

Language at Work in Jonathan Swift

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Language is not a simple bridge from thought to meaning: it has a constitutive function of its own, and its effects should be considered along with the ideas it conveys. The language of Jonathan Swift illustrates this point exactly, because of its mode of operation. In the Swiftian text language is always at work; involved in processes of questioning and reshaping its contents, and our reading of them. Swift's writing enacts, as much as it states, and the reader must be attentive to this process, if the full impact of the texts is to be measured. My project in this thesis is to analyse how language operates in the major works, and the outcome of its activity. In each chapter, I consider how relevant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ideas of language impact on, and are affected by, Swift's language; as well as his amenability to current ideas in theories of language. First, seventeenth-century attempts to reform and purge language are measured against Swift's handful of explicit statements on the subject; and although there are points of convergence, I conclude that it is more productive to study Swift's less conventional experiments with language than to assemble a fitful philosophy from a few comments. The remaining chapters engage in this project. I assess *A Tale of a Tub* in relation to ideas of 'the book'—an opportunity to consider the complex interactions between authors, texts, and readers from the vantage point of an ideal of certainty and totality. The poetry is measured against the Augustan separation of 'sound' from 'sense', which founders when confronted with Swift's contemplation of the poetic object through excessive concentration on the body and its products. And *Gulliver's Travels* represents an engagement with issues of fictionality and context, and how these affect the dispensation of meaning. Throughout these discussions, my intention is to establish that Swift's writing survives, and its future is assured, because of its interactive, interrogatory, self-reflective nature.

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Abbreviations Used in the Text

- C *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963-1965.
- P *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 2nd edn, 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.
- PW *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis et al., 14 vols. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939-68.
- TT *A Tale of a Tub, To which is added the Battle of the Books and the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith, 2nd edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.
- Ehrenpreis Irvin Ehrenpreis. *Swift: The Man, His Works, The Age*, 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962-83.

Introduction

Whoever is a Master of Language, and hath a Mind full of Ideas, will
be apt in speaking to hesitate upon the Choice of both.

Jonathan Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects* (PW, IV: 244)

The language of Jonathan Swift presents a unique challenge to its readers. Although his prose style is lucid and often spare, and his poetry direct and fluent, his words always express more than simple meaning. They are charged with dimensions and effects that I do not find in other writers of the same period, whether in prose or verse. This thesis addresses the special qualities of Swift's language, and tries to determine, in various texts, the components of his singularity.

The most economical means I have of describing Swift's language is that it is always at work. There is never a simple phrase or sentence in Swift because each one is constantly asking questions, seeking direction, as regards both its subject matter and itself. While other writers of the period may share this characteristic in some respects, in Swift it governs every movement and observation in his texts. Before considering the meaning of what he writes, we have to consider the way he writes, and the influence of his language—the difference from other writers is that he makes this the ground or constituency of his work; and it is not simply a case of mastering this aspect of his discourse and then moving on to the prize of recuperation. Language never

stops work in Swift, and the reader cannot either. Each discovery or observation must be referred to the other facets of the text.

Swift's attitude to his writing is filled with contradiction. Unlike Pope, who finds the reward of a career in it, Swift is largely a reactive writer, producing political pamphlets and occasional satires as easily as he produces more general works. There is not the same sense of project behind *Gulliver's Travels* as there is behind *The Dunciad*, although each is seen as the culmination of its author's output. And, as the 'Thoughts on Various Subjects' show, Swift exhibits a harsh tone of censorship, both of himself and of others. A writer who seems hesitant to commit himself to words is bound to produce a complex, self-interrogatory language.

I study this language in the major areas of his work; the early prose narrative *A Tale of a Tub*, the poems, and the fictional work *Gulliver's Travels*. Each of these sees language at work in different ways. In the *Tale*, effusiveness, hyperbole, and narratorial slippage produce a radically unstable text, which unseats certainty, threatens madness, and undermines the power of words to work more thoroughly than any of Swift's other works. It is a text that arises from other aspects of Swift yet is demonstrably unlike them. The poems pose questions about the representation of the human subject, often in a physical, even repugnant manner. They are concerned with the power of language to convey life, and with the particular restrictiveness yet allusiveness of poetic language. *Gulliver's Travels* dwells on the fictionality of language, and is particularly receptive to the controlling power of textuality, with its

frames of narrative and its summoning of discourses like travel writing. Within these, it debates the use of language in society, describing the mundane by way of the fantastic. In all the works, language is central, not merely another theme to be studied. This is what gives them their sophistication, and their currency for today.

Some historical groundwork is needed, however, for Swift's focus to make sense. I discuss Restoration and eighteenth-century attitudes towards language in the first chapter, as these have a relevance to Swift's modes of writing. The period in question assumes that the individual should be able to exercise control over language, to effect efficient and harmonious communication with others. It is characterised by pride and censoriousness; claiming, in universal language schemes and other projects, that it can right language, whilst ruthlessly castigating its wrongs. Swift subscribes to an extent to this philosophy—works like *A Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue* and *A Letter to a Young Gentleman lately entered into Holy Orders* abound in stern advice and commonsense didacticism. But if we see the guiding force behind Swift's writing as language at work, then these positions must yield to that. In themselves, they are pieces produced to answer a particular occasion or stake out a position. Their political motives must be acknowledged. In the larger context, they are outweighed by those works of Swift which do not openly incite or provoke, yet which are about language nonetheless. Those texts which have most to say about the actual status and progress of language do it by enactment, not statement. The most fruitful study of Swift's language must be immanent, not extrinsic, since this respects the construction of his texts. As must be expected from so wary a writer, certainty and finitude are not assumed; they must either be extorted from the

text by partial reading, or foregone in favour of a more rounded discussion of language. This second option is the one I pursue.

Recently, critics have become aware of this fundamental aspect of Swift, in response to criticism's increased self-questioning, and linguistic preoccupations. I will consider some of the material concerning Swift next. In general, my thesis is indebted to ideas and movements in modern literary theory, as befits any present study that centres on language. Some critics and schools of thought are interwoven into my argument. The chapter on *A Tale of a Tub* works with the language theories of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot. In the chapter on *Gulliver's Travels*, I make use of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, which has been taken up by deconstruction. Others are alluded to, if not brought into the argument so fully. Feminism is relevant to the poetry, reader-response theory to the *Tale* and elsewhere. These ideas are introduced, not as solutions to problems, but because the text seems receptive to their influences and stratagems at certain points. They illuminate rather than explicate. And neither constructive literary theory, nor Swift's work itself, would countenance the grafting of one discourse onto another to produce a resolution, even while both recognise the imperative that reading produces in this direction. It is because of the nature of Swift's text, its allusiveness, and also its active participation and self-reflection, that theory is of relevance.

The language of Swift is now the focus of welcome critical attention, partly in response to these theoretical movements, partly as a means of trying to make sense of Swift in ways that differ from our critical predecessors. He has attracted many labels—the 'hard' and 'soft' Swift of the voyage to the Houyhnhnms, 'masks', 'entrapment'—it seems that his style stokes a strong desire for the comfort of categories. Fortunately, the language-based criticism

is less restrictive, and almost all critics resist the urge to fasten a reductive single word to his multivalency. It is important to look at some of this criticism to determine the direction being taken, how my work is similar, and also its points of difference.

In a recent full-length study, Ann Cline Kelly provides a detailed analysis of the many aspects of Swift's language, from his proposal for an Academy along the French lines, through his dictates on style and conversation, to his word-games, obscenity, and practical jokes. Her task is to state the centrality and importance of language in Swift, which she sees as having its origin in his personal desire to transmit history through it. He is thus opposed to the scientific study of language as an object (this conflates words with things), and equally with the construing of words as outer extensions of ideas: 'Rejecting both of these ideas, Swift believed language was a historical entity that transcended both materialism and individualism'. And, 'Swift would reject the taxonomic systems of the seventeenth century as ad hoc, artificial constructs at variance with his idea of language as a fabric continually woven through time'.¹ Kelly's promotion of Swift's difference rests on this understanding of him, a perception echoed by Tony Crowley, who argues that 'language reform for Swift is an attempt to influence the direction of historical development'.² Both critics cite the section in *A Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue*, where Swift gives a highly slanted account of the decay of English from its golden age in the reign of Elizabeth I, to its corruptions in the Interregnum and Restoration periods (PW, IV: 9-10). Swift

¹ Ann Cline Kelly, *Swift and the English Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), p. 82.

² 'The Return of the Repressed: Saussure and Swift on Language and History', in George Wolf (ed.), *New Departures in Linguistics* (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 236-249 (p. 244).

is perceived as a writer trying to promulgate his version of history through language, and using language to privilege a section of society and its values. This is indeed part of his project, although his constant reworking of *The History of the Four Last Years of the Queen* and his eventual failure to publish it before his death, denote the difficulty of such an enterprise.

The more explicitly political influences that shape Swift's language are established by Martin J. Croghan, arguing that 'the eighteenth century, in particular, was the century in England when the focus of linguistics was political and not primarily philological, and Swift's approach to language reflects this spirit'.³ Carole Fabricant endorses such a view, holding that 'Swiftian texts, while often foregrounding their radical implication in the vagaries of language, insist on their inextricable ties to a world beyond text, and on their existence within particular institutional frameworks'.⁴ Critics with a historicist or political perspective alike are united in seeking a contemporary influence that accounts for Swift's singularity. They differ from previous critics in looking for a radical rather than a conservative solution. But it is the fact that, ultimately, they reach the same conclusion by an alternative route that marks their divergence from my interests. Criticism is still laying emphasis on finding the authentic voice of 'Swift' in the works, or of piecing together a coherent philosophy formed by him, and deducible from the writings. He is seen as fairly intentionalist in his language use, with a certain political or social agenda to convey. For example, Kelly discusses the *Argument against abolishing Christianity* in the following terms: 'Although

³ 'Savage Indignation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language and Semiotics in Jonathan Swift', *Swift Studies: The Annual of the Ehrenpreis Center*, 5 (1990), 11-37 (16).

⁴ 'The Battle of the Ancients and (Post) Moderns: Rethinking Swift through Contemporary Perspectives', *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 32 (1991), 256-73 (260).

the *Argument* is laden with irony, this particular passage [on the definition of words] accurately reflects Swift's belief that modifying language cannot modify the nature of man or things'.⁵ Another critic emphasises Swift's 'word-consciousness', and confidently asserts that 'Swift's awareness of the tenuous nature of the word-thing relationship and his anxiety about its consequences draw from him a variety of responses: he prescribes the proper relationship, proscribes abuses of it, and employs a number of strategies to ensure its propriety in his own prose'.⁶ To ascribe properties of argumentation, coherence and open criticism to Swift is a practice that I find optimistic, and one I cannot easily share in. We may read his works for intention, but whether we find it is a different matter, and I cannot share such confidence in Swift's lucidity. In fairness to Kelly, she admits a degree of licence into her argument: 'although in his explicit statements on style Swift emphasizes the importance of general intelligibility, he nonetheless savored the rich and strange realm of verbal enthusiasm. His sallies into bizarre frames of reference can be read ironically as examples of what not to do. But often norms in Swiftian works are elusive, as reams of scholarly prose demonstrate'.⁷ Perhaps this should lead to the conclusion that norms are neither discoverable nor desirable. I consider that much of the certainty proposed by critics of Swift is a reaction to the indeterminate nature of his writing, and critics who seek to catalogue are more interesting for how they function, and for what they omit, than for their final conclusions. Nevertheless the difficulty remains. As an understandable response to multiplicity, and to statements that often seem contradictory, sometimes at the

⁵ Kelly, p.79.

⁶ Dan Doll, 'The Word and the Thing in Swift's Prose', *SECC*, 15 (1986), 199-210 (202).

⁷ Kelly, pp. 106-7.

same moment, many critics opt for determinacy too early, hoping to round up rogue language along the way.

There is other work, however, which is more alert to such controversies. Frank Palmeri appears to account for Kelly's dilemma in his picture of 'the divided Swift'. Some of Swift's works seem to give clear indications of a direction or statement of intent, while others embrace freeplay, or frustrate recuperation. As Palmeri explains: 'The contradictions within Swift's writings might indicate not only conflicts between parts of Swift but, perhaps more significantly, contrasts between kinds of discourse and the understandings they express—one centralizing, authoritarian, and monological, another centrifugal, skeptical, and dialogical'. If this seems almost as formulaic as some of the statements of more traditionalist critics, he goes on to qualify it:

Instead of giving greater weight to the writings that express an official perspective on the world in a single voice, one could argue that the parodic satires embody both an eccentric, unauthorized perspective and, by their very nature, the perspective of a traditional, established world from which that unauthorized view is parodied. The parodic satires then would be understood not so much as the inverted opposite of the official discourse but as more capacious expressions of thought and feeling than the single-voiced, more nearly single-dimensional works.⁸

I would go further even than Palmeri, in arguing that the differences between the monologic and pluralistic works are not always clear, that Swift's prose often overlaps conventional boundaries, and that very often the distinction between the work and its critique is blurred. What Palmeri sees as a confusion between discrete units of writing I see as more permeable, and less distinct.

⁸ Frank Palmeri, 'Introduction: The Divided Swift', *Critical Essays on Jonathan Swift* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), p. 7.

But Palmeri's basic point holds good. There is a tendency amongst critics to shave off the works that complicate their understandings, or to acknowledge them in passing as difficult, but less to the point than 'establishment' texts.

My interest in Swift's language lies in a different direction, which might best be explained by considering a statement of Fabricant's:

Swift's texts keep reminding us that writing is always, inescapably, about the act of writing itself, but they insist that this act is neither a solipsistic nor a purely linguistic one, that writing is also, indeed, more precisely, about the material conditions in which texts are written and read.⁹

I also argue for the importance of the 'material conditions' of the transmission of words, but I do not recognise the distinction between this and a fascination with the act of writing, nor do I think the fascination is a solipsistic one. Swift's language is about the confusion of categories, its constant motion undermines the separatism that criticism installs. But also, the debate about the material conditions for language is conducted at the same time as its self-fascination is revealed. In elucidating the work of Jacques Derrida, Jonathan Culler makes a point about the desire to distinguish history (or politics, or any other context) from language, which is relevant here:

Those who invoke history adduce it as a ground that determines meaning, and since Derrida does not use it in this way, they see him as a 'textualist' who denies that historical contexts determine meaning. But in its critique of philosophy and of other essentializing theories, deconstruction emphasizes that discourse, meaning, and reading are historical through and through, produced in processes of contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization.¹⁰

⁹ Fabricant, p. 263.

¹⁰ *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 128.

Critics who try to impart significance to texts purely from localised historical issues do not recognise sufficiently the larger basis of language and textuality that informs all discourse. This is not an ahistoricist formalism, but rather a deeper engagement with the relations of text and history. And Swift's texts are highly receptive to such contemplation.

Edward Said's essay, 'Swift's Tory Anarchy' is perhaps the best critical demonstration of all these issues in Swift. For Said, eighteenth-century Toryism has a textual facet, an inbuilt conflict between order and anarchy, and Swift's is the writing that embodies this most deeply: 'capable of great multiplication, going from the difference between waste and conservation, absence and presence, obscenity and decorum, to the negative and positive dimensions of language, imagination, unity, and identity'.¹¹ Swift's work is important because it challenges a critical presumption: 'the critic is concerned with the interpretations of a text, but not with asking if the text is a text, or with ascertaining the discursive conditions by which a so-called text may, or may not, have become a text'.¹² So Swift's works act in a manner that calls the critical process into question. The critic is faced with two possibilities; either to ignore the question of the text and adopt conventional critical methods, or to engage with the text *as* text, and endanger the profession of criticism. Of the two, the second seems the valid option,

¹¹ Edward W. Said, 'Swift's Tory Anarchy', in *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 54-71 (p. 55).

¹² *Ibid.*

because, although it presents a risk, it also respects the construction of the text.

Said also considers that ‘the contrast between an event and writing as a substitute for an event is an important working opposition in Swift’.¹³ I now want to consider this contention in relation to an early production of Swift’s, his most famous practical joke, *The Bickerstaff Papers*. This is an invaluable set of texts for demonstrating the outcomes of language at work in Swift, and it introduces many of the ideas that I cover in later chapters. In making an example of Partridge, Swift achieves, through language, many effects beyond his original intention of indulging in a light practical joke.

The Example of Partridge

John Partridge is the most irritating of all the astrologers of the period. He interlards the predictions in his almanac, *Merlinus Liberatus*, with Whiggish poems, braggadocio, and insults to his rivals, Gadbury and Coley. Swift decides to exact a revenge on the former shoemaker by publishing a few satirical forecasts of his own. Thus appears ‘Predictions for the Year 1708’, introducing the character of Isaac Bickerstaff, who, alarmed by the ‘gross Abuse of Astrology in this Kingdom’ promises to publish ‘a large and rational Defence of this Art’ (PW, II: 141-2). In the meantime, however, he offers a

¹³ Ibid., p. 58.

few predictions for the current year, the first of which ('but a Trifle') is as follows:

It relates to *Partridge* the Almanack-Maker. I have consulted the Star of his Nativity by my own Rules; and find he will infallibly die upon the 29th of *March* next, about eleven at Night, of a raging Fever: Therefore I advise him to consider of it, and settle his Affairs in Time. (145)

The response to this squib is disproportionate to its original intent. The astrologer becomes a subject of public fascination and ridicule, with others taking up the discussion. Partridge himself even becomes embroiled in the matter, having to publish his own response to inform the world he is very much alive. The name 'Bickerstaff' is adopted by others, to pass comment on the affair, and to add to the confusion. It finally becomes immortalised in 1709, when Steele adopts it to launch his *Spectator* newspaper.

From a simple prank, *The Bickerstaff Papers* extends to raise many issues about the ownership of language, and the relations between author, reader, and text. It exists, not as a discrete unit, but as many works, from many different hands, challenging the premise that writing is the sole property of its author, and, as a result, thwarting the safe delivery of intention. Swift himself adds to the confusion, by appearing in his own works in other guises to pass comment on his handiwork. In 'An Answer to Bickerstaff', the tone is calculatedly phlegmatic, leading the reader towards certain objectives. The 'Person of Quality' observes that 'For a piece so carelessly written, the observations upon astrology are reasonable and pertinent, the remarks just' (196); and he invites Partridge to question the horoscope which foretells his

death, thus encouraging both the target of satire and other readers and writers into the argument.¹⁴ To unfurl his discovery of Partridge's 'death', Swift adopts another disguise, that of an employee of the revenue, writing in response to a command from a 'Person of Honour' for further investigation. This enables him again to descant on his own creation, taking Bickerstaff to task for a miscalculation of about four hours in his prediction. Although it may appear that Swift is the hand that guides all these manoeuvres, and that the dispensation of meaning is ultimately his, the behaviour of the works dislodges this security. Texts become the property of no individual, rather, their meanings are dispersed through frames of narrative, and beyond the original simple relation of author to text to reader into a more fluid formation. Swift the author acts as the initiator of the action, but because of his manner of writing, putting language to work beyond his original desire, and allowing its free distribution, he does not retain any lasting control over his work.

This state of affairs reaches a climax when Partridge, the object of the satire, becomes an author himself, intervening in the debate to announce his continuing existence. This is a major satiric coup for Swift, but the texts' logic is such that Partridge has little choice. Being pronounced dead in writing, he must use writing to regain his 'life'. Happily for Swift, Partridge is not a satiric genius:

¹⁴ I agree with Ehrenpreis that this article is by Swift, although Herbert Davis has some doubts about its authenticity (PW, II; xii). For my purposes, the correct attribution is less significant than the linguistic effects of these papers considered as a whole. Authority of the author is one

I thank God, by whose Mercy I have my Being, that I am still alive, and (excepting my Age) as well as I ever was in my Life; as I was also at that 29th of *March*. And that Paper was said to be done by one *Bickerstaffe*, Esq; but that was a Sham-Name; it was done by an *Impudent Lying Fellow*.¹⁵

With this statement, Partridge hopes to end the matter; he is alive, has never stopped being alive, and his written testimonial should resolve any dispute. But because he is involved in a pamphlet war which repeatedly disengages meaning from the author, both through the distribution of authors, and the instability of the texts themselves, he has no more claim to veracity than the other writers who use his name to attack Bickerstaff. Partridge is in an impossible situation. If he does not write, his death can be assumed; if he does, he participates in the tautology of proving himself alive, yet undermines even that action, by adding just one more voice to a many-authored work.

We can see already how a simple piece can become highly complex, demonstrating the industry of Swift's language. His choice of an astrologer as a target is apt, because it calls on a discourse of prediction and uncertainty which is relevant to the operation of the texts. Their whole pivot is the 'death' of Partridge, and it is this occasion, inscribed in writing, which galvanises the relationship between language and event. Swift's fun at the expense of a charlatan escalates into a drama of the relations between real and literary events. The conventional assumption about writing, the one that Swift seems

of the issues at stake here, and the uncertainty of Swift's involvement only augments the discussion. For the publishing history see Ehrenpreis, II: 197-209.

¹⁵*Merlinus Liberatus: Being an Almanack for the Year of our Blessed Saviour's Incarnation 1709*, repr., PW, II: 224.

on the surface to endorse, is that it relays events, giving a faithful account of something that has already taken place. But here, the texts actually intervene in events, and cause unexpected developments. Because of Swift's activities, and the public interest that surrounds them, Partridge's name is dissociated from his almanac, which is then produced independently of him by the Stationers' Company. He enjoys less esteem after his demise in language than he did before. And *The Bickerstaff Papers* anticipate this outcome. In 'A True and Impartial Account of the Proceedings of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq, Against me', Swift, or one of his contemporaries, poses as Partridge to lament the indignities visited on him by Bickerstaff. The hapless victim is forced to stand by and watch as his apartments are measured up for mourning, the sexton enquires about the arrangements for his funeral, and the street outside fills with hawkers, urchins, and dismals. These opportunists are dismayed by Partridge's refusal to accept his death as readily as they have, and are unconvinced by the empirical evidence of his existence:

Why, Sirrah, says I, [to the sexton] you know me well enough; you know I am not dead, and how dare you affront me after this Manner? Alack-a-day, Sir, replies the Fellow, why it is in Print, and the whole Town knows you are dead; why, there is Mr *White* the Joiner, is but fitting Screws to your Coffin, he will be here with it in an Instant; he was afraid you would have wanted it before this Time. (220)

This extraordinary exchange, and others like it, are made possible because the text acts upon the reader's assumptions. Partridge cannot simply die because Swift pronounces him dead in print.

At the same time, however, the text makes something happen, and the death of Partridge in writing takes place. It is this fictional event which language achieves, and which makes the whole jest possible. Yet, rather than establish writing as a secondary activity to real life, Swift's language shows how the two inform each other, and their boundaries sometimes cross. The actual misfortunes that befall Partridge are directly attributable to Swift's linguistic intervention. He wanted to teach Partridge a lesson, and succeeded perhaps beyond his own expectations. The very fact that Partridge has to proclaim the hoax in his almanac attests to the transforming, as well as documentary, capacity of language. Partridge's reception in his mock account as the ungrateful dead is emblematic of the confusion engendered by Swift's texts. Various parties take him to task for refusing his responsibilities as a dead man, and he stalks the action as a reminder that literary and real events cannot be separated with ease. The distinction is made untenable, even while it is required for the joke against Partridge to succeed.

In 'The Accomplishment of the First of Mr Bickerstaff's Predictions', the narrator states of Bickerstaff, 'whether he hath not been the Cause of this poor Man's Death, as well as the Predictor, may be very reasonably disputed' (155). He implies that the shock of the prediction may have brought on the astrologer's demise, and this is indeed the suggestion throughout the account. But this statement also configures the many effects the *Papers* produce. They are responsible for real events, like Partridge's decline in popularity, textual events, like the death and its aftermath, and for conflating the two, to

demonstrate that the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘textual’ must be considered through the evidence available to us through writing first of all.

The Bickerstaff Papers also show the fascination with fictionality betrayed throughout Swift’s writing. He adopts many fictional roles, and deliberately obscures his authorship of texts, often to preserve anonymity and develop a new angle on a contemporary problem, as in *The Drapier’s Letters*, for example. But fictionality is also an inevitable result of the experimentalism at work here. Swift’s work unseats some common assumptions—that authors are the sole arbiters of their texts’ meanings, that if an event is reported in writing it must have taken place, that writing is not an event in itself—and in turn, foregrounds the capacity for fictionality in all language, not just in stories. He writes at a time when scientific accuracy and empirical proof are valued above all. And yet, Swift’s language turns away from certainty to consider the effects of fiction on reality. In positing the fictional death of Partridge, his language is questioning how much life can be dictated by or inscribed in, language.¹⁶

From a small body of work arises a whole range of issues of Swift’s language: writing and event; authors, texts, and readers; fiction and reality. The ‘example’ of Partridge is twofold. Swift wants to make an example of the

¹⁶ Frederik N. Smith uncovers a preponderance of the fantastic and fictional in the apparently sober *Philosophical Transactions*: ‘The function of storytelling in the emerging science of this period brought it closer to fiction, at least fiction as practised by Defoe and Swift, than the Royal Society would have liked to admit’. ‘Scientific Discourse: *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The Philosophical Transactions*’, in Frederik N. Smith (ed.), *The Genres of Gulliver’s Travels* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), pp. 139-62 (p. 153).

man for his misdemeanours; and is able to effect alterations in Partridge's circumstances by the power of writing. But the figure of Partridge stalking the text, refusing to accept his death is also central, exemplifying the qualities of language that stretch beyond its supposed remit of the faithful recording of fact.

All of the matters broached in *The Bickerstaff Papers* are discussed in more detail in the rest of this thesis, alongside other expositions of language at work. Some of the relevant historical arguments and ideas about language are measured against Swift's incorporation of them, and their fortunes in his writing. In the first chapter, I analyse the dominant ideas of language in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, which group around notions of a good language, one that acts in servile accordance with fact and observation, and a corrupt language, that seeks to overwhelm its user, and place its self-interest at the forefront. I study the works of language reformers, in particular John Wilkins's universal scheme, *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Universal Language*, and the relevant sections of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, to determine the viability and success of their claims for language. Against this, I consider the much wider body of works that reprove and criticise language, and list its misuses, but I also show how difficult it is for the reformers to extricate good from bad, because of their failure to recognise aspects of language beyond mere communication. Literature in this respect has the advantage over philosophy, and later I

consider the claims of Swift's handful of explicit critiques of language against the fluidity and suggestiveness of his more experimental texts.

The next chapter reads *A Tale of a Tub* through the concept of 'the book'. This idea allows for discussion of the relationship between authors, writing, and reading that is central to the *Tale's* development. The many images and assumptions that historically surround 'the book' reach a crisis in the *Tale*, which pits the totality and authority of the originary voice against the energy and unpredictability of writing. The *Tale* is a work which both demands and resists reading, and I argue that the allegory contained in it enacts our frustrations and our desire to control the text. In adopting the idea of the book, I do not try to impose an external frame of reference on an unwieldy text—the *Tale's* self-awareness would never permit this. Instead, I use an image which is dense and problematic to allude to difficulties surrounding the act of interpretation as it is presented in the *Tale*. As a text which raises issues of authority and the role of the reader, the *Tale* is central in the study of Swift's language.

Swift's poetry is next considered, and I am particularly interested in its reaction to the constraints of poetic theories of the period. These identify a poem's features as 'sound' and 'sense', and are hostile to poems which betray too much of their form in expressing their content. Verse form, typography, and the nebulous 'wit' all feature in the discussions, which for the most part involve a roll-call of weak poetic effects. Swift and the other Scriblerians produce many works which exhibit the worst qualities of the Grub Street

poets, consistently using bodily imagery to create a negative impact. But Swift's own concentration on the body progresses beyond mere criticism to question the foundation of poetic language itself. His overweening physicality produces an unexpected effect, signifying the absence, rather than the presence, of the poetic object. Swift's poetry, in its extremism, finally breaks down the distinctions between sound and sense, replacing them with a less structured, but more rounded, reckoning of the effects of language in poetry.

In the final chapter, I analyse language in *Gulliver's Travels*, both within the narrative itself, but also in its broader aspect, as Swift's experiment with fictionality. It is this, and its effects on reading, which must be considered first, before we are able to uncover the satire of the third voyage, and moralise about the fourth. The ordering structure of the work, its opening sequence, invites confusion and opposition, gainsaying Gulliver's contention of the truth that is available in the narrative. To ignore this is to risk making the same errors of judgement that Gulliver himself makes, and I will show how the critical response, especially to the voyage to Houyhnhnmland, suppresses the confusions that the text offers in order to achieve closure. I also consider how language functions in the societies that Gulliver visits, both as an object of study in the Academy of Lagado, and at work in the other voyages. This culminates in an uncovering of the oppressiveness masquerading as simplicity that characterises Houyhnhnm language. But all of these discussions and effects must be filtered through the text's own awareness of its fictional status, and its observations on language as a result.

Ultimately, I aim to give an account of Swift's language which arises from his use of it. If we consider Swift's language simply as an object of study, then we ignore the signs and examples in the texts that prove otherwise. But if language is assessed as it *works* in each case, we are much closer to appreciating Swift's writing as it is, than as we would like it to be. My first impression on reading Swift is always that he enacts rather than debates ideas; and it is this characteristic that I aim to portray. In the chapters that follow, I assess each work according to this principle. Swift's language is not reducible to a single theory (nor should this be an option for critics of so far-ranging and self-questioning a writer). But it is amenable to a process of interlocution and appraisal, and this is my project.

1: The Seventeenth-Century World of Language

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the ideas and movements surrounding language in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In particular, I examine the tendency to consider language as having positive and negative aspects, and the results of this thinking. These results feed into Swift's views about language, and later I will consider some of these, and their relationship to the rest of his works.

The divided attitude of the period towards language is discussed in detail in a key work, Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society of London* (1667). As the Society's secretary and chief apologist, Sprat is at pains to contrast the superior written style of Society members to rivals in the same field, past and present. He believes that the abuse of language begins with the Ancient philosophers - the Egyptians, Assyrians and Chaldeans - who were prone to 'wrap up their Observations on Nature, and the Manners of Men, in the dark Shadows of *Hieroglyphicks*; and to conceal them, as sacred *Mysteries*, from the apprehensions of the vulgar'.¹ Further acts of sacrilege were committed by the Greeks and Romans, whose great wisdom did not prevent them from the folly of cultivating flowery rhetoric at the expense of

¹ *History of the Royal Society*, ed. Jackson I. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones (Saint Louis: Washington University Studies, 1958), p. 5. Further page references to this work will appear in the text.

simply-communicated knowledge. But Sprat reserves his greatest attack for the schoolmen, whose influence is still very strong at the time of the *History*'s composition.² He blames their cloistered and hermetic lifestyles for the overblown style they produce, as they are denied the empirical foundation necessary to construct a correct language: 'for it may easily be prov'd, that those very Theories, on which they built all their subtle webs, were not at all Collected, by a sufficient information from the things themselves. Which if it can be made out, I hope, it will be granted, that the force and vigour of their Wit did more hurt, then good: and onely serv'd to carry them faster out of the right way, when they were once going' (18-19). By granting more status to the study of terms, than to the things they describe, the schoolmen rapidly become enmeshed in controversies about language, which obscure the original purpose of their enterprise.

In contrast to these extremes of expression, Sprat presents the members of the Royal Society, champions of the 'plain style'. They are praised for their 'close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clearness; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars'. In this respect, the men of the Royal Society (their historiographer included, presumably) are quite unlike their counterparts in the French Academy, who, 'as they undertook the advancement of the elegance of Speech, so it became their *History*, to have some resemblance to their enterprize: Whereas the intention of ours, being

² The influence of scholasticism on Swift's satire is measured by Miriam Kosh Starkman in *Swift's Satire on Learning in A Tale of a Tub* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 56-63. Swift's own attitude is well-preserved in the famous letter to his cousin Thomas Swift regarding the practice of syllogistic disputation enforced at Trinity College: 'to enter into the causes of Philosophy is what I protest I will rather dy in a ditch than go about' (C, I: 11).

not the Artifice of Words, but a bare knowledge of things, my fault may be esteemed the less, that I have written of *Philosophers*, without any ornament of eloquence' (40). The lucid style of the Society is as important to Sprat as its experimental achievements: both are signs of the clarity and correctness of the new thought, as he sees it. To this end, he adopts Bacon as a kind of patron saint of the Society, as an example of a writer who embodies solidary values: 'he was a Man of strong, cleer, and powerful Imaginations: his Genius was searching, and inimitable: and of this I need give no other proof, then his Style itself; which as, for the most part, it describes mens minds, as well as Pictures do their Bodies; so it did his above all men living' (36). Bacon, shining in word and deed, is manipulated into position as a focus of the Society's self-image; his aristocratic status and contempt for scholasticism make him a valuable figure. He can be found on the frontispiece alongside Charles II lending an air of seriousness to the enterprise; and again in Cowley's prefatory ode 'To The Royal Society', battling against scholastic ignorance and superstition '*With the plain Magique of tru Reasons Light*'.

By eulogising the style of the Society, Sprat shows how far he mistrusts language left unchecked, and articulates a need for vigilance shared by others. Language past and present has failed to deliver the 'plain style' that he promotes. There are echoes of Bacon's criticism in Sprat's account, most notably from *The Advancement of Learning*: 'although we think we govern our words, and prescribe it well *loquendum ut vulgus sentiendum ut sapientes*; yet certain it is that words, as a Tartar's bow, do shoot back upon the understanding of the wisest, and mightily entangle and pervert the

judgement'.³ The thoughts of Bacon, and their elaboration in Sprat, are the blueprint for seventeenth-century ideas about language; and there are many who adopt and develop (but do not digress from), the notion of a divided language.

Sir Kenelm Digby is one of a number of writers who separates value along the lines of everyday and specialised uses of language, with the former being preferred over the latter. Everyone, he argues, understands the ordinary kind, for 'in this, the words express things properly and plainly, according to the natural conceptions that all people agree in making of them'. The trouble begins with scholarly discourse: 'many of the words which are proper to it have been, by the Authors of it, translated and wrested from the general conceptions of the same words, by some metaphor, or similitude, or allusion, to serve their private turns'.⁴ Digby echoes a common seventeenth-century attitude when he maligns the ornaments of writing. Figurative language of any kind is deemed inappropriate for the expression and dissemination of ideas. Thus, in an attack on the Platonic revival in Britain, Samuel Parker devotes much of his criticism to the language in which such unwelcome ideas are expressed:

Now to Discourse of the Natures of Things in Metaphors and Allegories is nothing else but to sport and trifle with empty words, because these Schems do not express the Natures of Things, but only their Similitudes and Resemblances, for Metaphors are only words, which properly signifying one thing, are apply'd to signifie another by reason of some Resemblance between them. When therefore any thing is express'd by a Metaphor or Allegory, the thing it self is not expressed, but only some similitude observ'd or made by Fancy.⁵

³ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, ed. Arthur Johnston (Oxford: Clarendon, Press, 1974), p. 128.

⁴ *Of Bodies, and of Mans Soul: To Discover the Immortality of Reasonable Souls* (London, 1669), p. 6.

⁵ *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie* (Oxford, 1666), p. 75.

Generally, such writers show little confidence in language left unchecked; it must be used and observed carefully, to prevent it from distorting and corrupting the message it conveys. Scarcely anyone allows language a spontaneous power for improvement. Some are stoical: 'the best is to take Words as they are most commonly spoken and meant, like Coyn as it most currantly passes, without raising scruples upon the weight or the allay, unless the cheat or the defect be gross and evident'.⁶ But most argue for more, not less, vigilance, echoing Hobbes's famous comment: 'seeing then that *truth* consisteth in the right ordering of names in our affirmations, a man that seeketh precise *truth*, had need to remember what every name he uses stands for; and to place it accordingly; or else he will find himself entangled in words, as a bird in lime-twiggs; the more he struggles, the more belimed'.⁷

As a result of such views, two significant developments occur which are of relevance to Swift's writing on language. First, a series of proposals for reforming and improving existing language, to render it a better vehicle of communication, are instigated. The Royal Society is of key importance here, but there is also the considerable influence of Locke's philosophy, perhaps the first to credit language with a major, constitutive function in understanding. Secondly, there arises a body of writing which adopts various approaches to draw attention to the perceived weaknesses and follies of language. I will examine both of these movements in detail, and also their complex and sometimes contradictory relationship, before concentrating on their outcomes in Swift's works.

⁶ Sir William Temple, *Of Poetry*, in J. E. Spingarn (ed.), *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), III, p. 73.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Pelican 1965; repr., Penguin, 1985), p. 105.

Reform

The many properties deemed unfortunate in existing languages encourage some individuals to attempt the creation of new ones. While the idea of a perfect language had been projected in literature and philosophy before, it is very systematically investigated in the seventeenth century. Reformers like the Royal Society's John Wilkins see an urgent need for an entirely new language. In the past, he argues, languages were created haphazardly, as needs arose, 'by which means they must needs be liable to manifold defects and imperfections, that in a Language at once invented and according to the *rules of Art* might be easily avoided'.⁸ To create a language all at once means starting from sound universal bases, not responding to local difficulties. Wilkins and other language projectors are united in the belief that past languages allowed error and irregularity to creep in. Even Latin, previously a kind of international language, but now in decline, is far from perfect. The influential Polish educational reformer Comenius finds many flaws in it. First, it is a Western language, so not as 'universal' as often claimed. In itself, it is full of confusions and irregularities. And the Romans adopted the same bad practice as other countries in forming it: 'very many of their words were brought into being by mere chance, and applied upon no principle so as to mean definitely this or that'.⁹ Latin is no longer considered as a good candidate for a universal language, for reasons made clear by Comenius: 'a universal language ought to be the richest and most copious of all, for the proper and precise expression of all subjects, and entirely adequate for the

⁸ *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (London, 1668), p. 19.

⁹ John Amos Comenius, *The Way of Light*, trans. and ed. E. H. Campagnac (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), p. 184.

easy rendering of all conceptions of the mind. And Latin must openly confess that it has not these qualities, for it is poor in composite words, and far from fortunate in its derivations'.¹⁰

Those who are seriously concerned to reform such errors of language are optimistic about the potential for improvement, buoyed up by a confidence in the new learning to achieve what has been impossible before. Writing of his 'real character', John Wilkins argues: 'supposing such a thing as is here proposed, could be well established, it would be the surest remedy that could be against the Curse of the Confusion, by rendring all other *Languages* and *Characters* useless'.¹¹ If only one language were used by everyone, adds Wilkins: '*besides that most obvious advantage which would ensue, of facilitating mutual Commerce, amongst the several Nations of the World, and the improving of all Natural knowledge, it would likewise very much conduce to the spreading of the knowledge of Religion*'.¹² An entirely new language would sweep away past controversies, as it would be created with the benefit of hindsight, and could eliminate previous errors.

It becomes clear from looking at a few of these proposed schemes for universal languages that reform of language is allied to reform of objects. Not only words, but the whole universe of things needs to be ordered into a retrievable, manageable form, in order for a universal scheme to succeed. Wilkins's mammoth *Essay* is thus a composite work, requiring the assistance of several other members of the Royal Society for the creation of its '*Tables of Substance*' of all known elements. He receives help from the naturalist John Ray in the making of tables of plants, William Lloyd compiles the dictionary

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 183.

¹¹ *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, p. 13.

¹² Ibid., 'Epistle Dedicatory'.

of words that accompanies the *Essay*, and Samuel Pepys provides nautical terms. It is this exhaustiveness, and the assurance that goes with it, that marks Wilkins out from earlier reformers. In his important study of universal languages in this period, James Knowlson argues that there is a historical shift in ideas from the middle of the century, when proposed schemes to catalogue what is already in existence are replaced by those which are more invasive, organising their materials: 'the transition that took place in England in the middle years of the century was thus from a character which merely *represented* things and notions by agreement, to one which *mirrored* the whole of human knowledge by means of the combination of its elements'.¹³ It is definitely the case that earlier writings on the subject are tentative in nature, mostly suggesting what might happen rather than offering any solutions to problems. In his 1641 pamphlet *Mercury*, Wilkins considers the anatomy and progress of secret codes. There is little sign here of his monumental later work, but he does suggest that musical notation might possibly work as a universal language.¹⁴ A short piece of 1647, Francis Lodowyc's *A Common Writing*, is an exploratory scheme, with the aim of doing little more than enabling people from different countries to understand one another without having to spend time learning languages. Instead, they translate one another's words with 'a kind of hieroglyphical representation of words, by so many severall Characters'. By this means, Lodowyc hopes that 'what is once

¹³ *Universal Language Schemes in England and France, 1600-1800* (Toronto and Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 74. Knowlson's comprehensive work includes a checklist of all language schemes published in England and France between these dates (pp. 224-32). Other useful works on universal language schemes are; Mary M. Slaughter, *Universal Language and Scientific Taxonomy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Murray Cohen, *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England, 1640-1785* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); and Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

¹⁴ *Mercury, or the Secret and Swift Messenger* (London, 1641), p. 143.

written with this writing, will be legible and intelligible, in all Languages whatsoever, although the reader in any Language, understood but his owne Language'.¹⁵ There seems to be little interest at this stage in changing the way language users organise their thinking before they begin to communicate. It is only later, in schemes such as Cave Beck's *The Universal Character* (1657), George Dalgarno's *Ars Signorum* (1661), and Wilkins's *Essay* (1668), that this idea comes to prominence.

In a letter to Marin Mersenne of 1629, Descartes anticipates the thinking behind the later schemes, and the problems that attended the earlier ones. He is responding cautiously to proposals for a universal language that have been sent to Mersenne. There are important matters which must be considered first, he believes: 'if someone were to explain correctly what are the simple ideas in the human imagination out of which all human thoughts are compounded, and if his explanation were generally received, I would dare to hope for a universal language very easy to learn, to speak, and to write'.¹⁶ It is not enough to want to catalogue everything in the world; there must be agreement at the level of thought, if all languages are to be replaced by a single, unifying one. This is why the later language reformers move away from simple schemes of exchange to more complex systems, which concern themselves with the correct definitions of objects. Wilkins makes a characteristic expression of their viewpoint: 'If to every thing and notion there were assigned a distinct *Mark*, together with some *provision* to express Grammatical *Derivations* and *Inflexions*; this might suffice as to one great end of a *Real Character*, namely, the expression of our Conceptions by *Marks*

¹⁵ *A Common Writing* (London, 1647), 'To the Reader'.

¹⁶ 'Descartes to Mersenne, 20 Nov 1629', in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, trans. and ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 6.

which should signifie *things*, and not *words*'.¹⁷ The ideal language would not draw attention to itself with figurative expressions, but be a limpid form through which ideas could be clearly grasped. Perhaps this explains why the Royal Society language reformers are so interested in non-linguistic descriptors, like marks, musical notes (Wilkins), or mathematical formulae (Beck); and why, at the same time, there is an interest in other types of non-graphic communication, such as sign-language and Chinese characters.¹⁸ With such a language in place, it is believed, knowledge will follow suit. Joseph Waite writes a prefatory poem to Cave Beck's universal character which has a high estimation of its potential effects: 'The Iliads in a Nut-Shell; Tongues in Brief; / *Babel* revers'd; The Traveller's Relief'.¹⁹ Even accounting for the exaggerated praise expected in most celebratory odes, these are substantial claims. But it is evident that the universal linguists feel equal to the task of repairing the damage caused at Babel. The particular late seventeenth-century blend of arbitrary notation and organisation of ideas is seen as the way forward, the answer to idiomatic and figurative difficulties of language, of the proliferation of different languages, and the decline of Latin. The linguists speak of improved commerce, an end to wars and religious disputes, and greater certainty in ideas, thanks in large measure to their new

¹⁷ *Essay*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Works on sign language and gesture in the period include:- John Bulwer, *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand, with Chironomia: Or the Art of Manual Rhetoric* (London, 1644); George Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus* (London, 1680); William Holder, *Elements of Speech* (London, 1669). Interest in Chinese writing is partly prompted by Bacon's enthusiastic description in *The Advancement of Learning*: 'And we understand further, that it is the use of China, and the kingdoms of the High Levant, to write in characters real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions; insomuch as countries or provinces, which understand not one another's language, can nevertheless read one another's writings' (p. 131). But for a hostile view, see Cave Beck, 'Preface' to *The Universal Character* (London, 1657).

¹⁹ 'Preface' to *The Universal Character*.

languages.

The other major reassessment of the role of language, comparable in significance to Wilkins, appears in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1689. While Locke has set out to consider mainly the workings of the human mind, he soon realises that he cannot progress far without a full analysis and reform of language:

I find, that there is so close a connexion between *Ideas* and Words; and our abstract *Ideas*, and general Words, have so constant a relation to one another, that it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our Knowledge, which all consists in Propositions, without considering, first, the Nature, Use, and Signification of Language.²⁰

And like the Royal Society's linguists, Locke contends that words designate arbitrarily: 'Words having naturally no signification, the *Idea* which each stands for, must be learned and retained by those, who would exchange Thoughts, and hold intelligible Discourse with others, in any Language' (III, ix, 5).

There are, however, notable differences between Locke and Wilkins. Locke is no utopian; the reform of existing languages, not the creation of perfect ones, is all that he anticipates. And in opposition to Wilkins, Locke holds that words denote *ideas*, not *things*. Wilkins is typical of the period immediately before Locke, a period with 'a tendency to assume that *things* should be expressible in *words*, or conversely, *words* should represent *things* not metaphysical and abstract concepts'.²¹ As we have seen, this is a reasonable reaction to the difficulties caused by the convoluted prose of

²⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book II, Chapter 33, § 19. Further references to the *Essay* will take this form, and will appear in the text.

²¹ A. C. Howell, 'Res et Verba: Words and Things', *ELH*, 13 (1946), 131-42 (131).

scholasticism. But Locke breaks this spell. As one commentator puts it: 'instead of asserting an identity between the signifier and the signified, as had Wilkins, Locke [...] asserts the primacy of the signified, where words are but the servant to thought. Language is no longer knowledge itself, but a passage to knowledge'.²² Words are aligned with the act of perception: 'the Use then of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*; and the *Ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate signification' (III, ii, 1). This puts words firmly in their place, lagging behind the operation of the mind, which itself responds to original objects. Locke is dismissive of any other kind of thought, 'it seeming to me near a Contradiction, to say, that there are Truths imprinted on the Soul, which it perceives or understand not; imprinting, if it signify any thing, being nothing else, but the making certain Truths to be perceived' (I, ii, 5). But he also rejects the ideas of Wilkins and the Royal Society about the direct availability of objects through words. Locke's entire philosophy of language rests on the belief that words serve ideas of objects, not the objects themselves. To make this distinction hold, he introduces ideas of primary and secondary qualities of objects. Primary qualities, such as solidity, motion, and extension, pertain to the object regardless of our perception of it; whereas secondary qualities are 'nothing in the Objects themselves, but Powers to produce various Sensations in us by their *Primary Qualities*' (II, xiii, 10). With this division, Locke hopes to end the dangerous practice of confusing things with our ideas of them once and for all:

To discover the nature of our *Ideas* the better, and to discourse of them intelligibly, it will be convenient to distinguish them, as they are *Ideas* or Perceptions in our Minds; and as they are modifications of matter in

²² James Thompson, *Language in Wycherley's Plays: Seventeenth-Century Language Theory and Drama* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984), p. 21. Thompson gives a useful short account of the theories of language in the late seventeenth century; see pp. 6-23.

the Bodies that cause such Perceptions in us: so that we *may not* think (as perhaps usually is done) that they are exactly the Images and *Resemblances* of something inherent in the subject. (II, xiii, 7)

Language itself cannot be one with the object it describes; instead it attaches to the act of perception, which itself is not part of the object. Language is thus at two removes from things.²³

Locke and the Royal Society represent the main strands of language reform in the period, and both express a dissatisfaction with language as it currently works, and a desire to change it. They consider that their proposed schemes will herald a change in perception, leading to the disappearance of bad thoughts and ideas. Language is thus maligned and abused, but also seen as crucial to the progress and dissemination of thought. What distinguishes this age from others, is the confidence of many of its writers that language can achieve a state of perfection. This they attempt or imply by separating the word from its object (or the idea of its object) to make it more malleable, and less mystical.

Such schemes are, however, seen as ambitious, and difficult to implement, by other commentators; and there exists a range of writings that indicate the pitfalls of large-scale revision, given the current degraded state of language. There is even contempt and scorn among some writers for the ‘projectors’. Thus, while language reform features prominently in the period, even more prevalent is a literature of reproof, which attacks the reformers, along with language itself. In the next section, I will discuss how the many

²³ For a clear reading of Locke’s language theories see Paul Guyer, ‘Locke’s Philosophy of Language’, in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 115-145: ‘he wants to undercut philosophical confusions arising from a false view of language, especially classificatory language, but he also wants to show us that a true view of this use reveals inherent liabilities in the ideal of perfect communication through language—although, of course, we have no other medium for communication’ (p. 116).

criticisms and satires of language can be more helpful in showing its complexities and problems than the less numerous attempts to improve it.

Reproof

At the same time as attempts are being made to reform language along clear-cut, empirical lines, an undercurrent of alternative writings which invite mistrust and scepticism are being produced. As a parallel to the works of Wilkins and others, for instance, there exist a number of mystical universal language schemes, which credit words with more power than the mainstream reformers believe they should possess. Murray Cohen explains: ‘some linguists in the seventeenth century tend to see the goal of their language work as the recovery, in the shapes and sounds of linguistic elements, of the essences of things in nature; others [like Wilkins] tend to define their work as reproducing, through mostly arbitrary symbols, the composition and coherence of things in nature’.²⁴ Comenius, with his ‘Pansophia’, has much in common with the first movement, which is strongly influenced by thinkers like Paracelsus, Fludd, and the mysterious Rosicrucians. Whilst the Royal Society-backed language reformers dominate in England, they are sufficiently threatened by this influential counter-movement to attack its apologists. Foremost amongst their targets is Jacob Boehme, whose *Signatura Rerum* becomes widely known and discussed after its translation into English. Boehme’s translator furnishes the reader with a telling explication: ‘in a word, his intent is to let thee know the inward Power and Property by the outward sign, for Nature hath given Marks and Notes to every thing, whereby it may be

²⁴ *Sensible Words*, p. 21.

known; and this is *the language of Nature*, which telleth for every thing what is good and profitable'.²⁵ The problem, for empirical language reformers, with such thinking is that it grants a separate power to the word, so that the meaning of an utterance cannot be discovered simply by reference to ideas in the speaker's mind; it also comes from a mystical property of the word itself. Or, as Boehme more colourfully puts it:

the whole outward visible World with all its Being is a Signature or Figure of the inward spiritual World; whatsoever is internally and howsoever its operation is, so likewise it hath its Character externally; like as the Spirit of each Creature doth set forth and manifest the internal Form of its Birth by its Body, so doth the Eternal Being also.²⁶

Hans Aarsleff summarises this seventeenth-century belief in the innate powers of words as 'Adamicism':

it held that languages even now, in spite of their multiplicity and seeming chaos, contain elements of the original perfect language created by Adam when he named the animals in his prelapsarian state. In the Adamic doctrine the relation between signifier and signified is not arbitrary; the linguistic sign is not double but unitary. Still retaining the divine nature of their common origin, languages were in fundamental accord with nature; indeed they were themselves part of creation and nature.²⁷

Such a theory is inimical to the Society, as it fails to keep words and ideas or things at a suitable distance, thus threatening the perceived basis of knowledge itself. Proponents of 'Adamicism' are often self-professed mystics or enthusiasts, whose writing style invites as much suspicion as their theories. One such is John Webster, who, in his *Academiarum Examen* of 1654, attacks the new learning for presumptuously imposing its own version of knowledge

²⁵ *Signatura Rerum: Or the Signature of all Things* (London, 1651), 'Preface of the Translator to the Reader'.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77

²⁷ *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 25.

in place of God's: 'principally I would have men to know, that it is the Spirit of God onely that freely gives men to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven'.²⁸ Webster is against advances in scientific discovery and knowledge, but praises those, like Comenius, who seek to uncover the mysteries of the universe as they are encoded in language. He attracts an excoriating response from Seth Ward, a leading Society figure, who aims to 'disprove' Webster's theories by an energetic application of his own terms, and on the way, to expose the obscurantism of 'Adamicist' thought and prose alike:

familiarity with M. *Webster* makes me bold with him, and that hath encouraged me, to deny, that ever there was any such Language of Nature, and to offer him this Demonstration:

The Paradisicall Protoplast, being Characteristically bound to the Matrix of Magicall contrition, by the Symphoniacall inspeaking of *Aleph tenebrosum*, and limited by *Shem hamphorish* to the central Ideas, in blowne by the numerations of *Belimah*, which are ten and not nine, ten and not eleven...²⁹

And so on.

The main complaint that reformers level against 'Adamicists' is that they disavow the separation of signifier and signified so vital to the success of reforming schemes. For them, words *are* things, in which case, cataloguing and explaining becomes redundant; knowledge is already immanent in language. As Wilkins and others see it, language should be an arbitrary system of notation, not a constitutive element in knowledge, otherwise nothing is ever discovered or learned, progress cannot be made, and there is the risk of a small group aiming to control the dispensation of meaning. To some extent, these fears are grounded. In his work *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault

²⁸ *Academiarum Examen, or the Examination of Academies* (London, 1654), p. 9.

²⁹ *Vindiciae Academiarum, Containing some brief Animadversions upon Mr Webster's Book Stiled The Examination of Academies* (Oxford, 1654), p. 22.

argues that this viewpoint reflects a historical drift away from ‘resemblance’, the pre-Renaissance reckoning of language:

In its original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they designated, just as strength is written in the body of the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle, just as the influence of the planets is marked upon the brows of men: by the form of similitude.³⁰

Language here is not an external descriptor, but a feature of the landscape, as material as the objects it designates. Its visible marks are imbued with their own powers: ‘Words group syllables together, and syllables letters, because there are virtues placed in individual letters that draw them towards each other or keep them apart, exactly as the marks found in nature also repel or attract one another’ (35). It is in fact impossible to use it to gain any external perspective on things: ‘Language partakes in the world-wide dissemination of similitudes and signatures. It must, therefore, be studied itself as a thing in nature’ (35). All this changes, in Foucault’s account, in the seventeenth century, when the epistemological order of resemblance is displaced by ‘representation’. The man-made sign for things replaces the natural one, so that the world can be ordered, contained, and reflected on from without: ‘It is no longer the task of knowledge to dig out the ancient Word from the unknown places where it may be hidden; its job now is to fabricate a language, and to fabricate it well—so that, as an instrument of analysis and combination, it will really be the language of calculation’ (62-3). Whereas before, the sign bound word and thing together, it now keeps them apart, so that they can be analysed separately: ‘though God still employs signs to speak to us through

³⁰ *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Tavistock, 1970, repr., Routledge, 1989), p. 36. Further page references to this work will appear in the text.

nature, he is making use of our knowledge, and of the relations that are set up between our impressions, in order to establish in our minds a relation of signification' (59). It is this detachment of the sign from the world, Foucault argues, that characterises the change in thought after the Renaissance. Terms like 'rationalism' and 'empiricism' apply only to parts of it; the period is united by its attitude towards words and the world.

Certainly, the writings of Boyle, Wilkins, and Locke bear out this description. The man-made sign is much in evidence in the later seventeenth century, whether in the manufactured symbols of the universal languages, or the separatist systems of Locke and other empiricists. The characterisation of language as a mixture of divine gift and human agency is also apparent. The universal linguists commonly offer translations of the Lord's Prayer into their languages. Boyle best sums up the confluence of divinity and science when he endorses Plato's belief, 'that the world was God's epistle written to mankind—and might have added, consonantly to another saying of his, it was written in mathematical letters'.³¹ So Foucault judges the mood of the times correctly. But his insistence on a historical division of language into separate epochs of 'resemblance' and 'representation' seems less convincing. At the same time as the works of Boyle and Wilkins gain prominence, the discredited alternative works remain strong. Boehme, Comenius, Webster, Thomas Vaughan, and the Rosicrucians have their adherents as much as Locke, Boyle, and Wilkins, and the virulence of attacks on them by less fantastical thinkers shows their widespread attraction. In his defence, Foucault argues that resemblance never goes away; it is the basis of representation, 'that barely

³¹ *The Excellency and Grounds of the Mechanical Hypothesis*, in M. A. Stewart (ed.), *Selected Philosophical Papers of Robert Boyle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), p. 152.

sketched form, that rudimentary relation which knowledge must overlay to its full extent, but which continues, indefinitely, to reside below knowledge in the manner of a mute and ineffaceable necessity' (68). Yet, even here, the historical division is maintained—Foucault still relegates resemblance to a minor, if necessary role. The actual historical circumstances seem somewhat different. The Royal Society language schemes are largely unsuccessful. Wilkins's 'real character' has a very limited application; a few attempts are made by friends to apply it, and a board set up to administer it after his death dissolves into confusion and argument. There is no successful, widespread application of any universal language. Foucault's terms 'resemblance' and 'representation' apply at some points to the language of the period, but they can also obscure the ways it escapes such easy categorisation. As a starting point, they are useful, but they by no means account for the various conclusions that are reached.

The main problem appears to be that the separation of word from object is easily described, but more difficult to maintain. This is one reason why the universal languages do not thrive—although appealing in theory, they are cumbersome and unworkable in practice. The lengths to which a user must go to maintain the extrinsic and distinct seem to cripple the functioning of the system. It's much easier to muddle along in an imperfect language. In the same way, Locke's highly ambitious re-ordering of language into sections and categories that all operate according to his philosophy is beset with difficulty. Locke's terms of reproof run in a similar vein to the Royal Society's. Words are potentially dangerous, and their use should be restricted: 'they interpose themselves so much between our Understandings, and the Truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the *Medium* through which visible Objects pass, their Obscurity and Disorder does not

seldom cast a mist before our Eyes, and impose upon our Understandings' (III,ix,21). Locke considers that all abuse of language stems from the perceiver's inability to differentiate word from idea, rather like the 'Adamicists' seem to do. He illustrates, and attempts to resolve, the problem with two categories of thought, substances and mixed modes.

A substance can never be known in its essentials; only the idea of it is available to us. Locke's definition of it is cumbersome:

the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that support *Substantia*: which, according to the true import of the Word, is in plain *English*, *standing under*, or *upholding*. (II, xxiii, 2)

When we name a substance, we usually assume that we are designating the object itself, and not the idea of it. This much is true for Wilkins as for Boehme. Locke counteracts this common assumption by introducing the terms 'real' and 'nominal essences' to talk about substances. It is only the second category that can be known to us: 'as to the *real Essences* of Substances, we only suppose their Being, without precisely knowing what they are: But that which annexes them still to the *Species*, is the nominal Essence, of which they are the supposed foundation and cause' (III, vi, 6). Because substances (such as 'Man, Horse, Gold, Water') appear in nature, and are not formed solely by our mental processes, Locke thinks that we consider ourselves as having direct, unmediated knowledge of them, which he is quick to deny.

Mixed modes, on the other hand, are totally formed from mental connections. Ideas like 'murder' and 'glory' are not immediately linked to objects in the outside world, but require processing to make them

comprehensible. In these cases, the role of language is more active. The real and nominal essences are not separate; everything takes place in the mental arena, so that the name actually helps 'shape' the idea:

these abstract *Ideas*, being the Workmanship of the Mind, and not referred to the real Existence of Things, there is no supposition of any thing more signified by that Name, but barely that complex *Idea*, the Mind it self has formed, which is all it would have express'd by it; and it is that, on which all the properties of the *Species* depend, and from which they all flow; and so in these the *real* and *nominal Essence* is the same. (III, v, 14)

Language thus moves a step closer to the object; the chain of sensation, intellection and designation is replaced by a flux between the name and the idea, with names, in the case of mixed modes, being less easily detached from ideas than in the case of substances.

The arguments about the names of mixed modes indicate the efforts to which Locke has to go to keep the idea/word separation in play. By calling the name of a mixed mode a 'knot', which ties together the disparate ideas that go into it, he seems to grant language more power than he would wish it to have. At times, Locke's system itself, and especially its terminology, seems like an imposition that complicates what it sets out to explain. While the introduction of real and nominal essences is meant to reduce indeterminacy, it seems only to increase it. How are the differences between real and nominal essences decided, for example? If a real essence cannot be known, it might be argued that the distinction does not hold. This aspect of Locke attracts philosophical and non-philosophical criticism. Many contemporary reactions are summed up in Swift's statement: 'since our modern Improvement of Human Understanding, instead of desiring a Philosopher to describe or define a Mouse-trap, or tell me what it is; I must gravely ask, what is contained in the

Idea of a Mouse-trap?'.³² Berkeley uses Locke as a point of departure for a full-blown idealism in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*.³³

Like the Royal Society and the universal linguists, Locke tries to diminish the powers of language by imposing an external scheme on it. He shares Wilkins's need to classify, to introduce terms to explain and control his arguments, but these terms are not always clearly defined, and still invite contrary interpretations. Locke appears to acknowledge the difficulty of the task he has set himself: 'To form a clear Notion of *Truth*, it is very necessary to consider *Truth* of thought, and *Truth* of Words, distinctly one from another: but yet it is very difficult to treat of them asunder' (IV,v,3). Language reforms like these, which attempt to distinguish language from its object, are always in danger of collapsing the two together, because such schemes often rely on artificial aggregations, which are difficult to implement.

There is another important feature in the reformers' work which fudges their distinctiveness from their enemies—the fact that, quite often, the two are interdependent. Robert Boyle is a case in point. Alongside his empirical research and experimentation, there is his fascination with alchemy, especially transmutation of base metals into gold, to consider. For many of the reformers, these issues exist side by side; they see no conflict in believing in the Elixir of Life at the same time as they conduct rigorously controlled experiments to discover the longitude. But, of course, such dualism undermines their attempts to be taken seriously as pragmatic reformers of

³² *Remarks upon a Book, Intituled, The Rights of the Christian Church Asserted*, PW, II: 80.

³³ 'What are the aforementioned objects [houses, mountains, and rivers] but the things we perceive by sense: and what do we perceive besides our own ideas of our sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived?'; George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, from *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), II, p. 44.

language, and, by extension, the world. The most persistent example of the reformers' double standard is in their treatment of the philosophy of atomism, which consists of plundering the elements which fit into new patterns of thought, and reviling those which do not.

The double attitude of the age towards atomism is expressed by Thomas Creech, who dismisses Lucretius's 'absurd Opinions' for being 'palpable and easy to be discovered, and the others being excellently confirmed by the *modern Philosophers* and agreeable to common Observation'.³⁴ In its Epicurean form, atomism has a materialist atheist character, which its greatest seventeenth-century exponent, Boyle, seeks to excise. He inserts God in the Epicurean system, to replace the accidental 'clinamen' or swerve, which supposedly brought the universe into being.³⁵ This is necessary, Boyle argues, 'for the ancient corpuscularian philosophers (whose doctrine in most other points, though not in all, we are the most inclinable to), not acknowledging an Author of the universe, were thereby reduced to make motion congenite to matter, and consequently coeval with it'.³⁶ Atomism is obviously valuable to the seventeenth-century experimenters. It offers a direct access to objects which the contorted language of the schoolmen could not. But its atheistic self-sufficiency extends to its account of the origins of language: 'As for the various sounds of *spoken language*, it was nature that drove men to utter these, and practical

³⁴ Thomas Creech, *Titus Lucretius Carus, His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy Done into English Verse*, 3rd edn (London, 1683), notes, p. 26.

³⁵ For some of the developments in seventeenth-century atomism, especially the clarification of such terms as 'mechanical' and 'corpuscular', see J. G. Gregory, *A Short History of Atomism: From Democritus to Bohr* (London: A & C Black, 1931), pp. 22-37.

³⁶ Robert Boyle, *The Origin of Forms and Qualities According to the Corpuscular Philosophy*, (1666), in Stewart, p. 19. Ralph Cudworth argues that atomism actually advances the cause of religion. See *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), pp. 27-50.

convenience that gave a form to the names of these objects. [...] To suppose that someone on some particular occasion allotted names to objects, and that by this means men learnt their first words, is stark madness'.³⁷ Lucretius fixes words squarely in the physical realm. When we speak, atoms rush forth from our bodies and strike the ears of our hearers. This can be proved, because, if we speak for a long time, it causes us discomfort, 'when atoms of voice in greater numbers than usual have begun to squeeze out through the narrow outlet, the doorway of the overcrowded mouth gets scraped'.³⁸ There is much satiric potential in such accounts. Swift's opinion of such a rigidly materialist account of thinking is apparent from his punning version of it in *A Tale of a Tub*:

Air being a heavy Body, and therefore (according to the System of *Epicurus*) continually descending, must needs be more so, when loaden and press'd down by Words; which are also Bodies of much Weight and Gravity, as is manifest from those deep *Impressions* they make and leave upon us; and therefore must be delivered from a due Altitude, or else they will neither carry a good Aim, nor fall down with a sufficient Force. (TT: 60)

Swift shows the lack of human agency allowed by such a view, and other thinkers of the time, even those who approve of atomism, echo this opinion. Atomism in its original incarnation is unacceptable to seventeenth-century thought, which seeks actively to confer meaning on objects. A work like Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) is seen to embody many of the insupportable ideas behind atomism. It is maligned because it minimises the human agency in such acts as imagining, dreaming, and remembering: 'after the object is removed, or the eye shut, wee still retain an image of the thing seen, though

³⁷ Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin, 1951), p. 203.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

more obscure than when we see it [...] IMAGINATION therefore is nothing more than *decaying sense*; and is found in men, and many other living Creatures, as well sleeping, as waking'.³⁹ Hobbes's sensationism inevitably draws charges of atheism: 'Mr *Hobbes* is so great an enemy to freedom, that he will not allow Man that which God hath given him, the freedom of his will', is one observation on the matter.⁴⁰ Hobbes allows language to be divine in origin, but quickly makes it fall into line with his materialist ideas, to serve as a kind of adhesive to 'the Consequences of our Thoughts; which being apt to slip out of our memory, and put us to a new labour, may again be recalled, by such words as they were marked by'.⁴¹ Hobbes does not go as far as Lucretius, but his theory of language nevertheless puts great emphasis on bodily actions and responses, and, in the eyes of other writers, denigrates human achievements.

Criticisms of atomism show how difficult it is for writers and thinkers of the time to separate what are considered the positive from the negative aspects of language. Atomic theory has much practical use, and many connections with empiricism, and its simplicity compares favourably with some of the excesses of scholasticism. But its theory of language has discomfiting overtones of self-sufficiency and atheism, denying any human or divine creativity into the act of naming. And the strength of feeling against Hobbes can in part be imputed to fears of indeterminacy and chaos that his theories invoke. But it is this dual standard which makes it difficult for language reformers to maintain their integrity. On the one hand, they believe

³⁹ *Leviathan*, p. 88.

⁴⁰ Edward, Earl of Clarendon, *A Brief View and Survey of the Dangerous and Pernicious Errors to Church and State, in Mr Hobbes's Book, entitled Leviathan* (Oxford, 1676), p. 80.

⁴¹ *Leviathan*, p. 101.

in a simple system, in which word and thing are effortlessly kept asunder, and total recuperation of knowledge is possible. On the other, they ally themselves with a theory which, in providing support for this movement, also confronts them with atheism, and materialism, the very facets of language that they were trying to discredit. Their own speculations cannot but be informed by these other, reviled opinions.

The language reformers further implicate themselves in what they criticise when they slip into styles which are apt to confuse rather than clarify. Locke shows how his own use of fine, rhetorical language undermines his emphasis on words' subservience to ideas. For instance, he declaims very eloquently against eloquence, which, 'like the fair sex, has too prevailing Beauties in it, to suffer it self for ever to be spoken against. And 'tis in vain to find fault with those Arts of deceiving, wherein Men find pleasure to be Deceived' (III, x, 34). Locke's rakishness here is by no means his only foray into ornament. The *Essay* is full of metaphors, figures, and allusions, as would befit an expository work of its length. And these often tend towards the fantastical—monstrous births, changelings, and disembodied spirits. In his essay 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', Paul de Man calls attention to Locke's imagery and writing style, and argues that this demands as much interpretative attention as his ideas. Locke should be read, 'not in terms of explicit statements (especially explicit statements about explicit statements) but in terms of the rhetorical motions of his own text, which cannot be simply reduced to intentions or to identifiable facts'.⁴² And Locke is by no means the only culprit amongst the reformers of language. Samuel Parker's severe injunctions against figures of speech are not enough to prevent him from

⁴² Paul de Man, 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1978), 13-30 (16).

embellishing the detested Platonic philosophy with the character of ‘a Landskip, in which at a distance appear huge Rocks, and vast Mountaines, that seem to vie height with, and out-reach the Clouds, and yet by a nearer approach these vast bulky Appearances are found to be nothing but a few Artificial Shadows’.⁴³

What Locke and Parker inadvertently illustrate is that their methods in themselves are not enough to account for all the contexts, functions, and implications of language. Words can operate in other ways than those designated or desired. It is not insignificant that, at their most vehement, they become most expressive. In general, the language of reproof is more satisfying, richer and fuller than that of reform; unfortunate since it sets out to discredit just such finery.

But it also offers an alternative to philosophy—literature. In philosophy’s own literariness, and in examples of literature in the period, more can be revealed about the workings of language than in the tracts which seek to separate language from its surroundings. Rather than try to prescribe uses and misuses of words, writers like Samuel Butler and Swift *show* how it works, in both negative and positive fashion. The conclusiveness of Locke’s *Essay* or Wilkins’s *Real Character* may be lost; but these writers show how such goals are in any case spurious. It is not that philosophy is an insufficient means of reforming language, but rather that, at this period, the non-prescriptive has a greater range, and therefore a greater potential, for showing the fullness of language.

Butler and Swift both produce satires that reproach philosophers for their language. Butler’s creation Hudibras is a figure who understands

⁴³ *A Free and Impartial Censure*, p. 77.

philosophy only as far as he understands language:

Beside he was a shrewd *Philosopher*,
And had read every Text and gloss over:
What e're the crabbed'st Author hath
He understood b'implicit Faith,
What ever *Sceptick* could inquire for;
For every *why* he had a *wherefore*:
Knew more than forty of them do,
As far as words and termes could goe.
All which he understood by Rote,
And as occasion serv'd, would quote;
No matter whether right or wrong:
They might be either said or sung.⁴⁴

The scholastic philosophy is the main offender, and here Butler is in accord with Sprat, condemning the schoolmen for their practice of 'the Streining of Knats, and Swallowing of Camels, For that they are curious in Subilties, and ignorant of things of solid Knowledge are but penny-wise and Pound-foolish'.⁴⁵ Hudibras himself comprehends things 'b'implicit Faith'; that is, he subscribes to the scholastic idea of *fides implicita*, the acceptance of another's ideas without personal examination of them. But Butler's satire extends to the new philosophy as well as the old, in that it perceives the split between language and knowledge as wide, and the philosophers' attempts to breach it misguided. Satiric points are underscored persuasively by the doggerel rhyme scheme, with its awkward mauling of language. Matching 'Philosopher' to 'gloss over', for instance, suggests that a philosopher is, by definition, a person who is content to skim over the surface of things without taking the time to contemplate his own reading; and who is capable of mistaking the language of philosophy for the thing itself. This is a recurring motif of the

⁴⁴ *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I, i.

⁴⁵ Samuel Butler, *Prose Observations*, ed. Hugh de Quehen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 10.

passage. Hudibras is a thinker who understands terms ‘by Rote’, and applies them at times when their use seems appropriate. He understands philosophy ‘as far as words and termes could goe’, which recalls the attack mounted by Sprat, Wilkins and Locke. But Butler’s medium also provides him with a platform to undermine the new philosophy at the same time as he seems to join with it. The suggestion that familiarity with philosophy can extend only as far as its terms anticipates *Locke’s difficulties with the nominal and the real*, as seen in his struggle to quell the difficulties raised by the names of substances and mixed modes. Butler’s knight possesses a significant name, and in some measure lives up to his forebear, Spenser’s Sir Huddibras (from the Greek Θρασύτης, or ‘rashness’). ‘Hudibras’ was also the name of a British king of some renown, and Spenser draws an unfavourable analogy between previous and present title holders: ‘Sir *Huddibras*, an hardy man; / Yet not so good of deedes, as great of name’.⁴⁶ Spenser’s Huddibras thus claims celebrity by genealogy, not by his own actions. Paradoxically, Butler’s Hudibras, then, seems *appropriately* named, for this play with names comments directly on his real character, whose actions are so unmemorable—a name used against real names, the nominal against nominalism. Hudibras’s knowledge of philosophy seems typical in extending only as far as a familiarity with its terms. But in order to understand Butler’s point, the reader, in some measure, must look beyond the nominal, to unearth the allusion. This is a facility of language that Wilkins and Locke would humourlessly excise.

A similar obsession with the nominal extends through an early piece

⁴⁶ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London and New York: Longman, 1984), II, ii, 17.

by Swift, *A Trritical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind*. Where Butler uses an allusion to a name to develop a satirical undertone, Swift relies on the term 'tritical' to structure his attack:

Philosophers say, that Man is a Microcosm or little World, resembling in Miniature every Part of the great: And, in my Opinion, the Body Natural may be compared to the Body Politick: And if this be so, how can the *Epicureans* Opinion be true, that the Universe was formed by a fortuitous Concourse of Atoms; which I will no more believe, than that the accidental Jumbling of the Letters in the Alphabet, could fall by chance into a most ingenious and learned Treatise of Philosophy, *Risum teneatis Amici*, HOR. (PW, I: 246-7)

The entire *Trritical Essay* is a patchwork of philosophical maxims, which are made 'tritical' in two ways. First, they are clichés that have been emptied of meaning by their continual use. No attempt is made to develop them, they are dropped into the text without preface or explanation. Secondly, they are trivialised by being wrenched from their own contexts and placed in other, inappropriate ones. For example: 'But the various Opinions of Philosophers, have scattered through the World as many Plagues of the Mind, as *Pandora's* Box did those of the Body; only with this Difference, that they have not left Hope at the Bottom. And if Truth be not fled with *Astraea*, she is certainly as hidden as the Source of the *Nile*, and can be found only in *Utopia*'.⁴⁷ The result is a tract which superficially resembles philosophising, but on closer inspection is no more than a collection of sayings, that cognitively relate to nothing. It operates along the lines of the Aeolists' syllogism in *A Tale of a Tub*: '*Words are but Wind; and Learning is nothing but Words; Ergo, Learning is nothing but Wind*'.⁴⁸ An argument that makes sense on its own terms is constructed from a ridiculous set of premises. The *Tritical Essay* also

⁴⁷ PW, I: 248

⁴⁸ TT: 153.

presents arguments which make sense linguistically, but do not increase knowledge. Swift thus attacks philosophical language simply by reproducing it, albeit in its most hackneyed form. Like the Aeolists' syllogism, the *Essay* advances its assault by a double mechanism of showing and telling, which is more effective than straightforward denunciation. Both Swift and Butler picture philosophical language as obstructive and wilful, tending to mislead rather than enlighten.

The success of Butler's and Swift's satires derives from their ingenious mixture of direct and indirect strategies. But there is another effect of their approach, perhaps less intentional or anticipated. Much as they scoff at knowledge that is only knowledge of language, they also run the risk of presenting knowledge as nothing *but* language. Hudibras's knowledge extends 'As far as words and termes could goe', but *how far exactly is this? Is it to the limits of knowledge, or the limits of language?* Swift's *Essay* shares this uncertainty. The Essayist believes that 'the accidental Jumbling of the Letters of the Alphabet' could in no way resolve into 'a most ingenious and learned Treatise of Philosophy', yet this is almost a summary of Swift's achievement here. The patchwork does not bear close scrutiny, but has the external appearance of order and sense. Both *Hudibras* and the *Tritical Essay* present versions of knowledge as language, closed systems that operate perfectly well according to their own logic. While they may satirise such 'knowledge', their success at imitating it obviates some of that satiric argument.

Writers appear to go further than philosophers in exploring the potential of language of the time, and they accordingly get into more trouble. Where Locke and Wilkins adopt didactic tones, and aim for a separation of the positive and negative aspects of language, Butler and Swift seem to collapse

everything together, and verge on chaos. But their writings produce valuable insights into the functioning of language within the philosophical text, which are not available to the philosophers themselves. The price of these insights appears to be definitiveness. *Hudibras* and the *Tritical Essay* can issue warnings about the multiplicity of words, without offering correctives. On the other hand, the reformers' attempts to commandeer language inevitably emphasise the weakness of their grip.

In considering Swift's place in the seventeenth-century world of language, we need to be aware of his own versions of reform and reproof, before unfolding his literary perspective. Much of my discussion in the present work seems to contradict Swift's explicit statements, but then, it is the effects of his process on his argument that I wish to expose. In the next section, I will show how Swift's involvement in the intellectual arguments of his period influences his works, and also how he differs, in idea and expression, to produce a radical questioning of the groundwork of language.

Swift on Language

It seems likely that Swift would have more sympathy with Locke's empiricism than Wilkins's utopianism, although he makes little direct comment on Locke. But, in addition to doubting the way Locke persists in his distinction between things and ideas, as noted previously, Swift targets some of Locke's terminology in an attack on the sterility of philosophical treatises in general: 'I have been better entertained, and more informed by a Chapter in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, than by a long Discourse upon the *Will* and the *Intellect*, and *simple*

.or *complex Ideas*'.⁴⁹ Swift positions himself as the man of sense, unimpressed by technical language, preferring to garner his metaphysics from religious teaching.⁵⁰

Swift openly rejects many of the seventeenth-century ideas described earlier, and shows little enthusiasm for others. But his thinking is in some respects informed by the same types of concerns about language and its power to represent or mystify. Swift is by no means an innatist, and there are several occasions on which he feels compelled to argue for clarity in expression along the same lines as Wilkins, Locke, and the Royal Society.

A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue is published in 1712, at the height of Swift's involvement with the Tories. By addressing it to Oxford, he cannot conceal its partisan nature, nor does he attempt to in the text itself, glorifying Oxford's ministry, and arguing that one reason for the control of language is to 'contribute to the Glory of her Majesty's Reign; which ought to be recorded in Words more durable than Brass, and such as our Posterity may read a thousand Years hence, with Pleasure as well as Admiration' (PW, IV: 17). The *Proposal* is Swift's clearest account of his opinions regarding language. There are several ideas here that we have already witnessed. The English language is 'extremely imperfect [...] its daily improvements are by no Means in Proportion to its daily Corruptions', and 'in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar' (6). Swift presents a highly politicised history of the rise and fall of English, from its peak in the reign of Elizabeth I, to a trough in the Civil War.

⁴⁹ *A Letter to a Young Gentleman, lately entered into Holy Orders*, PW, IX: 77.

⁵⁰ For an argument in favour of Locke's influence on Swift, see Daniel Eilon, *Factions' Fictions: Ideological Closure in Swift's Satire* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), pp. 67-76

The moral decay of the Restoration has not helped, and it remains for the forces of Tory Anglicanism to try to put matters right. As usual, Swift (and in this he is similar to the language reformers) is more eloquent on the wrongs than the rights of his subject. In the former category we find examples of social groups that threaten the simplicity of language. There are certain university students who, 'terribly possessed with the Fear of Pedantry' compensate by acquainting themselves with the latest town jargon: 'This they call *knowing the World*, and *reading Men and Manners*' (12). They are joined by poets who contract words into monosyllables at every opportunity, to produce works that are scarcely readable; and court fops, who corrupt writing by affecting to spell a word as they speak it. Swift is particularly scathing of those who mutilate the existing language. He has already expatiated on the theme in a *Tatler* of 1710, reproducing a mock letter stocked with examples of the latest jargon, contractions, and abuses: 'I *Cou'dn't* get the Things you sent for all *about Town*.—I *thot* to *ha'* come down my self, and then *I'd ha' bro't 'um*; but I *ha'nt don't*, and I believe I *can't do't*, that's *pozz*' (PW, II: 174). In this case, Swift recommends an '*Index Expurgatorius*' to rid the land of such a style: 'expunge all Words and Phrases that are offensive to good Sense, and condemn those barbarous Mutilations of Vowels and Syllables. In this last Point, the usual Pretence is, that they spell as they speak: A noble Standard for Language' (176).

To the extensive and witty expositions of language abuse, however, Swift proposes little in the way of solutions. The jocose brevity of the *Tatler* paper excuses it from having to offer any sound advice: 'I think it is our Office only to represent Abuses, and yours to redress them', he tells the editor (177). But in the larger and more serious *Proposal*, there are hardly any practical suggestions, beyond the idea of the formation of an unbiased group of

reformers, to meet at a given time, and proceed in the correction of the language. 'What Methods they will take, is not for me to prescribe', he says (PW, IV: 14). Such reservation is partially explained by Swift's wish to distance himself from schemers in general. His role as a disinterested amateur is to lead the way, not to dirty his hands with practicalities. He draws his paper to a close when he finds himself 'turning Projector before I am aware [...] although it be one of the last Characters under which I should desire to appear before your Lordship' (21). Swift does not wish to be seen as simply another of Harley's petitioners, but instead a trusted advisor, ready to comment when called upon. Another reason for his vagueness, however, is the content of the *Proposal* itself, which could hardly be taken up and worked on systematically by anyone else. Swift is largely concerned with how language can work for his interests: in glorifying the ministry he works for, preserving the literature he writes, and spreading the religion he subscribes to. There is little abstract analysis of language. His main desire is 'that some Method should be thought on for *Ascertaining* and *Fixing* our Language for ever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite' (14). In effect, this means freezing the language permanently in Swift's time, so that future generations will not forget its importance. (Swift proposes the language of the Bible and Book of Common Prayer as good sources for improvement, showing both his concern for a language that can be understood by everyone, and his church partisanship.) The impracticality of such an idea is seized on by one of his detractors:

It will be in vain to pretend to *ascertain* Language, unless they [a nation] had the Secret of setting Rules for Thinking, and could bring Thought to a Standard too. For every Age, as well as every Nation, has its different manner of Thinking, of which the Expression and Words will always have a Relish, and be Barbarous and Polite, according as

the Times take their Turn.⁵¹

The *Proposal* does not function as a scheme advanced by a projector would. It is more of a comment than a scheme. Swift may have taken the idea of an Academy very seriously, but he is not the person to lay the groundwork for it.

There is also little in the work to suggest what Swift's preferred style is. The famous dictum 'Proper Words in proper Places, makes the true Definition of a Stile' is found in his *Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Entered into Holy Orders, and it is necessary to turn to this for more clarification of Swift's attitude*. Despite the fact that the *Letter* is intended as a guide to the right approach to writing and delivering sermons, it is usually interpreted as a more general expression of Swiftian values. In it, we find Swift's closest approach to the conventional expression of the late seventeenth century: 'When a Man's Thoughts are clear, the properest Words will generally offer themselves first; and his own Judgment will direct him in what Order to place them, so as they may best be understood' (PW, IX: 68). He may credit the language with more natural propriety than Wilkins, and the individual with more native sense than Locke, but Swift concurs with them in placing language at the service of thought, and arguing that clear ideas will produce clear speech. Like them, he blames language when this process is disrupted. In the case of preaching, 'no Men succeed better than those, who trust entirely to the Stock or Fund of their own Reason; advanced, indeed, but not overlaid by Commerce with Books' (76). Of course, it is in this work that Swift attacks the importation into preaching of modern philosophical terms, such as those found in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, so we do not find him in company with Locke for very long.

⁵¹ John Oldmixon, *Reflections on Dr. Swift's Letter* (London, 1712), pp. 26-7.

There are, then, points of comparison between Swift's work and the attitudes to language in the period. He shares a wish to improve language, and a proportionate belief that this will be possible. Swift also subscribes to a view of language as secondary to thought, and controllable from without. But to argue that the comments produced in these scattered essays represent the whole of Swift's dealings with language would be impossible. These 'official' views have to be set against the mass of Swift's works which do not abide by such rules, or express any clear authorial doctrine, and yet are deeply concerned with language nonetheless. The offerings of the *Proposal* and the *Letter to a Young Gentleman* sit uncomfortably alongside the *Tale*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and others of Swift's works which deal with language in a less direct, but no less significant manner.

Leaving aside the bulk of Swift's work for a moment, it is apparent that even the few pieces which present some doctrine are not as clear, coherent, and unified as may at first appear. All of the pieces have been written with some motive which colours their outlook. Edward Said writes: 'With a few exceptions, most of his writing was precisely occasional: it was stimulated by a specific occasion and planned in some way to change it'.⁵² The *Letter to a Young Gentleman* deals specifically with preaching, and the evidence we have of Swift's sermons shows that he took his own advice to heart. The sermons are very different from his other works, designed to be understood by learned and unlearned alike. This must be borne in mind when considering any of the general pronouncements about language made in the *Letter*. Similarly, the *Proposal* fuses party politics with personal ambition.⁵³

⁵² Edward W. Said, 'Swift's Tory Anarchy', in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 53-71 (p. 56).

⁵³ See Ann Cline Kelly, *Swift and the English Language* (Philadelphia: University of

It is misleading to extrapolate these works from their origins, and knit them into a unified theory of language. Even commentators who attempt to do this, hedge their arguments.⁵⁴

The majority of Swift's works do not follow these few examples; in fact they are not recognisable as 'studies' of language. Swift's literariness ensures that the relationship of observer to object is replaced by a more complex, dialectical relation, in which the author does not preside dictatorially over the text. Swift's work differs from the projects of the Royal Society, or the prognostications of Locke, in their approaches to the 'subject' of language. As the example of the *Tritical Essay* shows, as well as the many satires on the Royal Society that occur in the voyage to Lagado in *Gulliver's Travels*,⁵⁵ language is not seen as something that can be mastered merely by being described and documented. While the Essayist uses more and more examples to illustrate his 'arguments', those arguments become less and less certain. The *Essay's* success on its own terms shows how difficult it is to separate language, to make it an object of enquiry, at the same time as one is using it. In Swift's works, the relationship between language and its objects of reference is repeatedly examined. But this examination does not take the form of simple diatribe or complex hypothesis. Rather, it is an implied, enacted debate, carried out at the level of textual play and question. As a result, Swift's works allow for some surprising connections. In *A Tale of a Tub*, for

Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 97-103, for a detailed discussion of the 'subtext' of the *Proposal*.

⁵⁴ For example, Barbara Strang dwells on Swift's explicit statements about language, but concedes: 'A wary eye is always needful to distinguish straight use of an expression from uses designed to satirise users of that expression, and there are times when discrimination is baffled'. 'Swift and the English Language: A Study in Principles and Practice', *To Honor Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), pp. 1947-60 (p. 1950).

⁵⁵ See below, Chapter 4.

instance, the separation of word from object that Wilkins, Locke, and the 'official' Swift seem to sanction, is not always maintained, as the narrator experiments with sounds and shapes of words as much as their supposed meaning. By this means, the *Tale* underlines what seems apparent from the opposition of Wilkins and the Royal Society to Boehme and atomism: the fascination and curiosity engendered by mystics and enthusiasts of language. At the same time as the *Tale* satirises the Aeolists for their windy mysticism, it parades its own fascination with the material of words, and indulges in deliberate confusion and obfuscation. In this respect, it echoes the fortunes of Locke and Wilkins, who dictate the rules of language, yet struggle in their own prose to follow them. It is the unofficial Swift who has the most intriguing, diverse, and ultimately radical points to make about language and the world. So while his writings that express an opinion on language are a useful starting point for any discussion, they should not be seen as the culmination; and it is misplaced to assume that other works can be analysed through these few, disparate examples.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Those who condemn and those who correct language in the late seventeenth century are united in attempting to make sense of a world in which ancient and modern values collide, confusion reigns, and authority is under attack. They seek to assert the primacy of human thought over language, because language

⁵⁶ Works which do assume this position include amongst others, Denis Donoghue, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Martin Price, *Swift's Rhetorical Art, a Study in Structure and Meaning* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1963); and Dan Doll, 'The Word and the Thing in Swift's Prose', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 15 (1986), 199-210.

is a human construct. But they are also highly aware that words unleashed on the world make their own progress, often in undesirable directions. While the results of this attitude are often risible, its origin is understandable. Swift's work is a useful corrective for two reasons. First, it uncovers some of the flaws of reform, and secondly it offers an alternative, if extreme, perspective on how language works. The reformers' contention that words are separate from objects, or ideas of objects, is put into question by Swift's rhetorical style, which advances ideas without seeming always to make 'sense' within these narrow parameters. His allusiveness, lack of authorial presence in the text, even his refusal to acknowledge his works in public is at odds with Locke and Wilkins; while some of his more extreme styles raise the spectre of Comenius and Boehme, when words actually seem to come alive, and to complicate the path to understanding. Swift's work unites the two alleged aspects of language, positive and negative, to show that such a distinction does not hold. Words work in many fashions, often at the same moment, and their use is not simply the preserve of their originator.

The Swiftian perspective on language which is offered as a replacement is diverse. Language is considered by Swift in all its aspects, not just inside the narrow range allowed for it by contemporary thinkers. The social use of language, for instance, or the differences between its written and spoken forms, feature as much as its referential function. Swift enlarges the realm of language, then. Its word/object or word/idea status is still at issue, but so too is the wider sphere of language use and effect, its contexts, and its non-representational capacities. Swift departs from most of his linguistic predecessors, not only in his literary use of language, but also in his extremism, his capacity to test and push language to the limit, to see where it will lead. The subject of the remaining chapters is the result of this unique

· and potentially disturbing approach to words, language working through his texts to produce an analysis of itself.

2: Writing, Reading, and the Book: *A Tale of a Tub*

Introduction

In this chapter, I read *A Tale of a Tub* with reference to the idea of ‘the book’. This allows for discussions of a number of aspects of the text that I consider crucial. It shows how writing operates, both thematically and structurally, in Swift. Ideas of authorship, ownership, and authority can be broached; in historical context, but also on a conceptual level. And the act of reading, as well as the roles of the reader and critic, are highlighted. There is also the opportunity to consider the relationship of books as material objects with the Book, the spiritual and intellectual component of knowledge. By choosing to concentrate on this idea, I intend to draw out from a complex text the significant work on language, work that is relevant throughout Swift’s writing. The *Tale* occurs early in Swift’s writing career, and in many respects, other works should be read in the light of its far-reaching and radical implications for language. But this would be the case regardless of its historical placing; in my opinion *A Tale of a Tub* acts as a template for Swift’s writing. It achieves a unique status as the text which foregrounds other texts, because of the manner of its expression; and for a student of Swift’s language its importance should not be underestimated. I am also aware that the *Tale* can accommodate a seemingly endless number of critical positions, and yet frustrate them all.

This is the first impression it offers, and the one which should never be ignored. My decision to write about the *Tale* in the light of the book is an acknowledgement of this difficulty. Like the *Tale*, 'the book' offers (and complicates) many possibilities. It is similarly vast in range and overarching in scope, and suitably textual. And without some strategic starting-point, it would be impossible to make any headway with the *Tale*. The book allows a consideration of the operation of language in the *Tale* that pays attention to the creative activities of readers.

In the first section, I deal with the history of the book until the time of the *Tale*, which is important in understanding some of the arcane reference material, and the reception of literature in the early eighteenth century. Then I discuss the fortunes of writing and text in the *Tale* itself; and finally, the allegory of the coats becomes the focus of the act of reading, which indicates the possible outcome of the many linguistic activities in the text. But rather than viewing the book as a cohesive theme which makes sense of a various text, I see it as an allusive concept, which expands the focus of the *Tale*. And the idea of 'the book' is itself responsible for initiating this action, as we shall discover.

The Story of the Book

God hath many Books of this Assize; of Nature, Scripture, Providence,
Predestination: in all, the materialls, compacture, parts are admirable:

for In wonderfull Wisdome he hath made all things. That Book of Nature is most common, most read on, learned, understood.¹

Imagery of books has been in existence for as long as books themselves. In the seventeenth century, it remains as popular as ever, appearing throughout the work of important figures like Bacon, Boyle, Bentley, Donne, Milton, and Herbert.² As Montagu's list shows, the metaphor of the book can be applied to all of God's works; but the 'Book of Nature' is the most widely disseminated in the seventeenth century. The book's importance is assured because it economically draws together several ideas. It emphasises the divinity behind all things, by implying that all books, literal and metaphorical, originate from one Author. It is thus a solidary image, uniting man, God, and nature; but without the sense of hierarchy found in the Chain of Being. For writers, the book underlines their craft, as a hallowed imitation of the Creation; and it also presents them with opportunities for analogy and self-reflection. To write of 'the book', then, is to become involved in questions about learning, and about the relationship between human and divine. The book image is not constant, however, and from its first usage to its novel treatment in *A Tale of a Tub* undergoes many conflicting changes. A brief survey of the history of the book image until the time of Swift will be useful in showing its shifting significance; and also in laying the ground plan for

¹Richard Montagu, *Acts and Monuments* (London, 1642), p. 38.

² See for example, John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alistair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968; repr., corr., 1980), III, ll. 46-50. Boyle and Herbert are discussed below.

Swift's approach to, and questioning of it, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Pagan societies vary in their approach to the book. In his influential study of 'The Book as Symbol', Ernst Robert Curtius profiles the differences between early Greek, a mainly oral culture, which disdains writing and neglects book imagery; and later Hellenism, in which books have more prominence. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the invention of writing is viewed balefully: 'written records are, according to Socrates, only a mnemonic aid for him who already knows that with which the writing is concerned'.³ Socrates can only perceive writing as a poor relation of speech: 'every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it'.⁴ Plato's words contrast strongly with the Hellenistic book culture, in which Curtius finds epigrams covering writing materials—pen, ink, papyrus, wax—and references to the 'book of life', in the poetry of Meleagar, for instance.⁵ Curtius finds little use of the book metaphor in Latin culture, and it is really not until the Middle Ages that the book becomes a central image in literature. The centring of a faith on one book inevitably leads to the consecration of

³ 'The Book as Symbol', in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), pp. 302-47 (p. 304). I am indebted to Curtius's extensive range of references throughout this section.

⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914, repr., 1990), p. 565.

⁵ Curtius, 'The Book', p. 307.

book metaphors. Now the idea of the book is strengthened considerably by its association with God. Whereas Plato saw no inherent value in writing, to medieval Christians there is one type of writing at least that is divine: God's Word. This new respectability leads to a profusion of images. Curtius is particularly impressed by 'the many images from the book and a constant "life-relation" to it' in the fifth-century *Peristaphenon* of Prudentius. Here, the wounds of St. Eulalia are shown translated on her body to purple writing in praise of Christ. A blow-by-blow account of the passion of St. Romanus is set down in a divine ledger kept by an angel. But most blessed of all is the schoolmaster Cassian, whose martyrdom consists in being beaten to death by his pupils with writing tablets. Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* also yields many book images: 'Turn we the ploughshare upon the wax and plow we with a point of bone', is his picturesque merger of the activities of writing and life.⁶ The worldliness of the Ancients' book metaphors has been replaced with an image that suggests the connection between the human and the divine, the sense that every individual act of writing has its equivalent on a cosmic scale. Writing is everywhere in this world; in everyday objects, in the Bible, in the stars, in human books, and the image of a great book solders together all the various elements of medieval living into a divinely ordained pattern. Even something as unlikely as architecture is replete with it. According to Jesse Gellrich, cathedrals are constructed to be 'encyclopedias in stone', reflecting the great Book of God in their designs. Durandus of Mende's thirteenth-

⁶ Ibid., pp. 311-12, 313.

century compendium on church architecture and liturgy is ‘an extrapolation of patterns and meanings already immanent in the structure of the building, for it embodied the Great Design of the universe as a system of divine truth to instruct moral conduct and to reveal the eschatological pains of Hell and glories of Heaven’.⁷

Yet, while the image provides many comforts for the medieval individual, it also serves as a reminder of his or her fallen state. If the world is a great text, only God can comprehend it all at once; humanity can at best glimpse a portion of it. Dante’s vision of Paradise at the end of the *Divine Comedy* is perhaps the closest the medieval imagination dare approach: ‘I saw gathered there in the depths of it / Bound up by love in a single volume / All the leaves scattered through the universe’.⁸ For most observers, however, such delights are forbidden, a consequence of the confusion of tongues at Babel. Where before there was only the language of Adam, which embodied the things it named, now there are many languages, which even together do not reconstitute the lost totality. It is no longer possible to exist in a pre-lapsarian harmony of word and object; comfort must now be sought in a less intense unity: ‘Language possesses a symbolic function; but since the disaster at Babel we must no longer seek for it—with rare exceptions—in the words themselves but rather in the very existence of language, in its total relation to

⁷ Gellrich, ‘The Argument of the Book: Medieval Writing and Modern Theory’, *Clio*, 10 (1981), 245-63 (254).

⁸ *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, repr., 1993), p. 498.

the totality of the world, in the intersecting of its space with the loci and forms of the cosmos'.⁹ The book is the obvious repository of such schemes.

These ideas associated with the book—totality, the interconnection of divine and human, the reminder of the Fall—continue to operate in the seventeenth century, but they are augmented with new concepts. The linking of the Book of Nature and the Scriptures becomes pronounced, at around the same time that empirical observation of nature is growing in respectability. And whereas the medieval and Renaissance individual was mostly a passive recipient of the knowledge in the book, in the seventeenth century, human agency is much more evident in the 'reading' of all the types of book available, from the empirical observations of the Royal Society to the personal interpretation of Scriptures approved by Dissenters.

Thomas Browne's famous observation in *Religio Medici* sets the scene for the seventeenth-century landscape of the two books:

Thus there are two bookes from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that one written of God, another of his servant Nature, that universall and publik Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discovered him in the other [...] surely the Heathens knew better how to joyne and reade these mysticall letters, than wee Christians, who cast a more carelesse eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of nature.¹⁰

A thorough knowledge of divinity comes from close consultation of *both* books, and in different writers, there are different emphases. Where Browne

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Tavistock, 1970, repr., Routledge, 1989) p. 37.

seems to accord equal weight to both, Robert Boyle is anxious to stress the priority of the Scriptures for the discovery of God. Even though he is personally engaged in the study of nature, it does not answer all his questions: 'though the material World be full of the Productions of [God's] Wisdom; yet that hinders not but that the Scripture may be enobled with many excellent Impresses, and, as it were, Signatures of the same attribute'.¹¹ He goes on to argue that the study of nature alone will not satisfy human curiosity, which seeks a greater meaning to the objects it perceives. Just as, when we read a good book, we hurry on to the end in order to achieve a complete understanding of the contents, so we are impatient to know the secrets of nature: 'in the Book of Nature, as in a well-contriv'd Romance, the parts have such a connection and relation to one another, and the things we would discover are so darkly or incompletely knowable by those that precede them, that the mind is never satisfied till it comes to the end of the Book'.¹² Such knowledge, of course, is unavailable in a post-lapsarian world; it is only for the contriver of nature himself to understand all its intricacies.¹³ So the book metaphor serves Boyle well, by uniting the strength of human knowledge with its limitations. He presents the enquiring observer as always reading, always

¹⁰ Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici and Other Works*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 15.

¹¹ *The Excellency of Theology, Compar'd with Natural Philosophy* (London, 1671), p. 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹³ For the belief that scientific discovery could unravel the mysteries of 'The Book of Nature', see especially Ken Robinson, 'The Book of Nature', in T. G. S. Cain and Ken Robinson (eds), *Into Another Mould: Change and Continuity in English Culture 1625-1700* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 96-106 (p. 89); and Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 123.

following the directions of an omniscient author. His investigations are thus protected against charges of presumption and arrogance, because they shelter under an image of self-effacement.

Writers of literature have a strong investment in the idea of the book, because they see it as a means of protecting their own works by a divine sanction. Milton's attack on censorship presses the relationship: 'Who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but hee who destroys a good Booke, kills reason itself, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye'.¹⁴

Henry Vaughan takes up the theme of the divine author in 'The Book':

Thou knew'st this *Tree*, when a green *shade*
Cover'd it, since a *Cover* made,
And where it flourish'd, grew and spread,
As if it never should be dead.¹⁵

Vaughan invokes a time before the Fall, a time when books did not have to be written, for all knowledge was there in nature—the line 'as if it never should be dead' contains a mild rebuke for the human process of cutting down a divine creation to produce a human artifact. But Vaughan does not persist in negativity. He considers the Day of Judgement, 'When thou shalt make all new again' (l. 27), but senses that it will not be a straightforward return to nature. Books gain more than a bare materiality during their time on earth, for they are also read, a process which awakens the spiritual. Vaughan asks God to consider him on Judgement Day: 'Give him among thy works a place, /

¹⁴ *Areopagitica*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al, 8 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1935-82), II, p. 492.

Who in them loved and sought thy face!'(ll. 29-30). For it is in the perusal of the book that Vaughan has discovered divinity, and for this he believes he shall be rewarded. (As if to stress the earthliness of the exercise, Vaughan has been searching for God's 'face', his human, physical aspects.) The achievement is as much a part of the book's fabric as its pages and binding, but it will not simply be reduced to dust along with them. The act of interpreting God in the book has an important status, and this marks the subtle difference between Vaughan and medieval writers, who are generally shown divinity, rather than actively involved in pursuing it. For Vaughan, the possibility is reversed. As a reader, he seeks eternal translation into one of the 'works' of God, a sign that he considers his action of great importance in the manifestation of the divine.

One poet who pursues this idea extensively is George Herbert, whose works abound in images of books and writing. Herbert's explicit concern is to do justice to God in his poetry, to find some means of expressing the divine free from the infection of his human pride. Thus, in 'Jordan (I)' he asks: 'Is there no truth in beautie? / Is all good structure in a winding stair?'.¹⁶ He draws on the conventional opposition between simple and elaborate writing, and argues that the first is the best vehicle for expressing truth, as it is not prey to the excessive self-contemplation of the second. As a poet, though, he faces

¹⁵ *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, ed. L. C. Martin, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), ll. 11-14. Further line references will be given in the text.

the problem of trying to express the truth in a manner pleasing to his readers, so that they will themselves acknowledge it. The resolution of Herbert's dilemma seems to come in the last lines, where he hopes that readers will find truth itself pleasing enough, without the need for embellishment: 'Nor let them punish me with losse of rime, / Who plainly say, *My God, My King*' (ll. 14-15). Herbert thus seems to eschew poetry at the last, instead preferring to show the act of praise itself. Of course, in order to present this moment to his readers, he has to write it down, and in a distinct typography too, so that his flight from the ornamental lacks total conviction. But this is the paradox that informs much of Herbert's writing. In his pursuit of the pure expression of the divine, he continually uncovers his human investments, a matter of great anxiety to him. But it is also this which gives his poetry its strength. Nowhere is this difficulty better expressed than in the use of book imagery. In 'Jordan (I)', he asks, 'Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines, / Catching the sense at two removes' (ll. 9-10). Bewailing the mediation of knowledge caused by the Fall, he nonetheless hints at the same ideas as Vaughan. The reading act is presented as paradoxical. It is frustrating, because it enables us only to 'catch the sense at two removes'. Reading is a substitute for a superior experience. But also, reading has powers of constitution, it is through this that we in some measure 'create' God: the word 'divines', as well as implying our need to guess the hidden meaning, also casts

¹⁶ *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941, repr., 1967), ll. 2-3. Further references to Herbert's poems are from this edition. Line numbers will

us as divinities ourselves, compensating for the lack of a divine presence with our own invention. This undertone of human power occurs again in 'The H. Scriptures II', where Herbert likens the Bible to the night sky, only a segment of which is visible to the frustrated observer: 'Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine, / And the configurations of their glorie!' (ll. 1-2). Herbert again pits human agency against divine inscrutability here: 'Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good, / And comments on thee' (ll. 9-10). Ostensibly, he is echoing a common theme, that the individual is a sacred reflection of the creator;¹⁷ but his language has an uneasy ambivalence—phrases like 'makes good' and 'comments on' imply the reciprocal power of the individual to become a critic of God. In the poem, Herbert openly praises the Bible: 'Thou art joyes handsell: heav'n lies flat in thee, / Subject to ev'ry mounter's bended knee' (ll. 13-14). Again, the opposing forces of creativity and passivity are in play. The Bible may be the repository of God's will, but it is also a physical book, prey to the same restraints as all others. It depends on the grace of its readers, for example—without their active intervention, the truths lie dormant. Herbert's eulogy is thus tinged with uncertainty. The Bible may well be 'joyes handsell', but, when the devout rise, in order to make it the 'subject' of their praise, it simultaneously becomes 'subject' to them. The act of praying ('the bended knee') is aligned with the act of reading (lying

be given in the text.

¹⁷ See for example Richard Bentley's praise of 'the innumerable Members of the Human Body, which in the Style of the Scripture *are all written in the Book of God*', in *The Folly and Unreasonableness of Atheism* (London, 1693), Sermon 2, p. 38.

the book flat on the bended knee to study it). In his attempt to pitch the Bible above ordinary works, Herbert in fact reveals their kinship. The Bible is noteworthy for its ordinariness; like any volume, it must depend upon the whim of its readers for the dissemination of its contents.

Threatening the Bible with its physicality seems to be a new departure, which is a symptom of the insecurity about the book found in Herbert and others. What is significant here is that the very mechanism of power—the act of interpreting—also threatens to diminish that power. The centrality of the book in Christian religion allows the divine authority to be transmitted and understood by future generations, but, in the seventeenth century at least, the agency of the human reader has a new prominence, upon which divinity is dependent. Herbert writes in order to praise his creator, but persists in uncovering his own and his readers' creativity; and if the activities are not in direct opposition, they certainly lead to tensions within the poetry.

The symbolism of the book has undergone some important changes in the seventeenth century. The evocation of man's passive inscription in nature still abounds; as in Donne's assertion that 'All *mankind* is of one *Author*, and is one *volume*'.¹⁸ Yet many writers are foregrounding the acts of writing and interpretation, as if the great metaphor of the book needs to be developed in order to continue to function. Thus, an image which once fused the individual and the universal in a static totality now serves as a reminder of the mutable

¹⁸ *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 86.

and progressive. Moreover, the book differs from other symbols of order and connection, such as the Chain of Being, because it has a heuristic function for its user. Writing about the book necessarily involves making discoveries and observations about one's own literary practice, as can be seen in Herbert's attempts to grapple with it. Perhaps this accounts for his disconcerting puns, which appear whenever he tries to distance his subject matter from its written medium.

The recent renewed interest in ideas of writing by twentieth-century critics has led to some speculation on what the function and effect of the idea of the book is in literature. The book is found to have a resonance which intersects with texts at various levels—structural as well as thematic. It also releases meaning along a linear, theological axis, whilst at the same time frustrating it in other ways. As these are notions which are apparent in many writers who use the image, and are particularly prominent in Swift, they deserve fuller exposition here.

Herbert's relationship with writing and the book is similar in many ways to the interpretation of it offered by Jacques Derrida. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that the book is always associated with totality, order, and control. The book is the space which encloses writing, gives it a shape and an end, and imposes meaning on it. It is through the idea of the book that writing can be controlled, and made to produce meaning: 'The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the

signified pre-exists it, supervises its inscriptions and signs, and is independent of it in its ideality'.¹⁹ The book is more than just a physical object; it is also a founding concept. It offers a final certainty of meaning, and as such, enables all individual books to be written. The idea of the great book of knowledge, or the Book of Nature, are all versions of this concept. Although Milton, Dante, and Boyle lament their specific lack of access to this great book, they are nevertheless confident that it exists, as the impetus behind their own works. For while each physical book cannot hope to contain the sum of the universe, the great Book can. It is the place where signifiers cease to turn into yet more signifiers, and come to rest as final signifieds. The place where meaning and interpretation are finally, irreversibly, settled.

The totalising book also features in the work of Maurice Blanchot, who writes that 'the book constitutes the condition for every possibility of reading and writing'.²⁰ He distinguishes three ideas signalled by the word: 'the empirical book; the book: condition for all reading and all writing; and the book: totality or Work' (423). The book is thus more than a physical object (which is nevertheless very important to a culture); it has conceptual force. We associate knowledge and meaning with the form of the book (the second idea), and, most important, behind all books lurks the notion of the

¹⁹ *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 18. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

²⁰ 'The Absence of the Book', in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 422-34 (p. 423). Further references to this work will be given in the text.

great book, which impels us to write (the third idea): 'the book is the *a priori* of knowledge. We would know nothing if there did not always exist in advance the impersonal memory of the book and, more essentially, the prior disposition to write and to read contained in every book and affirming itself only in the book' (423). Blanchot declares that totality informs all three notions: 'all these forms assume that the book contains knowledge as the presence of something that is virtually present and immediately accessible, if only with the help of mediations and relays' (423). The book can always be looked to for knowledge, because each separate work tacitly indicates the great book that lies behind it.

Both writers stress that the idea of the book is always a theological one, even when individual works do not pursue religious subjects. By this, they mean that the book supports the notion that language is derived from an origin, and can be understood by reference to it. Derrida argues that 'The age of the sign is essentially theological' (*Grammatology*, 18). The idea that a signifier relates to a signified develops from the idea that God imposes meaning onto the world, which can then be 'read' from it, if we refer back to his intention. Even if there is a difficulty in interpreting God's works, the possibility nevertheless exists. Blanchot goes further, arguing that not only are we governed by theology in general, but by the Bible in particular: 'The Bible refers language to its origin: whether it be written or spoken, this language forms the basis for the theological era that opens and endures for as long as Biblical space and time endure' ('Absence', 427). The Bible offers

two comforts—totality and presence. To read it is to have contact with God's meaning, and also to feel reassured that all knowledge is contained within it. And although the Bible is the best example, all books offer these consolations; they are, to cite Derrida: 'the encyclopedic protection of theology and logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy' (18).

But Derrida and Blanchot are not concerned to champion the cause of the book; rather they see it as beset with conflicts. Derrida writes of the 'historical closure' of the age of the book, if its complete 'end' is inconceivable. Blanchot's work focuses on the 'absence' of the book, in sharp contrast to its assumed presence and plenitude. In both cases, the individual human act of writing poses the threat to the book's hegemony, because it runs counter to the theological imposition of meaning. Of the human author, Blanchot says, 'In order to write, he must destroy language in its present form and create it in another form, denying books as he forms a book out of what other books are not'.²¹ The act of writing is thus confrontational, and although it takes the form of the theological book, it is also a threat to it; it has 'aphoristic energy', as Derrida says, which undermines the book's totality. For Derrida, the book's claim to final presence is in doubt, as is presence in language in general. His project in *Of Grammatology* is to show how what was once understood as language is now being replaced by writing. By this,

he does not mean that speech is becoming extinct, or that physical ('vulgar') writing is in the ascendant, but that our assumptions about language are changing. Western metaphysics has traditionally privileged speech over writing, because it seems sensible to associate speech with immediacy of ideas. In the presence of the speaker, there is less room for doubt about the meaning of his or her words. Writing, on the other hand, reinforces the absence of the speaker, and is beset with problems of misinterpretation and misattribution. Divine or natural writing is the only exception, because it is immediately linked with God. Derrida notes the often pejorative language used to make these distinctions: 'the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body' (17). In other words, all writing that is contaminated with proof of the human is wayward. Good writing is complete, given wholesale by God, and does not admit of multiple interpretations. For this reason it is always 'comprehended' in a book (the Book of Nature, for example), which is fully present and ordered. Bad writing is human, artificial, an affront to the divine origin of language, often tending to confuse rather than clarify.

However, Derrida uncovers a simple but significant problem in the presentation of the two types of writing:

²¹ 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *The Gaze of Orpheus and other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), pp. 21-62 (p. 34).

The paradox to which attention must be paid is this: natural and universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing, is thus named by metaphor [such as the Book of Nature]. A writing that is sensible, finite, and so on, is designated in the literal sense; it is thus thought on the side of culture, technique and artifice; a human procedure, the ruse of a being accidentally incarnated or of a finite creature. (15)

So 'natural' writing is in fact more artificial than the artificial, because it is mediated by a metaphor, a human production. The attempt to separate out the two strands of writing actually binds them closer together; they both require human agency for their existence; it is just that one is presented as if it were beyond the merely human. Derrida does not, however, conclude that the attempt to elevate one writing over another should be reversed, and the so-called 'literal' human writing valorised: 'It is not, therefore, a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning, but of determining the "literal" meaning of writing as metaphoricity itself' (15). All writing is ultimately metaphorical in that the sign stands in for the object it names: meaning is transferred from thing to sign. The distinction between literal and metaphorical should therefore be understood as a difference of degree, not an absolute. Derrida thus rules out the notion of immediacy and presence contained in the idea of the book. Our knowledge of this book must always be mediated, because it can only be understood through non-present writing. Blanchot reaches the same conclusion, when he focuses on the relationship between God and the Bible: 'In some sense God only remains God (only becomes divine) inasmuch as He speaks through the book' ('Absence', 428). Rather than affirm the presence of God, the Bible only marks his absence from

its pages. As another critic has observed, in the Old Testament 'God is replaced by Text, which then becomes the signifier both of God and the index of his silence'.²² Overall, it is the act of writing which threatens the book's totality, even as it relies on it for its conceptual form: 'Writing passes through the book, accomplishing itself there even as it disappears there; yet we do not write for the book. The book: a ruse by which writing goes towards *the absence of the book*'.²³

Thus, the ideas of presence, totality, and divinity which the book promises are undercut by its reliance on the act of writing, which imports absence, variety, and secularity into it. The works of Vaughan and Herbert seem alert to this conflict, if they nevertheless gloss over it, or try to resolve it. In Swift's *Tale*, the dilemmas and problems are less easily overlooked; in fact, they provide much of the text's impetus. The idea of the book receives a new treatment in the *Tale*: it is both openly thematised and internalised, as Swift engages in satire and textual self-analysis at the same time. How we read the *Tale* depends greatly on our response to this working out of the idea of the book, especially its troubled relationship with writing, and it is to these controversies that we now turn.

²² Richard Jacobson, 'Absence, Authority, and the Text', *Glyph*, 3 (1978), 137-47 (146).

²³ Blanchot, 'Absence', p. 424.

Writing

Critics have noted how frequently images and motifs of books appear in *A Tale of a Tub*. Angus Ross, for instance, draws our attention to ‘the vast range of the references to reading matter, books and pamphlets, ancient and modern’.²⁴ From its opening pages, the *Tale* reveals its environment as the crowded world of Modern book production. Inside the title page is the promise of future works ‘by the same Author [...] which will be speedily published’. They have intriguing titles: ‘*A Panegyric Essay upon the Number THREE*’, ‘*An Analytical Discourse upon Zeal, Histori-theo-physiologically considered*’, ‘*A General History of Ears*’ (TT: 2). In the Introduction, the narrator reveals his aim ‘to travel in a compleat and laborious Dissertation upon the prime Productions of our Society’—a guided tour of the works of the Moderns (67). The *Tale* is crammed with references to books, real and imaginary, from Homer to Dryden. It takes in a genealogy of criticism, an assault on the *Iliad*, and an excursion into the world of hermetic writings. There is no doubt that books are a major focus of the *Tale*. Even the allegory on abuses in religion takes the form of a series of misreadings of a will. The sprawling, all-embracing style of the *Tale*, and the pretensions of its

²⁴ ‘The Books in the *Tale*: Swift and Reading in *A Tale of a Tub*’, in *Proceedings of the First Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real and Heinz J. Vienken (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1985), pp. 209-216 (p. 215). See also, Carol H. Barnett, “‘The Children of the Brain’ and ‘All Devouring Time’; Swift on Books”, *College Language Association Journal*, 32 (1982), 494-512; Daniel Eilon, ‘Swift Burning the Library of Babel’, *MLN*, 80 (1985), 269-82; Clive T. Probyn, ‘Swift and Typographic Man: Foul Papers, Modern Criticism, and

narrator, provide a satirical overview of the world of Grub Street, a world described succinctly by Philip Pinkus:

The combination of all these circumstances—more readers, less enforcement, a compact market, powerful political parties who needed writers—created a new situation which became increasingly apparent by the last part of the 17th century, where it was possible for the hack writer to achieve a kind of independence which had neither social status nor the slightest financial assurance.²⁵

But it is more than just a creative attack on a literary scene. The style of Swift's satire also foregrounds the relationship of individual books, and of Grub Street writing in particular, to the idea of the book.

While there are too many disparate elements in the *Tale's* book theme to be neatly classified, one motif does recur—the personification of books. In the 'Dedication to Prince Posterity', the narrator describes the high turnover of Modern works in terms of life and death. The 'inveterate Malice' of Posterity's governor, Time, leads to the extinction of 'several Thousands' of new works annually: 'Unhappy Infants, many of them barbarously destroyed, before they have so much as learnt their *Mother-Tongue* to beg for Pity. Some he stifles in their Cradles, others he frights into Convulsions, whereof they suddenly die; Some he flays alive, others he tears Limb from Limb' (33).²⁶ The narrator is unable to present 'one single Poet' of his own age to Posterity,

Irish Dissenters', in *Reading Swift: Papers from the Second Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Richard H. Rodino and Hermann J. Real (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1993), pp. 25-43.

²⁵ *Grub Street Stripped Bare* (London: Constable, 1968), p. 17. For an extensive survey of the Grub Street milieu see also Pat Rogers, *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture* (London: Methuen & Co., 1972).

²⁶ For an interesting discussion of the 'orphan' metaphor in the *Tale*, and particularly its relationship to issues of legitimacy, authority, and origin, see Robert Phiddian, *Swift's Parody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 140-196.

an indication of how little of lasting worth there is in the works currently produced. In addition, the narrator unwittingly abets the satire by providing more and more information for Posterity about the demise of books:

When I first thought of this Address, I had prepared a copious List of *Titles* to present to *Your Highness* as an undisputed Argument for what I affirm. The Originals were posted fresh upon all Gates and Corners of Streets; but returning in a very few Hours to take a Review, they were all torn down, and fresh ones in their Places: I enquired after them among Readers and Booksellers, but I enquired in vain, the *Memorial of them was lost among Men, their Place was no more to be Found* .(34-5)

The rapid changes in taste, and the huge demand for novelty typical of the early eighteenth-century readership, are attacked here.²⁷ By writing of the title pages as if they were actual individuals, Swift also strengthens the connection, arising at the time, between author and work. Anonymity is giving ground to the desire for literary fame, and leading to a zeal for attribution amongst the reading public. Often, this results in unwelcome pairings, In 1715, Daniel Defoe complains: ‘This brings me to that other Oppression which as I said I suffer under, and which, I think, is of a kind, that no Man ever suffer’d under so much as my self: And this is to have every Libel, every Pamphlet, be it ever so foolish, so malicious, so unmannerly or so dangerous, be laid at my Door, and be call’d publicly by my Name’.²⁸ The public desire to identify authors of tracts is probably caused by many factors,

²⁷ For more on eighteenth-century literary culture, see Pat Rogers, *The Augustan Vision* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), pp. 76-86; and Isabel Rivers (ed.), *Books and Their Readers in the Eighteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982).

not least by the importance of knowing a writer's political standpoint. *A Tale of a Tub* itself was the cause of much rumour and speculation, and Swift's ambivalent attitude to owning authorship was in part a result of political and professional pressures. But when authors pursue recognition for their own works (or, sometimes, the works of others), other pressures are responsible. In many cases, an author's livelihood is so directly linked to his or her literary production, that recognition is vital, not just for success, but also for survival. The *Tale's* personification of books presents this brutal reality with great precision and economy. For a Modern, the inevitable decline of the work seems written into its method:

He will desire no more Ingredients [than works stolen from others] towards fitting up a Treatise, that shall make a very comely Figure on a Bookseller's Shelf, there to be preserved neat and clean, for a long Eternity, adorn'd with the Heraldry of its Title, fairly inscribed on a Label; never to be thumb'd or greas'd by students, nor bound to everlasting Chains of Darkness in a Library: But when the Fulness of time is come, shall haply undergo the Tryal of Purgatory, in order to *ascend the Sky*. (148)

The mock-pathetic tone of this 'biography' arises in part from an understanding of the closer connection now perceived in this period between authors and works. For many, writing has become a means of survival, not an amateur pursuit. And in the fight for literary recognition and reward, there is the additional problem of poaching to contend with: 'there is in this famous Island of *Britain* a certain poultry *Scribbler*, very voluminous, whose

²⁸ *An Appeal to Justice*, in *Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. First printed B. T. Batsford, 1965), pp. 166-95 (p. 189).

Character the Reader cannot wholly be a Stranger to. He deals in a pernicious Kind of Writings, called *Second Parts*, and usually passes under the Name of *the Author of the First*' (183). Swift bundles together the many writings of the Moderns and charges them with a single author, in an ironic valuation of their range and individuality. But he also draws attention to the instability of the literary market place. The goods on offer are devalued by being cut off from their connection with their authors. The fault, it is suggested, lies with the authors themselves, for producing such a quantity of work which has so little recognisable value. The narrator tells of the attempts by the inmates of the Royal Society and Will's Coffee House to claim much of the present writing as their own, and of a proposed solution, 'a Comparison of Books, both as to *Weight and Number*' (64). The narrator also suggests the expedient that 'a third indifferent Person be assigned, to whose impartial Judgment it shall be left to decide, which Society each Book, Treatise or Pamphlet do most properly belong to' (65). Inevitably the project comes to nothing, because of the difficulty of judging such works apart. And it is implied that none of the works is important enough to require separation: all could equally have been written by any member of the degenerate Modern fold. Yet the *Tale's* dramatisation of books as characters adds another dimension to the situation. The death of books, like the death of individuals, does not always strike with justice and fairness. In amongst the casualties are some good books too: 'I am living fast, to see the Time, when a *Book* that misses its Tide, shall be neglected, as the *Moon* by day, or like *Mackerel* a Week after the Season'

(206). Swift plays on the sense of 'mackerel' as 'prostitute', implying that the literary market-place is fickle and exploitative, and the book must adapt and submit to the demands of the public to survive. While the satire of the *Tale* may seek to distance good books, written by disinterested amateurs, from the rubbish that streams from hired Grub Street pens, the personification of books is more embracing, threatening all writing with the fate of destroying its author.

From the characterisation of the book there arises a link between an author and his or her work, which pertains to good and bad writing alike. The early eighteenth-century milieu of hack writers, including the narrator, is shown in all its ugliness. But the motif has another effect; it summons the idea of the sacred book, and puts it under strain. For while that work could rely on divine authority to control its contents, the books in the *Tale* have only their human authors to rely on. The result is a teeming mass of 'illiterate' work, with no ascertainable origin, which seems endlessly to proliferate and reproduce. Books are no longer distant echoes of a once-glorious past, but endless reiterations of a tawdry present. The narrator demonstrates the irredeemable aspect of the new secular work in his alchemical recipe to make a book. After concocting a potion made of boiled-down bodies of knowledge; the would-be author must inhale a distillation of it:

It will dilate itself about the Brain (where there is any) in fourteen Minutes, and you immediately perceive in your Head an infinite number of Abstracts, Summaries, Compendiums, Extracts, Collections, Medulla's, Excerpta quaedams, Florilegias and the like, all disposed into great Order, and reducible upon Paper. (127)

The Modern writing style is presented as both derivative and *sui generis*, directly crabbed from other, better writers, and yet adrift on a proliferating, parentless sea of similar works. In some measure, this view arises from Swift's preference for the Ancients, who appear to have the virtues the Moderns lack.²⁹ In his most celebrated formulation of his beliefs, *The Battle of the Books*, the writing styles of each group are represented by the spider and the bee. The Moderns' spider is a nightmare vision, introspective, self-reproducing, corrupt. The Bee, by comparison, looks outward for its subject matter, is receptive to the world, and to God and nature. In the end we are asked, in extremely biased terms, to make a judgement:

Whether is the nobler Being of the two, That which by a lazy Contemplation of four Inches round; by an over-weening Pride, which feeding and engendering on it self, turns all into Excrement and Venom; producing nothing at last, but Flybane and a Cobweb: Or That, which, by an universal Range, with long Search, much Study, true Judgment, and Distinction of Things, brings home Honey and Wax. (TT: 232)

The Moderns have cut themselves off from all links with the sacred origins of the book, producing only writing, self-reflexive, self-serving, detached from the world to which it supposedly refers. Their attacks on the Ancients, who are presented as more cautious and measured in their writings appear ill-natured and foolish. About Homer, the *Tale's* narrator has this to say: 'We

²⁹ For further discussion on the Ancients and Moderns controversy, see especially Richard Foster Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Rise of the Scientific Movement in Seventeenth-Century England*, 2nd edn (St. Louis: Washington University Studies, 1961). The background of Swift's involvement is charted by John R. Clark in *Form and Frenzy in Swift's A Tale of a Tub* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 92-115.

freely acknowledge Him to be the Inventor of the *Compass*, of *Gun-Powder*, and the *Circulation of the Blood*: But, I challenge any of his Admirers to shew me in all his Writings, a compleat Account of the *Spleen*; Does he not also leave us wholly to seek in the Art of *Political Wagering?*' (129). Satire comes from a Modern's inability to recognise the important characteristics of Homer's writing; his system of value depending on the discoveries of the Modern age. The gloomy aspect of the satire is its pervasiveness. Ancient writing, or at least the system of values that it promotes, is under attack from the chaotic, insensible threat of the Modern.

Perhaps this is why there is so much emphasis on the material in the discussion of books. We have already seen how the lives and deaths of books imitate and circumscribe the lives and deaths of their authors. But books are also presented as nothing more than the materials of which they are made. In the Dedication to Posterity, the narrator anticipates an important question: 'What is become of those immense Bales of Paper, which must needs have been employ'd in such Numbers of Books [as the Moderns produce]?' He has a ready, if unanticipated, reply: 'It ill befits the Distance between *Your Highness* and Me, to send You for ocular Conviction to a *Jakes*, or an *Oven*; to the Windows of a *Bawdy-House*, or to a sordid *Lanthorn*' (35-6). Vaughan's praise of the book, as more than the sum of its physical parts, has been overturned. In the world of the Moderns, a book is only as good as the paper it is written on; and, to judge by the destinations of these works, that standard itself is low. The overweening materiality of books demonstrates the

saturation of the market—high turnover, instant forgettability, and a sub-industry of recycling offers parallels with the twentieth-century popular fiction market. But it also draws a picture of the Modern mentality as avowedly unspiritual, and heavily literal-minded. The best example of this is given in the address of the ‘Bookseller’ that prefaces *The Battle of the Books*, where we are instructed ‘to beware of applying to Persons, what is here meant, only of Books in the most literal Sense. So, when *Virgil* is mentioned, we are not to understand the Person of a famous poet, call’d by that Name, but only certain sheets of Paper, bound up in Leather, containing in Print, the Works of the said Poet’ (TT: 214). Our response, of course, is to ignore this advice, and insist on equating the books with their authors. In order to retrieve the *Battle* for the purposes of satire, we are first invited to reject the paltry Modern air of literalism, before moving on to the ‘purer’ realm of metaphor.

So far, it seems that Swift’s satire has treated writing as a force for corruption and subversion, and the book as a force for good, mainly under the aegis of the Ancients. But the divisions are not as clear as that. Our focus on the book as a theme of the *Tale* must now give way to its complications of structure and form, to the ways in which the *Tale* acts as a book in its own right. The *Tale*’s most remarkable aspect, is, after all, its form; and it is this which also creates the most difficulty in interpreting its contents. Where the *Tale*’s satire often (although not always) attacks the presumption of writing from the stronghold of the book, the text’s structure has a contradictory effect. It is here that questions about the book’s authority and control over writing are

raised. As the following examples show, the power traditionally vested in the book is undercut by the *Tale's* formal characteristics.

A significant problem with the *Tale* is knowing where it begins. True to his Modern leanings, the narrator has provided a great deal of prefatory material: a list of other works, an apology, a dedication to Lord Somers, a bookseller's note, a dedication to Prince Posterity, a preface, and an introduction. All of these could work equally well as starting points for the narrative. By overloading the start of the work with introductions of one kind or another Swift satirises the Modern enthusiasm for extensive self-publicising prolegomena. There is a direct attack on Dryden for this crime later in the *Tale*: 'He has often said to me in Confidence, that the World would have never suspected him to be so great a Poet, if he had not assured them so frequently in his Prefaces, that it was impossible they could either doubt or forget it' (131). But there is more than satire at work here. The series of false starts dims our judgement of where authority and authenticity reside in the *Tale*. The linear progressiveness of the book, and its teleological goal, are undermined. It is quite common, for example, to regard the 'Apology' affixed to the 1710 edition as an authentic statement by Swift, intended to subdue hostility to earlier editions. Its statement of the author's intent seems genuine enough:

He thought the numerous and gross Corruptions in Religion and Learning might furnish Matter for a Satyr, that would be useful and diverting: He resolved to proceed in a manner, that should be altogether new, the World having been already too long nauseated with endless repetitions upon every Subject. (4)

Thus far, the 'Apology' fulfils its function: to explain the author's intention, and to make some concession to the reader for the oddness of his style. But what should we make of this pronouncement: 'Another Thing to be observed is, that there generally runs an Irony through the Thread of the whole Book, which the Men of Tast will observe and distinguish' (8)? Is it to be read in the same objective manner as the previous one? The 'Thread of Irony' might run through the 'Apology', as well as the rest of the book, affecting the statement of the author's intention. Clearly, it does not seem like the kind of comment which will sweep away doubt. Both statements appear to have an objective validity to them, and yet the second subtly unpicks the first.³⁰ More undermining tactics are employed in the Apologist's ruse of the lost copy. He indicates that there are, in fact, two versions of the *Tale*, and it is the 'blotted Copy' which has found its way into print: 'In the Authors Original Copy there were not so many Chasms as appear in the Book; and why some of them were left he knows not; had the Publication been trusted to him, he should have made several Corrections of Passages against which nothing hath ever been objected' (17). Whether Swift is trying to protect himself from criticism by this expedient, or merely enjoying a joke at the reader's expense, its effect is very disorientating. The 'authentic' text that we read is thrown into question as an 'inauthentic' one, and this in an 'Apology' which is intended to clear

³⁰ For more on the ironic rhetorical sophistication of the 'Apology', and its unreliability as a conventional expression of Swift's intent, see Judith C. Mueller, 'Writing Under Constraint: Swift's "Apology" for *A Tale of a Tub*', *ELH*, 60 (1993), 101-15.

away doubt and confusion. Other prefatory pieces do not offer much assistance. In 'The Bookseller to the Reader', the fictitious bookseller continues the jest of the 'blotted Copy', and makes much of the obscurity of the *Tale*: 'If any Gentleman will please to furnish me with a Key, in order to explain the more difficult Parts, I shall very gratefully acknowledge the Favour, and print it by it self' (29). The 'Preface' allegedly reveals the real reason for the existence of the *Tale*—a diversion for the Moderns to prevent them from reading Hobbes's *Leviathan* until an Academy big enough to house them all can be built. Introductions, apologies, dedications and prefaces are meant to produce order in books, to set out the author's intentions, and create the conditions for the narrative proper. But in the *Tale* they sprawl out of control, work against one another, present contradictory information, and disturb the orderly progression of the narrative. These apparently subsidiary pieces gradually invade the sanctity and integrity of the main text, the allegory of the three brothers, by their continuation in a series of digressions. One, 'A Digression in Praise of Digressions', reveals its essentially portable nature: 'I have chosen for it as proper a Place as I could readily find. If the judicious Reader can assign a fitter, I do here empower him to remove it into any other Corner he pleases' (149). Another, 'A Digression in the Modern Kind', contains material that should have been introduced into the 'Preface', but is instead left 'in the Body of the Work', to counter the Moderns' habit of skipping prefaces in their reading. (It also has the useful consequence of 'a very considerable Addition to the Bulk of the Volume, a Circumstance by no

means to be neglected by a skilful Writer [132]). Gradually, the allegory takes second place to the so-called 'Digressions', to be hastily recalled and just as quickly dismissed at the end of the *Tale*. The overall structure of the *Tale* is baggy and unlinear, challenging the theological revelation of meaning expected of the book. The *Tale* stops and starts, is excessive in some aspects and deficient in others: overall, it gives the impression of writing that has rejected and overruled the tenets of the book: unity, origin, stability.

As well as looseness of structure, the text also takes great liberties with typography. It is full of lists, gaps, hiatuses, and dummy footnotes. These last are a special affront to the book as the source of meaning. The learned footnote should have the function of augmenting the ideas in the parent text, and making them clearer, so that the reader can proceed. Its position at the foot of the page ensures that the reader is not distracted from progressing through the main text. When a footnote fails to illuminate the main text, and refuses to accept its lowly station, the integrity of the book is again compromised by writing. In 'A Digression on Madness', for example, the strange interjection '*Heark in your Ear*' interrupts the flow of narrative. The anonymous footnote that attempts to gloss it has this to say: '*I cannot conjecture what the Author means here, or how this Chasm could be fill'd, tho it is capable of more than one Interpretation*' (179). The footnote not only does not fulfil its function, but it also appears more sober and measured in tone than the actual text. It openly acknowledges its uselessness as an analytical tool, and yet it is much more accessible than the text. Knowledge is

thus displaced from text to footnote to nowhere, and the smooth linear flow of the narrative is disrupted twice over.

Structurally and typographically, the totality and order of the book is frequently usurped. Prefaces and introductions pile up, digressions choke the text, footnotes overpower it. The visual impact of the *Tale* sums up its contradictoriness. Although it mostly resembles an ordinary book, there are many subtle (and some unsubtle) differences. As early as its title page, the *Tale* shows a lack of adherence to the traditions of the book. The eighteenth-century convention of using quotations appears, but in a rather surprising form. Of the three quotations given, one appears to be invented, another is from Lucretius, the Moderns' Bible, which sets up the allegiances of the author, and the third, a piece of mystical gibberish originally recorded by Irenaeus, perhaps argues against the wisdom of trying to interpret title page quotations too closely. The mention of 'Explanatory Notes' by William Wotton glosses over the fact that these are really part of a polemic against an earlier edition of the *Tale*, even though they are here presented as though specially commissioned by the author. On the whole, the title page seems to carry a hidden warning to approach the remainder of the text with considerable caution: things are not as clear-cut as they seem.

In addition to producing physical anomalies, the *Tale* erodes the authority of the book by promoting its material aspects to an importance with which they are not usually credited. They become active constituents in the construction of meaning in some parts of the work. Much of the text is

occupied with concerns about the filling of space and volume. The great quantity of new works produced has left the narrator heedful of the warning of a mathematician friend that ‘there is not at this present, a sufficient Quantity of new Matter left in Nature, to furnish and adorn any one particular Subject to the extent of a Volume’ (146). His pun on matter, as both intellectual subject and physical space, neatly summarises the *Tale*’s focus. The material space of the book is seen as the only area where intellectual matters can be discussed; like Herbert in ‘The H. Scriptures II’, Swift risks limiting the ideal to its physical dimensions, a crude travesty of the perceived sanctity of the book. The *Tale* abounds with examples of the ideal dependent on the material. The three celebrated ‘Engines of the Orators’ in the ‘Introduction’—the pulpit, ladder (to the gallows), and street-entertainer’s stage—are deemed necessary because of the nature of the words spoken from them, ‘which are also bodies of much Weight and Gravity, as is manifest from those deep Impressions they make and leave upon us, and therefore must be delivered from a due Altitude’ (60). The satire on the sect of Aeolists depends on the material enactment of an idea. The group worship by standing in a circle, ‘with every Man a Pair of Bellows applied to his Neighbour’s Breech, by which they blew each other up to the Shape and Size of a *Tun*’. The reason for this comes from the Aeolist belief that ‘*Words are but Wind; and Learning is nothing but Words; ergo, Learning is nothing but Wind*’ (153). In ‘A Digression on Madness’, we witness the narrator’s famous ‘theory of vapours’, which ascribes to certain significant historical events a material origin. So, the wars of the reign of

Louis XIV are found to be the result of a '*Vapour* or *Spirit*, which animated the Hero's Brain, being in perpetual Circulation' (165); and the eventual peace a result, not so much of the edict of Nantes as of the movement of the same vapours downwards into an anal fistula, which was then removed. Throughout the text, the physical is promoted over the ideal, as its necessary ground. A particularly blatant example of this occurs in the narrator's allusion to his discourse on the word 'zeal', 'wherein I have deduced a *Histori-theo-physiological* Account [...] shewing how it first proceeded from a *Notion* into a *Word*, and from thence in a hot Summer, ripped into a *tangible Substance*' (137). The satire on the materiality of the Grub Street imagination is extended into the structure of the text, which, as the product of its Modern author, constantly deflates and reduces the ideal. But such a gesture, so often repeated, also destabilises the work as a book which is capable of satire. To reduce the book to its physical dimensions is to compromise its ability to make lasting, corrective statements, which exist beyond its short duration.

The most potent example of this is the narrator's account of his reasons for writing the *Tale*, given in the 'Preface'. He records how 'Sea-Men have a Custom when they meet a *Whale*, to fling him out an empty *Tub*, by way of Amusement, to divert him from laying violent hands upon the Ship'. A 'Grand Committee' has divined an important political message in this. The whale is Hobbes's *Leviathan*, 'from whence the terrible Wits of our Age are said to borrow their Weapons', which threaten the ship of state. The narrator is therefore commissioned to produce the 'tub' that will divert the wits away

from Hobbes, which turns out to be the *Tale*. But whereas all the other elements of the parable have metaphorical interpretations, the tub itself has none:

how to analyze the *Tub* was a Matter of difficulty; when after long enquiry and Debate, the literal Meaning was preserved: And it was decreed, that in order to prevent these *Leviathans* from tossing and sporting with the *Commonwealth*, (which of it self is too apt to *fluctuate*) they should be diverted from that Game by *A Tale of a Tub*. (40-41)

Whereas ship and whale represent other objects, the tub is simply itself. There is no meaning beyond the literal one, no escape from its materiality. Rather than challenge *Leviathan* on intellectual grounds, the *Tale* simply imposes its physical bulk in the way. The wits are diverted, not by intellectual engagement, but by the act of reading one book instead of another. However seriously we wish to take this stance, its very presence in the text signals a strong desire to remain at the level of the literal, to look at the actual words on the page, rather than translate them into types, signs, and symbols. This 'literalism' is carried through in a remarkable collapse of metaphorical language which takes place in the 'Introduction':

Wisdom is a *Fox*, who, after long hunting, will at last cost you the Pains to dig out: 'Tis a *Cheese*, which by how much the richer, has the thicker, the homelier, and the courser Coat; and whereof to a judicious Palate, the *Maggots* are the best. 'Tis a *Sack-Posset*, wherein the deeper you go, you will find it the sweeter. *Wisdom* is a *Hen*, whose *Cackling* we must value and consider, because it is attended with an *Egg*; But then lastly, 'tis a *Nut*, which unless you chuse with Judgment, may cost you a *Tooth*, and pay you with nothing but a *Worm*. (66)

Just what wisdom is, from this explanation, it is impossible to decide. The slipperiness of the term, as demonstrated here, has led the Grub Street writers

to 'convey their Precepts and their Arts, shut up within the Vehicles of Types and Fables', which have not always been successful:

it has fared with these Vehicles after the usual Fate of Coaches over finely-painted and gilt; that the transitory Gazers have so dazzled their Eyes, and fill'd their Imaginations with the outward Lustre, as neither to regard or consider, the Person or the Parts of the Owner within. (66)

It seems that at this point the text turns on itself. The accusation of an excessive 'outward Lustre' applies obviously to the narrator's own crumbling edifice of metaphors for wisdom. But this reads as more than just an ironic redoubling of the narrator's attack against himself. The metaphors for wisdom fail, singly and together, to convey a sense of what wisdom is—metaphor itself does not work. Thus we are faced, not with a choice between metaphor and literalism (which, as we have seen in Derrida's account, are not as different as is commonly maintained), but with the failure of metaphor to convey any idea at all accurately. The overwhelming literalism of the *Tale* is a symptom of its continually collapsing structure; of its denial of the possibility of a secure reference. Of course, it is inevitable that we will continue to find types and symbols in the *Tale*. But its own judgement on itself is that interpretation cannot overcome its continual, irrepressible literality. However many times we may try to transcend the text, to escape its materiality, our own judgement in doing so will be questioned. It is no coincidence that the word for which no metaphor will serve here is 'wisdom'.³¹

³¹ For further examples of 'literalization' in the *Tale* and in other works by Swift, see Maurice J. Quinlan, 'Swift's Use of Literalization as a Rhetorical Device', *PMLA*, 82 (1967), 516-21. For an illuminating discussion of the division between 'matter' and 'spirit', see Warren

Cary Nelson argues, that when we read the *Tale*, ‘we gain the shadowy intuition of an infectious form whose mechanical perfections are suspiciously organic—indeed, horribly “enlivened”’.³² Certainly, the text seems capable of making its space seem greater than it is. Its emphasis on the material, along with its shuffling of the formal features of the book, produce a sprawling, proliferating effect: the ‘aphoristic energy’ of writing against the controlled economy of the book. To further this movement, the text blurs distinctions between itself and other literary works, by its extensive range of (often incorrect) literary allusion. Thus, in the ‘Introduction’, the narrator produces, at the behest of his friends, a catalogue of Modern productions which leads to some illuminating mismatches of real works and surreal works. So, *Tom Thumb* is by a ‘*Pythagorean* Philosopher’, and ‘contains the whole scheme of the *Metempsychosis*, deducing the Progress of the Soul thro’ all her Stages’. Dryden’s *The Hind and the Panther* is hyperbolically advertised as ‘a compleat Abstract of sixteen thousand Schoolmen from *Scotus* to *Bellarmin*’. The tale of Dick Whittington is ‘the Work of that Mysterious *Rabbi, Jehuda Hannasi*, containing a Defence of the *Gemara* of the *Jerusalem Misna*, and its just preference to that of *Babylon*, contrary to the vulgar Opinion’ (68-9). The narrator’s gullibility, expressed in his desire to see serious designs in chapbooks and fairy tales, is only one effect of this selection. For the text also

Montag, *The Unthinkable Swift: The Spontaneous Philosophy of a Church of England Man* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 86-123.

³² *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 120.

projects a netherworld through these allusions, a place where fiction and reality merge, neither totally within the text nor wholly outside it. This quasi-fictionality in turn affects the *Tale* itself, making it difficult to draw discrete boundaries between text and context. Plunged into a world of books and writing, part fiction and part reality, the *Tale* questions and erodes the uniqueness and totality of its status as book, at times seeming to prefer the indeterminacy and dissolution of writing to the coherence and order offered by the book.

It seems, then, that the structure of *A Tale of a Tub* is directly at odds with its contents. While it thematises the decay of order and rationality engendered by the profuseness of Modern writing, it also partakes of that disorder, presenting itself as an onslaught of energetic Modern writing against the Ancient sanctity and calm of the book. But this division is spurious, for the contents of the satire cannot be neatly divided from their expression. Many times in the *Tale* it seems a thankless task to try to separate the authentic voice of Swift from the ramblings of the narrator. Added to this, its structural looseness, its physicality, with its attack on metaphor and illusion, and its typographical experimentation, all undermine the basis of the satire. Attacks on Grub Street are spasmodic rather than consistent; and the narrator's inability to occupy a position without contradicting himself, or to extricate himself from his own accusations, add to the confusion. In all, the general idea of the book has a precarious hold over the particular example that is the *Tale*. Here is writing at its most uncontrolled: linearity, narrative, meaning,

and origin are all threatened by the practice and procedure of the *Tale*. The harmony of The Book of Nature, and the comfort of the Works of God, come up against the rubble and wreckage of writing which has escaped the confines of the book.

Yet, the *Tale* does not dissolve into meaningless freeplay. In the midst of the digressions is an allegory which, though apparently about the rise of the Anglican church, has much to say about the *Tale*'s vision of itself. While the *Tale* may question and contort the power of the book, it also focuses on its own reception as a book, and on the possible future that awaits it. The *Tale*'s dereliction of the book negates critical attempts to foist a unifying Swiftian theme or message onto it—this would be to ignore its crucial ideas on the anecdotal and strategic properties possessed by writing. The allegory of the three brothers instead shows how the activity of reading brings a vital focus to this multivalent, self-diagnostic text.

Reading

The adventure of the three brothers, Peter, Jack and Martin is intended to form the basis of the attack on 'Abuses in Religion', a complement to the rest of the *Tale*'s attack on those in learning.³³ Their treatment of the three coats left to

³³ For more information on the treatment of religion in the *Tale* see Phillip Harth, *Swift and Anglican Rationalism: The Religious Background of A Tale of a Tub* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); and for the 'Abuses in Learning', Miriam Kosh Starkmann, *Swift's Satire on Learning in A Tale of a Tub* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

them by their father, and their differing interpretations of his will, mirror the rise of the Catholic, Anglican and Calvinist doctrines, and their relations to Scripture. But there are no prizes for guessing this: it is all explained for us in the footnote by William Wotton added to the 1710 edition: '*By these three Sons, Peter, Martyn, and Jack; Popery, the Church of England, and our Protestant Dissenters are designed. W. Wotton*' (73). In this allegory, little is left to the imagination. Every move of the three brothers is charted and explained by a panel of real and imaginary commentators, so that we can be in no doubt what specific events mean. Footnotes are provided even when the examples in the text are glaringly obvious, as in this club-footed example, again by Wotton: '*The Papal Bulls are ridicul'd by Name, So that here we are at no loss for the Authors Meaning*' (111). The straightforwardness of the adventure makes it necessary to look elsewhere for significance. Certainly, twentieth-century critics find it more interesting to work with the materials of the prefaces and digressions, than with the allegory. Reading the allegory on its own terms, for what it might have to say about church politics, seems somewhat limited. But its position in the *Tale*, surrounded by an extensive range of other writings, is no accident. While the allegory is influenced by (perhaps even threatened by) the digressions, it also has its own influence on the *Tale* as a whole. By introducing an allegory, even one of apparently limited scope, Swift draws attention to the act of *reading* as a dimension of the *Tale*. How we read and respond to the allegory, indeed, to allegory in general, shapes our response to the rest of the text.

It is no coincidence that the medieval period, the great age of the book, also abounds in allegory. Allegory functions as an earthly enactment of the idea of the book. Each work is a version of Scripture in miniature, offering light and grace to the reader privileged enough to possess the key to its mysteries. Allegories are often staged as terrestrial renderings of spiritual voyages—the protagonist makes several mistakes before successfully concluding the journey (attaining salvation). Allegory shows the authoritarianism of the book, by stipulating a single acceptable reading. Other ‘heretic’ versions must be discarded. Two significant allegories prior to the *Tale*—*The Faerie Queene* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—demonstrate this demand very clearly. Spenser announces his purpose, ‘to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline’, in a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, in which he also expresses a wish to guard against ‘gealous opinions and misconstructions’ in the reading of his allegory.³⁴ Bunyan prefixes an apologetic poem to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, arguing that ‘types, shadows and metaphors’ are found in the Bible, and that the truth of his tale silences any criticism about its form: ‘My dark and cloudy words they do but hold / The truth, as cabinets enclose the gold’.³⁵ Allegory thus encloses a ‘truth’ which is not freely available to all, but must be deciphered by the careful reader. There is danger, too, in straying from the path. At the conclusion to the first part of

³⁴ ‘To the Right noble, and Valorous, Sir Walter Raleigh, knight’, in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London and New York: Longman, 1984), p. 737.

³⁵ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965; repr., 1987), p. 46.

The Pilgrim's Progress, Bunyan warns, 'Take heed also that thou be not extreme, / In playing with the outside of my dream'.³⁶

Yet allegory's power is also the source of its weakness. In seeking to convey a single truth, but also to make that truth difficult to decipher, allegory opens itself up to the possibility of multiple interpretation. However hard Bunyan might try to close down meanings, by hedging his allegory with warnings, or by interceding in his text (as in the case of the House of the Interpreter), the devices of 'types, shadows, and metaphors' will always work against this. Because allegory functions at the level of written language, relying on symbolic names, and the narrative form, it has to admit all the uncertainties that go with it. Maureen Quilligan even goes as far as to argue that the defining characteristic of allegory is not its choice of theme, but the fact that it operates on a primarily linguistic level: 'More than any other creator of narrative, the allegorist begins with language purely; he also ends there'.³⁷ She stresses that allegory's use of language is 'literal', and not 'metaphorical', as often believed.³⁸ Allegory works at the level of the letter, requiring interpretation and understanding of its surface, not a simple transcendence of them to a truth beyond. Thus, while others may regard allegory as operating vertically, with each word being 'overcome' in order for

³⁶ Ibid., p. 219.

³⁷ *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 42.

³⁸ Like Derrida, she overturns the thinking that holds the metaphorical to be a 'pure' form of representation, and the literal to be too loaded with its textual presence to be capable of supplying meaning.

its higher meaning to be understood, she prefers to see its progression as horizontal:

meaning accretes serially, interconnecting and criss-crossing the verbal surface long before one can accurately speak of moving to another level, 'beyond' the literal. And that 'level' is not above the literal one in a vertically organized fictional space, but is located in the self-consciousness of the reader, who gradually becomes aware, as he reads, of the way he creates the meaning of the text.³⁹

So Bunyan's injunction to the reader to avoid looking too closely at the surface is revealing, by Quilligan's account. For it is on the surface that the significance of words is to be found. This is apparent in the case of *The Faerie Queene*, where Spenser's interest in etymology and punning makes the names doubly important. A word like 'Error' thus carries the charge of pointless physical wandering, as well as spiritual falsehood; as such, it doubly countenances the Redcrosse Knight's circuitous route to grace.

As a consequence of Quilligan's definition, the role of the reader is crucial to the success of allegory. Whereas it has been traditional to see the reader as a decipherer of symbols, encoded by the author in the text (a practice sanctioned by the idea of the book), in her account the reader is actually a more active part of the text, almost one of the characters: 'the reader's experience of grappling with the language of the text mirrors the characters' adventures'.⁴⁰ The hero's arrival in heaven should rightly coincide with our perfect understanding of the text, but it is only through our good offices that this dual event can take place. So, while allegory initially seems to uphold the

³⁹ Quilligan, p. 28.

power and authority of the book, by offering a single, theological meaning, and expecting the reader to be subservient, its emphatically textual nature means that the reader is in fact essential to its success. And the act of reading simultaneously empowers and subdues the book, making it prosper into the future, but also threatening its present form by opening up the possibility of multiple interpretations.

We can see how this happens in the allegory of *A Tale of a Tub*, which, unlike its predecessors, does not seem concerned to preserve its sacred meaning.⁴¹ As already noted, each significant event in the allegory is glossed by commentators, but the information they give is not always straightforward. In the case of the three brothers' coats for example, we are given conflicting ideas:

† *By his Coats which he gave his Sons, the Garments of the Israelites.*
W. Wotton.

An Error (with Submission) of the learned Commentator; for by the Coats are meant the Doctrine and Faith of Christianity, by the Wisdom of the Divine Founder fitted to all Times, Places, and Circumstances.
Lambin. (73)

The pretensions of Wotton's real commentary on the allegory are mocked by Swift, who, under the guise of a dead historical figure, inserts his own reading. But he chooses to leave Wotton's version to stand, and so introduces the idea of freedom of interpretation into the allegory. This freedom is mirrored in the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 254.

⁴¹ Quilligan sees the digressions as directly linked to the allegory: 'the narrative allegory, then, satirizes church history, while the digressions parody extreme methods of biblical *allegoresis*' (*Language of Allegory*, p. 137). While this may apply to some of the material in the digressions, it seems far too schematic to cover the variety of material involved.

events that take place in the allegory, all of which are dictated by the brothers' interpretations of the father's will. At first the brothers are content to accept the decrees of the will regarding their coats; but gradually, as new situations arise, they begin to take liberties. Finding themselves in need of shoulder knots to increase their public standing, they are unable to find any reference to these essential items in the will. Until, that is, they hit on a new plan: 'After much Thought, one of the Brothers who happened to be more *Book-learned* than the other two, said he had found an Expedient. *'Tis true, said he, there is nothing here in this Will, totidem verbis, making mention of Shoulder-knots, but I dare conjecture, we may find them inclusivè, or totidem syllabis'* (83). Despite being unable to find the letter K, they nevertheless proceed to spell out the word with a C (after reassuring themselves that K is 'a modern illegitimate Letter'), and don their shoulder-knots with the sanction of the will. Later, when they have failed to extract the approval they seek, they are driven to the drastic measure of locking the will away in a box, to prevent their actions from appearing incongruous with its demands. The various abuses of the will symbolise the openness of allegory to misinterpretation: as a written document, it lacks the authority that the presence of the father speaking would have.⁴² But the locking of the will in a box also indicates allegory's weakness. Without readers, allegory cannot operate; and even if those readers are as prejudiced as the three brothers, they still have the power to disregard the

⁴² See Terry J. Castle, 'Why the Houyhnhnms Don't Write: Swift, Satire, and the Fear of the Text', in Frank Palmeri (ed.), *Critical Essays on Jonathan Swift* (New York: G. K. Hall,

allegory altogether. It seems that, for a genre as vulnerable as this, any reader is preferable to none. What is more, the setting of the *Tale*'s allegory within a larger framework of digressions augments its influence. For while its major incidents function separately, both as a Bunyanesque indictment of misreading, and a discovery of allegory's inbuilt weakness; they also comment on our act of reading the rest of the *Tale*. The allegory may be almost buried underneath the weight of the digressions, but its lessons can be usefully applied beyond itself.

Like the brothers in the allegory, we run the risk of burying the original text of the *Tale* under our own interpretations of it. Each reading is necessarily partial, as each is a summary which cannot hope to embrace the many meanings of the work. Each will reflect our prejudices. The fabric of the book, its totality and unity is thus put under threat by the act of reading, which disrupts the linear progression of meaning from author through text to reader. But reading also shows this model of meaning to be false; for, as we have seen in the examples of allegory, reading is a *constitutive* act, responsible for the survival of the book beyond its time of writing. Our input is required, in order to bring the book into being again. As Blanchot says: 'What is a book no-one reads? Something that is not yet written'.⁴³ Reading is more than simply viewing or perceiving a given text; it interacts with that text to produce meaning for the reader. In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser contrasts the

1993), pp. 57-71 (p. 63). Originally published in *Essays in Literature*, 7 (1980), 31-44.

⁴³ *The Space of Literature*, p. 193.

literary object to other objects. Although the book has a physical shape and presence, the work is regarded differently:

We always stand outside the given object, whereas we are situated inside the literary text. The relation between text and reader is therefore quite different from that between object and observer; instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint which travels along *inside* that which it has to apprehend. This mode of grasping an object is unique to literature.⁴⁴

Unlike seeing, reading occurs gradually, and is subject to modifications. What we have read before influences what we will read in the future; the end of the book allows for a reconsideration of all its earlier components: 'throughout the reading process there is a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories'.⁴⁵ Allegory recognises this, and thus provides symbols to be deciphered in order to keep the reader actively involved. But allegory also demands a single correct result, and the act of reading will not inevitably produce this: 'As there is no definite frame of reference to regulate this process, successful communication must ultimately depend on the reader's creative activity'.⁴⁶ What allegory wants is reading with a strictly limited interpretation, one that is inscribed into the text by the author. But the nature of the text-object decrees that all reading must involve an element of pluralistic interpretation. Reading operates against the idea of the static, author-ordered book by producing an object that is continually modified, and

⁴⁴ Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112

subject to interpretation. Yet, without the act of reading, the book, whether of God, or Nature, or just an individual work, cannot exist.

In the *Tale*, the contradictions of reading are fully explored. The act of reading it is both pre-empted and denied. There are areas where the narrator usurps the creative freedoms of the reader, and others where he makes reading seem almost impossible. In all these cases, the activity of reading is pushed into focus, so that we are unable to read without being aware of our actions.

‘Readers may be divided into three Classes, the *Superficial*, the *Ignorant*, and the *Learned*: And I have with much Felicity fitted my Pen to the Genius and Advantage of each’ (184-5). With this announcement, the narrator questions our right to be the free interpreters of his text. He has organised the materials within it to suit our particular skills. Yet, the comforts gained from accepting his taxonomy, and perhaps putting ourselves in the place of the learned, are few: ‘the Reader truly *Learned*, chiefly for whose Benefit I wake, when others sleep, and sleep, when others wake, will here find sufficient Matter to employ his Speculations for the rest of his Life’ (185). Doomed to a life of tedious word-grubbing for our intellectual pretensions, we are then given a projection of the possible outcome of such a venture:

I do here humbly propose for an Experiment, that every Prince in *Christendom* will take seven of the *deepest Scholars* in his Dominions, and shut them up close for *seven Years*, in *seven Chambers*, with a command to write *seven* ample Commentaries on this comprehensive Discourse. I shall venture to affirm, that whatever Difference may be found in their several Conjectures, they will be all, without the least Distortion, manifestly deduceable from the Text. (185).

The *Tale* is full of similar blows to the reader's pride. For the 'Republic of Dark Authors', who, like the brothers, will be seeking for hidden significance in the words and letters of the text, the narrator has prepared a treat:

I have couched a very profound Mystery in the Number of O's multiply'd by *Seven*, and divided by *Nine*. Also, if a devout Brother of the *Rosy Cross* will pray fervently for sixty three Mornings, with a lively Faith, and then transpose certain Letters and Syllables according to Prescription, in the second and fifth Section; they will certainly reveal into a full Receipt of the *Opus Magnum*. (186-7)⁴⁷

These onslaughts are more than just perceptive satires on misreading. Together they contribute to a sense of disorientation in the *Tale*, as more and more of the space that we feel belongs to us as readers is encroached upon. Our practices are scorned, or pre-empted, the freedom that we demand as readers put into doubt. At one point, even the allegory, which has previously been seen as ripe for interpretation, seems to be denied to us:

Nor do I at all question but they [Jack's adventures] will furnish Plenty of noble Matter for such, whose converting Imaginations dispose them to reduce all things into *Types*; who can make *Shadows*, no thanks to the Sun; and then mould them into Substances, no thanks to Philosophy; whose particular Talent lies in fixing Tropes and Allegories to the *Letter*, and refining what is Literal into Figure and Mystery. (190)

In the attack on the reader, critics are given a section of their own. Again, the narrator brings an unflattering taxonomy into play, this time, identifying three uses of the word critic. The first two types (now obsolete), are defined as those whose main task is 'to Praise and Acquit', and those who

⁴⁷ For background information on Swift's use of the 'Republic of Dark Authors' see especially Starkmann, pp. 44-56; and Ronald Paulson, *Theme and Structure in Swift's Tale of a Tub* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 96-103.

restore 'Antient Learning from the Worms, and Graves, and Dust of Manuscripts' (93). These categories have now been superseded by that of the 'TRUE CRITICK', a creature whose objective is 'to travel thro' this vast World of Writings: to pursue and hunt those Monstrous Faults bred within them: to drag out the lurking Errors like *Cacus* from his Den; to multiply them like *Hydra's* Heads; and rake them together like *Augeas's* Dung' (95). A quick check of the family tree, which includes Bentley, Wotton and Dennis, establishes the target beyond doubt as the Modern pedants. The narrator's 'apology' for the true critics only seeks to uncover their flaws even further: 'The *True Criticks* are known by their Talent of swarming about the noblest Writers, to which they are carried meerly by Instinct, as a Rat to the best Cheese, or a Wasp to the fairest fruit' (103). By introducing a section on critics into his text, Swift does more than generate satire. The response to the *Tale* is pre-figured in this characterisation. That critics will find fault with it is not in doubt (Wotton's remarks have already been incorporated into the *Tale*); but to continue to do so must take into account the *Tale's* comments on criticism. The narrator goes on to demonstrate how he can outdo the critics in his own example of glaring misreading. He notes that Pausanius calls critics 'a Race of Men, who delighted to nibble at the Superfluities and Excrescencies of Books', a habit which impels writers to cut the 'Overgrown Branches from their Works' (98). And, with a degree of licence no greater than that practised by some of the critics themselves, the narrator concludes that the Ancients recognise critics by the sign of the ass, because the Nauplians in Argos used

an ass to prune their vine leaves. The narrator thus shows, in a vignette concocted to insult his audience, that he is as able as they are to graft alien meanings onto texts when it suits his purposes. The province of the critic, like that of the reader in general, is not free from the incursions of an aggressive, extrovert text.

To complement the areas where the *Tale* oversteps its boundaries as an object at the whim of the reader, there are also occasions when it seems to retreat into a baffling unreadability. We have already seen how the structure of the *Tale* thwarts the linear displacement of meaning. But there are other moments when understanding is neither invited nor assisted. In the ‘Digression on Madness’, an argument which has been unravelling smoothly (if its premises are themselves confusing) is brought to an abrupt halt, with the words, ‘there is in Mankind a certain’ followed by a gap in the manuscript. The footnote that accompanies this typographical oddity has this explanation: ‘*Here is another Defect in the Manuscript, but I think the Author did wisely, and that the Matter which thus strained his Faculties, was not worth a Solution; and it were well if all Metaphysical Cobweb Problems were no otherwise answered*’ (170). Instead of being reassured, the reader is criticised for expecting the footnote to explain the unexplainable. The criticism turns outwards, making the anonymous commentator appear contemptuous of his task. The comic deflation of the reader’s aspirations has a serious side too; texts can have functions other than the helpful or the explanatory. And while the commentator counsels against stretching our minds to solve this particular

problem, the physical presence of the gap is striking enough to require us to stop and question our reading practice at this point.

Not all the interruptions of the interpretative process are so abrupt or so visually striking. The 'Digression on Madness' also offers the conceptual challenge of locating sense in a narrative which bears the marks of its narrator's mental instability, exposed in an admission at the end: 'even I myself, the Author of these momentous Truths, am a Person, whose Imaginations are hard-mouth'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' (180). With hindsight, it is difficult to establish which of the statements in the 'Digression' are mad, and which are reasonable. The phrase '*Heark in your Ear*', for instance, seems to belong to the former category, but is the following sentence necessarily 'sane'?

In the Proportion that Credulity is a more peaceful Possession of the Mind, than Curiosity, so far preferable is that Wisdom, which converses about the Surface, to that pretended Philosophy which enters into the Depth of Things, and then comes gravely back with Information and Discoveries, that in the inside they are good for nothing. (173)

Words in the right places cannot dispel entirely the sense of something amiss here. Are we to view the passage as the contrived musings of a sane Modern or the linguistic mutilations of a madman (or is the difference one of tone rather than syntax)? The narrator has a skill in disturbing the reader's confidence by a throwaway sentence or phrase, such as this, from the 'Conclusion': 'I am now trying an Experiment very frequent among Modern

Authors, which is to *write upon Nothing*; When the subject is utterly exhausted, to let the Pen still move on; by some called, the Ghost of Wit, delighting to walk after the Death of its Body' (208). Is this a 'safe' Swiftian dig at the works of the Moderns, or a reflection on the text itself? The absence of an authorial overview makes it impossible for us to gauge accurately how much of the previous work is affected by this dictum.⁴⁸

Perhaps the most disabling force working against reading is the inconsistency of the *Tale*. Its structure and language vary. The narrator seems to switch from a mouthpiece for Swift to a freewheeling commentator on his own text. Sometimes he appears as a character, sometimes a mere textual effect. The attempts made to shackle the narrator to a set of characteristics, as in the case of persona criticism, cannot hope to contain and account for all his qualities.⁴⁹ The spurious position of the 'Apology', neither wholly part of, nor wholly apart from, the text, brings into doubt its value as the authentic voice of Swift. Reading in the *Tale* is a fraught affair, subject to the whims of the narrator, the fractures and false starts of the form, and the unreliability of the language itself. Like Martin, Jack, and Peter, we are locked into a struggle

⁴⁸ A detailed discussion of language and madness in the *Tale* can be found in Frederik N. Smith, *Language and Reality in Swift's A Tale of a Tub* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), pp. 93-124. See also Michael V. Deporte, *Nightmares and Hobby-Horses: Swift, Sterne and Augustan Ideas of Madness* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1974), pp. 60-78.

⁴⁹ See for example, William Ewald, Jr, *The Masks of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), pp. 15-23; and Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr, *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 141-154. But for an important redefinition of the 'persona' in the *Tale*, see Veronica Kelly, 'Following the Stage-Itinerant: Perception, Doubt, and Death in Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 17 (1987), 239-

with a text, attempting to shape it for our own ends, but also tempted to lock it out of sight when it refuses to be reduced to our demands. Everett Zimmerman characterises succinctly the divergent trends that we face, as readers of the *Tale*: 'while Swift urges the reader toward the ultimate authority of the real author, he also expands the rhetorical roles of narrator and narratee, making them enact a multitude of relationships between reader and author, ranging from complicity to contempt'.⁵⁰

Given that reading and interpreting are inevitable parts of the building of a literary work, but taking into account the prohibitions and frustrations of our reading that the *Tale* supplies, how should we adapt our reading practice, to avoid falling into its traps? One thing is certain; reading the *Tale* to find its single, theological 'meaning' will not suffice. The idea of the book has been roundly attacked, even if its importance to the *Tale* cannot be overestimated. On the other hand, there are many moments in the *Tale* of satirical importance, as well as a less charged atmosphere of learning and reference; and this part of the *Tale* is of great value. Perhaps it is possible to retain these moments if a general sacrifice of overall control of the text is made. This would accord with Derrida's model of double reading, which, as he explains, continues to look at the significance of individual texts while mounting an attack on the process of generalisation that this involves:

58: 'The simple and shifting personae of the *Tale* reject the psychologizing projections of the reader by setting up a syntax that equates person with persona, meaning with text' (243).

⁵⁰ *Swift's Narrative Satires: Author and Authority* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 63.

The one [reading] seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism.⁵¹

Reading is thus alert to the demands of each text, not an overarching formula to be freely applied to all. First, it is important to consider the historical reception of a text, the favoured reading of it by many critics, and the environment in which it comes into being. The literary background of *A Tale of a Tub*, especially in the atmosphere of Grub Street, thus has a significant bearing on its contents. But then each text must be addressed on its own terms, to see how far it upholds or questions its context. The *Tale* shows many examples of a rhetorical refusal to be governed by the demands of its production, and to assimilate ground usually thought the preserve of the reader, for instance. Reading in this aware fashion can prevent an uncritical adherence to the *Tale*'s arguments:

If the first moment of reading is the rigorous, scholarly reconstruction of the dominant interpretation of a text, its intended meaning (*vouloir dire*) in the guise of a commentary, then the second moment of reading, in virtue of which deconstruction obeys a double necessity, is *the destabilization of the stability of the dominant interpretation*.⁵²

Readings of the *Tale* which take account of its self-reflexiveness, and its attempts to outdo them, are no freer than other readings from themselves being interpreted or discarded. But they do demonstrate a respect for the

⁵¹ 'Structure, Sign, and Play, in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 278-293 (p. 292).

integrity of the *Tale*'s writing, for its power to influence and shape our reading of it. As such they lessen the violence that all reading performs on its chosen text.

Conclusion

The idea of the book gives shape and structure to language, imposing an origin and a personal authority, whether of God or of the writer; without it, writing would be meaningless and uncontrolled. But writing creates opposition to the book, and struggles to assert itself over its protector. The act of reading also threatens the book with misinterpretation, even while it preserves it for the future. This struggle is acted out in *A Tale of a Tub*, which takes all these elements of literature and ceaselessly interrogates them. It is difficult to decide what conclusion, if any, is reached; and more germane to the style of the *Tale* to see its achievement in the way it asks questions, rather than in any answer it may provide. In it, the book is accepted as a repository of Ancient values, and presented as a monolithic force—it must always be accounted for, negotiated, and considered, rather like the will of the father in the allegorical sections. But the book also appears as untrustworthy and perverse. When separated from its origins, as in the case of Modern works, it is capable of producing wild and wilful collections of ideas, of damaging its own divine

⁵² Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 26.

value. Not every book improves the world, or praises God. Writing is portrayed as destructive and malign, or just plain meaningless, and emptied of any content. But it also has great energy and vitality, and affirms its own power to create and transform. Reading offers posterity and community to the book, but it also damages it, replacing the infinite tome with an infinity of finite variations. Relationships between reading, writing, and the book are constantly replayed and reappraised throughout the text.

As a result, *A Tale of a Tub* is important to all of Swift's other works. Because Swift's language is thrust to the fore in his work, and heavily involved in any subject matter, the *Tale's* engagement with literary practice is central, and the focus it gives applicable elsewhere. The *Tale's* importance, I believe, lies in its self-reflexiveness; in the space it devotes to issues of its practice and function as a text. Although the *Tale* is bound, like all other works, to the strictures of the book, writing, and reading, its acknowledgement of this is vital. The text links seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fears of the loss of God and authority with contemporary concerns about the ability of language to continue to reflect and perpetuate life. *A Tale of a Tub* survives because it critically examines its basis for doing so.

3: Poetry, Language, and the Body

Introduction

This chapter deals with Swift's use of language in his poetry, considering the effects of poetry's demands on his meaning. In works such as *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift is free to explore new formats, and to develop unusual ideas in an uncharted format, whereas in poetry, he is obliged to obey certain formal constraints that are not in place elsewhere. I will therefore examine two areas of tension within Swift's poetry. The first is the reaction of his work to controlling themes of Augustan poetic theory, the second his own struggle for expression within the form of poetry itself. The chapter first takes account of theories of poetry that emerge during the Restoration and early eighteenth century, considering their claims, coherence and attempts to translate principles into practice. It is impossible to consider theory and practice apart with the Augustans, who produce most of their abstract concepts in the midst of poems, or as prefaces or digressions. Following this lead, I will juxtapose examples of criticism with examples from works like *The Dunciad*, and mock treatises such as the joint Scriblerian ~~production~~^{production} *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, which are as much part of the texture of Augustan aesthetics as less imaginative exercises. In the main, the criticism of the period is organised around the categories of 'sound' and 'sense', although these are by no means the only terms available to critics of the time. Rather, it is an economical way of presenting persistent ideas which Swift is both sympathetic to and

suspicious of. As for Swift's own conflict, I perceive this as relating to the representation of material life in the static form of poetry, and as such it centres on images of the body. Swift's poetry is immersed in such symbolism, even poems which do not openly thematise the body contain it. I believe that Swift's poetry issues a strong challenge to conventions of Augustan theory, and other types of poetry, even while it attempts to assimilate itself to the mainstream.¹ With its focus on the material, it unwittingly uncovers weaknesses and ellipses in the prevalent ethic of the time. It is this ethic which I shall discuss first.

Sound and Sense

Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence
The Sound must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*.²

Pope's couplet introduces the two factors which the criticism of the period considers most important in poetry—form and content, more specifically referred to as 'sound' and 'sense'. Pope proposes style, not as sheer entertainment, devised to comfort and delight the reader, but as a working partner in the production of meaning in the poem. This view is echoed by

¹ The dearth of criticism of Swift's poetry has been redressed in recent years, and a number of important full-length studies now exist alongside the many articles. See Nora Crow Jaffe, *The Poet Swift* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977); A. B. England, *Energy and Order in the Poetry of Swift* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980); John Irwin Fischer's Christian overview, *On Swift's Poetry* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978); Peter J. Schakel, *The Poetry of Jonathan Swift: Allusion and the Development of a Poetic Style* (London and Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); and a feminist study which draws important parallels between Swift and Pope, Ellen Pollak, *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

others who share the Augustan desire to control the dispensation of ideas in poetry. As a result, much attention is given to the conditions governing 'sound', whilst 'sense' is largely viewed as an independent factor requiring little policing. The underlying importance of control over form is dealt with in censorious collections of poetry and criticism like Sir Thomas Pope Blount's *De Re Poetica*. Blount provides definitions of the major verse forms, and gathers together current opinions about poetry like this example: '*Rimer* tells us, That *Fancy* in *Poetry*; is like *Faith* in *Religion*; it makes for Discoveries, and soars above *Reason* but never clashes, or runs against it'.³ Blount embodies two important traits in discussions of poetry—he aims to be inclusive, using enough detail and examples to provide a complete system, rather like the universal linguists; and he considers that sound needs to be organised and strictly governed if sense is to be achieved. It is considered vulgar to show the workings of one's art too clearly. Good sense is the result of good sound, which is why the latter is continually policed.

The areas of 'sound' which attract most discussion are rhyme scheme and typography. Debates about rhyme concentrate on the relative merits of rhyme and blank verse, and on the appropriateness of types of rhyme for types of poem. The critics who argue that rhyming couplets create sense without relying too heavily on sound are faced with a difficult task. Dryden is their leading figure. His ideas, disseminated through prose

² *An Essay on Criticism*, from *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt et al., 11 vols (London: Methuen 1939-69), I, ll. 364-5. All further references to Pope's poems are from this edition.

³ Sir Thomas Pope Blount, *De Re Poetica* (London, 1694), Introduction.

treatises and poetic prologues, dominate discussions of rhyme. His *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* states the case for and against rhyme in the dialogue between Crites and Neander. Crites considers rhyme inappropriate to plays, because its artificiality is unsuited to a medium in which spontaneity and natural expression are important:

For a Play is the imitation of Nature, and since no man, without premeditation, speaks in Rhyme, neither ought he to do it on the Stage [...] it cannot but be unnatural to present the most free way of speaking in that which is the most constrain'd.⁴

Crites adds two other objections to rhyme in plays: that it is unlikely to occur in the repartee between two characters, and that, even if we aware that the action in front of us is a representation, any unnecessary artifice, including rhyme, should still be avoided. He argues instead that we should heed Aristotle's call for blank verse in plays; an argument that Neander (Dryden) is quick to expose: isn't blank verse also a formal scheme and therefore 'unnatural' (by Crites's definition) even if it does not rhyme? Neander's greatest objection, however, is to the notion that rhyme is in some way artificial. There may be 'both care and Art requir'd to write in verse', but the art is chiefly in matching sound and sense as smoothly as possible:

what other conditions are requir'd to make Rhyme natural in it self, besides an election of apt words, and a right disposition of them.[?] For the due choice of your words expresses your sence naturally, and the due placing them adapts the rhyme to it. (69)

Rhyme is not an imposition which detracts from the author's meaning, but a component of it. Good sense will produce good sounds: 'the necessity of

a rhyme never forces any but bad or lazy Writers to say what they would not otherwise' (69). Neander's assertions place the poet in a strong position as the organiser of materials, not as the unwilling user of a pre-imposed system. 'Apt words' and 'right disposition' are the gestures of an elegant, harmonious formality; one that is in some cases necessary:

Verse 'tis true, is not the effect of sudden thought. But this hinders not that sudden thought may be represented in verse, since those thoughts are such as must be higher than Nature can raise them without premeditation, especially to a continuance of them even out of verse. (75)

There are certain states of mind, then, that issue 'naturally' in poetic language, and in these cases, the use of rhyme is especially appropriate. Dryden negotiates the idea that the formality of poetry is a hindrance to free expression by arguing for types of expression that can only be figured in a high poetic style.

Dryden's beliefs are countered by Sir Robert Howard in his 'Preface' to *Four New Plays*:

A Poem, being a premeditated form of Thoughts upon design'd Occasions, ought not to be unfurnish'd of any harmony in Words or Sound: [a play] is presented as the present Effect of Accidents not thought of; so that 'tis impossible it should be equally proper to both these, unless it were possible that all Persons were born so much more than Poets, that Verses were not to be compos'd by them, but already made in them.⁵

Howard goes on to reiterate Crites's objection that rhyme in a play draws attention to artificiality at a time when an audience should not be reminded of it. He is more fastidious even than Dryden in arguing for rhyme in one

⁴ *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy, The Works of John Dryden*, ed. E. N. Hooker and H. T. Swedenborg, 20 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956-), XVII, p. 65. All references are from this edition.

case, blank verse in another. Yet all the while that Howard and Dryden differ over the appropriateness of rhyme, neither ever sees it as anything other than subordinate to imagination. To Howard, a poem should rhyme because it does not treat of naturalistic events, a play should not because it is supposed to represent reality. Dryden argues that some realities can be expressed in rhyme, that the poet will still exercise control, and should be able to make a play seem realistic by careful deployment of rhyme, without the need to banish it altogether. But in any case, they are united in seeing sound as firmly within the remit of sense—a good poet will produce natural sounding language, a bad one will let the structure become too apparent.

The fact that Dryden writes primarily on poetry in plays has not prevented his essay from being seen as an important document in the criticism of poetry in general. His advocacy of the heroic couplet stems from this essay, and its dominance of the period is helped by his arguments. Interest in blank verse by contrast, is developed in response to the enormous, unavoidable influence of *Paradise Lost*. Those who prefer the structure of blank verse to rhyme are fortified by Milton's example. Milton himself claims an historic pedigree for his choice, and this is also seized on by his admirers. Rhyme is 'no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially, but the

⁵ 'Preface' to *Four New Plays*, in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908; repr. 1957), II, pp. 97-104 (p. 101).

invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame metre'.⁶ He adopts the heroic form of Homer and Virgil, which has also been used in some English tragedies, and now uses it in an English narrative poem, 'an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poems from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming'.⁷ Rhyme is a recent invention which has become a formal constraint, and is certainly not appropriate for a long heroic poem. Milton's example is referred to by Roscommon in the same glowing terms (although he feels compelled to compose his *Essay on Translated Poetry* in couplets), looking forward to a time when 'the *British Muse*' will 'in the *Roman Majesty* appear, / Which none know better, and none come so near'.⁸ Even Dryden, in his early career, admits to the superiority of unrhymed Classical metre, although he is quick to add that it is inappropriate for his own period: 'The learned Languages have, certainly, a great advantage of us, in not being tied to the slavery of any Rhyme, and were less constrain'd in the quantity of every syllable. [...] But in this necessity of our rhymes, I have always found the couplet Verse most easie'.⁹

The other aspect of the argument in favour of blank verse is its apparent 'naturalness', which, as we have already seen, makes it the preferred metre for plays. Dryden successfully shows that this appearance is deceptive, and that blank verse is as much a formal imposition as rhyme;

⁶ John Milton, 'The Verse', *Paradise Lost*, in *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alistair Fowler (London and New York: Longman, 1968), pp. 456-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Earl of Roscommon, *An Essay on Translated Verse*, Spingarn, III, pp. 297-309 (pp. 308-9).

⁹ Preface to *Annus Mirabilis*, *Works*, I, p. 51.

in addition he has questioned the argument for verisimilitude in plays. It is interesting, then, to find him developing an ambivalent attitude later. In the prologue to *Aureng-Zebe*, he confesses himself 'weary of his long-loved mistress, Rhyme', and 'to an age less polished, more unskilled, / Does with disdain the foremost honours yield'.¹⁰

In the eighteenth century Milton's case is strengthened by Addison's critical appreciation of him in the *Spectator* essays on *Paradise Lost*. Addison adopts an even-handed approach to rhyme, arguing that different writers require different metres. In Milton's case, his choice of subject is all-important:

Rhyme, without any other Assistance, throws the Language off from Prose, and very often makes an indifferent Phrase pass unregarded; but where the verse is not built upon Rhymes, there Pomp of Sound, and Energy of Expression, are indispensably necessary to support the Stile, and keep it from falling into the Flatness of Prose.¹¹

Milton's language, with 'the noblest Words and Phrases which our Tongue would afford him', is best suited to blank verse. Addison therefore recognises the need to adapt form to content, and does not argue that blank verse is a more 'natural' scheme, rather that it is more appropriate to a certain subject.

This is a consideration that is also important in the aesthetics of the time: it is as important to choose the correct verse form for a type of work, as it is to use that form appropriately. This is seen in the revival of the pindaric in the seventeenth century. The pindaric is chosen for its

¹⁰ *Works*, XII, p. 159.

¹¹ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 285, Saturday, January 26, 1711-12.

looseness, again, its 'naturalness', qualities which are amply described in

Blount's compendium:

The nature of [pindaric] is to be loose and free, and not to keep one settled pace, but sometimes like a gentle Stream to glide along peaceably within its own Channel, and sometimes, like an impetuous Torrent, to *roul* on extravagantly, and carry all before it.¹²

It is a form chosen to accentuate the free flow of expression, and to provide pleasure, for which reasons Cowley describes it as 'the noblest and highest kind of Writing in Verse'.¹³ And Cowley is seen as the seventeenth century's greatest practitioner. But while for some the freedom of pindarics is a positive force, for others it can be used to purvey lawlessness and lack of control. John Oldham apes the licentiousness of Rochester in pindarics, and the verse form seems to be put to far less appropriate use here:

Hence hated Vertue from our goodly Ile!
No More our Joys beguile;
No more with thy loth'd Presence plague our happy State
Thou enemy to all that's brisk, or gay, or brave, or great.¹⁴

It seems that in this case the relationship between sound and sense is felt to be very close, and rhyme scheme is a vital determinant of a poem's immoral content.

There exist a number of works which try to prescribe certain verse forms for certain subjects. Mulgrave's *Essay Upon Poetry* mixes definitions of the right use of verse form with censure of its misuse. In the

¹² *De Re Poetica*, p. 65.

¹³ Abraham Cowley, 'Preface' to *Pindarique Odes*, repr. in *Poems*, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), p. 156.

case of an Ode: 'The Poet here must be indeed Inspired, / And not with fancy, but with fury fired'.¹⁵ In poor examples, however: 'ill expression gives too great Allay / To that rich Fancy which can ne're decay', in other words, the choice of language is all-important, as the ode must give the impression of sheer emotion, not elegant contrivance. Similarly, there is a good and bad style of elegy. The former with 'sweet but solemn voice, / And of a Subject grave, exacts the choice, / The Praise of Beauty, Valour, Wit contains' (288). Elegies fail when they forget these simple rules:

If yet a just coherence be not made
Between each thought, and the whole model layed
So right that every step may higher rise,
As in a Ladder, till it reach the Skies;
Trifles like these perhaps of late have past,
And may be lik'd awhile, but never last;
'Tis Epigram, 'tis Point, 'tis what you will,
But not an Elegie, nor writ with skill. (289)

Mulgrave summarises many of the elements that constitute the criticism of the period. The tone is didactic. It is assumed that there is a correct procedure to follow, which will result in a 'proper' elegy. Wrong moves will produce something unworthy of the name, a mere shadow, which will be recognisable because of its privileging of sound over sense: words such as 'Epigram', 'Point', and 'Trifle' indicate a sneering contempt for word play as mere surface gesture. Overall, the interest in different types of rhyme scheme, and the agonising over rhyme and blank verse, reveal the concerns of the period with order and communication. It is felt, by people as diverse as Dryden and Rochester, that poetry should have meaning, and

¹⁴ 'A Satyr against Vertue', in *The Poems of John Oldham*, ed. Harold E. Brooks and Raman Selden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), ll. 26-9.

¹⁵ Earl of Mulgrave, *An Essay Upon Poetry*, Spingarn, III, pp. 286-96 (p. 289).

that that meaning should be created from a mixture of ideas and formal elements, the former governing the latter. To this end, they prescribe rules, produce positive and negative examples, and develop fierce internecine quarrels. But always the end is the same; to govern and control style, in order to achieve clarity and ease of communication.

Swift's adopted verse form is octosyllabic couplets, which he settles into after some early experiments with pindarics, which are not viewed as a great success by critics. Octosyllabics are suited to his satirical and pragmatic style, and align him with poets like John Skelton and Samuel Butler. In this he differs from Pope and Dryden, and this has to be taken into account when considering his poetry. But the differences extend beyond rhyme scheme into other areas of Swift's poetry, as I will show later. As far as 'sound' and 'sense' is concerned, Swift is answerable to the same demands and stresses as other poets of the period, even if his rhyme scheme, with its echoes of doggerel, seems to excuse him in part from entering the debate.¹⁶

The use of typography in poetry attracts almost as much attention as rhyme. More immediately visible, and more measurable than rhyme, it is more severely criticised and circumscribed. The overuse of typographical effects is frowned upon because it acts as a recourse for bad writing. A hack writer, with no serious ideas, can nevertheless turn out a

¹⁶ For analysis of the verse form, see William K. Wimsatt, 'Rhetoric and Poems: The Example of Swift', in *The Author in his Work: Essays on a Problem in Criticism*, ed. Louis L. Marks and Aubrey Williams (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 229-44. Swift's pindarics are discussed by David Sheehan, 'Swift on High Pindaric Stilts' from John Irwin Fischer and Donald C. Mell, Jr (ed.), *Contemporary Studies of Swift's Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), pp. 25-35; and

piece using the nuts and bolts of the poetry trade. The Scriblerians build a satiric industry on this contention. In the *Dunciad*, Richard Bentley is the toiling journeyman who mutilates the great works of literature to produce his criticism: 'Turn what they will to Verse, their toil is vain, / Critics like me shall make it prose again' (*Poems*, V, ll. 213-14). He is, of course, responsible for creating a new letter, the digamma, 'yet more great than letter' because it is higher than ordinary Greek letters (although *he* believes it is because it solves several problems in the composition of Greek). In 'On Poetry', Swift advocates the use of obvious typographical flags to assist the dunce audiences of dunce poetry:

When Letters are in vulgar Shapes,
Tis ten to one the Wit escapes;
But when in *Capitals* expresst,
The dullest Reader smoaks the jest. (P, II: ll. 97-100)

The visual aspects of a poem are of some use to all poets, but to a dunce they are invaluable, as a means of cloaking the poem's lack of substance.

The Augustans provide some theoretical account of the pitfalls of typography in their discussions about the nature and function of wit. Wit is especially manifest in poetry, since it is a contracted rather than discursive form, lending itself to many verbal acts, and requiring more reader interpolation than prose. 'Wit' is an extremely nebulous and contentious term, and much effort goes into describing and controlling its meaning. In the 'Preface' to Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* it is relayed as: 'some lively and apt description, dress'd in such colours of speech, that it sets before your eyes the absent object, as perfectly and more delightfully

the pedigree of the octosyllabic couplet by Donna G. Fricke, 'Swift and the Tradition of

than nature'.¹⁷ This ties in with his comments on the importance of poetic language in the *Essay*, where he states that: 'a Poet, in the description of a beautiful Garden or a Meadow, will please our imagination more than the place it self can please our sight'.¹⁸ Wit positively described is thus an impulse or effect of words which creates more than the words seem to convey, an extra dimension which is hard to describe. This would perhaps account for this ornate description from William Davenant:

Wit is the laborious and the lucky resultances of thought, having towards its excellence, as we say of the strokes of Painting, as well a happiness as care. It is a Webb consisting of the subt'lest threds; and like that of the *Spider* is considerably woven out of our selves.¹⁹

He agrees with Dryden that wit is beyond mere description, and his image of the spider suggests its proliferation and versatility. Altogether, writers of the period tend to view wit in this way, as a necessary component of the 'sense' side of poetry which exceeds and enlivens its more staid formal elements. Pope's famous couplet from the *Essay* sums this idea up: 'True *Wit* is nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was thought but ne'er so well exprest' (I, ll. 297-8).

True wit approximates to the critics' understanding of good sense, difficult to define, studiously created, yet appearing natural. False wit describes bad sense, particularly its incarnation in excessive fascination with sound effects. This account originates from an account by Addison adapted from some observations of Locke. Locke argues for a distinction

Informal Satiric Poetry', Fischer and Mell, pp. 36-40.

¹⁷ *Works*, I, p. 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁹ Sir William Davenant, *Preface to Gondibert*, Spingarn, II, pp. 1-53 (p. 20).

between wit and judgement, preferring the latter over the former as a more cautious and judicious means of describing the world.

For *Wit* lying most in the assemblage of *Ideas*, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant Pictures, and agreeable Visions in the Fancy: *Judgment*, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully, one from another, *Ideas*, wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by Similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another.²⁰

Wit seems to have taken on a negative association, quite at variance with its treatment by Dryden and others. Because it involves the connection or elision of ideas, wit is held by Locke to damage the process of perception. In his system, judgement fares better because it examines one idea at a time, and does not invite error in the same way.

It is left to Addison to make Locke's distinction more palatable to literary tastes. Addison smoothes over the division between Locke's view and the more common literary one almost imperceptibly. Citing Locke's famous passage, he concludes:

This is, I think, the best and most philosophical Account that I have ever met with of Wit [...] I shall only add to it, by way of Explanation, That every Resemblance of Ideas is not that which we call Wit, unless it be such an one that gives *Delight* and *Surprize* to the Reader.²¹

Addison overcomes Locke's criticism mainly by ignoring its charge, and reinstalling wit as a virtue. There is, however, a distinction between a good and a bad wit, and this he describes with recourse to Locke's model:

As *true Wit* generally consists in this Resemblance and Congruity of Ideas, *false Wit* chiefly consists in the Resemblance and

²⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book II, Ch. xi, § 2.

²¹ Joseph Addison, *Spectator* No. 62, Friday, May 11, 1711.

Congruity sometimes of single Letters, as in Anagrams, Chronograms, Lipograms, and Acrosticks: Sometimes of Syllables, as in Ecchos and Doggerel Rhymes: Sometimes of Words, as in Punsns and Quibbles; and sometimes of whole Sentences or Poems, cast into the Figures of *Eggs, Axes, or Altars*.²²

True wit is valued because it deals with resemblance of ideas, the very fact that Locke had criticised. But Addison stresses that this is at least thought on the level of ideas, whereas false wit plays around on the surface, parading puns and quibbles as real invention. Once again, the categories of sound and sense are being invoked, and the overuse of the materially visible is under attack. Addison's modification of Locke enables him to attack bad poetry with the 'backing' of philosophy. Addison takes his misappropriation of Locke even further, and creates 'mixed' wit which circuitously resembles Locke's definition of judgement: 'For not only the *Resemblance* but the *Opposition* of Ideas does very often produce Wit; as I could shew in several little Points, Turns, and Antitheses, that I may possibly enlarge upon in some future Speculation'.²³ Mixed wit allows for some ideas to be hatched from wordplay and quibble, thus weakening the stringency of the Augustan subjection of sound to pre-established sense.²⁴

Works by the Scriblerians are alert to, and develop, misuses of verse, typography, and poetic language to launch assaults on those whose concentration on elements of sound produces little in the way of good sense. Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is filled with examples of abuses, here cliché and redundancy:

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For a full discussion of Addison's interpretation of Locke see John Sitter, *Arguments of Augustan Wit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 49-88.

Where-e'r you find *the cooling Western Breeze,*
In the next Line, it *whispers thro' the Trees;* (I: ll. 350-1)

A *needless Alexandrine* ends the Song,
That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.(I: ll.355-6)

In *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, advice is given to the dunces to enable them to capitalise on their concentration of form over content: 'whenever you *start* a Metaphor, you must be sure to *Run it down*, and pursue it as far as it can go'.²⁵ Presumably you will have plenty of opportunity to achieve this if you adopt the 'cumbrous' style, 'which moves heavily under a Load of Metaphors, and draws after it a long Train of Words' (68). As a method of attack, the Scriblerians employ deflation, turning every high, idealised image into a base, material one. The figure of 'anti-climax' is described as 'A Surprize resembling that of a curious person in a Cabinet of antique Statues, who beholds on the Pedestal the names of *Homer*, or *Cato*, but looking up finds *Homer* without a Head, and nothing to be seen of *Cato*, but his privy Member' (47). The crudeness of the examples given here is intended to show the bad writers as materialist in every sense; as well as focusing on the shape or structure of a poem over its content, they are unable to use figural language properly, understanding its superficial and literal in place of its metaphorical sense.

In *The Art of Sinking*, critiques are taken one step further with the various 'receipts' to make epic poems and the like, which are designed by Scriblerus to remedy completely lack of brain or inspiration. His offering on 'Dedications, Panegyricks, or Satyrs' boasts such advice as '*the Golden*

Rule of Transformation, which consists in converting Vices into their *bordering* Virtues' (78). There is 'A Receipt to make an Epic Poem', which tells you what myths to draw on, when to introduce the gods, and how to make your hero heroic. It is not exhaustive, however: 'As for *Similes* and *Metaphors*, they may be found all over the Creation; the most ignorant may *gather* them, but the danger is in *applying* them. For this advise with your *Bookseller*' (85). Swift makes frequent recourse to this mode of criticism. In 'Advice to the Grub Street Verse-Writers', he credits dunces with no creative skills of their own; and suggests that they leave their unfinished works in the presence of his friend:

When *Pope* has fill'd the Margins round,
Why, then recal your Loan;
Sell them to *Curl* for Fifty Pound,
And swear they are your own. (P, II: ll. 16-20).

If impersonating a proper poet does not work, he advises the newcomer to 'Impartial judge within your Breast / What Subject you can manage best;' ('On Poetry', P, II: ll. 79-80) and to keep to that. In the last resort, there is plenty of jobbing work to be had:

A Pamphlet in Sir *Rob*'s Defence
Will never fail to bring in Pence;
Nor be concern'd about the Sale,
He pays his Workmen on the Nail. (ll. 187-90).

In Scriblerian poetry, the complaints of the Augustan critics are expressed as motifs. For example, in *The Dunciad*, lowness is introduced as a means of expressing the baleful influence of sense over sound. In the famous

²⁵*The Art of Sinking in Poetry: Martinus Scriblerus' ΠΕΡΙ ΒΑΘΟΥΣ*, ed. Edna Leake Steeves (New York: King's Crown Press, 1952), p. 47. Further page references to this work will be given in the text

diving contest, the goddess Dulness encourages her poetic brood to new depths of sinking:

‘Here strip my children! Here at once leap in!
Here prove who best can leap through thick and thin,
And who the most in love of dirt excel,
Or dark dexterity of groping well’. (V, ll. 275-8)

The dunces are categorised by the depths they can achieve. A fairly innocuous group are ‘just buoyant on the flood’ (l. 307), while professionals like Oldmixon ‘who but to sink the deeper, rose the higher’, are more strongly favoured (l. 290). One strong contender is the scribbling lawyer Arnall, with his ponderous skull:

No crab more active in the dirty dance
Downward to climb, and backward to advance.
He brings up half the bottom on his head, (ll. 319-21)

Throughout the *Dunciad*, lowness is prized as a target, an indication of the decline in standards of writing that has taken place. The poem’s opening remarks, by a caricature Richard Bentley, introduce the theme: ‘the Muse ceases not [with epic poetry] her Eagle-flight. Sometimes, satiated with the contemplation of these *Suns* of glory, she turneth downward on her wing, and darts like lightning on the *Goose* and *Serpent* kind’.²⁶ Lowness is thus introduced as the governing motif of the poem, a physical state which also represents a moral fall. Pope is not alone in the use of this figure to make moral points. In ‘On Poetry: A Rhapsody’, Swift remarks on the perversion of nature that the dunces’ movement creates:

From bad to worse, and worse they fall,
But, who can reach to worst of all?
For, though in nature depth and height
Are equally held infinite,

²⁶ *Poems*, V, p. 255.

In poetry the height we know;
'Tis only infinite below. (P, II: ll. 404-9)

He goes on to malign a few poets by name, before extending his image to show the creative process at work:

With heads to points the gulf they enter,
Linked perpendicular to the centre:
And as their heels elated rise,
Their heads attempt the nether skies. (ll. 416-20)

The Scriblerians' most intensive experiment in lowness is *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*. Basing itself on Longinus's *On the Sublime*, it translates that work's key term, βᾶθος, literally, to mean 'low' as well as 'deep'. The Scriblerians enjoy noting that while 'profound' can suggest intellectual depth, in the case of the writers they target it in fact indicates deep stupidity. The work attempts to answer the question: 'Is there not an Art of *Diving* as well as of *Flying*?'. Scriblerus proceeds to give his own versions of what the profound means. A writer of such literature should be able, 'on the appearance of any Object, to furnish his Imagination with Ideas infinitely below it. And his eyes should be like unto the wrong end of a Perspective Glass, by which the Objects of Nature are lessen'd' (19). Such writers are adept at achieving the same result by different methods. There then follows a roll-call of dunces, names initialised for easy reference, who adopt a variety of craven literary postures. There are the flying fishes: 'who now and then *rise* upon their *Fins*, and fly out of the *Profund*; but their Wings are soon *dry*, and they drop down to the *Bottom*' (26). But these fare better than the frogs, who 'live generally in the *Bottom* of a *Ditch*, and make a great *Noise* whenever they thrust their *Heads above Water*' (27-8). The most memorable image of this type is the figure of the

inverted man, who summarises the Scriblerian approach. He appears in Chapter XII, as a combination of two of the dunces' writing styles, the cumbrous and the buskin, or stately:

for as the first is the proper engine to depress what is High, so the second to raise what is Base and Low to a ridiculous visibility [...] When both these can be done at once, then is the *Bathos* in Perfection, as when a Man is set with his Head downward, and his Breech upright, his Degradation is compleat: One end of him is as high as ever, only that end is the wrong one. (69)

The figure represents the economy of the Scriblerians' attack, for every word is carefully chosen to reflect the general argument that high idealism can also become low materialism without any change of language. Thus, 'visibility' is literally interpreted. We see the dunces' lowness in its physical actuality: in the bared bottom of the inverted man. Likewise 'degradation' is punned upon to mean an actual motion that is coeval with moral failure. The dunces are de-graded, that is, pushed further down the hierarchy, but also presented as moving downwards, by the image of the man. Their moral fall is thus a literal tumbling to earth. In *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, as in *The Dunciad*, bad writers are punished by their own example. Their abasing concern with the material and the superficial is documented in the use of words which have both a literal, physical interpretation, and a higher, idealised one. In the case of the dunces, it is always expressed so that only the lowest meaning can be understood by it. They really are at the bottom of the heap, separated from the top by the physical presence of better writers.

As well as delineating the effects of the abuse of sound in the production of bad poetry, the Scriblerians' material images advert to the

social and historical conditions that, it is alleged, bring bad poetry into being. Brean Hammond argues that Scriblerian satire raises the issue of ‘whether writing was an activity of the spirit (issuing to be sure, in a set of marks on paper, but not reducible to these marks), or whether writing was a mechanical and material act which produced goods exchangeable for the wherewithal to buy necessities of life’.²⁷ The Scriblerians range themselves at one end of the spectrum, and dump the dunces at the other. If they are obliged to seek patrons themselves, it is a severe irritation, as Swift shows in his verse to Gay, which associates servility with perversity: ‘How could you, *Gay*, disgrace the Muses train, / To serve a tastless C----t twelve Years in vain?’.²⁸ Pope complains of being continually pestered by the sort of writer who ‘*Rymes e’re he wakes, and prints before Term ends, / Oblig’d by hunger and Request of Friends*’.²⁹ Swift provides an allegory of the incursions of the dunce lifestyle on a writing career in ‘The Progress of Poetry’. At first, the writer is living off the proceeds of a fairly successful play, and like the fattened goose, cannot attain high flights:

Deep sunk in Plenty and Delight,
 What Poet e’er could take his Flight?
 Or stuff’d with Phlegm up to the Throat,
 What Poet e’er could sing a Note? (P, II: ll. 23-6).

The poet’s access to inspiration is denied by his own bulk. Only when he is in a distressed condition is he able to produce work: ‘Now his exalted Spirit loaths / Incumbrances of Food and Cloaths’ (ll. 41-2). The poet makes a virtue of his indigence to fashion himself as a serious writer, and

²⁷ Brean S. Hammond, ‘Scriblerian Self-Fashioning’, *YES*, 18 (1988), 108-24 (118).

²⁸ ‘To Mr. Gay, on his being Steward to the Duke of Queensberry’, P, II: ll. 1-2.

²⁹ ‘Epistle to Arbuthnot’, *Poems*, II, ll. 43-4.

ascend the heavens, to the cheers of Grub Street. But a professional writer never achieves the independence required for good work to appear. As the goose, thriving or starving, can expect the same fate, so the poet has his actions circumscribed by his conditions. His 'Wings of Paper' show that his flight of fancy is just as economically driven as his bloated inactivity. He can ascend the skies only because he has become light through starvation, not because he is really free. Swift's tale is materialist throughout; and the momentary inspiration is destined to result in an even greater fall to earth.

The Scriblerians create a netherworld of bad poetry where the letter chokes the spirit. Their opponents are seen as bloated, scatological, morally retrograde, self-generating, excessive, and pedantic. Their satires enact concerns of the period about the roles of sound and sense in the production of poetry. Here is sound gone mad, and sense left far behind. And by the careful employment of their imagery, the Scriblerians are able to suggest the outcome. First, traditional moral standards are left behind, as the low is valued and the high degraded, and there is an absence of external control. Secondly, an industry of bad poetry without order breeds quickly and becomes self-perpetuating. Its profile is mechanical and external, with the focus on the visual short-cut to meaning, or the pointless word quibble, rather than real signification. Lastly, writing becomes solely determined by its environment, a mechanical process of supply and demand that circumvents traditional values like freedom and inspiration to produce turgid, disposable nonsense. There is an élitism about this kind of attack, in that it presumes there is a writing unsullied by material concerns,

and able to function in an environment which will never disfigure or restrain it. Such idealism, though impracticable, functions nevertheless as a powerful critical tool, to punish those poets who show the workings of their art too freely.

Literature and criticism of the period are deeply involved in the issues that sound and sense demarcate: how a poem's style should work in relation to its content, and how abuses of the relationship take place. The most frequent complaints are levelled against misuses of rhyme and typography. But as Scriblerian writing demonstrates, there is an issue of idealism and materialism which informs all critiques. Augustan poetic theories are galvanised by a desire to retain poetry as a pure form of expression, untainted by the necessary employment of material, measurable signs—to use sound as a means of travel, not the destination.

There are inevitably difficulties in maintaining this critical position, not least in separating the good from the bad. All poetry must depend on some measure of verbal and spatial ingenuity to achieve communication. In the works of the Scriblerians, the problems of so divisive a theory are gradually unearthed; in Swift, the whole basis is undermined. The vehicle for such a collapse is the Scriblerians' fascination with imagery of the body. As sophisticated poets, they are unable to launch their attack on the dunces without bringing into question the bases of their own writing. The result is that the body becomes a symbol of the failure of Augustan criticism to maintain its operative distinctions. This is the subject of the next section.

Body Language

The body and its products are powerful weapons for the Scriblerians, attaching a distinctive imagery to the works of their rivals. In the *Dunciad*, as a reward to Cibber for his noisy votive offerings in the lavatories near 'Temple-wall', the Goddess Cloacina gives the writer who 'fish'd her nether realms for wit' the strength to win the dunces' race:

Renew'd by ordure's sympathetic force,
As oil'd with magic juices for the course,
Vig'rous he rises; from the effluvia strong
Imbibes new life, and scours and stinks along;
Re-passes Lintot, vindicates the race,
Nor heeds the brown dishonours of his face. (V, ll. 100-106)

This type of imagery ensnares the writers in their degraded position by offering no alternative perspective. Their writing is literal and figural excrement—intellectually worthless and an actual bodily product, no more exalted than any of their other 'productions'. The writers are ignorant of their low standards, because they know of no other; the image of Cibber, unaware of the 'brown dishonours of his face', captures a world which has become detached from conventional standards of morality and created a structure of its own, where dirt and disease are glorified, and the low celebrated over the high.

Pope also presents the dunces' failure in another bodily capacity, in the imagery of birth and creation. Here again, the ideal is deflated into the material, as poetic inspiration is replaced by strenuous labour, miscarriage and afterbirth. A supperless Cibber strives in vain to create some work:

Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound!
Plung'd for his sense, but found no bottom there,
Yet wrote and flounder'd on in much despair.
Round him much Embryo, much Abortion lay [.] (ll. 118-121)

The *Dunciad* teems with such imagery. Birth and life are presented as unnatural, monstrous, overblown. Often, birth metaphors are linked to images of the proliferation of insects, to give the suggestion of waste and decay. Here, Dulness is taking note of the chaotic breeding that takes place in her realm:

How hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie,
How new-born nonsense first is taught to cry,
Maggots half-formed in rhyme exactly meet,
And learn to crawl upon poetic feet (ll. 55-62).

The imagery is employed to economic effect here, in the same way as the inverted man stands for a range of ideas. Every reference to birth or life contains a suggestion of unnaturalness or waste. The hints, which 'scarce quick in embryo lie', give the impression of being ready to die at the moment of their birth. They are both about to be born and hardly alive. Even at this stage, however, as they 'lie' in their gestating phase, they have the Grub Street characteristic of 'lying' as their only defining trait. In the next line 'nonsense' is punned upon to mean both bad writing, but also insentience, lifelessness. Unlike a new-born child, this lump of nothing has to be taught to cry, indicating its deviance from the natural order. The 'maggots' make up a whole of some sort when they 'meet' their other halves, rhyme schemes which are 'meet' to their inadequacy. And the resulting concoction can at best only 'crawl' on its 'feet', producing work which is not even up to a minimum standard. In these few lines Pope is able to make a range of comments on bad poetry, by drawing on all aspects of birth imagery. He implies that the dunces are too numerous, nameless, unnatural, producers of waste, or worse, of non-sense, unmissed at their

demise, and endlessly proliferating. As in the case of the falling images earlier in the poem, they are also seen to operate within their own world, which never impinges on an objective reality of rules and standards. The dunces and their work are self-generating, and without an external origin, parentless, in fact. As a result, they are free from moral guidance, and endlessly proliferate their own errors.

An attack in a similar style has been made previously, in Dryden's *Religio Laici*. Although he is talking about Biblical interpretation, rather than Grub Street poetry, he uses the same idiom as Pope: 'The *Fly-blown Text* creates a *crawling Brood*; / and turns to *Maggots* what was meant for Food'.³⁰ Dryden also puns on the sense/sentience idea, in 'Mac Flecknoe', where Shadwell's lack of sentience makes him an ideal successor to Flecknoe: 'The rest to some faint meaning make pretence, / But Sh— never deviates into sense'.³¹ The inversion of values is here, as is the connection of poetic meaning with life itself. And Dryden also draws on the imagery of mindless replication. Shadwell's followers 'justify their author's want of sense' by turning into his heirs:

Not Copies drawn, but Issue of thy own.
Nay let thy men of wit too be the same,
All full of thee, and differing but in name [.]³²

We have seen how Swift uses birth and monstrosity in *A Tale of a Tub* to document the brief lives of the Grub Street works. In the *Battle of the Books* he introduces the character of Criticism, a 'malignant deity' much called upon by the moderns, who, with her brood of children, and

³⁰ *Works*, II, ll. 419-20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 19-20.

her hideous appearance, encapsulates the range of birth-centred attacks on the dunces:

her teeth fallen out before, her eyes turned inward as if she looked only upon herself; her diet was the overflowing of her own gall; her spleen was so large as to stand prominent like a dug of the first rate, nor wanted excrescencies in form of teats, at which a crew of ugly monsters were greedily sucking; and what is wonderful to conceive, the bulk of spleen increased faster than the sucking could diminish it. (TT: 240)

Swift's character of criticism represents birth imagery taken to its furthest extreme. The horrific image of the self-absorbed mother, feeding on her own insides, with her mutated organs serving her vile brood, offers no hope of redemption for the critical target. She seems to overflow the boundaries of criticism itself, to go beyond a measured attack on critical chaos, and to become that chaos itself. Criticism is pure body, and her matter invades the safety of the text.

In Swift's poetry, the body depicted is usually female, often gruesome, and always exhaustive in detail. This motif provides an important basis for Swift's complex and not always cohesive 'theory' of materiality in poetry. Like the Scriblerians, he is able to deploy the body imagery against his poetic rivals, and like them, his writing has a strain of misogyny (as his depiction of 'Criticism' in the *Battle* clearly indicates).³³

³² Ibid., ll. 156, 160-2.

³³ Feminist criticism of Swift's poetry has responded thoroughly to this aspect of his work, and the positions adopted range from outright condemnation of him to qualified enthusiasm, indicating the discord which troubles all Swift criticism. See, for example, Susan Gubar, 'The Female Monster in Augustan Satire', *Signs*, 3 (1977), 380-94; Felicity Nussbaum, 'Juvenal, Swift, and *The Folly of Love*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 9 (1976), 540-52; Penelope Wilson, 'Feminism and the Augustans: Some Readings and Problems', *Critical Quarterly*, 28 (1986), 80-92; Laura Brown, 'Reading Race and Gender: Jonathan Swift', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 23 (1990), 424-43; and Ellen Pollak, *The Poetics of Sexual Myth*.

But Swift's work goes further, delving beyond mere observation and critique to examine his own creations, and his own poetic assumptions.

In poems in which Swift describes a female character, a similar pattern emerges. He launches a conventional attack by revealing some physical artificiality which implies moral falseness. But then, this artificiality is taken to an extreme, towards a total simulation and the ultimate absence of the object. So what begins as straightforward criticism turns into erosion of the poem's organising distinctions.

We can see this principle in 'The Progress of Beauty', one of a number of sardonic 'progress' poems which chart the decline of some weak or presuming figure. Here the victim is Celia, whose journey from early morning horror to 'the Wonder of her Sex' is lavishly illustrated. Swift's analogy is with the moon, which rises in the sky from an unpromising start to become increasingly luminous:

'Twixt earthly females and the Moon,
All parallels exactly run;
If Celia should appear too soon,
Alas, the nymph would be undone! (P, I: ll. 9-12)

Like Diana, Celia's beauty rests in subterfuge and disguise, and it is Swift's task to concentrate on those aspects which are normally and thankfully hidden. This is the ironic 'progress' of the title. Swift's satire takes a swipe at other poets' idealisation in poetry, by exaggerating its material aspects. Two stanzas in particular confront the illusory quality of poetic language with everyday reality:

Three colours, black, and red, and white,
So graceful in their proper place,
Remove them to a different light.
They form a frightful hideous face.

For instance, when the lily skips
Into the precincts of the rose,
And takes possession of the lips,
Leaving the purple to the nose. (ll. 21-8).

Fine language is quickly transformed into a more earthly, tangible variant, talk of lilies and roses overwhelmed by flat descriptions of colours and bodily organs. In the same way, the figure of the moon does not represent an escape into poetic flights as she herself is a flawed beauty:

When first Diana leaves her bed,
Vapours and steams her looks disgrace,
A frowzy dirty coloured red
Sits on her cloudy wrinkled face; (ll. 1-4).³⁴

The poem attacks all artifices which make women appear better than they are: their own cosmetics, the immortal figures they are compared to, and the fanciful language which describes them. The result is that there is no way, by the end of the poem, to evade the effects of corporeality:

Ye powers, who over love preside,
Since mortal beauties drop so soon,
If you would have us well supplied,
Send us new nymphs with each new moon. (ll. 117-20)

There seems to be no idealism here, as Diana is just as prey to the vagaries of time and physical decay as Celia. What replaces the natural process of decay, however, is an artificial cycle of re-creation. Just as the moon waxes and wanes, so Celia, through her skills in the use of cosmetics, is able to restore 'each Colour to its Place and Use, / And teach her Cheeks again to blush' (ll. 47-8). The implication is that she does not merely

³⁴ The difficulty of deciding whether Diana is an earthly or divine figure is discussed by John M. Aden in 'Those Gaudy Tulips: Swift's Unprintables', in Larry S. Champion (ed.), *Quick Springs of Sense: Studies in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), pp. 15-32 (pp.16-17); and by Christine Rees, 'Gay, Swift, and the Nymphs of Drury-Lane', *Essays in Criticism*, 23 (1973), 1-21 (17).

colour her face, but recreates it each morning. After a fresh coat of make-up, 'She knows her early self no more' (l. 49). This point seems to fail at the end, when mortality wins out. In the end, neither Celia nor Diana has the raw material even to work up this alteration:

But, art no longer can prevail
When the materials all are gone,
The best mechanic hand must fail,
When nothing's left to work upon. (ll. 77-80)

From this, it would appear that the traditional form of attack triumphs, and Celia's self-creation cannot escape the onslaught of time. But this argument must be set against the development of artificiality in the poem. It is not merely employed to malign a vain woman's character; it threatens to overwhelm the entire structure, thus negating the poem's satiric message. For in his attacks on Celia's habits, Swift repeatedly posits Celia as an image, constructed by others, not as a natural being. The make-up is the first clue—she applies it in the manner of a painter on a blank canvas, creating all the signifiers of womanhood from a few materials. This self-image is taken up by others, and the theme of picturing comes to dominate the poem. We find her out of reach, placed in a frame: 'The window is her proper sphere' (l. 66). When on the move, she keeps her sedan chair glasses in front of her face to distort her image for the benefit of waiting fops. The instant effect of the motif is to articulate Swift's hostile opinions on the falseness of women's appearance, by arguing that it is all surface and frame, with no concentration on content. But the image also has the effect of prising apart the homogeneous insulting tone and opening it to question. Celia's admiration

of herself as a painting, her capacity both to paint and be painted, clouds the clarity of the satire. When we look at her, it is from confusing vantage points. We could be Celia, the fops, the narrator, or Swift looking at the same picture, all bringing different perspectives to it. The image exists at both crass and sophisticated levels; Swift dwells on frames and pieces of glass and 'paints' (cosmetics), but he also calls up questions about viewing and perceiving through it, and these in turn raise the question of exactly where the object of the satire, Celia, is to be found. Is she an organic being, whose habits are being ridiculed, or is she in fact a product of the artificiality that she embraces? It seems that she has become so adept at self-painting that she has turned into an image in the poem, recuperable only from a distance; behind glass, behind paint. From the poem's image of artifice there emerges uncertainty about its nature and signifying practice.

There is a more dramatic enactment of such a process in 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed'. Corinna, 'pride of Drury Lane', is seen undressing, a process which denudes her of more than just clothes:

Now dextrously her plumpers draws,
That serve to fill her hollow jaws.
Untwists a wire and from her gums
A set of teeth completely comes. (P, II: ll. 17-20)

The satire consists in showing how entire Corinna's artificiality is: not only her make-up, but also parts of her body prove to be man-made. As in 'The Progress of Beauty', the idealistic language of poetry about women is also under attack. Corinna's 'crystal eye', which in another poem might have been a romantic image, is here a descriptive term for her glass eye, which

she pulls out at bedtime. Even her name is treated ironically. She is the kind of Corinna, 'For whom no shepherd sighs in vain', a readily available prostitute, not an elusive pastoral ideal. Throughout the poem, she is referred to as 'goddess' and 'nymph' at the same time as she is depicted pulling off artificial hips and losing surgical dressings. Swift's project in the poem is to reduce and invalidate the claims of poetry to idealise and praise women, and to replace it with a literal, realistic picture. The poem ends on an olfactory note:

Corinna in the morning dizen'd,
Who sees, will spew; who smells be poisoned. (ll. 73-4)

But by the time we reach this point, the linguistic dismantling has progressed so far that we are unable to picture a reconstituted Corinna. Her re-collection in the morning does not effectually reverse the progress. Her dressing aids have been stolen and misused by the animal life that shares her dwelling. 'The Nymph, tho' in this mangled Plight, / Must ev'ry Morn her limbs unite'(ll. 65-6). But the narrator finds himself unequal to the task of describing this reversal, insinuating that it cannot be achieved: 'The bashful Muse will never bear / In such a scene to interfere' (ll. 71-2). This is more than fake coyness. The poem has been gradually disclosing its own inability to grasp the essence of its female subject. It is ultimately Corinna's absence as a person that the poem documents, although its concentration on her seems to belie this. The final 'Corinna' that we perceive is an image doubly removed. First as a prostitute removed to the sanitising space of a page, but then as an automaton. The significant word is 'dizen'd', which means both 'gaudily dressed' and

'spun onto a distaff'; and it is this which gives the subject the semblance of a mechanical object. The sting of the final line, 'Who sees will spew; who smells, be poisoned.'(ll. 73-4) is lessened by the note of enquiry that 'who' introduces; since the previous content of the poem suggests that there is no 'real', visible, smellable Corinna.

The final insult of each poem fails to be delivered because its imagery has been working within it to ensure that the female object is marked by her absence. In an early, overlooked work, 'Verses Wrote in a Lady's Ivory Table-Book', the same process is employed to raise issues of the role of readers in the construction of the object. Here, the woman targeted becomes largely indistinguishable from the pages of her table-book. The conflicting subject positions in the poem fracture its inner and outer space, so that it cannot in the end be read as merely a diverting attack on fops and ladies. The poem sets the scene by dramatising what lies outside it, in an attempt to internalise everything. The place of the poet is taken by another observer, the reader, who has supposedly entered the woman's room and taken up her table book. This observer is led to believe that in fact the written verses, and not the poet, directly address him. But complexity, and complicity, is added by the poet's own suggested appearance at the scene. One way of reading the line 'Who that had Wit would place it here' (P, I: l. 17), involves the poet entering the space of the poem to record the poem in the book. But it could equally refer to the entire work, deposited in front of the reader. Strange dislocations result from Swift's use of a talking book as the subject of a poem. The woman seems at first closer to us than she would if pictured as the conventional

object of a poem, since she is allowed to speak for herself, in however degraded a fashion. But alongside the freshness there is an air of decay, in which the taint of death which covers all of the sayings comes to infect the whole of the poem, and to reveal its apparent directness as a stale reproduction. In the humorous juxtaposition of the fop's beau-spelling and the lady's bad spelling we find the gradual slippage of the object. The fop's protestation of love until death is matched by her increasing physical dereliction. But her death comes to reside, not in an actual physical disappearance, but in rhetorical and syntactical absence from the poem. Doomed to speak in parentheses, or to be (mis)construed by foolish lovers, she is sucked into the same fate as Corinna, a rarefied object pushed further from the reader's reach the more he or she tries to approach her. John Irwin Fischer deems the poem a failure, since 'at the imaginative level, where poetry matters most, Swift fails to discover for himself a joyous and fertile alternative to the sterile folly he condemns'.³⁵ At times the verse seems to overwhelm the reader, crushing all potential for redemption or pleasure beneath its unremitting message. But this is to read it on a purely thematic level, rather than to examine the interlocking development of structure and theme, which does allow some progress. For the presence (perhaps omnipresence) of the book obliges us to consider ourselves, other characters, even the woman herself, principally as readers. This precludes the possibility of jumping to a straightforward representation of a scene, where we are observers manipulating an object. We are all in danger of being read, even overlooked, just as the characters

³⁵ *On Swift's Poetry*, p. 57.

in the poem are. 'Verses Wrote' is a forcibly graphic poem, which draws attention to its materials and originators throughout. In this, it echoes some of the experiments of the Scriblerians: the typography in *The Dunciad*; Mrs Scriblerus's dream of a giant ink-horn; even Swift's 'Verses to the Grub Street Poets'. Where it differs is in refusing the clarity of a simple indictment for the less rewarding but more searching prospect of an engagement with poetic language, to see what becomes of the object when it is transmitted through this medium.

'Verses Wrote' is perhaps the most extreme example of the movement in all three poems, whereby an existing convention is expanded and stretched until it proves worthless as representation. The dual image of moon and woman which backfired in 'The Progress of Beauty'; the unstoppable disintegration and scattering of Corinna, and the dispersal through the leaves of the book of the table-book lady: all these are instances of Swift expanding a conventional rhetoric until it becomes meaningless, to 'demonstrate' the removal of the object under consideration from retrieval.

What remains, in the case of these poems, is a symbol for the absence of the object each represents. The picture in 'The Progress of Beauty' places Celia at an irretrievable distance; however much is poured on her in the way of satiric abuse, it becomes frustrated by the fact that she is always in the process of being presented to us, but never actually there. The distaff in 'A Beautiful Young Nymph going to Bed', classical symbol of womanhood, reminds us of Corinna's dispersal, of the failure of parts to make up the whole. The table-book alerts the reader to his or her

involvement in the creation of the woman, to the fact that she exists only in its pages, as the creation of others. Swift's poetry assumes the bodily imagery common to the Scriblerians and others of their time, and works on it so intensively that it becomes a cipher for absence, the non-bodily. As a result, the Augustan distinction of sound and sense becomes threatened. The body imagery is equated with sound, but as Swift's work shows, it issues in absence rather than presence. This implies that the distinction cannot hold; that sound is not the physical route to sense, and that sense is not achievable through sound. And this confusion is brought about, not by ignoring the categories, but by applying the physical to an extreme.

I believe that Swift goes further than his contemporaries in this respect, and that he rejects their confidence in the availability of the poetic object. An exchange of verse with Sheridan highlights this. Sheridan composes an urbane satire around the proposition that women and clouds have much in common:

Clouds turn with ev'ry Wind about,
They keep us in Suspense and Doubt,
Yet oft perverse like Woman-kind
Are seen to scud against the Wind [.] (11-14)³⁶

Sheridan is so smitten by his analogy that he gives it a general application: 'Let me proclaim it then aloud, / That ev'ry Woman is a *Cloud*' (ll. 81-2). Swift, however, is less than satisfied with such gallantry, and in the character of 'Dennis Nephelee, chief', replies unfavourably: 'To flatter woman by a Metaphor! / What profit would you hope to get of her?'.³⁷ He

³⁶ 'A New Simile for the Ladies', reprinted in Swift, *Poems*, II.

³⁷ 'An Answer to the late Scandalous Poem, wherein the Author most audaciously presumes to compare a Cloud to a Woman' (P, II: ll. 169-70).

unpicks Sheridan's subtle humour with his less delicate approach, but on the way devalues some common idealisations of women:

Tis sung, whenever Celia treads,
The Vilets ope their purple Heads,
The Roses blow, the Cowslip springs;
Tis sung. But we know better Things.
Tis true, a Woman on her mettle
Will often p---s upon a Nettle;
Yet, though we grant she makes it wetter,
The Nettle never thrives the better. (P, II: 139-46)

Swift keeps the rural setting, but he replaces the nymph with a real woman, whose requirements are more tangible, and whose relationship with nature is more immediate. But Swift's visualisation also has the effect of abdicating the poet's control over the object. He is unable to make fanciful assumptions about women, and not just because of the intrusion of their 'real natures'. Swift does not position himself as a commentator on women in the same manner as Sheridan or Pope. After his crude rebuttal of the idealised image, there is no offer of replacement, as we might find in Pope. Pope's role is that of the painter of faults, a delicate critic, whose own urbanity is not threatened by his criticism:

Come then, the colours and the ground prepare!
Dip in the Rainbow, trick her off in Air,
Chuse a firm Cloud, before it fall, and in it
Catch, ere she change, the Cynthia of this minute.³⁸

Swift is altogether more earthy, and does not provide overarching conclusions. Swift's body imagery departs from that of his contemporaries in its extremism and its experimentalism. We have seen how he enjoys exploding the myths of gallantry and euphemism that inform even poems critical of women. But this is more than just a cavalier attempt to be more

coarse and cynical. Swift's immersion in the material comes from a concern with its effects on the 'sense' of the poem, that cannot ignore the influence of its incursions of 'sound'. Thus, where Pope or Sheridan might use the material to make critical points, Swift's work gives the impression that it is in some respect controlling him. He is more receptive to the necessity and inevitability of the material than his peers, and as a result, there is less certainty in his poetry about the rigour and aptness of such categories as 'sound' and 'sense'. It would be difficult to conceive a Swiftian poem as frank or committed as *An Essay on Criticism*. As we will see, Swift's indeterminism opens up new possibilities for poetic language which have little to do with preconceived rules and the execration of matter.

Swift's poetry moves in two directions as a result of his uncovering of the absence of the object through concentration on the body. It is experienced as pathos in the poems to Stella, when Swift tries and fails to give life to his friend by celebrating her in verse. And it has an unexpected positive outcome in the excremental poems, where the extremism of the imagery begins to fragment the structure of the poems, but also breaks down the rigid Augustan perception of poetry to create a more questioning role.

In the poems to Stella, Swift's primary concern is how to represent a living person in a dead format. In 'Stella's Birth-Day (1721)' Swift tables an elaborate if not always flattering analogy between Stella and an inn, to show her popularity. As weary travellers 'at first incline / Where'er

³⁸ 'Epistle to a Lady', *Poems*, II: ll. 17-20.

they see the fairest Sign' (P, II: ll. 1-2), and often return there, so old friends do the same to Stella because they 'think it both a Shame and Sin / To quit the true old Angel Inn' (ll. 13-14). But Swift as ever complicates the reference by dwelling on Stella's face as an inn-sign: 'this is Stella's case in fact; / An Angel's face, a little crack't' (ll. 15-16). And there are difficulties in employing such an image, for although it attempts to ground its object in a field of shared reference, to make Stella accessible to all readers, it opens up possibilities for ambiguity, by using a broad vocabulary, and drawing attention to the supplementary relationship between language and the object. The pun on 'sign' indicates the tension, and the use of words like 'case' and 'form', which have physical and grammatical associations, complicates matters. Just as the figure of the moon in 'The Progress of Beauty' serves, not as a paradigm of the ideal, but a reinforcement of the mortal, so the inn-sign designed to represent Stella honestly succeeds in bringing to light the linguistic artifice involved in drawing analogies. The 'true' Stella is thus more distant than at first supposed. In fact, there is more direct access to her inferior sisters, for their qualities come to reside wholly in the inn-signs ('Doll hangs out a newer face', travellers 'stop and light at Chloe's head' [l. 34, l. 37]) while Stella's are preserved from such literalness. There is no manifestation of Stella which is not in the process of being turned into something else—hostess to inn, face to inn-sign—as the separation between the physical woman and the figure in the poem becomes thematised in the poem's substitutive play. Like Corinna and the lady with/in the Table Book,

Stella becomes dislocated by the very process which aims to pin her down and bring her to presence.

Swift's concern at this tendency in his verse is evident from 'A Receipt to Restore Stella's Youth', which seems both a comic and genuine experiment to preserve her in verse. For this performance, the hapless friend is cast as a cow, who, though starved and cold in the winter, becomes as new in the spring: 'Without an ounce of last Year's Flesh / Whate'er she gains is young and fresh' (P, II: ll. 15-16). If this is not wholly convincing, it offers him new opportunities. He can allude to the legend of Medea's kettle, from which a disembodied ram was born as a lamb, and compare his own writing practice to this. He recommends that Stella be sent to pasture at Quilca, where she will be reborn:

Nor Flesh nor Blood will be the same,
Nor aught of *Stella*, but the Name;
For, what was ever understood
By human Kind, but Flesh and Blood? (ll. 33-6)

This question is asked in vain; he knows that the current Stella cannot be replaced by a new one; physicality decays and cannot be annually replenished. And while the poem is homely and comic, it is also mixed with an eerie pathos. All that will remain of Stella is her name because her body will eventually waste away, and what is worse, all that there is of her in his poetry is a name, he cannot summon it to infuse her with real life (despite the italicisation). Instead, Swift creates a fantasy, in which a reborn Stella fights off the attentions of the local squires, but it is short-lived. In fact, it threatens to die even before the poem ends, as he is forced to revoke his powers: 'But lest you should my Skill disgrace, / Come back

before you're out of Case' (ll. 49-50). Once she has returned from her poetic hinterland, he imagines a domestic scene in which the 'real' woman devours the image. He may not be able to perpetuate her body through his clever devices, 'But here, before the Frost can mar it, / We'll make it firm with Beef and Claret' (ll. 56-7). The Stella at the end of the poem is no more tangible than her bovine version. But Swift's desire for her to be so, and his *simultaneous denial of his wishes, generates the melancholy that comes to dominate the Stella poems.*

But there is also a more positive, empowering result of Swift's failed experiment. His realisation of the impossibility of grasping through language what is nevertheless felt tangibly, as absence, sets him apart from others who adopt the categories of sound and sense, categories he himself seems to believe in. Instead, *his poetry works from a more strategic, practical standpoint (or number of standpoints), and the 'failure' is transformed into a more active and immanent engagement with the problems of poetic language than such a static polarity can muster.*

At times, Swift even seems to rejoice in his non-referential moments, in an indirect challenge to the normal Scriblerian line of attack on others. In 'The Journal of a Modern Lady', he approaches some of the exuberance of *A Tale of a Tub*. In an ironic undermining of the standard type of poetry in praise of women, he promises not to write satire:

Ah lovely Nymphs remove your Fears,
No more let fall those precious Tears.
Sooner shall ... &c.

[Here several Verses are omitted] (P, II: ll. 18-19)

His failure to keep to his promise forms the poem's humour, but the mock hiatus also indicates the breach in Swift's poems between the object and the representation. Swift's fake coyness reads differently from Pope's, which doubts the woman, not his ability to describe her: 'If Folly grows romantic, I must paint it'.³⁹

Swift's poetry, with its focus on the material, articulates and develops the criticisms by the Scriblerians and others, of the grossness of bad poetry, with its overemphasis on surface details at the expense of sense. At the same time, it moves in other directions, broaching issues about the nature of poetic language itself, its distance from the object, the necessity of its distance, and the significance of the reader's input. The result is a more voluble, fluid poetry of debate, rather than the kind of breezy descriptiveness that the sound and sense model advocates (and which, Swift's poetry shows, is never truly attainable). The most concentrated and controversial working out of these ideas takes place in the 'excremental' poems. They are normally read in terms of their subject matter, and their historical and social consequences are taken into account.⁴⁰ While this kind of reading should not be undervalued, there

³⁹ 'Epistle to a Lady', l. 16.

⁴⁰The debate is long-running and varied. Some critics treat them as essentially humorous, or worthwhile. See Thomas B. Gilmore, 'The Comedy of Swift's Scatological Poems', *PMLA*, 91 (1976), 33-43; and Donald Greene, 'On Swift's Scatological Poems', *Sewanee Review*, 75 (1967), 672-89. Others are straightforwardly critical, like Susan Gubar: 'Swift describes his own inability to accept the ambiguities and contradictions of the human condition, portraying his failure in the figure of the repulsive female'. See, 'The Female Monster in Augustan Satire', *Signs*, 3 (1977), 380-94 (381). On the other hand, Herbert Davis sees Swift as all too aware of his actions, producing the poems from his 'constant shock, as a moralist, at the insane pride of these miserable vermin, crawling about the face of the earth'. 'A Modest Defence of "The Lady's Dressing Room"', in C. Camden (ed.), *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 39-48 (p. 47). For a groundbreaking psychoanalytical reading of the poems, see Norman O. Brown, 'The Excremental

seems to be another, equally important but less frequently considered aspect to them, which leads on from the issues we have been discussing in Swift's poetry. The excremental poems catalogue and express that current in Swift's poetry which runs counter to the perceived relation between sound and sense; namely, the difficulty in attaining the object. They achieve this, first by dwelling on the material and the disgusting to such a point that it is in danger of losing its significance; and secondly, by examining the joint roles of reader and writer in constructing the literary object. They represent an attempt to move forward in poetic language, rather than to remain stymied by categories that do not fit.

Three of the poems in question, 'The Lady's Dressing Room', 'Strephon and Chloe', and 'Cassinus and Peter' (the other is 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed') share key structural and thematic qualities. In each narrative, a naive male is shocked out of his idealistic view of his mistress by the discovery of her most primal bodily functions. The methods of discovery vary, but what is always emphasised is a polarity between image and reality. Thus, in 'Cassinus and Peter', the moment of revelation is saved until the end, and related by the lovestruck Cassinus, who indulges in some wild lamentations beforehand:

Nor can imagination guess,
Nor eloquence divine express,
How that ungrateful charming maid,
My purest passion has betrayed. (P, II: ll. 55-8)

This high-flown and exaggerated language is meant to clang indecorously against the closing couplet:

Vision', in *Life Against Death: the Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (London:

Nor wonder how I lost my wits;
Oh! *Caelia, Caelia, Caelia*, Sh—. (ll. 117-8)

In 'The Lady's Dressing Room', the moment of deliverance from illusion occurs when Strephon touches Celia's excrement, after reaching into her chamber pot unawares. And in 'Strephon and Chloe', the unmasking takes the form of Strephon's realisation that his bride, having imbibed twelve cups of tea at the wedding feast not surprisingly uses a chamber pot for the displacement of her 'fuming Rill'. Most of the criticism of the excremental poems hinges around these moments, which all parties see as shocking. Opinion is divided over whether Swift wants to denigrate or champion the human body, whether it is the women or the narrators who are at fault. And arguments have been extensively advanced for both sides. But what seems significant in the poems arises from structural considerations as much as thematic ones, The moment of revelation is ushered in by hyperbolic use of poetic language, and (in 'Strephon and Chloe', and 'The Lady's Dressing Room') painstaking concentration on detail. In both cases, the focus on objects, or words, hinders the flow of narrative:

Adieu to ravishing delights,
High raptures and romantic flights;
To goddesses so heavenly sweet,
Expiring shepherds at their feet;
To silver meads and shady bowers,
Dressed up with amaranthine flowers.

(*'Strephon and Chloe'*, P: II, ll. 197-202)

A Paste of Composition rare,
Sweat, Dandriff, Powder, Lead and Hair.

(*'The Lady's Dressing Room'*, P, II: ll. 23-4)

Distortions, Groanings, Strainings, Heavings;
(‘Strephon and Chloe’, l. 241)

The discovery of the excrement is the powerful shock jolting the observer, at the same time as the reader, out of poetic stasis. Just as the narrators feel that they cannot maintain the idealist world in which they lived, with the knowledge of so physical a presence, so the reader cannot perceive poetry as pure idealism any longer. On the other hand, the taboo on excrement means that we cannot comprehend it completely (any more than the narrators can). As a physical object it will always be remote to us because of its exclusion from polite society. So Swift is not proposing immersion in the physical as an alternative to the ideal in poetry. The discovery of the faecal should be the discovery that poetry can neither wholly mimic nor substitute for its object. Neither total identification with, nor total rejection of, the possibility of positing an object in poetry, will suffice. Instead, it is up to us to make a tactical choice midway between the two. The desire to experience physical objects through writing is the motivation behind the Stella poems, its frustration is enacted in the poems on excrement. At the extremes of writing, Swift unpacks the assumptions that, for the Augustans, control poetry, and it is this, as much as the subject matter, that gives the poetry its impact.

Conclusion

By working through the categories of sound and sense, Swift’s poetry uncovers the inadequacy of such distinctions in poetry. Using the standard

line of attack on formalism, bodily imagery, he quickly leaves his contemporaries behind in the extremism and savagery of his attacks, but also, connectedly, in the radicality of his questions. The more corporeal he appears, the less so he is, as the artificiality that he attacks consumes his language, until only the absence of the object paraded before us can be known. Poetry does not give us the object without giving us itself. The negative implications of this are played out in the often agonised 'Stella' poems, which lament the inability of language to capture the essence (and even save the life) of a real person valued by Swift. But the 'positive' implications are a more honest comprehension of the strengths and limits of poetry, and of its own demands, which must take precedence over those of empirical description. The shock and novelty of the *excremental poems* allegorise this fluid and complex position, whereby the poetic object seems all too present yet simultaneously out of reach, neither desirable nor avoidable. Here, we see the emerging and convergent roles of poet, reader, and the language of poetry itself, which join together to create a different type of understanding, less fixed, but more embracing, than that offered by the rigid model of sound and sense. We see poetic language as something other than a possession or a tool. Unlike prose, it sets up resonances which do not always chime with the purported meanings of words, but these alternative visions lead us to question the empirical reality of the attainable object that Augustan theory posits. A rigid poetics of sound and sense tries to eliminate uncertainty, but it also frustrates experiment. Swift's poetry moves beyond this narrow world-view to entertain doubt but also depth.

4: Gulliver's Languages

Introduction

Gulliver's Travels presents the reader with a different experience of language from other works of Swift. Language is deemed to operate in a *fictional* manner first; its other properties can be considered only after this comprehension. In this chapter I will argue that this circumstance affects the text's adumbration of ideas. There are many discussions, examples, and adventures of language, but they all come under the aegis of self-conscious fictionality. In advertent to them, I take up Grant Holly's disaffection with 'the analyst, who reads [the text] merely as an arrow that points to a signified of transcendental importance, or gazes through its "transparency" to regions beyond'.¹ Later in the chapter, I will show how critics who attempt this kind of appropriation of *Gulliver's Travels* are presented with opposition from the text itself.

There are three dimensions to the work's study of language. The extended satire on the Royal Society and other projectors, which occupies much of Book Three, develops into a ramified consideration of abstraction and inflexibility. The ridiculous activities of the Laputans, and the absurdities of the Academy of Lagado, are set against the lifestyles of more rational people who assimilate language into their everyday lives. This extends into an analysis of the results, for society, of language disinvested of all versatility, and considered to be an unchanging object; in the 'Tribnia' piece, the confrontation of Aristotle with his commentators on Glubbudubdrib, and the miserable social conditions facing the disinherited Struldbruggs. Secondly, from this, I consider another side to language, its

¹ 'Travel and Translation: Textuality in *Gulliver's Travels*', *Criticism*, 21 (1979), 134-152 (136).

function as a supposed determinant of communication between social groups. This is examined in all the voyages, and Swift's keen sense of social observation results in an account of discrepancy and danger, rather than comfort and harmony. Gulliver's role is as both observer and participant in each society he visits, and it is here that difficulties present themselves. For while he is able to present something of the workings of language between inhabitants, his own intervention often causes difficulties and is usually the means of unveiling linguistic controversies. The final section looks at the many narratorial contexts of the *Travels*, through which all previous discussions must ultimately be filtered. As well as the frames of the narrative, I will in this section consider the underlying debate about truth, which destabilises so many moments of apparent certainty. I also move outward from the context of the book itself to its critical reception, which constitutes an extension of the dialogues within it in some respects, especially in the manner in which critics are drawn to take sides in the Houyhnhnm adventure to justify particular positions. I will attempt to overturn some common but restrictive assumptions about language in literature, by showing how, in a prescient work such as *Gulliver's Travels*, the demarcations between sections, narrative viewpoints, and the critical response are complicated; and how this all arises because of the text's own reckoning of its fictionality.

Fixing Language

The third part of the *Travels* has the most openly referential and satirical statements on language. Swift's furnishing of the Academy at Lagado with satires on the schemes undertaken and approved by the Royal Society is

well documented.² The language schemes are of particular interest to him, and there are direct allusions to Sprat's appreciation of the Society's use of language, as well as to John Wilkins's real character, and Leibniz's idea for a writing machine (Leibniz was at the time in correspondence with the Royal Society).³ Swift uses this background to develop attacks, not just on specific experiments, but on the consequences of trying to abstract and objectify language, to render it immobile. This theme is prefigured in the strange behaviour of the Laputans.

The Laputans employ servants called 'flappers', whose function is to touch the mouths and ears of conversants with a bladder of dried peas. This practice is necessary, Gulliver finds, because 'the Minds of these People are so taken up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the Discourses of others, without being roused by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and Hearing' (PW, XI: 157). The women on the flying island do not share this affliction, a circumstance that works to their benefit, for, if they wish consort with the men from the mainland, 'the Husband is always so rapt in Speculation, that the Mistress and Lover may proceed to the greatest familiarities before his Face, if he be but provided with Paper and Implements, and without his *Flapper* at his side' (165). In such unpromising circumstances, Gulliver is often made to talk to women, servants, and tradesmen, as 'these were the only People from whom I could ever receive a reasonable Answer' (173). We see the sterility and uncongeniality of language divorced from the arena of social exchange, and this lesson is not lost on Gulliver. Eager to

² For a detailed list of sources, see the two articles by Marjorie Hope Nicolson and Nora M. Mohler; 'The Scientific Background of Swift's *Voyage to Laputa*', and 'Swift's Flying Island in the *Voyage to Laputa*', in *Annals of Science*, 2 (1937), 299-304, and 405-30.

³ See Joel Reed, 'Restoration and Repression: The Language Projects of the Royal Society', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 19 (1989) 399-412; Frederik N. Smith, 'Scientific Discourse: *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Philosophical Transactions*', from Frederik N. Smith (ed.), *The Genres of Gulliver's Travels* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), pp. 139-62. Also Everett Zimmerman, *Swift's Narrative Satires: Author and Authority* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 140-3.

escape from this pensive people, he obtains letters of introduction for the country below. But he finds little improvement in the city of Lagado. The inhabitants live in misery because a few of their predecessors went on a visit to Laputa several years ago, and 'after five Months Continuance, came back with a very little Smattering in Mathematicks, but full of volatile Spirits acquired in that Airy Region' (176). They then set about putting their degraded version of Laputan knowledge into practical use in their own society, by setting up an Academy of Projectors. Gulliver has thus failed to escape from the abstraction of Laputa by leaving the island; its disastrous effects dog him on the mainland. While the projectors toil away with their fanciful schemes inside, outside the citizens' houses are falling down, and agricultural 'experiments' are destroying their livelihoods.

The Academy is divided into areas of practical and speculative learning, but this distinction soon proves rather arbitrary. What goes on in the practical school is mirrored in experiments in the speculative school. An 'Operation to reduce human Excrement to its Original Food' (180), is similar to attempts by political projectors to uncover treasonable plots by reading a suspect's excrement: 'Because Men are never so serious, thoughtful, and intent, as when they are at Stool' (190). A physician who tries to cure colic by 'contrary Operations from the same Instruments', demonstrates his technique by alternately blowing up and evacuating a dog's anus with a pair of bellows. The dog, unsurprisingly, does not survive. In the political school, another physician recommends trying something similar on political meetings, since the body politic seems to behave like a human body. He therefore diagnoses 'Aperitives, Abstersives, Corrosives, Restringtons, Palliatives, Laxatives', and so on, according to the requirements of each case (188).

As Gulliver's visit continues, it becomes clear that all of these experiments, whether practical or speculative, are governed by the same

logic, that of experimentation itself. Whether seeking to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, or a confession from a plotter, the projectors use the same methods. They all believe that they can achieve success by empirical work on material objects. And language is just another of these objects, that must take its place along with everything else. They assume that language can be fixed permanently into a system which can be applied without discrimination. Whereas the citizens, just like the Laputan women, use language in a variety of ways, to assist in their daily lives, the projectors try to pin it down to a single function.

The first of the language projects that Gulliver encounters is a huge writing machine, intended 'for improving speculative Knowledge by practical and mechanical Operations'. These involve turning letters randomly on a frame, and recording the results. Despite the large numbers of people involved in turning, reading, and noting down the letters, the professor in charge is left with only some volumes of 'broken Sentences, which he intended to piece together; and out of those rich Materials to give the World a compleat Body of all Arts and Sciences' (184). Time-saving is the motivation behind the machine, with which 'the most ignorant Person at a reasonable Charge, and with a little bodily Labour, may write Books in Philosophy, Poetry, Politicks, Law, Mathematicks, and Theology, without the least Assistance from Genius or Study' (183-4). The professor seems to pay little heed to the extent of 'bodily labour' that his invention requires, and how this might obviate his claim for economy. Nor is the machine all-powerful; the professor needs at least five hundred more if he is to service the whole nation.

Other projects also fail to impress. Two in particular seem to mimic Sprat's praise of the prose style of the Royal Society, which aims 'to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so

many *things* almost in an equal number of *words*'.⁴ A project to make language shorter, 'by cutting Polysyllables into one, and leaving out Verbs and Participles; because in Reality all things imaginable are but Nouns', develops into 'a Scheme for entirely abolishing Words whatsoever'. Ease of communication is the aim: 'since Words are only Names for *Things*, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such *Things* as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on' (185). For once, however, real life impinges on the Academy, when women, along with the 'Vulgar and Illiterate' demand the right to use speech. The idea is finally demolished by Gulliver's depiction of its practical difficulties:

I have often beheld two of those Sages almost sinking under the Weight of their Packs, like Pedlars among us; who when they met in the Streets would lay down their Loads, open up their Sacks, and hold *Conversation for an Hour together; then put up their Implements, help each other to resume their Burthens, and take their Leave.* (185-6)

(Although he admits that the materials for a short discourse will fit well enough under the arm.) A method of learning mathematical propositions is deemed equally impractical. Students have to swallow a wafer with a proposition written upon it, and then fast for three days, during which time it should imprint itself on the brain. The scheme fails 'partly by some error in the *Quantum* or Composition, and partly by the Perverseness of Lads', who refuse to be made into guinea-pigs for so absurd a project (186).

All these schemes are linked by complete impracticality and a steadfast concentration on the tangible features of language. The projectors seize on random letters, propositions on paper, things that words stand for, and try to impose these as language as a whole. The projects fail because they do not account for the non-material aspects of language; its

⁴ Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, ed. Jackson I. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones (Saint Louis: Washington University Press, 1958), p. 113.

surrounding circumstances, for instance, or the ideas it expresses which cannot be reduced to objects or formulae. Learning cannot take place through the swallowing of pills, or bodily exertions. And language is sometimes a useful social tool, designed to forestall the need to carry an armoury of objects around. Those with the greatest understanding of this in the third journey are the women, servants, illiterates, and students who reject the ideas of their masters, people who are actively using language, not trying to extract it from its circumstances.

Language cannot be just another object of study, as it constitutes the very grounds on which experiments take place. The projectors work from within their own established language, through which their results are filtered; they cannot get beyond this system, any more than the universal language projectors of the eighteenth century can escape the shackles of their languages. Swift demonstrates their short-sightedness in this respect by having them confine their work to a single aspect of language, its visible markers. And the failure of these ventures is a sign of the inadequacy of a language reduced to its nuts and bolts, and not considered in other dimensions.

Other events on Gulliver's third voyage spell out some consequences of abstracting language with the intention of immobilising it. Gulliver's account of 'Tribnia', his adventures on Glubbudubdrib, and the story of the Struldbruggs are all examples of language abuse brought on by the desire for fixity. In the 'Tribnia' satire, the work of the projector engaged in reading the excrement of suspected traitors for clues, is, in Gulliver's opinion, 'not altogether compleat', and his offer of assistance is gratefully received. He relates that, in the thinly veiled 'Tribnia', 'it is first agreed and settled among them, what suspected Persons shall be accused of a Plot: Then effectual care is taken to secure all their Letters and other Papers, and put the Owners in Chains'. A group of experts is then ordered

to look for significant words, which they decipher according to their own variants. At this point, Swift derives some satiric benefit from pairing off the terms to the best effect. We learn that 'a Chamber Pot' is 'a Committee of Grandees', for instance; 'a Mouse Trap, an Employment; a bottomless Pit, the Treasury; a Sink, a C—t; a Cap and Bells, a Favourite; a broken Reed, a Court of Justice; an empty Tun, a General; a running Sore, the Administration' (191). Each time the decipherers uncover the 'real' meaning of a term, we are pleased to find that it reflects badly on the institutions of which they are part, revealing more about the accusers than the accused.⁵ But the arbitrariness of the designations uncovers a nightmarish situation, in which language *itself* does not talk of the things it signifies, but condemns its users by being deciphered as an artificial code. By seeing language as an inert object rather than in its socially constitutive role, as an opaque statement of inner, secret thoughts rather than a medium of exoteric communication, it ceases to be a language at all. Yet, however absurd the results, politically this *can* happen. Almost any person could be accused of any activity, since the detachment of word from thing is made complete. Abstraction is seen here in its ideological function, being put to political service; and its failure to map onto fact results in the downfall of the innocent. Here is the dark aspect of the attempt to control language. It does not help individuals to understand one another; rather it allows people to impose their own misunderstandings for a more sinister purpose.

In the confrontation of Aristotle with his commentators on Glubbubdrib, Swift attacks readings of works which bring their own interests to bear on the original. Gulliver finds that 'these Commentators always kept in the most distant Quarters from their Principals in the lower

⁵ Robert M. Philmus considers that the preponderance of sexual and faecal terms in the code emphasises the implication of the accusers: 'By analogy with sexual intercourse, to connect words in this promiscuous manner eventually gives them the pox, which they, as it were, transmit to the social institutions that they designate'. See 'Swift, Gulliver, and "The Thing Which Was Not"', *ELH*, 38 (1971), 62-79 (76).

World, through a Consciousness of Shame and Guilt, because they had so horribly misrepresented the Meaning of those Authors to Posterity' (197). The implication is that Aristotle's meaning has been contorted to fit other agendas, and that his original intention has been waylaid. Aristotle is posited as the original, and all the others as inferior copies: he is 'out of all Patience' with Scotus and Ramus, and finds Gassendi and Descartes 'equally exploded' (197). But Aristotle, in addition to voicing Swift's distaste for scholasticism, makes a serious point about philosophical discourse:

He said, that new Systems of Nature were but new Fashions, which would vary in every Age; and even those who pretend to demonstrate them from Mathematical Principles, would flourish but a short Period of Time, and be out of Vogue when that was determined. (198)

Philosophical discourse regards itself as timeless, above history and change, and each philosopher considers his or her work to be the remedy to all previous controversies. But this is not the case; philosophy is rewritten for each age, in answer to that age's particular demands. Even Aristotle must succumb to this predicament. It is only as a ghost on a fantastic voyage that he can assert his priority over the Moderns. In reality, he must inevitably become the property of his commentators, and have his original ideas rewritten for each period in history. Philosophy must realise that it cannot stand beyond language; both critical exegesis and social need will alter its meaning; but this is the only way its survival is guaranteed.

The most unfortunate victims of language's inflexibility are the immortal *Struldbruggs*. On first hearing of their existence, Gulliver cannot contain his enthusiasm: 'happiest beyond all comparison are those excellent *Struldbruggs*, who being born exempt from that universal Calamity of human Nature, have their Minds free and disingaged, without the Weight and Depression of Spirits caused by the continual

Apprehension of Death' (208). But he is soon disabused of his attitude by the evidence presented to him by the Luggnaggians. The Struldbruggs live in destitution and misery, the burden, not the ornament, of their society. Their misery is augmented by their lack of a common bond of language:

The Language of this Country being always upon the Flux, the *Struldbruggs* of one Age do not understand those of another; neither are they able after two Hundred Years to hold any Conversation (farther than by a few general Words) with their Neighbours the Mortals; and thus they lye under the Disadvantage of living like Foreigners in their own Country. (213)

Deprived of the power of communication, the Struldbruggs are disinherited and despised, and unable to fight back. Their lack of status is a direct result of a linguistic predicament. On the one hand, their own inability to adapt to language modulations renders them effectively speechless. On the other, the laws that operate at the time Gulliver sees them are rigid and unco-operative. The Luggnaggians effectively write them out of existence by declaring them legally dead at eighty. They then add to their misery by binding them with more oppressive laws. Because they are forbidden to beg, the Struldbruggs are obliged to ask visitors for 'a Slumskudask, or a Token of Remembrance', to get around the restriction. This is the only exchange that Gulliver, who had expected so much, effects with them. The pathetic figures of the Struldbruggs serve as examples of language failing to accommodate humanity, because it has become fixed and prescriptive.

The obscurity of the language experiments in the third voyage does not mask their influence. The issues of interpretation raised have calamitous effects on the livelihoods of individuals. Nor can this state of affairs be wished away. Gulliver's frequent recourse to servants, women,

and the illiterate for conversation, identifies him with the powerless sections of society, a position he clearly does not relish.⁶

In the third voyage, we see example after example of language failing to allow communication, causing misery and distress, and alienating where it should unite. These events occur because a desire to control and stabilise language motivates the groups that Gulliver meets. The individuals who resist or who are ejected from this ethic are without power. But they are depicted in the text as more aware than their authoritarian leaders, more receptive to language as it functions in everyday life. It is this which forms the larger part of Gulliver's reports on language, as he experiences a range of languages in use in societies. But we will find that the turn from abstraction to concretion yields just as many controversies about language use.

Society

A significant portion of each stay in the places Gulliver visits is spent in learning the native language. In Lilliput and Laputa, he is helped by scholars; in Brobdingnag by Glumdalclitch, and in Houyhnhnmland by his Master. Each society accords a different role and function to language, and in each case, Gulliver's acquisition of it is circumscribed by these factors. In fact, Gulliver's visit to each society is responsible for bringing out and clarifying the particular aspects of its language, as the inhabitants have to come to terms with, and accommodate, his presence. The strains that this

⁶ I differ in this from Ann Cline Kelly, who believes that Swift's conversations here are an antidote to the language problems elsewhere, showing that 'reasonable talk requires only the native common sense which all possess'. See 'After Eden: Gulliver's (Linguistic) Travels', *ELH*, 45 (1978), 33-54 (51). Pitting 'good' conversation against the 'bad' projects of the Academy does not solve the problem of the indissoluble link between language and power, which comes to prominence in the many conversations between Gulliver and the Houyhnhnm.

causes for the languages in question unearths their weaknesses and agendas.

In Lilliput, great care is taken to teach him the language, by 'six of his Majesty's greatest Scholars', but political reasons inform this act. The emperor, heedful of Gulliver's physical potential for destruction, wants to bind him into his service by making him, '*Swear a Peace with him and his Kingdom*' (33). The Lilliputians have a society which is strictly controlled by laws. Crimes are dealt with severely, but, by contrast, anyone who behaves well is entitled to 'certain Privileges, according to his Quality and Condition of Life, with a proportionable Sum of Money out of a Fund appropriated for that Use' (59). In such a legalistic community, writing has a significant role. The egg-breaking controversy, which has split their country into two factions, and put them at war with their neighbours the Blefuscudians, arises out of a contested reading of the text by the Prophet Lustrog on the subject, namely, '*That all true Believers shall break their Eggs at the convenient end*' (50). Gulliver learns that 'many Hundred large Volumes have been published upon this Controversy: But the Books of the *Big-Endians* have been long forbidden, and the whole Party rendred incapable by Law of holding Employments' (49). Already we can see how language serves ideology in Lilliput. The vagueness of Lustrog's pronouncement causes the governing faction to interpolate their own meaning to the passage, and as a result claim power. The Lilliputians are resourceful exploiters of texts, and effectively gain control over Gulliver by committing him to their system of bonds and laws. When he learns that he is shortly to be arrested, and charged with treason, Gulliver briefly toys with the idea of using his physical strength to overturn the government: 'But I soon rejected that Project with Horror, by remembering the Oath I had made to the Emperor, the Favours I had received from him, and the high Title of *Nardac* he conferred upon me' (73). If this seems feeble-

mindful, we need to recall how early the shrewd emperor has contained Gulliver's activity with oaths and promises. Even before he has mastered enough language to swear his oath, he must agree to have his pockets examined and a written account of them made. Although most of the Lilliputians' approximations of the contents are wrong to a humorous degree, Gulliver has nevertheless become part of their system, explainable in their terms. He is also forced to give up his sword and pistols, although he manages to keep one or two articles concealed from the Lilliputians, his glasses amongst them.⁷ As a consequence, much of his power diminishes. The articles of his liberty in fact bind him even further to the Lilliputians, as he is obliged to take part in their war against Blefuscu, as well as restrict his movements within Lilliput. But he abides by them 'with great Cheerfulness and Content, although some of them were not so honourable as I could have wished' (44).

In reality, he has no choice. His experiences in Lilliput show that physical power is less important than the deployment of language; and as soon as he enters into their system, he must live by its consequences. As might be expected from a society in which the law and writing are so intertwined, the Lilliputians shape language to their own ends. Their indictment of Gulliver, for instance, is presented as a series of 'Articles of Impeachment', but Gulliver is also informed 'that his sacred Majesty, and the Council, who are your Judges, were in their own Consciences fully convinced of your Guilt; which was a sufficient Argument to condemn you to death, without the *formal Proofs required by the strict Letter of the Law*' (71). As the arbiters of language in their land, the Lilliputians are able to withdraw from its objective demands when it suits their political purposes.

⁷ This fact is seen as significant by Pat Rogers, who argues that the glasses represent Gulliver's curious nature, and also highlight the theme of perspective throughout the text. 'Gulliver's Glasses', in Clive T. Probyn (ed.), *The Art of Jonathan Swift* (London: Vision Press, 1978), pp. 179-188.

Gulliver does not ultimately derive any benefit from his great size in Lilliput. The threat he presents to his hosts is soon accounted for by their highly sophisticated political system, which is predicated on a resourceful deployment of language.⁸

In Brobdingnag, by contrast, there appears to be little intrigue and political organisation, and the inhabitants are noteworthy for appearing wise and judicious. They have a rule that 'no Law of that Country must exceed in Words the Number of Letters in their Alphabet; which consists only of two and twenty' (136). The Brobdingnagians do not subject their laws to over-interpretation, they simply abide by them. There are few books in their country, and their writing style is 'clear, masculine, and smooth, but not Florid; for they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary Words, or using various Expressions' (137). Gulliver is a little disappointed that he cannot convince them of the existence of 'Ideas, Entities, Abstractions and Transcendentals' (136). At first sight, Brobdingnag seems to possess a system that works well, neither too abstract nor too naive, a welcome alternative to the pettiness of Lilliput's decrees. But there appears to be a disinclination for knowledge and a lack of intellectual curiosity, especially in the treatment of Gulliver. This is understandable on the one level, since Gulliver's diminutiveness defuses any potential threat to the society he enters. The Lilliputians saw the danger, and immediately set about containing it in their linguistic system. To the Brobdingnagians, Gulliver could never be more than an irritant. But, just as the Lilliputians have an extremely rigid and legalistic system prior to Gulliver's entry into it; so the Brobdingnagians exhibit a relaxed, courtly approach that hardly alters to admit Gulliver. Although he fails to

⁸ For a detailed account of the contemporary political parallels suggested by the voyages, in particular by Lilliput, see David Bywaters, 'Gulliver's Travels and the Mode of Political Parallel during Walpole's Administration', *ELH*, 56 (1988), 717-40. F. P. Lock, in *The Politics of Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), aims to widen the political context from particular parallels to politics in general.

represent himself well in his audiences with the King, part of that failure comes from the Brobdingnagians' unreceptiveness to new ideas, and their tranquillity can in some cases take on the appearance of complacency. In addition, language here is used as often for the purposes of entertainment and ritual than for any intellectual discovery. Because of his size disadvantage, Gulliver quickly learns to exploit language in order to survive. When he is first discovered by a farm worker, he is afraid that he will be squashed like 'any little hateful animal' found in such circumstances. So he puts on an exaggerated oratorical show, rather like the emperor of Lilliput performed for his own benefit: 'my good Star would have it, that he appeared pleased with my Voice and Gestures, and began to look upon me as a Curiosity, much wondering to hear me pronounce articulate Words, although he could not understand them' (88). Gulliver's quick acquisition of the language helps him to survive, as the farmer decides to exhibit him for money, on the basis that he can 'speak several Words, and perform an hundred diverting Tricks' (97). When this mode of living becomes too demanding, he is able to insinuate himself into a more comfortable one at court, by delivering a specially rehearsed speech: 'delivered with great Improperities and Hesitation; the latter Part was altogether framed in the Style peculiar to that People, whereof I learned some Phrases from *Glumdalclitch*, while she was carrying me to Court' (102).

Gulliver's improved treatment in Brobdingnag might well stem from their simple, uncontroversial lifestyle. But it is also a direct consequence of his relative unimportance in their scheme of things. The Lilliputians rightly recognised him as a threat, and had to inaugurate him into their linguistic system, in order to control him. But the Brobdingnagians have no such problem. Gulliver's attempts to earn their notice, in his long discourses with the king and his set pieces for the

crowds only serve to confirm Brobdingnagian language use as complacent and limiting, and the inhabitants are accordingly lacking in intellectual curiosity.

Gulliver's attempts to educate the natives are no more successful in his voyage to Laputa, where the introspective hosts want him to acquire language 'hoping to raise my Admiration of their great Abilities, if I could be brought to converse with them' (28). He is dispatched a tutor who teaches him mainly astronomical and musical terms, as these are the ruling discourses on the island. After a month's tuition, he is able to attend the king, but the interview is not a success: 'His Majesty had not the least Curiosity to enquire into the Laws, Government, History, Religion or Manners of the Countries where I had been; but confined his Questions to the State of Mathematicks, and received the Account I gave him, with great Contempt and Indifference' (166). Gulliver can find no place in this highly speculative society, with its lack of enthusiasm for conversation. He meets with more success in Luggnagg, where the extreme ceremony is more to his purpose. On admittance to the king, he must advance prostrate, and lick the floor as he goes along, before repeating a standard eulogy. It is not surprising, given our insights into the workings of Lilliput, that this convention-laden court is also very powerful. The phrase '*lick the Dust before his Footstool*' not only metaphorically establishes the king's precedence, it also literally disadvantages his enemies. In performing this act, some find that they have a floor covered in sawdust to negotiate, and cannot speak when they finally reach the monarch, while others might be unfortunate enough to swallow poison on their journey. The occasional accidental deaths brought about by this means are no discouragement to the king, who clearly gains a great deal from imposing this practice on his subjects. Language here goes from an extreme of impotence to danger, a mere bandying of terms to a matter of life and death.

The variety of language uses that Gulliver encounters reach^{e3} a crisis in the final voyage, where the mechanisms of language-learning begin to fail. Despite the great size differences of the Brodingnagians and Lilliputians, and the angled heads and swivel eyes of the Laputans, Gulliver recognises all of them as people. But the Houyhnhnms present the problems of a non-human species with language. Although this may seem incidental in a journey in which all the events are fantastic, Gulliver enforces the distinction, by treating them as horses: 'I was amazed to see such Actions and Behaviour in Brute Beasts; and concluded with myself, that if the Inhabitants of this Country were endued with a proportionable Degree of Reason, they must needs be the wisest People upon Earth' (225). Throughout the narrative, there seem to be insuperable problems of communication. Although he learns their language, Gulliver finds it difficult to 'translate' into English, mainly because of its sonic difference. In order to inflect it properly, he is led to trot and neigh, which is the occasion of much hilarity amongst his friends back home. The events in Houyhnhnmland, more than anywhere else in the *Travels*, are marked by the difficulties the parties have in understanding each other, and by the problems of translation that Gulliver faces. As he spends more time there, he complicates the act of translation further, by revelling in the unrepeatability of his experience: 'My only concern is, that I shall hardly be able to do Justice to my Master's Arguments and Expressions, which must needs suffer by my Want and Capacity, as well as by a Translation into our barbarous *English*' (245). The breakdown of communication in the fourth voyage has important implications for the occurrences within it, as will be seen later. A special set of conditions obtains in Book Four, which throws the problems of communication in everyday language into focus.

The final part of Gulliver's journey contrasts starkly with the turmoil of the third voyage. After the controversies and peculiarities of the

other societies Gulliver visits, he at last seems to find one with a refreshingly simple philosophy:

As these noble *Houyhnhnms* are endowed by Nature with a general Disposition to all Virtues, and have no Conceptions or Ideas of what is evil in a rational Creature; so their grand Maxim is, to cultivate *Reason*, and to be wholly governed by it. (267)

Everything the Houyhnhnms do, by Gulliver's account, accords with this idea; they exhibit no philosophical or political differences, no warlike tendencies; in fact, their whole lives seem to be passed in peaceful sociability. And Gulliver considers them profoundly wise, even though they have no libraries or scholars: 'I freely confess, that all the little Knowledge I have of any Value, was acquired by the Lectures I received from my Master, and from hearing the Discourses of him and his Friends; to which I should be prouder to listen, than to dictate to the greatest and wisest Assembly in Europe' (278). Even taking into account his extreme partiality, the Houyhnhnms do seem on first sight to have an extremely efficient social system. And the simplicity of their society appears to be matched by the simplicity of their language.

Gulliver initially finds the limited vocabulary of the Houyhnhnms a hindrance to communication: 'It put me to the Pains of many Circumlocutions to give my Master a right Idea of what I spoke; for their Language doth not abound in a Variety of Words, because their Wants and Passions are fewer than among us' (242). Eventually, the two come to a better understanding of each other, not because the Houyhnhnm learns more words, but because Gulliver finds himself shedding many of the unnecessary attitudes for which the Houyhnhnms have no words. The Houyhnhnms seem naturally in possession of what the Lagadan projectors vainly strive to achieve—a language which is a genuine shortcut, conveying a set of ideas with a commensurate set of words. If they do not have a word for something, it is implied that such a concept does not exist.

Gulliver notes that there is no word for evil in their vocabulary. (We will test the veracity of this contention later.) Here, then, is a seemingly non-abstracted, unproblematically functioning language.

One other striking feature of the Houyhnhnms' language, and one which Gulliver deems a virtue, is their total lack of writing. He is unable to explain to the Houyhnhnm-Master what he is doing when he transcribes the words that he learns into a notebook, to help him with his language acquisition. Gulliver works hard to present this as an asset to his literate readership:

The *Houyhnhnms* have no Letters, and consequently their Knowledge is all traditional. But there happening few Events of any Moment among a People so well united, naturally disposed to every Virtue, wholly governed by Reason, and cut off from Commerce with all other Nations; the historical Part is easily preserved without burthening their Memories. (273)

As previously, when dealing with the Houyhnhnms' vocabulary, Gulliver adjusts his own perceptions to fit theirs. The Houyhnhnms seem to manage perfectly well without writing, even composing poetry; and so it becomes devalued, a 'fallen' human product.

However, if the Houyhnhnm language is investigated more closely, it produces as many problems as the more transparently flawed systems explored earlier. One of the problems is externally imposed—Gulliver's attribution of perfection, which may not be shared by the Houyhnhnms, fractures its surface, as we will see. But even by its own standards, the Houyhnhnm language is far from satisfactory. And its problems stem from the very aspects which Gulliver thinks are positive. Early in his account, he makes this observation about the language: 'The Word *Houyhnhnm*, in their Tongue, signifies a *Horse*, and in its Etymology, *the Perfection of Nature*' (235). In his attempt to show Houyhnhnm splendour at source, Gulliver has, in fact, highlighted their language as more complex than

stated elsewhere. Not only do they have an etymology, evidence that, although they do not possess writing in its material form, they have deep structures of language that order and determine its use; '*Houyhnhnm*' also has two meanings. One is simply descriptive, saying what type of creature it is; the other is an opinion, adding a dimension to the language that Gulliver does not ascribe to it. It seems that the Houyhnhnms are not simply passive consumers of language but ready to shape it to their own ends. We shall see later how the ordering forces of Houyhnhnm language have some surprising social effects with regard to the Yahoos.

Far from having a language which has arisen out of their needs, the Houyhnhnms are prey to the determining structures of language as much as anyone else. Gulliver is mistaken in assuming that their language simply passes on information, and is a series of 'moments' of conversation. There may be no visible writing, but there is a high level of linguistic organisation behind the simple façade. Gulliver's wistfulness, rather than any claim by the Houyhnhnms, seems to be behind the supposed perfection of their language. It would be more accurate to say of them that they have no great insight into the operations of their language.

In addition to the deep structure of their language, of which the conversational exchange is a part that should not be taken for the whole, there exists another complication. The Houyhnhnms state that they use language descriptively, purely to state facts. They have a limited vocabulary, after all, and Gulliver has been unable to convey any other uses of language to his master: 'I remember that it was with extreme Difficulty that I could bring my Master to understand the Meaning of the Word *Opinion*, or how a Point could be disputable' (267). The Houyhnhnms seem to use language as Locke would wish everyone to use it, to express ideas, and nothing else. 'When a Man speaks to another, it is, that he may be understood; and the end of Speech is, that those sounds, as

Marks, may make known his *Ideas* to the Hearer'.⁹ The example of *the Thing which was not* is couched in the same terms. But Berkeley charges Locke with not taking into account other, non-informational uses of language: 'there are other ends, as the raising of some passion, the exciting to or deferring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition'.¹⁰ More recently, the philosopher J. L. Austin has argued that language can never be simply descriptive, or 'constative', it has a 'performative' aspect as well. This theory will have important consequences for the picture of the Houyhnhnms' language, especially in relation to *the Thing which was not*. But first, it is necessary to elucidate some of Austin's ideas.

Austin argues that in certain cases words can make an event happen, or *be* an event, rather than simply describe it. He uses certain examples—phrases like 'I bet', 'I promise', 'I name this ship', 'I do' in a marriage ceremony—and shows that the actual speaking of these words causes something to happen.¹¹ Statements like 'she said she promised' only describe these events. As one commentator writes: 'When I say "I promise", "I swear", "I apologise", I am not describing my act but accomplishing it; by speaking, by pronouncing these words, I produce the *event* that they designate: the very act of promising, swearing, apologizing, and so forth'.¹² So the 'performative' is a spoken construction which produces a particular event in certain circumstances. Austin stresses the importance, not just of the utterance, but the circumstances that surround

⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book III, Chapter ii, § 2.

¹⁰ *The Principles of Human Knowledge in The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), II, p. 37.

¹¹ J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, repr., 1989), p. 5.

¹² Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 16.

it. First, because he wants to establish the difference between the performative proper, and the activity that speaking itself is, and also because 'besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have as a general rule to be right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action'.¹³ These include having the right procedure, the right setting, and the participants understanding what they are saying. Austin's way of examining this is to look at the things that could go wrong in a performative—a bigamist saying 'I will', a promise that is not meant, and so on. He goes into great detail in the categorisation of these 'misfires', but the most important conclusion he reaches is about misfiring itself. He realises that, unlike a constative, which is judged to be true or false, a performative can only be judged felicitous or infelicitous: it either works or it doesn't.

Having made the distinction between performative and constative, however, Austin finds that it does not hold. The constative 'John is running', for instance, could be construed as a performative, 'I am stating that John is running', and thus subject to problems of felicity or infelicity. Or the performative, 'I warn you that the bull will charge', if the bull will not, is open to the charge of falsity, like a constative.¹⁴ Austin concludes that there may in fact be no absolute distinction between the two types of language. He therefore argues for a new type of locution, the 'total speech act', in which performativity is considered in all statements, not just obvious performatives. He becomes interested, not only in the sound, sense and reference of the statement (locution), but in its force (illocution). One is unchangeable (he argues), the other depends on circumstantial factors—setting, mode of expression, and so on. Perhaps the most important achievement of Austin's philosophy is the inclusion in the study

¹³ Austin, *How To Do Things*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

of language of hitherto peripheral factors. In his attempts to find a formula inclusive of all speech acts in which saying is doing, Austin passes from consideration of grammatical form and transformational grammar to considerations of semantic and interpersonal effects'.¹⁵ Words should not be considered wholly apart from their situations.

Houyhnhnm language seems very different in the light of Austin's thinking.¹⁶ Gulliver's admiration of the simplicity of their style is apparent in his discussion with the Houyhnhnm Master of '*the Thing which was not*'. The phrase is obviously intended to convey the wholesomeness of the horses; so unaffected are they by lying that they have to adopt a clumsy circumlocution to talk about it. But this exchange deserves close attention, because many unexpected things happen within it. For instance, the Houyhnhnm's apparent lack of knowledge about lying is not borne out in his style of locution, which reads like a well-rehearsed dictum: 'That the Use of Speech was to make us Understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now if any one *said the Thing which was not*, these ends were defeated'. Even if the Houyhnhnm has thought this up on the trot, it has the hallmarks of an accepted style of discourse about difficult matters—it becomes abstracted in its use of tenses and persons, for instance. Prosaic though it is, it has a certain illocutionary force; as it moves the conversation between Gulliver and the Houyhnhnm into a formalised debate. But this implicit performativity gives way to an explicit version, in the form of the apparently artless '*said the Thing which was not*'. For by making this utterance, we would actually cause the event to

¹⁵ Barbara Johnson *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, repr., 1985), p. 56.

¹⁶ Austin rejects the application of his ideas to literature, since he believes that a speech act produced in a fictional setting is another example of a misfire, as it is not really meant to be taken seriously. But as Barbara Johnson points out: 'The performative utterance itself is here just as "serious" within the context of its surrounding fiction as it would be in the context of the fiction we call real life. Indeed, the question of seriousness attends the act of interpretation of *any* performative utterance'. *The Critical Difference*, p. 66.

happen. The Houyhnhnm persists in seeing these words as constative, however: 'I am so far from receiving Information, that he [who says '*the Thing which was not*'] leaves me worse than in Ignorance; for I am led to believe a Thing *Black* when it is *White*, and *Short* when it is *Long*' (240). But what has occurred is in fact a dislocation between the initial statement and its supposed effect. Saying '*the Thing which was not*' directly causes '*the Thing which was not*' to come into being. If the Houyhnhnms had a word equivalent to lying, this event would not necessarily occur, as '*said the Thing which was not*' could be replaced with 'I am lying', which is less performative than 'I tell a lie', a construction which closely resembles the Houyhnhnms' locution. The matter of black things being white is only a secondary occurrence to the speech-act itself, which has initiated an event solely within language. Rodolphe Gasché identifies this feature of performatives as particularly important. 'Before this act comes to mean anything particular, before this act becomes subject to rules which will lay out what the action is, it is meaningful as such, as act itself.'¹⁷ The crude formulation of the Houyhnhnms has thus revealed two things about their language: it is more than simply descriptive, and it has moments of self-reflexivity when it refers to itself referring to an external object.

It is possible to find other instances where Houyhnhnm language fails simply to transmit ideas; they have, for instance, a practice of 'exhorting' one another to do things, the strongest encouragement that their reasonable natures consider necessary. Nor do they state that their language should *never* be more than descriptive; in fact, most claims about them are made by Gulliver, not themselves. But the Houyhnhnms' basic assumptions about language seem to be those shared by Locke, the Royal

¹⁷ "'Setzung" and "Übersetzung": Notes on Paul de Man', *diacritics*, 11 (1981), 36-57 (38).

Society, and others who argue for simplicity.¹⁸ And the application of Austin's thought to one example shows that language can never function so simply.

Austin's inclusion of the effects and circumstances of speech within its study indicates that even the most primitive linguistic systems are full of complexity. The Houyhnhnms are unencumbered by writing, and pass their time in limited conversation, yet their language is no more simple than any of the others in the *Travels*. What is more, although it seems unlikely at first, it will become clear that language is central to their society, and is manipulated to make that society seem well-ordered and fair. Far from being a scarcely noted feature, it is in fact the organising principle, and its simplicity comes to look increasingly like an affectation.

We have already seen that the Houyhnhnms apply two meanings to their names, a descriptive and a judgmental one. Whenever we say 'Houyhnhnm' we are announcing both meanings. In the case of the Yahoos, the same situation applies. 'Yahoo' designates the creatures themselves, but it is also used in a pejorative way. It is a fact that Gulliver adverts to reluctantly:

I know not whether it may be worth observing, that the *Houyhnhnms* have no Word in their Language to express anything that is *evil*, except what they borrow from the Deformities or ill qualities of the *Yahoos*. Thus they denote the Folly of a Servant, an Omission of a Child, a Stone that cuts their Feet, a continuance of foul or unseasonable Weather, and the like, by adding to each the Epithet of *Yahoo*. (275)

The mildness of the examples given is perhaps intended to suggest the harmlessness of the enterprise, but this is far from innocent. By using *Yahoo* as a suffix, the Houyhnhnms ensure that their words are free from the taint of 'evil'; they are whole and undefiled, and anything unpleasant is

¹⁸ A full examination of the possible applications of Locke's philosophy to *Gulliver's Travels* is provided by W. B. Carnochan in 'Gulliver's Travels: An Essay on the Human Understanding?', *MLQ*, 25 (1964) 5-21.

tacked on to the end. And by this gesture, the Yahoos come to represent *everything* that is bad or indefensible. Their name is used, not only to describe them, but to judge them negatively, and to suggest that all evil has its root in one creature. While we can never say 'Houyhnhnm' without proclaiming their self-diagnosed perfection, we can equally never say 'Yahoo' without summoning evil. Perceived in this way, the Yahoos never have the opportunity to be anything other than wicked and despised. If their actual behaviour is indeed unbecoming, this is prefigured by their positioning within the Houyhnhnm language as the fallen ones. The Houyhnhnms affect to nominate the Yahoos as evil from a reasoned observation of their characteristics: 'as the *Yahoos* were the most filthy, noisome and deformed Animal which Nature ever produced, so they were the most restive and indocible, mischievous and malicious' (271). But the Houyhnhnms' act of designating is as much to blame for this as any observed behaviour. The word 'Yahoo' has an illocutionary force for them, *isolating and perpetuating evil*. Each time it is said, evil is directly invoked, even if no Yahoo malefactor is present. Ultimately, objective measures for the Yahoos' behaviour are not available to us, but are swallowed up in the Houyhnhnms' polarising discourse.

The Houyhnhnms are at pains to present themselves as reasonable in their treatment of the Yahoos, and right to keep them in subjection. But here, once again, we find that the artlessness of their language serves them well. Every four years they hold an assembly, in which they mostly debate what to do with the Yahoos. Their lack of written records enables them to subscribe to an oral myth about the origins of the Yahoos, which is in no way authenticated. One of the members of the assembly recalls, 'a general Tradition, that *Yahoos* had not been always in their Country: But, that many Ages ago, two of these Brutes appeared together upon a Mountain; whether produced by the Heat of the Sun upon corrupted Mud and Slime,

or from the Ooze and Froth of the Sea, was never known' (271). The lack of clear detail suits the Houyhnhnms' purpose very well, as it enables them to present the Yahoos as corrupted foreigners who will then go on to blight their country.¹⁹ Already, in this apparently impassive account, emotive words are being used. The Houyhnhnm argues that the Yahoos could not be aboriginal because of a 'violent Hatred' towards them on the part of all species. We see how obfuscation and the appeal to myth and tradition is used to vindicate types of Houyhnhnm behaviour. They appear as a superstitious race, which is at odds with Gulliver's constant reference to their reason. Language, once again, is being used to serve a particular end.

And what of the Yahoos' own language? It appears that they do not have one, and the Houyhnhnms classify them as brutes partly as a result of this. But there are instances where *they seem to communicate very well*, especially with their kin Gulliver; and their lack of understandable speech does not preclude them from having a language of sorts. On first seeing Gulliver, for example, they provide him with a special welcome: 'Several of this cursed Brood getting hold of the Branches behind, leaped up into the Tree, from whence they began to discharge their Excrements on my Head' (224). Swift commonly presents excrement as a kind of language, as some of the earlier experiments at the Academy of Lagado demonstrate. Norman O. Brown believes that a special status is ascribed to it in Yahoo culture. They 'are distinguished from other animals by their attitude towards their own excrement. Excrement to the Yahoos is no mere waste product but a magic instrument for self-expression and aggression'.²⁰ The Houyhnhnms evidently regard this use as troublesome. If a Yahoo is ill,

¹⁹ Ann Cline Kelly sees this as a reversed version of the story of Eden: 'Instead of coming into a Garden supervised by a God in the same image who spoke the same language, and with whom a natural affinity would exist, the original Yahoos came up against creatures who immediately branded them as evil because they were different'. See 'After Eden', p. 47.

²⁰ 'The Excremental Vision', in his *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 179-201 (p. 190).

'the Cure prescribed is a Mixture of *their own Dung and Urine*, forcibly put down the Yahoo's throat' (262). If not actually eating their own words, they are, at the very least, having their opportunities for self-expression violently stifled.

The vigour of this 'cure' shows how much of a perceived threat to the Houyhnhnms the Yahoos really are. The impressions we receive of life in this country are very one-sided; unlike in the other societies we see, one species holds all the power and controls the transmission of language, whilst the other cannot represent itself, and is therefore powerless. The Yahoos are positioned, in language and life, as a supplement to the Houyhnhnms. But by structuring their society in this narrow, linguistic way, the Houyhnhnms put it under strain. However much they may consider banishing and destroying the Yahoos, they do in the end prove necessary for the survival of the frail binary system. By projecting all evils onto the Yahoos, the Houyhnhnms establish a tidy index against which to measure their own good. The Houyhnhnms put the Yahoos at a distance, but then recall them to make moral distinctions to their own advantage. The Houyhnhnms could remove the pressure from their system if they acknowledged the centrality of language, instead of presenting it as another product of their reason. Because they do not, the entry of Gulliver into their rigidly defined system is a crisis, from which supposedly discrete identities become cross-infected. For, unlike in the other voyages, Gulliver's appearance in Houyhnhnmland has a serious effect on its language, and therefore its life.

Gulliver at first does not recognise his affiliation to the Yahoos, but when he does, he is unwilling to be counted among them. He asks his master to 'forbear applying that Word to me, and take the same Order in his Family, and among his Friends whom he suffered to see me' (237). Gulliver has equated himself, not with his own species, but with the

holders of power in society (as he does in all the other voyages), and adopts their tone when dealing with the Yahoos, referring to them as 'cursed', 'brutes', and so on. But the Houyhnhnm Master nevertheless persists in seeing him as a Yahoo, because of his physical resemblance to one. Gulliver never has an opportunity to become equal to the Houyhnhnms, as their rigid definitions would countenance neither an evil Houyhnhnm nor a good Yahoo. But he does succeed in making them perform some infelicities of language. In the assembly, his Master refers to Gulliver as 'a certain wonderful *Yahoo*', while the strangely affectionate sorrel nag who is Gulliver's helpmate presses him to 'take care of thy self, gentle *Yahoo*', on his departure from the country (283). Given the etymology of 'Yahoo', neither of these locutions make sense. Gulliver cannot be both evil ('Yahoo') and wonderful or gentle. This might be possible in human society, but in the extreme system that the Houyhnhnms adopt, it is unthinkable. Evil and good can never be entertained at the same moment. It is no wonder that Gulliver is expelled from the country by the Houyhnhnms. Although they claim that his continuing presence may incite the Yahoos to violence, it is more accurate to say that his intermediate status threatens the very grounds of their language, and the ideology that it simultaneously establishes and conceals.

Even before the advent of Gulliver, however, the Houyhnhnm language has points of strain. What are we to make of the term '*Hnea Yahoo*', applied to the dung and urine cure, which Gulliver translates as '*Yahoo's-Evil*'? As 'Yahoo' is the controlling term for evil, how does this avoid slipping into tautology? Is it just another of the problems of translation that Gulliver faces, or does it suggest that there is another, external evil, not related to the Yahoos, but known to the Houyhnhnms,

that can be used on them?²¹ Because the Houyhnhnms' society is structured around a linguistic binary opposition, it is unable to account for difference and change. Yet it is also responsible for that change, because the Houyhnhnms themselves tamper with language to produce an artificial morality predicated upon certain words.

The blanket simplicity of the Houyhnhnms' lifestyle and language has been revealed as an aspiration rather than an actual state of affairs. Although there is very little material evidence of the Houyhnhnms' deployment of language, they are in fact sophisticated users of it, little different from the other societies that Gulliver visits. In all voyages, Gulliver is the instrument for revealing the functioning of language in its social setting, and what is clear from each society, in a different way, is that language never *just* communicates ideas between people, but has a range of other properties in addition. These properties are usually hidden, whether consciously or not. Thus, in Lilliput, language underscores an oppressive regime, so that the size of these people does not indicate their lack of power. Instead it is Gulliver who is rendered impotent by their strictly proscriptive and prescriptive system. In Brobdingnag, the languor of the people leaves language in a state of neglect, and despite the stupidity of many of Gulliver's ideas, the society's lack of interest in him denotes a failure to inquire which is almost as stifling as the Lilliputians' excessive control. In Houyhnhnmland, even the basic communication between individuals is not properly effected, but when some measure of understanding takes place, the darker aspects of their discourse are brought out, and simplicity seems more like suppression.

It is in the last voyage, too, that Gulliver's impartiality finally breaks, and he identifies himself utterly with a society; at which point

²¹ In the nearest English equivalent, 'king's evil', the 'evil' (scrofula) does not pertain to the king, but is supposedly cured by him. But this formulation would be nonsensical if applied to the Yahoos.

questions about the veracity of his document emerge. The next section deals with the consequences of this turn, as part of an examination of the various contexts and constructs that make up the *Travels*. It cannot be forgotten that this is a fictionalised account (as if giants, flying islands, and talking horses would allow us to), and both the satires of the third voyage, and the presentation of language in each society, are subservient to this condition. As we shall see, the setting of the work, its narrative frames and contexts, and its critical reception, all have significant impact on its own communication with the reader, and on the question of the honesty of its contents.

Contexts

The chronological structure of *Gulliver's Travels* ensures that the fourth voyage is usually interpreted as its thematic conclusion, and this stance is assisted by its apocalyptic tone. But it is more valuable to read it as a series of overlapping contexts which do not fit into a neat temporising pattern. Some of these are thematic—the use of travel narrative, and the appeal to the background of publishing and writing of the period. Others are structural—the tension set up by the two opening letters, and the interpolation of Gulliver's own theories and ideas at points in the description. But they all interact to produce a complex work which consistently undermines the urge to totalise that many critics have felt in response to this often discomfiting text. In short, they remind us at various points of the fictionality of this enterprise; and our comprehension of language in the *Travels* must take account of this.

In Swift's own time, the vogue for travel writing was prominent, and he uses and manipulates this format to throw some of his content into

confusion. Despite the attempts of Sympson, Gulliver's cousin, to edit some of the more technical passages out, there are still patches of prose, like the following, that locate this as 'authentic' travel writing:

We got the Star-board Tacks aboard, we cast off our Weather-braces and Lifts; we set in the Lee-braces, and hawl'd forward by the Weather-bowlings, and hawl'd them tight, and belayed them, and hawl'd over the Missen Tack to Windward, and kept her full and by as near as she would lye. (84)

There are many such indicators of this type of narrative; Gulliver even refers at one point to his 'cousin Dampier' to press home the effect. Swift relies heavily on William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World* as a model for *Gulliver's Travels*.²² And the name of his cousin 'Sympson' recalls Captain William Sympson, another author of travel fictions. This generic imposition is not merely left dormant, but pressed into service when Gulliver sees an opportunity to make more claims for his truthfulness. When the Captain of the ship that rescues him after his Brobdingnagian adventure has heard the story, he begs Gulliver to publish it; and is greeted with an unexpected response: 'My Answer was, that I thought we were already overstocked with Books of Travels: That nothing could now pass which was not extraordinary; wherein I doubted, some Authors less consulted Truth than their own Vanity or Interest, or the Diversion of ignorant Readers' (147). Gulliver affects to distance himself from other travel writers by refusing to adopt sensationalist approaches. Their falsehoods have been discovered by him after his own experiences: 'it hath given me a great Disgust against this Part of Reading, and some Indignation to see the Credulity of Mankind so impudently abused' (291).

²² The background to Swift's borrowing from this and other travel narratives is discussed by Arthur Sherbo, in 'Swift and Travel Literature', *Modern Language Studies*, 9 (1979), 114-27. See also Jenny Mecziems, "'Tis not to Divert the Reader": Moral and Literary Determinants in some Early Travel Narratives', in Philip Dodd (ed.), *The Art of Travel: Essays on Travel Writing* (London: Frank Cass, 1982), pp. 1-19. Dampier's work is scrutinised by Philip Edwards, in *The Story of the Voyage: Sea-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 17-43.

This has an effect of distancing the reader. Gulliver attacks real travel narratives for their tendency to exaggerate and fictionalise, from within a work which is wholly fiction and often exaggerated. Notwithstanding the handful of contemporary readers who took the *Travels* to be true, the effect is one of a heightened, not diminished, fictionality. This sense grows stronger as the narrative progresses.

At the end of his account, when Gulliver adopts a more freakish tone, he seems to be cut off, not only from true travel accounts, but even from his own fictionalised version: 'I could perhaps like others have astonished thee with strange improbable Tales; but I rather chose to relate plain Matter of Fact in the simplest Manner and Style; because my principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse thee' (291). Everett Zimmerman sees this as the result of Gulliver's 'program of literalism' which issues from his overwhelming need to be more 'truthful' than the others: 'Having rejected all fictions, he is unable to link the ideal and the real'.²³ Travel narrative, then, is conjoined to the text as a sort of ordering format, but in our experience of reading it, we are also having to process the idea that it produces fanciful, false accounts. So our reaction to the truth of this particular travel narrative is being tested. What is more, Gulliver's tone seems to leave us no option but to dismiss a large part of what he says as eccentricity, if not downright falsehood. The use of the travel narrative context, then, is to make us question our reading process: how guilty are we of accepting too much at face value (even within a plainly fictional setting)? Yet how are we to proceed, if the text is signalling to us that it may be an unreliable example of what is certainly an unreliable genre?

²³ *Swift's Narrative Satires*, p. 130.

In addition to travel narrative, Swift uses other contexts to unseat readers' conceptions that this is a smoothly running, uncontroversial story. The introductory pieces broach a setting of textuality which will be prominent throughout the narrative, when Gulliver attacks the excessive amounts of literature that are being published at the time. He claims that books and writing are the cause of many of the evils of society. He hoped that the publication of his work would put a stop to 'Abuses and Corruptions' in England. He wished to see, amongst other effects: 'Smithfield blazing with Pyramids of Law-Books', and 'Wit, Merit and Learning rewarded; all Disgracers of the Press in Prose and Verse, condemned to eat nothing but their own Cotten, and quench their Thirst with their own Ink' (6). Instead, he is faced with a nightmare—his own book has provoked a rash of textual responses, which threatens to engulf him:

You are loading our Carrier every Week with Libels, and Keys, and Reflections, and Memoirs, and Second Parts; wherein I see myself accused of reflecting upon great States-Folk; of degrading human Nature, (for so they have still the Confidence to stile it) and of abusing the Female Sex. I find likewise, that the Writers of those Bundles are not agreed among themselves; for some of them will not allow me to be Author of mine own Travels; and others make me Author of Books to which I am wholly a Stranger. (7)

Gulliver's parenthetical remark in the middle of his diatribe is intended to put him beyond the reach of this textual war, and yet it is, ironically, by the publication of his work that he has brought it about. However much he may attempt to distance himself from fallen textuality, by arguing that he never wished to be published, it is clear that his unequivocal assertion of truth has not stemmed the tide of response. This section, which also appears to glance at the actual publication history of *Gulliver's Travels*, sets up the work, not as a privileged beacon of light, but as one text amongst others, fighting for supremacy.²⁴ For someone who has retired

²⁴ The publishing history is related in Ehrenpreis, III, pp. 493-5.

from human affairs, and believes himself beyond the judgement of his peers, Gulliver is strangely obsessed with publication details, practical editing matters, and the paraphernalia of the writing that he denounces. Here, as before, the text creates tensions which will feature throughout. Gulliver both abhors writing, as the mark of his fallen human state, and is responsible for producing it, directly, with his account, and at second-hand, by eliciting a welter of responses. So here, the context is again used to destabilise and confuse. The knowledge that we are reading one text amongst others puts a strain on that text's claim to truth, and also, equally disturbing, to uniqueness. Swift has reminded us of the ubiquitousness of writing, of the possibility that one text can be disavowed, or superseded by another; in general, of the contingency of all writing. This particular aspect of language must be measured against the eternal, doctrinaire truths that Gulliver intones. If we choose to take his statements fully on board (as some critics do), we are also electing to disregard this particular context of multiple texts, with multiple voices, that Swift here presents.

So it can be seen how Swift has employed various historical contexts to show his work in a different light, often with the effect of chipping away at its more monumental assertions. But these contexts themselves must give way to another, that of the work's structure. Before the tale proper begins, we have to negotiate the ordering format of the two letters, one from Gulliver to his cousin Sympson, the 'publisher' of the work, and one from Sympson to the reader. Thus, two fictitious characters are in charge of the material within the *Travels*, and although Sympson's role in the narrative is not active, it is suggested by Gulliver that he has an overarching, negative influence on what follows: 'you have either omitted some material Circumstances, or minced them in such a Manner, that I do hardly know mine own Work' (5). Sympson, it seems, is not as concerned with factual detail as Gulliver, an unfortunate trait in one who is entrusted

with the publication of a work in which accuracy is so important. Already, before any linguistic controversies in the *Travels* themselves, the reader is involved in a dispute about the veracity of its contents. Sympson's 'The Publisher to the Reader' seems to take little account of Gulliver's protestations, alleging that the only changes and omissions he made to the manuscript were to make its preponderance of nautical terms more palatable to the general public. Moreover, 'if any Traveller hath a Curiosity to see the whole Work at large, as it came from the Hand of the Author, I will be ready to gratify him' (10). This is distinctly at odds with Gulliver's intelligence: 'I hear the original Manuscript is all destroyed, since the Publication of my Book' (7).

It seems less profitable to try to trace out the 'true' state of affairs that exists between these imaginary custodians of the text, than to consider the relationship between the letters, and how their position affects each other. Gulliver's peevishness seems to be cancelled out by Sympson's tone of assurance, and his generosity towards his cousin. Seen in this light, the letter to the reader helps smooth the way for the efficient delivery of the *Travels* themselves, by putting editorial distance between the text and Gulliver's comments on it. But this transitional letter actually creates further ambiguity. Included in Sympson's ringing endorsement of his cousin is a paeon to his honesty:

There is an Air of Truth apparent through the whole; and indeed the Author was so distinguished for his Veracity, that it became a Sort of Proverb among his Neighbours at *Redriff*, when any one affirmed a Thing, to say, it was as true, as if Mr. *Gulliver* had spoke it. (9)

On first reading this sounds uncontroversial. But 'Air of Truth' is not a confident locution; in fact, it seems to insist as much on the reader's interpretation as any factual basis. The proverb also courts ambiguity; again, it is left to the reader to form a judgement. How might we regard

this statement, for example *after* reading the *Travels*, when we have discovered Gulliver to be a horse-loving recluse who has doctored one or two of the facts? The language that he adopts in the fourth voyage is sprinkled throughout his letter to Sympson, with its dismissive tone, and its talk of ‘*sea-Yahoos*’, and ‘*the Thing that was not*’. So at the points where truth is given priority in the text, it is accompanied by a destabilising admission of contingency.

First, the antagonistic relationship of the two letters undermines the claims for ‘truth’ made in each; and then, any claim made is always broached in terms of an appeal to the reader to *interpret* the truth; it is not self-evident.²⁵ In addition to Sympson’s qualified praise of the work, Gulliver has his own appeal to make: ‘I have sent you some Corrections, which you may insert, if ever there should be a second Edition: And yet I cannot stand to them, but shall leave that Matter to my judicious and candid Readers, to adjust it as they please’ (7). However much these may sound like gestures of affirmation that will lead the reader inevitably to appreciate Gulliver’s honesty, there is still an uneasy air of ambivalence about them, as if they acknowledge that the truth will not stand on its own, but needs constant validation from sympathetic readers. The apparently minor matter of the misspelling of what should read ‘Brobdingrag’ as ‘Brobingnag’ in the text proper, is an important instance of this. Every time that we read the ‘wrong’ spelling in the text itself, our practice is being silently linked to Gulliver’s complaints in the introduction. Readers

²⁵ A puzzling example of this practice occurs near the end of the work, when Gulliver follows his assertion that he will ‘*strictly adhere to truth*’ with a quotation from Virgil that identifies him with Sinon, a well-known liar: ‘*Nec si miserum Fortuna Sinonem / Finxit, vanum etiam, mendacemque improba finget*’ (‘nor, if cruel Fortune has made Sinon miserable, shall she also make him false and deceitful’, *Aeneid*, ii, 79-80). These words preface a lying story, designed to make the Trojans accept the wooden horse, and therefore prompt the question of why Gulliver uses them to vouch for his honesty. From a discussion of this passage, Robert M. Philmus concludes that it is Gulliver’s heavy-handed literalism, taken from the Houyhnhnms, which prevents him from seeing any context to the statement. ‘Swift, Gulliver, and “The Thing which was not”’, 74.

are thus guilty of perpetuating a falsehood over which they have no control.

These two letters present an imposing edifice for the reader to surmount on the way to the *Travels* proper; the issues they broach will dictate how the function of language is seen in the rest of the book. In the first place, there is no 'truth' adumbrated in the work which will not have to refer back to the relativistic moments of Gulliver's and Sympson's letters. Truth is not a constant, to be mined from the text, but can only be unfolded in the act of reading, as the structures of both letters show. For, at the moment that they ordain truth as a fixed value, they launch a simultaneous entreaty to the reader, to be an active agent in its constitution. Secondly, any desire to transcend textuality that we may have, a desire shared by Gulliver, is denied by the text itself, which creates internal fissures and wranglings (characterised by the disagreements between the two letters), and points to the endless proliferation of text to which the writing of this one has led. It is not a text to end all texts, but, rather, one which seems to create a good many more than others do. Presenting the actual book's publishing history as part of its fiction is a novel means of letting us know that we ignore the textuality of *Gulliver's Travels* at our own peril.²⁶

The effect of this organising framework, then, is to rearrange the others, and to reconfigure our reading of the text. Both the travel and textual contexts are now realigned under this structure of disagreement. It now introduces the dimension of truth, being something that is jointly reached by reader and author, rather than imposed from above. This

²⁶ The debate moves beyond the text, blurring the division between fiction and reality, in the unusual method Swift adopts to get his work published anonymously. Benjamin Motte takes delivery of a manuscript in an unknown hand, with a covering letter from one 'Richard Sympson'. As well as increasing the public interest in the *Travels*, Swift's subterfuge expands on many of the points about context and fiction being made within it. See C, III: 152-4.

causes the highlighting of those areas in the text where Gulliver appeals to the reader, or makes some grand claim. And these in turn become significant for looking at other parts of the work. Throughout the *Travels*, Gulliver repeats his appeals to the reader to help his work cohere. The voyages to Lilliput and Brobdingnag are full of phrases such as, 'I am content to gratify the curious Reader with some general Ideas' (57), and 'It was necessary to give the Reader this Information, without which he would be at the same Loss with me' (160). These draw us into feeling that we are being specially accommodated by Gulliver, and that a rapport of understanding exists between narrator and audience. But very often, this device is used at points of stress in the text, when Gulliver wants to normalise some unusual behaviour, and calls on the reader for assistance.

This is his first such appeal, made after he has described his toilet arrangements in Lilliput:

I would not have dwelt so long upon a Circumstance, that perhaps at first Sight may appear not very momentous; if I had not thought it necessary to justify my Character in point of Cleanliness to the World; which I am told, some of my Maligners have been pleased, upon this and other Occasions, to call in Question. (28)

What happens here is the direct opposite of what Gulliver wishes. It is his own 'dwelling' on the act that makes it 'momentous', not any external circumstance (although the amount produced would be momentous in Lilliputian terms). And his justification seems specious. Who are these 'maligners' who accuse him of unclean acts? The only evidence that he does such things is provided by himself, in his point-by-point description. So all the things which Gulliver wishes to gainsay are ironically reinforced by his own words. The entire apparatus of the appeal to the reader is thus threatened by this abuse of it.

This is more forcefully shown in an example in Brobdingnag, again in a very unusual circumstance. The now relatively diminutive Gulliver

has to endure some unwanted attentions from the queen's giant attendants: 'The handsomest among these Maids of Honour, a pleasant frolicksome Girl of sixteen, would sometimes set me astride upon one of her Nipples; with many other Tricks, wherein the Reader will excuse me for not being over particular' (119). We are now being asked, not to endure an unpleasant description, but to abjure one: Gulliver's frankness about his excremental actions is matched with coyness about his sexual ones. But surely the reader is being teased here? Surely, we would prefer him to be 'over particular'; and he seems aware of this in his earlier playful description of the girl. There is much irresolution about this scene. Although he requests his nurse to prevent any future occurrences of this kind, the pleasant tone of the language suggests that his indignation is mainly contrived for the reader's benefit. In both these examples, the formulaic appeal to the reader to verify Gulliver's account is put under strain. The first suffers from too much detail, the latter not enough, and in each case, the function of information-giving is subordinated to the entertainment to be had from playing with the formula itself. This, in turn, unsettles all those recurrences of the construct in which there seems to be a more straightforward appeal to the reader, with no catches.²⁷ Eventually, Gulliver relieves the reader of any pressure to agree at all, when he views the ghosts on the island of Glubbudubdrib: 'It is impossible to express the Satisfaction I recieved in my own Mind, after such a Manner as to make it a suitable Entertainment to the Reader' (196). The sheer spectacle, he implies, is too impressive to be captured in language, and the reader must be content merely to know that it occurred. But it is really Gulliver's (and Swift's) etiologies of the appeal to the reader, rather than any problems of

²⁷ Frederik N. Smith calls this and other similar incidents a 'double bind': 'The peculiar frustration and confusion which we repeatedly experience in reading the book can be explained by Swift's inconsistent, simultaneous injunctions to accept what is being averred and not to'. See 'The Danger of Reading Swift: The Double Binds of *Gulliver's Travels*', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 17 (1984), 35-47 (40-1).

description, which radically undermine it. As in the introductory letter, we have a situation in which explicit appeals to truth and stability are couched in a language and setting which deflates their ability to perform correctly. The requirement of 'entertainment' which is apparently demanded by the reader, is in fact mainly the interest of Gulliver.

This strain becomes more apparent when Gulliver tries to turn his random activities into a coherent philosophy:

I hope, the gentle Reader will excuse me for dwelling on these and the like Particulars; which however insignificant they may appear to grovelling vulgar Minds, yet will certainly help a Philosopher to enlarge his Thoughts and Imagination, and apply them to the Benefit of publick as well as private Life; [...] But the whole Scene of this Voyage made so strong an Impression on my Mind, and is so deeply fixed in my Memory, that in committing it to Paper, I did not omit one material Circumstance: However, upon a strict Review, I blotted out several Passages of less Moment which were in my first Copy, for fear of being censured as tedious and trifling, whereof Travellers are often, perhaps not without Justice, accused.
(94)

His philosophical pretensions are destroyed by the revelation, in the last sentence, that he has not put as many facts into his narrative as he might have. The reason offered, fear of irritating the reader, contrasts sharply with his unapologetic tone elsewhere. Once again, we are given more questions than answers. What are the 'Passages of less Moment' that he has removed? And what is his motivation in including other incidents, such as his toilet arrangements? Are these more necessary to a good understanding of the countries he visits? It is not squeamishness that leads him to censor things—when the King of Brobdingnag describes humans as 'the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth', Gulliver does not shirk his travel writer's duty: 'nothing but an extreme Love of Truth could have hindered me from concealing this Part of my Story' (132-3). Here, again, we have an example of one context of the *Travels* becoming subordinated to

another. The travel narrative code is employed partly to raise questions about the way Gulliver organises his writings; what principles he uses, what control he has over his narrative. Although the central theme of his digressions is truth, it is telling that, as in the case of his appeals to the reader, that truth is located in unstable and untrustworthy constructions.

These contexts in turn are subject to the influence of another, that of the narrative position of Gulliver. His intervention in the text, far from normalising or accounting for some types of behaviour, seems to bring matters to a crisis. With the exception of Sympson's letter, the narration of events is Gulliver's, and all facts pertaining to the voyage are reported through him. There is thus an immense pressure on this particular context to be rational and decipherable, both from ourselves as readers, and from the structure of the book, to prevent it from spiralling into madness. As we have already seen, Gulliver does not deliver the consistency that is necessary for the other contexts to be coherent. Swift's achievement here is to produce a narrator who challenges the act of narration; not merely by being unreliable in his reportage of facts and his mental state, but also by failing to function as a narrator at all, but turning at points into a key or cipher. We see best how this operates in his relationship with the Houyhnhnms.

Gulliver's interpretation of events is largely responsible for our picture of the Houyhnhnms. They are not a modest race, but it is mainly through his biased eyes that their perfection is proclaimed. Gulliver thrusts them into the limelight as a faultless species, to bring a sense of resolution to his wanderings. After the sobering incidents on Glubbudrib, and with the Struldbruggs, the Houyhnhnms do seem to offer a haven of experience, a place where language use is (apparently) less fraught. However, it is Gulliver's attempts to force the voyage into this role, to offer it as the culmination of his experiences of language, which lead us to the close

scrutiny of language in it. The results of that scrutiny indicate the dangers of doing away with the study of language altogether. The criticism of over-abstraction that features in the third voyage here gives way to an implied criticism of non-objectivity. Because Gulliver fails to analyse the Houyhnhnms' language, he unwittingly reproduces their ideologies verbatim. As he becomes less impartial, Gulliver also abdicates some of his right to stand as an independent commentator on the text, for now he must take part in it. Where he was content to observe and report on the activities of the Lagadans, in the case of the Houyhnhnms he becomes part of the drama, and so his commentary is impaired.

By making 'reason' feature so largely in his description, *Gulliver* invites us to consider every Houyhnhnm action in terms of its 'reasonableness', yet the Houyhnhnms would not have presented themselves in such a manner, as they are without a conception of human reason. In presenting his Master's speeches, Gulliver excels in contrasting them sharply with the human. In a discussion on war, the Houyhnhnm placidly concludes, 'And therefore in recounting the Numbers of those who have been killed in Battle, I cannot but think that you have *said the Thing which was not*'. Gulliver's reply does not show much restraint:

I could not forbear shaking my Head and smiling a little at his Ignorance. And, being no Stranger to the Art of War, I gave him a Description of Cannons, Culverins, Muskets, Carabines, Pistols, Bullets, Powder, Swords, Bayonets, Sieges, Retreats, Attacks, Undermines, Countermines, Bombardments...

And so on (247). Gulliver's lack of unease begins to look rather contrived when he later asserts that: 'it is now some Comfort to reflect, that in what I said of my Countrymen, I *extenuated* their Faults as much as I durst Before so strict an Examiner; and upon every Article, gave as *favourable* a Turn as the Matter would bear' (258-9). His appeals to truth throughout this adventure link it most strongly to the prefatory letter, through which

Gulliver has sprinkled terms like 'Yahoo' and 'Master'. Whereas other voyages are meant to be generally governed by the sentiments expressed in the preface, this voyage is seen as constitutive of them, for it is here that Gulliver learns of his extreme love of 'truth'. It is unfortunate for him, then, that this voyage also shows him at his most partial, identifying with the Houyhnhnms and assuming wholeheartedly their vilification of the Yahoos. The more Gulliver fails to detach himself from the scenes he witnesses, the more we are impelled to investigate his claims, with at least some of the objectivity that he has foregone. The more he alludes to the 'truth' of the voyage, the more its fictionality becomes apparent. Gulliver never explains why he refers to the Houyhnhnm who discovers him as his 'Master', but at his silent assumption of the servile role he unpicks the balanced objectivity which he promotes throughout.²⁸ His is not a coherent characterisation, but a series of roles adapted by Swift to each voyage, in order to stress the importance of various facets of them. The difference here is that Gulliver's transformation into pseudo-Houyhnhnm is so total that it threatens to engulf all his previous roles.

As the dominating voice of the narrative, Gulliver creates a context of observation and opinion which it is hard to resist. It is very tempting to consider his standpoint as the one through which our reading should be refracted, rather than to examine the other contexts that exist in the work. However, to do this is to risk repeating the ideology of Gulliver, and, as we have seen, the text itself does not allow this to stand unchallenged.

To demonstrate better how this works, it is useful to view the text in another context, that of its critical reception. It is not customary to

²⁸ The dignity of this form of address is, unfortunately for Gulliver, undercut by an episode of lewd punning at the beginning of his *Travels*, in which an earlier 'Master' of Gulliver is progressively downgraded. Starting off as 'Mr James Bates', he becomes 'my good Master Mr Bates, then, Mr Bates, my Master', and, inevitably, 'my good Master Bates' (19-20). There is a full discussion of this passage in Christopher Fox, 'The Myth of Narcissus in Swift's *Travels*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 20 (1986-7), 17-33.

perceive a work's criticism as part of it, yet *Gulliver's Travels* is so constructed that the division between text and context is not rigorously maintained. It even seems to reach beyond itself, and anticipate its critical reception, rather like *A Tale of a Tub*.

It is not surprising that a majority of criticism seeks to decipher the significance of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos, since they are so seductively offered as symbols.²⁹ Gulliver's departure from the realm of objectivity invites us to make identifications of our own, at the same time as it denies us hard evidence. It is generally agreed that the King of Brobdingnag is wise, and the Lilliputians are foolish, but what are we to make of the creatures in Houyhnhnmland? The Houyhnhnm/Yahoo opposition is responsible for one influential critical debate, documented in James L. Clifford's essay, 'Gulliver's Fourth Voyage: "Hard" and "Soft" Schools of Interpretation'. Clifford writes: 'By "hard" I mean an interpretation which stresses the shock and difficulty of the work, with almost tragic overtones, while by "soft" I mean the tendency to find comic passages and compromise solutions'.³⁰ Claude Rawson offers the following identifiably 'hard' reading:

The fact that we may not like [the Houyhnhnms] does not mean that Swift is disowning them: it is consistent with his whole style to nettle us with a positive we might find insulting and rebarbative. The older critics who disliked the Houyhnhnms but felt that Swift meant them as a positive were surely nearer the mark than some recent ones who translate their own dislikes into the meaning of the book.³¹

A hard critic thus sees the necessity of not shirking from the full pedagogic impact of the adventure, however personally unpleasant it may be. The

²⁹ See, as an example, Irvin Ehrenpreis, 'The Meaning of Gulliver's Last Voyage', *Review of English Literature*, 3 (1962), 18-38.

³⁰ Clifford, in Larry S. Champion (ed.), *Quick Springs of Sense: Studies in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), pp. 33-49 (p. 33).

³¹ C. J. Rawson, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and our Time* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 30.

'soft' school does not unite around a common interest in the Yahoos, rather it seeks ways to disinvest the Houyhnhnms of their importance. An influential essay of this type, by John F. Ross, argues for the intervention of the comic:

So far as I can see, Swift offers no answer of his own, no solution. But he does transcend the misanthropic solution. He could see that his own severest satire was the result of a partial and one-sided view, which was therefore properly a subject for mirth.³²

Despite the variety of this kind of criticism, it is united in seeing the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos in the moral opposition presented in the *Travels*, and then arguing either for or against it.

But as we have seen, strain is imposed on this binary from internal and external points. The logic that binds the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos harbours the elements of its own undoing in its reliance on the inferior part of the equation for its operation. And Gulliver's unwitting alterations to the system show its inadequacy as a force of totalisation. If criticism takes the Houyhnhnm culture as it stands, and then either tries to account for, or overthrow it, it risks repeating the ideological gestures of the text. For this society functions on a number of suppressions organised through language. To give one example, some critics have seen a Christian symbolism in the text, with the Yahoos as the types of 'fallen man'. But to take this view, even for positive purposes, is to accept and promulgate the Houyhnhnms' version of the advent of the Yahoos, which, as we have seen, presses myth into the service of linguistic determination.³³ We need also to take into account Gulliver's subjectivity. It is worthwhile to treat Gulliver as an internal reader, who has arrived at the materials before us, and is reaching

³² Ross, 'The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver', *University of California Publications in English*, VIII: 2 (1941), 175-96 (96).

³³ See, for example, Roland H. Frye, 'Swift's Yahoo and the Christian Symbols for Sin', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 15 (1954), 201-17; Calhoun Winton, 'Conversion on the Road to Houyhnhnmland', *Sewanee Review*, 68 (1960), 20-33; Philip Pinkus, 'Sin and Satire in Swift', *Bucknell Review*, 13 (1965), 11-25.

conclusions which we are left to digest. If we follow the account of the voyage without recognising Gulliver's interpolation, we go on to repeat his gesture without reflection. If we continue to see the fourth voyage as the 'answer', rather like Gulliver does, then we are ignoring the questions about truth, textuality, narrative and narrator posed by the different contexts of the book. Whereas, as Nigel Wood argues, 'if one criticises *Gulliver* textually, then it is quite possible to find in such mutually exclusive options, the contradictoriness and fascination of what is difficult about the work'.³⁴

How, then, can the reader of the fourth voyage avoid these enslaving textual games? All criticism involves some degree of reductiveness, if it is not to be a simple relation of facts. The lure of interpretation, coupled with its dangers, seems to present an insuperable obstacle, as James Gill notes: 'the construction of Part IV of the *Travels* does not enable readers to fix simple symbolic meanings to Yahoo and Houyhnhnm any more than it enables them to deny that these figures lack significance as symbols'.³⁵ But realising the degree of textual manipulation that is involved in the *Travels* is an important step. If we are unable to break away from ideological implication, we can at least, like Terry Eagleton, read this as a project of the text: 'to deconstruct the reader, reducing him from positioned subject to a function of polyphonic discourses: this is the *ideological* intervention accomplished by all of

³⁴Wood, *Swift* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), p. 64. Other critics also recognise the pitfalls of trying to totalise the work. For example, Louise K. Barnett sees the attempts to pin down meaning in the work as based on decisions about genre, and describes attempts to define it as philosophical tale, picaresque, and novel. She concludes: 'The history of reading *Gulliver's Travels* is a series of such genre decisions that attempt to cope with the text's polyvalence and indeterminacy by means of this principle—the implicit assumption that genre confers coherence and stability, that is, the text read monologically'. See 'Deconstructing *Gulliver's Travels*: Modern Readers and the Problematic of Genre', in Smith (ed.), *The Genres of Gulliver's Travels*, pp. 230-245 (p. 232).

³⁵James E. Gill, 'Man and Yahoo: Dialectic and Symbolism in Gulliver's "Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms"', in Robert B. White, Jr (ed.), *The Dress of Words: Essays on Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature in Honor of Richmond P. Bond* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Libraries, 1978), pp. 68-90 (p. 87).

Swift's writing'.³⁶ My emphasis on the role of language has been intended to show how elements that are usually considered apart from it, are prefigured in the text. It thus brings into question the very model that it is forced to adopt, that of a linear relationship of criticism to text. But, as Richard H. Rodino argues, this is the most fruitful way to proceed, 'not through pinning down the meaning of *Gulliver's Travels*, but through accepting the debates about its meaning as important symptoms of its essential linguistic nature'.³⁷ The nature of the fourth voyage dictates that decipherment of its themes must give way to reflection on the way that those themes are imposed upon us.

Ideas and functions of language pervade *Gulliver's Travels*, not simply as themes, but as part of its texture. Like all works, it has to attempt some control of signifying, to present itself as pure representation, in order to be readable. But in Swift, this process does not remain anonymous for long. The opening letters, with their emphasis on truth, contend with each other, and with the rest of the text, inviting doubt and contingency. The framework of travel narrative is invoked, then abused by Gulliver. In each country he visits, language-use is much more than a simple means of communication. The projectors of Lagado, who abstract, and then tamper with it, lead to the abuses witnessed in the third voyage. And finally, when, in Houyhnhnmland, language finally seems to be transparent, its greatest, most calculated exploitation emerges, proving the necessity of some degree of abstract analysis. As subject and object, language is the means by which Swift both grounds and questions his text. *Gulliver's Travels* is endlessly resistant to the totalising gestures which it

³⁶ 'Écriture and Eighteenth-Century Fiction', in *Literature, Society, and the Sociology of Literature: Proceedings of the Conference Held at the University of Essex, July, 1976* (University of Essex, 1977), pp. 55-8 (p. 58).

³⁷ "'Splendide, Mendax": Authors, Characters, and Readers in *Gulliver's Travels*', in Richard H. Rodino and Hermann J. Real (eds), *Reading Swift: Second Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift* (Munich: Fink, 1992), pp. 167-84 (p. 169).

helps to establish. Each context that it tries to settle into is threatened with overpowerment by another, and this is equally the case with the exterior as well as the interior of the work, as we struggle to impose a meaning on a text which argues against this practice by its structure, yet still has important points, political, social, and literary, to make.

Conclusion

Language is made to work especially hard in *Gulliver's Travels*. Within the narrative, in the work's contexts, and through its critical reception, language is admired and despised, provokes and suppresses, and endlessly analyses its own movement. It is the object of study, the means of exchange (and domination), and the format that contains these ideas. Although I have considered its aspects separately, it is more in keeping with the construction of the work to see them as functioning at the same moment.

Swift's experiment with a long work of fiction thus brings to the fore issues of language's fictionality. Throughout the text we see how words create more than they intend, how they amplify and complicate rather than simplify and communicate. Because the work is a fiction it is able to go further, to make important points about the use and reception of language in society. We see that communication involves a performative aspect that gives words multivalency. Language is fluid and adaptive, resisting attempts to fix and measure it. But most of all, language can operate in more than one context at once, and its dissemination is never a simple, unilateral process. *Gulliver's Travels* makes the impulse for self-reflection that is inherent in all texts the drama of its own.

Conclusion

Some People take more care to hide their Wisdom than their Folly
(*Thoughts on Various Subjects*, PW, IV: 244)

Language works in Swift, not as opinion and moral, but as example and question. It turns its back on the comfort of dry theorising, to explore instead a world of experiment and spontaneity. Swift may produce political pamphlets, treatises that attack freethinkers, sermons, and essays on good breeding; but we remember him for his ingenuity and evasiveness more than his didacticism. And this is not simply because of the tastes of the English literary canon, nor the effects of historical distance. What gives Swift's writing its value is its energy and radicalism; its rebuttal of easy options.

I have provided examples of how Swift's language operates in different texts. In his scattered pieces on language use, he accommodates yet resists common assumptions of the late seventeenth century. Driven by the same urge to designate good and bad, to cleanse and purify, he cannot settle for the same security as Locke and the Royal Society, preferring instead to disparage projectors and retreat from solutions. He leaves others to take up the issue, and writes works which create confusion and disorder. But from this platform, his language develops to bring into question the edifices of reason and control that others create. In *A Tale of a Tub*, Swift as author becomes detached from a work in which authority, closure, and sense are ousted by proliferation, change, and the threat of madness. He writes poetry

which struggles against the prevalent ethic of order and communication; and undermines that ethic with extreme linguistic experiments. In *Gulliver's Travels*, he crushes the reader's desire for information and entertainment with a multitude of frames and contexts and narrative slippages, until almost all that remains is our understanding of the text's fictionality. In the joke against Partridge, he revels in the ability of words to cause doubt and confusion, to dwell between the real and the imaginary, and to transform both. Whatever its subject, Swift's language has the power to challenge and modify stale assumptions, and to import disorder into what before seemed certain.

I believe that Swift's writing is capable of this because of its dominant characteristic: its activeness. Swift's language is always at work in his texts, sometimes endorsing his viewpoints, sometimes frustrating them, but always enacting, motivating, reshaping. He not only denounces the Moderns' world, in the *Tale* he creates it, and then projects it into a dimension of chaos that virtually disables his text. Where Pope and other poets decry the body, Swift inhabits it, and undercuts his own satires by dwelling on it at such length. But because his language works harder, and goes further, Swift's works bring a sharper focus to bear on the issues of his time; and arguments for control and order, which might have survived gentle criticism, are exploded by these unwearying experiments.

This is my assessment of the characteristics of Swift's language; and while it offers to the reader challenge and originality, I am aware that it also invites loss and indeterminacy. Often, presented with so exhaustive an

undertaking, the reader begins to feel incapable of reaching a conclusion, or drawing a positive, from the texts. Critics are anxious to garner some sort of opinion or evidence from the array of materials on offer, often having to distort and corrupt to find solutions to their questions. Yet this process is understandable. The Swiftian text commands it, because it implies that no such totality is available. But, if this is the case, why persevere with Swift, why try to make sense of such a recalcitrant and obscure writing?

My response to this question is linked with my understanding of how Swift's language behaves. It is precisely because words act rather than merely argue that Swift's work has lasting importance. For it reveals a language which is true to itself, which is aware of its own process, and which constantly questions and undermines its own function. Because of its self-critical nature, Swift's language seems to obviate much of the need for criticism. Yet it is this very nature, this espousal and complication of self-consciousness and reflection, that marks Swift's work as exploratory, prescient, and continually relevant.

Whether Swift believed or not that his work would survive, his texts are assured a future. They are always conducive to re-reading and reassessment; their range, and the operation of language throughout them, ensure that the reading process will never be at an end. And the fact that they seem to pre-read themselves, to entertain doubt and confusion, guarantees that we will feel compelled to judge for ourselves, even while our opportunity to

do so is always demarcated for us. In his writing, Swift may often entertain folly, but there is never any doubt that he contains wisdom.

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