TEXT, ‘TEXT’, AND SWIFT’S A TALE OF A TUB

Few printed texts make so apparent, or are so ingenious about, their textual nature and status as Swift’s A Tale of a Tub, and few have given rise to so much interpretative controversy. The Tale has been a focus of some of the key disagreements in modern critical theory.

It has been possible to think of the Tale as embodying, as the Apology of 1710 so repeatedly suggests, ‘the Author’s Intention’, its satiric purpose being ‘to expose the Abuses and Corruptions in Learning and Religion’.1 Readings of the Tale which explain that Swift uses the persona of a mad modern writer to exemplify and satirize scholastic and modern incoherence in learning and belief, and readings of the Tale (notably Ehrenpreis’s) which deny the use of a persona and invite us to seek ‘the direct sense implied by the irony’,2 have this in common: that they insist the Tale has an originating author, that this author’s meaning intention is there to be found, and that, despite all of the Tale’s evident complexity, a valid interpretation of its essential message can be offered. In particular such readings tend to argue that Swift sets up standards of plain, comprehensible expression, against which the vacancy and chaos of the Modern’s own writing, and interpretative principles, are found wanting.

More recently, however, the discussion of A Tale of a Tub has been dominated by a very different argument: that, far from satirizing expressive and interpretative incoherence, the Tale is a narrative without an authoritative voice, which sets out to exemplify the inevitable polysemy of writing, and, more especially, of print. In this view, it would be deluded to see A Tale of a Tub as even potentially stable, authoritative, bounded. The Tale is, in Barthesian terms, not a ‘work’ but a ‘text’, which ‘goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.)’.3 Textualizing studies have explored a number of the implications of this. In a recent essay Clive Probyn argues that, far from implicitly confirming by its satiric negatives a confident humanist belief in the comprehensibility and permanence of good writing and good printing, the Tale, as well as Gulliver’s Travels, reveals and explores Swift’s most fundamental fears about the transience of all printed texts: ‘a fear of supersession, the prospect of literary obsolescence, the anxiety of loss, the horror of obscurity, and the cancellation of history’.4 Nigel Wood has claimed that a key problem for the ‘Modern’ narrator of the Tale is ‘how to maintain one’s authority over the printed word . . . . The mediation of the printing-press did not necessarily ensure clarity or even a desirable measure of survival for one’s thoughts’.5 Other textualist critics suggest that Swift himself experienced and viewed this dilemma much as his modern persona did. Thomas Docherty takes the hack’s invitation to ‘every Prince in Christendom’ to appoint commentators on his Tale as evidence that

2 Irvin Ehrenpreis, Literary Meaning and Augustan Values (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1974), pp. 49–60 (p. 54).
Swift believed ‘a multiplicity of readings are sanctioned by the words of the text, independently of a supposedly pre-linguistic authorial intention or psychology’.

In an essay which argues, or assumes, that Swift thought of writing as dangerous supplement, Terry Castle describes the Tale as part of a ‘Swiftian critique of Text’, which takes in all writing, including the Bible:

Every writing is a source of corruption, no matter what authority — natural, divine, or archetypal — we may wishfully invest in it. Because they constitute an earthly text, the Scriptures themselves pathetically and paradoxically make up part of the fallen world of writing .... Swift does not state ... baldly that God’s text itself is corrupt, but ... the possibility is implicit everywhere in his satire.

Such recent readings of the Tale arise not only from the presumed difficulty or impossibility of identifying a securely present voice but also from the difficulties of establishing a context which might validate any voice. As Wood puts it, ‘as interpretation of the basic satiric context is problematic (such as, what is being attacked and on what authority), most textual critics have concluded that the main point of the Tale is to demonstrate the extreme difficulty of interpreting anything without a divine yardstick’ (p. 47). I would like to offer some qualifications of the textualist position by beginning to set A Tale of a Tub in a context which has been surprisingly little discussed, and which seems to me to have an immediate intellectual bearing on Swift’s discussion of Scripture, text, and meaning: that is, the argument between the Roman Church and the Anglican Church through much of the seventeenth century concerning Scripture as a rule of faith.

This polemic in very large part concerned itself, inevitably, with fundamental problems about the nature, determinacy, stability, and comprehensibility of the printed book. Questions of text and hermeneutics were obsessively debated, notably in William Chillingworth’s Religion of Protestants (1638), in the Dialogues (1640) of the exiled Romanist William Rushworth (and Chillingworth’s Answer), in John Sergeant’s Sure-Footing in Christianity (1665) and in Tillotson’s reply The Rule of Faith (1666), in Bossuet’s Exposition de la doctrine de l’Église Catholique (Paris, 1671) and its numerous English defenders and opponents, in Père Richard Simon’s magisterial Critical Histories of the Old and New Testaments (1678, 1689), and, most voluminously and passionately, in the debate of the 1680s between Anglican Churchmen (Tillotson, Sherlock, Stillingfleet, and others) and their Romanist adversaries led by John Gother. This was in no sense a set of peripheral pamphlet skirmishes, but a major war in the history of ideas, in which big guns on both sides were employed. The chief polemists of the reign of James II engaged as officially-sanctioned public representatives rather than private individuals, the works of Gother and many of the other Roman Catholic writers being regularly published by Henry Hills, ‘Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty’, and those of their opponents commonly appearing under the imprint of the English Church. The arguments employed in these debates have significant resonances for modern textual and hermeneutic

8 The Dialogues of William Richworth or the Judgment of Common Sense in the Choisie of Religion (Paris, 1640); An Answer to Some Passages in Rushworth’s Dialogues, printed in Chillingworth’s Works, ninth edition (1719).
9 The Rule of Faith; Or, An Answer to the Treatise of Mr. J. S. Entitled, Sure-Footing, &c (1666). All quotations from Tillotson in this article are from the Works, third edition (1701).
10 Quotations in this article from Père Simon are from A Critical History of the Old Testament. Written Originally in French by Father Simon ... Translated into English by a Person of Quality (London, 1682).
theory, and for the assessment of Swift’s textual and hermeneutic position in the *Tale*. In this essay I shall address myself chiefly to issues of textual theory.

‘Of Wills’, as the Peter of the *Tale* remarks, *duo sunt genera, Nuncupatory and scriptory* (p. 85). Peter’s preference for oral over written tradition is of course distinctly Roman, and as certainly not Swift’s. The written Testament consists of ‘certain plain, easy Directions’ (p. 190) and says nothing about gold lace; but oral tradition will allow, for Peter, a desirable extension of its licence: ‘For Brothers, if you remember, we heard a Fellow say when we were Boys, that he heard my Father’s Man say, that he heard my Father say, that he would advise his Sons to get Gold Lace on their Coats, as soon as ever they could procure Money to buy it’ (p. 86). The official Roman position, from the Counter-Reformation onwards, was that truth was to be found equally in the written Scriptures and in unwritten tradition.11 In their continuing polemic against Protestants, and against the inevitable Protestant dependence on Scripture as a rule of faith, however, Romanist writers repeatedly stressed what they thought to be the stability and continuity of oral tradition as preserved in the Church, the uncertainty of textual transmission and intrinsic textual interpretation, and the necessity of tradition to any safe understanding of Holy Scripture. Bossuet, in his *Exposition*, regarded by many as an official account of belief, insists that the Church is founded on an original spoken word: ‘JÉSUS-CHRIST ayant fondé son Église sur la prédication, la parole non écrite a esté la première regle du Christianisme; et lors que les Écritures du Nouveau Testament y ont esté jointes, cette parole n’a pas perdu pour cela son autorité’ (pp. 158–59). Similarly, John Gother, the leading, most ‘official’, and certainly the wittiest polemicist on the Catholic side of this debate in the reign of James II, insisted that Christ’s teaching was by word of mouth, and that the Apostles ‘Writing was only Accidental, occasion’d by reason of their Absence from those they would teach’.12 So the oral discourse takes precedence over the written text. The word of truth has been passed down from Christ to his Apostles, and thence through the agency of the Church to the modern believer. It is precisely the long, unbroken series of transmission, so much a joke to the Anglican Swift (‘we heard a Fellow say . . ., that he heard my Father’s Man say, that he heard my Father say . . .’) which for an orthodox Roman Catholic validated oral tradition: ‘n’étant pas possible de croire qu’une doctrine recevë dës le commencement de l’Église vienne d’une autre source que des Apôtres’ (Bossuet, *Exposition*, p. 160). By contrast with the institutionalized certainty of the chain of oral tradition, Scripture was characterized by Roman polemicists as inadequate, on its own, as a rule of faith: uncertain in its transmission, dubious in its translation, and dangerously ambiguous in its sense. ‘If we join not Tradition with the Scripture we can hardly affirm any thing for certain in Religion.’13

Anglicans resisted this privileging of the spoken word. Writing is neither an accident nor a substitute, but original, apostolic, fully equal to speech. If speech may be plain and comprehensible, so, argues Chillingworth, may writing. If the preaching of Christ and the Apostles could be understood by those who heard it, ‘why may we not be as well assured, that we understand sufficiently what we conceive plaine in their writings?’ (Religion of Protestants (1638), p. 111). Similarly, John Tillotson insisted that the Scriptures, not the oral tradition preserved in Peter’s Church,

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13 Simon, *Critical History of the Old Testament*, Author’s Preface br†.
‘are the means whereby the Christian Doctrine hath been brought down to us’. Like many of his Anglican contemporaries Tillotson understood that the defence of the Scriptures as a rule of faith inevitably depended on a defence of all writing and of all printed text as a determinate and reliable vehicle for the communication of meaning, fully equivalent to speech: ‘Whatever can be spoken in plain and intelligible words, and such as have a certain sense, may be written in the same words ... words are as intelligible when they are written as when they are spoken.’\(^{14}\) In principle books may be written ‘in plain and intelligible words’, just as the Father’s Will in *A Tale of a Tub* consists of ‘certain plain, easy Directions’, and just as the unambiguously comprehensible laws of Brobdingnag ‘are expressed in the most plain and simple Terms’.\(^{15}\)

Clearly, a crucial difference between oral and written (or printed) tradition is the presence or absence of the speaking subject. Nigel Wood, in his discussion of the Modern’s problem of control and authority over his published words in *A Tale of a Tub*, sums up a modern ‘textualist’ view of the uncertainties of writing and print consequent upon the disappearance of voice: ‘The printed word may bear the same marks [as “living” speech] of the author’s possession, but these are nominal compared with the speaker’s power to retract, qualify and employ physical indicators (facial expression, posture of the body or gestures)’ (pp. 38–39). The same argument was well known to Roman apologists. To have set down in writing even *exactly* the words Christ used in his spoken preaching could not have been enough, argues William Rushworth for example, to communicate Christ’s meaning:

> Let him have written in the same language, and let him have set downe everie word and sillable, yet men conversant in noting the changes of meanings in words, will tell you, that divers accents in the pronunciation of them, the turning of the speakers head or bodie this way or that way, ... may so change the sense of the words that they will seeme quite different in writing from what they were in speaking. (*Dialogues* (1640), pp. 275–76)

For Tillotson, however, the Scriptures are a fully adequate replacement for the presence of the speaking subject. In *The Rule of Faith* he quotes Eusebius to the effect that Matthew ‘by the diligence and pains of Writing, did abundantly supply the want of his presence to those whom he left’ (*Works*, p. 751). Tillotson quotes Rushworth’s words on ‘divers accents’ and ‘the turning of the speaker’s head’, and comments with a fine ironic anxiety for the necessary preservation of the gestural machinery:

> I hope that Oral and Practical Tradition hath been careful to preserve all these circumstances, and hath deliver’d down Christ’s Doctrine with all the right *Traditionary Accents, Nods and Gestures*, necessary to the understanding of it; otherwise the omission of these may have so altered the sense of it, that it may be now quite different from what it was at first. (*Works*, p. 696)

Oral tradition is reduced by Tillotson to an actor’s inherited repertoire of poses. It is perhaps a disappointment not to find such a traditionary pantomime portrayed in *A Tale of a Tub*.

Modern accounts of the status and independence of text cover the spectrum, from the view that texts not only have an objective existence but contain meaning, to the


view that texts are mere constructs, without physical existence. In *Objective Knowledge* Karl Popper argues that printed texts belong to the ‘third world’ of *objective contents of thought*, especially of scientific and poetic thoughts and works of art. A book, and its inherent meaning, have an objective existence, whether or not they are perceived by a knowing subject.16 Perhaps the closest to Popper’s view amongst modern literary theorists is E. D. Hirsch, who, though he accepts that ‘meaning is an affair of consciousness’ and that ‘the text does not exist even as a sequence of words until it is construed’, none the less insists that an author’s text embodies a determinate, self-identical, bounded meaning.17 On the whole, however, recent theorists of text have not been willing to accept Popper’s invitation to consider ‘the objects of our understanding’ in the humanities as ‘third-world’ objects, rather than as objects belonging to the ‘second world’ of mental states (pp. 106, 160–62). In particular, Derrida offers a ‘graphocentric’ model in which the text, shorn of the delusory presence of the speaking voice, becomes marks on paper, ‘noir sur blanc’, signifying only through difference. ‘Text’ has become open, destabilized, indeterminate, subject to interpretation, and indeed already multiply-interpreted.

Forms of the argument that truth and life inhere in spoken language, whereas writing is necessarily dead and incapable of explaining itself, go back to Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Here Socrates denies that ‘one can transmit or acquire clear and certain knowledge of an art through the medium of writing’. Written discourses, consisting merely of ink marks, are no more than the ‘shadow’ of ‘the living and animate speech of a man with knowledge’.18 St Paul platonizes, influentially, in 11 Corinthians 3. 6: ‘The letter killeth, but the spirit [*pneuma*] giveth life.’ A similar emphasis is offered by the cabalistic tradition that ‘the written Torah can take on corporeal form only through the power of the oral Torah’. The ‘ink on parchment’ of the written Torah cannot be understood, *does not exist*, except through the oral Torah, the interpretation which realizes it, which gives it sense. (My reference here, traditionally, is to Harold Bloom, quoting Scholem, quoting Rabbi Isaac the Blind.)19

As far as questions of the relative status of speech and writing were concerned, Romanist apologists in the century before Swift were the heirs of Plato and of the cabalists, insisting on the certainty and life of speech, against what they considered the dangerous indeterminacy, the deadness, of the written or printed text. The theme appears explicitly and repeatedly in the writings of French and English Romanists. John Sergeant’s *Sure-Footing* insists, typically, on the difference between the living truth of Christ’s words, and the ‘dead Letters’ or ‘dead Characters’ of the Scripture (pp. 127, 194).20 Sense is not inherent in the ‘Scripture’, by which word Protestants can mean only ‘that Book not yet senc’t or interpreted, but as *yet to be senc’t*’ (p. 13). Worse, the black marks of Scripture are ‘waxen-natur’d’ characters, dangerously polysemous, ‘fit to be plaid upon diversly by quirks of wit’ (p. 68). Sergeant is one of those who take what Popper calls the ‘mistaken subjective approach to knowledge’, believing that ‘a book is nothing without a reader: … otherwise it is just paper with black spots on it’ (*Objective Knowledge*, p. 115). For Sergeant, as for other Romanist apologists, it is Tradition which provides the text

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with a reader, giving determinate and living sense to the inert and mouldable words of the Holy Book: ‘Tradition is to sence Scripture’s Letter; and so that Letter no Rule but by virtue of Tradition .... Tradition gives us Christ’s Sence, that is, the Life of the Letter ascertain’d to our hands’ (pp. 130, 149).21 Similarly, Richard Simon argues that ‘the Church ... alone is possess’d of the Scripture, because she possesses the true sence thereof’. Even if ‘there were no Copies of the Bible in the World, Religion would be preserv’d, because the Church would always subsist’ (iii. 160). Religion and civilization are preserved not in the physical Bible (or in a complete set of Everyman’s Library floating on the waters) but in the continuing mind of the living Church. The contrast between such a textual scepticism and the objectivism of Popper could scarcely be clearer: one of Popper’s most dramatic knock-down arguments is the proposal of a ‘thought experiment’ in which all ‘our subjective learning’ (tradition, in fact) is destroyed, but ‘libraries and our capacity to learn from them survive’ (Objective Knowledge, pp. 107–08), enabling the continuation of our world.

Seventeenth-century Anglican apologists were conscious of the need to argue that the sense of Scripture, in essential points, is inherent in the words of Scripture, and may be understood without tradition’s explication. William Chillingworth cast his Answer to some Passages in Rushworth’s Dialogues in the form of a dialogue between ‘Uncle’ and ‘Nephew’. The Roman Catholic Uncle is made to assert that the sense of Scripture is ‘a distinct thing from the naked Letter’, belonging ‘to Tradition rather than Express Text of Scripture’. The Protestant Nephew replies that, in all those parts of Scripture which belong ‘to faith and good manners’ the sense is inherent and clear; such passages ‘carry their meaning in their foreheads’ (Works, p. 58). Later in the century Tillotson similarly rejected Sergeant’s premise ‘that [Protestants] cannot by the Scriptures mean the Sense of them but the book’. Just as books of statute law can sufficiently convey knowledge to men, so Scripture can sufficiently convey Christ’s doctrine; sense is inherent in both. Protestants ‘mean by the Scriptures, Books written in such words as do sufficiently express the sense and meaning of Christ’s Doctrine’ (Rule of Faith, pp. 672, 673).

Ultimately the Protestant belief, that the Scriptures have an inherent and determinate sense, validly interpretable, required justification by a developed hermeneutic theory, including especially questions of authorial intention and historical context.22 John Wilson argued that the Scriptures ‘have a true Sense Originally and Essentially in themselves, given them by their Author when they were first indited’; that ‘the Sense of Scripture is fixt and immutable, not varying with the times, ... no other than what it always had, and ever will have to the Worlds end’; that ‘the Rule of Interpretation is that which gives us the objective Evidence by which the true Sense of Scripture is discern’d’ (The Scripture’s Genuine Interpreter Asserted (1678), pp. 5–6). Such a hermeneutic was essential to a sophisticated defence of the Anglican view of the status of the Holy Scripture in particular, and of the book in general. It is also strikingly, and unsurprisingly, close to the position of such a modern objectivist as Hirsch.

The Roman argument for oral tradition shifts meaning, and authority, away from the text itself, and places both in the hands of Rome, the divinely-authorized interpreter. The argument is, explicitly, not confined to the Bible, but applicable, in principle, to any book. John Sergeant argues that if we read Aristotle (an author who

21 See Bossuet, Exposition, p. 162.
22 I discuss the hermeneutic arguments of Anglican writers at greater length in a forthcoming article.
was to become the standard example for this area of the debate), we cannot be sure of his ‘Certain Sence’ unless

the Point he writes on be first clear’d to us through a Scientifical discourse by word of mouth, made by some Interpreter vers’d in his Doctrin and perfectly acquainted with his meaning . . . . Now what a well-skill’d and insighted Interpreter or scientifical Explicator . . . is to such an Author, the same is Tradition to Scripture. (Sure-Footing, pp. 146–47)

In his reply to Sergeant, Tillotson concentrated on questions of the relative status of text and traditional commentary:

Suppose there were a controversie now on foot, how Men might come to know what was the true Art of Logick which Aristotle taught his Scholars; and some should be of opinion, that the only way to know this would be by Oral Tradition from his Scholars; which he might easily understand by consulting those of the present Age, who learned it from those who received it from them, who at last had it from Aristotle himself: But others should think it the surest way to study his Organon, a Book acknowledged by all his Scholars, to have been written by himself, and to obtain that Doctrine which he taught them. (Works, p. 668)

Tillotson does not attempt to prohibit commentary, or to deny the possible value of tradition: ‘These have been of good helps.’ To argue for the possibility of valid interpretation does not logically presage an end to all commentary, the mere reproduction of a supposedly pristine text, untainted by explanation. But Tillotson does insist on the central status of the text as the ‘measure and standard’ of the author’s doctrine, communicated in ‘the obvious sense of his words’. There is a clear parallel with the Father’s Will in the Tale: known to have been written by its author, consisting of ‘certain plain easy directions’, the repository of truth to which Martin and Jack have eventually to appeal if they are to challenge Peter’s forced and forcing commentary. Peter is ‘the Scholastick Brother’ (p. 89), not merely because he applies perverse ingenuity to particular interpretative cruces but because he is characteristically a scholastic commentator, heir to a tradition which decentralizes and destabilizes Scripture. For Peter, his scholia replace the text itself; he allows no appeal beyond his subjective interpretations to any objective, publicly accessible truth.

Swift’s examination of the relation of text and commentary is not confined to Peter’s interpretation of the Father’s Will. At one point the hack is confident that the ‘Learned among Posterity’ ‘will appoint . . . Commentators upon this elaborate Treatise’ (p. 114); at another, that ‘sublime Spirits . . . shall be appointed to labor in a universal Comment upon this wonderful Discourse’ (p. 186). He proposes that each Prince of Christendom might ‘take seven of the deepest Scholars in his Dominions, and shut them up close for seven Years, in seven Chambers, with a Command to write seven ample Commentaries on this comprehensive Discourse’ (p. 185). The text indeed already presents itself as overwhelmed by commentary. The kernel tale is introduced by a hack whose digressions, from the start lengthy, become less and less discrete, and at last force the ‘text’ out of sight altogether. The hack’s account is reached only through a maze of prefatory materials attributed to a variety of voices. Wotton’s notes are hoisted in, only to become themselves the subject of further commentary: for example, to call the coats given to each of the three sons ‘the Garments of the Israelites’ is ‘an Error (with Submission) of the learned Commentator; for by the Coats are meant the Doctrine and Faith of Christianity’ (p. 73). Clearly, the ‘text’ is becoming replaced by, is becoming, its commentaries. The principle that A Tale of a Tub exemplifies is stated clearly by the hack. Arguing as a Modern, he insists
that, ‘tho’ Authors need be little consulted, yet Criticks, and Commentators, and Lexicons carefully must’ (p. 148).

Formal parody of the gloss-making excesses of dull scholastic pedantry was of course to become a familiar method of Augustan humanist satire, reaching its apogee no doubt in the Dunciad Variorum. There are, however, some theoretical and historical implications of Swift’s use of the form in A Tale of a Tub which need further exploration. A recent article by Louis Hay discusses the history of ‘text’ as term and concept. Hay points out that for a long time an important sense of ‘text’ was ‘les propres paroles d’un auteur, considérées par rapport aux notes, aux commentaires, aux gloses’. These are the words of the French Academy Dictionary of 1786. Hay’s further citations make it clear that this sense of ‘text’ as something specifically distinct from gloss or commentary was pervasive. The examples in the Oxford English Dictionary (‘text’ sense 2) show that this sense operated in England at least as early as the fourteenth century. OED’s definition reads thus: ‘text: The very words and sentences as originally written, ... in the original form and order, as distinguished from a commentary ... or from annotations. Hence, in later use, the body of any treatise, the authoritative or formal part as distinguished from notes, appendices, introduction, and other explanatory or supplementary matter’. The last sentence of OED’s definition is obviously pertinent to the Tale, where distinction between text and ‘notes, appendices, introduction, and other explanatory or supplementary matter’ collapses.

Such a definition of ‘text’ is of course tendentious. The text may be thought of as pure, formal, original, authorial, canonical. Its commentary may be thought of as unauthorized, derivative, distorted, corrupt, apocryphal. As Hay points out, ‘what is implied in such an arrangement is a distinction between the sacred and the profane’ (p. 65). To make the distinction so as to privilege the text, to give it canonic status and accept it as the determinate statement of an identifiable voice, is the Anglican position, the position of Martin and, I think, of Swift. Anglicans regarded the text of the Bible as, to use Barthes’s changed terminology, a ‘work’; ‘the author is reputed the father and the owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the author’s declared intentions’ (‘From Work to Text’, p. 160). Martin attempts to reform his religion by ‘serving the true Intent and Meaning of his Father’s Will’ (Tale, pp. 136–37). To collapse the distinction between text and gloss, to allow the original text to become subordinate to and lost in a controlling critical apparatus, is the position of Peter and the Modern writer. Both are scholiasts, writers of scholia. Both operate with a ‘modern’, scholastic view of textuality. In Barthes’s words, ‘no vital “respect” is due to the Text: it can be broken (which is just what the Middle Ages did with two nevertheless authoritative texts — Holy Scripture and Aristotle); it can be read without the guarantee of its father’ (‘From Work to Text’, p. 161). The difference is that Peter and the Modern know that a text need not be ‘broken’ if it can be submerged or displaced by commentary.

The discussion of ‘text’ and Swift’s Tale needs also to include another specific sense of the word: the material form of what we read, and its transmission. For most of this century, academic editing has worked on the assumption that it is the editor’s task to recover the text intended by an author. The genealogy of this assumption may be traced back to the Renaissance humanists, who attempted to establish

reliable texts of classical authors and, more especially, to go beyond the corrupted Vulgate and recover God’s pristine Word. For the last two decades, however, debates about scholarly editing have increasingly had to address problems of textual ontology as well as technical problems of transmission. Is there an ‘author’? What can ‘intended’ mean? What sense does it make to speak of ‘the text’, to entertain the belief that there is an original text to recover, or that confident reconstruction is possible? The posing of such questions acquired a special impetus from Roland Barthes’s essay ‘From Work to Text’, and has grown stronger in the post-structuralist years. As early as 1971 Morse Peckham insisted, in an article entitled ‘Reflections on the Foundations of Modern Textual Editing’, that the textual editor works not with ‘printed artifacts as physical objects’ but with ‘human behaviour in the past, human behaviour that no longer exists and cannot now be examined’. Inevitably, the editor’s text is not a recovered original but a ‘construct’. For Peckham, analytical bibliography, like historiography, cannot be ‘scientific’; ‘It is not talking about anything which is empirically, phenomenally, observable now, about anything which lies outside discourse.’ The Popperian answer is that discourse itself belongs to ‘the world of intelligibles, or of ideas in the objective sense’ (Objective Knowledge, p. 154), and is as much a real object for ‘scientific’ enquiry as nuclear physics. Popper makes the point explicitly in reference to textual editing. The ‘method of problem solving, the method of conjecture and refutation’, is common to science and the humanities; ‘it is practised in reconstructing a damaged text as well as in constructing a theory of radioactivity’ (p. 185). Deconstruction, however, has continued to mount a theoretical challenge to the notion that there is an ‘ideal’ text to reconstruct. Lee Patterson’s words, in an essay on the iconoclastic Kane/Donaldson Piers Plowman, may be taken as a representative application of Derridean concepts to the theoretical field of editing: ‘For the postmodern critic, the text is a bricolage... insofar as the subject is constituted by its enunciation rather than vice versa, the very concept of a holograph as a text inscribed by its author becomes problematic.’

There is no disputing that A Tale of a Tub ‘as a text inscribed by its author’ is ‘problematic’. The work does not bear Swift’s name, and the Apology intimates, with what credibility it is hard to establish, that ‘in the Authors Original Copy there were not so many Chasms as appear in the Book’ (p. 17). The words of the ‘modern’ author come to us, sometimes for the modern’s own tactical reasons, with the signal losses of faulty transmission: here there is a ‘Hiatus in MS.’ (p. 62), there ‘multa desiderantur’ (p. 170), in another place ‘desunt nonnulla’ (p. 200). The modern’s whispered explanation concerning one of the students of Bedlam evaporates into the safety of blanks (p. 179), and the note emphasizes that such chasms invite ‘conjecture’, and ‘more than one interpretation’. Such textual absences and polysemy seem certainly attributable to the Modern, but may not be so safely attributable to Swift. Whatever accidents the ‘Original Copy’ referred to in the Apology may have met with, it is at least clear that a concept of original copy exists. There is a stable text in the Tale, though the Modern author (understanding that to offer quotation as evidence is a deluded humanist empiricism) naturally does not attempt substantially to reproduce it. Swift himself, however,
might be thought to have been so convinced of the effectiveness and value of humanist textual scholarship that he could think the project of textual reconstruction credible, if not unproblematic. Martin and Jack are able, once they have found the Father's Will, to make a 'Copia vera' without apparent difficulty (p. 121). For Swift a true humanist textual criticism, whose business is to recover the lost original, is possible: 'By the Word Critick, have been meant, the Restorers of Antient Learning from the Worms, and Graves, and Dust of Manuscripts' (p. 93). This is the Modern's second kind of 'false' critic, by clear implication for the intelligent reader therefore not a Grubean pedant but a humanist scholar. Guthkelch and Nichol Smith's note here makes the appropriate comparison with Temple's praise of those editors who have 'restored' old copies, and 'recovered' the jewels of ancient learning from the dust and rubbish. Also possible, however, to those of less pure motive and more duncely skills, has been the perversion and distortion of the text. The 'main Precept' of the Father's Will is that the sons must not add to, or diminish, their religion without a 'positive Command in the Will' (p. 81). Where a command does not exist, commentary may supply it. Here, as elsewhere, the Modern does not quote from the Will, but the note of 1734 makes the obviously germane reference to the anathema in Revelations 22. 18, 19, against textual omissions and additions: 'If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life.' Both Peter and Jack invite the curse. Peter justifies the addition to their coats of 'flame Coloured Sattin for Linings' (the addition to religion of the doctrine of purgatory) by arguing the desirability of appending to the Will a new-fangled (in fact an Apocryphal) 'Codicil' (pp. 86–87). Jack uses pieces and scrapings and inches of the Will on every occasion of his life (p. 190). Taken short, he remains filthy because of his application of a 'Passage' (Revelations 22. 11) which may have been 'foisted in by the transcriber' (p. 191).

The Tale arguably presents a contrast, then, between a stated humanist belief in the possibility of recovery and transmission of a true copy, and that modern scepticism which displays the incoherence of textual transmission and allows subjective application of the text. In this the Tale echoes, once more, a characterizing disagreement between Roman and Anglican polemicists in the later seventeenth century. Romanists argued that all textual transmission is inescapably subject to error and corruption, whether accidental or malicious, and that the Copia vera is an impossible dream. Anglicans had to defend the Scripture as a rule of faith by arguing that true texts could indeed, given scholarly effort, good will, and God's help, be recovered from the dust and worms.

Rushworth sets out the normal Roman arguments particularly fully and clearly. Salvation or damnation are at issue; if Scripture is to be a judge of controversies, 'everie word, everie letter, and everie tit[le] must be admitted of absolute and uncontroable certaintie' (Dialogues, pp. 244–45). Scripture, however, is inevitably faulty, because of 'the multitudes of nations and languages' and the 'mutabilitie of the world, ever subject to a thousand accidents' (pp. 247, 248). Familiarly, to a modern editor of secular texts, the process of transcription introduces errors 'by the negligence of Servants, which copied the Bible', who may have been mercenary, or 'witlesse', or 'weary' (pp. 250–52, 253). For John Sergeant, similarly, the 'material characters' of Scripture are as liable to destruction, to be 'burnt, torn, blotted, worn out', as any other object in this fallen world. Its transmission has inevitably been
subject to the weakness of mortal behaviour, and the many diverse readings of the numerous surviving copies show that ‘Scripture’s Letter may be uncertain in every tittle’. For Romans, so long as textual transmission is a human activity, the certainty essential to faith is impossible. Just as meaning can be guaranteed only by the divine presence (immediately in God’s own spoken words, mediately in the Church), so textual accuracy can be guaranteed only by divine providence. Just as Scripture’s ‘sense’ is located not in the Scripture itself but in the Church, so the accuracy of a text of Scripture cannot be established by textual criticism, and may be validated only by the conformity of its readings with Church doctrine.

In this debate the Romans had some inevitable laws of information transmission on their side. Human transcription must produce error. The attempt to bypass the series of transmission and return to a now-lost original is bound to involve some degree of editorial construction. In their replies Protestant apologists argued that reliable transmission of the Holy Scripture, as of other books, was in principle possible. Tillotson’s words in The Rule of Faith are typical: ‘The Books of Scripture are conveyed down to us, without any material corruption or alteration. And he that denies this, must ... reject the authority of all Books, because we cannot be certain whether they be the same now as they were at first’ (Works, pp. 660–61). Absolute textual accuracy, the ‘tittles’ on which Rushworth and Sergeant had insisted, was not essential, provided that those passages which communicate truths necessary to faith were not substantially faulty. Arthur Bury, Rector of Exeter College, insisted that: The Scriptures cannot be denied to be sufficient, though they may have suffered the common Fate of all long-lived Books, by Carelessness of Copiers, Fraud of Hereticks, or Dust of Time ... if all the rest of the Scripture were lost, but only those Texts which proclaim those Truths, to the Belief whereof eternal Life is promised; those few texts would be sufficient. (The Naked Gospel (1690), p. 43)

However much of a concession this may seem, there lies behind it a confident assumption that the Scripture, like other texts, like ‘all long-lived Books’, contains an essential message, and continues adequately to communicate even where noise intrudes. The evident contingency of transmission is not allowed to lead to a despairing scepticism. For Swift and his Anglican contemporaries, that scepticism was familiar both as a Romanist and as a deist position. John Sergeant had warned his Protestant opponents that to make Scripture, with its ‘almost innumerable Variae Lectiones’, a sole rule of faith was to leave themselves without an answer to a deist’s challenge, which Sergeant imagined posed in these terms: ‘All depends on the Truth of the Copies immediately taken from the Original, or the very next to them; which, what they were, by whom taken, where and how preserved from time to time, how narrowly examined when they were first transcribed ... is buried in obscurity and oblivion’ (Sure-Footing, pp. 31–32). Sergeant was prophetic: precisely such a charge would be made by the deist Anthony Collins in his Discourse of Free-Thinking (1713). Understanding his position in the history of this idea, Collins pointed out that ‘the Priests of all Christian Churches differ among themselves’ about the copies, readings, and senses of Scripture, and reminded his readers that ‘the Popish Priests contend that the Text of Scripture is so corrupted, precarious, and unintelligible, that we are to depend on the Authority of the Church’ (pp. 54, 55). Worse, the chaos of text

28 See Tillotson, Works, p. 678.
undercuts all books. Collins quotes (translating from the original Latin) Whitby’s apocalyptic response to John Mills’s listing of some thirty thousand textual variants in the Greek New Testament: ‘Nothing certain can be expected from Books, where there are various Readings in every Verse’ (p. 89). Swift’s parodic ‘abstract’ of Collins’s, and Whitby’s, words on the textual unreliability of the Bible clearly implies Swift’s understanding that to attack scriptural authority is inevitably (and in Swift’s view absurdly) to question the book itself, to deny the possibility of the transmission of doctrine and information in any book at all:

All Christian Priests differ so much about the Copies of [their Scriptures], and about the various Readings of the several Manuscripts, which quite destroys the Authority of the Bible: For what Authority can a Book pretend to, where there are various Readings? And for this reason, it is manifest that no Man can know the Opinions of Aristotle or Plato, or believe the Facts related by Thucydides or Livy, or be pleased with the Poetry of Homer and Virgil, all which Books are utterly useless, upon account of their various Readings.29

Richard Bentley’s devastating demolition of Collins (Remarks upon a Late Discourse of Freethinking (1719)) insists, just as Swift does here, that the textual case of Scripture is the same as that of other books. Mills’s listing of the Greek Testament’s numerous variants did not, as Whitby had feared and Collins had claimed, ‘prove the Text of Scripture precarious’; such variants, Bentley insists, ‘must necessarily have happened from the Nature of Things, and what are common and in equal proportion in all Classicks whatever’. The Scriptures are no less, and no more, subject to textual variation than other books. Like Swift, Bentley can afford to be relaxed about textual variance in Scripture, not because (with Pere Simon, or modern textualists) he believes all text vulnerable and corrupt but because he is convinced the message an author intends can be adequately transmitted in a written text despite the inevitable accumulation of (generally minor) error. The ocean of meaning cannot be swallowed by one, or thirty thousand, soiled fish of the textual sea. Of ancient writers, such as Cicero and Plutarch, the ‘Remains are sufficiently pure and genuine, to make us sure of the Writer’s design’; the presence of ‘a corrupt line or dubious reading’ need not be thought ‘to darken the whole Context’. Just as secular texts sufficiently communicate the author’s intended meaning, so, despite all its textual changes, Scripture ‘is perfect and sufficient to all the great ends and purposes of its first Writing’.30

This contextual evidence leads me to venture qualifications of some common assumptions in recent textualizing criticism of A Tale of a Tub. I am not convinced that the Tale is ‘the most devastating onslaught on the authenticity of The Book in literary history to date’ (Probyn, p. 189). Attacking the Book was a Roman Catholic activity: Anglicans tended to avoid sawing off the branch they sat on. It is reading particularly sharply against the grain to impute to Swift a radical textual scepticism which was evidently associated in his mind with the scholiasts, medieval and contemporary (and both ‘modern’) that he mocks, and with controvertists whose concern, for many decades before the Tale, had been to attack the Anglican Church and the assumptions about the nature and status of text upon which the Anglican Church indispensably and explicitly founded itself. The ‘Apology’ claims that the Tale ‘celebrates the Church of England as the most perfect of all others in Discipline

29 Mr. C.—ns’s Discourse of Free-Thinking, Put into Plain English, by Way of Abstract, for the Use of the Poor (1713), Prose Writings, iv (1957), 33;
30 Remarks upon a Late Discourse of Freethinking, in Enchiridion Theologicum, edited by John Randolph, 5 vols (1792), v, 156, 160, 163, 173–74.
and Doctrine, it advances no Opinion they reject, nor condemns any they receive' (p. 5). Unless we are prepared to think this claim wholly disingenuous, or by reason of lapse of time or otherwise a wholly inaccurate account of Swift's intentions, we might do well to be cautious about reading into A Tale of a Tub attitudes to text radically opposite to fundamental Anglican positions.

Clive Probyn argues, in the context of the later debate with Collins, that for Swift the Bible was a special case; precisely because 'all language and therefore all texts are prone to deconstruct themselves', the anarchy of individualist reading must be corrected, must, 'in the single case of the Bible', be controlled by expert interpretation (p. 193). For Swift the Scriptures, for political as well as for religious reasons, needed to be vested with a distinguishing authority and respect. He knew that in a mortal world language and text are prone to be corrupted and forced (not, however, 'to deconstruct themselves'), and he had no naive misconception that the text of Scripture was angel-guarded. None the less, he did not consider Scripture a 'single case', and did not give up all the rest of written discourse as inevitably indeterminate, unstable, or opaque. Earlier Anglican writers, as I have said, in defending the text of Scripture as a rule of faith, explicitly and repeatedly defended the Bible on the grounds that, like any other printed book, it is determinable and comprehensible, an adequate means of conveying meaning. Any writing, in principle, may be good writing; though it may very well also be possible to write on nothing, to write darkly, deliberately to solicit misleading commentary.

We have learnt to collapse distinctions between primary and secondary texts, between author and critic. 'A strong reading is the only text', as Bloom puts it. Recent comment on A Tale of a Tub has therefore been less concerned with the possible difference between text and commentary. Probyn, for example, writes that 'self-assertion as author or textual commentator is the sure Swiftian sign of amor sui' (p. 190). Authorship as the 'modern' conceives it, no doubt, for Swift is mere self-love. A Tale of a Tub, however, exemplifies throughout the essential Anglican (and humanist) distinction between a present real author and a parasitic commentator, between sacred original text and corrupt gloss. In Gulliver's Travels Swift uses Aristotle, as earlier Anglican apologists had done, as his exemplary case in the argument against self-serving commentary and its distortions of authorial meaning; Gulliver summons Aristotle, and Homer, to Glubbdubdrib, and learns that their commentators keep their distance in the lower world, shamed 'because they had so horribly misrepresented the Meaning of those Authors to Posterity' (Prose Writings, xi, 197).

Is it safe to assume Swift finds text problematic and speech divine and safe? Terry Castle argues that Swift's model of speech and writing is Platonic: 'The written object is a material rendering of something ideal, the pure world of speech' (p. 34). This does not in fact seem very convincingly supported by Castle's references to Swift's text itself, either to the fourth Voyage of Gulliver's Travels (in which the Houyhnhnms' purely oral traditions lead them to debate repeatedly the single proposition, 'whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth'),31 or to the Tale, which includes a lengthy satire on aeolist oral preaching. (The aeolists should perhaps put us in mind of the Platonic view of good, 'pneumatological', 'natural writing',

31 Prose Writings, xi, 271.
immediately united to the voice and to breath'). According to Castle, the account in the ‘Apology’ of the imperfect transmission of the text of the Tale ‘hints’ that all texts are ‘impure in regard to the world of spoken discourse, which maintains here an assumed priority’ (p. 34). This assumption of the priority of the voice seems to me nowhere stated or implied in the ‘Apology’ or in the Tale itself. Such an accommodation of Swift’s writing as Castle makes to an originally Platonic, and wholly alien, textual value-system, seems to me possible only as a consequence of seeking what meanings the Tale may have through its absences, and, more especially, by operating without reference to contexts of textual theory in the years immediately before Swift wrote the Tale, contexts which at least define the terms of debate and at most delimit the lines of textual argument open to Swift.

Criticism of A Tale of a Tub used to assume that Swift made a distinction between competent and incompetent writing. The Hack writes badly, and invites indulgent interpretation, but there is a plain and meaningful text, the Will, whose interpretation is possible and necessary. Castle, however, denies that it is possible to ‘separate good texts from bad texts’; ‘No text is privileged in regard to truth; no text is scriptural’ (Castle, p. 37). The Will is not only corrupted and distorted but also, in itself, ‘a deathly, parasitic, artefact’ (p. 35), feeding off the speech that gave it birth. These conclusions do not follow logically from the Tale. The aim of the Tale is ‘to expose the Abuses and Corruptions in Learning and Religion’ (‘Apology’, p. 12). To attack abuses and corruptions is not, as the ‘Apology’ insists, necessarily to attack learning or religion themselves, nor does such an attack logically deny the possibility of a genuine learning or a true religion. Many of the abuses and corruptions are, certainly, textual. The existence of corrupt texts is not, however, proof that all texts are, because of the nature of textuality itself, corrupt. More especially, the practice of abusive methods of interpretation of the Will is not proof either of the Will’s inherent corruption or of the impossibility of believing in good interpretation. There is no disputing that Swift’s satire reflects ‘upon the problematic status of the written word’ (Castle, p. 33), its vulnerability to mistransmission and misinterpretation. It is natural that a modern textual scepticism would wish to appropriate this central concern and energy in the Tale in support of the much more radical proposition that all text is fundamentally and inevitably ‘compromised, de-natured, separated from truth at its moment of origin’ (Castle, p. 35). Nothing in the Tale, however, gives clear indication that Swift held this much more extreme position, and the powerful and immediately relevant intellectual context I have outlined makes it very unlikely that he could possibly have done so.

I do not wish to simplify. Clearly the meaning or meanings of A Tale of a Tub are not straightforwardly given by, or in any simple way controlled by, the context of intellectual debate I have outlined. Recent textualizing critics have indispensably focused attention on Swift’s obsessive concern with the nature, status, and stability of writing itself. I do, however, wish to argue that we now too readily impute to Swift a notion of text to which he simply cannot have subscribed. Of course, Swift is not Chillingworth, or Tillotson, or Ehrenpreis. But he is not Rabbi Isaac, or Bossuet, or Derrida, either.

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