Gulliver and the Gentle Reader
Studies in Swift and Our Time

Claude Rawson
Originally published in 1991, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader* critically examines the writing of Jonathan Swift. The book is predominately concerned with what Rawson coins 'the "unofficial" energies' which work below the surface of Swift's conscious themes. Alongside this discussion, Rawson provides detailed studies on historical, cultural and psychological relationships, and the connections that exist between these areas, and the more extreme writers of the later period such as Breton, Mailer, and Yeats, as well as the connections with the writers such as his contemporary Pope, and those that followed such as Johnson, and Sterne. This book will be of interest to students of literature, as well as those researching in the area of literature.
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Claude Rawson

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FOR MY PARENTS
This book, like Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress, which
is being simultaneously reissued, was written on the following general
assumptions: that what has traditionally passed for an 'Augustan world
picture' is not a useful concept; that the aspirations to order and stability
visible in some leading writers were undercut by energies of misrule, both
personal and cultural; that (contrary to the assumptions of traditional literary
history) the thought and writings of the period, like those of any period,
always exist under pressure and display loose ends and inconsistencies which
are as powerful and important as the notional structures ('spirit of the age',
'providence of wit', 'great chain of being', 'peace of the Augustans') through
which literary historians have sought to understand or contain them; that
'periods' are not sealed units; and that literary texts are best understood in
a total context which includes not only their contemporaneous setting but
also comparable texts from earlier and later (including modern) times.

These assumptions, and their application to individual writers (chiefly
Swift and Fielding, but also Pope, Johnson and some others) were controver-
sial in the 1970s, when the books first appeared, and they continue to
challenge some orthodoxies. The passage of time has shown them to have
provoked a good deal of debate and to have had an impact on the study of
my two principal authors.

Two features of this book to which I attach special importance—its focus
on some aspects of author-reader relations and on the self-implication or
even self-subversiveness of Swift's satire—were early forays into territory
now occupied by some theorists with whose current work I do not
often feel in accord. There is now, I believe, a greater readiness than before
to understand the other aspects of Swift's work explored in this book.
I am thinking especially of his deep and in some ways prophetic inward-
ness with certain modes of the modern imagination which he would have
repudiated: the posturing Shandean self-consciousness, for example, which runs from Sterne to Norman Mailer and which he might be said to have parodied in advance; the eruptive violences and the play of ‘black humour’ which link him to the surrealists and the literature of ‘cruelty’; his extraordinary influence on writers whose adversarial or disruptive outlooks might seem the antithesis of his authoritarian commitment to tradition and rule.

This book, like its companion volume, has been out of print for some time, and it gives me pleasure that both are again being made available to readers.

Yale University
October 1990
The studies in this book were written over the same period of years as those which form my recent volume, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972). The two books are related by various common themes and ideas, most notably by their preoccupation with authorial temperaments and styles which reflect a tension between Augustan ideals of correctness and 'polite' civilization on the one hand, and inner and outer forces of misrule on the other. From this point of view, my two central figures, Fielding and Swift, throw light on one another, both in their resemblances and their differences, to an extent which made it seem undesirable and perhaps impossible to write about either without frequently referring to the other, and a certain amount of overlap will be found between the two books, including, in a few cases, brief passages nearly identical with one another. These have been kept to the minimum, and occur only where it seemed to me that a difficult or complex line of argument would otherwise come through less clearly.

There are also similarities of method between the two books. I have not attempted to provide a progressive account of Swift's development, and, as with Fielding in the previous book, I discuss a late work (here *Gulliver's Travels*) early in the book, and concentrate increasingly on an early work (here *A Tale of a Tub*) as the book progresses. It seemed to me that some of my principal themes were better deployed in this way: the order of the chapters is in fact roughly my order of composition, and records the unfolding of my own present conception of Swift. I imagine that the first essay will seem closest to orthodox readings of Swift, if there are such things, and that the later ones will seem, as they are meant to seem, increasingly exploratory. One thread of argument to which I attach importance is that Swift's satire reveals itself not primarily as a Satire on Man in some impersonal or third-person sense
which leaves the reader and the author out, but that some of its most powerful energies attack the reader (or 'second person') and finally implicate the author himself (or 'first person') in various ways, 'official' and 'unofficial'.

Some of the 'unofficial' energies of Swift's writing move further still, beyond satire to some kind of indulgence of the things mimicked or satirized. These energies seem to me to connect Swift with certain extremist or violent writers of later times, despite the fact that he would have disavowed the various kinds of 'modernity' they stood for. I have also been concerned to indicate certain paradoxes, which are related to this, in his relations with some writers of his own century. One such paradox is Swift's radical difference from Pope, the major writer with whom he had the closest ties of friendship and with whom he shared so many consciously formulated attitudes on moral and cultural matters. Another paradox is that of Swift's important similarities with Johnson, who disliked his work, and Sterne, whose work he would have disliked.

My method has been to explore these themes with a degree of deliberate circularity, to return in different contexts to the same crucial passages, and to examine them from what may sometimes seem overlapping or conflicting points of view. As in the book on Fielding, this method seemed to me likelier to reflect the many-sided complexity of the works discussed than a more logically ordered arrangement.

Chapter I was first published, in a slightly different form, in Imagined Worlds: Essays on Some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt, ed. Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (Methuen, 1968), pp. 51-90. Chapter II and part of chapter III appeared, also in a slightly different form, in Essays in Criticism, xx (1970), 24-56, and xxii (1972), 161-81, and are reprinted by kind permission of the editors.

Chapter II grew out of a paper read at the Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association of America in New York in 1968. To Max Novak, who invited me to do this, I owe debts of gratitude which go well beyond the specific occasion. He has been a warm friend and a valued intellectual stimulus for many years. To many scholars at the Convention with whom I had the privilege to exchange views I owe many points of information, and much clarification of ideas. The Pope and Johnson sections of chapter II were read as a paper to G. S. Rousseau's Eighteenth-Century Seminar at the University of California, Los Angeles, and I owe much to the searching discussion which followed.

Other parts of this book were read as papers at the Universities of
Newcastle upon Tyne and Warwick, where many colleagues and students helped me to form my ideas.


To Joyce Pemberton and Ann Griffin I am deeply indebted for many kinds of secretarial assistance, always accomplished with generosity, patience and skill.

To the University of Warwick Library, and especially to Audrey Cooper, I owe a great and continuing debt for many kinds of help. The University's generous sabbatical leave facilities enabled me to complete the book in freedom from teaching and from administrative duties, and for this I am grateful.

C. J. Rawson
University of Warwick
The following abbreviations have been used throughout in references to Swift's writings:

*Correspondence:* ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols (Oxford, 1963-5)

*Journal to Stella:* ed. Harold Williams, 2 vols (Oxford, 1948)


All quotations are from these editions, unless otherwise noted. I normally give volume and page references in the notes, but chapter, section or line of individual works, where convenient, in brackets in the text. A special exception for *Gulliver's Travels* in my first chapter is explained at chapter I, n.18.

All quotations from Pope's poems use the Twickenham texts and lineation.
JILL You put me in the wrong
JACK I am not putting you in the wrong
JILL You put me in the wrong for thinking you put me in the wrong.

(R. D. Laing, Knots)

'Tis a great Ease to my Conscience that I have writ so elaborate and useful a Discourse without one grain of Satyr intermixt': this, from the Preface to A Tale of a Tub, outdoes even Gulliver's claims to veracity in its cheeky outrageousness. That 'provocative display of indirectness' which Herbert Read (in a fine though somewhat unfriendly phrase) saw in Gulliver governs also the mad parodic word of the Tale. The seven prefatory items followed by an Introduction, the signposted chapters of digression (one of them in praise of digressions), the pseudo-scholarly annotation (with the 'commentator' sometimes at odds with the 'author'), the triumphant assimilation into the notes of Wotton's hostile exegesis, the asterisks and gaps in the MS., the promise of such forthcoming publications as A Panegyrick upon the World and A General History of Ears, have an exuberance which transcends mere parody and mere playfulness. In such a context, the posturing denial of satiric intention draws a provoking and almost unsettling attention to itself. We have not yet reached the sudden violences, and the more radical underminings, of the religious allegory or the Digression on Madness, but we are made curiously insecure as to how, exactly, to take the joke.

Nor can we comfortably separate, in our minds, the silly geniality of
the putative ‘author’ from Swift’s own more astringent presence. Typically, we become aware of a strange interplay of astringency and exuberance, in which it is not always easy to distinguish between narrator and real author. The narrator, or mock-author, is a creature of mad and monstrous egotism, who confides his private problems and draws garrulous attention to his literary techniques. But the Tale’s whole marathon of self-posturing cannot be entirely accounted for by its ostensible purpose, which is to mock those modern authors, ‘L’estrange, Dryden, and some others’ (Tale, 1), who write this sort of book straight. For the Tale has at the same time a vitality of sheer performance which suggests that a strong self-conscious pressure of primary self-display on Swift’s own part is also at work; the almost ‘romantic’ assertion of an immense (though edgy, oblique, and aggressively self-concealing) egocentricity. Swift’s descendants in the old game of parodic self-consciousness are Romantics of a special sort, like Sterne and (after him) the Byron of Don Juan. If the Tale’s ‘Digression in Praise of Digressions’ looks back to, and mocks, things like L’Estrange’s ‘Preface upon a Preface’, it also looks forward to Sterne’s ‘chapter upon chapters’, and it is not for nothing that Tristram thinks his book will ‘swim down the gutter of Time’ in the company of Swift’s.

Whatever the ancestry of the technical devices as such, the parodic intrusions of Swift’s ‘authors’ have a centrality and importance, and are made by Swift to carry a strength of personal charge, which seem to be new. In Sterne and Byron, and in the Norman Mailer of Advertisements for Myself, self-conscious forms of parody and self-parody openly become a solipsistic exercise, an oblique mode of self-exploration and self-display much more radical and far-reaching than the playful posturings of Cervantes or Burton, or even Rabelais. Compare the fact that Swift’s Tale is a satire of advertisements for oneself not only with the title of Mailer’s book, but with the fact that Mailer’s ‘advertisements’ are exactly the kind of prefatory note and solipsistic digression which Swift parodies. Mailer’s coy description of his practice and motives might almost be taken from the Tale, with its ‘admirable desire to please his readers’, its typographic self-consciousness, its acknowledgment of the superior attraction of prefaces over the books themselves:

The author, taken with an admirable desire to please his readers, has also added a set of advertisements, printed in italics, which surround all of these writings with his present tastes, preferences, apologies, prides, and occasional confessions. Like many another literary fraud, the writer has been known on occasion
to read the Preface of a book instead of a book, and bearing this vice in mind, he tried to make the advertisements more readable than the rest of his pages.

It might be argued that Mailer has reached a point where irony, or at least any very fundamental degree of self-mockery, has largely disappeared, and that he provides an impure comparison. Perhaps this fact shows *a fortiori* the special potential of Swiftian parody for turning into a primary self-assertion, and more will be said about Mailer later. In Sterne, where the outward forms of mockery and self-mockery are still almost as prominent as in Swift, and where the style looks back to Swift most directly and avowedly, there is a more immediate guide to certain `unofficial' aspects of Swift's manner.

Swift has in common with Sterne, against most pre-Swiftian practitioners of `self-conscious narration', the imposition of an exceptional immediacy of involvement with the reader. The narrators are not, of course, the equivalents of Swift or even Sterne: but each is an `I' of whose existence and temperament we are kept unremittingly aware, who talks to the reader and seems to be writing the book, and through whom the real author projects a very distinctive presence of his own. Swift and Sterne also share a kind of intimate, inward-looking obliquity which sets them off, say, from their master Rabelais, who like them projects a formidable presence, but whose boozy companionable exhibitionism amounts to an altogether different (and more `open') manner. This obliquity (more or less instinctive in Swift, more coyly self-aware in Sterne) perhaps takes the place of an overt self-expression which Augustan decorum, and whatever personal inhibitions, discouraged. There are, however, important differences also. When Swift's `author' declares in his Dedication to Prince Posterity that `what I am going to say is literally true this Minute I am writing: What Revolutions may happen before it shall be ready for your Perusal, I can by no means warrant', Swift is exposing the trivial ephemerality of modern writers. Similar remarks from Sterne (or, without any ironic admixture, from Richardson) proudly proclaim the immediacy of their method of writing *to the Moment*. Swift's mimicry repudiates that intimacy between author and reader which Sterne and Richardson celebrate, but it does not cancel such intimacy, as I shall hope to show. Again, when Swift's `author' proclaims in the Preface his determination `to assist the diligent Reader' in `putting himself into the Circumstances and Postures of Life, that the Writer was in, upon every important Passage as it flow'd from his Pen', so that there may be `a Parity and strict Correspondence of
Idea's between the Reader and the Author', Swift is attacking modern garrulities of self-revelation which for him amount to indecent exposure. In Sterne such remarks, however fraught with all manner of Shandean indirection, are genially proffered tokens of relationship. Tristram wants to tell you everything about himself, because he and Sterne enjoy his character (including the irony injected into it by Sterne, and of which Sterne's parodic performance is a part) as a rich fact of human nature. Both want to get the reader intimately involved:

As you proceed farther with me, the slight acquaintance, which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship.—O diem praeclarum!—then nothing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature or tedious in its telling.

The difference is not simply a matter of parody, for that exists in Sterne too. Swift's 'author', like Sterne's, often addresses the reader and invokes 'all the Friendship that hath passed between Us'. At the end of the Tale, he has no more to say but thinks of experimenting on how to go on writing 'upon Nothing', 'to let' (in a phrase Sterne might have used) 'the Pen still move on':

By the Time that an Author has writ out a Book, he and his Readers are become old Acquaintance, and grow very loth to part: So that I have sometimes known it to be in Writing, as in Visiting, where the Ceremony of taking Leave, has employ'd more Time than the whole Conversation before.

Neither this, nor Sterne's passage, is quite straight. That both are in some sense ironic need not be laboured. But Sterne's irony is of that puppyish, clinging sort which prods, cajoles, sometimes irritates the reader into a participation which may be reluctant and grudging, but which is also primary, direct and real. Swift's words assert the same intimacy, but the actual effect of the Swiftian acidity at the end of the 'author's' innocent sentence would appear to be to sever the link, to achieve not intimacy but an alienation. Sterne's irony is one of fond permissive indulgence; the egotism, though mocked, is freely played with, and the reader offered hospitality within it. In Swift's characteristic sting, the friendly egotism freezes into a stark reminder of the fact of mockery or parody of egotism, and (more than parody though by way of it) the claim to friendship with the reader becomes a kind of insulting denial.

But this denial is not an effacement of Swift, nor a suspension of the