THE FLYING ISLAND OF LAPUTA IN GULLIVER'S TRAVELS AND ITS POST-NEWTONIAN DEPARTURE FROM THE EARLIER FLYING ENGINES

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Jonathan Swift's flying island of Laputa in Gulliver's Travels (1726) is the most famous of all the 'Edifices in the Air' he satirized from A Tale of a Tub (1704) onwards, and my current study proposes a new interpretation of Laputa by underscoring its post-Newtonian configuration as an aerial body in pseudo-satellitic motion and relation to the larger-massed body/island Balnibarbi. While the flying island of Laputa has been transformed and familiarized to modern audience via the Ghibli and Hollywood images of the aerial castle and mountains in Howl's Moving Castle and Avatar respectively, literary critics view the Laputa episodes within the tradition of 'voyages to the moon' and other cosmic voyages in early modern Europe, including Kepler's Somnium (published in 1634) and Voltaire's Micromegas (1752), or in the context of Swift's satire on the 'new science' instituted by the Royal Society of London. No study, however, has properly recognized the crucial departure of Laputa, distinctively informed by Newton's cosmology, from the earlier lunar narratives: Laputa is neither a simple moon nor a flying machine to reach it, but a sort of heavenly body whose motive power lies in alternations of attraction to and repulsion from Balnibarbi, thus bound to the 'Extent of the Dominions below' and 'Height of four Miles'. (Newton distinguishes gravity from magnetic force, and the force that governs Laputa's motion reads more like gravity than magnetism.) Previous investigations have covered Swift's sources for Laputa largely in two groups, i.e. imaginary models such as Cyrano de Bergerac's L'Autre Monde: ou les États et Empires de la Lune (1657) and real-life scientific models such as William Gilbert's terella in De Magnete (1600) or projects of flying ships or flying chariots published in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society. Flying engines before Laputa, including the eponymous one in Defoe's Consolidator (1705), are fanciful vehicles of shuttling the lunar voyagers back and forth, whereas Laputa's closest modern equivalent would be a (artificial) satellite, except for its non-curvilinear motion none the less governed by the gravity-like force from Balnibarbi. Despite Laputa's apparent rule over Balnibarbi, the smaller(-massed) island is given a satellitic motion according to the Swiftian laws of gravitation between the two, which I argue manifests a post-Newtonian imagination. Recent Swift criticism has shed new lights on his multivarious clashes with Newton, who not only served as President of the Royal Society from 1703 to his death in 1727 but also endorsed Wood's copper half pence in the capacity of the Master of the Royal Mint during the Drapier crisis, when Swift wrote the voyage to Laputa. Swift is known to have owned and read the second edition of the Principia (1713) and sustained a keen interest in Newtonian cosmology as every serious intellectual of his time would have. Seen in this context, Laputa is not just another ingenious flying engine but a distinctively mock-Newtonian engine, an artificial 'Edifice in the Air', whose claim to mechanical rule over Balnibarbi Swift subverts by subjecting it to the Newtonian laws of physics.