

# Preface

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**On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a stylistic model of satirical humour**

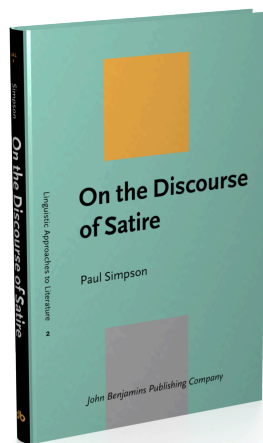
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## Preface

I suppose it would be accurate to say that the “idea” for this book arose out of an experience during a university seminar which took place, alarmingly, over two decades ago. I was then still a fresh-faced and follically-unchallenged undergraduate reading a degree in literature and linguistics, and the episode in question occurred during the week when we were “doing” that (in)famous Anglo-Irish writer, Jonathan Swift. Swift of course cannot be “done” without some reference to his famous skit, the “Modest Proposal”, in which an unassuming persona urges the eating of children in order to solve the problem of Irish overpopulation. A programme advocating the lessening by cannibalism of “the number of Papists among us” proved to be as contentious a hot potato, so to speak, in the Northern Ireland of the late nineteen seventies as it no doubt was in eighteenth century Dublin. As to Swift’s ironic purpose in the skit, everyone, bar one student, reached a satirical interpretation. Unusually for an otherwise parochial undergraduate community, the student who “didn’t get it” happened to have been born and raised several thousand miles away from Northern Ireland. His objection to Swift was resolutely framed: the proposal was “disgusting” and that if this was the best Ireland could do literary-wise, then it was a very poor show. The tutor’s riposte to this was perhaps the predictable one. But Swift didn’t really mean it, it was literature, it was, well, ironic. To which the student replied, with inexorable logic, that of course he meant it because he *said* it. And so it went on, as an ever widening interpretive chasm pushed the two positions further and further apart. Some twenty five years later – such it seems is the necessary gestation period for my academic output these days – I came to the idea of a project which explored the interpretative chasm between the two positions taken up in that seminar. No-one was wrong in that interchange, although no-one was completely right either; both arguments could be sustained with some degree of validity. Quite why such a duality of interpretation is possible, and what that says about the particular form of discourse that is satirical humour, is one of the main preoccupations of this monograph.

The book comes principally out of the academic tradition of modern stylistics. That simply means that it applies to text a variety of models of language, linguistics and pragmatics. While that tradition reflects best the type of methods used and the sorts of analytic frameworks applied, this study departs from much other stylistic work in that its principal emphasis is neither specifically, nor necessarily, on literary discourse. The emphasis is, rather, on satire's status as a culturally situated discursive practice. This direction has not been taken because of any antipathy towards "classical" literature or towards the practice of literary criticism. It is simply that satire's "everydayness" as a vibrant and dynamic form of verbal humour has been significantly neglected in terms of the amount of attention it has received within the academe. It is indeed a central argument of this book that a "non-literary stylistics" of satire is much needed, simply because continued interest over the decades in canonically literary examples has tended to draw a veil over the day-to-day functions of satire in contemporary social and discourse contexts. That said, it is hoped that the broad design of the model proposed is sufficiently watertight theoretically to be applied across to the canon of classical satire, although such a study is of course well beyond the remit of the present project.

Writing about humour can be a strange and somewhat disorientating business. Humour is glued into social, cultural and even national contexts, so writing a monograph which hopefully draws an international readership forces one to tread a fine line when "unpacking" humour texts; a fine line that is between, on the one hand, stating the obvious in the explication of humorous material, or, on the other, risking losing readers because the topically and culturally situated references within those texts have not been made sufficiently transparent. In this book, although the data derives primarily from humour practices in Britain, Ireland and the USA, the theoretical model advanced is designed to have generalised application. In the design of that model I hope to have contextualised sufficiently the data so as to make it accessible without insulting the intelligence of my readers. But please forgive me if I do.

Another thing about writing about humour, a fact brought home to me midway through this project, is that while humorous texts become progressively less amusing the more one pays attention to them, research on humour concomitantly starts to seem very strange indeed. I was struck particularly by one well-intentioned experimental study, written many years ago, on the impact of conflict on the basic humour mechanism. Victims of war-induced trauma had flashed before them a series of cards containing "jokes", to which their responses were noted. As it turned out, the war veterans really didn't find the experience very funny at all; in any case, the jokes themselves are "clas-

sified” and now rest with the relevant Department of Defence of the august international power from which the research stemmed. By dint of curious coincidence, around the time of the publication of that article, an episode from the renowned Monty Python television series featured a sketch where someone had discovered a joke so funny that it had the power to wipe out entire armies. So potent was this joke that parts of it had to be shown on cards by individual soldiers in relay so as not to endanger the troops on one’s own side. After spending so much time on humour research, I frankly cannot tell which of the two scenarios, the academic study or the Python comedy sketch, is the more bizarre.

Such is the nature of research into humour. An editorial comment made many years ago in the first issue of the journal *Humor* points to a central dilemma in humour research; namely, that hoping to derive amusement from an academic study of humour is akin to hoping to enjoy gastronomically the recipe for delicious meal. Well, the present book offers a fairly largish menu, comprising several courses, of a very particular type of cuisine. I can only hope that this “food for thought” does not spoil your further enjoyment of the meal.

