

© Keith Waddington 1997

M. Brian

Restoration Lit.

28.4.97

### **Debunking the Bunk**

#### **Swift's Epitaph**

Swift has sailed into his rest;  
Savage indignation there  
Cannot lacerate his breast.  
Imitate him if you dare,  
World-besotted traveller; he  
Served human liberty.

W.B. Yeats

And indeed, liberties have been taken. Contemporary critics--perhaps intoxicated by narcissism, perhaps crooked from the imbalance of weighty wages, perhaps cockeyed from cocksure perception, or perhaps over-cooked from the pressure to publish--boastfully and generously inform the less perspicacious world that two centuries of misreading *Gulliver's Travels* have thankfully drawn to a final close: the curtain opens and a new show begins with the Houyhnhnms recast as a nasty herd of horse-flesh dressed up in the artful costumes of irony. Herbert Davies states that

the interpretation of irony may become more difficult with the passage of the centuries, as changing ways of life and standards of behaviour

sometimes throw into obscurity the original intentions of the writer."(154)

Here there can be no disagreement; what does seem remarkable then is the plethora of new readings, verging on radical re-writings, which overcome this difficulty and discover irony completely *a perte de vue* for Swift's contemporary readers. If, as Gilbert insisted, "Man is Nature's sole mistake," then the literary critic is surely our penance. And so the academics have abandoned the Ivory Tower and delivered themselves to the lofty sanctuary of Laputa, where the gravity of their labour is moderated not by humour or modesty, but by absurdity of such puissance that the land is kept permanently suspended, floating about in several directions at once and rarely descending to touch solid earth. Their gravity, in a sense, defies gravity, just as it defies common sense. If much learning doth make them mad, to paraphrase the apostles, then perhaps they should learn less and understand more.<sup>1</sup> The task then is to reveal the Houyhnhnm irony, like "The Emperor's New

---

<sup>1</sup>The insanity associated with much modern literary criticism is, by now, par for the course; what I find most troubling is the unusual level of accord ridiculous readings have secured, as we witnessed in the impromptu class poll, where 90% of students accepted the Houyhnhnms lack of horse-sense. Although critics are ostensible the target of this paper, my intention, as ever, is a politically correct and indiscriminate inclusion: if the dunces cap fits, wear it.

Clothes," as both imaginary and unsuitable dress for so noble and natural a creature.

### **The Horses are Asses**

Our journey of diversion begins with Swift's considered employment of the horse as the embodiment of rationality. Several compelling explanations underscore the suitability of this particular quadruped: the horse traditionally symbolised social rank and prestige, was the embodiment of dignity and an exemplar--in terms of the work-horse--of the practical. And yet the investment of the horse as master of men does seem somehow impoverished. As Henry Craik suggests in this respect, "there is no great depth of satiric force"(65). Whether or not theriophilism itself supplies the deficiency, this fundamental does seem a weakness of Book IV, especially when considered in conjunction with the power of conception in Books I and II, and even specific realms of III. And yet one detail remains which affords Swift's decision additional depth: as R. S. Crane discovers in "The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and the History of Idea," philosophers from Porphyry (3rd century AD) onwards chose the horse as *the* archetypal symbol *antithetical* to reasoning man, a notion given new vigour in 17th and 18th century logic textbooks current in Trinity College Dublin at the time of Swift's enrolment. The lesson learned from this conception propagates the uniqueness of man, for though he, like the horse, is of animal based, only man possesses *animal rationale*. When we also recall that the horse as literary symbol characterised carnality, it becomes clear that the

initial formulation of the Houyhnhnm Yahoo dichotomy is founded upon a humorous reversal.

With this in mind, some distinction between comedy and satire seems useful.<sup>2</sup> Besides comedy's requisite contented conclusion, the felicitous finish, that ubiquitous happy ending by any other name, perhaps more germane is the pleonastic convention of offering a sense of security by rendering harmless the frightening or embarrassing. *Gulliver's Travels*, in contrast, takes the frightening and embarrassing as its primary material, even as its *raison d'être*, offering no security save in ignorance: the point of departure rather than the point of arrival.

And yet elements of comedy are strongly featured in *Gulliver's Travels*: human error, verbal humour, undignified characters and so on. When we notice also that tragedy takes its own primary requirement as the enforcement of divine or social rules, satire seems to occupy a middle ground, with the capacity to borrow elements of both.<sup>3</sup> The importance of all this is to underline the scope of satire and, more particularly, to make clear that humorous treatment does not necessarily mean satirical treatment. With this in mind:

---

<sup>2</sup>A distinction overlooked or denied by the class, perhaps for the elementary reason that satire make 'em laugh.

<sup>3</sup>See W.B.C. Watkins' *Perilous Balance: The Tragic Genius of Swift, Johnson and Sterne*, for a sensible examination of the tragedy of Book IV.

I have seen a white mare of our family thread a needle (which I lent her on purpose) with that joint. They milk their cows, reap their oats, and do all the work which requires hands, in the same manner. They have a kind of hard flint, which by grinding against other stones, they form into instruments, that serve instead of wedges, axes, and hammers. With tools made of these flints they likewise cut their hay and reap their oats . . .

(239)

Here, with the representation of *Equus caballus* busy a-needle-threading, we see Swift at his comic best, briefly abandoning satire and turning rather to pure burlesque. Indeed, if we traipse through *Gulliver's Travels* willy-nilly, the combination of satire and simple comedy is revealed as a common stylistic device. The articles of impeachment in Book I offer another example of this. Accordingly, when we read that the Houyhnhnms are unable to recognise the inherent advantages of the human form, this is merely a continuation of the original comic premise--the reversal--rather than an instance of their limited capacities. Indeed, this continuation is unavoidable and sensible: Swift shows the Houyhnhnms capable of delicate hoofing and hoofing dexterity, and so the thesis that their physique is best adapted turns out to be, in fact, ironically true. The irony of the Houyhnhnms is an amusement in *absentia*, that there is no irony.

It is instances such as this that lead John F. Ross to

synthesise the earliest modern upside-down reading of *Gulliver's Travels*. Ross establishes his thesis upon the differentiation of Swift and Gulliver, suggesting that Swift "permits Gulliver to reveal in his narrative the horses' incompetence to judge"(102), and so their general "intellectual limitations and arrogance"(113). Instead of my own reading of comic treatment, Ross suggests that Swift, in addition to the caustic Juvenalian satire, colours the Houyhnhnms--in fact, the whole work--with comic satire.

To begin with the first point: author/narrator differentiation has traditionally proven particularly difficult with *Gulliver's Travels*; indeed, even Ross, with his frequent variations of "where surely Swift is speaking through Gulliver"(118) seems unable to sustain such measure. Ironically, Swift himself provides some explanation for this difficulty:

I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is towards individuals: for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love Counsellor Such-a-one, and Judge Such -a-one . . . But principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth. This is the system upon which I have governed myself many years, but do not tell, and so I shall go on till I have done with them. 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 in Timon's manner, the whole building of my travels is erected; and I will never have peace of mind till all honest men are of my opinion.(qtd. Wedel, 85-86)

From this it seems clear that much of the vituperation in *Gulliver's Travels* entirely befits Swift's own sentiments. This is not to suggest that we should read Gulliver as Swift, only that sometimes they share such affinity that the error is almost unavoidable.

Although Ross provides the most sensible of the upside-down readings, his comment that "basic comic absurdity . . . pervades the entire voyage"(105) indicates the central weakness of his thesis, in that comic absurdity does not mean comic irony<sup>4</sup> and Ross, in the final analysis, fails to establish otherwise.

Moving now to the second point: Houyhnhnm capacity. Kathleen Williams, in "Gulliver's Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," also takes the physical problematics of horsiness as a point of departure, suggesting more categorically than Ross that "the Houyhnhnms, far from being the models of perfection, are intended to show the inadequacies of the life of reason"(138). Accordingly, she ploughs through the text, uprooting examples

---

<sup>4</sup>The essay itself, at least to my mind, holds a basic comic absurdity, though I would hardly suggest it is therefore entirely ironic.

where the Houyhnhnms seem lacking in certain capacities and displaying them like a cornucopia of discrepancy ostensibly providing clues of ironic treatment, rather than the chaff of her own inadequate reading. For example, Williams informs us that the Houyhnhnms "have great difficulty in understanding such humanly simple matters as Gulliver's clothes, his ship, his writing"(140). Reading such terms as nouns rather than leitmotifs, which are systematically defined throughout *Gulliver's Travels*, is the real obstacle; by unlocking meaning, Swift's intentions become clear--and requires a good deal less than two centuries to discover.

Since these are key terms, an extended examination seems not altogether inappropriate. To begin, the sartorial leitmotif, frequent and extended in all four books, makes its initial appearance in the brief utopian section of Lilliput: "The clothes and food of the children are plain and simple"(37). Here clothes are offered as an outward sign of the inner self, in this case of a provident and moderate life, antithetical to the conceit which Swift frequently targets. In Book II, it is the vanity of dress which becomes more overt when Gulliver considers

if I had then beheld a company of English lords and ladies in their finery and best day clothes, acting their several parts in the most courtly manner, of strutting, and bowing, and prating, to say the truth, I should have been strongly tempted to laugh as much at them as the King and his grandees did at

me.(82)

Clothes, courtly, strutting and bowing and prating, all clearly linked and with polysyndeton utilised to underscore the absurdity of that vanity; and Gulliver craftily including himself in the courtly catalogue of narcissism.

Closely linked to vanity is, of course, sexuality:

. . . I immediately stripped myself stark naked, and went down softly into the stream. It happened that a young female Yahoo, standing behind a bank, saw the whole proceeding, and inflamed by desire, as the nag and I conjectured, came running with all speed, and leaped into the water, within five yards of the place where I bathed . . . She embraced me after a most fulsome manner.(232)

Here then we have a particularly Christian view of modesty, chastity, nudity and sexuality. For Swift, man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden means the playful act of denudation can lead only to tragic copulation.<sup>5</sup> For the Houyhnhnms, who yet dwell in that idyllic Garden, masters rather than slaves of sexual compulsion, such notions, like the idea of clothes themselves, are beyond conception. Their lack of understanding is rather a lack of corruption. Of course, all this escapes many a learned critic, content to ride his blinkered irony-shoed hobby horse rather than dismount and look the Houyhnhnms in the eye with either common sense or attentive

---

<sup>5</sup>Poetic licence is here applied.

consideration.

Finally, in Book II, with Gulliver in difficulties, the sartorial offers new resonance:

Here it was impossible for me to advance a step; for the stalks were so interwoven that I could not creep through, and the beards of the fallen ears so strong and pointed that they pierced through my clothes into my flesh.(65)

Although only a passing detail, the clothes here represents simple pragmatic protective covering implicitly alluding to the frailties of the human body. Also in Book II, for instance, Gulliver tells us:

This writer went through all the usual topics of European showing how diminutive, contemptible, and helpless an animal was man in his own nature; how unable to defend himself from the inclemencies of the air, or the fury of wild beasts; how much he was excelled by one creature in strength, by another in speed, by a third in foresight, by a fourth in industry.(84)

Indeed, this becomes an important issue in Book IV also and has provided, as we shall see, ample material for critics to further keep their readers in stitches with debate over the relative merit of human and horse corporeality.

Modesty, vanity, frailty, these then are the general significations of the clothing leitmotif, and, together with the final addition of artful deception, form the material of a

penultimate inquiry in Book IV:

I had hitherto concealed the secret of my dress, in order to distinguish myself as much as possible from that cursed race of Yahoos; but now I found it in vain to do so any longer . . . I therefore told my master that in the country from which I came those of my kind always covered their bodies with the hairs of certain animals prepared by *art*, as well for decency as to avoid the inclemencies of air, both hot and cold; of which, as to my own person, I would give him immediate conviction, if he pleased to command me; only desiring his excuse, if I did not expose those parts that nature taught us to conceal. He said my discourse was all very strange, but especially the last part; for he could not understand why nature should teach us to conceal what nature had given. That neither himself nor family were ashamed of any parts of their bodies; but however I might do as I pleased . . . He desired to see no more, and gave me leave to put on my clothes again, for I was shuddering with cold. I expressed my uneasiness at his giving me so often the appellation of Yahoo, an odious animal for which I had so utter a hatred and contempt.(204)

Finally, the general understanding we now have fits in nicely with the larger analogy of Swift disrobing contemporary life, a dissertation designed to expose the world--a metaphor

made clear, as we have seen, with Gulliver's own wardrobe providing the principle distinguishing feature by which his association with the Yahoos is qualified.<sup>6</sup>

I<sup>7</sup> will turn now more briefly to the Houyhnhnms difficulties with Gulliver's ship and writing. Again we must understand the signification behind these terms in order to grasp why Swift disallows the Houyhnhnms any initial understanding. Firstly, as suggested above, if we read Houyhnhnmland as a Garden of Eden--and I can see no reason inimical to this--then voluntary egress becomes absurd, as do any mechanical contrivances so conceived. Who besides a candid fool would censure a race "subject to no diseases" for lacking pharmaceuticals? Candide, indeed! Yet this is precisely the faulty logic behind much learned upside-down reading. Secondly, the voyages of discovery are described in *Gulliver's Travels* in terms of expropriation and subjugation: Book III, for instance has a number of acrimonious references to the South Sea Company. What we now understand as human curiosity, leading man towards exploration, reads in *Gulliver's Travels* as either another projector's project, a fruitless inquiry into matters transcendental, or of exploitation. Rather than wonder why the Houyhnhnms do not understand maritime vessels, we might ask

---

<sup>6</sup>See also *A Tale of a Tub* for similar sartorial imagery.

<sup>7</sup>Yes, first person pro-noun is unique to this paper. Since this is my *last ever term paper*, it seems only appropriate that I should finally make an actual appearance.

why on earth they *should*?

The issue of writing in Book IV is also in keeping with the writing leitmotif of the previous books. From the fleeting comic scribbling in Lilliput, " . . . aslant from one corner of the paper to the other, like ladies in England"(38), which suggests in *Dunciad* fashion that we are what we write, Book II provides a more particular examination of the art:

. . . Their style is clear, masculine, and smooth, but not florid, for they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary words, or using various expressions.(111)

We must recollect here that this again is the ideal, for we are told that of all the Yahoo peoples "the least corrupted are the Brobdingnagians"(201).<sup>8</sup> With this clearly out of mind, A. E. Dyson, in "Swift: The Metamorphosis of Irony," also picks upon on the Houyhnhnms' "limited vocabulary, limited interests"(165) as an instance of horsy inadequacy. Hugh Sykes Davies, in "Irony and the English Tongue" though mixed in with some familiar upside-down reading, allows that Swift saw the period between the accession of Elizabeth and the beginning of the civil war as providing the Golden Age of English language, rather than the commonly held post-restoration period. The subsequent period of continuous corruption implied the need

---

<sup>8</sup>Although Brobdingnag comes close to a utopian treatise, it is the human element, and most particularly the corruption of flesh which prevents complete consummation.

for a policy of vocabulic restriction.

Here the example of the French Academy invited imitation, and Swift was only one of that long line of English writers who believed that a similar institution was needed here, and that it would have a beneficial influence on the language.(132)

Once again, what seems as horsy limitation turns out to be neo-classical doctrine. In addition, the digressional "limited interests" seems also within the neo-classical paradigm, with its particular aversion to innovation, with value placed instead in the re-expression and rearrangement of the best of what had already been thought and felt.

The issue of writing smudges still further to more fundamental issues of cultural development. Thus, also in Brobdingnag:

No law of that country must exceed in words the number of letters in their alphabet, which consists only of twenty-two. But indeed few of them extend even to that length. They are expressed in the most plain and simple terms, wherein those people are not mercurial enough to discover above one interpretation . . .(105)

Modest critics, alternatively, have demonstrated their own mercurial abilities where even interpretations are interpreted--and with a gusto and pride which surely demonstrates the loftiness of their Gulliverian humanity. We also note that the Brobdingnag

libraries are not very large; for that of the King's which is reckoned the biggest, does not amount to above a thousand volumes.(106)

It becomes clear from the chords of this particular leitmotif that writing, to Swift, advances the means of deception and contrivance: art both artful and crafty. Those earning their daily caviar--and perhaps substantiating their sense of self--from the immaculate conceptions of their own scholarly scribbling might indeed find inverted reading of *Gulliver's Travels* as the most appropriate provision.

When we examine the actual text, pursue various meanings of variegated leitmotifs, careful to understand the larger picture and Swift's general intentions, such examples of Houyhnhnm deficiencies are not so much evidence of ironic treatment as an *unfallen* state of grace. Houyhnhnm weaknesses are rather emblems of virtue, since simplicity and rectitude coupled with Edenesque isolation inevitably means worldly naiveté. Such weakness then is actually the peculiar strength of the Houyhnhnms.

Beside these ill-conceived inadequacies, Williams also suggests that a "full, clear, and wholly unambiguous account of a state of life to aim at would be unusual and unexpected in Swift"(138). Besides Williams' ungrammatical grammar, besides the Brobdingnagian virtue of clarity and brevity, besides the utopian elements extent in Book I, II, and III, Swift's intention to "vex" his readers seems suddenly suspect amongst all this smoke and mirrors. If the magician critic

manages to pull an ironic horse from her inverted hat, the prestidigitation also transforms the "vexing" *Gulliver's Travels* into a pleasant walk down the garden path. Swift's *masterful* Houyhnhnm irony becomes a good deal of horsing around and the ironic stallion is peremptorily gelded and prematurely readied for the knackers-yard. Besides this, traditionally and specifically, *Gulliver's Travels* has been cited as an example of clear and lucid prose. In 1783, for example, James Beattie states:

The style too deserves particular notice. It is not free from inaccuracy: but as a model of easy and graceful simplicity, it has not been exceeded by any thing in our language.(40)

This, of course, remained a commonplace understanding until the centuries of misreading came to light and miraculously turned "easy" prose into obscure irony. This is even more remarkable when we note that

ease . . . and grace . . . are the chief merits of this celebrated work; which has been more read, than any other publication of the present century.(40)

Remarkable then that a book so widely read was so badly read, and that Swift, the great corrector of human error, offered no word of correction. Book IV then, despite Williams' claim, finally gets to the nitty-gritty of Swift's idealism.

The honest, kindly and generous Don Pedro, captain of the Portuguese ship which finally rescues Gulliver, provides both Ross and Williams with additional proof that Swift does not

share Gulliver's final judgements. But the notion that we either accept Gulliver's judgement--which is absurd--or else announce its invalidity and imagine instead ironic pages dabbed with ironic ink is to miss the point entirely.

Thomas Sheridan, in *The Life of the Reverend Johnathan Smith*, provides some early criticism which recalls a self-evident, though often overlooked, point:

Here [in the Houyhnhnms] you may see collected all the virtues, all the great qualities, which dignify man's nature. and constitute the happiness of his life. What is the natural inference to be drawn from these two different representations [Yahoo and Houyhnhnms]? Is it not evidently to lessen mankind, warning them not to suffer the animal part to be predominant in them, lest they resemble the vile Yahoo, and fall into vice and misery; but to emulate the noble and generous Houyhnhnms, by cultivating the rational faculty to the utmost; which will lead them to a life of virtue and happiness.(42-43)

Gulliver's recognition of man as Yahoo, though extreme, is also an extreme modification of his earlier convictions, where naiveté allowed an unquestioning endorsement of the *malum in se*. Gulliver, in Book IV, becomes analogous with Plato's well penned prisoner, taken out from the darkened cave to witness the sun and the real world, and understanding then a life of shadow watching to be only a shadow of life. The reader of *Gulliver's Travels*, however, need not be so blinded by the

blinding light: by recognising ourselves exclusively as Yahoo, we disregard man's potential, his "*rationis capax*." Indeed, as we have seen, Swift himself proposes *Gulliver's Travels* as a treatise proving man only "*rationis capax*"; and it seems therefore unavoidable that some comparative "*animal rationale*" is essential, for otherwise the thesis is all body and no soul. Ross suggests we should not accept Gulliver's judgement. I insist we *cannot* accept Gulliver's judgement. Unlike Gulliver, the reader remains impartial and the Houyhnhnm Yahoo binary stands like a classical archway leading to the Swiftian ideal. The benignity of the Portuguese captain, rather than providing proof of ironic Houyhnhnms, actually underscores this Houyhnhnm Yahoo binary, as well as demonstrating with stark resolution that Gulliver's judgement of mankind is lopsided.

Even as we acknowledge Gulliver's error, the Houyhnhnms remain the standard by which all things might be measured, incorporating qualities which, though exalted, find their source not only in utopian idealism but in actual men. M. M. Kelsall, in "*Iterum Houyhnhnm: Swift's Sextumvirate and the Horses*," offers some cunning evidence which convincingly supports this. Kelsall turns his attention to Book III, to the island of the sorcerers and Gulliver's conversations with the mighty dead. Gulliver's--and I think equally Swift's--heroes are Brutus, Junius, Socrates, Epaminondas, Cato the younger and Thomas More. This Sextumvirate incorporates, as Kelsall carefully demonstrates, the same "rational virtue"(214) as we

find in the Houyhnhnms, paying tribute not only to the ancients but to the eternal qualities they embody. I think also the inclusion of the temporally discontinuous More, beside offering a nationalistic acclamation worthy of Gulliver, suggests a certain positivism which effectively intensifies the invective satire of Book IV: if history can produce so few rationally virtuous men, More's presence suggests that the capacity may be dormant rather than dead, transforming the disparity between the ideal and the actual from a cerebral exercise to a genuine deprivation.

Besides this new connection with Book III, we might also recall the portrait of Brobdingnag, where general simplicity is beautified by a lack of political science, common sense controls bankrupt book multiplication, philosophy denies philosophy, and where legalistic mumbo-jumbo is a capital crime. In addition to this, Gulliver travels to both Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnmland in the same ship: the *Adventurer*. Even in this incomplete catalogue we see a commonalty between Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnmland. The contrast which exists between Books I and II and between III and IV and the similarities between Book II and Book IV essentially means that any modern upside-down reading of the Houyhnhnms must also result in a holistic distortion, casting a shadow of doubt across the entire work.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>The contrast between III and IV, though less obvious than between I and II, is nevertheless apparent in the general

**The Horses are Too Good for their Own Good**

Mixed in with arguments of general deficiencies, which seem to work upon the premise that, "To err is Houyhnhnms, to forgive divine," we discover also the antithesis, where, in simple terms, the Houyhnhnm seems too good for his own good.

In 1752, for example, John Boyle suggested the Houyhnhnms "are incapable of doing wrong, therefore they act right"(36), and so provide no useful model. Although this seems a valid point, the absolute morality of the Houyhnhnms is by no means a given: firstly, they debate Yahoo annihilation, which suggests that right behaviour is not altogether assured; secondly, since they are "governed" by reason, other aspects surely must be extent over which reason might govern. But even setting aside these nit-picking arguments, I would suggest that the didactic value of the Houyhnhnms lies only in conjunction with the Yahoos.

More recently, A. E. Dyson similarly suggests that Swift's "most subtle trap of all"(165) lies in the fact that the "Houyhnhnms are not human at all, so that their way of life is wholly irrelevant as a human ideal"(165). This sentiment is echoed--or perhaps copied--by Williams, who tells us that Houyhnhnms are of a nature "not simply unattainable by man, but irrelevant to him"(141). Fortunately, Aesop remained

---

artful craftiness: the flying island, the projects of Lagado and so on, which find answer in the pastoral simplicity of the Houyhnhnms.

blissfully ignorant of such parochial understanding, for otherwise he might have abandoned the pen and taken up instead the sledge hammer. The absurdity, I think, needs no further comment.

To throw another spanner in the works of Swift, F. R. Leavis, in *The Common Pursuit*, although recognising the Houyhnhnms as exemplary, argues that Swift achieves no positive affirmation of Augustan ideals:

The Houyhnhnms, of course, stand for Reason, Truth and Nature, the Augustan positives, and it was in deadly earnest that Swift appealed to these; but how little at best they were anything solidly realised, comparison with Pope brings out. Swift did his best for the Houyhnhnms, and they may have all the reason, but the Yahoos have all the life.(84)

As George Sherburn points out in reply to a reply to a reply<sup>10</sup> of Professor Ehrenpreis, the Houyhnhnms may indeed possess all the reason, though reason is not all they possess. When Gulliver remarks, for example, "Reason alone is sufficient to govern a rational creature," Sherburn explains:

The proper word to emphasise here is *govern*, and thus clarified . . . it simply places reason in a hierarchy above the emotions or "inferior mind" and gives, by implication, reason something other than itself to govern. It is not "alone" in the

---

<sup>10</sup>!!!!

mind.(261)

This aside, Leavis is correct in realising Swift's Augustan positivism is somehow wanting vitality; but pure goodness, destitute of the fleshy vitality which evil habitually embodies, is surely predestined--Pope notwithstanding--to want corporeal life.

### **The Dystopia of Utopia**

This problem of insipidity is further compounded by the constitution of utopian systems--and especially in one which need not accommodate human weakness--whose *modus operandi* effectively precludes the deviation which is life itself: perfection, by definition, requires no change; without change there can be no meaningful life; without meaningful life there can be no perfection. The problem then is not altogether Swift's, but the nature of the beast.

Although critics offer, at best, only passing mention of utopian problematics, it seems to me that this element stratifies the general dissatisfaction and explains, in large part, the ironic quest for ironic Houyhnhnms. Furthermore, the ethico-religious Utopias of Old Testament Prophets, the Utopianism of Jesus, of Saint Augustine's "City of God," formulated and entrenched within religious doctrine and so by practical definition exclusionary, are necessarily dystopian to the heretic. Swift's Houyhnhnmland, founded upon Augustan

principles, must also suffer similar limitations.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>Caution: you are entering the longest digressory footnote in the known footnote world. My own readings of utopian literature includes those by Plato, St. Augustine, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and H.G. Wells. Even this modest survey sufficiently highlights the acute problems Swift encountered. Perhaps the ultimate test of any utopia is whether or not the reader would wish to live there himself. Only Charles Fourier, the French mad man, warrants a qualified "maybe." The survey volume, *The Utopian Visions of Charles Fourier*, bound in a purely pink cover that provides an immediate indication of Augustan exclusion, is a work certainly worth its weight in pink. In the historical community of utopias, built in that region which surely feature the *Republic* as its church, Fourier's offers an architecture that is remarkable in its idiosyncrasy, with seven back doors and no front. The roof is made of string. Newton's laws of attraction--gravity--in the physical universe were, according to Fourier, merely a preamble to his more momentous discovery of a similar force at play in the social, animal and organic realms. This force he labelled "the law of passionate attraction";(215) a fundamental principle controlling all human activity. Fourier recognised no harmful passions, nor unhealthy desires, believing only that it is suppression of such wherein lies the evil. Fourier further

---

propounds that Nature intended all man's desires to be gratified, with this universal gratification providing the key to universal harmony. Everything in Fourier's utopia is therefore based upon the pleasure principle, including work. If certain tasks are always abhorrent, as he freely admits, solutions are only a thought away: boys, he suggests, between the ages of nine and fifteen commonly take great pleasure in associating with filth. Such boys as these, and we might include such adults as Swift, will perform--with pleasure and zeal--such tasks as digging the dung heap and cleaning out the sewers.

Since passionate attraction is an omnipresent force, suppression and subjugation to *reason* is both futile and harmful. Free love is perhaps the most notable and extravagant manifestation of Fourier's "Theory of Passionate Attractions"; and there is therefore a minimum quota of sexual activity guaranteed to all citizens. But we should not read "free" as anarchistic, for like all things in all utopias, order is paramount. Accordingly, government plays an important role in sexual liaisons: the "affairs" of every commune are run by an elaborate hierarchy of officials, the nomenclature of which is delightfully subversive: high priests, pontiffs, matrons, confessors, fairies, fakirs and genies. Such dignitaries serve at the evening Courts of Love, where fetes and orgies are organised and amorous ties formed.

An efficient utopianist is able to recognise problems of his period; a proficient utopianist is able to escape the confines of contemporaneity and discover solutions in a non-temporal realm. Plato's topless women elite, exercising alongside their male counterparts and More's religious toleration and communism are two reasonable examples. Swift, rooted in neo-classical ideology, is never able to evade entirely his temporality. For this reason, positive suggestions for society's improvement resort, in Books I-III, to clichéd generalities. When Book IV finally deals in details, limitations stand out like the skeleton of starvation. It seems clear that Swift's utopian failure points not so much to individual deficiency, but to the fundamental weakness of neo-classical values and the *Houyhnhnminess* of Platonic

---

Fourier, surprisingly, reveals a certain affinity with Swift, at least in his insistence upon order and the extent of his dissatisfaction with contemporary life:

In winter-time he sleeps on a pile of leaves which rapidly turns into a worm infested compost heap. When his family wakes up, they have to pull the worms out of their flesh. The food served in these huts is just as elegant as the furniture.(126)

We inherit a romantic vision which cannot see the over-rule of reason as particularly desirable, and Fourier's utopia, for all its madness, at least appeals to modern sybaritic, hedonistic and perhaps more realistic self-indulgent tendencies.

rationalism. In a sense, to discover irony in the Houyhnhnms is to discover treasure for centuries hidden, to repudiate Swift's failure where there really is no real need. The treasure, though it might sparkle, finally turns out to be obsolete coin without actual currency. As Orwell suggests, we should recognise rather that

The durability of *Gulliver's Travels* goes to show that if the force of belief is behind it, a world-view which only just passes the test of sanity is sufficient to produce a great work of art.(393)

#### **Gullible Gulliver**

Finally, I turn away from the either perfectly inadequate or inadequately perfect readings of the Houyhnhnms to briefly examine Gulliver himself.

It is the final chapters of Book IV which offer our upside-down critics most upside-down material. In refuting the old argument of Swift's carelessness in support of ironic horse-play, Edward Stone pays particular attention to Gulliver's behaviour back in England.

But is Gulliver's comportment actually so unexpected? Certainly he has abandoned that familiar naive understanding of his European homeland; but Gulliver, though often more a satirical device more than a character, does maintain his essential naiveté. The absurd behaviour we witness at the conclusion of Book IV provides no evidence of ironic Houyhnhnms, for the simple reason that we have seen it all before. His return from Brobdingnag, for example:

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 had like to have gotten one or two broken heads for my impertinence. When I came to my own house, for which I was forced to enquire, one of the servants opening the door, I bent down to go in (like a goose under a gate) for fear of striking my head. My wife ran out to embrace me, but I stooped lower than her knees, thinking she could otherwise never be able to reach my mouth. My daughter kneeled to ask my blessing, but I could not see her till she arose, having been so long used to stand with my head and eyes erect to above sixty feet; and then I went to take her up with one hand, by the waist. I looked down upon the servants and one or two friends who were in the house, as if they had been pigmies, and I a giant.(120-121)

Gulliver's break in Brobdingnag and hiatus in Houyhnhnmland result in *self-conceptions* of gianthood and horsehood respectively. Gulliver's behaviour at the conclusion of Book IV is only an augmentation--Gulliver, after all, stays longer in Houyhnhnmland than any other place--of his previous behaviour and requires no further explanation. There is no secret agenda, only Swift enjoying a joke at Gulliver's

expense. I suggested earlier that reading Gulliver as Swift is sometimes inevitable and even helpful; but it is here most particularly that we must distinguish the two: it is Gulliver who accepts the Yahoos as humans incapable of Houyhnhnm excellence. Swift, on the other hand, in a letter to Pope and Bolingbroke, says:

I tell you after all I do not hate mankind, it is *vous autres* who hate them, because you would have them reasonable Animals, and are angry at being disappointed.(qtd. Monk, 316)

When we disassociate Gulliver's conclusions from Swift, we begin to understand properly the Yahoo Houyhnhnms binary and to realise that Gulliver's naiveté, initially a satirical imperative, becomes finally a comic capacity which Swift develops to its comic conclusion. Whether or not the comedy weakens the satire I offer no judgement; what does seem certain, however, is that it forces the reader to step back and examine the larger picture, to abandon Gulliver's pessimistic vision and discover another, perhaps less fatalistic, which finds some balance in the general dichotomy.

In addition, such panoramic examination reveals two fundamental types of progress in *Gulliver's Travels*: firstly we notice that Gulliver's material prospects steadily improve, from the advantageous offer of the first voyage, he finally becomes Captain of the *Adventurer* in the last. Besides being something of a plot imperative, justifying his continued adventures after continued calamities, Gulliver's advancement

also calms the wind, deflating any scholarly sails patterned around personal disappointment motivating his final antipathy to mankind. Secondly, the nature of Gulliver's ship-board displacement reveals a more pessimistic progress. When Howard Erskine-Hill suggests that, "When we read Part IV for the first time few of us, I think, take these repulsive animals for men and women"(62) he exhibits that common misreading which accepts Yahoos as human, despite the continuous allusions to differences of intellectual capacity, manners, hygiene and so on. As Gulliver himself perceives,

. . . the Yahoos appear to be the most unteachable of all animals, their capacities never reaching higher than to draw or carry burdens.(198)

But even with this aside, the accumulative effect of Swift's satire in concert with the intensification of Gulliver's mistreatment actually allows the reader to recognise immediately the Yahoo as symbolic of the feral in man.

#### **A Contrary Conclusion Straight From the Horses Mouth**

The debate is protracted, with more angles than an English riverbank on a sunny Sunday afternoon, and with twice as much bait. I have, accordingly and hopefully, debunked only the greatest, most prevailing or most ludicrous bunk. In addition to the upside-down readings discussed, R.S. Crane's "The Rationale of the Fourth Voyage," turns the whole work inside-out and suggests that we read without reading, that Book IV contains no allegory, that the Yahoos and Houyhnhnms are symbolic of nothing, that all we really have is a simple

animal fable with no particular meaning. An original thesis indeed, best read perhaps in the shade of flying pigs escaped from some other animal fable.

The truth of *Gulliver's Travels* lies somewhere between these two extremes. Swift does indeed achieve a good deal of clarity, but this provides no licence for careless reading. In the school of political projectors, for example, Gulliver tells us: "I was but ill entertained; the professors appearing in my judgement wholly out of their senses"(155). To this the reader is entirely in agreement; but then Gulliver adds that these

unhappy people were proposing schemes for persuading monarchs to choose favourites upon the score of their wisdom, capacity and virtue(156).

Although a simple example, it highlights one important element of Swift's narrative strategy: narrative shift; and demonstrates the way Swift's irony *actually* functions. Although Book IV largely abandons this particular strategy, another narrative shift takes place, where Gulliver accepts an *ideal* as a *modus operandi*.

Gulliver's fundamental error therefore, his fundamentalism, is his rejection of humanism. His condemnation of mankind for falling short of Houyhnhnms standards is indeed to offer oats to a Trojan Horse, and here the final absurdity of Gulliver is realised and the author narrator differentiation becomes not only apparent but necessary. This then is the essential difference between Swift and Gulliver: one would improve man,

the other disprove him. The reader, unlike Gulliver, cannot seriously suppose himself to be a Yahoo, though perhaps he might acknowledge a Yahooish bent. Similarly, he is not a Houyhnhnm, though might possess a modicum of their qualities.

It seems, however, above and beyond all the arguments so far examined, that ironic readings of the Houyhnhnms open up a can of worms which is entirely overlooked by critics on both sides of the argument, for it demands also a revaluation of similar philosophies in Book II,<sup>12</sup> which destroys the overall structural symmetry (Book I and II, Book III and IV) which turns an ontological examination into a fantastical travelogue and finally leaves us with nothing that means anything and the firm desire that Gulliver had stayed at home.

Finally, Swift held some firm opinions concerning clarity in writing. For instance, in "On Poetry" he wrote:

To Statesmen wou'd you give a wipe,  
You print it in *Italic Type*.  
When Letters are in Vulgar Shapes,  
'Tis ten to one the Wit escapes;  
But when in Capitals exprest  
The dullest Reader smoaks the Jest. (*Poems*, 643)

The expectation is that, ten to one, there will be a deficiency in reading skills; the strategy, to make clarity the principle object; the result, a horsy tale that disdains

---

<sup>12</sup>Perhaps we can imagine horses clad in ironic fancy dress, but the Brobdingnagians also?

artful irony in its execution. Our learned critics might heed this logic, and in the process debunk their own bunk before it stains the page. And yet there is, in all this weird and wonderful reading, at least one weird and wonderful by-product for which we can all be grateful, for we have, by some form of immaculate conception, discovered Book V of *Gulliver's Travels*, a land inhabited exclusively by literary critics who pass their time horsing around and sometimes even flogging dead horses, where the horseless carriage is understood as a typewriter component, horsemanship a naval strategy, and where everything except the inhabitants themselves is either back to front, inside out, or upside-down.

**Works Cited**<sup>13</sup>

Beattie, James. "On Fable and Romance." *Swift Gulliver's Travels A Casebook*. Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan. 1974. (40-41).

Boyle, John. From *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Johnathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin. In a Series of Letters from John, Earl of Orrey to his Son, the Honourable Hamilton Boyle. Swift Gulliver's Travels A Casebook*. Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan. 1974. (35-37).

Craik, Henry. From *Life of Johnathan Swift. Swift Gulliver's Travels A Casebook*. Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan. 1974. (64-66).

Crane, R.S. "The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and the History of Idea," *Reason and the Imagination; Studies in the History of Ideas, 1600-1800*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1962. (120-133).

Davies, Herbert. "Swift's Use of Irony" *The World of Jonathan Swift*. Ed. Brian Vickers. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968. (154-170).

Davies, Hugh Sykes. "Irony and the English Tongue" *The World of Jonathan Swift*. Ed. Brian Vickers. Oxford: Basil Blackwell,

---

<sup>13</sup>Since the Works Cited of *Love's Labour's Lost*--my last "real" paper--was conspicuous by its emptiness, here's a horse of a different colour.

1968. (129-154).

Dyson, A. E. "Swift: The Metamorphosis of Irony." Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan. 1974(157-172).

Fourier, Charles. *The Utopian Visions of Charles Fourier*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1972.

Hill, Howard Erskine. *Swift Gulliver's Travels*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Kelsall, M. M. "Iterum Houyhnhnm: Swift's Sextumvirate and the Horses." *Swift Gulliver's Travels A Casebook*. Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan. 1974. (212-223).

Leavis, F. R. *The Common Pursuit*. New York: George W. Stewart, 1952.

Monk, Samuel Holt. "The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver." *Gulliver's Travels*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961. (312-330).

Orwell, George. "Politics vs Literature" in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984.

Ross, John F. "The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver" *A Casebook on Gulliver's Travels*. Ed. Milton P. Foster. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961. (121-138).

Sherburn, George. "Errors Concerning the Houyhnhnms." (258-267) *A Casebook on Gulliver's Travels*. Ed. Milton P. Foster. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961.

Sheridan, Thomas. From *The Life of the Reverend Johnathan Smith*. *Swift Gulliver's Travels A Casebook*. Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan, 1974 (42-43).

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. London: W.W. Norton &

Company, 1961.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Poems*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1958.

Watkins, W. B. C. *Perilous Balance: The Tragic Genius of Swift, Johnson & Sterne*. Cambridge, Walker-deBerry, 1960.

Wedel, T.O. "On the Philosophical Background of *Gulliver's Travels*." *Swift Gulliver's Travels A Casebook*. Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan, 1974(83-99).

Williams, Kathleen. "Gulliver's Voyage to the Houyhnhnms." *Swift Gulliver's Travels A Casebook*. Ed. Richard Gravil. London: Macmillan, 1974 (136-148).