Ab Ovo: Swift’s Small-Endians and Big-Endians and Transubstantiation

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The Greatest Concern of Meum and Tuum, Ly’s in
Hoc est Corpus Meum.

Samuel Butler, Prose Observations

I

While in Lilliput, Gulliver is treated to a crash course in the country’s political and religious history. The ‘two great Empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu’, Reldresal, ‘Principal Secretary […] of private Affairs’, instructs the voyager, have been engaged in long and murderous warfare. The occasion for all this warring, Reldresal explains, was a conflict about the breaking of eggs, the ‘primitive Way’ of which ‘was upon the larger End’. ‘But his present Majesty’s Grand-father, while he was a Boy’, the Secretary continues, ‘going to eat an Egg, and breaking it according to the ancient Practice, happened to cut one of his Fingers’, with unforeseen consequences. ‘The Emperor his Father’, Reldresal expatiates:

published an Edict, commanding all his Subjects, upon great Penalties, to break the smaller End of their Eggs. The People so highly resented this Law, that our Histories tell us, there have been six Rebellions raised on that Account, wherein one Emperor lost his Life, and another his Crown. These civil Commotions were constantly fomented by the Monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire. It is computed, that eleven Thousand Persons have, at several Times, suffered Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller End. Many hundred large Volumes have been published upon this Controversy: But the Books of the Big-Endians have been long forbidden, and the whole Party rendred incapable by Law of holding Employments. During the Course of these Troubles, the Emperors of Blefuscu did frequently expostulate by their Ambassadors, accusing us of making a Schism in Religion, by offending against a fundamental Doctrine of our great Prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth Chapter of the
Brundrecal [...] This, however, is thought to be a mere Strain upon the Text: For the Words are these; That all true Believers shall break their Eggs at the convenient End: and which is the convenient End, seems, in my humble Opinion, to be left to every Man’s Conscience, or at least in the Power of the chief Magistrate to determine.¹ (I, iv, 5)

This account is significant on a variety of counts, structurally and allegorically, historically and symbolically, all of them interrelated, of course. Superficially, it is also a teasing inversion of the Horatian admonition, which grew into a proverb, never to begin a story from the egg, ab ovo.²

Structurally, the episode is a ritardando: it not so much develops the sequence of events surrounding Gulliver as it opens up a vista of the Lilliputian past, that is, English political and religious history. In that respect, it anticipates, and supplements, the ‘utopian’ Chapter vi, which in its first part (paragraphs 1–18) describes the legal, moral, and educational constitution of the Lilliputian, that is, English, res publica.³

¹ The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, ed. by Herbert Davis and others, 16 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939–68; various re-impressions [sometimes corrected]), XI, 49–50. All following quotations are from this edition, abbreviated as Prose Works.

² Horace, Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica, ed. and trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, and London: William Heinemann, 1965 [1926]), p. 462: ‘nec gemino bellum Trojanum orditur ab ovo; | semper ad eventum festinat et in medias res | non secus ac notas auditorem rapit’ (ll. 147–49). Horace was referring to the amorous adventure of Zeus with Nemesis, metamorphosed as swan and goose, respectively. From one of Nemesis’s eggs, Helen, the most beautiful of women, was born. Married to Menelaus, King of Sparta, she was carried away by Paris to Troy, and thus became instrumental in the outbreak of the Trojan War. In Swift’s parodic account, then, wars are not only initiated by the sexual lust of kings (Prose Works, I, 103), the ‘Ambition of Princes’ (Prose Works, XI, 53 [I, v, 4], and the ‘Avarice’ of Generals (Prose Works, III, 80–85), they also start ‘from eggs’.

³ For the best interpretation of its function(s), see Dirk F. Passmann, ‘The Lilliputian Utopia: A Revised Focus’,
Although in Swift studies there is little that is uncontested, consensus on the allegorical character of this episode seems almost universal.\(^4\) Irvin Ehrenpreis summarized the long history of this consensus when jotting down, in the firm and unmistakable manner so characteristic of him, the story’s allegorical equivalents in the margin of his own copy of *Gulliver’s Travels*, now at the Ehrenpreis Centre at Münster:

> the primitive way of breaking Eggs] Romans Catholics
> his present Majesty’s Grand-father] Henry VIII
> The People so highly resented this Law] Protestants
> one Emperor lost his Life] Charles I
> another his Crown] James II
> Monarchs of Blefuscu] France
> But the Books of the Big-Endians have been long forbidden, and the whole Party rendered incapable by Law of holding Employments] Roman Catholics
> a fundamental Doctrine of our great Prophet Lustrog] Transubstantiation.\(^5\)

The majority of the Dean’s annotators have endorsed this view, if occasionally with a pinch of salt. Some at times worry about the ‘historical exactitude’,\(^6\) reminding their audience, implicitly or explicitly, of the methodological caveat that, in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift was not concerned with ‘actual events’ but with Swift’s ‘versions of those events’\(^7\) and that ‘a satirist does not want to make his targets too obvious’ in any case.\(^8\) Others supplement the allegorical equivalents, even though not unanimously. Thus, while one critic takes the ‘Boy [who], going to eat an Egg […] happened to cut one of his Fingers’ as a thinly veiled allusion to Queen Elizabeth, who ‘according to the canons of the Roman Catholic Church, was illegitimate, and consequently incapable of inheriting the crown’,\(^9\) another sees the boy as a reference to Henry VIII who ‘felt injured at not being allowed to marry Anne Boleyn’.\(^10\) Still another

\(^5\) For possible definitions of ‘allegory’, see Hermann J. Real, ‘Allegorical Adventure and Adventurous Allegory: Gulliver’s “Several Ridiculous and Troublesome Accidents” in Brobdingnag’, *Qwerty*, 11 (2001), 81–87. From what follows, it will become clear that I endorse the first definition according to which allegorical characters and events, which are superimposed on a narrative basis, refer to historically authentic, identifiable equivalents, ‘to persons [and events] important in history’ (p. 82).
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echoes this view in explaining Henry’s cutting his fingers as a metaphor of ‘Catholic doctrine’ which would not grant the King a divorce from his Queen. Whichever the case, neither of these alternatives is likely to affect the interpretation of the episode as a whole.

II

What matters most for its more ‘enlightened’ understanding is a reassessment of the story’s *causa efficiens*: ‘His present Majesty’s Grand-father, while he was a Boy, going to eat an Egg, and breaking it according to the ancient Practice, happened to cut one of his Fingers’, whereupon ‘the Emperor his Father, published an Edict, commanding all his Subjects, upon great Penalties, to break the smaller End of their Eggs’. This decision sets the sequence of events — the subsequent peculiarities and memorabilia of England’s religious and political history — in motion. Here, more often than not, Swift’s annotators do point to Edward VI and Henry VIII (seldom failing to note that their chronological order has been transposed), and to the egg as a symbol of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist. Indeed, there seem to be good reasons for this view. For one thing, Henry VIII was Swift’s favourite *bête noire*. His copy of Lord Edward Herbert’s *Life and Raigne of King Henry the Eighth* (1649) is peppered with ferocious marginalia denouncing the King, among other things, as a ‘profligate Dog’ and ‘detestable, hellish Tyrant’ as well as a ‘Hypocritical Villain’, ‘Viper, Monster’ and ‘Bloody inhuman Hell-hound’, in comparison with whom Nero, perhaps the most cruel of all Roman Emperors ‘was a Saint’.

However, what mattered even more for Swift’s satirical purposes in *Gulliver’s Travels* was his conviction that Henry VIII’s ostensible advocacy of the Reformation notwithstanding ‘he made no other Step than rejecting the Pope’s Supremacy’. On the contrary, as Swift had recorded in his Preface to Gilbert Burnet’s *Introduction to the Third Volume of the History of the Reformation* of 1713, Henry ‘retained every Corruption of [the Roman Court and Church]’, going so far as to persecute all ‘who professed any Protestant Doctrine’. Swift continued to be obsessed with this image of Henry as a pseudo-Papist. As late as May 1736,

12 Readers who are interested in the question of how it would have been practically possible to cut one’s fingers within a context of seventeenth-century table manners are referred to J. V. Guerinot, J. K. Welchler, and Jonathan Gray, ‘Re Egg Breakers, Eggcups, and Gulliver’, *The Scriblerian*, 24 (1991), 58–61.
13 From what follows, it will become apparent why I disagree with Charles Allen Beaumont, who sees Gulliver’s encounter with ‘the great debate between the Big-Endians and the Little-Endians’ as ‘entirely a political matter’; see his *Swift’s Use of the Bible: A Documentation and a Study in Allusion* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1965), pp. 53–54.
14 See, for example, *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. by Case, p. 37, note 9, and p. 332.
15 For an illuminating account of Swift’s critical attitude towards Henry VIII (even if not germane to the present discussion), see Louis A. Landa, *Swift and the Church of Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), pp. 161–64.
17 *Prose Works*, IV, 73.
he reiterated in an unfinished, posthumously published paper, *Concerning that Universal Hatred, which Prevails against the Clergy*, that the ‘detestable Tyrant Henry VIII, although he abolished the Pope’s power in England’, nonetheless persisted in defending ‘all the Popish doctrines, even those which were the most absurd’. The ‘popish doctrine’ Swift, and the majority of seventeenth-century Anglican theologians beside him, is likely to have regarded as ‘the most absurd’ is the Catholic teaching on Transubstantiation, the conversion of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the whole substance of the Body and Blood of Christ, with the ‘accidents,’ the outer appearance of bread and wine, unaltered. Swift had targeted Transubstantiation as the ‘principal Occasion to that great and famous Rupture’, the Reformation, in his early stroke of genius, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), and he knew from Gilbert Burnet’s *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, the first two volumes of which he had studied with care during his great reading period at Moor Park in 1697–98, that Henry VIII had upheld the Catholic belief in Transubstantiation. As the Bishop had noted in his Preface to this monumental work,

> And indeed in the whole progress of these Changes, the Kings design seemed to have been to terrifie the Court of Rome, and cudgel the Pope into a Compliance with what he desired: for in his heart he continued addicted to some of the most extravagant Opinions of

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18 *Prose Works*, XIII, 123, 223 (my emphasis).


21 *The Battle of the Books*, ed. by Real, pp. 128–32 (pp. 129, 131). We do not know whether Swift read the first edition of 1679–81 or the second of 1681–83.

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*that Church, such as Transubstantiation* and the other Corruptions in the Mass, so that he was to his lives end more Papist than Protestant. 23

Historians of the Church have confirmed this view in recent years. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, the controversy about the Eucharist developed and proliferated. In fact, as one of them has noted, ‘one’s eucharistic beliefs were in many of the Tudor years literally a matter of life or death.’ 24 It is small cause for surprise, then, that Swift should have returned to it here in *Gulliver's Travels*, even though with a change in orientation and intent. 25

III

All Protestant reservations against the Eucharist were summarized in the Westminster *Confession of Faith* of 1658. On this *Confession*, including the larger and lesser catechisms of the Protestant churches, an Assembly of Divines had publicly agreed, after lengthy deliberations following its summons by Parliament in 1644 to assist in re-organizing the religious system of the country. There were three variant issues of *The Confession of Faith* in 1658, one of which was in the Dean’s library. 26 Its Chapter XXIX, ‘*Of the Lords Supper*’, ruled on Transubstantiation:

That Doctrine which maintaines a change of the substance of Bread and Wine, into the substance of Christ, Body and Blood (commonly called Transubstantiation) by consecration of a Priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common Sense and Reason; overthroweth the nature of the Sacrament, and hath been, and is the cause of manifold Superstitions; yea of gross Idolatries. 27

This paragraph presents all the familiar, indeed stereotypical counterarguments with which seventeenth-century Protestant polemicists were endeavouring to scolding their Catholic adversaries into silence. All of these had often been raised before *The Confession of Faith* was published, and all of them were to be repeated many times after it came out:

being against the evidence of the senses, the doctrine of the Eucharist was irrational; being against the authority of Scripture, it was without validation, and being against both the evidence of the senses *and* the authority of the Bible, it was idolatrous.

Remarkably, the fiercest critic of Transubstantiation as an act of idol worship was a philosopher whom many Anglicans would have regarded as a strange bedfellow, Thomas Hobbes. 28 In his *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes went out of his way to distinguish between ‘Consecration’ and ‘Conjuration, or Enchantment’. This distinction put him in a position to bracket the Catholic practice of consecration with conjuration, which, in turn, made Transubstantiation, being as


25 This largely forgotten observation was made, rightly, I believe, some seventy years ago; see G. V. Jourdan, ‘The Religion of Dean Swift’, *Church Quarterly Review*, 126 (1938), 269–86 (pp. 283–84).


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it was ‘contrary to the testimony of mans Sight, and of all the rest of his Senses’, an act of primitive magic enchantment.\(^{29}\)

Among the countless theologians who joined in the chorus and who were also all well represented in Swift’s library were bishops, such as Edward Stillingfleet and John Tillotson, scholars like Richard Hooker, John Hales, and Henry More, as well as preachers like Isaac Barrow and William Clettage, to name but a few. Predictably, their contributions to the controversy vary greatly, both in tone and substance. Like the undogmatic Hooker who, in his defence of the Church of England, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, lamented above all the ‘fierce contentions’ this sacramental issue had given rise to,\(^{30}\) the ‘irenical’ John Hales, Canon of Windsor, and the Bishop of Worcester, Edward Stillingfleet, were moderates, who firmly but calmly justified their rejection of Transubstantiation by its being ‘not only repugnant to reason’, but also by its [being] ‘insufficiently proved from Scripture’.\(^{31}\) Resorting to the same repertory of arguments, both the Cambridge Platonist Henry More and the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson, by contrast, were openly confrontational. More was happy to denounce Transubstantiation vociferously as ‘incredible’ and ‘impossible’ as well as ‘conducive to atheism and idolatry’ whenever an opportunity presented itself.\(^{32}\) Tillotson likewise articulated his hatred of the Roman Catholic Church in haughty and self-complacent, if learned, rodomontades: ‘So that the business of *Transubstantiation* is not a controversie of Scripture against Scripture, or of Reason against Reason, but of downright Impudence against the plain meaning of Scripture, and all the Sense and Reason of Mankind’. This rhetoric mingles with liberal doses of ‘absurd’, ‘scandalous’, ‘monstrous’, and ‘groundless throughout’.\(^{33}\)

In 1680, Isaac Barrow, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, added a new facet to all this opprobrium. In line with the general thrust of his *Treatise of the Pope’s Supremacy*, he derided Transubstantiation, which was urged, he claimed, ‘with so furious zeale’, as a power game designed for the purpose of creating a godlike status for priests, ‘to magnify the credit of those, who by saying of a few words can make Our God and Saviour’.\(^{34}\) A few years

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later, in February 1686, when England was manifestly in danger of being re-catholicized, William Clagett, one of William III's Chaplains in Ordinary, engaged in a conference about Transubstantiation with the vociferous Catholic pamphleteer Father Peter Gooden (d. 1695).\(^5\)

The sum of this conference was appended to a collection of Clagett's Sermons, showing the preacher firing off salvos against his hair-splitting opponent and ending, deservedly, on a note of mockery that is reminiscent of Erasmus’s ridicule of theological casuistry in his own critique of Transubstantiation in The Praise of Folly:

I observe the Answerer [Father Gooden] will allow nothing to be broken but Accidents; I observe also, that nothing is said to be the Body of Christ, or the Communion of the Body of Christ, but what is broken: If therefore nothing is broken but Accidents, then Accidents are either […] the very Body of Christ; or […] the Communion of the Body of Christ.\(^6\)

Finally, if around the turn of the century any Anglican faithful had asked for an elucidation of their Church's stance on the doctrine of Christ’s ‘Corporal Presence’ in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, they would have found plenty of exegetical and spiritual orientation in Gilbert Burnet’s Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles (1699), the doctrinal formulae accepted by the Church of England in its attempt to define its dogmatic tenets. However, having sifted numerous biblical passages germane to his subject and having invoked the hermeneutic authority of the Fathers of the Church, the Bishop of Salisbury was but able to polish doctrinal clichés:

This we believe is plain Idolatry, when an Insensible piece of Matter, such as Bread and Wine, has Divine Honours paid it; when it is believed to be God, when it is called God, and is in all respects Worshipped with the same Adoration that is offered up to Almighty God.\(^7\)

IV

There can be no doubt that Swift was familiar with most of these ‘arguments’. In fact, he not only subscribed to them, he also utilized them, with his selective and modifying intelligence, as ‘raw material’ for his ridicule of Transubstantiation in A Tale of a Tub.\(^8\) But there were

... of the Reformation, Burnet echoed this argument (I, 366), as Swift was to do in his sermon On the Trinity, first published in 1744 (Prose Works, IX, 163).

Among other things, this danger becomes evident in the flood of (at times as violent as absurd) pamphlets and treatises rejecting Transubstantiation published between 1685 and 1688. See, among others, [Samuel Johnson], The Absolute Impossibility of Transubstantiation Demonstrated, 2nd edn (London: William Rogers, 1688), whose ‘BOOKS lately Printed for W. Rogers’ appended at the end lists no less than two dozen anti-Catholic tracts, several of which bear on Transubstantiation (p. 56); [Thomas Goodwin], Transubstantiation a Peculiar Article of the Roman Catholick Faith … Never Own’d by the Ancient Church or Any of the Reform’d Churches (London: Printed in the Year, 1688); [Robert Nelson], Transubstantiation Contrary to Scripture (London: Dorman Newman, 1688). Admittedly, there is no evidence that Swift knew any of these authors, yet for an assessment of the intellectual climate in the latter half of the 1680s, it is perhaps useful to realize that many of them invoke, and resort to, traditional arguments, such as the authority of the Scriptures, the evidence of the senses, the possibility of miracle and mystery, and the nature of ‘substance’.


logical dilemmas inherent in this assault, which rested on the assumption that ‘a crust of bread’, which Lord Peter, Swift’s symbol of the Papacy, tries to pass off for a piece of mutton on his brothers Martin and Jack,39 ‘can never be anything more than a piece of bread’.40 This position expressly ruled out any possibility of a mysterious divine intervention happening in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, a position that conflicted with Swift’s own views on mysteries, such as the Trinity.41 It is for this reason, I suggest, that when the Dean resumed the topic in Gulliver’s Travels, he focused on two other aspects of Transubstantiation which he had ignored in the Tale’s parody but which had come to upset him by the time he was engaged in Gulliver’s Travels.

The first concession Swift was ready to make is that belief in Transubstantiation was a matter of an individual’s faith and liberty of conscience, defined by him in Thoughts on Religion as ‘no more than the liberty of possessing [one’s] own thoughts and opinions, which every man enjoys without fear of the magistrate’.42 As Swift posited a few years after Gulliver’s Travels had been published, in Reasons Humbly Offered to the Parliament of Ireland for Repealing the Sacramental Test (1733), this ‘liberty of possessing [one’s] own thoughts and opinions’ including ‘the Belief of Transubstantiation’ does ‘not affect the political Interest of Society’ and is therefore not ‘subject to human Jurisdiction’.43 In other words, it is neither legal nor legitimate for ‘the authorities’ to enforce belief, no matter whether Catholic or Anglican, by whatever political means, least of all ‘Edicts’ leading to rebellions and wars designed to silence the minds of ‘non-believers’. Swift took this point so seriously that he made Gulliver repeat it with unconcealed contempt in his traveller’s conversations with the Houyhnhnm master:

Difference in Opinions hath cost many Millions of Lives: For Instance, whether Flesh be Bread, or Bread be Flesh: Whether the Juice of a certain Berry be Blood or Wine […] Neither are any Wars so furious and bloody, or of so long Continuance, as those occasioned by Difference in Opinion.44

The emphasis is on ‘opinion’, together with ignorance, the very opposite of truth and knowledge. In Swift, as throughout seventeenth-century intellectual history, ‘opinion’ is as uncertain and inconclusive as it is many-headed, temporal, and forever changing. At best, it grants probability, that is, non-demonstrative knowledge.45 Significantly, Gulliver's


39 Prose Works, I, 72.
44 Prose Works, XI, 246 (IV, v, 245) (my emphasis).
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Houyhnhnm master, the embodiment of reason, has difficulty understanding the ‘Meaning of the Word Opinion’ (IV, viii, 9). In wholly rational creatures, reason is bound to be an innate, intuitive standard with which to distinguish true from false; for wholly rational creatures, to perceive is to recognize the truth, and the truth is as certain and conclusive as it is indisputable and incontrovertible. But this is not the case with fallible humankind, torn by ‘difference in opinion’. Thus, the point is not that Swift here ridicules ‘the trivial causes of religious controversies’ and ‘the struggle between Catholic and Anglican [as] an empty one’, but that wars have been waged by either party on an issue which is a matter of faith not of reason, and which thus is incapable of truth. By no stretch of the imagination is this assessment a sign of irreverence; it is rather a pretty accurate description of historical facticity. If Swift objected to Transubstantiation in *Gulliver’s Travels*, he did not object to it so much as a Catholic doctrine as to the *donnée* that the doctrine, and any of its opposites, had lent themselves to distressing misuse by both Catholics and Anglicans as a vehicle of war. He thus linked it up with a powerful motif of the *Travels*, the criticism of war, warfare, and warmongering. At the same time, Swift proposed as his norm, his ethical alternative, the recommendation he had laid down in *Thoughts on Religion*: ‘That all true Believers shall break their Eggs at the convenient End: and which is the convenient End, seems, in my humble Opinion, to be left to every Man’s Conscience.’

On the other hand, this reading does not rule out that Swift privately objected to Transubstantiation as a theological doctrine. But if he did, he did not make this view explicit in Reldresal’s account of Lilliput’s religious and political past. Rather, his evidence is hidden in the subtext, veiled in the symbolism of the egg, and has to be inferred. As a rule, the Dean’s annotators have professed to be mystified on the signification of the egg as a symbol of the Eucharist. While one group refrained from commenting on the allegory altogether, ostensibly ‘because it was extremely obvious’, another points towards the egg as an age-old symbol of Easter, and, thus, of Christianity. A third, finally, suggests that the choice of the egg demonstrates ‘the insignificance’ of the dispute. But these explanations will not do. After all, the egg figures widely in Christian iconography and European folklore as an emblem of the Resurrection, of fertility, of new life, and, unsurprisingly, as a symbol of every beginning.

More precisely, in a painting by the Italian artist Piero della Francesca, which draws on a rich pictorial tradition, the egg assumes the symbolic value of divine holiness. It shows


50 *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. by Turner, p. 299, note 36.


52 See the rich material assembled by Robert Wildhaber, ‘Zum Symbolgehalt und zur Ikonographie des Eies’, *Deutsches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde*, 6 (1960), 77–84.

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the Virgin Mary, seated in the chancel of a church, with the sleeping child Jesus in her lap, and surrounded by saints, with an egg, emanation of the Divine Essence, dangling over her head from above.\textsuperscript{53} In a more secular version elaborated by Thomas Burnet, Master of the Charterhouse, in The Theory of the Earth, the egg becomes the symbol of perfection for the ante-diluvian earth, whose oviform construction, Burnet explained, was rather different from its present one: ‘The face of the Earth before the Deluge was smooth, regular and uniform’, resembling in fact the shape of ‘an Egg’: ‘And this not so much for its External Figure, though that be true too: as for the inward composition of it; consisting of several Orbs, one including another, and in that order, as to answer the several Elementary Regions of which the new-made Earth was constituted’. As Burnet pointed out, this model had not originated with him, but ‘[had] been the sence and Language of all Antiquity’.\textsuperscript{54}

Within these con-texts, it does not, perhaps, come entirely as a surprise that the egg, as a symbol of holiness and perfection, also surfaces in emblematic descriptions of the Eucharist. For a more meaningful understanding of Swift’s satiric purposes, it is important to note that these descriptions are associated with Jesuit emblem books throughout.\textsuperscript{55} The

\textsuperscript{53} See Matilde Battistini, Bildlexikon der Kunst, III: Symbole und Allegorien (Berlin: Parthas Verlag, 2003), pp. 133–37. For the interpretation, see also Alessandro Angelini, Piero della Francesca (Mailand: Scala, 1992), p. 73. I thank Dr Kirsten Juhas and Esther F. Sommer for these references.


\textsuperscript{55} See Mario Praz, Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura,
most momentous of these may well be a work by ‘the subtle and learned’ Father Georg(ius) Stengel(ius) (1584–1651). This was first published in Munich under the title *Ova paschalia sacro emblemate inscripta descriptaque* in 1634, in the declared intention to disseminate ‘the profound mysteries’ of the Catholic faith at a time when Germany was ravaged by the Thirty Years’ War, and reprinted again in a slightly revised version under the same title in 1635, 1672, and 1678.56

All of its one hundred emblems are egg-shaped, and divided into those in which a ‘good meaning is inscribed’ *(quae virtutem ac res divinas habent insculptas)* (nos 1–55) and those ‘which are disgraced by vices or vicious men’ *(vitis aut vitiosis deformata)*.57 Their structure follows a familiar pattern: each emblem is preceded by an *inscriptio*, a pithy and terse caption, which is easy to memorize, and accompanied by a moral, political, or religious *interpretatio* in prose of up to five pages.

Emblem, no. 48, for example, is introduced by the *inscriptio*: ‘In ovo unius species Eucharisticæ sufficientia ostensa’, and subsequently explained in a lengthy interpretation studded with biblical references:


Similarly, Emblem, no. 47, in response to the question in what way a nest of eggs and the sacrament of the Eucharist were comparable, answers: ‘Quibus Symbolum Eucharistiae, clarissimum continetur. Nam in primis, quod in *ovo* nonnulli mirantur, hoc in nido quoque est isto. In *ovo* nucleum, & vasculum, cibum & lancem; potum & pocus, nectar & cyathum habemus’.58

Admittedly, some scepticism is bound to remain: there is no certain evidence that Swift was familiar with it. *Ova paschalia* was never in his library at any stage, nor is it known to have been in any other library, such as that of Archbishop Marsh, of which the Dean of St Patrick’s was *ex-officio* governor,59 or that of Swift’s friend Thomas Sheridan,60 or that of

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56 For Father Stengel’s biography and bibliography, see Helmut Zäh, ‘Die Welt im Ei: Georg Stengels *Ova paschalia*’, in *Emblematik und Kunst der Jesuiten in Bayern: Einfluss und Wirkung*, ed. by Peter M. Daly, G. Richard Dimler, SJ, and Rita Haub (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2000), pp. 145–61. This essay also lists a number of further important studies.


58 Quotations are from the edition of *Ova paschalia* published at Ingolstadt, Bavaria, by Johann Simon Knabs Witwe, 1672, pp. 276–81 (p. 278) and 272. I would like to acknowledge here that a dear ‘old’ friend, Professor Anne Barbeau Gardiner, New York, who has written so well on Transubstantiation and the Real Presence, made the same discovery, simultaneously and independently, shortly before this essay was submitted, although she never saw any edition of Stengel’s *Ova paschalia* but had to rely on secondary information; see her ‘Swift and the Primitive Church’, *Sustaining Literature: Essays on Literature, History, and Culture*, 1500–1800, *Commemorating the Life and Work of Simon Varey*, ed. by Greg Clingham (Cranbury, New Jersey: Bucknell University Press, 2007), pp. 109–26 (pp. 113, 124, note 21).

59 Muriel McCarthy, *All Graduates and Gentlemen: Marsh’s Library* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 1980), pp. 49–51. I am indebted to Dr McCarthy, Librarian, for the information that Stengel was not in Marsh’s Library.

any other friend to which he may have had access. We do know, however, that like the English Jesuit missionaries who surreptitiously returned to their native country after having trained at Jesuit seminaries on the Continent, ‘the Jesuit emblem book was likewise making its entrance into England’. Like the majority of his fellow citizens, Swift associated the Jesuits with the detested Pretender, eager ‘to introduce Popery and Slavery, and Arbitrary Power’ and always in the mood for ‘Plots against the State’, for freethinking and schisms in religion. Presumably, like many of his contemporaries, the Dean was unable to think of a more odious name than ‘Jesuit’, ‘the vile brood of Loyola and Hell’, when he wished to heap opprobrium on an enemy, a position, or an attitude he despised. This is what he did, I would like to suggest, in a veiled way, in the case of the egg, which had so baneful an effect on a century of Lilliputian religion and politics: Swift articulated his contempt for Transubstantiation, the Catholic view of the Eucharist, in a Jesuit symbol. It is true that the evidence for this suggestion is circumstantial, but the alternative to it does not carry greater conviction, either. It would lead us to assume that Swift chanced upon the egg as a symbol of the Catholic Eucharist, or that he thought of it independently. Logically, such a coincidence is not to be ruled out, of course. However, given the unusualness of the image, not to mention its contribution to an improved meaning of the passage, choice here seems more probable than chance.

In the history of his posthumous reputation, the Dean of St Patrick’s has often been taken to task for his religious views. In fact, it is presumably no exaggeration to say that Swift has been made to suffer for his religion, or rather what others have taken to be his religion, from a welter of accusations and recriminations. This religion has been described as ‘impious’ and ‘hypocritical’, as ‘unprincipled’ and ‘ lukewarm’ as well as ‘dangerous’ and ‘blasphemous’, and Swift himself been characterized, grotesquely, as ‘a ribald, faithless priest’ and as ‘one of those beings whom Providence occasionally inflicts upon the world, blighting all they pass, poisoning all they come in contact with, withering all that cling to them’.

For one critic’, a reader has summarized the prevailing impression, ‘who deems the Dean “jocose,” innumerable
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others describe his religious positioning as “problematic”, “mysterious”, or “debatable”.67 Although more recent scholars, including Swift aficionados, tend to be more cautious in their judgements, they still contribute to proliferating old prejudices, doubting, for example, that the Dean had ‘serious views’ on specific religious issues,68 or positing that he ‘[stood] in opposition to tenets of Christian faith’.69 However, given the fact that these judgements are based on insufficient historical evidence, we need to look, and think, again. If we continue to be interested in a more reasoned and less arbitrary understanding of ‘our man’, we had better engage in reconstructing the historical con-texts in which his texts were written and embed them in harder, and more philological, facts.70 After all, whoever caught anything with a naked hook?71

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67 See the impressive collection of such and similar verdicts in Nathalie Zimpfer, ‘Swift and Religion: From Myth to Reality’, Swift Studies, 24 (2009), 46–69.

68 See, in addition to Ehrenpreis, Dean Swift, pp. 461–62, the same author’s ‘Swiftian Dilemmas’, Satire in the 18th Century, ed. by Browning, pp. 222–23.


71 This is the moment to thank Dr Kirsten Juhas, and Sandra Simon, M.A., ‘my people’ at the Ehrenpreis Centre, for intellectual inspiration as well as bibliographical and electronic support, and for just being there.