

Gulliver the Preacher

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Gulliver the Preacher

SWIFT was a subtle man—in his life as well as in his writings. This remark is a truism and little regarded; our difficulty is not in finding complexities but in resolving them. The bishop who, according to Swift, said that *Gulliver's Travels* “was full of improbable lies, and for his part, he hardly believed a word of it” was an early benefactor to Swift studies.¹ This bishop's work is being advanced by those who find that Gulliver himself has no character: “he is a cipher . . . there is nothing beneath what we see, no underground man to be sensed beneath the detail of his imprisonment.”² *Gulliver's Travels* is reduced to a bald set of opinions. Unfortunately, we are not always sure that they are Swift's opinions: “He delighted in seeming worse than he was,” wrote Samuel Johnson in his *Life of Swift*.³ Despite his irritation, Johnson recognized that Swift's misleading conduct was not merely perverse; it was a response to a moral principle—“dread of hypocrisy.”

For Swift, morality was not exclusively a matter of those social duties that he so emphatically recognized. His great concern for the public aspects of man was in part a reaction against the deceitfulness of that inner man whom he discerned in himself and found in Christian tradition. In order to deal effectively with moral issues he thought it necessary to avoid the almost inevitable distortions of personal interest. In “Thoughts on Religion” Swift commented: “Violent zeal for truth hath an hundred to one odds to be either petulance, ambition, or pride.”⁴ In his expository writings about religion, Swift is persistently skeptical of the motives that people profess. And in his satires he allows his narrators to reveal their reprehensible motivations indirectly. Although the emphasis differs, both kinds of writing spring from the same deep suspicion of the inner man.

In Swift's “A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Entered into Holy Orders,” the speaker states that “the two principal Branches of Preach-

ing, are first to tell the People what is their Duty; and then to convince them that it is so” (ix, 70). The “moving Manner of Preaching” is the subject of a wry warning: “I therefore entreat you to make use of this Faculty (if you be ever so unfortunate as to think you have it) as seldom, and with as much Caution as you can” (ix, 70). The young clergyman is persistently reminded of his practical duties and warned that self-display is in vain. The contrast between this work and George Herbert's “The Parson preaching” may help to define Swift's attitude. Herbert is unsympathetic to the grand homiletic style of the seventeenth century as practiced by men like Donne and Jeremy Taylor. Like Swift, he advises simplicity: according to Herbert, the parson is “not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy.”⁵ Apart from a superficial similarity, however, the two works differ enormously. In contrast to Herbert, Swift is extremely suspicious of the preacher's motives. Swift conceives of the preacher as a potential menace to the truth, while Herbert sees him as an instrument to inspire others. Herbert believes that the “country people . . . need a mountaine of fire to kindle them.” The parson must preach “so that the auditors may plainly perceive that every word is hart-deep” (p. 233). He believes that the sermon is an opportunity for good, but Swift sees great danger in the preacher's conception of this opportunity. From Swift's point of view, the preacher's principal duty is often to suppress, rather than to express, himself: “I am not answerable to God for the doubts that arise in my own breast, since they are the consequence of that reason which he hath planted in me, if I take care to conceal those doubts from others, if I use my best endeavours to subdue them, and if they have no influence on the conduct of my life” (ix, 262).

Swift's sermons, too, reflect his preoccupation with the fallibility of the inner man. In “On the Testimony of Conscience” he states that “when- ever our Conscience accuses us, we are certainly

guilty; but we are not always innocent when it doth not accuse us" (IX, 150). Often "we do not suffer our Conscience to take any Cognizance of several Sins we commit" (IX, 150). Although the authorship of "The Difficulty of Knowing One's Self" is uncertain, it was found among Swift's papers and is in accord with his attitudes: men "are wonderfully unacquainted with their own Temper and Disposition, and know very little of what passes within them" (IX, 350).

In his satires Swift expressed the traditional view that the satirist attacks in order to ameliorate: his "Apology" for *A Tale of a Tub* is, "Why should any Clergyman of our Church be angry to see the Follies of Fanaticism and Superstition exposed, tho' in the most ridiculous Manner? since that is perhaps the most probable way to cure them, or at least to hinder them from farther spreading" (I, 2). And in "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D. S. P. D." he explains that "His Satyr points at no Defect, / But what all Mortals may correct" (ll. 463-64). Nevertheless, it is often extremely difficult, or even impossible, to determine the course of action that is suggested by Swift's satires.

The difficulties of interpreting satire may seem to result from the genre's too exclusive dedication to attack: the author's positive injunctions are there only by implication. But Swift has little difficulty in making clear, at least generally, from what position the attack proceeds. In *A Modest Proposal* the narrator lists what are obviously the appropriate economic and moral actions for the Irish to take. That he calls these "vain, idle, visionary thoughts" deceives no one (XII, 117). But the interjection of the narrator's attitude does complicate the moral issues of the satire. We are presented with the plight of the failed idealist, the moralist demoralized: experience has disabused the narrator of his visionary expectations. He insists that the only possible solution is one requiring no moral energy, a technological one. We see the horror of his proposal, but can we refute his view? And if the plight of the Irish is, as the narrator argues, more cruel than the cannibalism that he has proposed, how can we blithely call him inhumane? Swift has negated any specific proposals seemingly implied by the satire. We are not going to eat children, but our confidence in high-minded solutions of economic problems has not been strengthened either. The effect of *A Modest Pro-*

posal is modified by the narrator's character, and our duty is perhaps even less clear than it was before.⁶

Swift's satires are not sermons. As satirist, Swift is still the moralist, but he has not chosen the nearest way to show man his duty. He uses the persona as the major fictional device of his satires in order to introduce precisely what he warns the preacher to exclude: the self-deceptive private world. By focusing on the interaction of the speaker and his message, the satires gain a moral dimension not available to the sermon, but they also lose the moral imperative of the sermon. Swift derides the arrogant zeal of the satirist. Gulliver is comically dismayed that his book has not uprooted the vices of his Yahoo countrymen, and Swift's own letter to Ford about the *Travels* is self-mockery: "they are admirable Things, and will wonderfully mend the World."⁷

Gulliver is the most sustained character in Swift's fiction: no matter how many contradictions one finds in him, one remains aware of his presence. Inevitably, our sense of Swift's meaning is modified by our sense of Gulliver. Taken by itself, the character's final view of man is an appropriate one: it is in accord with Augustinian Christianity, the traditions of satire, and Gulliver's experience. Roland Frye has shown beyond any doubt that the descriptions of the Yahoos are closely related to both the biblical passages and the Anglican homiletic traditions that deal with man's body.⁸ And, in any case, Gulliver's final view is undoubtedly preferable to his earlier determination to see no evil. Why then is so unsingular an attitude so difficult to accept? The antipathy of readers to the fourth voyage is not just a Victorian aberration. In the eighteenth century, William Warburton objected: "But where is the sense of a general Satire, if the whole Species be degenerated."⁹ Lord Orrery wrote of Swift, "In painting *Yahoos* he becomes one himself."¹⁰ And a multitude of modern critics, annoyed by Swift's depiction of the Yahoos, argue that Swift did not like the Houyhnhnms either. What we cannot forget is that Gulliver's perceptions are those of a man who gallops and neighs, converses with horses, and will not touch his children. If these are the consequences, then perhaps Gulliver's truth should be questioned.

The unresolved discussions about the Houyhnhnms result from these creatures' presumably dele-

terious effects on Gulliver. Taken by themselves, the Houyhnhnms seem easy enough to evaluate. They are limited in power and knowledge; clearly they are not gods. They are also on occasion comic, and may even resemble deists. Nevertheless, they are good. Certainly Gulliver, given the alternative of Houyhnhnm or Yahoo, has chosen well, but we cannot avoid feeling that something has gone wrong. "To have not even one friend": Gulliver's choice was also made by another character who liked horsy smells—Stephen Dedalus. Such arrogance disconcerts us; we feel it must be mistaken.

The theological mystery of the Houyhnhnms is not deep. At least the beginning of wisdom on this subject is to be found in George Sherburn's statement that "Having made his Houyhnhnms horses, Swift could hardly make them Anglicans."¹¹ They are adequately explained by the familiar opening chapter of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. St. Paul argues that even men who have no special Christian revelation are morally responsible because "the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Rom. i.20). He goes on to describe man's deliberate sinning against what he knows to be truth: men "became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (i.21). The Houyhnhnms, however, represent the hypothetical creatures who, although to some degree subject to the physical evils of man, have not deliberately perverted their understanding. Reason and virtue are for them still the same (xi, 259). Unlike men, they have not "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (Rom. i.23). The absence of a religious establishment among them is only additional evidence that their natural religion is uncorrupted. They still recognize the absolute and unrelenting claims of reason, a reason that is not yet distorted: "no Person can disobey Reason, without giving up his Claim to be a rational Creature" (ix, 280). Here is where they part company from men: man's religion must be different. The Houyhnhnms do not even know of those "unnatural Appetites" (xi, 264) that St. Paul implies are the inevitable result of changing "the truth of God into a lie" (Rom. i.25, 24; 26). In creating the Houyhnhnms good, Swift in no way compromises either the theology of orthodox

Christianity or his objections to deism. By contrasting Houyhnhnms to man, Swift is showing that man is evil by choice, one of the lessons of Pauline and Augustinian Christianity.

Gulliver is not wrong to admire Houyhnhnms and to detest Yahoos. And his perception of the Yahoo in man is inevitable and reasonable. But Gulliver is wrong to adopt a moral perspective that ignores the essential and emphasizes the trivial. He swoons at the touch of his wife and his spirits are revived by the smell of his groom (xi, 289–90). His morality has become a mechanical response to external stimuli. He fails to draw the proper Pauline lesson from the contrast of Yahoo and Houyhnhnm: "Therefore thou art Inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things" (Rom. ii.1). External moral categories are, explains St. Paul, hypocritical: "Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God" (ii.23); "But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; Whose praise is not of men, but of God" (ii.29). Gulliver, however, tries to hide his guilt by imitating horses; he is unable to practice Houyhnhnm virtues.

Gulliver's Travels defines the process leading to this failure. Gulliver's movement from naïf to satirist is also from a limited self-knowledge to deliberate self-deception. He locates internal evils in the external world; his jeremiads of the fourth book are defenses against perceiving himself. He cannot abide any reflection—not even of his form in a glass. A morality encompassing only exteriors is all that is possible for him: it circumvents painful introspection while describing an observable reality. This moral perspective is put in its extreme and undisguised form in the clothes philosophy of *A Tale of a Tub*: "Is not Religion a *Cloak* . . . and Conscience a *Pair of Breeches*, which, tho' a Cover for Lewdness as well as Nastiness, is easily slipt down for the Service of both" (i, 47).

Gulliver's Travels is both a satire and a psychological analysis of Gulliver as satirist. Gulliver's invective defines the evil in mankind. At the same time, we see Gulliver using his comments about others to obscure the truth about himself. Having experienced coercion and violence, Gulliver does not, understandably, think highly of his world.

But he is himself an angry man: the external world mirrors the emotions that he feels. His response to the Lilliputians is violent: "I confess I was often tempted, while they were passing backwards and forwards on my Body, to seize Forty or Fifty of the first that came in my Reach, and dash them against the Ground. But the Remembrance of what I had felt, which probably might not be the worst they could do; and the Promise of Honour I made them, for so I interpreted my submissive Behaviour, soon drove out those Imaginations" (xi, 24). The order of Gulliver's explanations for his restraint is significant: the fear of pain is prior to, and just as important as, "the Promise of Honour."

The "Intrepidity of these diminutive Mortals" (xi, 24) is ludicrous because we know what goes on in Gulliver's mind and they obviously do not. Gulliver imagines what he might do should they try to kill him: "For supposing these People had endeavoured to kill me with their Spears and Arrows while I was asleep; I should certainly have awakened with the first Sense of Smart, which might so far have roused my Rage and Strength, as to enable me to break the Strings wherewith I was tyed; after which, as they were not able to make Resistance, so they could expect no Mercy" (xi, 26). But we soon learn that the Lilliputians' courage and generosity—their manliness—disguise imaginations even more malicious and cruel than Gulliver's. From the first they consider killing him, but the bulk of his carcass deters them. Later, however, the Secretary suggests starving him: "five or six Thousand of his Majesty's Subjects might, in two or three Days, cut your Flesh from your Bones, take it away by Cart-loads, and bury it in distant Parts to prevent Infection; leaving the Skeleton as a Monument of Admiration to Posterity" (xi, 71). Gulliver also learns that when the King speaks of mercy, the Lilliputians expect cruelty (xi, 72).

Gulliver and his little hosts get on well for a time because they are balanced in a nice opposition: fear produces prudence and prudence civility. But throughout the *Travels* Gulliver's persisting and characteristic emotions are fear and anger. Although disguised, they become progressively greater parts of his emotional spectrum.

In Brobdingnag the institutions are relatively uncorrupted, but the giants have the same personal failings as other people. Although the difference in

size makes any deliberate violence to Gulliver unnecessary, they have the usual propensities to malice. Not only do the children and the dwarf torment Gulliver, but all are ready to laugh at his misfortunes, even when his life is endangered. Glumdalclitch herself defines her relationship to him in inhumane terms: "She said, her *Papa* and *Mama* had promised that *Grildrig* should be hers; but now she found they meant to serve her as they did last Year, when they pretended to give her a Lamb; and yet, as soon as it was fat, sold it to the Butcher" (xi, 96–97). The giants have public executions, a spectacle that Gulliver "abhorred" (xi, 119). He is, however, urged to attend one by an interested gentleman whose friend had been murdered. The description of the execution is gruesome both because of its concreteness and because of the emotional distance implied by Gulliver's figure of speech: "The Veins and Arteries spouted up such a prodigious Quantity of Blood, and so high in the Air, that the great *Jet d'Eau* at *Versailles* was not equal for the Time it lasted; and the Head when it fell on the Scaffold Floor, gave such a Bounce, as made me start, although I were at least an *English* Mile distant" (xi, 120). The spectator sports of the giants are not idealized.

To control his emotions while he is in Brobdingnag, Gulliver attributes them to others. Terrified by the giants, he bemoans his "desolate Widow, and Fatherless Children" (xi, 86). Facing the dangers of day-to-day existence in this land, he walks about "thinking on poor *England*" (xi, 118). Carried off like a tortoise by an eagle, he cannot "forbear lamenting my poor Nurse, the Grief she would suffer for my Loss, the Displeasure of the Queen, and the Ruin of her Fortune" (xi, 141–42).

His response to persistent humiliation is to repress his sense of injury: "But, as I was not in a Condition to resent Injuries, so, upon mature Thoughts, I began to doubt whether I were injured or no" (xi, 107). He does, however, resist in indirect ways. His extravagant praise of England is not patriotism but an assertion of his worth. After this attempt is ridiculed by the King, Gulliver gives his bloodthirsty account of guns. The power-mad Gulliver here is no contradiction to the restrained Gulliver of Lilliput. In Brobdingnag he can only assert his strength and express his rage in this indirect way.

It is entirely appropriate that the man who is sexually humiliated, treated without "any Manner

of Ceremony” by the maids of honor (xi, 119), should soon tell terrifying stories of big guns. The penis as weapon appears repeatedly in Swift, most obviously perhaps in *A Tale of a Tub*: Jack “would of a sudden, with one Hand out with his Gear, and piss full in their Eyes, and with the other, all to-bespatter them with mud” (I, 125). In Lilliput, Gulliver’s great size reduces his aggressiveness: his genitals are admired even by the army (xi, 42). Nevertheless, the association of his genitals with hostility is implied even when the hostility is only latent. He urinates with “Noise and Violence” (xi, 25), and when putting out the fire, he recognizes that “his Majesty might resent the Manner” (xi, 56). He insists, nevertheless, that he has done “a very eminent Piece of Service” (xi, 56), which is what he is trying to do for the King of Brobdingnag when he explains artillery. But in both Lilliput and Brobdingnag his efforts are interpreted by the inhabitants as expressions of hostility.

Feces are another of the obvious symbols of hostility. Gulliver is concerned to dissociate himself from any charges of uncleanness; only once, he explains, did he defecate in his own quarters (xi, 29). The Yahoos, however, “discharge their Excrements” on him (xi, 224), and he later recommends the Yahoo remedy to his countrymen, “a Mixture of *their own Dung and Urine*, forcibly put down the *Yahoo’s* throat” (xi, 262). However, he obviously does not wish to take his own medicine; his endeavor is to turn his shame into a weapon.

In Brobdingnag, Gulliver praises Europeans; in the land of the Houyhnhnms, he attacks them. Nevertheless, the motive is the same—to defend himself. Because the Houyhnhnms associate mankind with Yahoos, Gulliver must dissociate himself from both. Gulliver explains his abrupt change of tone—from defending to attacking man—as his submission to truth (xi, 258); nevertheless, he repeatedly notes that he withholds details and extenuates the faults of man whenever he can.¹² He willingly submits to his master’s judgments when they are unavoidable or when the truth would be even worse than his master can comprehend, as in the case of sexual perversions (xi, 264). But at other times he makes bizarrely hyperbolic charges—about lawyers, for example: “I have known some of them to have refused a large Bribe from the Side where Justice lay, rather than injure the *Faculty*, by doing any thing unbecoming their

Nature or their Office” (xi, 249). This is conventional satiric exaggeration, but it is also Gulliver’s attempt to ingratiate himself; if men seem sufficiently wicked and irrational, Gulliver will seem better than men. The suppressions and the invective have the same function.

“A Voyage to Laputa” was completed last, but inserted in third place. The changes in Gulliver’s tone during this voyage are even more abrupt than in Book iv. It is reasonable to assume, I think, that “A Voyage to Laputa” reflects an emotional state reached by Gulliver only in the last voyage, that Swift miscalculated and created an attitude incongruous with an earlier stage of Gulliver’s development. The many abrupt shifts from satiric comment to apparent self-deception to be found in Book iii are characteristic of Gulliver’s final condition—when he has abandoned all pretensions to truth and speaks whatever will achieve his ends. Morality has then become a tool to serve his emotional needs.

“A Voyage to Laputa” most obviously shows us Gulliver the “modern,”¹³ a projector and fraud. It brings into focus what might otherwise seem merely peripheral in the *Travels*—the way in which the physical becomes Gulliver’s only moral dimension. It has often been noted that Swift uses the physical as a symbol of the moral.¹⁴ But Gulliver goes further: he accepts the symbol for the substance. Seeing Brutus on Glubdubdrib, he “could easily discover the most consummate Virtue, the greatest Intrepidity, and Firmness of Mind, the Truest Love of his Country, and general Benevolence for Mankind in every Lineament of his Countenance” (xi, 196). Swift perhaps shares Gulliver’s admiration of Brutus’ virtues but not Gulliver’s confidence in the unlimited expressiveness of the human countenance.

Gulliver adjusts easily to the Grand Academy of Lagado. He admits to having once been a “Projector” (xi, 178) and is himself able to make a contribution: the “anagrammatic method” of discovering plots (xi, 191–92). Those political schemes that demand moral judgment and will are “wild impossible Chimaeras”; he approves only those that are “not so visionary”: drugs to control the senate and the examination of excrements to uncover conspiracies (xi, 187–90).

On hearing of the Struldbruggs, Gulliver makes his obeisance to the past: “Happy People who enjoy so many living Examples of antient Virtue”

(xi, 208). But modern that he is, he imagines the glories of living forever—onward and upward in perpetuity. As a Struldbrugg he might even “prevent that Continual Degeneracy of human Nature, so justly complained of in all Ages” (xi, 210). Of the familiar motif of immortal but increasingly miserable creatures, Gulliver says, “I do not remember to have met the like in any Book of Travels that hath come to my Hands” (xi, 283). In this insistence on the originality of his commonplace, he resembles Swift’s most prominent modern, the narrator of *A Tale of a Tub* who “found a very strange, new and important Discovery; That the Publick Good of Mankind is performed by two Ways, *Instruction*, and *Diversion*” (I, 77).

While reveling in his imagined immortality, Gulliver speaks to his hosts with offensive brutality: he will associate with only “a few of the most valuable among you Mortals, whom Length of Time would harden me to lose with little or no Reluctance, and treat your Posterity after the same Manner; just as a Man diverts himself with the annual Succession of Pinks and Tulips in his Garden, without regretting the Loss of those which withered the preceding Year” (xi, 210). This benefactor of mankind retains little civility and even less morality.

Although the tone of “A Voyage to Laputa” is not entirely consistent with the book’s position, the intellectual content is. Gulliver receives necessary experience in separating appearance from reality, form from content, surface from substance.¹⁵ The Laputans force even their food into mathematical forms unrelated to its nature (xi, 161). Language itself is here reduced to an object that is to be substituted for any other reality. The projectors who replace words with things eliminate all those undemonstrable metaphysical assumptions that are implied by language. They reduce everything to a physical appearance. Gulliver himself finally makes anagrams, manipulating letters to produce apparent meaning that is detached from any external reality. One recalls the prefiguration of this part of Gulliver’s education in the opening chapter of the third voyage: Gulliver returns an answer in Italian to someone on the floating island, knowing that he does not understand, but “hoping at least that the Cadence might be more agreeable to his Ears” (xi, 158).

In the next book, Gulliver must distort his culture in order to explain it to his Houyhnhnm

master. Everything must be translated into those externalities for which both languages—English and Houyhnhnm—have names. Disputes over the Eucharist are “Differences in Opinions” about physical substances, a reductionism that Gulliver has been prepared for in Laputa: “. . . whether *Flesh* be *Bread*, or *Bread* be *Flesh*: Whether the Juice of a certain *Berry* be *Blood* or *Wine*” (xi, 246). As European terms of value disappear, Gulliver can make no sense of morality, except as it is embodied in the Houyhnhnms. European virtues finally become purely verbal for him; only their “Names” are “still retained among us in most languages” (xi, 294). By the end, Gulliver can see nothing more than the Houyhnhnms see. He can apply the terms “Courteous and generous” to Pedro de Mendez, but he can make no adequate distinctions between this man and others.

Gulliver’s detachment from the values implied by his language is prepared for even before his “Voyage to Laputa.” Laughing heartily while stroking him gently, the King of Brobdingnag asks if Gulliver is Whig or Tory (xi, 107). No matter how serious his political commitments, Gulliver cannot maintain a human perspective on them in this situation. And in *Gulliver’s Travels* the loss of one’s normal orientation leads to another kind of distortion, not to a higher truth. Neither Lilliputians, nor Brobdingnagians, nor Houyhnhnms understand Gulliver, and when Gulliver adopts their perceptions, he sees himself less clearly. In Brobdingnag and in the country of the Houyhnhnms, he attempts to deny his painful weakness by assuming the attitudes of those who are stronger or better than he is.

Meeting the Portuguese after leaving the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver “trembled all the while betwixt Fear and Hatred” (xi, 285). Both emotions are obviously inappropriate: even the common sailors speak “with great Humanity” (xi, 286). But Gulliver of course fears and hates his own humanity. The sailors reflect what he has been attempting to deny in himself. Why then does he prefer to remain with savages, who have already attacked him and who reveal a more obviously debased nature? The answer has been implied earlier in the book: Gulliver “could better endure the Sight of a common *Yahoo*” than of himself (xi, 278). The more degenerate the creature, the easier it is for Gulliver to differentiate himself from it.

Gulliver clearly finds the Yahoos attractive as

well as repellent. He spends much time observing them and noting their differences from humans, but he also deliberately entices them sexually (xi, 265). He can bear to observe the fascinating affinities while he still feels that he is not of their species. But when he strips himself naked and is attacked by a female, he acknowledges that he is a “real *Yahoo*” (xi, 267). He must from that time on be vigilant to defend himself against the implications of that knowledge.

The various meanings attached to Gulliver’s clothes mark how far he is from any traditional Christian view of mankind.¹⁶ God’s clothing of Adam and Eve with coats of skins was traditionally interpreted as a type of Christ’s atonement; the aprons of fig leaves that Adam and Eve had first made to conceal themselves are inadequate. Clothes are a sign that man is fallen, and they are also a sign of the possibility of his redemption—of a righteousness imputed to him, although not earned by him. In *Paradise Lost*, Christ judges and then clothes man: “Nor he their outward only with the skins / Of beasts, but inward nakedness, much more / Opprobrious, with his Robe of righteousness / Amazing, covered from his Father’s sight” (x.220–23).

The Houyhnhnms, who have not degenerated from the perfection of nature, do not comprehend the meaning of clothes: “he could not understand why Nature should teach us to conceal what Nature had given” (xi, 237). Gulliver realizes that he can use his clothes to keep the Houyhnhnms from identifying him absolutely as a *Yahoo*. Indeed, the clothes are, in their full significance, the major difference between Gulliver and the *Yahoos*, but he sees clothes only in their limited, physical sense. When found out by his master, Gulliver requests “that the secret of my having a false Covering to my Body might be known to none but himself, at least as long as my present Cloathing should last” (xi, 237). Here Gulliver commits himself to systematic hypocrisy. Instead of being the sign that he recognizes his fallen nature and has hopes of redemption, his clothes become an attempt at self-aggrandizement.

Gulliver repairs his clothes with the skins of *Yahoos*. Swift’s jest is a grim parody of atonement; Gulliver separates himself from the reprobate *Yahoos* by inflicting violence upon them. Later, he pretends that he will be defiled by the clothes of the Portuguese, but what he really fears

is self-knowledge. He can bear naked savages, but not the admission of his identity as a fallen man.

The moral rigor of Gulliver’s language and the truth in his charges compel right-thinking men to suppress their anger at his insolence. Under cover of improving mankind, Gulliver can insult with impunity; in the land of the Houyhnhnms,

I enjoyed perfect Health of Body, and Tranquility of Mind; I did not feel the Treachery or Inconstancy of a Friend, nor the Injuries of a secret or open Enemy. I had no Occasion of bribing, flattering or pimping, to procure the Favour of any great Man, or of his Minion. I wanted no Fence against Fraud or Oppression: Here was neither Physician to destroy my Body, nor Lawyer to ruin my Fortune: No Informer to watch my Words and Actions, or forge Accusations against me for Hire: Here were no Gibbers, Censurers, Backbiters, Pickpockets, Highwaymen, House-breakers, Attorneys, Bawds, Buffoons, Controvertists, Ravishers, Murderers, Robbers, Virtuoso’s; no Leaders or Followers of Party and Faction; no Encouragers to Vice, by Seducement or Examples: No Dungeon, Axes, Gibbets, Whippingposts, or Pillories; No cheating Shopkeepers or Mechanicks: No Pride, Vanity or Affectation: No Fops, Bullies, Drunkards, strolling Whores, or Poxes: No ranting, lewd, expensive Wives: No stupid, proud Pedants: No importunate, overbearing, quarrelsome, noisy, roaring, Empty, Conceited, swearing Companions: No Scoundrels raised from the Dust upon the Merit of their Vices; or Nobility thrown into it on account of their Virtues: No Lords, Fidlers, Judges or Dancing-masters.

(xi, 276–77)

This invective occurs in the midst of his account of his idealized life among the Houyhnhnms. Clearly, his strongest interest is in venting his rage at England, not in Utopian narrative.

In Gulliver’s mouth, the invective becomes a parody of satire; the more traditional it becomes the less it is used by him for traditional satiric purposes.¹⁷ As Alvin Kernan has noted, all satire tends to implicate the satirist.¹⁸ But Swift does more than implicate Gulliver in the satiric judgments made by the character himself: Gulliver becomes quintessentially the modern at the very time that his commentary is most orthodox. The speaker and the spoken are incompatible.

In the last chapter, Gulliver appears as a Grub Street writer, author of a travel book designed to raise him above the crowd. He praises his own originality and disguises his borrowing from familiar stories. Unable to rise, he will, like a true

modern, lower others. Like the narrator of the *Tale*, Gulliver vacillates between contempt for, and servility to, the reader. He does not even bother to pretend to consistency of attitude.¹⁹ Invective is followed by statements that he has no “Passion, Prejudice, or Ill-will against any Man” (xi, 293). Quoting Sinon in defense of his veracity is not ignorance (xi, 292); anything will do. His fears make him veil his contempt, but he prefers the veil to be thin. His book has become a barely disguised vehicle for controlling his fears and inflicting his hatred on the reader. Language has become a tool divorced from principle: its only end is to do things for him.

Gulliver thunders against the evils of the Yahoos, but he is a false prophet, only capable of simulating moral insight. Swift does use Gulliver’s commentary as a straightforward satiric attack on man’s fallen nature, but he also shows us the character concealing himself in the denunciations: a man who no longer understands the traditional meanings of his conventional language, who can make only the most limited moral discriminations, and who often disguises his rage in a pretense of objectivity.

In the last chapter, Gulliver seems to make an attempt at self-reform. He proposes to look at his “Figure often in a Glass, and thus if possible habituate my self by Time to tolerate the Sight of a Human Creature” (xi, 295). But immediately he also proposes “To lament the Brutality of *Houyhnhnms* in my own Country, but always treat their Persons with Respect,” an example of his continued failure to discriminate between the trivial and the morally significant. The book ends with Gulliver interpreting the pride of others as an insult to his own greatness: “I here intreat those who have any Tincture of this absurd Vice, that they will not presume to appear in my Sight” (xi, 296).

Swift’s own sermons have the traditional vir-

tues: they are clear and precise, they deal with significant moral issues, and they are sound in doctrine (if not always in politics). They are unexceptionable—and also a little dull. Herbert Davis has pointed out that the sermons show Swift’s characteristic skill in writing;²⁰ nevertheless, many readers feel that Swift’s heart is not in them. Swift, however, may have thought this limitation to be a very good thing indeed. His satires show that fervent enunciations of moral truths are often used for devious ends; such satires do not inspire us (as a sermon should) to put these truths into action. *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver’s Travels* are attempts to justify, and sometimes ingratiate, their putative authors. The narrators of *A Modest Proposal* and *An Argument against Abolishing Christianity* play upon moral and religious assumptions in order to manipulate people for social and economic ends that are neither moral nor religious.

In contrast, a sermon should exist for its truth, not for its preacher. But we cannot even understand what Gulliver means unless we compare his often unexceptionable statements to his devious ends. He wrote his book to stop “all Abuses and Corruptions” (xi, 6), but his extravagant moral aim is self-serving; it is his tribute to his own powers and goodness. In the “Letter from Capt. Gulliver to His Cousin Sympson” he finally and firmly establishes his own superiority to the human race:²¹

I must freely confess, that since my last Return, some corruptions of my *Yahoo* Nature have revived in me by Conversing with a few of your Species, and particularly those of mine own Family, by an unavoidable Necessity; else I should never have attempted so absurd a Project as that of reforming the *Yahoo* Race in this Kingdom; but, I have now done with all such visionary Schemes for ever. (xi, 8)

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Notes

¹ Swift to Pope, 27 Nov. 1726. In *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), III, 189. Hereafter cited as *Correspondence*.

² Denis Donoghue, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. 162. I choose Donoghue’s words to represent a conception of Gulliver; Donoghue is more persuasive than many who hold his view.

³ In *Lives of the English Poets*, Everyman’s Library Ed. (London: J. M. Dent, 1925), II, 268.

⁴ *Prose Works*, ed. Herbert Davis, 14 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939–68), IX, 261. All references to Swift’s prose, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition and are noted parenthetically by volume and page.

⁵ *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), p. 233.

⁶ See Herbert Davis, *The Satire of Jonathan Swift* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 108–09, for a fine discussion of Swift's self-parody in this satire.

⁷ Swift to Ford, 14 Aug. 1725. *Correspondence*, III, 87.

⁸ "Swift's Yahoo and the Christian Symbols for Sin," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 15 (1954), 201–17.

⁹ From *A Critical and Philosophic Enquiry into the Causes of Prodiges and Miracles*, rpt. in *Swift: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Kathleen Williams (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), p. 72.

¹⁰ From *Remarks on the Life and Writing of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin*, rpt. in *Swift: The Critical Heritage*, p. 127.

¹¹ "Errors concerning the Houyhnhnms," *Modern Philology*, 56 (1958), 93.

¹² William Bragg Ewald, Jr., *The Masks of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 132–37, gives a detailed account of Gulliver's deviations from truth throughout the *Travels*.

¹³ Ronald Paulson, *The Fictions of Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 165, comments on Gulliver's "automatic reactions as a correct modern—collecting specimens in Lilliput and weighing hailstones, keeping a cabinet of curiosities, and wishing to dissect a louse in Brobdingnag; showing his pride in England as well as in the latest 'modern' inventions for improving warfare."

¹⁴ For an extended study related to this point, see Maurice J. Quinlan, "Swift's Use of Literalization as a Rhetorical Device," *PMLA*, 82 (1967), 516–21.

¹⁵ Martin Price, *Swift's Rhetorical Art: A Study in Structure and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953), deals with Gulliver's limitations throughout the

Travels: "Thoroughly literal, he can respond to images, but not to their metaphorical significance" (p. 100).

¹⁶ Kathleen Williams, *Jonathan Swift and the Age of Compromise* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1958), p. 183, notes that clothes are a sign of sinfulness: "The signification was an old one among Christian moralists, who inferred from Genesis that the urge to clothe ourselves is an urge to cover our nakedness both of body and of mind, and a direct consequence of the Fall." Price comments on Swift's use of clothes throughout his works: "Clothes in general show man's acceptance of his place in the natural order, neither beast nor angel, and man's particular dress signifies his rational acceptance of his proper place in a social order" (p. 105).

¹⁷ Hugh Kenner, *The Counterfeiters* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 119–42, deals with *Gulliver's Travels* as a variation on Turing's game, the object of which is to distinguish a man from a machine. Here perhaps the game is to distinguish Gulliver from an authentic satirist.

¹⁸ *The Cankered Muse* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 14–30.

¹⁹ Raymond Bentman, "Satiric Structure and Tone in the Conclusion of *Gulliver's Travels*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 11 (1971), 535–48, deals with the alternations of tone in the last book.

²⁰ "The Conciseness of Swift," *Essays on the Eighteenth Century Presented to David Nichol Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), pp. 15–32.

²¹ For a differing view of Gulliver's development, one more sympathetic to Gulliver's final attempts at self-reform, see Donald Greene's introd. to *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Clauston Jenkins (New York: Bantam, 1971).