

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 3 (1987)

Artikel: Swift : the satirical use of framing fictions
Autor: Forster, Jean-Paul
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99855>

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Swift: The Satirical Use of Framing Fictions

Jean-Paul Forster

Swift's satires are often rather loosely described as blending different genres with one another: allegory, parody, mock encomium in *A Tale of a Tub*, and travel book, imaginary voyage, utopia and autobiography in *Gulliver's Travels*. At the same time, it is obvious that Swift did not so much follow classical models as borrow the least literary forms of his time, immortalising its ephemeral writings, while mocking its achievements. That the champion of the "Ancients" in the quarrel between "Ancients" and "Moderns" should so resolutely have chosen to play the "Modern" and express his views in the least traditional and most fugitively fashionable genres of Queen Anne's reign is just one of a number of contradictions for which Swift's work is famous. This utilization of contemporary genres and the combination of disparate elements warrant investigation as one of the crucial, though little studied, strategies used by the author to produce the corrosive effect of satire.

The gesture towards, and implicit reliance on, a contemporary context now largely fallen into oblivion, except in the case of historians, makes Swift difficult to approach by way of modern formalistic theories, notions of literary inter-textuality and conceptions of non-referentiality in literary criticism, as Edward Said has noted.¹ To such theories satire has, in any case, usually been something of a problem, because satire refers to a situation outside the text and insists that the reference be considered as part and parcel of the economy of the text. This reference often takes the form of a mimetic and "isomorphic" representation of reality, which does not totally preclude formalistic approaches. With Swift the problem of referentiality is more fundamental since the act of satirising the contemporary world does not take place only at the level of

¹ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), pp. 55-56.

its representation, but begins with the choice of a form of publication or genre as part of a complex structure. The purpose of the following analysis is to describe the structural rôle and function of this choice of contemporary genres in the satirical fictions.

In his satires Swift parodies the forms and genres that he follows. However, the purpose behind the parody is different from that of his contemporary and friend Alexander Pope. The latter, in his mock-epics, aims, through the use of a deliberately debased form, to suggest the remoteness of modern life from the classical ideals celebrated by the great epic poets. The attitude manifested by the handling of form is conservative and nostalgic. Swift's parodies evidence no such indirectness. They are straightforward imitations of the *discourses* of contemporary journalism, science – or philosophy, as it was then called –, and literary criticism. Whatever may be said of Swift's political and religious ideas, there is no trace of conservatism and nostalgia here.

Strangely enough, it is Swift's use of masks or *personae* that has attracted most attention, and not his caricature of contemporary genres. Of course, his impersonations of various types of scribblers is a striking feature of his fiction-making, but it is not present in all his satires, and, where it is found, it is subordinated to, and a mere emanation of, the playful imitation of a discourse. Discourse has priority over persona. Discourse is an apt concept to describe Swift's satires and, in particular, their framework, which is the object of this study, for two reasons. On the one hand the framework, however discreet it may be, is always argumentative, in contradistinction to narrative or dramatic structures. On the other hand the term refers to a new conception of language that emerged at the end of the seventeenth century and aimed at representing the world and experience in such a way as to give a faithful verbal picture of them, and with a view, likewise, to their verbal analysis.² Swift's mimicking of typical genres and forms of publication has the same purpose. It presents them as discourses, in other words as the ways in which certain groups of people – one is tempted to say pressure groups – think and speak of certain subjects: religion, politics, science or madness. The importance taken by the mimicking of contemporary genres supports Swift's own claim that his parodies do not primarily intend to ridicule people, "John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth," as he once put it in a letter.³ It is more correct to say that they isolate samples from diverse

² Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

³ *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, edited by Harold Williams (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), vol.iii, p. 103.

discourses to hold them up for inspection and criticism. To be immediately identifiable, the individual samples of fashionable discourses must present the typical characteristics of the genre in a concentrated form: hence the necessity of some degree of caricature. So the parodic quality that results from underlining typical features achieves two things: it introduces the distancing that makes a critical evaluation possible and it draws something like a circle around the sample which reveals it as a fake. The circle is the starting point of the fictionalising process. Swift makes it sufficiently visible for the fictitious to be easily distinguished from the real thing. He does so mainly by a device that criticism calls "framing." By including – framing – one type of discourse within another, he presents the phenomenon of communication as complex and the relation between text or original intention, and reader or reception, as problematic.

Swift's use of framing is of a kind that seems to have had a particular appeal for his contemporaries. The early novels sometimes purported to be the editing of private papers, memoirs or letters. If no full account was given of their provenances, the title pages at least vouchsafed their authenticity. Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* is subtitled: "Written by a Citizen who continued all the while in London. Never made public before." This minimal sort of framing underlined the fact that there was some direct connection between real life and fiction. In short, it claimed for the artefact the status of a truthful document. It pretended to give the public not something novel or new, as is often understood today, but news of the world. A narrative introduced by this kind of device is called framed. A similar kind of staging characterises most of Swift's satires and, here too, framing may be roughly equated with the editing of purportedly true pieces of writing.⁴ There the similarities end, however. Swift does not write narrative or pretendedly documentary fictions, even when his satires take a narrative turn. It is well known that satires usually promise one thing and end up by offering another. Swift's parodies of forms of publication, genres, and more generally discourses, do precisely this. They do not fulfil their promises. They are editing tricks which promise information but frame fanciful tales or made up stories. Consequently the framing plays a different rôle from that in the novel, where it authenticates the fiction.

⁴ Everett Zimmerman has recently pointed out that "Swift's major satires analyse the context in which the novel arose, engaging the hermeneutical and epistemological concerns that are implicit in the new form." (*Swift's Narrative Satires: Author and Authority*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 14.

Swift is a parodist of genius, and he pushes the art of parody further than any early novelist. There is no genre, however humble and non-literary, that he cannot turn to advantage in his satirical fictions. In general the forms he chooses for his framing devices are those that he also handles in the other important aspect of his production, the polemical writings: prefaces, forewords, advertisements to readers, digressions, letters, pamphlets, apologies, petitions, manuals, proposals, elegies, songs, lampoons and broadsides. Their diversity is considerable, and no discussion of the subject can do more than propose a few illustrations.⁵ Here is a list of those that will be mentioned in the course of the analysis. Apart from *A Tale of a Tub*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, which are too familiar to need presenting, the following works come in for discussion: *The Battle of the Books*, familiar for its allegory and mock-epic battle, but which begins – the fact is usually ignored – like an eighteenth-century disquisition on the moral causes of wars; *A Meditation on a Broomstick*, which mocks a favourite genre with churchmen; *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, subtitled a “discourse”, but written in the leisurely style of an epistolary exchange; *A Critical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind*, a mock psychological, or, in eighteenth-century language, physiological essay; *The Bickerstaff Papers*, a collection of texts whose nucleus is the imitation of an almanac and whose core is public polemics; *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation*, which satirises manuals of good manners; two news items or reports, *A Hue and Cry after Dismal* and *A New Journey to Paris*; two letters, *A Letter from the Pretender to a Whig Lord* and *The Story of the Injured Lady. In a Letter to her Friend, with his Answer*; two petitions, one in verse, *Mrs Harris's Petition*, and one in prose, *The Humble Petition of the Footmen of Dublin*; a public protest, *An Examination of Certain Abuses, Corruptions and Enormities in the City of Dublin*; a prose broadside, *The Last Speech and Dying Words of Ebenezer Elliston*; and finally two poems, “A Description of the Morning” and “A Description of a City Shower.”

This list immediately invites two remarks. The first is that Swift's satirical fictions are never offered to the reader as literature, as the work of a highbrow man of letters like Pope, but as contributions to a vast public debate of ideas on politics, religion, superstition, education, social life and relationships, as well as literature. Their forms, down to the

⁵ John G. Blair discusses some aspects of the problem facing any examination of literary variety in his essay on *Moby Dick* included in the present volume, see pp. 209–220.

use of disguises, which was a common feature of all journalistic writing, are those typical of this public debate. By Pope's standards, and on the basis of the criterion of genre, Swift's satirical fictions can only be classed as low and answering mostly practical purposes. The second clearly concerns the difference between the satirical parodies and the polemical writings themselves. Though the caricatural element in the former helps to detect the fake in most cases, they remain outwardly so closely akin that only the degree of fictionalization resulting from the use of a framing device and their different finalities mark off the fakes from the real thing. A study of framing is then doubly useful: it explains the peculiar nature of the satirical fictions and their very different appeal to readers, compared to the polemical writings.

Considering the variety of the satirical fictions, it would be illusory to try to reduce all the satires to the same pattern. First of all, though the major works and a large proportion of minor pieces use the device, other pieces do not. Most satirical verse had better be regarded as unframed narrative or descriptive satire. Furthermore – and this is important for what follows –, the nature of the framing varies considerably from one work to another. In some cases it is minimal and consists only in a signal external to the text, the material support of the framed tale or made up story. In other cases it develops into a full parody and forms the wrapping of another fiction. At this end of the spectrum the framing becomes heavy and sometimes even threatens to swallow up the framed fiction or allows it only the ghost of an existence. *An Examination of Certain Abuses* is so full of its supposed author's presence and concerns as to leave little room for the development of the fictional message it contains: a picture of universal conspiracy. In *A Tale of a Tub* the reader has to get through no less than seven pieces of introductory material, four declared digressive chapters and a fifth unannounced one, to which must be added several minor digressions within the narrative, as well as a number of footnotes, before he comes to the end of the tale of the three brothers. In *Gulliver's Travels*, on the other hand, the framing, though fully developed, is kept within bounds and tailored so as not to interfere with the travelling tale. In these cases the framing constitutes a complete fiction in itself, as well as the parody of a discourse. From this discourse there sometimes emerges the personality of a purported author. The nature of the relation between this author and the framed fiction which he prefaces and proposes to the reader reveals one or both discourses to be burlesques, so that the writing cannot be taken for serious polemics.

At the other end of the spectrum there are cases of minimal framing, which one hesitates to call fictional and which simply anchor the parody

in the literary and intellectual debate of the time. Sometimes all the framing consists in a title, a subtitle, or the lay-out of the printed text as in letters. Sometimes it is only present by implication, in the margins of the text, as when the material support of the item could be said to be all the framing there is. *A Hue and Cry after Dismal, Ebenezor Elliston*, and several of the songs were distributed as half-sheets and fulfilled a function similar to that of special newspaper editions today.⁶ As for the two poems, "A Description of the Morning" and "A Description of a City Shower", they may have appeared framed to their first readers, who discovered them in *The Tatler* and no doubt first saw in them true instances of reportage on city life, something like the equivalent of today's magazine photographs. Such instances come close to the pretence of serious editing found in the novel of the age. Editing some writing of a particular kind will usually imply that the editor takes its content seriously and has given it what he believes to be appropriate diffusion as news, pamphlet or declaration. If the attitude implied by the editing and the genre of the writing or its place of appearance contradict the nature of the contents, of the framed fiction, the disjunction draws attention to itself and is sufficient to trace around the satire the circle that frames it and shows it to be a fake. Whether in the case of heavy or minimal framing, it is always the nature of the framed fiction and the relationship it bears to the framing device that makes the satirical intent clear. Even where the framing device does not look much like fiction in itself, it is fiction in so far as it pretends to be what it is not, i.e. something true and authentic.

As a structuring device, framing looks both inward towards the organization of the individual works and outward towards the world outside the text. As such it is the articulation of a complex relationship, only a few of whose traits can be examined here. To begin with the internal structure of the work, it is a commonplace of criticism that this structure is in its broad outlines dictated by the conventions of genre. As a rule, the more elementary the genre, the stricter the plan of the work. There are not several ways of reporting a piece of political news. In *A Hue and Cry after Dismal* the subtitle already gives the essential element, like the boldface type at the beginning of a modern article: "Being a full and true Account, how a Whig Lord was taken at Dunkirk, in the

⁶ *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift* (PW), edited by Herbert Davis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969–1973), vol.vi, p. 210. All references to Swift's prose are to this edition.

Habit of a Chimney-Sweeper, and carryed before General *Hill*.⁷ Here follows a brief reminder of the general political situation that led to the event:

We have an old Saying, *That it is better to play at small Game than to stand out*: And it seems, the Whigs practice accordingly, there being nothing so little or so base, that they will not attempt, to recover their Power.

After which, the story of the arrest is given with all the details desired: "On Wednesday Morning the 9th Instant, we are certainly informed, that Collonell Killegrew (who went to France with General Hill) walking in Dunkirk Streets met a tall Chimney-Sweeper with his Brooms and Poles" (PW, vol.vi, pp. 139–141). Needless to say, not a word of the anecdote is true. Swift enjoyed creating fully developed little fictions like this one or that of *A New Journey to Paris* as a relaxation from his serious work as a Tory pamphleteer.

In a similar way, once it is realised that *A Tale of a Tub* satirises the editing practices of a new generation of scholars,⁸ whom Swift accuses of boosting their reputation by publishing the stories or writings of others instead of doing original work, its structure becomes clear. The book-seller's note corresponds to our modern dust jacket notices; a preface, an introduction and notes are in the order of what any reader has come to expect of a good scholarly edition, and today the digressions would be relegated to the end of the volume and they would be called appendices. Swift even invites the reader to follow my suggestion when he writes that "if the judicious Reader can assign a fitter [place to one of his digressions, he does] here empower him to remove it into any other Corner he please" (PW, vol.i, p. 94). The multiplying of introductory material and its peculiar nature evidence Swift's intention to caricature a new practice and show that he would have been delighted by Bernard Crick's editing of George Orwell's *1984*, had he lived today. As for the structure of *Gulliver's Travels*, it is equally straightforward and in keeping with conventions. Gulliver introduces the story of his four incursions into fairyland with a brief account of his person, quality and life. Each voyage begins and ends with a glimpse of his life in England or aboard Western ships. Even the long discursive passages that intersperse the otherwise chronological narrative are in keeping with the genre of the

⁷ Udo Fries calls this part the "summary" of the article in "Summaries in Newspapers: A Textlinguistic Investigation", included in the present volume, pp. 47–63. This study suggests that there has been a remarkable stability in the genre since the seventeenth century.

⁸ Miriam K. Starkman, *Swift's Satire on Learning in "A Tale of a Tub"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).

memoir. Swift adopts conventions and follows them faithfully. There is no search for renewal or sophistication on this head, nor does one expect any, as the structure must remain to the end a reminder that a discourse is being satirised by means of parody. Generic transparency plays a capital rôle.

Similarly, by anchoring the fiction in the literary, political or religious context of the time, the framing fiction fictionalises reality. On this point its rôle is different from that in the novel of the period. In the latter the framing fiction simply claims for the framed fiction the status of an authentic document. It is not the claim which is problematic but the relationship of the framed fiction to the circumstantial reality of the time. The fantasy of Swift's framed fictions and the grotesqueness of some of their purported authors prevent the reader's taking the fictional satire for anything but a hoax. But, at first sight, things look different. It is as though the framing fiction, the genre of the piece, or at least its material support, were in part dictated by the circumstances occasioning the purported author's gesture, and as though Swift wanted his fictitious discourses to pass off for real contributions to the intellectual debate of the period, a period of virulent paper controversies as historians tell us. He shows his purported authors to be directly involved in the activities of the period, acting in a socio-political context and reacting to it, as he himself was doing as a friend and later political opponent of Addison and Steele. When it is remembered that the authority of print, what Lennard J. Davis calls its "legitimising effect,"⁹ was unquestioned, the power of authentication of Swift's fictions must have been irresistible. Readers must have thought at first that they were dealing with true journalistic or polemical writings. As they began to realise that what they were reading was a counterfeit, a joke, their whole idea of the intellectual and political debate of the time became tainted by analogy. What had looked serious was shown to be what could be designated by the metaphor of a game, and this metaphor turns reality into an implicit fiction.¹⁰ It is true that many of the fakes were written to embarrass Swift's enemies, so that the polemical bias cannot be ignored. But when he invented events, Swift was conscious of doing something different. Issues were forgotten, imagination took over, the limited objectives of polemics were abandoned and human activities were caricatured and aped as activities, as ludicrous and pointless agitation.

⁹ *Factual Fiction: The Origin of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 148.

¹⁰ A metaphor used in a different sense by Peter Steel in *Jonathan Swift: Preacher and Jester* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), p. 143.

By far the most ambitious and complex attempt to inscribe a fiction in the circumstantial reality of the period, and to fictionalise reality through it, resulted in *The Bickerstaff Papers*. On Swift's side, the *Papers* consist of a series of five publications, a whole polemic, allegedly by several hands. It is to be noted that a plurality of pens is usually an essential feature of the literary game, which must be collective to be a game. *A Tale* is also the product of several pens, and *Gulliver's Travels* is Gulliver's account, published and prefaced by his cousin Sympson. In a letter prefixed to a later edition, Gulliver complains to his cousin about an "Interpolator." This interpolator, also referred to as "a Person since deceased, on whose Judgment the Publisher relied to make any Alterations that might be necessary," is accused of having tampered with Gulliver's text. Gulliver, in his letter, also claims to be cousin with William Dampier (1652–1715), pirate, explorer and author of *A New Voyage Round the World* (1697) and *A Voyage to New Holland* (1703). *A Modest Proposal* not only presupposes the existence of other proposals, it also refers to a friend of the author, who has given him a good idea. *The Bickerstaff Papers* (PW, vol.ii) form a practical joke at the expense of an almanac writer called Partridge. The game was to stir up a polemic over the seriousness of almanac writers and "the credulity of the vulgar," as a contemporary put it (PW, vol.ii, p. 196). Another contemporary, the poet Nicholas Rowe, described the hoax as a plan "to murder a man by Way of Prophecy" (PW, vol.ii, p. 233). It ran over a period of several months and was so successful that not only was Partridge forced to defend himself, but other writers joined in the fray unprompted, helping to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. The fiction shows a brilliant sense of timing. It develops like a comedy in three acts.

Act I. In February 1708 a certain Isaac Bickerstaff, who introduced himself as a serious student of astrology, which almanac writers, he claimed, were not, offered the public a counter-almanac. His first prediction for the following months concerned the death of a popular astrologer, John Partridge. The date given was 29th March, a little more than a month away. Some readers at once detected a *bite*. As for the fools and gulls, "he has them fast for some time," someone remarked (PW, vol.ii, p 195). In the meantime, the astrologer Partridge could not resist rising to the bait and publishing a reply. Act II. 29th March came and went. On the following day an account appeared reporting Partridge's alleged death on the day predicted. The author of this account was not Bickerstaff. He described himself as an acquaintance of the almanac writer and, in his "Letter to a Person of Honour," not only narrated the manner of the astrologer's death, but also attacked Bickerstaff for failing

to determine the exact time of the death in question. There was, he argued, as much as four hours' difference. For good measure, there also appeared, presumably on the same day, an anonymous "Elegy on Mr Partridge, the Almanack-maker, who died on the 29th of this Instant March, 1708."¹¹ It was printed on a separate half-sheet. Unable to foretell the time of his own death, Partridge was discredited. He had been killed metaphorically. Act III. When, in the second half of the same year, the living Partridge ventured to publish his predictions for 1709, protesting that he was still alive and kicking, Bickerstaff was ready to pounce on him and deal him a second metaphorical blow. In a proud and solemn "Vindication," he accused Partridge of not playing fair, of having dealings with the devil as, quite obviously, he was dead and consequently could not publish a new almanac without recourse to the most devilish witchcraft. Such practice, he went on, impeded "the progress of his own art" for selfish reasons (PW, vol.ii, p. 161). Bickerstaff also defended himself against the accusation of failing to determine the exact moment of the astrologer's death the previous spring. To crown the whole, Swift forged a supposedly ancient prophecy, "A Famous Prediction of Merlin," which concluded the polemic. The comedy ends with the defeat of the villain and of the obstructive forces, unscrupulous astrology and superstition, and with the victory of the genial character, Bickerstaff. With this fiction of a polemical debate inscribed in real life, the fictitious character ends up having more presence and reality than the real people taking part in it. After such a promising beginning, Bickerstaff was guaranteed a brilliant literary career, as everyone knows. Several years later Swift was to repeat the same tactic for strictly polemical purposes. In *The Drapier's Letters*, however, the mask of the drapier is only a thin disguise for the Dean of St. Patrick's and the polemic is no longer a game but deadly serious.

The framing fictions have been seen to express two opposed, even contradictory, aims. On the one hand they fictionalise reality and on the other hand they claim for themselves the status of facts and real events. Either way the structuring of the satire blurs the distinction between real life and fiction and lends them an ambivalent character. To what end? In so far as the fictionalising of reality turns contemporary polemics, reports and the public taking of stand by private individuals into a mere game – this is, by the way, an interesting instance of what criticism today calls "troping" of reality – it casts doubt on the seriousness and honesty of the intellectual, scholarly and journalistic activities of many writers: it

¹¹ *Swift: Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 67–70.

belittles their efforts and ridicules the low level of the debate itself. The use of framing fictions thus contributes a crucial element to the scope and meaning of the satire. The parody of a genre is prolonged beyond the text so as to become a parody of the intellectual activities of the time. If, in a novel of Aphra Behn or Defoe, the framing fiction mediates between fact and fiction and guarantees a factual fiction, in Swift's satires the framing fictions do not become factual. On the contrary, they may more properly be described as fictional facts, fictional gestures and events, in that, in them a fictitious writer, writing about his fictitious experience, publishes a materially real, credible and printed contribution to the contemporary debate of ideas. When the fictitious authors imitate their contemporaries and compose news reports, pamphlets, petitions, prefaces, digressions, notes, proposals or travel books, they give no guarantee but of their fictionality, and it is fiction that steps into reality. The fictionalising force is such, as has been seen with *The Bickerstaff Papers*, that historical figures whose example is directly called upon are metamorphosed into fictional types. This fate is incurred not only by Partridge, but by a well-known scholar of the age, William Wotton, in *A Tale of a Tub*, and by other figures as well. The fictionalization of reality that occurs when the framing fiction suggests the image of the literary and journalistic game and an active participation in it may be said to supply the fictional plots that have eluded critics.¹² Only here the plot has to be looked for outside the text, in its imaginative extension. Swift's satirical strategy does not only consist of a way of deflating partisan and various other biased views of life. The framing device contextualises the fiction at the same time as it fictionalises the context so as to make possible a fictional participation in the drama of real life.

At the point where living people are digested into the fiction, a watershed is reached. The movement is reversed and the fictionalization of reality yields to a process that is best described, to oppose it to the other tendency, as the factualization of fiction. It is not just that each framing fiction ends up being an event and a gesture inscribed into circumstantial reality. The fiction shifts and assimilates, not only contemporary figures as mentioned above, but also a large number of factual details about everyday life, so that the substance of the framing fiction appears as though contaminated by the contemporary background. The fictitious authors make repeated references to their supposed life, their profession,

¹² A notable example is John R. Clark's *Form and Frenzy in Swift's "Tale of a Tub"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), which looks for the *Tale's* fictional plot in various abstract patterns.

and the life of the age. These references are usually brief and form many Hogarthian vignettes in the text. They are not intended to give the reader a sense of the individuality of the purported author. They do not build up a coherent vision of life as in a novel. Their rôle is rather to create the impression that the voice of the fictitious author is that of a real person acting in real circumstances. These Hogarthian vignettes sometimes appear purely incidental, like the following one from the bookseller's dedication "To the Right Honourable, John Lord Sommers" at the beginning of *A Tale of a Tub*:

But, it unluckily fell out, that none of the Authors I employ, understood *Latin* (tho' I have them often in pay, to translate out of that Language) I was therefore compelled to have recourse to the Curate of our Parish, who Englished it thus, *Let it be given to the Worthiest*; And his Comment was, that the Author meant, his Work should be dedicated to the sublimest Genius of the Age, for Wit, Learning, Judgment, Eloquence and Wisdom. I call'd at a Poet's Chamber (who works for my Shop) in an Alley hard by, shewed him the Translation, and desired his Opinion, who it was that the Author could mean; He told me, after some Consideration, that Vanity was a Thing he abhor'd; but by the Description, he thought Himself to be the Person aimed at; And, at the same time, he very kindly offer'd his own Assistance *gratis*, towards penning a Dedication to Himself. I desired him, however, to give a second Guess; Why then, said he, It must be I, or my Lord *Sommers*. From thence I went to several other Wits of my Acquaintance, with no small Hazard and Weariness to my Person, from a prodigious Number of dark, winding Stairs; But found them all in the same Story, both of your Lordship and themselves. Now, your Lordship is to understand, that this Proceeding was not of my own Invention; For, I have somewhere heard, it is a Maxim, that those, to whom every Body allows the second Place, have an undoubted Title to the First. (PW, vol.i, p. 14)

The next illustration offers a glimpse of eighteenth century life. In the text it functions as a simile. Allowance being made for Swift's animus against the Scots, the picture need not apply to Edinburgh in particular. It is as accurate a picture of city life as "A Description of a City Shower." To do their work, the purported author of *A Tale* says, critics must proceed

in their common perusal of Books, singling out the Errors and Defects, the Nauseous, the Fulsome, the Dull, and the Impertinent, with the Caution of a Man that walks thro' *Edenborough* Streets in a Morning, who is indeed as careful as he can, to watch diligently, and spy out the Filth in his Way, not that he is curious to observe the Colour and Complexion of the Ordure, or take its Dimensions, much less to be paddling in, or tasting it: but only with a Design to come out as cleanly as he may. (Ibid., p. 56)

To this method of anchoring the satire and the fictitious author's gesture more firmly in the contemporary reality the reader owes the short account that Gulliver gives of his parentage and education at the beginning of *Gulliver's Travels*, as well as a number of allusions to his family life between his voyages. The Wagstaff of *Polite Conversation* and the conversations he collects come more fully alive when he describes himself going about the fashionable world with his "Table-Book" in his pocket (PW, vol. iv, p. 100), like a modern would-be social scientist with tape-recorder and camera.

The Hogarthian vignettes considerably reinforce the reader's impression that the satire is relevant to the world outside the text. They are vivid little tableaux and have the ring of authenticity about them. They make the fabrication of the document and the fictitious author look true. They have a visual quality which enables Swift to heighten his staging effect and to make the fictitious author's gesture look dramatic like that of a character in a play.

Both when they fictionalise reality and when they pass themselves off as genuine contributions to the contemporary debate of ideas, Swift's framing fictions fulfil a more ambitious and different function than is the case in the novel of the age. Swift is not content to exploit the news / novel ambiguity like Defoe and to offer the public an allegedly truthful document. He uses his framing fictions like weapons. Whereas Addison and Steele attempted with their essays to raise the periodical newspaper above polemics and to turn their undertaking into literature in the modern sense of the word, Swift seemed, by comparison and for all his scorn of modern practices, ever ready to plunge into polemics. It is on precisely this point that his satirical strategy, with its recourse to the framing device, parts company with that of other satirists. These will generally hold up their distorting mirrors to nature at a distance. The framing fictions give Swift's satires the thrust of polemical writings. The reader has the impression of dealing directly with a message which makes a claim on his sympathy and approval. Satirists normally avoid this. The reader is called upon to take sides. Swift manipulates his response so as to provoke a new awareness about the implications of the problem or attitude presented in the fiction. When he completes the framing fiction in *Gulliver's Travels* and adds to the Faulkner edition (1735) an "Advertisement" and a letter from Gulliver to his cousin Sympson, who was the alleged author of the preface to the original edition (1726), Swift's intention is neither to make the travel account look more genuine nor to conceal his identity, as has been argued. He does so explicitly to provoke a reaction. The starting point is always that the writing should excite

curiosity. Then several ways are open. Either the appeal to the reader's sympathy and approval is meant to be answered positively as in *The Bickerstaff Papers* and *A Hue and Cry* and the complicity between alleged author and reader leads to their sharing the joke at someone else's expense contained in the framed fiction; or the reader grants his sympathy, but not his approval, as in the petitions, so that the satire is directed both at the alleged author, who becomes the target of Swift's sense of humour, and at the framed fiction as tale or made-up story; or the claim on the reader's sympathy and approval becomes so embarrassing that the reader is led to reject all collusion with the polemical stance expressed in the framing discourse as in *A Modest Proposal*, but sometimes not before he has been tempted first to embrace it as in *Gulliver's Travels*. Sometimes the reader is manoeuvered into giving an impossible assent and feels taken to task. *Gulliver's Travels*, originally entitled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, takes him to task for, among other things, not discriminating between true reports and marvellous tales, *A Hue and Cry* for his thirst after sensational news, and *A Modest Proposal* for a well-meaning but callous response to the problem of poverty and exploitation of Ireland. In fact it is a great mistake to ignore the polemical side of the satires, as is often done, especially with the narrative ones like the *Travels*. The framing fictions work like shock tactics to prevent a distant and, consequently, indifferent response. Light or ferocious, the lightness or ferociousness of the satire is directed at the reader, a member of the public, even where there seems to be a particular addressee as in the case of the astrologer Partridge. Their function is to avoid at all cost the satirical fictions remaining looking-glasses in which people would recognise everyone's face but their own.¹³ With Swift the satirist is no "littérateur," but a polemicist still, or, more exactly, a preacher still; also a man of action, an activist wielding power. Satire is action, even when it proposes fictions to the public. Satire cannot change the world overnight. Nor can sermons for that matter. With Swift, ferociousness becomes very direct.

To stress the fact that Swift gives his satirical fictions the thrust of polemical writings might at first sight seem to lend support to the view, rejected above, that satire is just another form of polemics, and to undermine the validity of the proposed distinction between his satirical and polemical writings. If both points were granted, and the distinction made in the preceding discussion thus reduced to the status of a simple analytical move, the procedure could still, of course, claim to have

¹³ *The Battle of the Books* (PW, vol.i, p. 140).

served a useful purpose in bringing out one of the singular qualities of Swift's satires: the way they take the reader personally to task. This could be said to substantiate Edward Said's case for considering Swift "as a kind of local activist" and his writings as "reactive" gestures and "events."¹⁴ If there is in this view a timely reminder that Swift's satirical fictions are deeply rooted in the circumstantial reality of their time, the description is, however, also unduly reductive and consequently unsatisfactory. In the first place, it does not account for the lasting fascination of *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, a fascination universally recognised. To take notice of the rôle played by the framing device in the creation of the fakes and fictions helps to understand why the distinction between satirical and polemical writings is not merely one of convenience or of degree in the sharpness of the attack. It shows it to be structural and to correspond to a different intention. Swift's strategy is to give his satirical fictions the thrust of polemical writings, but not their character. *They* give the impression of being the work of local activists. He disclaims any share in their composition and foists them on imaginary authors, thereby exhibiting an unquestionable measure of humorous aloofness. The polemical stance must be considered as part of the larger fiction of the literary and journalistic game. The polemical intent is subordinated to the satirical, and the satirical to the fictional. Reducing the satirical fictions to polemics also amounts to dismissing the imaginative element, the Hogarthian vignettes and the dramatic character, as purely decorative, which it is not. Swift's satirical art is an art of parody and mimesis as much as a visionary art. It creates prefaces, pamphlets, books or broadsides; it invents fictitious authors and situations. Swift does not only ridicule the issues in the controversies of his age. When he mimics the style of all sorts of writings that were competing in his time to satisfy, and sometimes to pander to, a new thirst for information, discussion and education, he does, for the flood of popular writings of his time, much the same as Cervantes had done for the vogue of the mediaeval romance a century earlier.

As has often been noted, criticism today is fond of spatial metaphors. Framing is one. It suggests an enclosed surface, and frames are themselves surfaces of a sort, more often than just lines: they enclose a surface between two lines. The metaphoric meaning, the vehicle of the metaphor, twice points to the notion of enclosure. In Swift's satires the enclosed spaces tend to become the spaces of an exclusion. The framing becomes the drama of a blacklisting, or proscription, of all that does not

¹⁴ Edward Said, op. cit., pp. 77, 78, 59.

come up to the decent standards that a classical age, or just decency and commonsense, ought to promote. The space of exclusion is sometimes that of the framed fiction – which cannot be discussed here –, sometimes that of the framing and framed fictions, whenever the purported author or the discourse become unacceptable as a whole, as in *A Tale of a Tub* or *Polite Conversation*. The notion of enclosure recalls Foucault's notion of confinement of people exhibiting irregular behaviour.¹⁵ In this context, it is interesting to note how conscious Swift is of the social dynamics of confinement and exclusion in his work. In the framing fiction of *A Tale*, his most systematic attempt to deal with various aberrant behaviours and enclose them in a fiction, he has his fictitious author propose that certain inmates of Bedlam be paradoxically brought out of their confinement and used by the state in different official capacities. Such a proposal is in keeping with the intent to fictionalise reality: it visualises the invasion of reality by fiction which the hack's framing fiction dramatises. But it also shows that the choice of genre and the typical character of the discourse can become ways of placing a class of writing, of topics or of people on a blacklist. The ridicule of the parody becomes in itself a condemnation in the virulent cases and a means of depreciation in the milder ones.

Finally, to return to my starting point, it is obvious that the question of whether Swift is a traditionalist or a Tory is irrelevant from a creative perspective. Even if the initial germ of his satires may be his attachment to inherited values, the fact that the satirical intent is effected by, and finds expression in, parodies of fashionable genres that show the prevalent discourse to be problematic makes the fictions more radical than conservative. Imitation becomes invention, the satirical fiction opens the way for a new generation of writings: for novels more aware of their fictitious character, and often more humorous or satirical as a result; for the “conte philosophique,” which *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Tale of a Tub* prefigure.

¹⁵ *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).