

A Modest Proposal in the Context
of Swift's *Irish Tracts*

A Modest Proposal in the Context
of Swift's *Irish Tracts*:
A Relevance-Theoretic Study

By

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P U B L I S H I N G

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The work of Jonathan Swift has always aroused the interest of literary historians, critics, and more recently also of pragmatists. In particular, Swift's effectiveness in his use of irony and of satire has always been widely acknowledged by criticism. Besides, within pragmatic approaches to irony, scholars have recurrently made reference to *A Modest Proposal*.

Traditional explanations tended to account for irony following semantic and rhetoric criteria, that is, as a discrepancy between what is "said" and what is "meant". Thus, irony tended to be defined as either "meaning the opposite of what has been said", or else "meaning something different from what has been said". At the core of such distinctions, there seemed to underlie a conception of meaning based upon a process of codification and decodification of information.

Within linguistics, it was the development of contemporary pragmatics, starting from the work of Grice (1957) onwards, that was about to offer new insights and approaches to meaning and irony. Hence, factors such as the intention of the speaker, or the context accessible to the addressee, hardly taken into consideration so far, have become paramount.

A Modest Proposal, then, has been regarded as a masterpiece of irony and satire, for instance, by critics such as Rowse (1975), Ward (1973), Speck (1969) or Davis (1964, 1947). The present work sets out to examine this piece in the context of the literary production by Swift on the "Irish Question", with a view to assessing one of the main controversies raised around the work from pragmatic standpoints of analysis. Two of the most outstanding pragmatic approaches to irony—namely, Sperber and Wilson's relevance-theoretical account of irony as echoic mention, on the one hand, and Clark and Gerrig's pretense theory of irony, on the other hand—have precisely dwelled on this work to demonstrate or else refute their main contentions to account for this resource in pragmatic terms.

There seems to be overall consensus amongst pragmatic—and also rhetoric and literary—approaches to irony nowadays on aspects such as the following: first, irony is connected with the expression of a certain attitude on the part of the speaker—as noted, respectively, by authors such as Grice

(1978, 1957) or most pragmatists and Hutcheon (1994, 1978)–; second, it is therefore also related to a certain communicative intention; or third, such intention and attitude will be reflected in context. Yet, there has been an ongoing debate between the two pragmatic approaches to irony referred to above, namely, mention and pretense theorists.

The debate was opened by the forerunners of pretense theory, (Clark and Gerrig 1984). Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1978) had claimed that irony could be accounted for in terms of the speaker's distance from what the content of the utterance was about. In other words, they claimed that, on being ironic, the speaker meant to *echo* the propositional content of her utterance. When trying to criticise such an approach, Clark and Gerrig (1984) referred to Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and claimed that the work could not be accounted for in terms of echoic mention. Instead, Clark and Gerrig suggested that in Swift's (1729) work the speaker pretended to be somebody injudicious, who was to be identified as other than himself.

Next, the approaches taken to the relationship between irony and pretense throughout history will be analysed. It will be shown that, on the one hand, Clark and Gerrig (1984) are correct regarding the fact that some of the most representative classical authors who had tackled with irony had linked it to pretense. On the other hand, however, a historical survey has made us conclude that such a relationship has not been always understood in the same way: for Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (384-322 BC), *both* the ironist and his addressee or victim *pretended* to be other than what they really were. On the other hand, Clark and Gerrig's central claim—namely, that the *source of echo* was rather imprecise—, has indeed been one of earliest and recurrent critical issues raised in connection with the model proposed by Sperber and Wilson.

Taking all this into account, our main contention is as follows. The departing point will be Sperber and Wilson's own early argument—no matter if it has no longer been retaken—that there may be echoes of different types or degrees. Besides, we shall also argue that the source of echo may likewise be broad or indefinite enough. This tenet is based upon two assumptions: first, the relevance-theoretic claim that language used with a pre-eminently poetic meaning or function is characterised by its *indeterminacy*. As we will see in Chapter Four, this implies that the meaning of a text may *weakly* suggest a somehow wide array of possible implicatures. This further entails that the addressee is given much greater freedom but also responsibility in coping with it.

Secondly, we shall rely upon the notion of *intertextual echoes* (Hatim, 1997), so as to justify an approach to Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in echoic terms. Interestingly enough, this concept has not been produced within the

relevance-theoretical framework itself, but in the field of translation theory. Hatim (1997) proposes a tripartite classification of the echoes to be found in irony. In his view, depending on the source and on a textual basis, echoes may be of three different kinds: *intratextual*, *intertextual*—if the source lies in other texts—and *contratextual*—. It is our hypothesis that any of these forms of echo may occur both in interlingual and also in intralingual communication as well.

It is upon the second type, that is, *intertextual echoes*, that we have relied much of our analysis of *A Modest Proposal*, with a view to demonstrating that it may be interpreted in terms of echoic irony. Thus, the *sources of echo* may take us not just to the text itself, but rather, to other previous works by Swift on the Irish Question. This squares with the fact,—generally acknowledged by criticism on the Anglo-Irish author—, that throughout his life as well as his literary production, Swift grew increasingly disillusioned about the ever-shrinking reaction of the Irish towards the domination exerted by the British over them. It is our main hypothesis, then, that this is the main reason why *A Modest Proposal* may be read on echoic terms: the work stands for a certain sort of climax in the attitude held by Swift towards the Irish, where he gives up all hopes that he might have previously harboured.

Another aspect worth considering in the analysis of irony is *the role of context*, and more particularly, whether it is necessary or not to take *mutual knowledge* into account. Thus, some of the forerunners of the theories of irony as echoic mention and pretense, respectively, had also debated in 1982 about the role of *shared knowledge* in communication. Then, Sperber and Wilson had denied that it should be either a necessary or a sufficient condition, in contrast to Clark and Carlson (1982). In the case of the works that will be analysed, we believe that the reader should be able to recognise both the speaker's intention, and also the references to other previous texts by Swift.

So as to fulfil this aim, the work is structured into the following chapters. Chapter Two analyses the historical and political context in which Swift's production on the so-called Irish Question is to be inserted, because the works analysed may be regarded as instances of *contingent literature*: they deal with historical facts closely connected with the historical momentum lived by the author. In Chapter Three, we will set out to characterise the most significant aspects of irony and satire as employed by Swift. In Chapter Four a brief survey of the pragmatic theories which have dealt with Swift's *A Modest Proposal* will follow. Chapter Five will be devoted to the analysis of a representative anthology of *Irish Tracts* written by Swift between 1707 and 1729. Three different periods will be

distinguished: namely, the earliest works, previous to the decade of the 1720ies; second, a selection of works written during that period, the most prolific one as regards the treatment of the Irish Question. That period will include the whole of the series of letters signed by the Drapier. Finally, two works will be analysed, among those which correspond to the latest works by Swift on Ireland, *A Modest Proposal* and *An Answer to "The Craftsman"*.

The method followed has been based on the analysis of a selection of corpus of representative utterances appearing in each of the works concerned. Each work has been contextualised, in so far as each of the works devoted by Swift to the Irish Question sprang as a kind of response towards concrete facts. The corpus, then, has to be complemented and inserted in the context where it appears and which makes it meaningful. In the case of the works under analysis, such a context also embraces other works which may be connected to one in particular being analysed.

CHAPTER TWO

THE *IRISH TRACTS* WITHIN SWIFT'S LITERARY PRODUCTION

2.1 The Historical, Political and Religious Background

The so-called *Irish Tracts* compile the most outstanding works devoted to the political situation of Swift's homeland within the bulk of his literary career. In order to understand this anthology of works devoted to Ireland, the reader has to cope with aspects such as the following: the situation of the country at the time, and in particular its political relationship to Britain; the views and attitudes held by Swift (1667-1754) and also his own position with regard to Britain and Ireland. We shall briefly do so next.

Historians tend to underline the extreme complexity that characterises the social, political and religious situation of Ireland during the eighteenth century, which must surely have been a consequence of the past and which to a certain extent can still be felt nowadays. During the Middle Ages, the status of Ireland with regard to Britain may be described in terms a feudal status of vassalage (Usandizaga, 1982). The origin must have been the Treaty signed between King Henry II –King of England, during the Norman settlement in Britain (1154-1189), who had conquered Ireland– and the King of Ireland, Rory O'Connor, who could have seen in this alliance a guarantee of defence against the Norman invaders. Then, about two centuries later, King Edward III (1327-1377) settled a position of dominance of Britain over Ireland through the Acts of Kilkenny, which must have marked the beginning of the oppression felt by the Irish throughout time.

The situation did not become any better in Tudor times. Thus, during the reign of Henry VII (1485-1509), the British sought to bring the Irish Parliament under their control: thus, the Poyning Act (1494) forbade the holding of any session at the Irish Parliament unless authorised by the King of England. This lays the basis for the systematic political control of the British over Ireland.

After many complex episodes in the history of the status between Ireland and Britain throughout history, the situation worsens significantly at Swift's time, during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus, at the reign of Charles I (1625-1649), the native Irish population were already deeply upset about the land policy of successive governments, who had confiscated their lands and handed them over to English landlords (Act for the Settlement of Ireland, 1652). Besides, the Irish had also been forbidden to practise their Catholic religion. Then, during Cromwell's ruling (1653-1658), the subjugation of Ireland had been seen as the first step in the reconstitution of the British Empire by the Republican Government. The transference of the Irish soil to British landlords continued. After the death of Cromwell in 1658, Charles II, –son of Charles I, whom Cromwell had fought against and executed–was brought back to the throne. Such a situation immediately raised crucial questions about the ownership of the land: Whom did the land belong to, whether to the formerly dispossessed and often exiled lords who had been faithful to the crown, or to the Cromwellians who had been given it?

At the Revolution of 1668, Ireland had supported the Catholic King James II, eventually defeated. During his kingship, the Catholic Irish had hoped for a restoration of formerly confiscated lands and estates. However, after the Revolution, the Irish were strongly subjected and the English rule was restored in Ireland at the time of William of Orange. Every act passed placed the Catholics in Ireland under all kinds of possible social and political disadvantage and discrimination. Besides, Ireland became a battlefield in a war that eventually became European, as the King of France decided to support James II against William III. The Treaty of Limerick put an end to the war in 1691, even though the Parliament refused to ratify its civil terms. Instead, a system was devised to exclude Roman Catholics from property, power and influence as well as to exert pressure upon them to accept and conform to the Protestant faith. Whereas at the time of Charles I (1641), the Irish Catholics had owned half of the land, they kept only a fifth part after Limerick. This would also have particularly detrimental political consequences for the Irish, as the access to public posts depended on the possession of land.

Even as late as by the end of the eighteenth century, there were still being confiscations of land. As a result of all that has been noted, more than eighty per cent of the land of Ireland had changed hands within about a hundred years. In the process a whole new class of land owners became established as the ruling class, who are named as “the Protestant Ascendancy”. What is even worse, the minority made up by Irish landlords tended to be *absentees* and live in England. Even after the Treaty

of Limerick (1691), between 1697 and 1746, the Irish parliament passed a series of laws, known as the "popery laws" or "penal laws", which restricted to Anglican Protestants the power, property and privilege of the country, thus excluding Catholics from most public office. They were deprived of any civil rights and their participation in politics was also forbidden. As a result, the only Irish people that could become members of the Irish Parliament were the Anglicans. Most of the public posts, both civil and ecclesiastical, were likewise held by the British.

The Irish Parliament itself was heavily controlled by Britain: its attempts to argue for its rights as the supreme organ of decision of a distinct kingdom were met by a Declaratory or Dependency Act (1720), which asserted the subordination of the Irish Parliament to Westminster. As seen above, ever since Poyning's Act (1494), no meetings could be held unless authorised by Britain. More recently, the so-called "Sixth Act", promulgated in 1719, during the reign of George I, empowered the British Parliament to dictate laws for Ireland even without the assent of the Irish Parliament. There were also heavy restrictions imposed by Britain on Irish trade, giving way to further frictions between the British and the Irish. As will be seen below, Swift will play an important part in the defence of the Irish interests in these affairs, and clearly objected to the view of the British government of its relationship with Ireland. A particularly heated dispute had to do with the British grant to William Wood, a Birmingham minter, to coin copper currency for Ireland. Such a decision had been reached through the mediation of a lover of George I, the Duchess of Kendall. This will lie at the core of Swift's decision to write some of his rousing pamphlets.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, another aspect that accounts for the deleterious influence of Britain over Irish economy has to do with the so-called *Navigation Acts*, *Wool Acts* and *Cattle Acts*, which meant the practically total control and exploitation of the Irish economic resources by Britain. During the Restoration, at the second half of the seventeenth century, three Acts in particular were passed that would have a disastrous impact upon the Irish economy. First, the Navigation Act of 1663 established a distinction between the British and the Irish colonial commerce, resulting in the prohibition imposed upon the Irish to export any Irish products whatsoever to the American colonies, unless ships departed from British ports. More than any other practical inconvenience, this Act implied that Ireland was being regarded as a colony. Secondly, the Cattle Act of 1666 meant that livestock imported by Britain from Ireland was imposed exorbitant duties, which meant the impossibility to export cattle, which was a crucial sector of Irish economy. Thirdly, the Navigation

Act of 1669 and the Wool Act of 1699 forbade Ireland to export any woollen products. On the whole, these Acts brought Ireland to a state of bankruptcy.

However, despite the existence of what may in justice be called a common enemy, the Irish society at the time was characterised for the enormous differences among its members, resulting in disunity (Usandizaga, 1982). This was so due to socio-economic, political and religious reasons. The country was roughly divided into three major groups, namely, the British ruling class, the Anglo-Irish and the Catholic Irish population. The British ruling class, whom we have already referred to as “the Protestant ascendancy”, owned most of the land, even though they lived in England most of the time. Their lands were often subleased by certain intermediaries who rented them for very short periods of time, which made it unprofitable to cultivate them. Consequently, many lands became pasture, to a point that there were no lands to let. The Protestants roughly amounted to a minority of 150,000 people.

The Anglo-Irish were the only ones who felt the need to defend the interests of the country, and who, being aware of the oppression exerted by the British, found it necessary to search for the unity of the whole country and the defence of common interests. This is the group Swift belongs to, and that is why Swift will insist in his writings upon the badly needed union among all the members of the country.

The Catholic Irish population were the least favoured and most heavily oppressed group, no matter if by 1700 they amounted to about three quarters or more of the two million people that made up the Irish population. As noted above, they had no rights to power or property, and most had their lands confiscated.

Apart from these three larger groups, there were also Presbyterians, who, like the Catholics, were also excluded from most public office. These lived mainly in the north of the country and were relatively well off, on account of the fact that they cultivated mainly linen, which at the time was not suffering yet the same kind of oppression and British intervention as the wool. Their number was approximately of 350,000 people. However, the Test Act (1703) denied them any right to vote.

The political and economic crisis of Ireland and of Britain as a whole seems to have reached a peak in the decade of the seventeenth twenties. The decade starts with the crisis known as “the South Sea Bubble”, which resulted in a general financial crash. According to Langford (1984), the formation of the South Sea Company in 1711 had been encouraged by the Tory ministers of Queen Anne’s reign (1702-1714) with a view to providing an effective alternative to the Whig Bank. This Company

attempted to redistribute the National Debt while offering at the same time better terms for the Exchequer. However, it ran into difficulties not only because of the complexity of the plan itself, but also on account of the fact that there were a large number of people intending to profit from the scheme, from the Directors of the Company themselves to many courtiers, ministers and MPs, whose support was furthermore necessary to guarantee the acceptance of the proposals put forward. As Langford notes, "many of those involved in the management of the South Sea Scheme had a strong interest in quick profits, which could only be achieved by boosting the Company's potential far beyond competing investments possibilities" (1984: 413). This depended strongly on the possibilities of the business to be conducted overseas, particularly the South Seas. The Anglo-Spanish treaty of 1713 had given the Company a monopoly of the Spanish slave trade and a valuable share in the Spanish American market for European goods. Despite all this, the political situation between Spain and Britain was often difficult, and conflicts often arose, which made trade difficult and unprofitable. Still, as long as the stock rose, new speculators were encouraged to invest, and more generous pay-offs were being made to some politicians. All in all, this was the situation—a corrupt regime, a naïve investing public and a certainly well-established National Debt—leading to a steady growth of the bubble and the appearance of even more fraudulent bubbles in ever more implausible projects as it grew.

Apart from the Bubble, there were other facts making 1720s troubled years. The decade also began with fears of spread of the plague currently affecting France, although eventually the panic proved to be unjustified. The period is also seen as overflowing with moral decay, extensive corruption and great scandals that disfigured public life at the time, in which prominent MPs and supporters of the government were implicated.

All this had a great impact on literature and the arts. Certainly not by chance, the seventeenth twenties and thirties witnessed a considerable expansion in the London theatre which is increasingly politically-gearred. This is also the time of works that cope with themes that reflect the *statu quo* and the problems of society, thus being remarkable decades for polemical satire, such as Pope's *Dunciad*, or Swift's own literary production in works such as *Gulliver's Travels* or the *Irish Tracts*. Next, the position of Swift within this complex reality and the role played by his works will be analysed. It may be noted, for a start, that St. Patrick's Cathedral lay close to the location of most of the drapers' and weavers' guilds, which enabled Swift to become well-acquainted with their grieves and painful situation.

2.2 Swift's Position in the History of his Country: The Presence of "The Irish Question" in his Literary Work

After the overall panorama of the situation in Ireland and in Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth century and of the main historical antecedents that account for it, we shall devote this section to analyse the position of Swift within such a society and complex political and ideological situation as well as the main traits of his attitude and standpoints.

His life epitomises the highly complex situation between England and Ireland, and the no less intricate position of the members of the Anglo-Irish minority—of which he was a member—within Ireland. Despite his relatively privileged situation, he will fight for the union and amalgamation of his nation, and his defence of the interests of the Irish was always meant to embrace the whole country. Born in Dublin in 1667, of a Protestant family, his life runs between England and Ireland. His first stay in England was in 1689, when he started working as a secretary of Sir William Temple, and remained there until 1694, when he became a priest of the Anglican Church. Nevertheless, he was sent as a priest to Kilroot, near Belfast, where there were an important number of Presbyterians, and where the Protestants were in the poorest condition of all Ireland. This made him accept the invitation of Sir William Temple and come back to Moor Park in 1696, where he read voraciously and became well-learned. On Sir Temple's death in 1699, and having failed to achieve a post of importance, Swift came back to Ireland in 1700, where he stayed until 1710, although he travelled to England several times in the meantime. He became Dean of the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Dublin in 1713, supported by the Tory government. George I of Hannover's coronation as the King of England (1714) meant the ascension of the Whigs to power, which made Swift definitively leave England for more than a decade.

If he seems to have oscillated between England and Ireland all his life, something similar may be said of his political ideas. Initially, he could have only sympathised with the Whigs, on account of his Anglo-Irish condition. His main disagreement with the Whigs has to do with his failure to accept the *Test Acts*, which, as noted above, prevented those which denied the supremacy of the Anglican Church from holding political and public posts whatsoever. But at the same time, Swift feared political revolution, and in any case, he felt much closer to the views of the official Anglican Church, which was backed by the Tories.

It is precisely from the decade of the seventeenth twenties onwards—when, as noted above, the situation became critical for the Irish—that Swift writes the most biting of his *Irish Tracts*. But until that moment, several

steps can be traced in Swift's attitude towards his motherland, reflected in his writings and which we shall analyse next. According to Herbert Davis (1964), three different periods in Swift's literary production may be distinguished: first, an aesthetic period; second, a political period which shows Swift's relation with society; and third, an ethical period, in which Swift is mostly concerned with moral and permanent values. *The Drapier's Letters* would then stand for a significant instance of the second period, in which Swift still seems to cherish some hope in the improvement of the situation, even though he fustigates his victims mercilessly. However, the satires corresponding to the third period, as distinguished by Davis, of which *A Modest Proposal* and *Answer to the Craftsman* would constitute uppermost significant instances, show a desperate Swift, who practises irony and satire for their own sake, without no practical purpose, and having lost any hope in achieving any redemption or consciousness whatsoever of the people concerned.

Thus, some earlier works by Swift are devoted to political matters, no matter if the Irish question may be more incidental and indirect. This is what happens with *The Story of the Injured Lady in a Letter to her Friend with his Answer* (1707), which he wrote when he had been staying in Ireland for a period of three years and the same year as the historical fact that raises this allegorical text, namely, the union of England with Scotland (Act of Union, 1707). The work, however, may have been published only after Swift's death (Jeffares, 1976). Be as it may, the main interest in these works nowadays lies in that they set the foundations of the arguments that will be put forward by Swift with regard to "the Irish Question" in subsequent *Tracts*.

The following writings by Swift dealing with Ireland do not only cope with economic aspects, but also with social and religious ones. This is the case of *A Letter from a Member of the House of Commons of Ireland to a Member of the House of Commons in England Concerning the Sacramental Test* (1709), where the main topic is the discussion of the relationship between the Presbyterian and the Anglican Churches of Ireland. Indirectly, however, the work is also a protest against the intermingling of Britain in Irish affairs, as the British Parliament considered itself entitled to decide about the situation of the Presbyterians in England.

As noted above, from that moment on, Swift will not write any more about Ireland until the decade of the seventeenth twenties. Such silence was due to Swift's much greater involvement in British politics, once the Tories become in office in 1710. Swift becomes the chief editor of the conservative newspaper *The Examiner*, which, although it had not gone

too well until then, became a powerful aid to the ministry. After the death of Queen Anne in 1714 and the subsequent disintegration of the Tory government and the ascent to the government of the Whig party, Swift leaves England and does not get involved in political affairs during the six following years.

However, it is precisely from the decade of the seventeenth twenties that the most important works written by Swift on the Irish question date. As has been seen above, at that time the situation had become particularly unbearable for the Irish. Swift's decision to write about the political situation of his homeland is usually motivated by a concrete fact. This time, it is the *Declaratory Act* (1720) at the time of the reign of George I, which, as noted above, forbade the Irish Parliament to hold any session without the prior consent of Britain, and which therefore meant that Ireland was being treated as a British colony. 1720 becomes, then, the starting date of a very active involvement of Swift in Irish politics over more than a decade.

Thus, just two months after the promulgation of the Declaratory Act, Swift writes his pamphlet *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (1720), which deals mainly with economic affairs, no matter if the real motivation had been political. This work shows certain recurrent traits both with the previous political writings by Swift, namely, *The Injured Lady* (1707) and with forthcoming works: most important of all, Swift shows an attitude that both denounces the situation of Ireland and lays the blame for it not only upon the British, but also upon the Irish themselves. Satire becomes harsh in this work, and probably only its having been published anonymously prevents Swift from being sent into prison. According to critics, however, this treatise is not as effective as some of the ones written by Swift some years afterwards (Usandizaga 1982: 36). This is probably so on account of the fact that, as Swift attempted to cover several different problems, the work lacks certain internal coherence somehow. Moreover, the style is not as brilliant as other works written by Swift on the same question years after. On the whole, this work may be seen as a kind of rehearsal of the forthcoming works by Swift on the Irish question.

The above commented issue of the fraud of the South Sea Company in 1711 resulted in the lack of sufficient currency and the subsequent collapse of trade. It also was the scope of another of Swift's works on Ireland, *The Present Miserable State of Ireland* (1721). The persona in this case is an Irish wool trader who writes to a friend in London, anticipating that the situation is likely to worsen in the near future. It has not been easy to determine Swift's contribution in the controversy raised on occasion of

the Irish aspiration to have their own bank, since the works dealing with this issue were published anonymously and only two of them—*The Wonderful Wonder of Wonders* and *The Wonder of all the Wonders* (1721)—were included by Faulkner in his edition of Swift's complete works.

Swift will retake his writings on the Irish question three years later and will do so for a longer and much more intense period. What made him retake his political writings was the affair of the license given to Wood for the coinage of copper money for Ireland. This will give way to the most important frictions between Britain and Ireland throughout the century, the reasons being not merely political, but most importantly financial and economic. As will be seen next, Swift will have a pre-eminent role in the unfolding of the whole crisis.

The starting point was that the British government had granted a license to coin copper money to the Duchess of Kendall, a lover of the King George I's, who in turn had transferred it to William Wood, who was eventually allowed to produce 360 tons of copper coins for a total amount of 100,800 pounds. Ireland had not been consulted at all, and was very much disturbed. The first mistake made by Britain was to believe that the reason was only political, but the damage was above all financial, and this made the whole Irish nation unit against Britain, despite the profound disunion that had always characterised the country. But Wood's coinage damaged all the Irish economy, and consequently all social classes were affected. The reasons are the following: first, the conditions of the coinage led to the issue of much more money than what would have been strictly necessary. Second, the coinage in copper also resulted in the possible exchange of coins between the two countries, the British being of gold or silver, whereas the Irish ones would be of copper. This was absolutely deleterious for Ireland, even more so if it is taken into account that the value of money was directly connected to the value of the metal in which it was coined. What is even worse, if the value of the money was intrinsically low, Wood's task was precisely to depreciate it even more. Third, and as a result of the former, because the value of copper was so low, it was relatively easy to coin forged money. Other reasons for the opposition against Wood's involvement with money for Ireland concern the procedure employed for doing so: thus, money was coined not in London, under the supervision of the government—as was the case with the money to circulate in Britain—but in Bristol, which provided another alibi for any kind of abuse on the part of Wood.

Moreover, both the attitude of the representative of the British government in Ireland, Grafton, and Wood's own contributed to the failure

of the latter's project. Thus, Grafton was unable to solve the crisis, and even the Irish Parliament, judges and the Privy Council opposed Wood's privilege and abuse. What was even worse, it seems that Wood himself wrote several letters boasting about his patent to coin money for Ireland. Incidentally, some of these letters were published—and were so done when the Irish readership was also soon to read letters of a very different kind: those written by a *drapier*, an M.B., in which a general boycott against Wood's coins was requested. Needless to say, the real author of these letters was Jonathan Swift.

The reason why Swift chose the *persona* of a drapier was not incidental and was a major contribution to the success of his proposals: to begin with,—and as noted above—being the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, which lay close to many of the guilds of drapiers and weavers, Swift knew almost first hand about their concerns. As a character, he was intended by Swift to address the common people in simple and clear terms that everybody could understand, and could at the same time exaggerate wherever necessary, so as to make people aware of the catastrophe that was hovering over their heads. At the same time, a drapier could be seen as a perfect antagonist of the coiner: both are, after all, traders.

The first thing that Swift undertook to do in his writings was to remind the Irish of their rights: the subjects of the British Crown were not compelled to accept money coined in any material other than gold or silver. Even if in practice copper coins were used, the King had no right to impose them. In this first letter, not only does Swift remind the Irish of their rights, but he also encourages his fellow compatriots to put them into practice and make them be respected.

In the fourth of his "Drapier's Letters", also known as "To the Whole People of Ireland" (1724), and published anonymously, Swift goes a step further and upholds the legislative independence of Ireland from Britain. Its writing springs as a result of the arrival of a new governor, whose main task was to impose Wood's currency by a royal decree. It is written by Swift to make Walpole, prime minister of Britain, be acquainted with the Irish struggle to become an independent nation. It was issued just the day before the arrival of the new governor, Carteret, who regarded it as seditious. As a consequence, Harding, the printer, was arrested, and a 300-pound reward was offered for anybody who could unveil the identity of the drapier. Yet, nobody betrayed Swift, and the trial against the printer never took place. Even Swift himself published another pamphlet, known as *Seasonable Advice*, in which he warned those who had censored his fourth letter that such an attitude meant the acceptance of Wood's coinage.

The letter is remarkable or even astonishing for the boldness shown by Swift. In it Swift claims that the governor himself is at the mercy of Wood, whose only merit is the favourite of the king's lover. Yet the main argument of the letter is the discussion of the legal status of Ireland, which must not have been overlooked by the British. Swift follows Molineux, a member of the Irish Parliament, who, in his work *The Case for Ireland's Being Bound by Acts of Parliament in England* (1698), had analysed the legal connections between Ireland and Britain throughout a period of more than five hundred years. Molineux sets out to demonstrate that Ireland can by no means be regarded a British colony, since the island had not been conquered at the time of the reign of Henry II (1154-1189), and that king himself had referred to an independent kingdom on offering it as inheritance to King John. His conclusion is that, in any case, having its own Parliament, Ireland owed allegiance to the King, but not to Westminster. Moreover, being a friend of Locke's and highly influenced by him, Molineux insists upon such illustrated ideas as the individual's freedom and consent as well as of the need for the government to represent the will of individuals. No matter if the book was considered to be dangerous on its publication, and it may have even been burnt, yet it was considerably influential upon the history of the Irish revolution, in particular during the following century. All in all, Molineux's work has been regarded as crucial when trying to understand Swift's argumentation in his political works dealing with Ireland.

According to Usandizaga (1982), the influence of Molineux upon Swift also explains that Swift never upholds any kind of rebellion against the British on the part of Ireland and his acceptance of the lawfulness of the Hanover dynasty, which is also due to his own position within the Irish society. In fact, Swift will blame the Irish themselves for their situation many times, a standpoint that becomes more blatant in the latest writings on Ireland, when Swift becomes more and more disillusioned about the Irish passive attitude about their situation. Thus, it will only be in the case of *The Drapier's Letters* that Swift will achieve his purpose to make all his Irish compatriots join and fight the common enemy, Britain. Once the problem of the coinage of money was overcome, each socioeconomic group kept caring only for its own interests, and neglecting those of the rest of the people. Another failure was that the "Wood's affair" did not mean any change in the legislation that regulated the status between Britain and Ireland, and what was even worse, the British government took all the necessary steps to prevent the situation from ever occurring again. Yet, Swift will not give up, and will continue to struggle to improve the situation of Ireland, but with no success to the point of despair.

Swift's works dealing with "the Irish Question" written from the decade of the late seventeenth twenties onwards represent a sharp change of attitude if compared to *The Drapier's Letters*. No matter if those showed Swift being deeply concerned about the situation of his country, he still seemed to feel that it could improve. Yet, from now on, his writings show a sharp change of attitude if compared with the former. This can be seen from his work *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (1728-29) and will be felt in his forthcoming works on the Irish question. The reason for that is politically grounded, and has to do with Swift's disillusion with the policy applied by Walpole to Ireland, both during the reign of George I and, after his death in 1726, of George II. Having lost all hope of a change of the British policy in Ireland, Swift turns to his compatriots, whom he initially trusts upon as the only source to struggle for the relief of the economic situation of the country. Yet, he grows more and more disillusioned, leading to hopelessness and even desperation, on account of his realising how idle the Irish seem to be about their own situation and their own destiny.

Swift's turn into desperation is, however, gradual. Thus, in *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (1728-29) he still sets out to undertake an objective analysis of the reasons that account for the poverty of Ireland. This leads him to conclude that the situation of Ireland is unique in the world, since whichever sources of wealth that countries may have, they become sources of poverty for Ireland. The solutions proposed by Swift in this work are also commonsensical: to make the most of the sources of wealth of the country, to foster agriculture and the consumption of the products manufactured in the country, and to do without any imports of products that are not indispensable.

Above all, Swift considered the Irish to be free individuals, able to decide about their own situation and destiny, and who were therefore at least partly responsible for the coetaneous state of affairs. At the same time, Swift also found their situation pitiable. Together with the ominous economic situation, on account of the bad harvests and because of the heavy reliance of the Irish economy upon agriculture, Swift believed that not only the British but also the Irish themselves were to blame for the causes of the ruin of the country. Swift found particularly irritating that after a decade of enormous poverty, in 1729 the Parliament had limited itself to discussing without any practical proposal that might have provided certain solutions.

It is this context that the creation of his *Modest Proposal* (1729) has to be set against. The work is notoriously different from everything that Swift has either said or written about Ireland for more than twenty years by then.

If there is a work which may be said to have been written following Swift's own motto of the *saeva indignatio*,¹ *A Modest Proposal* is undoubtedly a most remarkable instance. Thus, Swift wrote it compelled by his own fury, indignation and desperation.

However, it is not only the tone that makes the work unique. As will be seen in due course, it is the only work by Swift on Ireland where the British are excluded as the target of his attack. That is laid upon the Irish themselves. The work has become a masterpiece in the use of irony and satire. As is characteristic of most of his satirical works, Swift makes a narrator come between himself, the author and the reader. This time, such narrator is a *projector* who introduces himself as a heartily-intentioned, unselfish, uninterested, patriot, who is also an expert in economics. After having referred to his very sensible project, without specifying at all what such proposal indeed is, cannibalism is set forth as the real solution for the problem of the Irish. What Swift cannot understand by now is how unable the Irish are as a nation to become all together and fight against the real, common enemy, as well as to struggle for the improvement of their calamitous situation.

This was the last work published by Swift dealing with the situation of Ireland. Even though he wrote a further work on that topic, *An Answer to the Craftsman* (1730), Swift limited himself to distributing some copies among some of his friends. Once more, the work had sprung as Swift's reaction against a concrete fact, this time the recruitment of many Irish soldiers who had departed to fight in the British armies against France or Spain. At the time the wealth of a nation was calculated on the basis of the number of its inhabitants, which is then one of the reasons why this was so deleterious.

If in *A Modest Proposal* the core idea had been the annihilation of Irish children, now Swift proposes the extermination of the whole nation, because that way Ireland could become immense areas of pasture to feed the British. This was based on the inalienable rights of the British upon Ireland.

¹ These words are a part of the inscription to be found in Swift's own epitaph, "Hic depositum est corpus Jonathan Swift, STD. hujus ecclesiae cathedralis decani, *ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit*. Abi viator, et imitare, si poteris, strenuum pro virili libertatis vindicatorem". That is, "Here lies Jonathan Swift's corpse, Doctor in Sacrosanct Theology and Dean of this Church Cathedral, where the savage indignation can no longer lacerate his heart. Depart, traveller, and imitate, if you can, whom fought with all his might to defend liberty". They have also become a defining feature to characterise Swift's style.

Swift will not write any other works devoted to the situation of his motherland. But it must be concluded that he struggled deeply to make his nation come together and become aware of their situation. In this sense, Swift stands as the forerunner of the greatest patriots and literary heroes of his nation, and thus as a terribly lonely figure in his own historical context, who somehow sows the seeds for the independence of Ireland, which was not to be achieved until the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1921.

CHAPTER THREE

MAIN TRAITS AND QUESTIONS RAISED BY SWIFT'S IRONY AND SATIRE

Satire and irony have been traced as important aspects in the literature of most European countries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to critics, this is so because these rhetoric forms seemed to be particularly suitable for the expression of the uncertainty and unsteadiness that characterise the period (Muecke, 1970; Williams, K. 1958). Bullit (1961) also notes that at the time there seemed to be a causal connection between the questioning of high moral values, between the fixation of high ideals regarding human nature that can hardly be objectified in individuals, on the one hand, and the practice of satire, on the other hand. It is a time in which traditional values in politics, religion and even rational standards seem to prove insufficient for the improvement of humankind.

What is more, the interest in satire was made manifest not only in its practice into works, but also in the theorisation about it, since it was felt that satire could have a didactic and social purpose connected with the improvement of social institutions through its criticism of them. So as to attain its purposes, satire would rather combine witty criticism and even ridicule together with humour. Yet, among the classical models of satire, namely, Horace and Juvenal, it is the latter's sharper and more fustigating kind that English authors, in general, and Swift in particular, tended to follow.

In Britain, the historical moment corresponding to the transition from the Restoration to the eighteenth century is seen by critics as "a unique fusion of ingenuity with traditionalism, of decorum with realism, of Stoic coolness with sentimental effusion, of simplicity with rococo ornamentation" (Sherburne and Bond 1967: 824). And yet, as regards irony, no substantial, significant contribution had been made to its concept as such ever since Quintilian (Knox 1961; Sedgewick 1948), nor would it be done until the Romantics.

Quite on the contrary, authors and critics are concerned with satire both from the point of view of criticism as well as from its practice in

literary works. In this respect, the case of Swift is paradigmatic: not only did he write notorious satires, but he also theorised about satire. Thus, in a well-known passage from the “Preface” to *The Battle of the Books*, Swift refers to the power of satire as an indirect weapon of criticism, and notes how people tend to see in it everybody’s follies, except their own. Concerned as he was about reception, Swift also notes that on account of the indirectness characteristic of satire, people may often fail—or pretend to—to feel alluded by the criticism being made. At the same time, however, he lays all responsibility for the interpretation derived on the reader. Similar claims may also be found in the “Prologue” of *A Tale of a Tub*:

Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets with in the world, and that so very few are offended with it. But, if it should happen otherwise, the danger is not great; and I have learned from long experience never to apprehend mischief from those understandings I have been able to provoke: for anger and fury, though they add strength to the sinews of the body, yet are found to relax those of the mind, and to render all its efforts feeble and impotent.

(From the Preface to *The Battle of the Books*)

... but satire being levelled at all, is never resented for an offence by any, since every individual person makes bold to understand it of others, and very wisely removes his particular part of the burden upon the shoulders of the world, which are broad enough, and able to bear it.

(From the “Prologue” of *A Tale of a Tub*).

Swift’s work may be approached as paradigmatic in its use of irony and satire in several ways. As Muecke and other authors have shown, he is to be inserted in a literary tradition which, through all Europe, makes extensive use of both resources. Generally speaking, irony and satire are resorted by many of the contemporary authors of Swift’s own time seeking to convey their central message. Some of them do contribute certain proposals on the understanding of satire, and also make profuse use of certain classical techniques of irony, such as “blame by praise”, or “praise by blame”, or a basic underlying contradiction between what is “said” and what is “meant”.

Nevertheless, it will be seen in the present work that categories such as the ones just mentioned really fall short of accounting for the significance of irony within Swift’s work. This is the reason why we shall point at pragmatic approaches, where aspects such as *intention* or *attitude* play a central role, and which therefore do not really take the contradiction between what is “said” and what is “meant” as a necessary and sufficient,

defining feature of irony. So as to adequately understand the message conveyed by Swift in his works, it is interesting to firstly approach the way how irony and of satire contribute to it.

Among the Augustans, Swift is seen as "the most indirect, most shifting, yet most inexorable, of all" (Williams, Kathleen 1948: 116). This is partly because beyond the apparent destructive force that seems to emerge from his works, an eminently positive and constructive purpose that provides them with internal unity and consistency emerges. According to Williams, Swift's satire, characterised by its inventiveness and resourcefulness, seeks an answer to the necessities both of his own mind and his age. This does not mean, however, that the topics and the significance of Swift's satire have remained attached to his age. Quite on the contrary, in fact, the approach taken by Swift, as well as the central questioning about humankind as a whole within his work, endow his work as well as, more particularly, his satire, with universal significance. For Swift, satire was a method at the disposal of the understanding of a corrupt humanity, so that through an appeal to the shame of the real situation, satire might have aroused in people the necessity of moral action. For this reason, as a satirist, Swift sought to unveil and depict what he found ridiculous, understood in the Platonic sense as the ignorance of man about his condition. With regard to this, critics (Ward, 1973) have noted that his greatest satires are precisely those in which it is most difficult to determine the target of the satiric attack, and in which the writer himself is not excluded from the process of questioning practically everything. According to Ward, the theme that encompasses the whole of Swift's satiric works is, as in Defoe's, "the problem of survival in a hostile world", with the only difference that in Defoe's works the enemy is external, whereas "Swift finds the real enemy within, in Man's endless capacity to deceive himself". No matter if this topic can be found elsewhere in the Western and Christian traditions, Swift stands out for the "unusual personal intensity" that he brings to the horrors dealt with in his satires (1973: 3).

As noted by Bullit (1961), another aspect that makes Swift's satire interesting for the twenty-first century reader is its *realism*, that is, no matter if satire is intrinsically connected to criticism and may therefore be a matter of opinions rather than facts, yet Swift takes as a starting point the way things are or the way they tend to be. Quite a graphic image to be found in *A Tale of a Tub* illustrates what is meant by this: Swift acts as a surgeon who operates upon the anatomy of the way things are.

If many times satire deals with a critique of a definite state of affairs and is therefore grounded upon realism, Swift also provides the reader

with alternative solutions, be them commonsensical or otherwise simply absurd. Both of them can appear in the same work, as happens, for instance, in *A Modest Proposal*: thus, the projector's absurd and irrational suggestion of eating up children to put an end to the miseries of the Irish is followed by a whole series of sensible projects. This shows that in the satirical works by Swift the realism of the state of affairs being criticised must be counterbalanced by an equally intense *idealism* (Bullit, 1961). According to this critic, both this antagonism and Swift's reaction against the clash between the real and the ideal with a certain moral insight provide the central impulse behind his satire and are recurrent topics to be traced throughout his works. Moreover this makes Swift's satire unique, together with the "struggle between contempt and indignation", which endows it with a central aspect of the author's attitude and intention, which cannot be overlooked when trying to cope with the significance of Swift's works.

Indeed, attitude—which, as will be seen in the present work, has been drawn to as a central element in the pragmatic accounts of irony—has been noted as one of the most important devices in Swift's satires. Concretely, Ward refers to a "polarization of attitudes", whereby "the reader is persuaded to look at the world from a strange new angle, an angle which rapidly becomes intolerably uncomfortable" (1973: 11), but which at the same time forces the reader to supply a moral stance on the perception of reality and attempt to commit himself to the good.

No matter if satire often seeks to shatter people's conscience and is inherently critical, yet a feature that recurs throughout Swift's works, especially his earliest ones, is the presence of *comedy*. According to Bullit, Bergson's ideas on comedy (1900) may contribute to shedding light upon the connection between satire and humour in Swift's works. Bergson thought that common sense was an inherently human attribute, a norm which, if transgressed, made comedy possible. What he shares with Swift, in Bullit's view, is the emphasis upon "the necessity of the mind perceiving things as they are and not imposing upon them some biased abstraction" (1961: 132-33).

Such ideas may contribute to the interpretation of the humorous elements present in Swift's satire. For instance, *A Tale of a Tub* has been approached as a comic satire on religion and learning (Elena, 2000). Above all, comedy enables Swift to offer a very peculiar perspective upon the disparity between appearance and reality, which may be seen as a complementary aspect of the distance and detachment that also characterises irony. But as an ingredient of satire, humour becomes a way to modulate Swift's satiric techniques. Thus, as many of his contemporaries,