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Jonathan Swift

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION
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Introduction

Gulliver's Travels, like most of the other great books of the world, has been freshly interpreted from age to age. Cherished alongside *Robinson Crusoe* as a children's book, it has, quite unlike *Crusoe*, been the subject of furious debate among historians, philosophers and literary critics. Many of its pages are devoted to direct political satire, but we may safely guess that not one in ten thousand of its appreciative readers is aware of even the most patent particular references. Writers claiming to do no more than appraise its philosophical content have been driven to paroxysms of denunciation. Somehow the foremost exponent of lucidity in the English language has left as his chief legacy a grotesque enigma.

The author protests at the outset that 'the style is very plain and simple'. And so it is. In accordance with his custom, Swift read large chunks aloud to his servants, to make sure that every sentence attained his rigorous standard of simplicity. It is possible, with much enjoyment, to skate over the surface, most of it as smooth as ice, without noticing the dark chasms underneath, and this no doubt is what children do with their expurgated editions. But no one can deceive himself for long. Gentleness, playfulness, irony, finely poised argument and lacerating invectives are so carefully enfolded one within another that it is evident Jonathan Swift created the endless mystery on purpose.

Part One, *A Voyage to Lilliput*, is the fantasy about the giant in the land of midgets told in such unchallengeable, precise, matter-of-fact terms that it has become a household word and idea in every civilized tongue throughout the world. Yet through this section in particular runs a long, weaving stream of topical innuendo about the forgotten politics of the reign of Queen Anne. Part Two, *A Voyage to Brobdingnag*, is Lilliput in reverse, but it also offers some of Swift's fiercest assaults

upon the behaviour of his fellow countrymen and the nearest effort he ever made to describe his own notion of an ideal State. Part Three, *A Voyage to Laputa, etc.* is evidently directed against the scientists and philosophers of his own age, but how up to date these gentlemen appear; no less so at least than Beachcomber's Dr Strabismus of Utrecht or characters from Spike Milligan's Goon Show. Part Four, *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*, has been regarded as a vile or corrective satire on human nature itself, but any attempt to compress its meaning into a sentence becomes an absurdity. In the country of the Houyhnhnms, the ground trembles beneath our feet; a storm beats about our heads; terrifying shafts of light and darkness are thrown backwards across the rest of the book, into every corner of the human mind.

The reader, then, must be warned from the start: *Gulliver's Travels* is a perpetual unfinished argument, one from which flatly contradictory morals have been and still can be extracted. Perhaps one service which a 1967 introduction can do is to indicate how the controversy has proceeded over the past two and a half centuries and what temporary and insecure resting place has now been reached. And let no reader be deterred by the experts from forming his own judgement. On this subject, some of the most eminent authorities have made the most eminent asses of themselves, a development which Swift foresaw and invited. He says in the last chapter that he hopes he may pronounce himself 'an author perfectly blameless, against whom the tribe of answerers, considerers, observers, reflecters, detecters, remarkers, will never be able to find matter for exercising their talents'. By which, of course, he meant the opposite. One of the fascinations of *Gulliver's Travels* is that, although every phrase seems immediately comprehensible, the whole subject matter is endlessly complex.

When the book was published, anonymously, on 28 October 1726, success was instantaneous. One report said that ten thousand copies were sold in three weeks. Immediate trans-

lations were made into French and Dutch, weekly journals started printing pirated extracts, and Swift's friends in London competed with one another in dispatching glowing reports to the author in Dublin. Dr John Arbuthnot, the closest friend of all, wrote:

> I will make over all my profits to you for the property of Gullivers Travels; which, I believe, will have as great a run as John Bunyan. Gulliver is a happy man, that, at his age [Swift was 59], can write such a merry book.

Alexander Pope and John Gay wrote jointly: 'From the highest to the lowest it is universally read, from the cabinet council to the nursery.' Thus soon was the volume accepted as a classic simultaneously from the cradle to the corridors of power. The old Duchess of Marlborough, once the victim of Swift's harshest abuse, was said to be 'in raptures at it; she says she can dream of nothing else since she read it'. And Swift's own fears were set at rest. He had told Pope a year before that publication would have to wait until 'a printer shall be found brave enough to venture his ears'; in those days authors at odds with the authorities risked the pillory or imprisonment as well as mere poverty. He had warned the publisher, to whom the manuscript was deviously delivered, that some parts of what he had written 'may be thought in one or two places to be a little satirical'. But all was well. No hint of a prosecution, such as had often threatened Swift before in his pamphleteering career, was heard. 'It has passed Lords and Common's *nemine contradicente*; and the whole town, men, women and children are full of it,' was Pope's reassurance. One of the few expressions of protest at the time, heralding what was to follow later, came, curiously, from a member of Swift's intimate circle, Lord Bolingbroke; 'he is the person', continued Pope, 'who least approves it, blaming it as a design of evil consequence to depreciate human nature'. But this might have been no more than a joke at Bolingbroke's

expense, comparable with that told of the old gentleman who, when lent the book, was alleged to have gone immediately to his map to search for Lilliput, or of the Bishop who said it was 'full of improbable lies, and, for his part, he hardly believed a word of it'. Pope, the Roman Catholic, and Swift, the militant Church of England or Church of Ireland man, needed no excuse to poke fun at Bolingbroke, and his deistical or even atheistical deviations from the Christian faith. 'A merry book' by a man gay-spirited and greatly loved as well as feared; that was the general view of Swift's contemporaries. Stomachs were stronger in the reigns of Queen Anne and George I.

Fifty years later in his *Lives of the English Poets* Dr Johnson gravely recalled the publication of the already famous volume:

> a production so new and strange that it filled the reader with a mingled emotion of merriment and amazement. It was received with such avidity, that the price of the first edition was raised before the second could be made; it was read by high and low, the learned and illiterate. Criticism was for a while lost in wonder; no rules of judgement were applied to a book written in open defiance of truth and regularity.

Thereafter, Johnson applied his own rules. Boswell tells how the assault upon Swift was renewed on all available occasions, despite his own valiant efforts to withstand the deluge of nonsense. Johnson thought that Swift's political writings were inferior to Addison's, that his most brilliant pamphlet, *The Conduct of the Allies*, was a mere bundle of facts, that *Gulliver's Travels* might be assigned to its proper place thus: 'When once you have thought of the big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest.' A good Johnsonian joke, maybe, but it still leaves us wondering whether he ever got past the first two books and the disappearance of the big men and the little men.

More insidiously effective, however, than the criticism of Swift's talents was the denigration of his demeanour and

character. A man of muddy complexion, of sour and severe countenance, deficient in both wit and humour, one 'who stubbornly resisted any tendency to laughter', was Johnson's summary. The beloved friend of Arbuthnot and Pope, the drinking companion of Addison and Steele, recedes, and a grim twisted specimen begins to take his place. Dr Johnson even recalls, with some relish and too faint repudiation, the false tale that Pope entrusted to his executors a defamatory Life of Swift which he had prepared in advance as an instrument of vengeance to be drawn from its scabbard if provocation arose; the implication being, presumably, that Swift might have savaged Pope or at least that Pope considered him capable of it. The historical evidence is different. Never in our literary annals has there existed between two prominent figures a purer friendship and one so untinged by the slightest strain of jealousy or envy as that which prevailed between Pope and Swift. All Pope's superabundant venom subsided in the presence of Swift, and Swift's devotion, in particular it could be said, never wavered or weakened to the end of his days. Yet the tale-bearers spread lies about Swift's disloyalties, his eccentricities, his furies, his diseased nature, his madness. 'The merry book' was quite forgotten; it had become something sinister. Indeed, the strangest fate overtook Swift's general reputation. When he died in 1745, he had already, in the words of a recent critic, Professor Ricardo Quintana,

> ceased to be understood by the eighteenth century. . . . No English writer of corresponding stature has been repudiated so persistently and so fiercely by immediately succeeding generations.

How the change occurred, from the first exultation that the human mind had produced a delight and marvel to such frantic fear or hate, is not easy to discern. Some responsibility may rest with the ineffectualness of Swift's early biographers who purveyed silly gossip about him with ponderous assiduity. But the heaviest burden of guilt must rest on Dr Johnson.

True, ever-growing multitudes of readers continued to read Swift despite Johnson's condemnation of his manners and his morals. True, some years later, a few stray voices were raised openly in his defence – William Godwin, William Cobbett, William Hazlitt. But these were literary no less than political outcasts, quite beyond the pale of the early nineteenth-century literary Establishment; rabid apologists for, if not actual advocates of, revolution after the French style. Defence from that quarter damned Swift more than ever.

Then, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, an additional offence committed by the miscreant was added to the charge sheet, if it had ever been absent. Swift's politics – the truth can be concealed no longer – left much to be desired. He himself had made the confession in playful verse:

> He was an Honest Man, I'll swear –
> Why, Sir, I differ from you there.
> For, I have heard another Story
> He was a most confounded Tory.

The ugly fact did not deter a fellow Tory, Sir Walter Scott, who produced a life and collected works of Swift in 1814. But he, be it noted, could not swallow *Gulliver's Travels.*

> Severe, unjust and degrading as this satire is [he wrote], it was hailed with malignant triumph by those whose disappointed hopes had thrown them into the same state of gloomy misanthropy which it argues in its author.

If this was how Swift was to be defended by his political friends, what could he expect from his enemies? Francis Jeffrey, in his *Edinburgh Review* article on Scott's book, made a momentary effort to distinguish between the literary achievement and the character, and then launched into a brilliant libel in which the victim might have been a composite Tory figure of Jeffrey's own age. Macaulay, in 1833, went much far-

ther. He conjured up in one ferocious sentence a vision hard to dispel:

the apostate politician, the ribald priest, the perjured lover, a heart burning with hatred against the whole human race, a mind richly stored with images from the dunghill and the lazar house.

The portrait of the monster was now widely accepted, and, in 1851, Thackeray unloosed an invective which, even when its more flamboyant passages are dismissed as hysterical, leaves no doubt about what had become the settled verdict of Victorian opinion.

Dr Johnson, wrote Thackeray (it was always safe to ride into battle behind that shield),

could not give the Dean that honest hand of his; the stout old man puts it into his breast, and moves off from him. . . . As fierce a beak and talon as ever struck, as strong as ever beat, belonged to Swift. . . . One can gaze, and not without awe and pity, at the lonely eagle chained behind bars. . . . The 'saeva indignatio' of which he spoke as lacerating his heart, and which he dares to inscribe on his tombstone – as if the wretch who lay under that stone waiting God's Judgement had a right to be angry – breaks out from him in a thousand pages of his writing, and tears and rends him . . .

Thus the prelude on Swift's character has prepared the way for the cool appraisal of his book.

Mr Dean has no softness, and enters the nursery with the tread and gaiety of an ogre. . . . Our great satirist was of the opinion that conjugal love was inadvisable, and illustrated the theory by his own practice and example – God help him – which made him about the most wretched being in God's world. . . . As for the humour and conduct of this famous fable, I suppose there is no person who reads but must admire; 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. . . . It [the fourth book of *Gulliver*] is Yahoo language: a monster, gibbering shrieks and gnashing imprecations

against mankind – tearing down all shreds of modesty, past all sense of manliness and shame; filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene.

And thus – but there is much more of it – in the name of everything the nineteenth century considered holy, Thackeray anticipated the Day of Judgement. The merry book had become a work of the devil.

A few decades later, some lesser figures than Macaulay and Thackeray struggled to retrieve the century's critical reputation. A series of writers attempted the serious work of biography previously neglected and the more they assembled facts in their proper context the more the picture of Swift, the ogre, began to dissolve. Leslie Stephen in his volume (1882) and Churton Collins in his (1893) surveyed the work already done in rectifying glaring injustices, but, even so, both quailed before the later sections of *Gulliver's Travels*. Leslie Stephen called them 'painful and repulsive' and 'a ghastly caricature'.

Readers who wish to indulge in a harmless play of fancy will do well to omit the last two voyages; for the strain of misanthropy which breathes in them is simply oppressive. They are probably the sources from which the popular impression of Swift's character is often derived. It is important therefore to remember that they were wrung from him in later years, after a life tormented by constant disappointment and disease.

Churton Collins's reactions were similar.

It [*Gulliver's Travels*, he wrote,] has no moral, no social, no philosophical purpose. It was the mere ebullition of cynicism and misanthropy. A savage *jeu d'esprit*. And as such wise men will regard it. . . . At no period distinguished by generosity of sentiment, by humanity, by decency, could such satire have been universally applauded. Yet so it was. The men and women of those times appear to have seen nothing objectionable in an apologue which would scarcely have passed without protest in the Rome of Petronius.

So even strong Swift defenders seemed unable to repel the

weight of the attack. Augustine Birrell, reviewing Churton Collins's biography in the 1890s, could write:

> It is a question not of morality, but of decency, whether it is becoming to sit in the same room with the works of this divine. ... Thackeray's criticism is severe, but is it not just? Are we to stand by and hear our nature libelled, and our purest affections beslimed, without a word of protest?

Somehow *Gulliver* could not be treated as a book at all: it was unfit for human consumption.

Twenty-five years later, to his credit, Birrell had recovered a sense of proportion. Partly he had been studying Swift's new biographers, although these, as we have seen, were still on the defensive about *Gulliver*. Partly he attributed the conversion to a warm-hearted lecture in defence of Swift, as the enemy of injustice and oppression, delivered by Charles Whibley at Cambridge in 1917. But, more obviously, he himself had been reading – and writing a life of – William Hazlitt, and Hazlitt could have saved all concerned a century of trouble and defamation. For in the year 1818 – exactly a century before Whibley's apologia – Hazlitt had delivered a lecture which both replied to Dr Johnson and leaped forward to adopt a modern view of *Gulliver's Travels*. Little notice was taken of it at the time, except by an unknown John Keats, then twenty-two years old. Leslie Stephen and Churton Collins, disinterring Hazlitt's case as if they had made some recondite discoveries, both acknowledged its force, but found it too extreme for acceptance. It must be pardonable to quote a part of the passage at length and to marvel that Hazlitt, Macaulay, Thackeray and the rest were supposedly talking about the same man and the same book.

> Whether the excellence of *Gulliver's Travels* is in the conception or the execution, is of little consequence; the power is somewhere, and it is a power that has moved the world. The power is not that of big words and vaunting common places. Swift left these to those

who wanted them; and has done what his acuteness and intensity of mind alone could enable any one to conceive or to perform. His object was to strip empty pride and grandeur of the imposing air which external circumstances throw around them; and for this purpose he has cheated the imagination of the illusions which the prejudices of sense and of the world put upon it, by reducing every thing to the abstract predicament of size. He enlarges or diminishes the scale, as he wishes to shew the insignificance or the grossness of our overweening self-love. That he has done this with mathematical precision, with complete presence of mind and perfect keeping, in a manner that comes equally home to the understanding of the man and of the child, does not take away from the merit of the work or the genius of the author. He has taken a new view of human nature, such as a being of a higher sphere might take of it; he has torn the scales from off his moral vision; he has tried an experiment upon human life, and sifted its pretensions from the alloy of circumstances; he has measured it with a rule, has weighed it in a balance, and found it, for the most part, wanting and worthless – in substance and in shew. Nothing solid, nothing valuable is left in his system but virtue and wisdom. What a libel is this upon mankind! What a convincing proof of misanthropy! What presumption and what *malice prepense*, to shew men what they are, and to teach them what they ought to be! What a mortifying stroke aimed at national glory, is that unlucky incident of Gulliver's wading across the channel and carrying off the whole fleet of Blefuscu! After that, we have only to consider which of the contending parties was in the right. What a shock to personal vanity is given in the account of Gulliver's nurse Glumdalclitch! Still, notwithstanding the disparagement of her personal charms, her good-nature remains the same amiable quality as before. I cannot see the harm, the misanthropy, the immoral and degrading tendency of this. The moral lesson is as fine as the intellectual exhibition is amusing. It is an attempt to tear off the mask of imposture from the world; and nothing but imposture has a right to complain of it.

There! Swift, one feels, would have cheered. At last someone had understood. In the next paragraph, Hazlitt, at the distance of a century, took it upon himself to forgive Swift for