

THE LITERARY OPINIONS OF JONATHAN SWIFT

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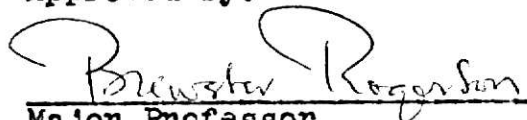
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Jonathan Swift rarely presents himself as a critic of literature. He has no corpus of works dealing systematically with literary theory, or with specific works and authors. Even in the satires with nominally literary subjects, he offers a minimum of explicit commentary on critical values. In an age distinguished for its intensive debate over the problems of criticism, he stands out not for his leadership, as one might expect of so decisive and significant a man, but for his silence. Yet here and there in the prose works, the poems, and the correspondence can be found a good many judgments upon literary matters; and in a few works Swift discourses at some length on topics related to literary theory. It is the purpose of this report to assemble these scattered utterances, and thus to put into more regular form the ideas that Swift expresses about literature.

First, however, it must be recorded that the evidence is not only fragmentary, but often indirect. Swift simply is not interested in pontificating about literature; and though he must surely have discussed it on many occasions with his friends, particularly the Scriblerians, he is not even inclined to write much about it in his letters. One is obliged to work by inference much of the way, and to share the frustrations of other students such as Herbert Davis and Harold Kelling,¹ who have attempted to systematize Swift's literary opinions. "It is disappointing," wrote F. E. Ball after his editorial study of the correspondence, "to find comparatively few references...to

literature or literary criticism."² When Swift does make a reference to an author or work in one of his letters, he gives little more than his verdict: a work gives pleasure, the author a worthy person; or it is dull, the author a puppy. Ball concludes -- wrongly, I think -- that Swift is not greatly concerned about literary issues, and that "it is safe to say that statecraft occupied a larger share of his thoughts than literature."³

Herbert Davis, on the other hand, found a larger quantity of material which reflected Swift's literary thinking when he examined the poetry -- enough that he remarked of Swift's pervasive interest in literary matters.⁴ There is, however, no Horatian poem, no Essay on Criticism, no Dunciad. In a few poems he gives straightforward praise or condemnation of a poet or work, or lists some trite similes to be avoided. But the bulk of the literary ideas in the poetry comes by indirection; they are set out in irony, burlesque, parody, and statements of Swift's personae. The tenor of Swift's critical statement is usually clear and powerful, but lacking in elaboration, so that it resists translation into detailed positive terms.

In his prose works there is more of this indirect criticism and implicit theorizing. Neither A Tale of a Tub nor The Battle of the Books makes its statement directly. "A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet" is ironical. The "Meditation upon a Broomstick" is a parody. Almost alone among the more considerable pieces, "A Letter to a Young Gentleman" advances ideas and definitions directly and explicitly.