

## 14. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*



**I**N 1726 an unusual travelogue appeared, ostensibly written by a man who had been 'first a surgeon, and then a captain of several ships'. There was even a portrait of the author in the front of the book and a letter written by him to his cousin Richard Sympson, who had supposedly edited the manuscript, reprimanding him for the poor quality of his editing, as well as a foreword by Sympson, guiltily admitting that the writer "may be a little dissatisfied".

Of course, Lemuel Gulliver, this alleged author, was pure invention, and 'Gulliver's Travels into several remote nations of the world' was entirely the satiric fiction of Jonathan Swift, one of Ireland's greatest writers. At the time, many were not sure whether the work was real or imaginary. In a letter to his friend Alexander Pope, Swift noted: "A bishop here said, that book was full of improbable lies, and for his part, he hardly believed a word of it". Pope, for his part, was highly impressed, prophesying that it "will be in future the admiration of all men". But he was only half-right, for he could not foresee the irony that one of the greatest subversive satires ever written would be relegated to a nursery tale or, worse still, a silly Hollywood comedy starring Jack Black – more juvenile than Juvenal – that would cause the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral once again to lacerate his breast in savage indignation while spinning in his ecclesiastical grave.

*Gulliver's Travels* comprises four parts in each of which the hero Lemuel Gulliver embarks on a voyage, but shipwreck or some other misadventure casts him up on a strange land. Book I takes him to the land of Lilliput, where he wakes to find himself the giant prisoner of the six-inch-high Lilliputians. Their diminutive size is a mirror of the pettiness and pretensions of their way of life. He is told that Lilliput went to war with neighbouring Blefuscu over a disagreement about whether boiled eggs should be opened at the larger or smaller end. This egg war parodies the French-English and Catholic-Protestant conflicts of the time, which Swift reduces to trivial differences.

Man-Mountain, as they call him, ingratiates himself with the Lilliputians when he wades into the sea and captures an invasion fleet from Blefuscu. But he falls into disfavour when he puts out a fire in the palace of the Empress (read Queen Anne, who slighted Swift by appointing him to Ireland instead of England) by urinating on it. Learning of a plot to charge him with treason, he escapes from the island to Blefuscu and eventually back to England.

Book II takes Gulliver to Brobdingnag, where the inhabitants are 60 feet tall giants. He is captured by a farmer, who displays him as a circus wonder at local fairs, and eventually sells him to the Queen who keeps him as a kind of pet. While he lives at the palace, he is constantly in danger: bees the size of pigeons almost stab him, a puppy almost tramples him to death, a monkey mistakes him for a baby monkey and tries to stuff him full of food. He is disgusted by the people's enormous skin pores and the sound of their torrential urination.

After Gulliver describes to the king of Brobdingnag all that he can think of about English culture and history, the latter decides that the English sound like tiny little pests – "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth". He absolutely refuses to accept Gulliver's gift of gunpowder because such weapons seem like an invitation to horrible violence and abuse. Picked up by an eagle and dropped into the sea, he manages to return home.

On his third voyage, he gets marooned by pirates on a small island near Vietnam. As he sits, he sees a shadow passing overhead: a floating island called Laputa. He signals the Laputians for help and is brought up by rope. The Laputians are dedicated to only two things, mathematics and music. But their love of equations makes them really poor at practical things, so no one in the kingdom can make a good suit of clothes or build a house. And in imitation of the Laputians' abstract science, the residents of the continent below, Balnibarbi, have been steadily ruining their farms and buildings with newfangled 'reforms'.

Gulliver also visits Glubbudrib, an island of sorcerers where he gets to meet the ghosts of famous historical figures, such as Julius Caesar and other military leaders, whom he finds much less impressive than in books. After visiting the Luggnaggians and the Struldbrugs, the latter of which are senile immortals who prove that age does not bring wisdom, he is able to sail to Japan and from there back to England.

On his fourth voyage, Gulliver sails out as a captain in his own right, but his sailors quickly mutiny against him and maroon him on a distant island. This island is home to two kinds of creatures: the beastly Yahoos, violent, lying, disgusting animals who attack Gulliver by climbing trees and defecating on him; and the Houyhnhnms, who look

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like horses. The Houyhnhnms govern themselves with absolute reason. They do not even have words for human problems like disease, deception, or war. As for the Yahoos – they are human beings. They are just like Gulliver, except that Gulliver has learned to clip his nails, shave his face, and wear clothes. Thus he finally realises the true depths of human awfulness and grows so used to the new way of life that, when the Houyhnhnms finally tell him he must leave, he goes reluctantly and nearly jumps off the Portuguese ship carrying him home.

Once Gulliver returns to his family, he feels physical revulsion at the thought that he had sex with a Yahoo female (his wife) and had three Yahoo children. He can barely be in the same room with them. We leave Gulliver slowly reconciling himself to being among humans again, but he is still really sad not to be with the Houyhnhnms. In fact, he spends at least four hours a day talking to his two stallions in their stable. It seems that the more he sees of humans, the less he wants to be one.

In his essay 'Politics vs Literature' George Orwell wrote that "Swift shows no sign of having any religious beliefs". Thackeray said of him that 'he puts his apostasy out to hire... and his sermons have scarce a Christian characteristic', and Leavis attributed to him 'a complete incapacity even to guess what religious feeling might be'. G. Wilson Knight even described him as 'a sceptical humanist who again and again tilts at Christian belief'.

However, these judgments are mistaken. For what Swift persistently opposed was hypocrisy, so much so that he always wanted to avoid the same charge levelled at himself. Samuel Johnson, no lover of the Irishman, realised this truth when he wrote that "the suspicion of his irreligion proceeded in a great measure from his dread of hypocrisy; instead of wishing to seem better, he delighted in seeming worse than he was" (*Lives of the English Poets*).

Swift was clearly a Christian Humanist, an outlook that infuses much of his writing, not least *Gulliver's Travels*, which Hazlitt described as 'an attempt to tear off the mask of imposture from the world'. It is also a satire on man's sinfulness. True, Gulliver, unlike say Robinson Crusoe, never invokes the aid of God in his plights and even when he is afraid of being squashed to death by a Brobdingnagian giant, he does not pray, though he does adopt a 'supplicating posture', places his hands together and raises his eyes 'towards the sun'. When he is 'delivered' from danger, it is not God whom he thanks but 'my good star'. Yet Swift is stressing the fact that Gulliver is a man afflicted with the delusions of 18th century rationalist optimism, lacking the resources of the Christian faith and unable to recognise the image of his own sinful self in the mirrors held up to him throughout his travels. Thus Swift's Christianity is as subtle as Shakespeare's, leading critics to the same mistaken conclusion that it is not even there.

Swift mistrusted reason and science. In his *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity in England* (1708) he attacks deists and freethinkers. John Toland, 'the great Oracle of the Anti-Christians, is an Irish Priest, the Son of an Irish Priest'. As for those who advocate liberty of conscience, they are fanatics who want to 'overthrow the faith which the laws have already established'. For Swift, Christianity was not a matter of theology and proofs but a religion of faith and action. "The reason of every particular man is weak and wavering, perpetually swayed and turned by his interest, his passions and his vices", he wrote. Yet, paradoxically, his satirical purpose is to 'shame men out of their vices'.

Politically, Swift is more complicated. His own reference to his championship of liberty is stressed by Michael Foot: "He had a horror of state tyranny and... an uncanny presentiment of totalitarianism and all the torture it would brand on body and mind. He loathed cruelty. He was enraged by the attempts of one nation to impose its will on another which we call imperialism. He exposed, as never before or since, the crimes committed in the name of a strutting, shouting patriotism... Above all, he hated war and the barbarisms it let loose. War, for him, embraced all other forms of agony and wickedness. *Gulliver's Travels* is still the most powerful of pacifist pamphlets" (Michael Foot: *Debts of Honour*, Picador, 1980, pp207-8).

Foot sees Swift not only as a revolutionary iconoclast sounding the trumpet of anarchistic revolt against establishment values but also as a defender of the poor against the growing ethos of laissez-faire capitalism. He knew what crawling self-seekers politicians could be, but he knew too that politics was concerned with the great question of rich and poor. *A Modest Proposal* (1729), in which Swift offered as a satirical solution to the problem of Irish poverty that the Irish should sell their own children to be eaten, was, in Foot's view, the 'most tremendous curse on the money lenders since Jesus of Nazareth drove them from the temple' (op. cit. p209).

In his essay on 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' (reprinted in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*), Edward Said describes Swift as 'the most devastating pamphleteer of his time'. In another essay, 'Humanism's Sphere' (reprinted in the same volume), written a few months before he died, Said suggests that it is possible following the example of Yeats to read Swift in a revisionist way, 'as a demonic and tigerish a writer as has ever lived', and he continues: "Yeats magnanimously envisioned Swift's internal world essentially in a ceaseless conflict with itself, unsatisfied, unappeased, unreconciled in an almost Adornian way, rather than as settled into untroubled patterns of tranquility and unchanging order".

Although religious in a professional sense, Swift was not overburdened with piety. "Life", he wrote to Pope, "is not a farce; it is a ridiculous tragedy, which is the worst kind of composition". His apparent misanthropy doesn't say much for divine providence and, although Macaulay goes too far in saying that he had 'a heart burning with hatred against the whole human race', Swift confessed to Pope: "Principally I hate and detest that animal called man; although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth".

This acute awareness of human weakness and hypocrisy is the primary source of his comic genius. In the preface to *The Battle of the Books* (1704) he wrote that "satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own". In some ways he was a public anti-intellectual, satirising the intellectual pretensions of 'atheists and sophists'. But in his condemnation of poverty, injustice and tyranny, Said is right: Swift used his savage satire responsibly to 'wonderfully mend the world'.

He was not a humanist in the sense of being sceptical about a god. He was also a reactionary thinker who was pessimistic about human progress. His greatest admirers cannot claim that he was a true revolutionary, and they might even have difficulty in proving that he was a democrat. Nor was he an advocate of the restoration of land to the ancient Irish. His form of dissidence was the continuous condemnation of injustice and a demand for an equality of rights for abominably oppressed people, and these are surely two very important tenets of Humanism.

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