

THE PORTABLE SWIFT

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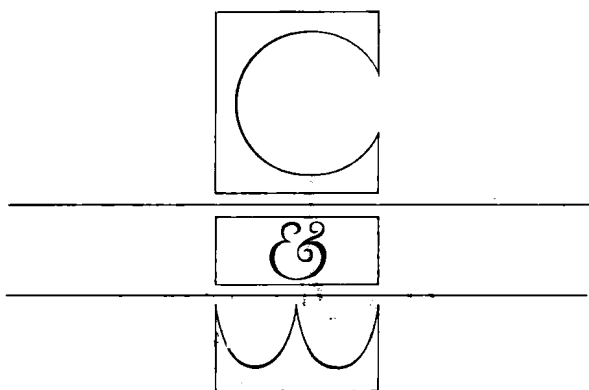
Essays • Poems • Letters • Journals and,
complete, *Gulliver's Travels*



Edited and with an Introduction by
Carl Van Doren



CHATTO & WINDUS



The Portable
JONATHAN SWIFT

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THE PORTABLE JONATHAN SWIFT.

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Editor's Introduction

JONATHAN SWIFT, for most of his readers round the earth, survives as the author of one book. But that is one of the three most widely known English books, all of them written in the half-century when English literature began to use the prose still used in the present age. They are so familiar that none of them is commonly called by its correct title. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from this World to that which is to come* (1678) has become *Pilgrim's Progress* in customary speech. Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* (1719) is now merely *Robinson Crusoe*. Few readers are even aware that what they call *Gulliver's Travels* is properly *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World . . . By Captain Lemuel Gulliver* (1726). All three of these books are thought of as primarily books for children, and are so often read in abridged versions in childhood that many older readers do not even know they have read only the simple plots within the total works. Each of the books is both a story and a commentary on human life: the story for everybody, the commentary for anybody who reflects on the plight and fate of men.

If the story in each of these books is only the core of the whole, so each book is only the core of the whole work of the author, each of whom wrote many books besides his most renowned masterpiece. As *Gulliver's Travels* is more than the bare story, so is Swift more than

Gulliver's Travels alone. The book is the essence of his mind and art, but it cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of his activities as clergyman, politician, lover, friend, satirist, wit, and poet, and of the dominating, pervading qualities of his powerful, troubled, restless spirit. Gulliver among the pygmies, the giants, the pedants, or the horses was hardly more extraordinary than Swift among the people of Ireland and England in his day.

An extraordinary man, with a boundless appetite for power, must master or please ordinary men, or else go hungry. Swift was born without the rank or fortune which are such a man's natural advantages. Worse, Swift was born without the hide of brass and bowels of iron which would have been nearly as good for him as rank and fortune. He could not climb without caring what he set his feet on. He could not take snubs and kicks and stabs as incidental, but had quick, ungovernable impulses to strike back. No man is so extraordinary that he can, starting below his fellows, scramble past all of them without a stubborn, insolent devotion to the main path. Swift was not single-minded enough to master his world.¹

Nor would Swift rise, as some men do, by pleasing. To wriggle far, he would have had to be more supple than he was. Even in an age when it was still barely a disgrace to court a lord, Swift could not court one long. He was more ready to bully than to flatter. He used a winter speech in the most comfortable summers. Above all, he had no zeal to please, and was half ashamed when he pleased, as if he were a tragedian who had raised a laugh. This was not his part. This was for mountebanks.

¹ This Introduction draws freely on Carl Van Doren's *Swift* (Viking, 1930); included also in *The Portable Carl Van Doren* (Viking, 1945).

Nothing about Swift was more extraordinary than his blindness to the part which he played so well while he was failing in the one on which he had fixed his desire. Still in his twenties, or just out of them, he raged because he had no chance to command. Yet in those same years he flung off prose satire such as no Englishman had ever written before, and such as no Englishman but Swift ever wrote again. In London, scheming to rule among the Whigs or Tories, half winning, and then disappointed after his spell of power, Swift, almost without effort or concern, ruled the wits. In Ireland, where he thought of himself as a despairing exile, he wrote pamphlets that are monuments, poems that added to poetry what was almost a new species. He wrote his *Travels* in a vain fury of revenge, and entertained the world. On the other side of every failure was a triumph.

On the other side of all his hatreds were loves. Swift was a misanthropist, but he is famous for his friendships. He shrank from women, but he made two women famous. He detested Ireland, but he has the eternal affection of the Irish. He loathed the human race, but he has been a delight to it for two centuries. It was his extraordinary fortune to draw an interest of love from a principal of hate.

No doubt Swift should have measured his gifts more exactly and should have put himself into fitting roles, like any ordinary man of talent. But Swift was outside the shrewd discipline of talent. He could not sit down and write prose and verse as if they were sufficient ends. Prose and verse were the weapons he found in his fists, scarcely realizing how they came there. He used them in his tragic role, in the war of his ambition, not because he valued them, but because they were the only weapons he had. After he had lost his war and had given it up as hopeless when he was only forty-five, Swift would never

again allow himself to be consoled. He would not see that he had been winning, and still was winning, a great war while he was losing a small one. His pride blinded him.

A few years reverse many verdicts. While Swift was still alive, king of Ireland but pretending to be king of triflers, he had good reasons for foreseeing the true verdict upon him. In the long run, he might have guessed, he would be remembered for what he had written before he even tried the world, or for what he had written and done in Ireland, after he had bitterly renounced his expectations. What he had thought his glorious episode, the years with Oxford and Bolingbroke, would look a little shabby. In time Swift would seem to have been most splendid when he had been most himself, and not the satellite of politicians.

Still, Swift might also have understood—if he had been without his blindness—that simple formulas would not explain him. To do what he had done he had needed the blind obsession of his will. What had raised Swift, scattered and random as most of his writing was, to the first rank among writers, was the high reach of his pride, the magnificence of his scorn. He had won the war in which he hardly noticed he was fighting because he had fought with so much passion in a war which was not worth it. It was his passion that mattered, and not his long illusion. Nature cares no more whether prose or verse is produced in illusion than it cares whether children are begotten in moods of unreason.

Unsurpassed in directness, Swift is one of the most personal of writers. There is autobiography in almost every line he wrote: not too often the facts of his life, but always the pulse and color of his temper. This is apparent in his later recollections of his restless youth in Ireland, at Kilkenny School and at Trinity College;

it is unmistakable in the letters and poems and satires he wrote during his years from twenty-two to thirty-two, of which he spent seven as half dependent, half secretary in the household of Sir William Temple, retired English diplomat, at Moor Park in Surrey. Having written some conventional Pindaric odes which pleased no one, Swift at twenty-four angrily renounced the "visionary power" of his Muse:

And since thy essence on thy breath depends,
Thus with a puff the whole delusion ends.

Instead he turned to satire, in another poem, and put his trust in

My hate, whose lash just heaven had long decreed
Shall on a day make sin and folly bleed.

The character of his first satires was determined by his circumstances. Living a little out of the world, in Temple's suave realm, Swift had come to despise the buzzing wits and upstart scientists who, he thought, infested the moral and intellectual life of the times. Though Dryden was one of the wits and Newton one of the scientists, Swift did not particularly distinguish among them. His hate was no more disposed to scrupulous justice than another man's love. Temple, involved in a current dispute over the relative merits of the Ancients and Moderns, decided, like a gentleman, for the past and dismissed the present. Swift, superficially like Temple but fundamentally like himself, agreed. He took the superiority of the Ancients for granted, with nothing but contempt for any Modern who doubted it. The contemporary world of learning Swift assumed to be made up almost altogether of mean, starved, envious, strident, stingless fools and fops, ignorant and arrogant, who swarmed about their betters with a fly's equal in-

clination to dung or honey. But whereas Temple surveyed the contest in a smooth, stately exposition, Swift turned it into burlesque comedy. The Ancients and Moderns of his *Battle of the Books* were personified as actual warriors, brawling "on Friday last" in the King's library. The spokesman of the Moderns was a venomous spider, of the Ancients a bee praising sweetness and light.

In *A Tale of a Tub* Swift actively declared a war. This satire was like a tub thrown by seamen to a whale to keep it off the ship. Let the yelping wits and empty scholars butt and tumble the satire instead of harming the commonwealth. The *Tale* did not trouble to complete the allegory of Peter (St. Peter) and Martin (Luther) and Jack (John Calvin), the three brothers who stood for the Church of Rome, the Church of England, and the Dissenting Churches. The allegory, satirizing the abuses of religion, made up no more than a third of the satire. The digressions were the larger and more varied part. It was Swift's duty, as a clergyman, to defend his Church by cutting down its enemies. He was ruthless with the quibbles of theology, fanaticism, superstition, priestly greed and imposture. But he felt a more seasoned malice when he turned aside to prune and lop among the charlatans of wit whom he regarded as his own enemies, and whom he ridiculed by the contemptuous device of praising them. Yet they were for him, at most, annoying creatures that he studied briefly before he trod on them. They roused only his irritation. His hate, which after preliminary years of brooding had found a language natural to it, was for human life at large. Happiness was only "a perpetual possession of being well deceived." Credulity, he satirically argued, is better than curiosity, and it is better to accept the surfaces of life with the senses than to inquire deeper with the reason. "Last week I saw a woman flayed, and

you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse." The "sublime and refined point of felicity" was the "serene, peaceful state of being a fool among knaves."

The two satires were probably written in 1696-97. When they were published in 1704, mankind did not mind. Fools did not read Swift. Wise men were only confirmed in their wisdom. The wits were delighted. But the *Tale* offended powerful prelates. Though it was published with guarded anonymity, and Swift never publicly acknowledged it, after a scuffle of ascriptions it settled down at his door. From that time on he was suspected, within his Church, of irreverence—or, as he phrased it, "the sin of wit."

This was certain to affect Swift's career, since the Church was his profession and his support. "I look upon myself, in the capacity of a clergyman," he wrote in his *Reflections on Religion*, "to be one appointed by Providence for defending a post assigned to me, and for gaining over as many enemies as I can. Although I think my cause is just, yet one great motive is my submitting to the pleasure of Providence, and to the laws of my country." This was the attitude not of a saint but of a soldier. Swift was always militant in his defense of the rights of the Church, and he never forgot, among the statesmen with whom he worked or among the wits with whom he played, that he was a clergyman; and he never let them forget it.

For eleven years after Temple's death in 1699 Swift lived in Ireland, sometimes in his rural parsonage at Laracor, more often in lodgings in Dublin, with visits to London where he watched the course of politics or relaxed with a few friends. Something in him kept him from more than brief satisfactions. Content to be a clergyman, he could not wait to become a bishop. Un-

troubled by debts, he longed for a fortune. A scholar, a clergyman, and a wit, he cared little for the company of his fellows. He could be at ease only among the great, and even there he did not lend himself wholly to their purposes. He stood solitary on the peak of his nature, his scornful eyes raking mankind.

So far as he was ever happy, it was with Joseph Addison, who was five years younger than Swift, but more precocious, and already established in the favor of the Whig ministers. The two wits became acquainted in February 1708, and were immediately friends. Addison called Swift "the most agreeable companion, the truest friend, and the greatest genius of his age." Swift thought that Addison had wit, charm, learning, virtue, "worth enough to give reputation to an age." Swift contributed to the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, and Addison persuaded Swift to revise his poem *Baucis and Philemon*. Too proud to be stubborn about his verses, Swift, as he loosely said, let Addison "blot out fourscore, add four-score, and alter fourscore" of the lines. The poem suffered, but Swift did not. He would, and did, write more smoothly if it was pleasing to Addison, who was Swift's first equal friend. When Addison went to Ireland as chief secretary, with a salary of two thousand pounds a year, Swift, still without promotion or much hope, felt no envy, and was delighted for Ireland as well as for Addison.

So far as Swift was ever at peace during those waiting years, it was with Esther Johnson, whom he made famous by the name of Stella. She also had been a member of Temple's household at Moor Park, the daughter of a former steward whose widow was companion to Temple's sister. Stella was eight when Swift first met her. He took an early interest in directing the books she read, taught her to write, and came to depend upon comforts

which only she could give him in those restive years: admiration without analysis, affection without exigence, a child's obedience, a child's worship. The attachment between them increased and deepened. After Swift left Moor Park for Ireland Stella soon followed him, on his advice. The reasons he gave for this were that living was cheaper in Ireland, and Stella's fortune, a legacy from Temple, was small. Stella never gave any reasons. She was barely twenty when she went to Ireland, in the company of another Temple dependent, an older woman named Rebecca Dingley. At first the venture looked, as Swift said, "like a frolic," and there was some talk, but this was soon quieted by the unwaveringly circumspect behavior of the two friends. Stella and Mrs. (that is, Miss) Dingley lived ordinarily in lodgings with their own servants. When Swift was at Laracor they lived in a cottage not far away. When he was in lodgings in Dublin they lodged elsewhere in the town. Only, it seems, during his absences did they economize by living in the vicarage at Laracor or in his Dublin lodgings. No one knew that Swift made Stella an allowance of fifty pounds a year. He almost never saw her in the morning, and never, it is said, in the afternoon or evening without at least a third person present.

If Stella and Swift were ever married, as gossip long ago asserted and some recent investigators believe, it was only privately, without license or record, when Swift was Dean of St. Patrick's. It was a marriage in name only, and it was without a name in public. Of the innumerable conjectures why Swift and Stella were never avowedly married, not one is better than a guess. "If my fortunes and humour served me to think of that state," Swift wrote in April 1704, he would have chosen Stella "among all persons on earth" for a wife, "because I never saw that person whose conversation I absolutely valued

but hers." He preferred friendship with her to marriage. She preferred friendship with him to marriage with anybody else. Not a surviving syllable from Stella tells whether she knew of any barrier between her and Swift except the cold sword of his will, or whether she struggled against fitting herself to the place he made for her, or whether she felt bitterness or regret. She knew that Swift's devotion was partly his pride admiring itself in her as in its glass. He trusted her judgment, which was a bright reflection of his own. He took her advice, which was colored by what she deftly guessed to be his inclination. But she was no such replica in dough as might have bored him. She was witty and lively, talked back to him, was charmingly perverse when he convinced her of her errors, and would not permit him to have a maid or housekeeper "with a tolerable face."

Because Swift, after Stella's death, destroyed all her letters to him, and all his to her except one he apparently missed and those of the famous *Journal to Stella*, she hardly lives except in his words about her. But in the *Journal*, written from September 2, 1710, to June 6, 1713, many revealing as well as tantalizing lights fall incidentally on her character and tastes. Stella was the person in whom Swift chose to confide most in his days of power. She was the kind of person to whom Swift could write such letters, so candid, so vigorous, so unforgettable.

Swift went to London in September 1710 on a special mission for what was called the First Fruits. Queen Anne, devoted to the Church, had given up her right to any clergyman's first year's profit from an ecclesiastical benefice in England. The Irish Church hoped she would extend the same bounty to Ireland. The *Journal to Stella* speaks often of Swift's lobbying for this cause. But it was soon lost in the larger issues which

absorbed him. The Whig ministers Swift had formerly looked to were falling out of power. The Tory Henry St. John (later Viscount Bolingbroke) had become Secretary of State. The Tory Robert Harley (later Earl of Oxford) had become first minister, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. "Every Whig in great office," Swift exultantly wrote to Stella on September 9, "will, to a man, be infallibly put out; and we shall have such a winter as has not been seen in England." Swift had never been entirely a Whig, as he was not now entirely a Tory. He was a churchman, and the Tories promptly won from the Queen the grant of the Irish First Fruits. Swift, now courted by Harley, began to think *A Tale of a Tub* would no longer be held against its author, and that at last he might have a place among the masters of the kingdom.

Harley, in fact no more concerned about the bounty of the First Fruits than about the orthodoxy of the *Tub*, had set out to seduce the most lively and deadly wit in England. At the price of a thousand pounds a year, cut out of the Queen's income, Swift would be a bargain for her minister. Nor would Swift be required to argue for principles he did not believe in. The Tories were, it was easy for Swift to think, more truly than the Whigs the party of order in Church and State. The Whigs had accused him of being a Tory. Then he would be a Tory. It was enough for Swift, as it had been enough when he took holy orders, that he was assigned a post in a cause which he thought good. He gave to the cause all his passion, intensity, genius.

When Swift closed with Harley there commenced a chapter singular in English history. No other man of affairs has ever made such use of a man of letters. At the outset Harley so misgauged his pamphleteer that after three months he could send him a banknote for fifty pounds. It was as if the squire had tipped the bishop.