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GULLIVER'S VOYAGE TO THE HOUYHNNHNS

By KATHLEEN M. WILLIAMS

It has long been recognised that the fourth Voyage of *Gulliver's Travels*, far from being the outburst of a misanthrope who delighted in "degrading human Nature," is the culmination of Swift's lifelong attack on the pride of man, especially the pride which convinces him that he can live by the light of his unaided reason, the pride that Swift himself sums up, in the title of one of his imaginary discourses in *A Tale of A Tub*, as "An Universal Rule of Reason, or Every Man his own Carver." In particular, he is taking up a position opposed to the doctrines of natural goodness which pervade eighteenth century thought and which find systematic expression in the writings of "Toland, Collins, Tindal, and others of the fraternity," who, as Swift remarks, all talk much the same language and whose ideas are dismissed in the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity* as "Trumpery." It is clear, both from the satires and the religious writings, that Swift was hostile to all doctrines of the natural self-sufficiency of man, whether they were expressed in Deistic terms or in the related pride of neo-Stoicism; and the Fourth Voyage of *Gulliver's Travels* embodies that hostility. But while the object of attack is established, it is not immediately clear, from the Voyage itself, whether any positive position is implied in the Houyhnhnms or in the other characters. The Yahoos, clearly, embody the negative intention, and are to be condemned. This is what happens to man when he tries to live by reason and nature; he falls, as has been pointed out,¹ into a "state of nature" nearer to that envisaged by Hobbes than that of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. It is significant that, according to one Houyhnhnm theory, the Yahoos were descended from a pair of human beings, driven to the country by sea: "coming to Land and being forsaken by their Companions, they retired to the Mountains, and degenerating by Degrees, became in Process of Time, much

¹ By T. O. Wedel, "On the Philosophical Background of Gulliver's Travels," *SP XXIII* (1926).

more savage than those of their own Species in the Country from whence these two Originals came." Presumably these originals, forced into self-reliance, had degenerated because their feeble human reason had been overwhelmed by an irrational "nature," and more adequate guides had been forgotten.

The ambiguity of the Fourth Voyage lies not in the Yahoos, but in the positions of Gulliver and, especially, of the Houyhnhnms. The function of the Houyhnhnms may be to present an ideal of the true life of reason, to be admired even if unattainable, and to be contrasted with the Yahoos to chasten the pride of that lump of deformity, man, by showing him the vanity of his pretensions. But if Swift did intend the Houyhnhnms to stand as an ideal contrast, he has badly mismanaged the matter. The Houyhnhnms do not strike the reader as altogether admirable beings; indeed they are sometimes absurd, and even repellent, and we are disgusted by Gulliver's exaggerated devotion to them. The dispassionate arguments of the assembly, for instance, about the nature and future fate of Gulliver and the Yahoos, show the characteristic and unpleasant coldness of the Houyhnhnm race; while Gulliver's master displays their equally characteristic self-satisfaction, carried here to the point of absurdity, when he criticises Gulliver's physical qualities. Gulliver tells us how his master interrupted his account of the relations of the European Yahoos with their horses, to point out the inferiority for all practical purposes of the Yahoo shape—"the Flatness of my Face, the Prominence of my Nose, mine Eyes placed directly in Front, so that I could not look on either Side without turning my Head; that I was not able to feed myself without lifting one of my fore Feet to my Mouth; and therefore Nature had placed those Joints to answer that Necessity." Throughout the book there are obvious blunders which cannot be explained away by the inevitable lack of positive attraction in rational Utopias. One of Swift's most attractive characters, Don Pedro de Mendez, is placed in a position at the end of the book where comparison with the Houyhnhnms is inevitable, and our sympathies are alienated by the humourless arrogance both of the Houyhnhnms themselves, and of Gulliver when, absorbed in admiration of his former master, he avoids his own family to concentrate on "the neighing of

those two degenerate Houyhnhnms I keep in my Stable." Clumsiness of this kind is not usual with Swift, who is well aware, as a rule, of the way to enlist our sympathy for a character, and shews his awareness in the drawing of M. B. Drapier, and of Gulliver in the Voyage to Lilliput. The whole course of his work makes it unlikely that he could be unaware of the unpleasantness of such passages as these. Possibly, then, the effect is a deliberate one, and the Houyhnhnms, far from being a model of perfection, are intended to show the inadequacy of the life of reason. This would be in keeping with the usual method of Swift's satire, and with the negative quality which has been observed in it. The characteristic of Swift's satire is precisely his inability, or his refusal, to present us straightforwardly with a positive to aim at. It may be, at bottom, a psychological or a spiritual weakness; he turns it to satiric strength, and produces satire which is comfortless but is also disturbing and courageous. He will leave us with nothing more than a few scattered hints of what is desirable and attainable, or sometimes, when what is desirable is clearly not to be had, with a half-ironic acceptance of the best that is to hand. A full, clear, and wholly unambiguous account of a state of life to aim at would be unusual and unexpected in Swift. It is his habit to look sceptically, not only at the evils of the world, but at those, including himself, who criticise such evils, and at those who present schemes for the betterment of mankind. Gulliver is quaintly indignant and surprised at the evils which still exist six months after the publication of his travels, and in *A Tale of A Tub* the Digression on Madness ends with a confession which undermines the whole: "Even I myself, the Author of these Momentous Truths, am a person whose Imaginations are hardmouth'd, and exceedingly Disposed to run away with his Reason." In fact, there is not usually a "norm" in Swift's satire, positively and unequivocally stated. As far as any positive position can be discovered, it must be by piecing together the hints and implications and indirections typical of Swift's whole method; it is foreign to that method to embody in one person or one race a state of things of which he fully approves. It is, indeed, more than a matter of satiric method for a man "betwixt two Ages cast," who had little of

which he could approve wholeheartedly. The spirit of compromise and commonsense, the love of the middle way, affected him sufficiently to undermine any more rigorous standards, while failing to satisfy him as it satisfied his younger contemporaries; and his position was further complicated by a strong feeling for existing forms and a dislike of innovation, which, like Dryden, he regards as dangerous. Any suggestion of radical remedies is distrusted by him even as he presents it, and he will withdraw from it into irony, or fall back into compromise, as he does in the ambiguous *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, this characteristic method re-appears. In the first two books, no one person or group of persons is put forward for our approval, and neither the Lilliputians, the Brobdingnagians, nor Gulliver himself, can be regarded as a consistent satiric norm against which the moral and political vagaries of eighteenth century England are to be precisely measured. Swift slips from one side to another according as his isolated satiric points require it, and we are at one moment to admire, at another to dislike, the creatures of his imagination. Even in Laputa, a set of serious political schemes, such as the visionary project of "persuading Monarchs to chuse Favourites upon the Score of their Wisdom, Capacity, and Virtue," appears among the absurdities of the projectors. Gulliver himself is now honest and kindly, now credulous or pompous, according to the momentary demands of the satire. During his adventures in Brobdingnag he is frequently ridiculous and on one occasion definitely unpleasant; his complacent attitude to warfare, in Chapter VI, horrifies the giant King. In none of the first three books are we left with a consistent standard embodied in any creature, and it would seem that if the Houyhnhnms are presented fairly and squarely for our approval a change is involved not only in Swift's normal method but in his whole attitude of mind. He would hardly present the radical primitivism and rationalism of Houyhnhm-land as desirable, at least without the ironic and sceptical withdrawal which his uncertain temperament demanded.

One would expect to find that Swift uses the Houyhnhnms in the same indirect way as he does the peoples of the earlier

books, not as a complete statement of the right kind of man or society, attainable or not, but as a satiric contrast in which good and less good are mixed in a proportion which we must decide for ourselves, with the aid of such hints of the author's as we can piece together. And in fact Swift is just as ready to sacrifice the consistency of the Houyhnhnms to their satiric function of innocent comment on unknown humanity as he is any of his other creatures. The opinion of Gulliver's master on the "prodigious Abilities of Mind" of English lawyers, which should qualify them to instruct others in wisdom and knowledge, leads to a valid satiric point, but does not show the Houyhnhnm in a very good light when one considers the damning account he has just heard of their moral depravity and lack of intellectual integrity. No doubt one reason why the Houyhnhnms are a race of animals is for satiric distance; but of course Swift's insistence on the animal in Book IV has a significance beyond that of satiric effectiveness. Several of the Houyhnhnms' characteristics seem to be intended to show their remoteness, and their irrelevance to the ordinary life and standards of mankind. Primitivism is used for this effect; they have great difficulty in understanding such humanly simple matters as Gulliver's clothes, his ship, his writing, and the Houyhnhnm in his dealings with Gulliver in Chapter III is not only unattractive, but unattractive in a particular way. "He brought me into all Company," Gulliver says of him, "and made them treat me with Civility because as he told them privately, this would put me into good Humour and make me more diverting." This may be intended to lessen Gulliver's status and lower his pride, but Swift could hardly have missed its effect of displaying the lack of humanity and sympathy, the cold curiosity of the Houyhnhnms. There is, too, the solemn criticism of Gulliver's physical characteristics in Chapter IV, part of which has already been quoted. This passage stresses the fact that man is not well endowed, either physically or mentally, to live a "natural" life; but it also shows the Houyhnhnm's inability to grasp the human point of view, his self-righteousness, and his determination to belittle these creatures who in their own land claim to rule over the Houyhnhnm race. The Houyhnhnms are alien and unsympathetic creatures,

not man at his best, as Godwin suggested, or man as he might be, but a kind of life with which humanity has nothing to do. The word Houyhnhnm, we are told, means "Perfection of Nature." These are not human beings, but virtuous animals, perfect but limited natural creatures, of a "nature" not simply unattainable by man, but irrelevant to him, and incapable not only of the depths, but also of the heights, to which humanity can reach. The Houyhnhnms have no shame, no temptations, no conception of sin; they are totally unable to comprehend the purpose of lying or other common temptations of man. They can live by reason because they have been created passionless. In man, we know, the passions are apt to get astride of the reason, which is not strong enough to restrain them, and the result in its extremest form is seen in the Yahoos, but the Houyhnhnms have no passions to control: "As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by Nature with a general Disposition to all Virtues, and have no Conceptions or Ideas of what is evil in a rational Creature, so their grand Maxim is, to cultivate Reason, and to be wholly governed by it." The point of the description lies in "as" and "so." The Houyhnhnms can live harmlessly by reason because their nature is different from ours.

Swift makes much of the differing natures of the Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and Gulliver himself. In the Houyhnhnms, nature and reason are one and the same. They have no "natural affections" in our sense; Nature, they say, has taught them to be equally benevolent to everyone, and to make a distinction of persons only on the rational grounds of "a superior Degree of Virtue." Marriage is undertaken simply as "one of the necessary Actions in a reasonable Being." Nor have they any fear of death, which they greet with the same complete absence of emotion that they show towards every other event, great or small. These attitudes are not those which Nature teaches human beings, as Swift recognizes both in *Gulliver's Travels* and elsewhere; man has affections and passions, and Swift seems not to regard them as wholly bad. The painful and universal fear of death in mankind was a subject which particularly interested and affected him, and the curious episode of the immortal Struldbrugs in the Third Voyage is an attempt to

deal with it. Gulliver wished to take some of the Struldbrugs back with him to England, "to arm our People against the Fear of Death," that dread which Nature has implanted in us, but not in the Houyhnhnms. In the *Thoughts on Religion* reason is brought to bear on the problem: "Its is impossible that anything so natural, so necessary, and so universal as death, should ever have been designed by providence as an evil to mankind." But reason is powerless against man's fear of death, and his clinging to life on any terms; and Swift puts forward the idea that although in general reason was intended by Providence to govern our passions, in this God intended our passions to prevail over reason. Man cannot in all respects govern his passions by reason, he suggests, because he has not been equipped by Providence to do so; perhaps both love of life and the propagation of the species are passions exempted by Providence, for particular purposes, from the control of reason. The precise amount of irony in such statements is always difficult to gauge, though the *Thoughts on Religion* are not satirically intended; but at least the passage shows Swift's feeling that such deep-rooted passions as these are part of the nature of man, created by God, and cannot and perhaps should not be ruled by reason. The Houyhnhnms are rational even in those things in which the wisest man's passions inevitably and even perhaps rightly rule him, and the handling of them seems to suggest not only the remoteness but the inadequacy by human standards, of the life of Reason. They have only the negative virtue of blamelessness.

The Houyhnhnms refer repeatedly to Gulliver's fellow-humans in terms which press home the contrast between themselves and mankind. Men are creatures "pretending to Reason," the character of a rational creature was one which mankind "had no Pretence to challenge." Again the Houyhnhnms thought that "Nature and Reason were sufficient Guides for a reasonable Animal, as we pretended to be." Man has no right to lay claim to the life of Reason, for in him nature and reason are not, as in the Houyhnhnms, identical, and there is that in his nature which is outside reason's legitimate control. But this is not necessarily to say that man's nature is thoroughly evil, and his situation hopeless, as in the case of the degenerate

Yahoos, nor is man treated in these terms. Gulliver and the other humans of Book IV are clearly distinguished from the Yahoos as well as from the Houyhnhnms, and the difference in their mental and physical habits is strongly insisted upon. They stand apart from the two races of this animal world, separated from both by characteristics of which neither the naturally virtuous and rational animals, nor the vicious and irrational ones, have any knowledge—in fact by the characteristics proper to humanity. Man does indeed share the Yahoos' propensity to evil, but he has compensating qualities which the bestial Yahoos have not possessed since their first degeneration; and with these qualities he may surpass the cold rational virtue of the Houyhnhnms. The member of that race who is treated with most sympathy by Swift is the humble sorrel nag, one of the servant breeds who were “not born with equal Talents of Mind.” Into the incompletely rational mind of the nag, some near-human warmth and devotion can creep, and he is the only creature in Houyhnhnm-land to show any affection; Gulliver's last link with the country as he sails away is the voice of the “Sorrel Nag (who always loved me) crying out . . . Take Care of thyself, gentle Yahoo.”

With this partial exception, there is no sign among the Houyhnhnms of kindness, compassion, or self-sacrifice, yet elsewhere in *Gulliver's Travels* there is sympathetic treatment of love, pity, and a deliberate intervention of one man in the life of another, very different from the Houyhnhnm's equal benevolence, detachment, and rational respect for virtue. Even in Book I, where moral satire is not at its most serious, there is an insistence on the importance of gratitude among the Lilliputians, by whom, we are told in Chapter VI, ingratitude is regarded as a capital crime. Gratitude is shown in action in Gulliver's behaviour to the Lilliputian King, when despite the King's unjust sentence upon him he cannot bring himself to retaliate, for, he tells us, “Neither had I so soon learned the Gratitude of Courtiers, to persuade myself that his Majesty's present Severities quitted me of all past Obligations.” In Book II there is the forbearance of the Giant King and the affection between Gulliver and the protective Glumdalclitch, and in Book IV great prominence is given to the Captain and crew

of the ship which rescues Gulliver. Swift makes it plain that the Portuguese sailors are admirable human beings, and emphasizes in them the very qualities which the Houyhnhnms neither possess nor would understand. It is Don Pedro who persuades Gulliver to abandon his design of living as a recluse, following as far as he can the life of a rational detached virtue which the Houyhnhnms have taught him to admire, and instead to commit himself once more to the human relationships proper to mankind. Gulliver's duty as Don Pedro sees it is to return to a life of humanity, tolerance, and affection among his own people, and Gulliver, finding he can do no better, reluctantly agrees. But his behaviour towards his own family, set in a place where it contrasts forcibly with the tolerant practical goodwill of Don Pedro, is exaggerated to the point of madness. Only with difficulty can he endure the sight of the wife and children for whom he had shown so charming a fondness in the past. Gulliver, once a normal affectionate human being, concerned with the well-being of his friends, is now a solitary misanthrope, absurd and yet terrible in his self-concentration and his loathing of those he had once loved. He had been, he tells us, a great lover of mankind, and his conduct in the previous voyages shows that he was particularly affectionate to his own family. Now they "dare not presume to touch my Bread, or drink out of the same Cup." To this point Gulliver has been led by his pride in the unaided reason. He has become inhuman, losing the specifically human virtues in his attempt to achieve something for which humanity is not fitted. He is ruined as a human being, and the failure of his fellows to attain his own alien standards has made him hate them. We are reminded of Swift's letter (of the 26th November, 1725) to Pope: "I tell you after all, that I do not hate mankind: it is 'vous autres' who hate them, because you would have them reasonable animals, and are angry for being disappointed." Gulliver is one of 'vous autres,' for to set for humanity the irrelevant standards of absolute reason is to end as Gulliver ended, in hatred and defeat. Swift was well aware of the process of disillusionment which has been attributed to him, and he exemplifies it in Gulliver, the true misanthrope, who believes man should try to rule himself by "Reason alone."

On this interpretation, neither the master Houyhnhnm nor the misanthropic Gulliver who once thought so highly of mankind is presented as an ideal of behaviour. Like all the peoples of the *Travels* the Houyhnhnms have some characteristics, such as honesty and truthfulness, which we might well try to follow, and they are used for particular satiric points, but as a whole they represent an inadequate and inhuman rationalism, and the negativeness of their blameless life is part of Swift's deliberate intention. For us, with our less perfect but also less limited nature, to try to live like them would be to do as the Stoics did, according to Swift's remark in his *Thoughts on Various Subjects*: "The Stoical Scheme of Supplying our Wants by lopping off our Desires, is like cutting off our Feet when we want Shoes." It would mean abandoning the purely human possibilities as well as the disadvantages of our own nature. The Houyhnhnms may indeed be compared with the passionless Stoics of the Sermon *Upon the Excellency of Christianity*, who are contrasted with the Christian ideal of positive charity. Gulliver, in his turn, shows the loss of hope, proportion, and even common humanity in a man who tries to limit the complex nature of man to "Reason alone." Something more than Houyhnhnm harmlessness is needed in a world of human beings, and in so far as there is any positive presentation of right living to be found in *Gulliver's Travels*, it is in the representatives of that humanity which Gulliver rejects. For it is not, after all, a purely destructive view of humanity that Swift shows us. "Reason and Nature," indeed are set up only to be shown as inadequate. Swift never doubted that man should make use of reason to control his bad instincts where he can, but to live by reason alone is neither possible nor desirable if we are to remain human beings. Yet we have the generous King of Brobdingnag, whose people are the "least corrupted" of Yahoos or humans, and of whom Swift says, with his habitual indirection, "it would be hard indeed, if so remote a Prince's Notions of Virtue and Vice were to be offered as a Standard for all Mankind." And there is Don Pedro de Mendez, who shows to what unselfish goodness man can attain. Don Pedro is guided by 'Honour and Conscience,' and for Swift, as we know from the sermons, conscience was not a natural sense of right and wrong, or

Shaftesbury's "aesthetic perception of the harmony of the universe," but a faculty which must itself be guided, by the divine laws which we can know only from a source outside ourselves, from revelation. "There is no solid, firm Foundation for Virtue," he tells us in the sermon *On the Testimony of Conscience*, "but on a Conscience which is guided by Religion." "There is no other Tie thro' which the Pride, or Lust, or Avarice, or Ambition of Mankind will not certainly break one time or other." For him, as for so many Churchmen concerned with the controversies of the period, Reason is an insufficient guide without Revelation. The sermons, with their systematic attack on the supposed sufficiency of the moral sense, the scheme of virtue without religion, are clearly relevant to the theme of the fourth Voyage of *Gulliver's Travels*, and here we find the positive aspect of Swift's intention more explicitly set out. The sermon *Upon the Excellency of Christianity* shows, in its account of the ideal Christian, a creature who is meek and lowly, "affable and courteous, gentle and kind, without any morose leaven of pride or vanity, which entered into the composition of most Heathen schemes." The description applies far more nearly to Don Pedro and the early Gulliver than to the Houyhnhnms, or to Gulliver the misanthrope, into whose composition pride certainly enters. While allowing a place to the passions and affections, and their possibility, under guidance, for good, Swift does not fall into the Tillotsonian position that human nature's "mild and merciful" inclinations and the maternal and other natural affections are more important than revealed religion. An implied disapproval of such a position is expressed in Swift's version of Anthony Collins' *Discourse of Freethinking*, in which Tillotson, naturally, is praised. Both affections and reason have their place in the well-regulated man, but they are to be subjected to the laws of God. Reason and gratitude may both suggest to a man that he should obey his parents, but the surest and most lasting cause of obedience must be the consideration "that his Reason is the Gift of God; that God commanded him to be obedient to the Laws, and did moreover in a particular manner enjoin him to be Dutiful to his Parents" (*On the Testimony of Conscience*). Swift would no doubt have agreed with that passage from

Butler's sermon *Upon Compassion* (published in the same year as *Gulliver's Travels*) in which passions and affections, carefully guided, are treated as necessary in creatures who are imperfect and interdependent, "who naturally and, from the condition we are placed in, necessarily depend upon each other. With respect to such creatures, it would be found of as bad consequence to eradicate all natural affections, as to be entirely governed by them. This would almost sink us to the condition of brutes; and that would leave us without a sufficient principle of action." The passage forms a comment on the contrasting creatures of Houyhnhm-land, for Swift is as well aware as Butler of the complex nature of man, the possessor not only of evil impulses but of passions and affections which under the guidance of conscience and religion (to which reason must be subject) can issue in virtuous action, especially that compassionate assistance to our fellow men, whether or not our reason judges them worthy of it, which "the Gentile philosophy" fails to produce. In *Gulliver's Travels* there is not only a traditional Christian pessimism; there may well be a positive Christian ideal suggested in the conduct of the good humans, though it is presented with Swift's habitual obliquity and restraint.

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