

# WILEY

---

ON "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS"

Author(s): George Sayer

Source: *Blackfriars*, Vol. 19, No. 224 (NOVEMBER, 1938), pp. 839-847

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43811312>

Accessed: 04-04-2020 06:39 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Wiley is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Blackfriars*

## ON "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS"

"Personality" is one of the most rampant of the little devils responsible for the poorly state of modern literary criticism. He is the devil behind the heresy of looking not so much at the work as at the writer, and of expecting to find the person of the writer in the work. Than this heresy there are few things harder to scotch; you think you've stamped it out in some little corner; but wait a minute and it will perk up its head again like bindweed or the Shepherd's Purse.

It is certainly a very old heresy, but it can hardly ever have been so common as it is nowadays. For it is apparently related to having to write for a very large public, and there can hardly ever have been so many people reading as now. Most of us are far more interested in persons than in ideas and things. In this we are surely entirely right, and in reading books, so long as they were good books, our attention would naturally be caught and held by the author's characters. Left to ourselves there would naturally be little danger of our being too interested in the author, for the author, especially if he be a good author, is generally a very vague and shadowy person compared with the persons he has created. To the reader of *David Copperfield*, David, Agnes and Dora, rather than Dickens, are the interesting persons; and even if the author does figure as a character in his own novel or play, the ordinary reader cannot know it. Nor does a knowledge of the life of an author help the reader to appreciate his work: some of the most admired authors—Marlowe and Shakespeare among them—have been most uncertain as persons. The ordinary reader could not indeed have often been guilty of the "personal heresy," if he had not been misled by the critic and, more recently, by the author. Uninstructed by Matthew Arnold or Francis Thompson, it would scarcely occur to us in reading *Prome-*

## BLACKFRIARS

*theus Unbound* and *The Cenci* to think that the real Shelley was an "angel" or "a child." Nor would most of us think it worth the while of a Cambridge don to write down a vast examination of Shakespearean imagery in order to find out what Shakespeare's tastes really were.

But nowadays we have been given so many apples to eat that our appetite has been to a large extent perverted. We now really want to find the man behind the book. Our modern public likes to see an author lay himself bare. However humble an author may be, however limited the field of his activity, he is continually being asked to unveil himself. As soon as he has had a book or two published, some press-cutting agency will write to him offering to send him, for a consideration, snippets about himself, and to do something about it if his name does not appear often enough. In this spirit these sad children of Rousseau fill the waste-paper baskets of the present and attack the writings of the past. In the crudest way, the book must be the man.

But Swift was, as Dr. Johnson said, "one of the most reticent of men." He has written of himself in none of his formal works, but only in a few passages of his private letters. Anyone as naive as Gulliver at the beginning of his travels would be surprised to find that he has become "one of the most interesting of 18th century literary personalities." The comments of the imaginative modern critic on this "personality" would undoubtedly also startle Gulliver, probably into wishing himself back in Lilliput or Laputa. Gulliver would find that Swift was no longer the kind friend, dutiful dean, hater of shams and lover of animals, which his friends thought him. According to one critic he was "a tiger" and "a soulless monster." Another, a Mr. Collins, asserts not only "that his philosophy of life is ignoble and false" and that "his impious mockery extends even to the deity," but that "a large portion of his works exhibit, and in intense activity, all the worst attributes of his filthy and disgusting nature—revenge, spite, malignity, uncleanness." Yet another assures us that "*Gulliver's Travels* could not have been written except by a man mentally deranged."

## ON "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS"

Even Miss Sitwell has her fling at "his diseased brain and demented imagination," a blow which would perhaps have shocked eighteenth century Gulliver most of all.

The general opinion of critics is that *Gulliver's Travels* is a misanthropic work, written out of hatred. True, this view is supported by a number of anecdotes about Swift. But these, as several writers, who lived in the same century and were therefore in a better position to judge, tell us, all dissolve when pressed into an unsubstantial mass of wild and whirling words. The question of Swift's motive in writing *Gulliver's Travels* is of great importance; the point of a satire can easily be lost if the writer's objects are not understood. The point of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* was missed for 300 years, largely because critics failed to remember that he was a devout Christian and had a sense of humour.

Most of Swift's writings are satirical. Quite a good way of discovering the point of view of his satires would be to examine the serious pieces he wrote at about the same time. These are, oddly enough, nearly all of a religious nature. In them is expressed not the point of view of a "false and ignoble" philosopher, but that of a devout and sincere Christian, and of one desperately anxious for the welfare of his fellow-men. Among the titles are *Mutual Subjection*, *On the Testimony of Conscience*, *On the Trinity*, and *On the Wisdom of the World*. A few quotations will throw a lot of light on Gulliver.

"It plainly appears, that unless men are guided by the advice and judgment of a conscience founded on religion, they can give no security that they will be either good subjects, faithful servants of the public, or honest in their mutual dealings; since there is no other tie through which the pride, or lust or avarice, or ambition of mankind will not certainly break one time or another."

It will be recalled that the mankind satirised in *Gulliver's Travels* was one never guided by a conscience founded on religion. All the civilisations dealt with are entirely pagan. From beginning to end of the satire there is no mention of Christianity. Religion is almost the only thing which is not

## BLACKFRIARS

satirised. By religion Swift means the revealed Christian religion:

“The true misery of the heathen world appears to be what I before mentioned, the want of Divine Sanction, without which the dictates of the philosophers failed in the point of authority, and consequently the bulk of mankind lay under a great load of ignorance even in the article of morality.”

The misery of the heathen world! How like it is to the misery of the pagan peoples described in *Gulliver*!

One of Swift's favourite religious themes seems to have been “The wisdom of the world is foolishness with God.” One of his most famous sermons took this as its text. After pointing out some of the defects common to all pagan philosophies, he quoted from St. Paul:

“Pagan wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. But the wisdom that is from above, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.”

and commented:

“This is the true heavenly wisdom, which Christianity only can boast of, and which the greatest of the heathen wise men could never arrive at.”

Time and again Swift insisted on the “absolute necessity of divine revelation” and once wrote of Christianity as the only faith which “we may acquire without giving up our senses or contradicting our reason.”

Any of these passages would serve excellently as a text to *Gulliver's Travels*. Any could with equal propriety be placed at the head of More's *Utopia*. Swift may have been influenced by *Utopia*, he was anyway doing what More did nearly 200 years before: he was showing the hopelessness of man's state without religion. His satire, like *Utopia*, might, considered very generally, be said to have a double purpose: it was written for the pagan to show him the foolishness of all his life, thought and aspiration, it was written for the Christian as a lesson in humility, to show him how sadly he betrays his heritage. There are also considerable

## ON "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS"

similarities in method. Each satire is in the form of a travellers's tale, with Gulliver the seaman corresponding with Raphael Hythloday. But Gulliver is more of a person than Hythloday, and his story far more vivid and exciting as a tale. Perhaps the best tribute to its quality as a tale is the fact that it is constantly read with delight by people too young to appreciate its satirical significance. This recognition that *Gulliver's Travels* is essentially a tale carries with it a warning. Not everything in it can be interpreted satirically; a large number of incidents are included for the sake of the story, or as concessions to art and romance.

The character of the hero is a matter of great importance in any tale, but especially in a satire. Gulliver is an ordinary, very decent sort of man. He is married, loves his wife and children, and is rich in common sense. He has in fact almost every quality which a good type of modern pagan could be expected to have. He has especially the invaluable gift of being able to learn from experience. This, coupled with a pure and strong instinctive love of good, enables him to reject what is foolish and evil wherever he travels and to get always nearer to belief in the Christian virtues. The theme of the book is the education of Gulliver, the development of the hero from rather self-satisfied acceptance of everyday English life to scorn and rage at its iniquity. At the beginning of the book he is very much an advocate of the merits of his own country. He learns slowly, always some time after the reader has learnt. This device has a double effect: it underlines each point and thus confirms the reader in each new opinion, and it ennobles Gulliver by showing the conflict in him between his love of truth and his feeling of honest natural loyalty to his country.

"Nothing but an extreme love of truth could have hindered me from concealing this part of the story. It was in vain to discover my resentments, which were always turned into ridicule; and I was forced to rest with patience, while my noble and most beloved country was so injudiciously treated. I am heartily sorry as any of my readers can possibly be, that such an occasion was given . . ."

## BLACKFRIARS

Only by having Gulliver slower to learn than the average reader could Swift teach the reader effectively—through making him find each truth out for himself: and only by having Gulliver prejudiced with noble sentiments could he prevent him from appearing stupid. The characterization is fine throughout, and good use is made of “human” touches. For instance, after Gulliver in the last section of the book has been embraced by a female Yahoo, he says that she “did not make an appearance altogether so hideous as the rest of the kind.”

The first two voyages, those to Lilliput and Brobdingnag, have been fairly well understood. Swift is giving his readers a perspective view of themselves, but is for the most part satirising only particular manners and customs. The subjects are nearly all political or social. The other two sections are the ones which have aroused so much hatred and which are in my opinion commonly misinterpreted. They are usually left out of the expurgated editions of *Gulliver's Travels* given to children.

The voyage to Laputa seems to me to be a satire on ideals in general, on dons, scientists, and philosophers. A recent biographer, Taylor, has taken exception to Swift's description of the Struldbrugs, creatures destined to live for ever in this world. He thinks this shows “the hatred and abhorrence with which Swift regarded life.” This seems to me a most unnatural interpretation. If a man writes a book introducing into it characters who live for ever on earth and are most wretched in spite of it, why should it mean that he regards life with hatred and abhorrence? It could mean many things. But if he were known to be a Christian, and Dean of St. Patrick's, it would surely most naturally mean that he was satirising the ideal of earthly immortality, the idea that pagan man can attain absolute perfection on earth. That I think is what Swift was doing. The indirect object of the satire would be to incline his readers to a belief in original sin.

Necromancy and alchemy are satirised. Theoretical science, as opposed to common sense, is satirised by the

## ON "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS"

tailor who used a quadrant to measure the clients for whom he was to make clothes, and by the most "ingenious architect who had contrived a new method of building houses, by beginning at the roof, and working downwards to the foundations, which he justified by the like practice of those two prudent insects, the bee and the spider." Some people find this section dull. This is surprising, for most of the satire is as applicable to our century as to Swift's. As the Stock Exchange knows, we too have our projectors; our newspapers are kept alive by panacea medicine companies; and our bookshops are still well-stocked with slim outlines of knowledge and "easy" guides to religion, philosophy or science.

The concluding section of the *Travels*, the voyage to the Houyhnhms, has aroused most indignation of all. In it Swift imagines that man's rational soul was taken from him and given to the horses, who of course make far better use of it. Their civilisation represents the highest good which Gulliver meets with in all his voyaging. It is, I think, meant by Swift to represent the highest possible pitch of pagan wisdom, to be, like *Utopia*, a picture of the highest ideal the world could attain without revelation. And like *Utopia* and the ideal of the old Greek Stoics which it so closely resembles, it is a cold and emotionally unsatisfying ideal. There was no joy and no sorrow in the lives of the Houyhnhms. When they died, their friends and relations expressed "neither grief nor joy at their departing." Nor had they any "fondness for their colts or foals, but the care they take in educating them proceeds entirely from the dictates of reason." "*And I observed my master to have the same affection to his neighbour's issue, that he had for his own. They will have it that nature teaches them to love the whole species, and it is reason only that maketh a distinction of persons, where there is a superior degree of virtue.*" In the same way they practise a form of birth control. Also a form of eugenics:

"In their marriages they are exactly careful to choose such



## BLACKFRIARS

colours as will not make any disagreeable mixture in the breed. Strength is chiefly valued in the male, and comeliness in the female; not upon the account of love, but to preserve the race from degenerating . . . Courtship, love . . . have no place in their thoughts, or terms with which to express them in their language."

And most monstrous and inhuman of all:

"Here likewise the regulation of children is settled: as for instance, if a Houyhnhnm hath two males, he changeth one of them with another that hath two females; and when a child hath been lost by a casualty, where the mother is past breeding, it is determined what family in the district shall breed another to supply the loss."

As such creatures would, the Houyhnhnms practised an excessive cleanliness. This Swift rags freely. On his arrival home in England Gulliver was disgusted by the smell of his wife and children. It was a year before he could bear to be in the same room as they.

The view that Swift was seriously putting forward the life of the Houyhnhnms as an ideal is no more tenable than the corresponding view about Sir Thomas More and the *Utopia*. Gulliver himself says that the ideas of the Houyhnhnms agreed exactly with the philosophy of Socrates, one of the philosophies whose inadequacy Swift demonstrated in his sermon on "The Wisdom of the World." *Gulliver's Travels* is really an elaborate extension of the theme of that sermon and serves as high a devotional purpose.

The big guns of Swift's satire are not used until this last section of the *Travels*. Their effect is then devastating. Thanks to the clever plot he has his reader, whether Christian or pagan, already at his mercy, because in each case ashamed of having betrayed his privileges. The satire stops at nothing: skeleton after skeleton rises out of the Pandora's box of our everyday lives and stands ghastly clear before us, the flesh with which tepidity and compromise clothe them cut clean away. The writing, obviously inspired by a true hatred of evil and a true love of good, has a great power to bite at a man's pride to humble him. One way or another, he must after reading it be different from what he was before.

ON "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS"

I am afraid it is easy to see why the book has been so hated.

In another of his satires Swift defined happiness as "a perpetual possession of being well-deceived," an excellent definition of the self-satisfied attitude he spent much of his life attacking. The age in which he lived was a self-satisfied one: in 1726, the year in which *Gulliver's Travels* was published, appeared Hutcheson's famous essay on the rightness of man's natural instincts, a book that was liked as much as Swift's satire was disliked. Many people were bound to dislike Swift's writings, because they threatened to take away the props of their happiness. It is bound to be much the same in every age. His satire, because it is so personal, that is to say because it seems to attack the person of each reader, will inevitably, like the work of Léon Bloy of last century, be thought "bad form" by many.

It is terrible to have "The Hound" at the door.

GEORGE SAYER.