

9. THE GULLING OF GULLIVER

The history of our era is the nauseating and repulsive history of the crucifixion of the procreative body for the glorification of the spirit, the mental consciousness. Plato was an arch-priest of this crucifixion. Art, that handmaid, humbly and honestly served the vile deed, through three thousand years at least. The Renaissance put the spear through the side of the already crucified body, and syphilis put poison into the wound made by the imaginative spear. It took still three hundred years for the body to finish: but in the eighteenth century it became a corpse, a corpse with an abnormally active mind: and today it stinketh.

[D.H. Lawrence]

For anyone unfamiliar with *Gulliver's Travels* (or having the usual hazy memories of it from childhood), the 1997 television adaptation must have come as a very pleasant surprise. In order to give Swift's rambling and discursive story a dramatic shape and drive, the adapters very cleverly invented a new main story-line and set of characters. The whole story takes place after Gulliver's return from the final voyage. A wicked doctor who lusts after Gulliver's wife has almost persuaded her that Gulliver must be dead, when he returns. Under the pretence of helping Gulliver, whose memories of his extraordinary and extreme experiences are so strong that his hold on the present is tenuous, he succeeds in getting Gulliver committed to an asylum for the insane. Most of the first two voyages are given in the flashbacks of Gulliver's memories. The last he relates at his public hearing before the asylum doctors to determine whether he shall be allowed to return home. Neither his own evident rationality (apart from his claim to have had these adventures at all) nor his wife's loyal plea cut any ice. But Gulliver's son produces a live Lilluputian sheep, the wicked doctor flees, and Gulliver and his family (once they have weaned him of his temporary preference for horses) live happily ever after.

In its own terms the adaptation worked very well. Gulliver's sanity made him as outlandish and alien in his own society as in any of the strange lands he had visited. Here the Yahoos rule. The format of the public hearing sharpened some of Swift's general satire. Why didn't Swift think of it? Perhaps he did, but had his own reasons for rejecting it, and for not turning his 'prostitute flatterer' into a romantic hero. Of course, to make room for all the new material, much of the original text had to go. Much bathwater was disposed of, but unfortunately

the baby went with it. The baby, the gist of the matter, in my reading of *Gulliver's Travels*, is precisely the ambiguity of Gulliver's position. He is certainly not the merely put-upon hero of the adaptation. The issue of his sanity is crucial. In the adaptation this was reduced to the simple question of whether he was telling the truth (the viewer knowing all along that he was). The possibility that Gulliver might have had the experiences he claims to have had, but responded to them insanely, or been driven to insanity by them, is never once considered. The main drive of the adaptation is to vindicate Gulliver's sanity (and thereby everything about him). The main drive of the novel is to demonstrate his insanity.

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The first two voyages of *Gulliver's Travels* are splendid satire. But pure satire is, by its very nature, disqualified from the highest ranks of imaginative literature as I have been defining it. It is largely a product of the critical intellect. It is not concerned to explore the depths and recesses of the writer's own psyche. It is judgmental, and that judgement is directed outwards, against fools and rogues, or, in Swift's case, almost the whole human race. There is always the assumption that the writer stands in a privileged position above those he castigates. The charges Swift brings against civilized man, and enforces so mercilessly, are so broad that every reader is intended to come under the lash. Yet satire always gives the reader an easy escape-route - to identify not with the defendant, but with the judge; in this case to identify with Swift against Gulliver. We would never be so gullible or naive as Gulliver.

But the fourth voyage is another matter. Here, it is often claimed, Swift is writing something different, something more like a Utopian romance than a satire. We are, we are told, intended to share Gulliver's horror of the Yahoos and admiration for the Houyhnhnms. Now, suddenly, the satirical gap between the author and his protagonist-victim has gone. Swift and Gulliver are one. The main justification for these assumptions does not derive from the text, but from our knowledge, from other sources, of Swift's opinions, which are frequently interchangeable with those of Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master.

Even if Swift's conscious intention in the last voyage *had* been simply to depict a Houyhnhnm Utopia and to use the Houyhnhnms as a stick to beat Yahoo-like man, that intention was radically subverted in the event. There is perhaps some truth, where the relatively straightforward satire of the first two books is concerned, in Dr. Johnson's claim that once one had thought of little men and big men, the rest was easy. But when Swift thought of Houyhnhnms

and Yahoos he found that he had created a potent myth which demanded his engagement at an altogether deeper imaginative level, which demanded the honesty and courage of the greatest imaginative art. The mythic possibilities become Shakespearean. Ferdinand, cast upon an alien shore, finds already living there not just one Caliban and one Prospero, but a whole race of Calibans subjugated and despised by a whole race of Prosperos, who happen to look like horses...

Swift was certainly familiar with the controversy on the nature of man which had raged some thirty years earlier between Edward Stillingfleet and John Locke. An attempt was being made to classify each species in accordance with some characteristic unique to it. Thus the horse, as the only whinnying animal, became *animal hinnibile*. Locke had raised philosophical objections to the classification of man as *animal rationale* on the grounds that not all men reason and some other species do in some degree:

Body, life, and the power of reasoning, being not the real essence of a man, as I believe your lordship will agree; will your lordship say, that they are not enough to make the thing, wherein they are found, of the kind called man, and not of the kind called baboon, because the difference of these kinds is real? If this be not real enough to make the thing of one kind and not of another, I do not see how *animal rationale* can be enough really to distinguish a man from a horse. [quoted by Ehrenpreis, 135]

Locke also raised the case of a man who took a knock twenty years ago, since when there has been 'not so much appearance of reason in him, as in his horse or monkey'. He argued that both a man without reason and 'the shape of an ass with reason' would have to be classified as distinct species between man and beast.

These ideas threw up rich possibilities for satire, and for more than satire. Swift was interested in the moral rather than purely logical implications. Ehrenpreis sums up the use Swift made of this material:

The problem seems to be to induce from the assemblage of specimens of mankind a definition which will not only comprehend them but will distinguish them from Yahoos without granting them the properties of Houyhnhnms. At the same time the effect of the varied exhibit is to disprove the validity of current definitions. Perhaps Swift is obliging his readers to acknowledge the paradox that most of them cling to a concept of their species which would exclude their respective selves. ... Against

this background the Yahoos would embody an ironical reflection upon the fact that the bulk of unthinking men do in practice treat external shape as a sounder guide to humanity than reasonable conduct. Further yet, and as the bitterest irony of all, the Yahoos seem Swift's way of showing that for practical purposes one could more easily distinguish man by his vices than by his virtues; for it is certain vices, says Gulliver, that are 'rooted in the very souls of all my species'. [137-8]

So far, so good. But if this were all, the fourth voyage would be adding little to what had already been done, especially in the second voyage. Ehrenpreis has difficulty in substantiating his sense of the superior and more complex art of the last voyage because he is trapped within the assumption that we must accept that the Houyhnhnms are 'ideal patterns' embodying 'the highest natural virtues', that they are 'beyond criticism', and that 'Gulliver was right to adopt what appears to be their view of humanity'. These assumptions derive not from the text, but from the belief that 'the principles embodied in the Houyhnhnms were normative for everyone'. It is exactly the argument used by Bernard Knox about *Antigone*: that the ideals propounded by Creon and the chorus were at that time universal and therefore must have been shared by Sophocles. In consequence Ehrenpreis is able to do little to defend Swift against his detractors:

If, says Swift, we were more like the Houyhnhnms in character, we should be better off than we are now: that is his premise. And though his contemporaries, whether Protestant, Roman, or deist, spoke in unison with him, his readers today almost as single-mindedly shout *No*.

But rejection of the Houyhnhnms is not new. In 1818 Coleridge wrote:

They are not progressive; they have servants without any reason for their natural inferiority or any explanation how the difference acted; and, above all, they, that is Swift himself, have a perpetual affectation of being wiser than their Maker, and of eradicating what God gave to be subordinated and used: the maternal and paternal affection. There is likewise a true Yahooism in the constant denial of the existence of love, as not identical with friendship, and yet always distinct and very often divided from lust.

[reprinted in Donaghue 103-4]

This is all true, except for the totally unjustified conflating of Swift and the Houyhnhnms - 'they, that is Swift himself'. Swift the imaginative artist knew, whatever Swift the abstract thinker might have said, what was lacking in the Houyhnhnms.

Thackeray was another to shout *No*: 'As for the moral, I think it horrible, shameful, unmanly, blasphemous: and giant and great as this Dean is, I say we should hoot him'. Aldous Huxley, Orwell, Leavis, Murry and many others have taken Thackeray at his word. Leavis can be allowed to speak for all these detractors when he says:

Swift did his best for the Houyhnhnms, and they may have all the reason, but the Yahoos have all the life. Gulliver's master 'thought Nature and reason were sufficient guides for a reasonable animal', but nature and reason as Gulliver exhibits them are curiously negative, and the reasonable animals appear to have nothing in them to guide. ... The clean skin of the Houyhnhnms, in short, is stretched over a void; instincts, emotion and life, which complicate the problem of cleanliness and decency, are left for the Yahoos with the dirt and the indecorum.

[*Common Pursuit* 84-5]

That nature and reason are here exhibited so negatively would not be curious without the assumption, totally unsupported by the text, that Swift was doing his best for the Houyhnhnms. Leavis shifts his ground from Swift to Gulliver's master to Gulliver as if they were interchangeable. It is Gulliver who is doing his best for the Houyhnhnms, and that is exhibited as nowhere near good enough. How can Leavis or any other reader think that we are expected to identify with Gulliver in his praise of Houyhnhnm culture with its total absence of love and reduction of marriage to breeding, when, in the middle of it, Gulliver solemnly recommends as highly deserving our imitation the Houyhnhnm method of educating their young: 'These are not suffered to taste a Grain of *Oats*, except upon certain Days, till Eighteen Years old; nor *Milk*, but very rarely; and in Summer they graze two Hours in the Morning ...' and so on. These are clearly the ramblings of a madman who, in his blinkered pursuit of 'nature and reason', has lost his own defining humanity.

For Leavis the ultimate sanity about the life of the body was expressed in Lawrence's essay *A Propos of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'* (1929), and he may have been influenced by Lawrence's outburst against Swift in that essay:

The mind's terror of the body has probably driven more men mad than ever could be counted. The insanity of a great mind like Swift's is at least partly traceable to this cause. In the poem to his mistress Celia, which has the maddened refrain 'But - Celia, Celia, Celia s***s,' (the word rhymes with spits), we see what can happen to a great mind when it falls into panic. A great wit like Swift could not see how ridiculous he made himself. Of course Celia s***s! Who doesn't? And how much worse if she didn't. It is hopeless. And then think of poor Celia, made to feel iniquitous about her proper natural function, by her 'lover'. It is monstrous.

[*Phoenix II*, 491]

As recently as 1926 Lawrence had written that it was 'honourable, and necessary, to hate society, as Swift did, or to hate mankind altogether, as often Voltaire did' [*Phoenix* 239]. What happened to turn Lawrence so violently against Swift? I surmise that Aldous Huxley, whose essay on Swift appeared in *Do What You Will* in 1929, quoted the offending line to Lawrence out of context. Clearly he had no first-hand knowledge of the poem ('The Lady's Dressing Room'), since Celia is not the poet's mistress, but Strephon's, and the purpose of the poem is to ridicule Strephon for falling into just such a panic:

His foul imagination links
Each dame he sees with all her stinks.

In the Introduction to *Pansies* Lawrence had discussed the line at even greater length, making what he took to be the opposite point, that 'the fairest thing in nature, a flower, still has its roots in earth and manure' [*Poems* 417-18]. But this was exactly Swift's point also. If Strephon were not deranged and ridiculous,

He soon would learn to think like me,
And bless his ravisht sight to see
Such order from confusion sprung,
And gaudy tulips rais'd from dung.

Strephon's horror at Celia's bodily functions is entirely his iniquity, not hers. Similarly the sublime, sublimated Houynhnhnms in their rejection of the life of the body convert that life (which they cannot banish or do without any more than Prospero can do without Caliban) into filthy Yahoos.

Leavis also underestimates the importance of religious issues in *Gulliver's Travels*, accusing Swift, on the strength of his essays, of 'a complete incapacity even to guess what religious feeling might be' [85]. The Houyhnhnms believe all Yahoos in their country to be degenerate descendants of 'two Originals' from elsewhere. The Houyhnhnms have, however, no myths of their own origins and no interest in metaphysics or the imaginative arts. They have always been and always will be exactly the same. Ernest Tuveson draws our attention to a theological problem which had been raised by Henry More in his *Divine Dialogues* of 1668:

What about the salvation of rational beings who may well exist in distant planets - as well as in remote places of our own earth? It is suggested that they may be creatures, endowed with reason, who have never experienced the fall. Such beings would have no need of 'that Religion that the sons of *Adam* are saved by.' They would live a perfectly orderly but monotonous existence, and 'no Properties but those either of the *Animal* or *middle* life' would be needed. 'In virtue whereof they may be good *Naturalists*, good *Politicians*, good *Geometricians* and *Analysts*, good *Architects*, build *Cities* and frame *Commonwealths*, and rule over their *brother-Brutes* in those *Planets*, and make as good use of them as we doe ...' But this is nothing but a 'middle' life, for all its placid excellence. The heights of human existence, the glory of knowing God, as well as (by implication) the depths, are outside their ken. [Tuveson 102]

If, as I have argued, many great works of literature are the imagination's indictment of the ego, or the writer's detached intelligence, *Gulliver's Travels* is a particularly clear example of Lawrence's dictum 'Never trust the artist, trust the tale'. To Swift's intelligence the culture of the Houyhnhnms indeed presented itself as wholly rational and therefore wholly desirable. If man were ever to justify the name of *animal rationale*, he would have to behave like the Houyhnhnms and evolve a culture very similar to theirs. Nothing could be clearer, for example, than Swift's statement in a letter to Pope (29 September 1725):

I have got materials towards a treatise proving the falsity of that definition *animal rationale*; and to show it should be only *rationis capax*. Upon this great foundation of misanthropy (though not Timon's manner) the whole building of my *Travels* is erected.

In fact, it seems to me, in the fourth voyage Swift goes rather further than this, possibly further than he knew, calling in question both man's capacity for reason and the desirability of reasoning as a definitive characteristic of a species.

Swift was more than a detached intelligence. To assume that his values in the novel must correspond to those outside it is to subvert the autonomy of the imagination. It gives to a man's opinions, such as he might express in correspondence, a status equal to that of his imaginative work. It denies a writer the right to put himself in the dock rather than the seat of judgement, and to call in evidence against himself (as Coleridge does) just such documents as he might have written when writing from his critical intellect and not from his imagination. If we allow the voyage to the Houyhnhnms to speak for itself we will find that in it Swift accuses both Gulliver and himself of the crime against Nature.

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It does not at first occur to Gulliver that he has any more in common with a Yahoo than with a baboon. When the suggestion is first made to him that he might be a kind of Yahoo, he bitterly resents it, and attempts, despite the gross physical dissimilarity to get himself accepted as an honorary Houyhnhnm. The Houyhnhnms see Gulliver, despite his ridiculous plumage, as a Yahoo, (and so does the Yahoo female who, coming upon him naked, fancies him as a mate). 'Furred gowns hide all'. Lear might have thought himself of a different species from the naked beggars of his realm until, in his 'madness', he strips himself to a 'poor, bare, forked creature'. Gulliver wraps his nakedness in pretensions to reason; but the Houyhnhnm master is disturbed by what seems to him a difference in kind between Gulliver and the Yahoos to *their* advantage.

Though he hated the Yahoos of this Country, yet he no more blamed them for their odious Qualities, than he did a *Gnnayh* (a Bird of Prey) for its Cruelty, or a sharp stone for cutting his Hoof. But when a Creature pretending to Reason, could be capable of such Enormities, he dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality itself. He seemed therefore confident, that instead of Reason, we were only possessed of some Quality fitted to increase our natural Vices. [ch.v]

This passage exactly corresponds to a letter from Swift to Pope (26 Nov. 1725):

I tell you after all that I do not hate mankind; it is *vous autres* who hate them, because you would have them reasonable animals, and are angry for being disappointed. I have always rejected that definition and made another of my own. I am no more angry with [Walpole] than I was with the kite that last week flew away with one of my chickens, and yet I was pleased when one of my servants shot him two days after. [Donoghue 48]

The Houyhnhnm master is more angry and disappointed than Swift because his judgement of mankind depends entirely on information supplied by Gulliver, who has just given him a graphic and enthusiastic description of the Art of War. Gulliver is here at his most obtuse, as he had been at the equivalent point in his relationship with the King of Brobdingnag, where Gulliver's 'admirable Panegyrick' upon his Country had amply justified the king's conclusion that the Natives of that Country were 'the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth' [ch.vi]. This is the Gulliver described by Swift as 'a prostitute flatterer ... whose chief study is to extenuate the vices and magnify the virtues of mankind' [Donoghue 53].

In both the first two voyages Gulliver had gradually become conditioned to both the values and perspectives of the alien worlds. This produces some of the most ludicrous situations, as where Gulliver solemnly martials evidence in defence of the reputation of the Lilliputian noblewoman accused of sexual indiscretions with him. This pattern is repeated in the last voyage, where Gulliver gradually comes to see the world through Houyhnhnm eyes. But now the process is taken still further. Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms not only converge, but ultimately cross over. The Houyhnhnms (or some of them) come to concede that Gulliver is not a Yahoo, but somewhere midway between the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms:

He observed in me all the Qualities of a *Yahoo*, only a little more civilized by some Tincture of Reason; which however was in a Degree as far inferior to the *Houyhnhnm* Race, as the *Yahoos* of their Country were to me. [ch. ix]

whereas Gulliver himself gradually loses the distinction between himself and the Yahoos:

At first, indeed, I did not feel that natural Awe which the *Yahoos* and all other Animals bear towards them; but it grew upon me by Degrees, much sooner than I imagined, and was mingled with a respectful Love and Gratitude, that they would condescend to distinguish me from the rest of my Species. [ch. x]

The pompous tone of such passages exactly corresponds to the tone of passages in the earlier voyages where Gulliver is most clearly being set up by Swift as a figure of fun. Why should we take such passages in the fourth voyage to be any less satirical than those in the earlier voyages where Gulliver swallows whole the values of his hosts? In Lilliput he stands on his Lilliputian dignities: 'I had the honour to be a *Nardac*, which the treasurer himself is not; for all the World knows he is only a *Clumglum*, a Title inferior by one Degree' [ch. vi]. In Luggnagg, he expresses the desire to pass his life 'here in the Conversation of those superiour Beings the *Struldbruggs*' [ch. x]. He is fortunately disabused about the *Struldbruggs*, and his 'keen Appetite for Perpetuity of Life' is much abated. There is no-one to disabuse him about 'the Virtues and Ideas of those exalted *Houyhnhnms*' (since these were, theoretically, the virtues and ideas of everyone in that age); but that is not to say that the reader, suddenly immune to the play of irony in the last voyage, is expected to identify with Gulliver when he writes: 'as I was going to prostrate myself to kiss his Hoof, he did me the Honour to raise it gently to my Mouth', or when he takes those ideas to their logical conclusion: 'And when I began to consider, that by copulating with one of the *Yahoo*-Species, I had become a Parent of more; it struck me with the utmost Shame, Confusion and Horror' [ch. xi].

Though the incongruity of lodging pure reason in the bodies of horses affords occasions for some broad comedy at Gulliver's expense and undermines his efforts to convince both the *Houyhnhnms* and himself that he is one of them, it is perhaps slightly at odds (horses being such *physical* creatures) with the insistence that, as pure intelligences, they must be above, detached from, their own bodies. Their bodies do not generate physical needs, instincts, emotions, which in any way threaten the absolute rule of reason. With so little bodily life, the shape of their bodies is neither here nor there. Like Shaw's abominable Ancients in *Back to Methuselah*, they would dispense with bodies if they could.

In the *Yahoos*, on the other hand, we see the flesh at its most rank and gross, soiling everything it touches. We are back to Hamlet's problem. As Gulliver was exactly half way, in size and sense, between the Lilliputians and the Brobdingnagians, so, here, he is half way in all things between *Yahoo* and

Houyhnhnm. So, in the Great Chain of Being, man had been seen as exactly half way between the angels and the beasts, with a body and passions scarcely to be distinguished from the higher beasts, combined with angelic action and godlike reason. In these terms the challenge of being human could be interpreted in two mutually exclusive ways. The puritanical idealist would strive to repudiate everything he shared with the beasts and develop, in isolation, his god-like faculties. This is the ideal to which Gulliver commits himself 'by endeavouring, as far as my inferior Nature was capable, to imitate the *Houyhnhnms*' [ch. x]. It is Gulliver, not Swift, who is willing to eradicate the affections. Swift, on the other hand, sees this as spiritual pride, rejecting the god-given creation and man's ordained place in it.

Gulliver's Travels is not without its positives. Gulliver is judged against a standard of wholeness, humanity and common sense embodied in the King of Brobdingnag and Pedro de Mendez. Gulliver thinks of himself as a truth-seeker, motivated by a desire to grow in virtue and wisdom. He ends up talking only to his horses. For such a quest is doomed without self-knowledge, humanity and humility, and a man is unlikely to have those qualities without the aid of Christ, who is conspicuous by his absence from Gulliver's thinking. Gulliver declares himself to be a Christian, but the only occasion on which this has the slightest effect on his thinking or behaviour is when he refuses to trample on a crucifix. John B. Radner has demonstrated the blindness of Gulliver to the paramount wisdom all his experiences should teach him, man's need of redemption. (Radner shows that although Swift did not want the *Travels* to be overtly religious, he did build in for those alert to such things a number of significant details. For example, the dates framing the third voyage were in those years Good Friday and Easter Monday; and date of the concluding letter to Sympson was Easter Sunday.)

We have only Gulliver's word that his chief motivation is the pursuit of virtue and wisdom. In fact his motivation is closer than might at first appear to that other inveterate traveller, Odysseus. He cannot resist the lure of new experience. He has no compunction about deserting his wife and children. He is solipsistic, cruel and proud. He is always on the lookout for opportunities to increase his wealth and prestige. He is much more interested in talking than listening. He wants others to have a high opinion both of himself and of his nation. Another Odysseus-like quality in Gulliver, seldom noted by critics, is his cruelty and ruthlessness. He had earlier shown himself unmoved by the horrors of war. But his attempt to imitate the utilitarian rationalism of the Houyhnhnms leads into much greater inhumanity. Even after he has conceded that men and Yahoos are the same species, this 'gentle Yahoo', as the sorrel nag

calls him, kills and skins several Yahoos, including some children, then forces other Yahoos to draw the boat made from and sealed with tallow from these bodies, down to the sea. The whole scene reminds us of the obscenities of the concentration camps.

The responses of the open-minded reader are carefully controlled by Swift, in, for example, the parallels and progression in the structure of each voyage. Just as the reasons for Gulliver's arrival on strange shores get progressively more culpable in his fellow men (first accident, then excusable desertion, then violence from pirates, and finally the treachery of his own men), so his return to his familiar world progresses from joy through contempt to horror. When he returns from Brobdingnag, the first men he sees seem to him 'the most little contemptible Creatures I had ever beheld'. The fault is clearly entirely in Gulliver's eyes:

As I was on the Road; observing the Littleness of the Houses, the Trees, the Cattle and the People, I began to think myself in *Lilliput*. I was afraid of trampling on every Traveller I met; and often called aloud to have them stand out of the Way; so that I was like to have gotten one or two broken Heads for my Impertinence. [ch. viii]

The result of his capitulation to the perspectives of the Houyhnhnms is even more distorting and ludicrous, the indiscriminate contempt even more impertinent. He is rescued by some honest Portuguese, who treat him with 'great Humanity', especially their captain, the courteous and generous Pedro de Mendez. Gulliver's response reveals the extent to which his own humanity has deserted him: 'I wondered to find such Civilities from a *Yahoo*. ... I was ready to faint at the very Smell of him and his Men' [ch. xi]. He cannot endure the presence of his wife and children but retires to his stable to converse with his horses. In refusing to eat bread or drink wine with his family he is rejecting both holy and human communion, stealing from his own nature all the natural man. Is this the man whose admiration for the Houyhnhnms we are expected to share? Gulliver, at the end, has lost the sense that we are all one life. In his own imaginative mode, Swift spells out just as powerfully as Lawrence, that the worship of reason, detached from both the sacred and the human, is unnatural, sterile, and insane.

