

The Anti-poet

Every discussion of Swift the poet must contend with the long tradition that debars him from being one. In one of the earliest and most influential accounts of Swift's poetic career, Samuel Johnson concludes that there is 'not much' to say about the poems and popularises the apocryphal judgement of John Dryden that Swift would 'never be a poet'.¹ Dryden's prophecy has become a curse, its judgement neither fair nor accurate but always temptingly within reach. He may be the first Irish-born writer with a worldwide literary reputation and a substantial body of poetry in English, but Swift is usually set up in the Irish poetic tradition as a cautionary exemplar rather than a tutelary one. He comes down to us, Derek Mahon says, as 'a sort of anti-poet', nurturing what W. B. Yeats called 'bitter wisdom' in his imagination's 'dark grove'.² Both remarks are part of a manoeuvre which accords praise to Swift's work only after laboriously negotiating its accumulated criticisms, but each identifies a legitimate concern. Mahon attests how Swift's formidable body of verse, which continues to grow as new attributions come to light, adopts measures and subjects that attract labels like 'sub-poetic' and 'close to doggerel'.³ Yeats, by inverting a famous phrase of Swift's own coinage, suggests that anyone patient or perverse enough to press past such formal obstacles in search of philosophical content will be rewarded not with 'sweetness and light',⁴ but something burdensome, bitter and dark. The suspicion endures that Swift's poetry, channelling nihilism and contempt through what looks to modern readers like 'light' verse, is by turns too serious and not serious enough. '[S]ome pieces are gross', to return to Samuel Johnson's judgement, 'and some are trifling', but a middle ground is lacking.⁵ Whether apprehended as 'something fierce and repellent' or 'something joyous',⁶ something in the poems repeatedly confronts and affronts cherished ideas of what poetry is for.