

INTRODUCTION: “THE CHURCH HAD NEVER SUCH A WRITER”¹

Swift's political life presents a number of paradoxes, some genuine, some only apparent. Attracted to the figure of Cato, the classical example of principled retirement from public life, he found his political mentor in a contemporary version of the type, Sir William Temple. He approached the emergence of modern partisan politics by fixing his eyes firmly on the past – on a church that tried to emulate primitive Christianity and on the exemplary models of constitutional balance provided by classical antiquity. Opposed to the very idea of political parties and contemptuous of turncoat writers, he himself wrote on behalf of first one and then the other of the dominant political parties of his day. An Anglo-Irishman eager for English preferment, he regarded his return to Ireland as an exile but was eventually celebrated as an Irish patriot. Although he did not see a contradiction, his simultaneous commitment to an authoritarian state church and the principle of liberty baffles modern readers. Because they try to align him with one of these impulses or the other, they disagree about whether he was ‘really’ a Whig or a Tory. They disagree, that is, about the primary political convictions of an eloquent writer who spent his life writing political pamphlets. Remarkably, this historically remote and elusive pamphleteer nevertheless enjoys the esteem of politically engaged modern writers, who find him oddly current. They hear in him a voice that speaks directly to their own experience of totalitarian regimes and colonial oppression. Indeed, readers who praise or condemn Swift for his agreement or disagreement with our standards have provoked an indignant backlash designed to place Swift back where he properly belongs. The campaign will be informative, but it seems about as likely to succeed as the attempt to fix his political identity unambiguously. These disputes might amuse Swift, and they would probably also inspire a familiar feeling of exasperation. When he contemplated his own posthumous fame in *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, after all, he anticipated interested and obtuse uses of it. The hardest won lesson of his political life was his recognition that the price he paid for his effectiveness was his inescapable vulnerability to misunderstanding, misappropriation, and (in the early eighteenth-century sense

