper power of established textual and spiritual authority. There is a close and nervous similarity between what Swift sees in Collins and what some readers saw Swift doing in the religious satire in *A Tale of a Tub*. Bentley was the one to expose Collins's shaky scholarship, but Swift was Collins's most acute *reader* because he had been there before Collins.

Not only were the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer models of English prose for Swift, but the Bible contained truths which were beyond human meddling, and were valuable because of their inexplicable nature, as he sternly reminded the addressee of his *Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Enter'd into Holy Orders* (1720):

I DO not find that you are any where directed in the Canons, or Articles, to attempt explaining the Mysteries of the Christian Religion. And, indeed, since Providence intended there should be Mysteries; I do not see how it can be agreeable to *Piety, Orthodoxy, or good Sense*, to go about such a Work (IX, 77).

Swift's enemies preferred to see his satire on textual misinterpretation in *A Tale of a Tub* as a subversion of all religion, Anglicanism not excepted. The truth was that orthodoxy in problematical matters of Biblical interpretation meant not speculating at all about its Mysteries, for no *permission* had been granted to do so and no human was endowed with such gifts. In everything else, the thrust of Swift's satiric imagination produces a text in close agreement with Collins's overt scepticism. Stylistically, the two are sometimes unnervingly close in their radical rhetoric. It would be difficult to tell, in isolation, which of the two following passages, the first from Collins's book, the second from Swift's *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*, is the more ironical, or even ironical at all:

*Where are there more Assignations made, more Pimping, more Adulterys concerted, than by Priests in their Churches and at their Altars? And there is more flaming Lust perpetrated in Religious Houses than in the publick Stews* (pp. 164–65).

Are fewer Claps got upon *Sundays* than other Days? Is not that the chief Day for Traders to sum up the Accounts of the Week; and for Lawyers to prepare their Briefs? But I would fain know how it can be pretended, that the Churches are misapplied. Where are more Appointments and Rendezvouzes of Gallantry? (II, 31)

Whereas Swift may publicly argue the *civil* necessity for authority of a specialised sort as an interpretative guide in spiritual matters and the latter reject all external authority on the ground that there is no consensus amongst the cognoscenti, the consistent appeal in Swift's satire is also to the *individual* reader alone. Collins does not, of course, explain why the individual perception need not also be as perverse and inconsistent as the authoritarian method, nor how society could function if everyone chose their own truths. In his major satires, Swift shows nothing else.

The paradox we are left with in Swift's argument is hardly a surprising one, but it is this: it is *because* all language and therefore all texts are prone to deconstruct themselves into ambiguity, obscurity, multiple interpretations, egomaniacal substitutions for the world as it exists, false images of reality, that the law of the unreliable reader's individual response to a text must, in the single case of the Bible, be corrected, improved and ascertained by leaving it to the expert Interpreter. As a Whig in state politics, but a Tory

in Church politics, Swift's position could hardly be more aptly illustrated. Collins's *Discourse* is seen to anarchize the Bible in all seriousness, whereas Swift had *intended* in *A Tale of a Tub* to show that free-thinking and hermeneutic individualism must lead to madness and a comic anarchy in both the state and the individual. Whereas Collins will spend nearly five pages exposing the absurd inconsistencies of the natural, figurative, allegorical and anagogical modes of Biblical interpretation, Swift dismisses the errors in six lines. Swift prefers dogma: he *adds* a clause to Collins's discussion on Original Sin ("for if Men are not liable to be damn'd for *Adam's Sin*, the Christian Religion is an Imposture"), to remind us that there is, after all, a limit beyond which Swift's willingness to speak as *advocatus diaboli* will not trespass, and a point at which we must simply accept doctrine as doctrine.

In Swift's work, it is only the madman who asserts that what is written in some way reflects the universe outside the book. The minute circumstantial realism of *Gulliver's Travels* sabotages such an assumption and simply enforces the referential nature of the text as parody, refunctioning pre-existent literary texts. There is for Swift a profound and ineradicable suspicion of all printed discourse: writing is warfare carried out by other means and "*Ink* is the great missive Weapon, in all Battels of the *Learned*" (I, 143). The *truth* is not at issue in the *Modern* world at all. In the second paragraph of *The Battle of the Books*, Swift describes their pseudo-war as a self-generating meta-fiction:

As the *Grecians*, after an Engagement, when they could not *agree* about the Victory, were wont to set up Trophies on both sides, the beaten Party being content to be at the same Expence, to keep it self in Countenance (A laudable and antient Custom, happily reviv'd of late, in the Art of War) so the *Learned*, after a sharp and bloody Dispute, do on both sides hang out their Trophies too, which-ever comes by the worst. These Trophies have largely inscribed on them the Merits of the Cause; a full impartial Account of such a Battel, and how the Victory fell clearly to the Party that set them up. They are known to the World under several Names; As, *Disputes, Arguments, Rejoynders, Brief Considerations, Answers, Replies, Remarks, Reflexions, Objections, Confutations* . . . *Books of Controversie* (I, 144).

Radical Controvertists such as Collins are not worth answering. Thus, the awkward questions he poses about textual authoritarianism are, as it were, reduced to the status of mere words in books, filed away in the cemetery of a modern library, containing nothing but printed emblems of their authors' individual pride.

Swift's hack author in *A Tale* sees himself as "Secretary of the Universe", and the moments of greatest authorial confidence in *A Tale* are those in which ideas of the world are seen as in some way "containable" by the text. Such moments may immediately crumble away because of a gap in the manuscript. For Swift, Art is only one thing, a way of deepening the paradox in man between the perception of his mind and the urging of his senses. Swift's own role, as parodist, is to remind his literary victims that outside their little *parole* is a very large *langue* in which they may drown. So there is nothing more absurd than reading the claims of Swift's various *personae* to priority or posterity or to the final word, in a fictional world not even of their own creation. Every sentence they utter is liable to Swift's eventual deconstruction or subversion.

Swift was prone to joke about Prince Posterity. But this is not to say that futurity was of no concern to him. The reverse is true, and this also provides a more than fortuitous link between the *Proposal* and the *Abstract of Collins's Discourse*. The former is made in order to enable the best writers to go on speaking to Posterity, and enlarging the canon

of literature; the second provides the antitype, an example of the necessary process of censorship and a justification for Swift's efforts, that is, the horrific prospect of The Book making no sense to its best readers (those of "good mind" in Descartes's phrase), its reference to the real world having been destroyed, and having become un-canonical. If Collins says that the effect of priests' textual arguments has been to reveal the Bible as *mere* text, the subject of hermeneutic games-playing careerists, then Scripture itself has become truly "Modernised", disintegrated into a plurality of conflicting meanings through allegorisation, and becoming, literally, a fiction of the mind. Each of Swift's tracts is concerned with the problem of books losing their meanings. In the *Proposal*, meaning and therefore literature will be lost if rapid linguistic change allows massive redundancy. Past meanings will become irrecoverable, and the future will have its memory destroyed in advance. The Moderns will win. In the *Proposal*, Swift wants a Society to legislate for the future, and for the sake of the present. In the *Abstract* and in all of his parodies, Swift acts a role similar to the one he proposed for Isaac Bickerstaff, that of textual censor, or, in the words of *The Examiner* on Collins's *Discourse*, stripping "that adventurous Piece of its Disguises, and [leaving] it naked and exposed in full Light".<sup>11</sup>

Most of what we call literature has designs on futurity, and parody, once one of its purlieus, but now, after the Russian Formalists, one of its central avenues, is no exception. Parody assumes that what was regarded as final can only be regarded as provisional. It opens debates with other texts by apparently foreclosing on their intended meanings. It is a refunctioning of the known into the problematical arena of textual analysis and authorship. A recent study defines this double function of parody, "in its specific form, the critical quotation of pre-formed literary language with comic effect, and . . . its general form, the meta-fictional 'mirror' to the process of composing and receiving literary texts".<sup>12</sup> *A Tale of a Tub* belongs to the latter category. It analyses the nature of writing from within the fiction itself, as *Tristram Shandy* was to do; whereas *A Modest Proposal* largely refunctions a certain type of economic discourse in order to render it grotesquely and comically inappropriate and cruel to the specific case of Ireland. Both may be seen as products of authorship whose validity is now limited to the act of writing and no further. Neither is allowed its fundamental purpose, referentiality to the practical concerns of the real world. Both are dismissed as, quite literally, pieces of writing: the one through means of excessive and eventually illusory faith in the idea of a literary form "containing" meaning — witness the crucial gaps in the manuscript — the other through a disassociation of its mathematical elegance and the intractable moral horror of its subject. It is no cause for wonder that Swift parodied the form of the novel twenty years before it appeared. "The world of print was made to order for Swift", as Bertrand H. Bronson has remarked,<sup>13</sup> and perhaps no other writer is so keenly aware of the fictions we invent to take the place of reality, of our desire to substitute beliefs for knowledge, and particularly of our pride in authorship, the creation whether by writer or reader of fictional worlds.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Herbert Davis; *PW*, IV, xvi (from *The Examiner*, January 19–23, 1712–13). For the Bickerstaff reference ("*Index Expurgatorius*"), see *PW*, II, 176.

<sup>12</sup> Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> "The Writer", *Man versus Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Six Points of View*, ed. James L. Clifford (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 117–18.

Swift's own texts may be made up from the destruction of other texts, and there seems no doubt that this is how he saw the state of Modern literary culture. His work is therefore a symptom and an imitation of the Modern method, but it is also a signal of what it suppresses, not simply the classical Humanist tradition, but of the *moral* reference to the world as is, which that tradition once was said to provide. When Swift refunctions texts, he not only re-constitutes *all* of the conditions of literary discourse, the author, the world of his text, the world outside the text, and the reader's role, but also re-arranges their relationship with each other. His parodies reinstate the obligation to exercise one's own critical skills as conscious readers of texts in the way Proust described:

Every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument, which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived for himself.<sup>14</sup>

But Proust was not a parodist, and the parodist, the arch-misreader of another's fictions, is particularly concerned with "the limits of the fictional world and with the related problem of the reception of texts by the reader".<sup>15</sup> Swift gives us not one optical instrument, but three, the model text, the parody of that text, and the combination of the two set in a third text. Thus, in this case, Swift is both reader of the first text, author of the second, and finally the seeing eye looking at us interpreting the result: "*SATYR is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own*" (I,140). What this means is that when the outside world of non-literary realities breaks into Swift's texts, which normally establish a set of strong *generic* expectations through the literary *Kinds*, it does so in an ugly, shocking but nevertheless *recognisable* form, shattering the mirror, which is no more than tinsel and refracted angles of literary discourse: the carcass of the beau; the body of the flayed whore; the prostitute "For whom no shepherd sighs in vain" returning at the midnight hour; the Dublin poor, of whom "it is very well known, that they are every Day *dying*, and *rotting*, by *Cold* and *Famine*, and *Filth*, and *Vermis*, as fast as can be reasonably expected"; the giant breast of the Brobdingnagian maid; the animal copulation of the degenerate anthropoid Yahoos, in whom Gulliver momentarily and traumatically recognises an appalling consanguinity.

These, and many other "intrusions" indicate that Swift's referential literary approach posits a world inimical to simple textualising and also a reality which no theories of interpretation can contain. Their presence in *his* texts is precisely a measure of the ludicrously text-bound constraints of his targets, Collins included. It is for this reason that Swift, I think, plays games with the authorship of books, including his own. He delights to reveal the hubris and the artifice of literary authorship for the same reason he normally suppresses his own. He folds the allegedly impartial observer into his own discourse in order to trap him with his own, ego-bound *unrepresentativeness* and alienation. The outstanding example of this is Gulliver, but it is also true of the Bickerstaff hoax, the projector in *A Modest Proposal*, and of the hack author in *A Tale*, who at the end of "A Digression concerning Madness" sacrifices whatever slim authority he has as narrator in trying to prove his authorship, or *auctoritas*:

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction* (London, 1971), p. 24; see also pp. 149–54 for a discussion of *A Tale*.

<sup>15</sup> Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

That even, I my self, the Author of these momentous Truths, am a Person, whose Imaginations are hardmouth'd, and exceedingly disposed to run away with his *Reason*, which I have observed from long Experience, to be a very light Rider, and easily shook off; upon which Account, my Friends will never trust me alone, without a solemn Promise, to vent my Speculations in this, or the like manner, for the universal Benefit of Human kind; which, perhaps, the gentle, courteous, and candid Reader, brimful of that *Modern Charity and Tenderness*, usually annexed to his *Office*, will be very hardly persuaded to believe (I, 114).

Thus does Swift trap Gulliver after his encounter with the Lagadian professor who has invented a machine to write books "in Philosophy, Poetry, Politicks, Law, Mathematicks and Theology, without the least Assistance from Genius or Study" (XI, 182–84): he promises that on his return to England, he will personally guarantee the inventor's copyright, the official recognition of individual authorship and ownership, and of course proprietorial lunacy. Like a satirical version of Theseus, Swift re-locates the "aery nothing" of his targets' work and gives it a new "local habitation and a place" (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, i, 7) in the world of solipsistic fiction. Swift was not against fiction per se, but he preferred a single chapter of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to a "long Discourse" (IX, 77) on the attributes of the mind, and being a master of fiction himself made it easier for him (if not the odd Irish bishop) to discern as clearly as any modern-day deconstructionist critic the illusions of verbal discourse, as well as the pride involved in its perpetration on an audience. But in particular, Swift never ceased to regard with suspicion the pretensions of the learned book as a guide to the most fundamental questions of belief. His proposed antidote to the disease caught from hieratic ivory towers is demotic exposure, as at the end of *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*. In his *Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Enter'd into Holy Orders* (1721), Swift pointedly remarks to the fresh graduate from college learning:

I hope you will think it proper to pass your Quarentine among some of the desolate Churches five Miles round this Town, where you may at least learn to *read* and to *speak* (IX, 64).