AN ANCIENT GREEK SOURCE FOR SWIFT’S FLOATING ISLAND

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There are already several excellent studies of the possible sources from which Jonathan Swift may have devised the Floating Island of Laputa in Part Three of Gulliver’s Travels (1726). ¹ Therefore, without wishing to tread over well-travelled territory, I would like to offer a further contribution to this rich constellation of research. ² The existing commentaries generally concentrate on the scientific or pseudoscientific contexts that are likely to have inspired the Floating Island’s mechanism of flight. In addition, one finds a range of political, historical, and disparate literary sources, including a study on the emblematic background of the Floating, or Flying, Island. ³ Whether we are meant to prefer a “floating” or “flying” island is treated by and large as a matter of ambivalence. I will not go so far as to say that the terms are interchangeable. There is, after all, a conceptual difference. But it is well known that Gulliver at one point refers to Laputa as the “Flying or Floating Island” at the same time in the same sentence. ⁴ One may therefore allow for a change of valence according to the context, so long as one also recalls Gulliver’s admitted difficulty in translating “the Original Laputa” (p. 414 [III, ii, 6]). If pressed to make the distinction, however, my interest here will concentrate on the sense that belongs primarily to a floating island, since this is most appropriate to the ancient Greek context that I am concerned with.

To date, scholars have considered a very wide range of possible influences, most often in reference to some combination of an imaginary flying machine, divine city, or

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⁴Jonathan Swift, Gulliver’s Travels, in The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism, eds Claude Rawson and Ian Higgins (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 414 (III, ii, 6). All citations to Swift refer to this volume, unless otherwise noted. Further references to Gulliver’s Travels will appear parenthetically in the text.
blessed island conjoined with the pejorative rhetoric of ‘building castles in the air.’ It is likewise often noted that Swift’s mentor, Sir William Temple, sometimes referred to England as “this floating island” when he wished to mock the ineffectuality of its politics.\(^5\)

Nevertheless, one would be hard-pressed to coordinate the exact relevance of these various allusions to Swift’s parody, with its emphatic ridicule of the New Science inaugurated by Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes. Scholars, for their part, are most often concerned with whether Swift may have known this or that reference given what we know about the contents of his library or the literary, scientific, historical, or political discourse of the day. Frustration with trying to pinpoint the most salient of Swift’s allegorical sources has even led one scholar to remark that there is “no precedent for a flying island” in the “literature of political and utopian speculation,” and that Swift must therefore have “derived the idea from a literal application of sovereignty, which derives from super, ‘over, above.’”\(^4\)

However this may be, there was certainly a precedent for putting buildings in the air and calling all such projects ridiculous by the same intonation. While my primary goal is not to trace each of these notions to their historical or etymological origins, some comment on this topic is worthy of attention, if only as a preface to my thesis regarding an ancient Greek source for Swift’s famous parody.

*Gulliver’s Travels* was first published in October 1726, and Part Three was the last section of the book to be written.\(^7\) At this point in literary history, the coinage ‘castles in the air’ was already well absorbed into the English vernacular.\(^8\) The OED traces the phrase back to William Painter’s 1567 [*sic*] *Palace of Pleasure* (first published in 1566), and it notes that the related expression of ‘building castles in Spain’ dates back as far as the thirteenth-century French poem, *Roman de la rose* (s.v. “Castle”), as verified by the sixteenth-century French historian, Étienne Pasquier.\(^9\) There is of course a world of metaphorical difference between building castles in the air and building castles in Spain, but the implication of having fanciful or visionary aspirations is consistent. In the medieval poem, the reference to Spain is somewhat overdetermined, but it seems to have served both a metrical and a metaphorical function: the latter in reference to Spanish castles perched high on mountain rocks. Beyond these observations, it is difficult to tell when exactly the expression ‘castles in the air’ entered into the European vocabulary. As a point of reference, one finds two mentions of “chasteaux en Espaigne” in Montaigne’s

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\(^7\) Ehrenpreis, *Dean Swift*, pp. 442-45.

\(^8\) It had in fact already become proverbial (TILLEY C126; ODEP, p. 107). Swift himself had earlier used the phrase, or a slight variation of it, in *the Tale* (1704), where he describes “the Philosopher’s Way in all Ages” as “erecting certain Edifices in the Air” (*Prose Works*, I, 33). See also his poem, “Vanbrugh’s House” (1708-9): “On Earth, the God of Wealth was made / Sole Patron of the Building Trade, / Leaving the Wits the Spacious Air / With Licence to build Castles there” (*Poems*, ed. Williams, I, 106, II, 23-26).

Essais of 1580; and in a letter dated 9 April 1513, Machiavelli rather facetiously refers to his own thoughts on politics as “castellucci,” an expression sometimes erroneously translated as “castles in the air,” but more accurately understood as a diminutive form of “castles” meant to convey the sense of a fantastic construction analogous to ‘castles in Spain.’ All told, it seems the most one can say is that somewhere between 1566 and 1580 the older expression still had currency while the new expression was coming into vogue.

Yet, despite these observations, Gulliver’s Travels does not yield a single allusion to castles in Spain, save for the oblique play on the Spanish la puta, the whore. And while Swift may have subtly suffused the older expression with the new one, thereby indicating that the Laputans have ‘prostituted’ themselves to the New Science in search of paradise, what is central to Swift’s intention for the Floating Island is the sensation of groundlessness, or of being ungrounded, that the new scientific learning has produced. Here, we may recall the destabilizing effects that Copernicus and Galileo had on the Aristotelian (that is, teleological) view of the cosmos, so doggedly defended by the likes of Ptolemy and the Catholic Church.

I turn, therefore, to what I have come to regard as the key source for interpreting Swift’s knotted parody. Indeed, the clue was already identified by Nicolson and Mohler, but their enthusiasm for demonstrating the scientific principles on which Swift constructed his satire seems to have prevented them from exploring the full import of this insight. I am speaking here of the mythical floating island of Delos, which was, like Swift’s Laputa, made of adamantine (pp. 417-18 [III, iii, 2-3]).

Like everything in Swift, this reference is not accidental, and its significance becomes apparent as soon as one sees how it locates the allegory of the Floating Island directly within a Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns concerning the status and fate of human happiness in the epoch of scientific Enlightenment. To that end, the connection between Delos and the mythical land of the Hyperboreans is crucial. Swift would certainly have known Pindar’s elogy for the eternally blissful land of the Hyperboreans, located far to the north and accessible “neither on foot nor by sea”; and he would almost certainly

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10Michel de Montaigne, Les Essais, ed. Pierre Villey (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004), II, 6; III, 4. Swift had two editions by Montaigne in his library, one of which is unidentifiable (deest titulus), and the other by Pierre Coste, which came out a year after Gulliver’s Travels (PASSMANN AND VENKEN II, 1269-72). The Essais were reprinted numberless times throughout the seventeenth century, both in the original and in English translation. See R. A. Sayce and David Maskell, A Descriptive Bibliography of Montaigne’s “Essais,” 1580-1700 (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1983).


have known the Greek myth according to which Apollo returned every spring to his birthplace at Delos after wintering in Hyperborea, literally the land beyond Boreas, God of the North Wind.\footnote{Pindar, \textit{Pythian Odes} in \textit{The Complete Odes of Pindar}, trans. Anthony Verity and ed. Stephen Instone (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 82 (X, 29-30). See also Louis Moréri, \textit{The Great Historical, Geographical, and Poetical Dictionary} (2 vols [in one] [London: Henry Rhodes, et al., 1694], s.v. "Delos" and "Hyperborean"), to which Swift subscribed (\textit{Passmann and Vienken II}, 1288-89).} I submit that if my thesis is correct, the ancient Greek propensity to identify the Hyperboreans with the Celts would likewise not have been lost on Swift, a native Irishman.\footnote{Correspondence, ed. Woolley, I, 110 and n4; see also Harvey D. Goldstein, "\textit{Anglorum Pindarus}: Model and Milieu," \textit{Comparative Literature}, 17 (1965), 299-310.} As for Swift’s knowledge of Pindar, we know it was extensive. His first attempts at poetry consisted in Pindaric odes; in a letter written to Cousin Thomas Swift, dated 3 May 1692, he confessed that, whenever he was pleased with these Pindaric effusions, he imagined himself to be Cowley, \textit{Anglorum Pindarus};\footnote{Pindari \textit{Olympia, Pythia, Nemea, Isthmia}, ed. Johannes Benedictus (Saumur: Petrus Pecediurius, 1620), p. 458 (\textit{Passmann and Vienken II}, 1432).} and in \textit{Gulliver’s Travels}, Houyhnhnm poetry is described as usually containing “some exalted Notions of Friendship and Benevolence, or the Praises of those who were Victor of Races, and other bodily Exercises” (p. 487 [IV, ix, 7]), most like Pindar in his early \textit{Olympiads}. Moreover, Swift was in possession of the important, fully annotated edition of Pindar’s \textit{Odes} by the Saumur Professor of Greek, Johannes Benedictus, who in his paraphrases and notes expressly emphasized the connection between Delos and the inaccessible Hyperborean paradise high up in the north: “hic est veluti nostrae ad beatitudinem navigationis terminus: ita vt viterius proregdi non liceat: vt neque ... vel maritimo vel pedestri itinere populos Hyperboreos adire.”\footnote{Swift, \textit{The Battle of the Books}, pp. 103, 107-8.} Of course, the Greek poet also takes on a valiant role against the Moderns in \textit{The Battle of the Books}.\footnote{Swift, \textit{The Battle of the Books}, p. 95. See “Running Commentary,” \textit{The Battle of the Books}, eds Hermann J. Real, Kirsten Juhas, Dirk F. Passmann, and Sandra Simon (Online.Swift/Ehrenpreis Centre for Swift Studies, Münster, October 2011), p. 31 (ad ll. 16-20).} And while the \textit{Battle} does not easily admit “to which side the Victory fell,” there is little ambiguity about Swift’s preference for the Ancients.\footnote{See also “Running Commentary,” \textit{The Battle of the Books}, eds Real, Juhas, Passmann, and Simon (Online.Swift/Ehrenpreis Centre for Swift Studies, Münster, October 2011), p. 31 (ad ll. 12-13).} In the Bookseller’s Preface to the Reader, written undoubtedly by Swift himself, we are told that the town resented the rough treatment of Sir William Temple by his adversaries in their defence of modern learning, and we are consequently led to infer that such \textit{ad hominem} attacks were something deemed permissible by an expanding modern decadence.\footnote{\textit{Houyhnhnm}, 	extit{Benedictus},\textit{Oedipus}} The allegory of the Floating Island takes up the theme of modern decadence by showing how the advancement of the New Science and its ambitions for the technological mastery of nature and society did not improve, but rather destroyed, the paragon of ancient happiness.
Swift achieves this effect through several allusions to, and poetic inversions of, the Hyperborean standpoint. Much like the land of the Hyperboreans, Laputa resides far to the north “in the Latitude of 46 N. and of Longitude 183,” which would locate the Floating Island at an impossible (hence, inaccessible) point in the Northern Pacific Ocean, somewhere near the Aleutian Islands, but three degrees beyond the direct opposite of the Prime Meridian, which passes through the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England (established 1675) (p. 410 [III, i, 8]). But even more pointedly, whereas Laputa floats in the air, Delos was said to float aimlessly in the sea, until it was fixed by Poseidon to four granite pillars in preparation for the births of Apollo and Artemis.20 Indeed, the figure of Apollo connects the earthly, or human, realm with the inaccessible Hyperborean ideal, meaning that the introduction of Greek divinity anchors the island to the earth, thereby grounding an image of the highest happiness on the principle of divine virtue. By contrast, the Laputans have learned to keep their island aloft in the air by a system of magnets, which is to say, that they have become their own gods. The scientific mastery of nature therefore replaces faith in divinity or the principle of ancient virtue.

We should also do well to remember that Laputa was a weapon and instrument of the ruling class. Should the terrestrial population under its dominion enter into disobedience, the island could be manoeuvred to block out the sun and the rain, thereby inducing desolation and disease. It could likewise be used as a platform from which large stones might be hurled onto the inhabitants below; and in the event of a terrible insurrection, the island itself could be lowered to the ground in order to crush out the rebellion. However, this could be done only so long as the operation would not endanger the undersurface of the island, which if cracked would result in its collapse to the ground (p. 421 [III, iii, 13]). The power of mutually assured mass destruction is an inevitable invention of the New Science; and as always, the mountains provide safe haven for insurgents.

Whereas in the Greek myth the relation between human and divine happiness is mediated by Apollo, it is the singular emblem of Laputa – namely, its mania for modern science – that has brought the Floating Island down to humankind in the persona of Gulliver, and hence corrupted the ideals of ancient virtue signified by the northern height of the Hyperboreans. Much like Hyperborea, Laputa may be characterized by the view from above. Only here, the view is clearly lowered, and its effect destructive. No longer inaccessible by land or by sea, Gulliver discovers Laputa on a voyage; and he was invited to explore the island in detail by the Laputans, who raised him up by a system of pulleys (p. 412 [III, i, 13]). With respect to politics, then, it is not the Greeks but the population of Balnibarbi over whom the Laputans float and exercise dominion. And again,

20Worth noting is Swift’s familiarity with Andrew Tooke’s mythological bestseller, The Pantheon, Representing the Fabulous Histories of the Heav’n Gods, in which one reads: “That Island heretofore floated in the Sea, and then was hid under the Waters … but emerg’d afterwards by the Order of Neptune, and became fix’d and immovable … from which time it was call’d Delos, because it was now visible.” The quotation is from the 11th edition ([London: J. Walton, et al., 1729], p. 130). For Swift’s knowledge of Tooke, see Poems, ed. Williams, III, 856 and n.
corresponding to the principle of poetic inversion, the influence exerted on the
Balnibarbians by the Laputans has not elevated the happiness of their subjects, but rather
ruined them after a contingent had travelled up to Laputa for a period of five months
and returned “with a very little Smattering in Mathematicks, but full of Volatile Spirits
acquired in that Airy Region” (p. 425 [III, iv, 14]). As Gulliver tells it, these determined
Balnibarbians “fell into Schemes of putting all Arts, Sciences, Languages, and Mechanicks
upon a new Foot,” with the result that “none of these Projects are yet brought to
Perfection; and in the mean time, the whole Country lies miserably waste, the Houses in
Ruins, and the People without Food or Cloaths” (p. 425 [III, iv, 14]). The eternal spring of
the Hyperboreans is thus transformed into a devastated landscape.

One may consider, here, the dangers that Descartes sought to avoid by the clumsy
application of his method.21 Indeed, it is a further irony that the Laputans themselves
demonstrate a litany of errors and deformities. Their heads are inclined either to the left or
to the right; one eye turns inward, the other points to the zenith (no doubt a joke on the
Cartesian coordinate system) (p. 412 [III, ii, 1]; see also p. 438 [III, viii, 2]); their men are
so distracted that their wives, filled with an “Abundance of Vivacity,” may openly commit
adultery without consequence (p. 416 [III, ii, 15]). Moreover, the Laputans are “so taken
up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, or attend to the Discourses of
others, without being roused by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and
Hearing,” with the consequence that “those Persons who were able to afford it, always
keep a Flapper” (p. 412 [III, ii, 1]). Yet despite all their theoretical learning, their houses
are very ill-built (due to their contempt for practical geometry), the clothes they make for
Gulliver are ill-fitting (due to an error in calculation), and their music is a stunning noise
due to their ears being adapted to hear “the Musick of the Spheres”) (p. 415 [III, ii, 8]).22
The lone exception to this pity of modern ‘advancement’ is Lord Munodi, a former
Governor of Balnibarbi, who was discharged from his position for “Insufficiency,” and
whose character represents the last vestige of ancient virtue, as indicated by the solid
condition of his house, “which was indeed a noble Structure, built according to the best
Rules of ancient Architecture” (p. 424 [III, iv, 12]).

But perhaps most damning of the Laputans is their constant state of anxiety: “THESE
People are under continual Disquietudes, never enjoying a Minute’s Peace of Mind; and
their Disturbances proceed from Causes which very little affect the rest of Mortals. Their
Apprehensions arise from several Changes they dread in the Celestial Bodies. For
Instance; that the Earth by the continual Approaches of the Sun towards it, must in Course
of Time be absorbed or swallowed up” (p. 416 [III, iii, 13]). In other words, their mock
fortitude in mathematics and astronomy has made them terrified by thoughts of

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21See especially Part Three of the *Discours de la méthode*.
22For the satiric implications, see Hermann J. Real, “The Dean and the Lord Chancellor: or, Swift
Saving his Bacon,” *Britannien und Europa: Studien zur Literatur-, Geistes- und Kulturgeschichte.
Festschrift für Jürgen Klein*, ed. Michael Szczekalla (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 95-111.
apocalypse. These are Swift’s new Hyperboreans: deformed and angst-ridden, the embodied anticipation of modern existentialism.

These observations lead to a final comment on the etymological derivation of Laputa. Despite its plausible debt to a Spanish homonym, this reference is absent from Gulliver’s own attempt to decipher the origin of the word. That Gulliver takes the time to investigate the matter is significant, despite the result that he “could never learn the true Etymology” (p. 414 [III, ii, 6]). By contrast, it is clear that Delos takes its name directly from the Greek δῆλος [dēlos] in all likelihood, because the island became “visible” by rising up from the sea. For his part, Gulliver rejects the official derivation of Laputa and its overtly political connotation, said to be from “Lap in the old obsolete Language [which] signifieth High, and Untuh a Governor” (p. 414). In exchange, Gulliver “ventured to offer the Learned among them ... that Laputa was quasi Lap oued; Lap signifying properly the dancing of the Sun Beams in the Sea, and outed a Wing,” which however, he says, “I shall not obtrude, but submit to the judicious Reader” (p. 414 [III, iii, 6]). Therefore standing in for the judicious reader, I suggest that Swift’s fictional etymology dislocates the political satire of Laputa from any conventional conception of politics, while finding its etymological root in a mirage, or some such disturbance of the visual system from which a Platonist might infer the source of blindness. Indeed, we may push the Greek context by noting that the “Island in the Air” first appears to Gulliver as “a vast Opake Body” intervening between him and the sun (p. 411 [III, i, 10]). I conclude that to the degree which a political philosophy is at stake in Swift’s allegory, it is not concerned with any particular system of government (as in Sir William Temple’s formulation), but rather with the absurd replacement of political insight by a flight of fancy. Insofar as the Laputans caricature the immoderate misapplication of the mathematical and experimental sciences, the image of the Floating Island depicts the dissolution of happiness into anxiety, and hence the lowering of an ancient ideal to a false vision of the good.

23The Lexicon Manuale Graeco-Latinum by Cornelius Schrevelius (Leiden: Hackius, 1664), which also was in Swift’s library (Passmann and Vienken III, 1654), defines δῆλος as “manifestus, notus, perspicuus” (p. 168).

24This contradicts Fitzgerald’s suggestion (“Science and Politics in Swift’s Voyage to Laputa,” p. 222).