Essay for *Reading Swift: Papers from the Seventh Münster Symposium* (2017)

Swift, the Church, and Religion: the Sermons, the *Tale*, and the Critics

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Swift represented himself as an orthodox and faithful son of the Church of England. He insisted that the fundamentals of the Church’s polity and doctrine ‘both were deduced from Christ and his Apostles, and the Instructions of the purest and earliest Ages’.[[1]](#endnote-2) In the Apology written for the 1710 *Tale of a Tub* he famously affirmed that the work ‘Celebrates the Church of *England* as the most perfect of all others in Discipline and Doctrine, it advances no Opinion they reject, nor condemns any they receive’.[[2]](#endnote-3) Swift’s self-description has been broadly accepted by such scholars as Louis Landa, who speaks of Swift’s ‘conservative adherence to simple and indisputable orthodoxy as he conceived it’, and Donald Greene, who describes him as ‘just one … of the vast majority of important English writers, thinkers, and artists of the century’ who were ‘professing, often devout Christians’. Nathalie Zimpfer, in an essay published more recently, in *Swift Studies*, has cogently set out the ‘reality’ of Swift’s religious positions, in contrast with the ‘myth’ of Swift’s heterodoxy which began in his own lifetime and has lingered, with a more or less healthy life, for the three centuries since.[[3]](#endnote-4)

In academia there has been over the last two or three decades a lingering tendency to prefer or, I would argue, to construct a Swift altogether more in tune with ideals that we all nowadays share: social equality, the distribution of wealth, religious toleration and freedom of speech. (I am aware that I beg a number of questions in making that statement.) Carole Fabricant for example is troubled by what she describes as Swift’s conservative attribution of ‘an inflated value to quiet and stability in the realm’, and not unreasonably seeks evidence of ‘Swift’s capacity to speak to contemporary struggles and concerns’; more problematically she seeks to rescue him from what she calls ‘the paralytic grip of criticisms that artificially freeze Swift in time’.[[4]](#endnote-5) There has been a concerted attempt to represent Swift as heterodox (rather than uninterestingly orthodox) in religion, whether as Anti-Trinitarian, freethinking, or even (in a recent book) as pagan.[[5]](#endnote-6) The Swift who appears, on the *prima facie* evidence of what he wrote, to have believed in a conservative politics and a conformist religion is found unsatisfactory, failing as he does to live up to our own ideals. So, we have recently been told, the Swift who proposed giving badges to Dublin’s deserving poor ‘exerts few charms’.[[6]](#endnote-7) Many recent critics of Swift, in fact, adopt some variation of a common discursive logic. They begin by postulating or desiderating a modern liberal Swift. Having done this they blame Swift for failing, in his writings, to consist with that preferred modern version. In so blaming Swift they cite abundant textual evidence of his lamentably contemporaneous and rebarbative views.[[7]](#endnote-8) They then necessarily derive from this position a radically conflicted Swift, compromised by false consciousness, whose theology and politics are unstable like his satire. Such critical strategies would require us to reject as untrustworthy, or wholly to disregard, a good deal of unhelpful evidence from Swift’s works; to assume from the outset that ironic writing is radically and necessarily unstable; and to place no reliance on such of his writings as the sermons as were written straight, unironically, *in propria persona*.

We should not seek, or expect to find, a charming and agreeable Swift. The Swift who was born in 1667 was a man of his time, not ours. He grew up of course and wrote at a time when the consequences of both political and religious dissent could credibly and reasonably be regarded, on the basis of recent experience, as dangerous. Political and religious conservatism, the stability of a settled state, was for Swift as for John Dryden a stated highest good. There was no thought of pleasing us when he was writing *A Tale of a Tub*, or *Gulliver’s Travels*, or *The Presbyterian’s Plea of Merit*. Criticism that seeks to understand him in his own moment is not by any necessary tendency paralytic or refrigerating. Like other forms of humanist scholarship, it seeks not to accommodate the past to ourselves, but to help us understand ourselves and the world better by delineating the precise differences of other times and other places. We can delineate those differences more fully and more safely by reading with appropriate seriousness the writings he left, and resisting the temptation to elide or translate what we find inconvenient. In what follows I shall attempt to continue the defence of an orthodox Swift by describing and addressing what seem to me some familiar, ideologically-driven, misreadings.

Few of Swift’s writings have seemed more inconvenient to many modern critics than his sermons, not least because they state so straightforwardly and uncompromisingly views that are less liberal, less egalitarian, less ecumenical than many would wish to associate with him. There has been, following the familiar logic I have outlined, an attempt to rule the sermons out of the evidential record by arguing that Swift did not himself take them seriously, and indeed that he looked upon them with something approaching contempt. Louis Landa, in the Introduction to the Sermons in the *Prose Works*, provides a balanced survey of the evidence for Swift’s estimation of his homiletic writings, concluding that ‘we may well view with suspicion Swift’s slighting remarks and receive cautiously any presumption that he was entirely indifferent to his own sermons’.[[8]](#endnote-9) Todd Parker, with less caution, asks ‘why are the sermons so offensive to Swift?’ (p. 59).[[9]](#endnote-10) Robert Mahony accepts as a ‘fact’ that Swift had ‘little regard for his sermons’.[[10]](#endnote-11) The main evidence provided for the view that Swift thought little of his sermons is his letter to his successor at Kilroot, the Reverend John Winder, dated 13 January 1698/9, in which Winder is discouraged from making use of the sermons Swift had left behind him:

Those sermons … will utterly disgrace You, unless you have so much credit that whatever comes from You will pass. They were what I was firmly resolved to burn and especially some of them the idlest trifling stuff that ever was writt, calculated for a Church without Company or a roof.[[11]](#endnote-12)

This understandable modesty topos was written by a novice clergyman who had barely passed the age of thirty, in respect of early sermons written at a remote rural parish, which he did not want another clergyman to steal. The letter tells us nothing convincing about his attitude to sermons written and delivered in the city of Dublin twenty and thirty years later, in the course of his professional duties as a senior churchman, in a church which had both a company and a roof. There is no reason to think Swift did not take sufficiently seriously the sermons that he delivered as Dean of St Patrick’s, or that they do not represent, however lacking they may be in desirable charm, originality or radicalism, serious statements of his own understandings of Christian doctrine and behaviour.

Swift’s sermon ‘On the Trinity’ is a characterising statement of Swift’s theological position. Its hermeneutic methodology is deliberately stripped and simple. It is written in plain terms, so as to be comprehensible even, as Swift puts it, to ‘the most ignorant’ among his audience.[[12]](#endnote-13) This statement should not be taken as Swiftian disdain for his audience; it was for Swift and his contemporaries a normal and widely shared view of the proper level of the effective sermon. Swift’s Trinity sermon is not a work of indirection or irony; it is to be taken at face value. It locates revelation unequivocally in Scripture. It identifies from the beginning those who have argued against the Scripture-derived Church doctrine of the Trinity, as ‘Enemies to all Revealed Religion’. It offers to ordinary capacities a summary of the Trinity doctrine so far as they need to understand it. It insists that the doctrine is clearly and plainly expressed in Scripture, even though the word ‘Trinity’ itself

is indeed not in Scripture, but was a Term of Art invented in the earlier Times to express the Doctrine by a single Word, for the Sake of Brevity and Convenience. The Doctrine, then, as delivered in Holy Scripture, although not exactly in the same Words, is very short, and amounts only to this, That the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, are each of them God, and yet that there is but One God.[[13]](#endnote-14)

This last statement has however seemed at best a prevarication and a self-deception to more than one recent commentator. Todd Parker remarks that

the Trinity thus becomes a function of readerly intention . . . it is the interpretive act that brings the Trinity . . . into being as such. The doctrine of the Trinity is an approximation . . . of a meaning from Scripture that cannot be localized in any particular verse. The ‘term of Art’ that signifies the Trinity is, then, a signified without local signifiers, and its adequacy to the doctrine it symbolizes depends. . . on the skill of those readers ‘of an earlier Time to express, the Doctrine by a single word . . .’.[[14]](#endnote-15)

Parker’s language as well as his argument here is deconstructive, and both his language and his argument operate according to hermeneutical assumptions foreign to Swift. The concept of the Trinity that Swift states is not brought into being by an ‘interpretive act’, ‘a signified without local signifiers’. It is rather a paraphrasing inference from the multiple moments of textual evidence, each thought of as plain in itself, provided by Scripture. For Swift the doctrine of the Trinity is effectively and fully delivered in Scripture, even though the word ‘Trinity’ itself was ‘invented’—that is, *found, discovered*—‘in the earlier Times’—that is, by the Church Fathers. That the doctrine as a whole is not explicitly stated in a single scriptural *locus* is of no great consequence for Swift. Swift finds in Scripture plain though multiple statements in support of the Church’s doctrine:

I see it plainly declared in Scripture, that there is but one God; and yet I find our Saviour . . . saying *He and his Father are one*; and, *before Abraham was, I am*. I read, that the Disciples worshipped him: That *Thomas* said to him, *My Lord and my God*. And, Saint *John*, Chap. 1st, *In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. I read likewise that the Holy Ghost bestowed the Gift of Tongues, and the Power of working Miracles . . .[[15]](#endnote-16)

Swift’s rhetoric itself, the reiterated ‘I see it plainly declared’, ‘I read’, ‘I read’, insists to his audience that the mystery he seeks to explain to them is communicated through plain and multiple texts of Scripture. This is a deliberately simple version of Anglican hermeneutics, and no doubt, as Nathalie Zimpfer has argued,[[16]](#endnote-17) in itself a deliberate rhetorical strategy. It is ostentatiously not an elaborated ‘interpretive act’. Its signifieds are based, precisely, upon ‘local signifiers’.

Scripture emphatically is the authority on which Swift’s theology is based. This sermon preaches ‘the Doctrine of the Trinity, as it is positively affirmed in Scripture’. Mysteries are to be believed so far, and only in so far, as they are ‘taught and commanded in Holy Writ’.[[17]](#endnote-18) It is true that Swift wrote and uttered these words for and in the pulpit, with the authority of a Dean guiding his congregation. A number of modern Swift scholars have argued that, for Swift, ‘faith is not restricted absolutely to Scripture but extends to the interpretive authority of the Church’.[[18]](#endnote-19) I would argue however that Swift did not in his sermons understand and represent ‘the interpretive authority of the Church’ in such a way. The English Church claimed not to make doctrine, but to derive doctrine from the divine revelation made through Scripture. Clearly, Scripture is a text to be interpreted, but Anglicans of course believed and regularly argued that (in Hooker’s words) ‘of things necessary to all men’s salvation . . . they are in Scripture plain and easy to be understood’,[[19]](#endnote-20) and safely therefore comprehensible to ordinary readers. Evidently, in such mysteries as the Trinity, Swift’s congregation required instruction, but that instruction rests on Scripture: ‘it can never be said, that we preach Mysteries without Warrant from Holy Scripture’. The Roman Church, in clear contrast, has, as Swift put it, ‘enriched herself by trading in Mysteries, for which they have not the least Authority from Scripture . . . ; such as *Transubstantiation, Worshipping of Images, Indulgences* for *Sins, Purgatory*, and *Masses for the Dead*’.[[20]](#endnote-21) These of course are doctrinal claims made by Brother Peter in *A Tale of a Tub*, and enforced in that work by the absolute spiritual authority of excommunication and the irresistible secular authority of Peter’s dragoons.[[21]](#endnote-22) Peter locks up Scripture, the primary evidence of revelation, in a strong-box; Swift’s congregation, like Martin and Jack, have access to the word of Scripture itself.

In guiding his congregation, Swift understood himself to be not a judge or dictator of scriptural meaning, but a teacher. This distinction between the roles and authority of judge and teacher is crucial.[[22]](#endnote-23) Like other Anglican clergymen he claimed no absolute authority from the gown. Hooker had written more than a century earlier that the Anglican priest has the authority of a guide and instructor, who teaches what the words of Scripture mean, and who is worthy of his congregation’s credit:

whatsoever we believe concerning salvation by Christ, although the Scripture be therein the ground of our belief; yet the authorityof many is, if we mark it, the key which openeth the door of entrance into the knowledge of the Scripture. The Scripture could not teach us the things that are of God, unless we did credit men who have taught us that the words of Scripture do signify those things.[[23]](#endnote-24)

In its essentials this would be a normative understanding amongst Church of England polemicists. Tillotson for example asserts that:

God hath appointed Guides and Teachers for us in matters of Religion, and if we will be contented to be instructed by them in those necessary Articles and Duties of Religion, which are plainly contained in Scripture; and to be counselled and directed by them in things that are more doubtful and difficult, I do not see why we might not do well enough without any infallible Judge or Guide.

Where the guidance of Scripture is plain, ‘no Guide or Judge can in reason claim that authority over men, as to oblige them to believe or do the contrary; no, tho he pretend to Infallibility’.[[24]](#endnote-25) Here of course Tillotson’s target is the overriding interpretative authority claimed by the Church of Peter. The Church of England preacher, for Tillotson as for Hooker, has an authority derived from, and dependent on, his wisdom and learning. Congregations do well to respond to that rather different kind of authority: ‘When men are once come to this, to think themselves wiser than their Teachers, and to despise and cast off their Guides, no wonder if *then* they go astray’.[[25]](#endnote-26) William Sherlock, in his *Discourse Concerning a Judge of Controversies in Matters of Religion* (1686), similarly insists on the distinction between judge and teacher, and understands in the same way the different authority of the two roles: ‘To teach and instruct, and to determine as a Judge, are two very different things; the first reserves to us a liberty of judging; the second determines us to believe the Dictates of our Judge.’ (p. 47).

This standard distinction is implicit everywhere in Swift, and explicit in several places. So, in his parodic *Abstract* of Collins he makes the freethinker ‘conclude, that there ought to be no such Thing in the World as Priests, Teachers, or Guides, for instructing ignorant People in Religion; but that every Man ought to *think freely for himself*’.[[26]](#endnote-27) More straightforwardly, in his sermon ‘On False Witness’, Swift defines the gradient of authority, from the scriptural revelation, through the priest as guide, to the individual Christian reader: ‘Next to the Word of God, and the Advice of Teachers, every Man’s conscience strictly examined will be his best Director’.[[27]](#endnote-28) Swift’s word is ‘advice’; not judgment, or dictation.

This gradient of authority underlies, and is often explicit in, those of Swift’s sermons which have seemed particularly obnoxious to modern readers, dealing with subordination in society, the practical exercise of charity, and the Irish poor, particularly the sermons ‘On Mutual Subjection’, ‘The Poor Man’s Contentment’, and ‘Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland’. Of the first of these, Todd Parker remarks that ‘Swift aims his indignation here at the poor for aspiring to sin above their station, and yet this too is presumably the Swift whose heart was lacerated by social injustice.’[[28]](#endnote-29) One might suggest that the savage indignation that lacerated Swift’s heart was provoked by other views of social injustice and the liberty of men than ours. More to the point, Swift’s views on social subordination were conventional enough amongst Anglican thinkers of his time, and indeed of earlier and later times, and scarcely amount to a surprise or a paradox. The argument has been made sufficiently convincingly by earlier Swift scholars, most clearly by Louis Landa,[[29]](#endnote-30) and needs no repetition. What I should like here to insist on is the repeated, emphatic, necessary connection that Swift makes, in his sermons and elsewhere, between Christian belief as revealed in the text of Scripture, and the morality that he preaches—however difficult that morality, and some of the social and political views with which it is associated, may seem to us. The coupling of the words ‘truth’ and ‘duty’, of ‘faith’ and ‘duty’, of ‘revelation’ and ‘morality’, is one of the most distinct features of his theological writings, and of his sermons in particular. In *The Sentiments of a Church-of-England Man* (1708) he asserts that the claimed belief of many in God and ‘revealed Religion’ is ‘practically’ contradicted by ‘the Immorality of their Lives’.[[30]](#endnote-31) In ‘A Sermon upon the Excellency of Christianity’ he found that the ‘defects in morals’ of the ancient pagan philosophers were the mere and necessary consequences of ‘want of a support by revelation from God’.[[31]](#endnote-32) That revelation, it needs to be re-emphasised, is, for Swift as for other Church of England men, always scriptural. Swift’s sermons like other sermons are a teacher’s comments upon a text. His sermon ‘On Mutual Subjection’ is based on 1 Peter, 5: 5, and begins with the words: ‘The Apostle having in many Parts of this Epistle given Directions to Christians concerning the Duty of Subjection or Obedience to Superiors’. We may not much like Swift’s notions of subjection or obedience; but for him they were duties that arose necessarily from ‘the Doctrine of the Text’.[[32]](#endnote-33) Moral cleanliness for Swift is not next to godliness, but a central aspect of godliness. His arguments for the moral life, for virtue, courtesy, obedience and civility, are based on scriptural revelation. They are, to speak generally, part of his orthodox Arminianism, often unstated because profoundly internalised. More particularly they are a crucial part of the beliefs of churchmen of his time: ‘This fast union of morality and religion’ (to use Melvyn New’s words) ‘is one of the marks of Latitudinarian Anglicanism’.[[33]](#endnote-34) In theology, if not in politics, Swift was essentially at one with the legacy of Tillotson and his fellow latitude men.

We can deny Swift a theology only by demanding that the theology he stated was other than it was, or by assuming that an orthodox theology can be no theology at all, or by insisting that true belief must be an internal and personal rather than an external and public matter. These demands and assumptions and insistences are modern, or, from Swift’s perspective, heterodox. They are foreign to Swift and his orthodox contemporaries. Swift had read his Bible rather closely, and had prepared for the priesthood with some care. He knew the orthodox positions of Anglicanism, and had no difficulty articulating those positions. He did so on the basis of his understanding that revelation came from scripture; that scripture was interpretable, offering us ‘plain, easy Directions’;[[34]](#endnote-35) and that it was the duty of the preacher to communicate that revelation, from those plain directions, in comprehensible language. It is in his sermons, as we would expect, that he most fully and straightforwardly undertakes and carries out what he understands to be his duty.

It is not however Swift’s sermons only which have been the subject of misreading by a tendency in modern criticism. Evidently, texts such as *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, amongst others, are allegorical in method, figurative in discourse, ironic in mode, various and often fugitive in speaking voice. Evidently such productions have been properly open to diverse critical readings at the level of the work as a whole. Many of those readings may be valid (have truth value), within the possible meaning horizons of these texts.[[35]](#endnote-36) Some of those readings, I shall argue, cannot be valid.

Some assumptions underlying what follows. All pieces of writing are made up, normally, of sentences, in syntactical form.[[36]](#endnote-37) Those sentences are propositions.[[37]](#endnote-38) They are as propositions generally comprehensible, and communicable. They are constructed of shareable lexis, shareable syntactical structure, shareable reference. They have a textual and an extra-textual context which guides understanding. The meanings of those sentences, however complex and multiple and difficult, are in principle determinate. Without determinacy of meaning, as E. D. Hirsch puts it, ‘there can be no knowledge in interpretation, nor any knowledge in the many humanistic disciplines based upon textual interpretation’.[[38]](#endnote-39) Determinacy does not imply or require simplicity or singularity; determinate meanings may be, and in literary works typically are, complex and multiple, but they are at the same time bounded.[[39]](#endnote-40) ‘Literary’ writings, and most especially the writings of Jonathan Swift, of course and notoriously raise issues of fictionality, voice and figuration: allegory, narrative, parody, personation, irony, metaphor. Largely because of such properties, philosophers from Plato onwards have denied imaginative literature’s claim to truth, and many have explicitly denied that literature can achieve the specifically propositional rigour of a genuine discipline.[[40]](#endnote-41) John Locke, much to the present purpose, insists that ‘By the *Philosophical Use* of Words, I mean such an use of them, as may serve . . . to express, in general Propositions, certain and undoubted Truths, which the Mind may . . . be satisfied with, in its search after true Knowledge’.[[41]](#endnote-42) Locke does not find such usage in literary writing. Many modern philosophers of language and theorists of literature argue however that, in the words of the Liverpool philosopher Richard Gaskin, ‘the referential content of a work of literature . . . will take a propositional form, and can, if true, be an object of propositional knowledge’.[[42]](#endnote-43) This is a challengeable position but a defensible one, both logically and ethically.[[43]](#endnote-44)

The relation between the meaning of the work as a whole and the meanings of the propositions it contains is complex, and has long and notoriously been a central issue for hermeneutic theory. Schleiermacher provides this statement of the hermeneutic circle:

Complete knowledge always involves an apparent circle, that each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs, and vice versa. All knowledge which is scientific must be constructed in this way.[[44]](#endnote-45)

Without interrogating the contested history of the hermeneutic circle, let me assert that as a methodology it is defensible in principle and viable in practice.[[45]](#endnote-46) History of course shows that it is possible to offer a variety of reading of any complex and challenging work of literature. Some of those will be legitimately ‘deduceable from the Text’ (to steal a phrase from the *Tale of a Tub* itself).[[46]](#endnote-47) At the level of the work, what makes some readings legitimate and others not? For the purpose of my present argument, I make the limited assertion that interpretations of the text as a whole which either do not resort to the evidence of the propositions which make up that work, or which are based on flawed readings of the individual propositions which make up that work, cannot have truth value. Such readings may accord with favoured, prior, ideological positions, but they cannot count as knowledge. As Gerald Graff has put it, ‘the subjectivity of [interpretative] vision is a fact about its genesis, not about the adequacy of its truth claim’.[[47]](#endnote-48) Interpretations are hypotheses. Worthwhile hypotheses may be strengthened by confirming evidence, and falsified by contrary evidence. All empirical enquiry risks confirmation bias, and empirical enquiry conducted according to strongly held ideological positions is no doubt particularly liable to confirmation bias.[[48]](#endnote-49)

It does seem to me that some recent work on Swift has been compromised by perspectivism, by confirmation bias, by local (and, it follows, by larger scale) interpretative hypotheses which are false on the evidence, and compromised too by refusal to surrender falsified hypotheses.[[49]](#endnote-50) I shall offer three examples.

My first example however, no doubt not a unique exception to the rule, is of a darling hypothesis, apparently supported by good evidence, which proved to be false, but which the scholar concerned rejected when the evidence proved to be mistaken. Everything is ideological, and in this case too there is an ideological tendency, but the critic concerned might claim to be pursuing the ideology of truth. This scholar, working on Swift’s Trinity sermon, was intrigued by the passage in which Swift tells us that the doctrine of the Trinity, though not explicitly set out in Scripture, may be assembled or collected from clear though separate statements:

I see it plainly declared in Scripture, that there is but one God; and yet I find our Saviour . . . saying *He and his Father are one*; and, *before Abraham was, I am*. I read, that the Disciples worshipped him: That *Thomas* said to him, *My Lord and my God*. And, Saint *John*, Chap. 1st, *In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. I read likewise that the Holy Ghost bestowed the Gift of Tongues, and the Power of working Miracles …[[50]](#endnote-51)

This scholar was thrilled to discover an apparent statement of just such a hermeneutic principle and methodology, in a discussion of the Scripture doctrine of the Trinity, in Richard Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*:

there hath been some doubt .... whether *containing* in Scripture do import express setting down in plain terms, or else *comprehending* in such sort that by reason we may from thence conclude all such things which are necessary. Against the former of these two constructions instance hath sundry ways been given. For our belief in the Trinity, the co-eternity of the Son of God with his Father, the proceeding of the Spirit from the Father and the Son . . . the necessity whereof is by none denied, are notwithstanding in Scripture no where to be found by express literal mention, only deduced they are out of Scripture by collection. This kind of comprehension in Scripture [is] therefore received . . . (I. xiv. 2)

Our scholar had never found any similar statement of a principle of collection or assembly in his readings in Anglican hermeneutics, and was deeply satisfied to find such compelling authority for Swift’s statement. He naturally wished to strengthen his hypothesis by seeking further instances and development of this idea of textual ‘collection’ in Hooker. And indeed Hooker uses the word ‘collection’ very frequently. Alas for our excited scholar, it rapidly became clear that Hooker uses this word not to mean the gathering or assembly of concurring though separate textual places, but rather to mean deduction, inference, of meaning from a single textual place. *OED* confirms this older, rarer, technical sense.[[51]](#endnote-52) Chastened, our scholar abandoned his darling hypothesis. His ignorance of this special sense of ‘collection’, and of its use by Hooker throughout the *Laws*, is not at all to his credit, nor yet is his recycling of this episode of infamy on this occasion. Something, however, is to be said for his decision to acknowledge the hypothesis as falsified, and to drop it from his paper.

My second example is from a recent critic, part of whose purpose is to demonstrate the hypothesis, common enough as my discussion of the sermons partly illustrates, that Swift was heterodox or pagan in religion. From that critic’s extended analysis I select, from other possible instances, their response to this passage, describing a scene of devotion, from *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*:

you perceive the Vapors to ascend very fast . . . the Preacher . . . begins a loud Hum, which pierces you quite thro’; This is immediately returned by the Audience, and you find your self prompted to imitate them, by a meer spontaneous Impulse . . .

According to this critic, Swift ‘suggest[s] in this passage that the mechanical operation of the spirit is encouraged by the clergy, who take advantage of and exploit the people’s natural vulnerability to superstition.’ However, Swift makes explicit, in the quoted sentences, and in the sentences of its immediate textual context, that he here describes not an orthodox Anglican congregation, but ‘an Assembly of Modern Saints’. The ‘preacher’ is not an Anglican clergyman, but one of ‘our *British* [spiritual] *Workmen’*. Like the Tub-preacher depicted in the plate in Section I, he wears the two-part black and white cap of the Presbyterian preacher, and holds forth, to a behatted audience. The ‘Assembly’ is identified as Presbyterian, or possibly Quaker, by the ‘hum’ of the preacher, and the artificial turning inwards of the eyes of the congregation. In this passage as throughout the *Tub* volume Swift attacks belief in individual inspiration by the Spirit, representing it as an internal, mechanical, and delusory operation. In this passage Swift distinguishes explicitly between understanding the Spirit as a genuine ‘supernatural Assistance, approaching from without’, and the deluded Saints’ belief in a spirit ‘proceeding entirely from within’. [[52]](#endnote-53) (The distinction is articulated by a persona, in indirect and ironic terms, but here as often in the *Tale* the direction of the irony is sufficiently clear.) Swift’s satirical point here is not (as this critic goes on, by a logical leap, to claim) ‘that the spirit is a fiction’,[[53]](#endnote-54) but that the enthusiastic preacher and Assembly he describes and, fairly or unfairly, mocks, rely on a purely internal inspiration, ‘a meer spontaneous impulse’, and defend themselves from the ‘Approaches’ of the true divine Spirit, the cloven tongues of the Holy Ghost,[[54]](#endnote-55) by their headwear. Here, in fact, a particular passage, and the propositions within it, have been misread; and that more local misreading, with other such misreadings, driven by this critic’s prior thesis, has led in her book to a larger misinterpretation of the work.

My third example is from a critic writing in 1998. This critic begins his essay on the *Tale of a Tub* with the familiar claim that ‘Swift’s satire is a semantic *perpetuum mobile* . . . ; it never allows what critics call a “standard interpretation” . . . the very history of reader-response-criticism imitates its object’s dynamics by refusing any definitive interpretations’.[[55]](#endnote-56) I would disagree with these formulations on principle: the image of the ‘semantic *perpetuum mobile’* is a sceptic’s *reductio* of any possibility of determinable meaning; ‘the notion of ‘standard’ or ‘definitive’ interpretation is a straw man of no very definite shape (a determinate interpretation, like any other hypothesis, cannot claim to be either ‘standard’ nor ‘definitive’); it is not clear what kinds of meaning are ‘ever changing’ or how; and that readers have offered many interpretations does not logically entail that they have offered many valid interpretations. My main objection again, however, is to the nature of this critic’s response to the propositions which make up the *Tale*. For instance: the brothers begin by interpreting the Will in a manner in which Swift and other Anglican theorists approved, *totidem verbis* (that is, propositionally). That method however does not meet the brotherly readers’ requirements for change in their coats, that is, in their religion. Here the ‘*Book-learned*’ brother advocates interpretation of the Will *totidem syllabis* or *totidem literis*. Our third, modern, critic remarks:

Swift . . . here touches the basis of Christian belief, demonstrating that the whole church may be based on doctrines which themselves are mere products of arbitrary interpretations of so called holy texts. By subjecting the Testament, that is the Bible, to the teleology [*sic*.; *recte* <to theology>?] of a strictly profane kind, both religious lore and homiletic tradition are severely chastised.

At this pre-Reformation moment the brothers, as yet effectively undifferentiated, are all no doubt implicated. But the hermeneutic scam is that of Peter (as he will shortly be named), and it parodies modes of interpretation practised in the pre-Reformation Church to justify abuses here represented as specifically romanist. It is not clear, and our critic does not explain, how the entire post-Reformation Church, and particularly the Church of England, could possibly be a ‘mere product’ of these particular and historical modes of interpretation. Swift does not endorse arbitrary interpretations in the *Tale*, and indeed sets out a very different hermeneutics in the ‘Apology’ particularly; Swift’s position in the *Tale* on this issue is entirely consonant with that generally held and set out within the Church of England of which Swift professed himself a loyal member.[[56]](#endnote-57) To which ‘holy texts’ does our critic refer, and by whom are these holy texts ‘so called’? (A proposition in the passive voice, as always, generalises and elides agency; and here the critic’s proposition begs the question.) Again, our critic alleges ‘the connection between Protestantism, Catholicism and Puritanism on the one hand and the enigmatic learning of cabala, Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism and alchemy on the other’, and asserts that

the three great religions are infiltrated by arcane learning to different degrees; Protestantism comes off best, but on the whole the harsh criticism that Swift here launches on the “errors” in religion in general can hardly be overlooked.

To identify and label the three brothers as Protestant, Catholic and Puritan is already a failure of the contextual understanding (and its appropriate associated terminology) which, as theorists from Schleiermacher to Austin have taught us, is essential to understanding. It is a failure, in fact, to understand the meaning horizon of the text. This critic makes a representative movement from the identification of Swift’s satire on specific tendencies in Peter and Jack, in Romanism and dissent, to the allegation that Swift’s target is ‘religion in general’. Our critic does not explain how, in the propositions offered in the *Tale*, Martin—the English Church—is implicated in this part of Swift’s satire. In his 1705 *Observations* on the *Tale*, William Wotton similarly accused the *Tale*-teller of an attack on all religion, driven by ‘his contemptible Opinion of every Thing which is called Christianity’. Our critic offers essentially the same response to the *Tale* as William Wotton’s, and like Wotton’s his response is mistaken on *interpretative* grounds.[[57]](#endnote-58)

These critics of Swift’s sermons and his *Tale* are similar in kind. Led by modern theoretical assumptions, and by modern cultural and political preferences, they generate a version of Swift and Swift’s thinking false to the texts he wrote. It may well be legitimate for a modern reader to find some of the social and doctrinal positions stated in Swift’s sermons rebarbative and unacceptable; it is not legitimate on those grounds to make those sermons say something other than they do, to claim they are incoherent or necessarily conflicted, and to represent them as marginal. It is legitimate to find in any one of the complex propositions in the *Tale* a plurality of determinate, and determinable meanings. It is legitimate to disagree with some or all of those plural determinate meanings and the positions they articulate (and for us as modern readers this is often perhaps not only a credible but a necessary option). It is legitimate to argue for almost any number of readings of the *Tale* (or of *Hamlet*, or of *Mansfield Park*) as a whole text, on the basis of the complex interrelations of the plurality of determinate meanings of those complex propositions. It is not legitimate to mistake the terms of those propositions, or to misunderstand or misrepresent, or merely to assert, the relations of subjects and predicate within those propositions. It is not, I have particularly attempted to show, legitimate to argue for, or to assert, readings of the whole text based on such misprisions, or assertions, of the propositions it contains. The interpretation of complex and distant texts is a challenging discipline, and error is a normal and inevitable part of that discipline. We all live in glass houses; it is always possible to make, in Hooker’s sense of the term, ‘wrong Collections’. Nevertheless, perhaps especially at a time when truth in public discourse is at a premium, and perhaps especially in the case of Swift, there is a case to be made for our best fidelity to the utterances of the authors we study.

1. *Remarks upon Tindal,* *Prose Works,* II, 78-9) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. *Cambridge Works of Jonathan Swift,* I, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Landa, Introduction to the Sermons, *Prose Works,* IX, 101; Greene, ‘The Via Media in an Age of Revolution: Anglicanism in the Eighteenth Century’, in *The Varied Pattern: Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Hughes and David Williams (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert, 1971), pp. 297-320 (p. 300); Zimpfer, ‘Swift and Religion: from Myth to Reality’, *Swift Studies*, 24 (2009), 46-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. *Swift’s Landscape* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. x, xxv. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See, for example, Todd C. Parker, ‘“The Idlest Trifling Stuff that ever was Writ”, or, Why Swift hated his Sermons’, in Parker, ed., *Swift as Priest and Satirist*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009, pp. 58-71 (p. 61); Sarah Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature Ancient Heresy and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660-1760* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, California, 2008), p. 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Parker, ‘“Idlest Trifling Stuff”’, p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. For example, Fabricant, *Landscape*, p. xxxvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. *Prose Works*, IX, 99. Swift sent Dr. Sheridan a package of his sermons, probably 35 in number, with a characteristically dismissive covering note: ‘Here are a bundle of my own sermons; you may have them if you please: they may be of use to you, they have never been of any to me’ (Orrery, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (London, 1752), p. 289). Walter Harte reported that Swift sent eleven of the sermons, stitched together, in a black leather case, to Pope; see *Prose Works*, IX, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Parker, ‘“Idlest Trifling Stuff”’, p. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Robert Mahony, ‘Certainty and Irony in Swift: Faith and the Indeterminate’, in Todd C. Parker, ed., *Swift as Priest and Satirist* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), pp. 37-57 (p. 38). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. *Correspondence*, ed. Woolley, I, 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. *Prose Works*, IX, 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. *Prose Works*, IX, 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Parker, ‘“Idlest Trifling Stuff”’, pp. 64-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. *Prose Works*, IX, 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. ‘The Paradoxical Rhetoric of Swift’s Homiletics’, *Münster*, V, 264-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. *Prose Works*, IX, 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Mahony, ‘Certainty and Irony in Swift’, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. *Ecclesiastical Polity*, II. xxii. 14 (2. 96-8). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. *Prose Works*, IX, 162, 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. *Cambridge Works of Jonathan Swift*, I, 76, 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. I have developed this argument at greater length in ‘Profession and Authority: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *Literature and Theology*, 9 (1995), 383-398. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. *Ecclesiastical Polity*, II. vii. 3 (I, 267). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Tillotson, *Works* (sixth edition, 1710), I, 232 (Sermon 21). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. *Works*, I, 449 (Sermon 38). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. *Prose Works*, IV, 34-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. *Prose Works*, IX, 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Parker, ‘“Idlest Trifling Stuff”’, p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. See ‘Jonathan Swift and Charity’, *JEGP*, 44 (1945), 337-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. *Prose Works*, II, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. *Prose Works*, IX, 247. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. *Prose Works*, IX, 141, 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Melvyn New, *Lawrence Sterne as Satirist* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1969), p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. *Tale of a Tub*, *Cambridge Works of Jonathan Swift*, I, 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. See E. D. Hirsch’s discussion of the Husserlian concept of the meaning ‘horizon’, and its effect in setting the boundaries of implication, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 221-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. ‘Normally’ allows for numerous non-syntactical tendencies common long before modernism or post-modernism, for example in the lists of Homer or Rabelais or Swift, or the ‘Chough’s language’ used to hoodwink Parolles in the fourth Act of *All’s Well that End’s Well*, or the significations of paratextual elements in both literary and non-literary texts. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. ‘A proposition has a subject . . . and a predicate. The subject is a sign; the predicate is a sign; and the proposition is a sign that the predicate is a sign of that of which the subject is a sign. If it be so, it is true.’ C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 5. 553. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Cf. Hirsch: ‘Undoubtedly, most verbal meanings are imprecise and ambiguous, and to call them such is to acknowledge their determinacy. . . . an ambiguous meaning has a boundary like any other verbal meaning. . . . Determinacy . . . means self-identity. . . . Without it neither communication nor validity in interpretation would be possible’ (*Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 44-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. In an important recent discussion, Susan Haack denies that literature can claim to adopt ‘the attitude of disinterested truth seeking’ characteristic of philosophy and the natural and physical sciences, but allows ‘that literature may make, or convey, true claims . . . and in a perfectly ordinary sense of true.’ Haack’s argument is about ‘literature’ as such (she is fully aware that philosophy—notably the writings of Locke—may be literary in character); it does not threaten the distinct but connected claim that literary criticism, and *a fortiori* literary scholarship, like other disciplines of knowledge, may and should aspire to ‘disinterested truth seeking’ (‘Reading in a Literary Spirit’, in Haack’s *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* ((Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 48-68 (pp. 49, 59); cf. ‘“Dry Truth and Real Knowledge”: Epistemologies of Metaphor and Metaphors of Epistemology’, *Manifesto*, pp. 69-89). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. ### Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.ix.3;, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 476.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Richard Gaskin, *Language Truth and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. I discuss this argument at greater length in an essay entitled ‘Mimesis and Understanding in Samuel Johnson’s Notes to Shakespeare (1765)’, forthcoming in *The Age of Johnson*. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: the Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, tr. James Duke and Jack Forstman, Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977. Quoted from Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed. *The Hermeneutics Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Schleiermacher’s account of the circle of hermeneutics is a recognizable and credible account of the process of editorial explication in particular. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. *Tale of a Tub*, Section X; *Cambridge Works of Jonathan Swift*, I, 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Gerald Graff, *Literature against itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. I make an exception here for ‘the ideology of truth’, as being, in E. D. Hirsch’s words, ‘structurally different from any other political ideology’. Hirsch argues that ‘Under other political ideologies, we desire and sometimes pre-determine a particular result. Under the ideology of truth, our desire for a particular result is subordinated to our desire to be right. Our orientation is a posteriori, not a priori. We decide after the fact, not before the fact’ (E. D. Hirsch, Jr. ‘The Politics of Theories of Interpretation’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 1, The Politics of Interpretation (1982), pp. 235-247 (235-6)). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. For instance, the hypothesis that Swift wrote ‘The History of Martin’. See Marcus Walsh, ‘Si vulgus vult decipi, decipiatur’, *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 56 (2015), 392-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. *Prose Works*, IX, 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. ### *OED*, *n.* 5.’The action of inferring or deducing; an inference, deduction, conclusion. *Obs.*[<Latin *collectio*.]’ *OED* gives examples dated from 1529 to 1705, including Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, 15: ‘Wrong collections have been hitherto made out of those words by modern Divines’.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. *Cambridge Works of Jonathan Swift*, I, 174-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. Sarah Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660-1760* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 106, 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. Later in his life Swift explicitly insisted that the Pentecostal visitation was genuine, in terms consistent with this passage in the *Tale*: ‘the Holy Ghost bestowed the Gift of Tongues … such as could be done by the Inspiration of God alone’ (‘On the Trinity’, *Prose Works*, IX, 161). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. Rudolf Freiburg, ‘Enlightened Darkness: the Treatment of Arcane Learning in Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub*’, in *Swift: The Enigmatic Dean. Festschrift for Hermann Josef Real*, ed. Rudolf Freiburg, Arno Löffler and Wolfgang Zach (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1998), pp. 47-69 (at pp. 47, 49, 56-7, 59). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. I have belaboured this point in ‘Text, “Text”, and Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub*’, *Modern Language Review*, 85 (1990), 290-303. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. Wotton, *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* . . . *With Observations upon the Tale of a Tub* (3rd edn, 1705; *Cambridge works of Jonathan Swift*, I, 224). In an essay entitled ‘Against Hypocrisy and Dissent’ (forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Eighteenth-Century Satire,* ed. Paddy Bullard (Oxford University Press) I offer a longer discussion of Wotton’s response, as consistent with the widespread contemporaneous sense of scandal provoked by the *Tale*, but as nevertheless unconvincing in its argument that the *Tale* attacks all Christianity. Wotton’s *Observations* nevertheless remain the most sustained and methodologically credible attack on the orthodoxy of Swift’s *Tale*. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)