

Heinz Kosok

## Explorations in Irish Literature

Heinz Kosok, Heinz Rölleke, Michael Scheffel (Hg.)

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## Preface

This is a collection of essays and articles on Irish literature in English which were first published between 1973 and 2004. Apart from any individual merit some of them may still have, they reflect, in their totality, the development of the study of Irish literature over a period of more than thirty years.

When the first of these articles was printed, Irish literary studies were still far from being generally recognised as a serious academic discipline. Admittedly, a number of individual scholars had already done valuable work on certain Irish writers from the beginning of the century and even before, and moreover the first two great anthologies of Irish literature (Justin McCarthy's ten-volume collection *Irish Literature* and the four volumes of *The Cabinet of Irish Literature* by Charles A. Read and Katharine Tynan Hinkson) had been published as early as 1904 and 1905 respectively, brave attempts at establishing a canon of Irish literature, whose importance has not always been duly recognised.

Yet it was only from 1970 onwards when the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature or IASAIL (as it was then called) was founded by the late A. Norman Jeffares, that scholars working in the field began to see themselves as part of a more general concerted effort to put Irish literature on the map of literary studies, and that they recognised their position in the emerging research field devoted to the various national literatures in the English language in the context of their specific historical, social, cultural and religious conditions. When, in 1981, the first IASAIL conference to be held outside Ireland (modestly called a 'Symposium') took place in the University of Wuppertal, Germany, it brought together a record attendance of academics from many countries, some of whom were astounded to find themselves part of a larger community of scholars working in a common field. The collection of papers from this conference (*Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1982), with fifty-five contributions by scholars from fifteen different countries, was, for all its individual shortcomings, an impressive document of an emerging academic discipline.

When, twenty-six years later, several hundred scholars from all five continents assembled at University College Dublin for another such conference to read and discuss their work, many of them may not even have been aware of the fact that this had not always been a perfectly normal thing to do. Irish Literary Studies, now deservedly capitalised, has become a major discipline with dozens of annual conferences, a comprehensive annual bibliography of publications, and a host of followers in all parts of the world. The essays in this collection may add some modest documentation to such a development.

The papers reprinted here are presented with some modifications from their original form: several of them have been translated from the German, others have been slightly shortened or expanded, and a few were rewritten in their entirety. However, some repetition of evidence or argument has been allowed to stand where their elimination would have endangered the coherence of the article, and it has not been attempted to place them into the context of later research or to add a complete set of up-to-date bibliographical references; essentially they appear as they were conceived at the time, minor documents of a progress towards a better understanding of Ireland through her literature.

My thanks are due to the publishers and editors who have freely granted permission to reprint these articles. In each case the original place of publication has been indicated in the Notes.

H. K.



## Stages in the Captain's Career: Dramatisations of *Gulliver's Travels*

This paper needs to be prefaced by a brief personal statement. Some time in 1999, a young theatre director approached me to say that he was planning to put *Gulliver's Travels* on the stage, and that I was to write the play. Since this young director happened to be my son, there was no refusing him. So, although my experience in practical playwriting was strictly limited, I rather reluctantly began to reflect on a dramatic version of this unlikely text, and while my misgivings right from the beginning had been high indeed, they increased in the course of the next months. Nevertheless, somehow the play got itself written, it went into rehearsal at the beginning of September and was premiered on 11 November 2000 at the *Kleines Haus* of the *Musiktheater Gelsenkirchen* by the professional company of *Schiller-Theater NRW*. It ran for 57 performances and was seen by some fifteen thousand people, both adults and children, many of whom undoubtedly had expected a play about a man among the dwarfs and the giants and found that they had bitten off more than they could chew, but most of them sat patiently through the performance and, to judge by their reactions, even enjoyed it.<sup>1</sup> Eventually the play had to be taken off not because of box-office problems (even the last performance was sold out) but because the theatre was needed for another programme. These, then, are my credentials, whatever they may be worth, for investigating the unlikely project of putting the Dean's great 'book of the century' on the stage.

Why is this such an unlikely project? There are at least three major reasons for rendering *Gulliver's Travels* one of the most unsuitable novels to be used as a blueprint for a stage production. First of all, it is not a novel at all in the received meaning of the term. Rather, it is a mixed bag of genre conventions, functioning on many different levels, and quite often on several levels at the same time. While the question of the juxtaposition of genre conventions is a large and complex area, it can be said in brief that, on one level, *Gulliver's Travels* is a *fairy tale*, utilizing such folklore elements as dwarfs and giants, speaking animals, ghosts and a flying island, some of which Swift derived from oral traditions in rural Ireland. On a second level, it is a *fictional travelogue*, even to the point of providing maps for the imaginary islands that Gulliver explores. Also, long passages of the book reveal themselves as an *allegory*, where Gulliver's descriptions of the islands he visits turn out to be one-to-one corres-

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1     Reviews: HJL, "Über die Wunder der Welt: Mit 'Gullivers Reisen' auf den Spuren eines Klassikers", *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (13 Nov. 2000), and Markus Wessling, "Staatsanwältin glaubt nicht an Zeitkompass: 'Gullivers Reisen mit seinem Schiffsjungen Pip' im Musiktheater", *Ruhr-Nachrichten* (13 Nov. 2000).

pendences to his own world and its political and social conditions. On this allegorical level, Lilliput and Blefuscu are, of course, mere ciphers for England and France. A fourth set of genre conventions derives from *utopian fiction*, the presentation of an ideal and exemplary political system with a specific ideological concept, as it is for instance personified by the King of Brobdingnag, and more often, from *dystopian fiction*, describing nightmare visions of the future which the author wishes to reject at all cost. Even more important than these elements is, however, the book's *satirical* dimension. Swift criticizes, by comic exaggeration, a great variety of objects, for instance individual persons from eighteenth-century reality such as Prime Minister Walpole, institutions of contemporary society such as the Church or the political parties, general political conditions as, for instance, the vagaries of the law or the favouritism when it comes to the selection of leaders and officials. However, Swift's satire is by no means restricted to conditions of his own time; his book has retained its popularity to the present day precisely because its satire hits at universal attitudes and conditions, and again and again the reader discovers to his dismay that he himself is the real object of Swift's satire, when, for instance, he has identified with Gulliver during his visit to Lilliput, looking down with condescension on the small Lilliputians who take themselves so ridiculously seriously, and suddenly finds Gulliver, *and himself*, in precisely the same situation among the giant Brobdingnagians. Discussions of this aspect have, of course, filled whole libraries of Swift criticism and have led to bitter feuds between the various camps of Swift followers. If Swift's book, despite these various ingredients, has often been called a 'novel', it is primarily because of two elements: the person of the narrator who, alone among the numerous figures in the book, achieves the status of a 'round character', and the four-fold travel motif which leads Gulliver on four voyages to distant island worlds.

The second major reason for rendering *Gulliver's Travels* unsuitable as the basis for a playscript lies in the absence of a proper plot structure. Plot, here understood as a closely linked sequence of events which evolve logically, psychologically and/or chronologically from one another, is essential to most dramas which are tightly bound to a purposeful forward movement. Swift's book, on the other hand, is remarkable for the absence or near-absence of such a target-directed movement. Admittedly there are a few events which are motivated by preceding occurrences: Gulliver is shipwrecked and *therefore* arrives at an unknown island; or Gulliver urinates on the royal palace of Lilliput which *subsequently* renders him *persona non grata* in the island world which *as a consequence* leads to his departure from the island – but such sequences of motivated events are few and far between, while as a rule the book shows a static or circular structure, necessitated by its descriptive or satirical nature but difficult to reproduce on stage.

The third problem is closely linked to the second: it concerns the monological structure of *Gulliver's Travels*. This is not only a matter of Gulliver's function as the