

1. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Rationalism, Anti-Colonialism, Philosophy and Comedy

JONATHAN SWIFT

The first great Irish writer in English, **Jonathan Swift** (1667-1745), is best known for *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), a savagely satiric view of human society, yet one which has become a children's classic. Lemuel Gulliver, a supposed ship's surgeon, recounts his voyages, the first to Lilliput where he is called the 'Man Mountain' by the diminutive inhabitants. At first he helps them (notably by extinguishing a fire in the Queen's palace by urinating on it) but becomes disillusioned by their way of life, is falsely accused of treason and escapes to Blefuscu, the neighbouring kingdom with which the Lilliputians are at war (this mirrors the longstanding antagonism between England and France).

In Part II Gulliver goes to Brobdingnag where he is minute compared to the gigantic inhabitants; he is disgusted by human anatomy in enlarged form. But his account of English political life, of European politics and warfare disgusts the King of Brobdingnag who considers Gulliver's race 'the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the Earth'.

After being carried off in his specially built travelling cage by a vast eagle, Gulliver returns to England (which now seems Lilliputian to him!). Then, in Part III, he visits the flying island Laputa and the neighbouring Lagado – a nice anticipation of science fiction. In Laputa the inhabitants are obsessed by speculations about mathematics and music, which Gulliver finds incomprehensible. In Lagado the

Academy of Projectors are engaged in absurd research – one is trying to extract sunbeams out of cucumbers – and Swift obviously enjoys satirising the activities of members of the Royal Society in describing their research activities. The morose Struldbrugs are here too, gloomily resigned to their immortality.

In Part IV Gulliver makes his last voyage, to the land of the Houyhnhnms, horses who run their lives by reason. This is also the land of the degraded Yahoos who are akin to human beings but regarded by the Houyhnhnms as the vilest form of life. After hearing Gulliver's description of European politics they decide he is a Yahoo and he is banished. On his return to England he prefers the company of horses to that of his family.

As soon as I entered the House, my Wife took me in her Arms, and kissed me; at which, having not been used to the Touch of that odious Animal for so many Years, I fell in a Swoon for almost an Hour. At the Time I am writing, it is five Years since my last Return to *England*: During the first Year I could not endure my Wife or Children in my Presence, the very Smell of them was intolerable; much less could I suffer them to eat in the same Room. To this Hour they dare not presume to touch my Bread, or drink out of the same Cup; neither was I ever able to let one of them take me by the Hand. The first money I laid out was to buy two young Stone-Horses, which I keep in a good Stable, and next to them the Groom is my greatest Favourite; for I feel my Spirits revived by the Smell he contracts in the Stable. My horses understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four Hours every day.

Swift's praise of the rational horses and his disgust at the brutal Yahoos have led some commentators to see the last book of the *Travels* as giving an ultimately pessimistic view of human nature, but Swift's own view of humanity is larger

than the one his invented character Gulliver puts forward. Gulliver's pride is being satirised. Swift himself combatted the evils of existence with laughter and with exuberant fantastic humour; he balanced his *saeva indignatio*, his fierce anger at the injustice and irrationality of mankind, with compassion and kindness, with his capacity 'for mirth and society'.

In writing to his friend Alexander Pope about *Gulliver's Travels*, he said:

I have ever hated all nations, professions and communities, and all my love is towards individuals: for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love Counsellor Such-a-one, and Judge Such-a-one ... But principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth.

Swift had been educated at Kilkenny College and Trinity College, Dublin. He worked as a secretary to Sir William Temple, a retired diplomat living at Moor Park in Surrey, before becoming ordained in the Church of Ireland and taking charge of a parish in Kilroot in Northern Ireland. He did not enjoy being surrounded by dour Presbyterians and returned to work for Temple until the latter's death when he became rector of a parish north of Dublin, this time being surrounded by Roman Catholics. At his advice Esther Johnson, whom he called 'Stella' and had known at Moor Park, moved with her friend Rebecca Dingley to live in Dublin.

Swift visited London in 1701, issuing anonymously there his first political pamphlet, *The Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome*, in which he praised the Whig leaders. In 1704 *A Tale of a Tub*, which he had begun in Kilroot, attacked abuses in religion. A father leaves his three sons a coat each which

they are not to alter in any way. These coats are the Christian faith: the sons are Peter, Martin and Jack, respectively standing for the Catholics, the Anglicans and the Calvinists. Swift thought Roman Christianity too worldly and non-conformism too immoderate; he was himself a churchman of the centre and considered the Anglican church, though imperfect, to be the best because it was the most rational religion he knew.

Swift had now invented his own style, creating a persona whose apparent innocence, varied viewpoint and shattering satiric comments on stupidity have sometimes puzzled his readers.

In *A Tale of a Tub* he lulls his readers into false security, then exposes the falsity of his reasoning. He praises the pursuit of truth, despite the pain this might cause:

Reason is certainly in the Right; and that in most Corporeal Beings which have fallen under my Cognizance, the *Outside* hath been infinitely preferable to the *In*; Whereof I have been farther convinced from some late Experiments. Last week I saw a Woman *flay'd* and you will hardly believe how much it altered her Person for the worse.

Queen Anne was not amused and Swift's barbs were later to cost him preferment to a bishopric. *The Battle of the Books*, published along with *A Tale of a Tub*, reflects Swift's unease with contemporary corruption of the English language and voices his scepticism about the value of the new sciences. It praises the wisdom of the past, rejecting new intellectual fashions.

From 1707 to 1709 Swift was again in London, seeking in vain as an emissary of the Irish clergy to persuade the Whigs to grant a remission of a tax (the first year's income paid by holders of benefices). When the Tories came to power in 1710 they realised the political power of his blend

of cold reason and explosive logic and put him in charge of a journal, *The Examiner*. He became a close friend of the government ministers, Harley and St John, and obtained the concession sought by the Church of Ireland. He did much to get the ministers' policies accepted through his skilful journalism. His anti-war propaganda in *The Conduct of the Allies* largely brought about the end of the war in France and caused the dismissal in 1711 of the conquering Captain-General, the Duke of Marlborough.

In 1713 Swift visited Ireland briefly, to be installed as Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, a disappointed man because he had failed to obtain a bishopric in Ireland or a deanery in England despite his work for the Tory government. When it fell in 1714 he returned to Dublin determined to keep out of Irish politics but after a few years he took up the cause of Ireland, advocating the greater use of Irish manufacturers. Adopting the persona of a Dublin shopkeeper, M B Drapier, in a series of letters – *The Drapier Letters* – Swift successfully attacked a proposal which would have allowed an English ironmaster, William Wood, to coin copper money ('Wood's halfpence') for Ireland. As a result Swift became a popular hero.

His horror at the widespread poverty of Ireland led to his devastating *A Modest Proposal* (1729) for 'preventing the children of the poor being burdensome and for making them beneficial'. In an apparently matter-of-fact way, he argues a case against poverty as if he were an economist, suggesting that 'a young healthy child, well nursed, is, at a year old, a most nourishing and wholesome food whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasse or ragout.' The scheme is carefully worked out: 'of the 120,000 children computed, 20,000 are to be reserved for breeding', the remaining 100,000 'to be

offered for sale at a year old to Persons of Quality and Fortune ... always advising the mothers to let them suck plentifully in the last month so as to render them plump and fat for a good table'. He thought that Irish apathy and greed were as much to blame as English economic policy:

I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very *proper for Landlords*; who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

Swift's letters, especially those which make up the *Journal to Stella*, written from London to Esther Johnson, are a delight to read for their directness and vivid, lively wit. In his poetry too, he was concerned to convey truth but that truth had to be presented in concise yet conversational speech. 'A Description of a City Shower' and the 'Humble Petition of Mrs Harris' are good examples. There is plenty of variety among his poems: savage satire on politicians, affectionately teasing poems to Stella, some written for her birthdays, praising her character, her intellect and her kindness, and that strange, long poem *Cadenus and Vanessa* – (Cadenus is an anagram for *decanus*, Latin for dean) which deals with his relationship with Esther Vanhomrigh, whom he called 'Vanessa'.

Against his stern advice, she had followed him from London to Dublin after he became Dean of St Patrick's. She was an attractive girl of twenty, he forty-one, when their intimate friendship began. The poem contrasts her perfections with the imperfections of other women; it tells how Cadenus was surprised at her falling in love with him. He had offered her friendship, he had tutored her, guiding her reading and thinking, but she wants the situation reversed. The poem remains enigmatic. Vanessa, who died in 1723, left instructions in her will for it to be published.

But what success Vanessa met,
 Is to the world a Secret yet:
 Whether the nymph to please her Swain,
 Talks in a high Romantick Strain;
 Or whether he at last descends
 To like with less Seraphick Ends;
 Or, to compound the business, whether
 They temper Love and Books together;
 Must never to Mankind be told,
 Nor shall the conscious Muse unfold.

Other poems record his disgust with untidiness and lack of hygiene; there are playful poems such as the laughing account of his own achievement in 'The Life and Character of Dr Swift' and the supremely comic 'Verses on the Death of Dr Swift', linking himself with the land in which he had not wanted to live. In his will, written in 1745, the year he died, he left money to found a hospital for the mentally ill; and St Patrick's Hospital, the first of its kind, still flourishes. Swift took a keen interest in the planning of it:

He gave the little wealth he had
 To build a house for fools and mad:
 And showed by one satiric touch
 No nation wanted it so much.

GEORGE BERKELEY

Another pupil of Kilkenny College, **George Berkeley** (1685-1753), became a Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, Dean of Derry and later Bishop of Cloyne. He travelled in Europe, staying in Italy for several years and then, having formed the plan of founding a college in Bermuda and collected promises of funding for it, sailed to Rhode Island in 1729. The plan came to nothing, stultified by Robert Walpole's scepticism and the English Treasury's bureaucratic ineptitude, and Berkeley returned to Ireland in 1731.

A gentle person with a powerful intellect, he wrote his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1716) with an easy eloquence, disliking the unnecessary obscurity of much learned writing. As a philosopher he opposed John Locke's more mechanical ideas and in his notebooks (labelled *Philosophical Commentaries* by A A Luce, the Berkeleyan scholar) he revealed how he had formed his idea of immaterialism. He believed in the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and could reconcile God's foreknowledge with the freedom of humanity.

His other work includes his earlier *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709); *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (1732), *The Analyst* (1734), *The Querist* (1735) and *Siris* (1744). A major European philosopher by the age of twenty-eight, Berkeley was very conscious of being Irish, to the extent of remarking on several occasions in his *Philosophical Commentaries*, when recording his dissent from various viewpoints (notably of 'the mathematicians'), that 'we Irish men' do not agree. His immaterialism denies that objects exist independently of our perception of them: to exist, he thought, is 'to be perceived'.

Irish Dramatists

WILLIAM CONGREVE

Swift was not the only successful Irish writer in London in the early 18th century. **William Congreve** (1670-1729), his schoolfellow at Kilkenny College and contemporary at Trinity College, Dublin, before he moved to the Inns of Court, made his name with a novel, *Incognita*, a *jeu d'esprit*, which anticipated Fielding's fiction in its detached ironic comedy. It reflected the air and the taste of polite society as did Congreve's most complex play *The Way of*