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THE NATURE OF ALLEGORY AS USED BY SWIFT

The purpose of this essay is to analyze, somewhat more closely than has been done hitherto, the nature of the allegory which Swift developed in the service of satire. Much has been written about Swift, and I am well aware that the facts and many of the critical dicta which appear below are by no means novel; but I believe that in linking together such material I can show that the great satirist handled allegory with a subtlety of technique which has not been credited to him. There may be some novelty in claiming that a great part of his power lies in the consistent use of symbolism to deride and degrade the objects of his satire; but I wish further to determine how both the consistency and resourcefulness of his methods are conditioned by the psychology of symbolism. In the course of my analysis, I hope to demonstrate that, although the *Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels* have rightly been studied for their "sources,"¹ the allegory in those works has a positive distinction. In other words I shall try to clarify one of the issues, perhaps not the smallest, on which the critics of Swift are wont to debate his title to originality.

In order to make that issue clear, let me offer some comments on the nature, or at least the practice, of satiric allegory as contrasted with the practice of allegory which is not satiric.

I. THE SATIRIC SYMBOL

When the seraph Hope with her anchor is suggested to our mind's eye, her primary duty is to give us, by her concrete appearance and action, a sharper concept of "hope" the abstract idea. In other words, an allegory of Hope in literature is usually meant to lead us on by the visualization of the symbol to a vision of the nature of hope. Except in so far as this is eventually accomplished, the allegory is lame. No doubt the seraph should be described with attractions of

¹ In addition to the comments found in the standard biographies of Swift by Scott, Forster, Stephen, Craik and Collins, the following source-studies are important: Th. Borkowsky; "Quellen zu Swifts *Gulliver*" (*Anglia*, vol. xv; 1892); A. C. L. Brown, "*Gulliver's Travels* and an Irish Folk-Tale" (*Modern Language Notes*, xix; Febr. 1904); A. Guthkelch, "Swift's *Tale of a Tub*" (*Modern Language Review*, viii and ix; July and Oct. 1913, Jan. 1914); J. H. Hanford, "Plutarch and Dean Swift," (*Modern Language Notes*, xxv; June 1910); Hermann Hoffman, *Swift's Tale of a Tub* (dissertation, Leipzig, 1911); E. Hönncher, "Quellen zu Dean Jonathan Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels'" (*Anglia*, x; 1888); Max Poll, "The Sources of *Gulliver's Travels*" (University of Cincinnati Bulletins, Ser. 2, vol. 3, no. 24); Paul Thierkopf, "Swift's Gulliver und seine französische Vorgänger" (monograph, Magdeburg, 1899). I acknowledge indebtedness to all the foregoing, and also to H. E. Greene's "The Allegory as employed by Spenser, Bunyan, and Swift" (*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, iv; 1888-9); but I have not been able to utilize their conclusions for my purpose.

her own; but the reader must not be permitted to linger so long over the superficial aspects of angels and anchors that he becomes preoccupied with winged females and marine hardware; he must, on the contrary, regard the quasi-human being with her attribute as a mere interpreter of something other than herself. Generally, of course, she leads him upward: the vision which she provides is poignant, spiritual, and ennobling. In the long run, therefore, the symbol in this kind of allegory is often tinged with the nature of the thing symbolized; and, when that nature is an exalted one, the symbol is carried up above its own natural level to a plane of spiritual meaning. The Grail, for example, becomes no mere specimen of goldsmith's work, but Heaven's consummate cup, owing little to earth's wheel.

But when Bunyan's Hopeful chats by the wayside, he is less likely to glorify our notion of hope, or be glorified by it, than to make it seem simple, vivid, and human, something which perhaps comes nearer to our hearts than do those vague "shining ones" whom Christian later encounters. Of course the staunch but somewhat homely optimist is less purely an allegorical figure than the heavenly visitant; but he and others like him appear continually in allegories, where they help to condense and vitalize abstract ideas by presenting virtues and emotions in actual human operations, not in transcendental constancy. Such a figure may even vary from the nature he is supposed to represent, as Christian varies from Christianity; but he does not, necessarily, forfeit his significance by such a variance; indeed, he may make the meaning brighter. Through him the allegory is not lost, but is conducted less on the two somewhat discrepant planes of this world and the world outside the senses, than on the single intelligible plane of common daily soil: virtue is still virtue, but it is also a mortal characteristic made one with mortal character. Hence, though we need not fail to translate the allegory, we are not much affected by any discrepancy in intrinsic value between the type-figure and the quality which he typifies. Hopeful, in a way, shares in the sincere but unidealizing respect which we feel for the optimism of our neighbor across the street.²

The two varieties of allegory discussed above might be denominated, relatively to each other, visionary and realistic. They differ

² The distinction between "type" and "symbol" on which the preceding paragraphs touch is similar to that which I have heard from Professor W. A. Neilson, and which is embodied in a work by one of Mr. Neilson's pupils, W. R. Mackenzie's *English Moralities from the Point of View of Allegory*, Boston 1914; see pp. ix-x, 5-7, 258. Like Dr. Mackenzie, I am grateful to Professor Neilson for much guidance in the study of allegory; but I do not wish to commit either of these gentlemen to my attempts at distinguishing the satiric species.

radically from satiric allegory in purpose: vision is meant to exalt, realism to portray, but satire endeavors to degrade and deride. As the purpose differs, so do the symbols differ in the impression they make upon our consciousness: the satiric symbols do not lead up to the higher spiritual plane or greater intrinsic value of the things which they symbolize; they do not delineate or brighten or cheerfully humanize those things; but they bring down to their own level things which are of greater real or reputed value and dignity. Hence these symbols, being instruments of depreciation, must be so managed as to seem themselves on a low level: if the seraph Hope is to help to satirize hope, she must be bedraggled and tawdry, her anchor must be old iron; if Hopeful is to make hopefulness despicable, he must be a mean creature. When Piers Plowman wants us to condemn drunkenness, he does not give us a figure of Dionysian beauty with Hedda Gabler's "vine-leaves in his hair," but a sodden lout staggering like "a gleeman's dog"; when Bunyan wants to show us the illusions of a false hope, he gives us the figure of Atheist, whose laughter crackles ever the more vainly as he steps forward into perdition. Moreover, such figures should not only be managed so as to emphasize a casual meanness and ugliness, but selected, so far as possible, from whatever is inherently mean and ugly, if satiric allegory is to achieve thoroughly its essential duty of derogation. Hence it behooves the satirist to be careful in his choice; he may find, if he wishes to deride the idea of hope, that an anchor is not peculiarly an object of scorn; he may be troubled, if he wishes to deride intemperance and atheism, by the fact that all men, even the drunkard and the scoffer, are more or less in the image of God; whereas satire wants symbols which will do by their own weight half the business of dragging down. Often, therefore, the satirist abandons the classes of symbols from which I have been drawing examples, and turns to a class in which each member is, according to our habitual estimate, on a very much lower plane than the plane of those ideas or traits which they are to symbolize. For example: if humanity, as well as the traits of humanity, is to be disgraced, there is a great value in presenting human nature through the debasing screen of the beast-fable, to suggest as Henrysoun phrased it

"How mony men in operacioun
Ar lyke to beistis in condicioun."

Very convenient is that device by which a satirist like Swift may suggest a frog to represent a politician; for what reader may not be

led to infer that the conscience of a Whig, like the skin of the frog, is changeable, slippery, and unclean?³

The foregoing discussion leads me to believe that between visionary allegory and satiric there exists one important difference in practice: in the latter the artist more often wishes to prejudice or preoccupy his reader's mind with the qualities of the symbol before the reader passes to the concept of the thing symbolized; whereas in visionary allegory the reader's imagination must quickly be shifted from symbol to symbolized and in realistic allegory, as I have tried to show above, the type and the thing typified are closely united in impression. So far as visionary allegory is concerned, the difference in practice between it and the satiric depends on the fact that in vision there is no suggestion of a moral equivalence between the anchor and hope; but satire does suggest a moral equivalence of the frog and the Whig. I am not arguing that the visionary symbol lacks intrinsic impressiveness and beauty, but simply that such beauty is inadequate and non-definitive: the Lord's Supper is the most impressive of ceremonies, but it is ritual as well as ceremony; the participant must know "exultations and gustation of God": like the Graal, the cup of the Passover is merely employed to lead the worshipper up from its own level to the plane of divine suffering and redemptive love. In lower matters of vision, too, the symbol is inadequate: even a transcendental nature-worshipper is not satisfied to pore forever over the physical grace of the primrose by the river's brim; the rose, perfect attribute though it be of Venus in its color, curves, fragrance, frailty, and general voluptuous opulence, is not all that is needed to bring to a focus our conception of the strife-provoking Cytherean. But in satire the symbol is really intended to be, in a sense which is not paradoxical, inadequate and yet definitive: in *The Hind and The Panther* the fabulist wishes his readers to believe that the Anabaptist is more bestial than is truly the case; we are at liberty to focus our attention on the boar's snout and the boar's bristles by which Dryden presents the Anabaptist, and the complex moral character of the man is satirized through the simple physical appearance and action of the beast. Indeed, it is worth noting that this policy of satire accords well with the very nature of symbolism; for surely the most common function of any symbol is to present the complex through the simple, the infinite through the finite, or the abstract through the concrete; the difference in satire is that adroit use may be made of the fact that the

³ Cf. *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift* (ed. F. E. Ball), i, 58.

symbol, by its very nature, is generally on a lower plane of intrinsic universal value than the thing symbolized, and for purposes of satire we are invited to let our imaginations riot on that lower plane. The boar does not mount the Baptist pulpit, but the preacher wallows with the boar; the frog does not enter Parliament, but the politician croaks with parliamentary eloquence in the pond.

If this be true, we may observe further that, from the point of view of technique, satire has a certain command of allegory which some high poetry may lack. It is natural for the imagination to halt, quite as often from inertia as from perplexity, in the contemplation of symbols before the interpretation of them: "consequently there is the danger of considering the illustration so closely as to forget the thing illustrated."⁴ A primrose *may* give thoughts too deep for tears, but on the other hand many of us are very prone to think of it as a simple primrose; and visionary allegory too often affects us with the simple meaning rather than with the vision: did not Dante lament the blindness of his readers who saw only the literal significance in the Divine Comedy? The law which accounts for this mortifying lack of penetration has been explained psychologically as the law of mental pause—"l'arrêt mental."

"Le symbole n'est qu' un signe; sa seule fonction est de représenter quelqu' élément psychique, une image, une idée, une emotion; mais si telles sont sa nature et sa fonction considérées en elles mêmes, le symbole finit souvent au contraire par remplacer entièrement la chose qu' il devrait représenter; il absorbe la réalité, et acquiert une importance exagérée, l' importance de la chose représentée."⁵

Yet I hesitate to believe that such a substitution is often complete, or that it is desirable in satiric allegory for the symbol to attain the importance, much less the dignity, of the thing represented. The point is rather that the reader's mental pause is only a temporary halt, just long enough to let the symbol so preoccupy his consciousness that the true nature of the thing symbolized, when finally discernible, is very slow to regain any ascendancy over the imagination. We think of the frog and then almost immediately of the politician; but the politician forthwith is very froglike to our senses; and even thus he is most effectively satirized.

Let us turn to Swift, and see how in theory and practice he illustrates this doctrine of the satiric symbol.

⁴ Cf. Greene, "The Allegory as employed by Spenser. . .," (op. cit.), p. 154.

⁵ Guglielmo Ferrero, *Les Lois Psychologiques de symbolisme* (Paris 1895), p. 93.

II. CLOTHES-PHILOSOPHY

Assuming the character of an apologist for Grub Street, Swift, in the *Tale of a Tub*,⁶ complains that the productions of modern wit have not always been understood:

“. . . the greatest maim given to that general reception, which the writings of our society have formerly received, (next to the transitory state of all sublunary things) has been a superficial vein among many readers of the present age, who will by no means be persuaded to inspect beyond the surface and the rind of things; whereas, wisdom is a fox, who, after long hunting, will at last cost you the pains to dig out. . . . In consequence of these momentous truths, the Grubaeon Sages have always chosen to convey their precepts and their arts, shut up within the vehicles of types and fables; which having been perhaps more careful and curious in adorning, than was altogether necessary, it has fared with these vehicles, after the usual fate of coaches over finely painted and gilt, that the transitory gazers have so dazzled their eyes, and filled their imaginations with the outward lustre, as neither to regard nor consider the person, or the parts, of the owner within. A misfortune we undergo with somewhat less reluctance, because it has been common to us with Pythagoras, Aesop, Socrates, and other of our predecessors.”

Although this passage may well be taken as an acknowledgment of the difficulties or limitations inherent in allegory, the last sentence denies that those limitations are ruinous. Moreover, Swift, still in the role of a Grub-Streeter, goes on to announce that the *Tale of a Tub* will observe the practice of its predecessors, among which he reckons the *History of Reynard the Fox* (in a version which he pretends was begun “some years ago by one of our most eminent members”) and Dryden’s *The Hind and the Panther*: he praises the wit and style of Grub Street—“in both which, as well as the more profound and mystical part, I have, throughout this treatise, closely followed the most applauded originals.”⁷

He does follow them; but not closely. Different as it is in style and wit from other satires, the *Tale* is no less different in the thoroughness with which it prepares and pursues a definite scheme of allegory—a scheme largely novel in its essence, more novel in the skill with which it is elaborated to utilize that law of “*l’arrêt mental*” which had checkmated the Grubaeon Sages. This is not to deny that Swift may have borrowed hints for the separate elements which he united.⁸ I think

⁶ Introduction. I quote from the Temple Scott edition (London 1897), p. 54 f.

⁷ *Ibid.*; pp. 55, 56, and 58.

⁸ The source question is discussed at length by Guthkelch (op. cit., passim) whose conclusions, which I am here quoting, seem to me much sounder than those of Hoffmann, to whom he is replying. See also Collins, *Jonathan Swift*, p. 47, for the alleged influence from Sharp; it should be observed that Swift’s acquaintance with the sermon could only have been by oral report, as Guthkelch shows. For Selden, see *Notes and Queries*, 3d Ser., xii, 451.

it possible that he was in some way influenced by the sermon of Archbishop Sharp which resembles the *Tale* in that both "illustrate the disputes between the Churches of Rome and England by a comparison with the disputes of heirs to an estate, and in both cases there is reference to a will." But

"in Swift the heirs are three, in Sharp their number is not stated: in Swift they are sons, in Sharp they are descendants removed by 'some generations': in Swift the main part of the allegory concerns the coats which the father gives his sons, in Sharp there is nothing corresponding: and there is nothing in Swift corresponding to the argument of the 'insolent pretender' in Sharp. In fact there is nothing in common but the ancestor, the descendants, and the will."

If Swift got anything from Sharp, clearly he did not get the clothes-philosophy and the satiric application: he merely took the plot of a non-satiric *exemplum*. And if he owes anything to the "story of the three rings," to Fontenelle, or to Optatus, the debt is much the same in nature and less in quantity. To Selden's "Table-Talk" he may have owed a more precious suggestion; but let comparison of the passages which have been adduced as parallel show how greatly they differ:

"Religion is like the fashion, one Man wears his Doublet slash'd, another lac'd, another plain; but every Man has a Doublet: So every Man has his Religion. We differ about Trimming.

So writes Selden; compare Swift:

"The worshippers of this deity (the tailor) had also a system of their belief, which seemed to turn upon the following fundamentals. They held the universe to be a large suit of clothes, which invests everything; that the earth is invested by the air; the air is invested by the stars; and the stars are invested by the *primum mobile*. Look on this globe of earth, you will find it to be a very complete and fashionable dress. . . . What is man himself but a microcoat, or rather a complete suit of clothes with all its trimmings? as to his body, there can be no dispute: but examine even the acquirements of his mind . . . is not religion a cloak; honesty a pair of shoes worn out in the dirt; self-love a surtout; vanity a shirt; and conscience a pair of breeches . . . ? These *postulata* being admitted, it will follow in due course of reasoning, that those beings which the world calls improperly suits of clothes, are in reality the most refined species of animals; or to proceed higher, that they are rational creatures, or men. . . . If one of them be trimmed up with a gold chain, and a red gown, and a white rod, and a great horse, it is called a Lord-Mayor; if certain ermines and furs be placed in a certain position, we style them a Judge; and so an apt conjunction of lawn and black satin we entitle a Bishop. . . .

. . . By all which it is manifest, that the outward dress must needs be the soul."⁹

Here is a sort of philosophy for which "fundamentals," "*postulata*," and universal applicability are claimed; if Selden had any such seed in his garden, he certainly never watered and tended it into any such efflorescence. Aside from the irony of the passage, which I shall discuss later, my point is that the clothes-philosophy, with its grave insistence on physical and concrete externals, furnishes a unique and remarkable hypothesis by which satiric symbolism can be made to seem valid. Furthermore, Swift later strengthens the basis of the allegory by equally pertinent generalizations:

"The two senses, to which all objects first address themselves, are the sight and the touch; these never examine farther than the colour, the shape, the size and whatever other qualities dwell, or are drawn by art upon the outward of bodies; and then comes reason officiously with tools for cutting, and opening, and mangling, and piercing, offering to demonstrate, that they are not of the same consistence quite through. Now I take all this to be the last degree of perverting nature; one of whose eternal laws it is, to put her best furniture forward. . . . Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse. Yesterday I ordered the carcass of a beau to be stripped in my presence, when we were all amazed to find so many unexpected faults under one suit of clothes. . . . And he, whose fortunes and dispositions have placed him in a convenient station to . . . content his ideas with the films and images that fly off upon his senses from the superficies of things; such a man, truly wise, creams off nature, leaving the sour and the dregs of philosophy and reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined point of felicity, called the possession of being well deceived; the serene peaceful state, of being a fool among knaves."¹⁰

This passage has been quoted and praised by innumerable critics; its originality, its depth of irony and of pessimism, have often been vindicated; but is it not also of great and original value as an explanation of satiric allegory?

The irony, of course, is evident; it is an intellectual current running counter to the imaginative sweep of the allegory. Swift, as Leslie Stephen says, is "playing with paradoxes, "and expects his more sympathetic readers to reverse by thought what he tells them through fancy. There is bitterness in the definition of happiness as "a perpetual definition of being well deceived," and bitterness in the comment—

⁹ *Tale of a Tub*, 61 f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 119 f. The whole passage is important; I quote from p. 120.

How fading and insipid do all objects accost us, that are not conveyed in the vehicle of delusion! How shrunk is everything, as it appears in the glass of nature!—

But if Swift eventually preaches the doctrine that your genuine seeker after truth must continue, despite the disillusionment, to penetrate and strip away the “superficies of things,” he holds our imagination first with the half-humorous postulate that the consummate qualities of the universe may be found in clothing and films generally; on the strength of which postulate he persuades us, as the allegory is developed, that the tarnished lace on a coat is a fit expression for certain vagaries of religious dogma. If his irony is inconsistent with his allegory, it is because our own intellectual faculty is frequently inconsistent with our imagination.

The dominance and the thoroughness of the symbolic scheme may appear when it is contrasted with the practice of other satirists, from whom, though he did not borrow hints of structure, he certainly learned something about the technique of satire and allegory. With Erasmus and with Rabelais, for example, he shares the common satiric habit of letting the symbols pass muster as the more or less complete equivalents of the things symbolized; but I cannot find that either Erasmus or Rabelais worked the game by a definite programme or on the strength of any such initial philosophy as that of clothes. Both, and especially Rabelais, are more often simply boisterous; and both show a certain almost nervous anxiety—strange in Rabelais!—not to trust too far the reader’s docility in accepting the fallacious equivalence. They are very decided, furthermore, in clearing their writings from the charge of being what they seem: they weaken by direct statement where Swift weakens, if at all, by ironical and indifferent implication: they want it to be known that the net import of their work is serious and edifying. The curé of Meudon assures his illustrious clients that his book is like the Sileni of Plato’s *Symposium*, ugly without but full of value within; the *Praise of Folly*, in nearly identical phraseology, warns us against being contented with the masque and neglecting the realities of life.¹¹ There are instances in which the reader of Gargantua’s “*mocqueries, folateries, et menteries joyeuses*” is deliberately invited, like the reader of the far different fancies in the *Divina Commedia*, at least to see through into the allegorical and true meaning if not to accept it as dominant and

¹¹ Cf. Rabelais, “Prologue de l’ auteur,” Livre I; Erasmus, *Encomium Moriae*, (edition of London 1765), p. 63.

essential; and for the moment, as the assumed impassivity of satire is broken, the symbols retreat from the foreground of our consciousness into the edges leaving the things symbolized to stretch and spread into their usual dimension and repute. And the philosophy of clothes, which in the *Tale of a Tub* is united with an ostensible theory of gross materialism, has no potency in Rabelais or Erasmus to cover the objects of satire with its distorting screen.

And in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* the clothes-philosophy, though it was certainly inspired by Swift, is neither gross nor distorting, and not always satiric. For although it is advanced and elaborated with the mock-solemn meticulousness of style which seems so closely similar to Swift's method, it is used in two quite distinct ways, both altogether unlike the Swiftian hypothesis: Carlyle sometimes implies that clothes and other symbols are not degrading but interpretative—"the garment of God thou seest him by"; and at other times that, whether degrading or not, they are temporary and inessential—man "is by nature a *Naked Animal*, and only in certain circumstances, by purpose and device, masks himself in Clothes."¹² Both in the value he assigns to the symbol and the value he denies it, Carlyle is visionary. He tells us indeed that

"in this one pregnant subject of CLOTHES, rightly understood, is included all that men have thought, dreamed, done and been: the whole External Universe and what it holds is but Clothing; and the essence of all Science lies in the PHILOSOPHY OF CLOTHES."

But the grounds for this pronouncement of Herr Teufelsdröckh lie in Carlyle's power, which to Swift was foolishness, of recognizing the extrinsic worth of a symbol; indeed, *Sartor* has a notable passage with the lines which touch on patriotism:

"Have I not myself known five-hundred living soldiers sabred into crows' meat for a piece of glazed cotton, which they called their Flag; which, had you sold it at any market-cross, would not have brought above three groschen?"

Carlyle is not here deriding either the symbol or the virtue of patriotism, but pointing out that the former is of importance only as it stands for the latter. Therefore

"as Time adds much to the sacredness of Symbols, so likewise in his progress he at length defaces, or even desecrates them; and Symbols, like all terrestrial Garments, wax old."

¹² I quote *Sartor* from the Athenaeum Press edition, edited by Archibald MacMechan (Boston, 1896); pp. 2, 65, 201, 203 f.

Again,

“Whatsoever sensibly exists, whatsoever represents Spirit to Spirit, is properly a Clothing, a suit of Raiment, put on for a season, and to be laid off.”

So, in spite of passages like that about the dandies which are more in the Swiftian vein, the fundamental assumptions of *Sartor* are utterly unlike those of the *Tale of a Tub*: the didactic Carlyle would persuade us, seriously enough, that the outside of things is often a valuable clue to their inside but never a substitute for it; the satiric Swift assumes, for allegory, that the outside is enough, and implies, by irony, that the inside is the only thing worth considering.

If I have correctly interpreted the outline of the *Tale*, the filling in need not be analyzed minutely: the narrative is doubtless familiar enough to most of my readers. The whole history of the dissensions in the Christian Church becomes the history of a family squabble, in which three brothers wrangle over the interpretation of their father's will or fall into the errors of conduct appropriate to a town rake; the creed of primitive Christianity is represented by three coats, all at first alike, but changed by errors of doctrine which adorn and deface the cloth with shoulder-knots, gold lace, or ill-advised remodeling; the learning and wisdom of the Popes and world-wide awe which the Papacy has inspired are levelled with the wisdom and repute of Brother Peter, who was known as “the best scholar in all that, or the next street to it”; the fervors of Calvinistic exhortation are levelled with Brother Jack's invention of “a soporiferous medicine to be conveyed in at the ears, . . . a compound of sulphur and balm of Gilead, with a little pilgrim's salve”; holy water is compared to a pickling-fluid, the merits of which are extolled in language like that on the labels of patent-medicine bottles; the kings of temporal power and dominion are represented as “naughty boys”; and to preserve proportion, the very Deity must become for the nonce a temporal and earthly king. Many of the symbols used in the details of the narrative had never before been applied to such purposes; in order to make sure that the objects of his satire are presented through matters which are inherently small and shabby, Swift invents new emblems; but if there is a ready-made emblem convenient it is stripped of its mystical glory and reduced, by literalness of treatment, to a bald and foolish aspect—thus the cross is described as an “old sign-post,” belonging to Peter's father, “with nails and timber enough in it to build sixteen large men-of-war”; and in the same spirit he glances at the science of numbers or at the Rosicrucians.¹³

¹³ *Tale*, pp. 69, 135, 81, 89, 87, 49, 128.

Of course the allegory is not without blemishes and artistic shortcomings; indeed, two fruitful sources of such blemishes are provided by the initial scheme: it is a hard scheme to maintain through all details, it is also a hard scheme to limit in application when application is not wanted. In the first place Swift's invention sometimes flagged or became confused, and he might be taken to task for minor blunders and licenses: incongruous symbols are used for Purgatory, which is at one time a tract of land and at another time the flame-colored lining of Peter's coat; and by the use of a punning symbol for the Pope's Bulls cattle are endowed with an unlikely taste for money.¹⁴ But the difficulty of maintaining plausible correspondences between the real meaning and the literal one is not confined to Swift, nor to that species of allegory which is satiric; his failures in this respect can be paralleled in the work of the visionary and the realist. A more serious fault lies in the over-completeness, rather than the need for inventiveness, of the satiric foundation with which he began the *Tale*. The clothes-philosophy and the allegory built on it deny the value of vision; what then becomes, not only of those things which the satirist attacks, but of those exalted doctrines which the Christian moralist should vindicate and reveal in brighter hues? They too are obscured; and Swift, quite against his will, loses the character of a Christian moralist: his ethical or doctrinal teaching is submerged in the general satiric deluge, or swims with difficulty. He protests vainly that he was not attacking the Church of England, and doubtless he did not mean to attack it; but in the *Tale* the virtuous or neutral elements of all religious institutions are made derisory by the unworthiness of the shapes through which they are represented to us; Brother Martin is handled by Swift so as to seem less knave or fool than Brother Peter or Brother Jack, but Martin is unavoidably a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Reformed doctrine and polity through being part of a scheme that tended to make all religions seem petty; the cross and the Deity are not objects of Swift's attack, but they have to be put in the category of the despicable. Hence the unpopularity of the *Tale* among the devout of Swift's generation and later is not altogether unjust; even to readers not specially devout may come the feeling that the satire is unreasonably narrowed, and lacks the more warm-blooded tolerance of Rabelais and Erasmus and even of Carlyle. Where there is no vision the people perish, and sometimes the critic yawns.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79, 82 f.

I have spoken chiefly of the narrative portions of the *Tale*, for they are the organic development of the allegory; but something of the initial hypothesis supports the digressions which hold up to scorn the abuses of learning; as Mr. Paul E. More says, these too "shrivel" what they attack. And if we leave the *Tale of a Tub* and turn to the *Battle of the Books*, we find again the usual shrivelling policy of satiric symbolism, though not carried out, I think, with the bitterness and completeness of philosophic foundation that underlie the *Tale*: not only the Moderns, but the Ancients too, are made rather absurd through the mock-epic combat. But I postpone full discussion of the *Battle* to a subsequent paper in which I hope to deal with it from another point of view, for it is more remarkable as burlesque than as allegory; let me turn now to the most significant and influential of all Swift's symbolism—that which he develops in *Gulliver's Travels*.

III. BIG AND LITTLE

Although it may be true that "*Gulliver's Travels* is one of the very few books some knowledge of which may be fairly assumed in any one who reads anything,"¹⁵ yet there are probably not many readers who would agree offhand in an analysis of the allegorical scheme. Aside from those who read it merely for the story, those who are perfectly competent and willing to enjoy the satire have sometimes felt uncertain of the means by which the satire is conveyed and of the direction which it takes. Some, for example, have been tempted to regard the first two voyages (those to Lilliput and Brobdingnag, especially the former) as possessing a large autobiographical element, and there are certain incidents, such as that in which Gulliver extinguished the fire in the Queen's palace, which certainly lend color to this interpretation: the wrath of the Lilliputian queen resembles the displeasure which Queen Anne felt with Swift for having published the *Tale of a Tub*; there is a topographical resemblance between Lilliput and Ireland; and various other touches which justify the opinion that sometimes at least the author is tracing a resemblance between his own life and the life of Gulliver among the pigmies, with the implied moral—"what does it profit thee, to be possessed of genius, to perform thy duties—the little people will not permit thee to use thy strength, even thy freedom seems to them dangerous, and Jonathan Swift is exiled to a deanery in Dublin."¹⁶ . . . The author of *Gulliver* deliberately takes

¹⁵ Sir Leslie Stephen, *Jonathan Swift* (English Men of Letters), p. 168.

¹⁶ Cf. Richard M. Meyer, *Jonathan Swift und G. Ch. Lichtenberg* (monograph, Berlin 1886), pp. 21, 25.

himself as the standard by which the littleness of others may be exposed. Moreover, even when the allegory is not autobiographical, it may still be biographical, and doubtless is in those passages which seem to glance at the career of the Tory leaders with whom Swift felt sympathy: Gulliver is used as a representative of Bolingbroke: the inventory of Gulliver's belongings, made by the Lilliputian king; the capture of the hostile Blefusudian fleet by Gulliver's prowess; the ingratitude of the government and the subsequent flight of Gulliver to Blefuscu; these and many other incidents can be smoothly interpreted as incidents in the political vicissitudes of Bolingbroke, if we take Lilliput as England and Blefuscu as France; and the slighter passages about the Minister Flimnap's cutting "a caper on the straight rope at least an inch higher than any other lord in the whole empire,"¹⁷ or jumping over a stick for a bit of ribbon, are presumably allusions to Walpole's seeking office and the Order of the Bath. But if Swift wanted to drive home his point in this part of the satire, it is unlikely that he would have permitted the inconvenient and misleading doubling of Gulliver's roles: Gulliver would have been either Swift or Swift's friend, not sometimes one and sometimes the other; and as a matter of fact few critics and readers have supposed that this personal satire is of great moment, especially since it grows very much less perceptible as the book advances, and is at no time wholly certain or subtle in its reference. The truth, of course, or at least the common agreement, is that personal satire and personal vindication were not the main intention of *Gulliver's Travels*: even in the first book the foolery about Bigendians and Littleendians, High-heels and Low-heels, colored ribbons and jumping-contests, is an outgrowth from the main allegory, which consists, quite simply, in the trick of presenting a kingdom in miniature, with the implication that England resembles that kingdom. The original postulate of the allegory is a symbolic circumstance or condition—the condition of size: symbolic action may be added, but it is less essential, and apparently Swift as he worked on realized the peculiar value of the circumstance more and more clearly as a vehicle for universal satire, and trusted it to perform that task. It did perform it, but by what means we must now inquire more closely; for the crux of the interpretation of *Gulliver* lies in our understanding of the psychological effectiveness of physical size as an index to moral or intellectual importance.

¹⁷*Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Temple Scott and G.R. Dennis, pp. 39 ff.

This last phrase is a heavy one for a light prejudice: what reader does not feel, as he turns the pages of *Gulliver*, that the Lilliputians are amusing simply and mainly because they are small? and that the Brobdingnagians are imposing because big? The prejudice which makes physical pettiness a sign of moral pettiness is so old and inveterate, however often confuted, that Swift can trust it safely enough. His scheme requires no such elaborate justification as he gave to the clothes-philosophy in the *Tale*, and critics have better understood, I think, its scope and validity. Thus Sir Leslie Stephen:

“He strikes the key-note of contempt by his imagery of dwarfs and giants. We despise the petty quarrels of beings six inches high; and therefore we are prepared to despise the wars carried on by a Marlborough or a Eugene. We transfer the contempt based upon mere size to the motives, which are the same in big men and little. The argument, if argument there be, is a fallacy; but it is equally efficacious for the feelings.”¹⁸

So far as Brobdingnag is concerned, Stephen also recognizes that Swift wishes to show moral dignity as before he has shown pettiness, and therefore exhibits human passions in a race seventy feet tall and imposing in proportion. I claim no special novelty for the remark that in *Gulliver* Swift is operating his allegory by an initial assumption, or that, as he applies the assumption, he drives home his satire by the moderate and consistent implication that smallness is pettiness, largeness is dignity.

It has also been noted that he makes use of the contrary prejudice and implication,¹⁹ but I think his critics have not fully realized the effect of the contrariety. In reading Lilliput, we realize that the smallness of the pigmies is only relative to the largeness of Captain Gulliver, and, of course, we realize, but somewhat dimly, that if they are petty it is because he has some dignity. As a matter of fact, we also realize, rather often, that his dignity is questionable, and is not the only quality implied by his relative physical largeness. In other words, the captain often appears clumsy and gross; and, by comparison, the midgets appear dainty: he accommodates himself to an absurd life with slightly ridiculous meekness; they are admirable for the resourcefulness with which they provide food, clothing, and lodging for their huge guest; and their system of education, as Swift lovingly describes it, is not a replica of the English system made

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 175.

¹⁹ Stephen gives clearer expression to the belief that Swift is mainly trying to “show the grossness of men’s passions.” He does not lay much stress on the contradiction of Swift’s practice.

laughable by reduction in scale, but a pattern of pedagogy.²⁰ In brief, Lilliput is sometimes a model kingdom in more senses than one: the physical smallness of the inhabitants is meant to predispose our minds in their favor as well as in their disfavor: that is, their smallness is a symbol of excellence as well as of pettiness. A similar contradiction of symbolism has been noticed in the account of Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians: here Gulliver appears as the one midget among many large people, and usually he plays the fool or is in some way derisory on account of his tininess; but the Brobdingnagian giants are also sometimes disgusting on account of their hugeness: the maids of honor and the peasantry are coarse in proportion to their seventy feet. Here is a fine but somewhat bewildering way of playing upon our imaginations and prejudices; what does Swift mean by letting his allegory contradict itself? Does he mean that

little = good
big = good

little = bad
big = bad?

Apparently some readers have been troubled by a loose screw in this peculiar arithmetic; possibly they lack a taste to which I plead guilty, for the imaginative potency of an Irish bull. But we must soberly admit with Stephen that

“if we insist upon taking the question as one of strict logic, the only conclusion which could be drawn from *Gulliver's Travels* is the very safe one that the interest of the human drama does not depend upon the size of the actors”;

that is, the Hibernian equations neutralize and cancel one another. On the other hand, the allegorical validity of the device is certainly real, as Sir Leslie goes on to assert, for Swift “‘proves’ nothing, mathematically or otherwise.” So long as we are prone to think littleness insignificant or dainty, bigness gross or magnificent, the scheme will work,—provided, of course, that the transition from one idea to its logical contradiction is not made too abruptly. Moreover, Swift is at least consistent in keeping generally uppermost the idea that littleness is the trivial thing, and bigness the important one.

Still, there is a sense in which the lesson of *Gulliver* is that the interest of the human drama does not depend upon the size of the actors: the book has somewhat the duality of meaning which I indicated in the *Tale*: the irony of appearances runs counter to the allegory, which assists the irony by a greater ambiguity or contradiction

²⁰ *Gulliver*, p. 62.

than is inherent in the clothes-philosophy. To some critics, therefore, the ironical interpretation has quite reasonably appealed. Hazlitt betrays his feeling by referring to the condition of physical dimension, which would impress most people as concrete, as the "abstract predicament of size," and thinks that Swift's purpose was to "strip empty pride and grandeur of the imposing air which external circumstances throw around them."²¹ Another commentator²² declares that the moral is, whether "man is three inches or three miles high, he remains man, that is, a presumptuous zero." Such an idea is certainly Swiftian, and is sometimes conveyed, I daresay, by the allegory of big and little, which are neither good nor bad when thinking makes them seem both.

In another sense, moreover, the symbolism of Brobdingnag and Lilliput, as it is more pliant than that of the *Tale*, is also more catholic; and the satire, less narrow in consequence, is likewise more humane and often more agreeable. The prejudice in favor of clothes and films is less firmly fixed in our minds than the prejudice regarding the moral value of size; but the latter prejudice admits of more easy interpretation and sometimes of suspension or contradiction. Hence the artistic difference, often enough observed, between the *Tale* and *Gulliver*: the *Tale* is in some ways the clearer and keener satire, *Gulliver* is much the more interesting story. Yet in the long run I question whether even the satiric import of *Gulliver* suffers so greatly from ambiguity or the dominance of narrative interest: satire is a precarious *genre* and must make sacrifices to retain its influence. Much of the popularity of *Gulliver* is due to its resemblance to a yarn of strange adventures; in consequence of that popularity it has carried its satiric message to many a reader who knows nothing about the other work of Swift, and carries it because the face-value of the story remains for the most part uninjured while the satire is inculcated. Among the pigmies and giants we are persuaded to judge human character by physical appearance rather than by action; the physical appearance is a charming postulate, and the action, not too closely confined to definite symbolic meaning, wanders into pleasant by-paths of mere fancy.

The advantage of this concession to narrative, and the disadvantage of an unnatural symbolic assumption, are illustrated in the last

²¹ *Lectures on the English Comic Poets* (Collected Works, London, 1902-06), p. 110; quoted by Stephen.

²² Cf. Meyer, *loc. cit.*

voyage of *Gulliver*, wherein he visits the land of rational horses and irrational men. His third voyage, to Laputa, may be passed over without discussion in this essay, for it lacks consistent and well-developed symbolism.

IV. MAN AND BEAST

The *Roman de Renart* contains a delightful passage in which the fox is tried before the great court of Noble the lion for high crimes and misdemeanors unworthy of a true knight. In connection with the proceedings one of Renard's victims, a chicken foully slain, is interred with the ceremonies of ecclesiastical burial, while the ass furnishes the knell. The derision of medieval jurisprudence and religious ritual is very gentle: but it is satiric and allegorical: the forms and ceremonies are presented to us through the somewhat debasing medium of a comedy in which beasts take the place of human beings. The device is common enough, and varies from the even gentler innuendoes of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* to the harsh inferences of *The Hind and the Panther*: in most instances where the device appears we are expected to conceive of the beasts as living below the ordinary level of humanity, but dragging down humanity to that level. Furthermore, that this process of degradation is psychologically natural may be confirmed if we examine those instances in which animals are used rather as visionary symbols than as satiric: Chaucer's Tercel Eagle is not easily made magnificent; Dryden's Hind is by no means a wholly alluring representation of the Catholic church, despite the alleged beauties of her appearance and character. Although it is certainly true that such creatures can be used with success as symbols that lead toward vision and glory, yet it is also true, I think, that representation of the beast's physical nature is more normally used to debase than to elevate the humanity which is symbolized.

Why then does Swift, in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels*, reverse that normal inference? Why is it that in Houyhnhnmland the creatures called Yahoos have the physical characteristics of men, but are much less to be admired than the Houyhnhnms, who have the physical characteristics of horses? Various explanations have been offered; the simplest is to deny or seek to mitigate the apparent physical resemblance between Yahoo and man. Thus an apologist for Swift's misanthropy may write dissertations

“to prove that by altering the physical characteristics of this race their likeness to humanity has been mutilated, and that therefore they are not meant by Swift to be a satire on his own species.”²³

The answer to this is that, although some changes are made, they are all in keeping with the essential physical constitution of man, and merely emphasize his natural depravities or bring out a physical odiousness which is latent in his body: if the Yahoos are not men, what on earth are they? and why does Swift insist unremittingly on their correspondence to humanity? These questions lead at once to a second interpretation, which may be rather too vehemently expressed by Churton Collins, but is certainly acceptable to most readers:

“Nothing can be plainer than that these odious and repulsive creatures were designed to be types, not of man, as man when brutalized and degenerate may become, but of man as man is naturally constituted.”²⁴

A third interpretation seeks a compromise, inclining perhaps toward the first opinion, by laying stress on the fact that throughout Gulliver's four voyages, Swift tends to treat his allegorical figures less and less as realistic types of human beings, more and more as abstractions: therefore in Houyhnhnmland we have a sort of war between virtues and vices, like the conflict in the morality play, with the Houyhnhnms symbolizing the abstract perfection of humanity and the Yahoos symbolizing the abstracted baseness. There is much truth in this view: the full truth may lie somewhere between it and that entertained by Collins. At any rate, one thing is fairly evident: Swift does reverse the usual assumption of beast-satire by making the horses admirable, and he does so to support the thesis that the boasted physical perfection of man offers no guarantee of moral and rational perfection. He supports that thesis further by denying even the reality of the physical supremacy of man, which to him is no Shekinah; he carries out his usual policy of letting the odious and contemptible material features of his symbol stand as a representation of internal moral decadence; but he is nevertheless working at variance with the psychological prejudices which he had so deftly observed in the clothes-philosophy and the allegory of size, for we are not easily persuaded that men are intrinsically below beasts in the scale of physical creation.

There can be no doubt that in this reversal of policy he was acting somewhat under the influence of de Bergerac. The species of beast-allegory which is also a beast-Utopia is not a common one, and,

²³ Such a work is mentioned by S. S. Smith, *Dean Swift* (London 1910), p. 234.

²⁴ Collins, *Jonathan Swift* (London 1893), p. 209.

although foreshadowed somewhat in the beast-literature, reaches a more definite form in de Bergerac's visit to the land of the sun and of the birds. The exact extent of de Bergerac's influence has been much discussed,²⁵ and it is not necessary to my argument to broach the whole question here: the point is simply that in the Frenchman's satire men are made ridiculous by letting them appear to physical disadvantage in a more or less ideal commonwealth of other creatures—creatures which, according to our habitual estimate, are of less physical prowess than men. And, were it not for the fact that our conception of Swift's peculiar pessimism would be incomplete without the fourth book of *Gulliver*, which de Bergerac helped him to project, we might be tempted to regret the suggestion. Skilfully and powerfully as Swift supports his postulate that horses are physical paragons and men clumsy brutes, the postulate is in its nature less supportable than those underlying the *Tale of a Tub* and the first two books of *Gulliver's Travels*; in that fact lies the secret of its unsuccess in allegory.

The ironic counter-current which is present in his other allegories is also present here; perhaps it is unfortunate that it does not flow more freely. The evident grotesqueness of the Houyhnhnms, which made them seem very repellent paragons to critics like Sir Walter Scott²⁶ and Coleridge, might have been subtly used to imply that equine and human perfection are alike vanity. Something of the kind is implied: we gather a dim notion that in his republic of quadrupeds the constitution is flawless and the executive department grotesque because he wanted to imply that reason has no home on earth: but this implication is not often discernible in the midst of his exaltation of the brute-nature,—an exaltation which seems meant for the constant degradation, by contrast, of man-nature.

V. CONCLUSIONS

I may now try to sum up the results of the analysis I have attempted. As a satirist, Swift demonstrated, I believe, that the satiric allegory adheres most closely to its essential function when it operates by some popular prejudice and beguiles the reader's fancy with symbols which do not represent but speciously misrepresent the objects for which they stand. It is a fallacy that religion or creed is a tawdry coat;

²⁵ See especially the articles by Hönncher and Borkowsky in *Anglia* x and xv.

²⁶ Cf. his *Memoir of Swift* (London, republished 1883-87), p. 338 f. Coleridge's very interesting comments on *Gulliver* have been printed by Mr. G. A. Aitken in the *Athenaeum*, 1896, 2:224 (Aug. 15, 1896).

that politicians are physical pigmies; that the typical Englishman or European is an overgrown Brobdingnagian booby, or a toy in the hands of a giant; but these fallacious persuasions with which we are subtly indoctrinated are strangely potent and consistent, and they owe their effectiveness to the "law of mental halting" by which we accept their validity. No other satirist, I think, so fully develops so neat a system for exhibiting the pomposities of life through its meannesses—a system by which the symbols, varied as they may be, are kept remorselessly before us until the things symbolized are stained and degraded. No doubt this rigorous policy of detraction has its artistic shortcomings: aside from the flaws in the assumption of equine perfection in Houyhnhnmland, there are other cases when the assumption is too faultily faultless or too imaginatively narrow: Swift, as everyone knows, has offended by his exhibition of the great through the small, the worthy through the unworthy, the universal and eternal through the local and transient. But although his allegory may thus lack some of the human freedom in the looser schemes of men like Langland or Rabelais, he surpasses them in that he avails himself of the limitations native to allegory and makes them serve his satiric purpose. It is natural that the reader should think of the sign rather than the thing signified, of the tawdry coat rather than the exalted religion. So, by Swift's method, are the dogmas made to seem as cheap as the coat. And if sometimes (as in this instance) Swift's plan carried him beyond himself in the dishonoring of what is worthy of honor, let us remember how often and how well he used it for the shaming of what is worthy of shame.

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