

Discontinuities in *Gulliver's Travels*

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Ten days after the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* in November 1726 the author's friend John Gay wrote to Swift in Ireland: "From the highest to the lowest it is universally read, from the Cabinet-council to the Nursery."¹ From the beginning the audience with which the book has been popular has been unusually diverse, and different parts of the work have evoked very different responses. Thackeray's celebrated denunciation of the Fourth Voyage as "horrible, shameful, unmanly, blasphemous . . . filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene,"² is hardly the description one expects to find of a book that was and is a children's classic. Children enjoy the story and keep it one-dimensional by skipping through the passages which are sometimes bowdlerized for them, but adult readers find themselves alternately fascinated by the narrative and distracted by the invective. *Gulliver's Travels* is both a marvellously realized account of fantastic adventures in imaginary lands, and a searching, brutally reductive account of the delusions, follies, and vices of men, and of the radical limitations of human nature. It is a strangely discontinuous book, and it is the effect of this on the reader that I want to explore.

If we look for evidence of what Swift was about when he wrote so disjunctive a work we can find clues both within and outside the book. Within the book he has Gulliver allege "my principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse thee" (IV, xii, p. 255),³ and later: "I write for the noblest End, to inform and instruct Mankind" (p. 257). Gulliver, not notable for his sense of fun and not much given to amusing or being amused, is self-importantly defending himself when he makes these claims, and naturally stresses his serious intentions. His protestations are variations on the Horatian maxim, a commonplace of the period, that the function of literature is to instruct and to entertain.⁴ In

1 *The Letters of John Gay*, ed. C. F. Burgess (Oxford 1966), p. 60.

2 "Swift," in *The English Humorists: The Four Georges* (London 1912), pp. 34-5.

3 Quotations are from the revised Norton Edition of *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg (New York 1970).

4 See Charles L. Batten, Jr., *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth Century Travel Literature* (Berkeley 1978).

a much-quoted letter to Pope, Swift, who did have a sense of fun, said that "the chief end I propose to my self in all my labors is to vex the world rather than divert it."⁵ Together these comments might suggest that when we turn to the book itself we will find rather more instruction than entertainment, but what we do in fact find is an extraordinary combination of the two.

Swift's strategy is to put the reader in a position similar to Gulliver's. Setting out on an adventure the reader unexpectedly finds himself cut off from familiar surroundings, disoriented, and uncertain what to expect next. He blunders about, getting his bearings, learning the language, and finally ventures some opinions. Almost as soon as he begins to feel comfortable the surroundings are changed, and the process begins again. The dream-like world is not allowed to lose its surrealistic quality and to become familiar. The author's disorienting use of "big men and little men"⁶ has a double and in many ways contrary effect. On the one hand it defamiliarizes people and institutions, it removes the blinkers of custom from our eyes so that we are made to look again at basic facts of the human condition that we obscure with euphemisms and pious hopes. On the other hand it lulls us into a sense of false security, a sense that this is only a story, a fantasy of imagined worlds into which we can escape from our own mundane concerns. So powerful is Swift's imaginative creation of these dream worlds that we continue to participate in them even when repeated satirical applications remind us that, like dreams, they contain uncomfortable truths about our daylight selves.

The workings of this strategy may be observed in the description of Gulliver's watch by the Lilliputian officers who search him:

Out of the right Fob hung a great Silver Chain, with a wonderful kind of Engine at the Bottom. We directed him to draw out whatever was at the End of that Chain; which appeared to be a Globe, half Silver, and half of some transparent Metal: For on the transparent Side we saw certain strange Figures circularly drawn, and thought we could touch them, until we found our Fingers stopped with that lucid Substance. He put this Engine to our Ears, which made an incessant Noise like that of a Water-Mill. And we conjecture it is either some unknown Animal, or the God that he

5 *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford 1963), III. 102.

6 The phrase is Dr Johnson's. See *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford 1934), II. 319.

worships: But we are more inclined to the latter Opinion, because he assured us (if we understood him right, for he expressed himself very imperfectly) that he seldom did any Thing without consulting it. He called it his Oracle, and said it pointed out the Time for every Action of his Life. (I, ii; p. 18)

The passage begins with the wonder of a child or a savage discovering something new and unknown. The watch is described with scientific, if uncomprehending, accuracy, and the reader is drawn to look through such unfamiliar eyes at a piece of machinery that, more than any other, familiarity has robbed of its significance, and to experience a shock of rediscovery. The shock becomes a moral one when the officers suppose that the watch is not the civilized convenience we take it for, but the god which European man worships and is governed by. The machine, it is suggested, in classic science-fiction manner, has mastered its inventor, without his even realizing, and it takes an ignorant savage to see what is obvious to all but the victim. The example, while small, is representative: the reader begins by enjoying a story-telling situation, only to find himself promptly discomfited by insights derived with seeming inevitability from that very situation.

Another interesting example of Swift leading the reader a merry dance from narrative absorption to alert if puzzled disengagement is Gulliver's description of the "Learning" of the Brobdingnagians. In order to read their giant books Gulliver has the Queen's joiner make him an ingenious machine:

... it was indeed a movable Pair of Stairs ... The Book I had a Mind to read was put up leaning against the Wall. I first mounted to the upper Step of the Ladder, and turning my Face towards the Book, began at the Top of the Page, and so walking to the Right and Left about eight or ten Paces according to the Length of the Lines, till I had gotten a little below the Level of my Eyes; and then descending gradually till I came to the Bottom. (II, vii; p. 112)

This imaginative realization delights the reader in much the same manner as Robinson Crusoe's laborious reproductions of European technology. Having thus engaged the reader's assent, Swift turns abruptly to instructing him, though the precise nature of the instruction is less than immediately apparent. The Brobdingnagian book Gulliver chooses to describe "treats of the Weakness of Human kind." Its author "went through all the usual Topicks of *European* Moralists; shewing how diminutive, contemptible, and helpless an Animal was Man in his own Nature ... How much he was excelled by one Creature in Strength, by another in

Speed, by a third in Foresight, by a fourth in Industry" (p. 112). When Gulliver thus patronizes as commonplace one of the emerging themes of Swift's book, the reader, who was enjoying the description of the reading machine, suddenly finds himself reading a different kind of book, in which there are multiple ironies to negotiate. Is Gulliver a fool for dismissing this "little old Treatise" popular only "among Women and the Vulgar"? Or is Swift perhaps mocking his own lack of originality? No sooner has the reader concluded that Gulliver is here a fool, and that Swift is asserting his own position in the mainstream of European moralists, than the terms of the argument are shifted. The Treatise goes on to complain that modern men are physically and, by implication, morally inferior to the giants of old. But Gulliver is not convinced: "I could not avoid reflecting, how universally this Talent was spread of drawing Lectures in Morality, or indeed rather Matter of Discontent and repining, from the Quarrels we raise with Nature. And, I believe upon a strict Enquiry, those Quarrels might be shewn as ill-grounded among us, as they are among that People" (p. 112). Later, however, in Glubbudubdrib, Gulliver expresses a contrary opinion when he views the Senate of Rome and a modern Parliament: "The first seemed to be an Assembly of Heroes and Demy-Gods; the other a Knot of Pedlars, Pick-pockets, Highwaymen and Bullies" (III, vii; p. 167). How much assent then should the beleaguered reader give to Gulliver's opinion in the Second Voyage that lectures in morality (like *Gulliver's Travels*) are mere discontent and repining, based on ill-grounded quarrels with nature? The easiest answer is to say that Gulliver is still a fool, ironically supporting Swift by fatuously disagreeing with him, and this may have been Swift's purpose. But generations of readers have felt that Swift's depiction of the human condition is, to some extent, discontented and repining. Is the master ironist then hoist with his own petard? Or has he laid a further trap for the reader, expecting him to congratulate himself on observing the discrepancy, and to feel comfortably sure that European man is not as bad as he appears in the last chapters of the Second Voyage, only to be persuaded, like Gulliver, by the fierce rhetoric of the Fourth Voyage that the bulk of mankind is indeed a "pernicious Race of little odious Vermin" (II, vi; p. 108)?

The reader of *Gulliver's Travels* periodically find himself facing such problems of interpretation when confronted by

passages like this one, or Gulliver's return from the Houyhnhnms, in which the irony is unclear, and seems at times to escape the author's control. Deliberately or not Swift has succeeded in vexing those readers who irritably search for the "meaning" of such contexts. It is, however, part of his deliberate method to insert passages like the one discussed, replete with multiple, sometimes contradictory and self-cancelling ironies, between passages of description or uncomplicated satire. This passage is followed, for example, by Gulliver's account of the citizen militia of Lorbrulgrud, in which Swift expresses through Gulliver his dislike for standing armies. The rhetoric here is comparatively simple, with no great discrepancy apparent between the opinions of the author and those expressed by his character.

The book opens jarringly with two prefaces which arouse very different expectations in the reader. "The Publisher to the Reader," ostensibly by Richard Sympson, is a conventional publisher's blurb which identifies the supposed author, testifies to his veracity, and lends an air of authenticity to the work. The "Letter" from Gulliver to Sympson which precedes this blurb is entirely different in tone, though it adds to the impression of authenticity. It reveals the disturbed Gulliver who has returned home from Houyhnhnmland contemptuous of and alienated from the human (Yahoo) race. Much of what he says is only to be understood by a reader who has completed the *Travels*, but there are intriguing hints which engage the curiosity of a reader about to begin. And there is Swift's self-directed irony, which is also intriguing. Gulliver, for example, complains to his cousin that "instead of seeing a full Stop put to all Abuses and Corruptions, at least in this little Island, as I had Reason to expect: Behold, after above six Months Warning, I cannot learn that my Book hath produced one single Effect according to mine Intentions". Gulliver blames the Yahoo nature, which is incapable of "the least Disposition to Virtue or Wisdom" (p. v). The extent to which Swift agrees with his character at this point is difficult to judge precisely. While he may be using Gulliver's argument that only a Yahoo could be unmoved by the *Travels* to encourage his readers to heed the satire, he is also mocking, to some extent, the satirist's aim of improving mankind.

It is a very different Gulliver who begins the narration of the First Voyage immediately after these two letters. He is, anachronistically, Gulliver as he was at the time of the voyage, and not as he has since become. As in all the voyages the narrative

is initially unruffled by discordant notes. As early as the second chapter, however, they begin to appear, and they relate both to Gulliver and to his extraordinary environment. After a detailed account of his arrangement for relieving the "Necessities of Nature" Gulliver feels obliged to defend himself: "I would not have dwelt so long upon a Circumstance, that perhaps at first Sight may appear not very momentous; if I had not thought it necessary to justify my Character in Point of Cleanliness to the World; which I am told, some of my Maligners have been pleased, upon this and other Occasions, to call in Question" (I, ii; p. 13). This sounds more like the paranoid, post-Houyhnhnm Gulliver than the matter-of-fact adventurer of the earlier voyages. Like so many things in Swift, the passage has a double effect: it humanizes Gulliver, while at the same time being out of character. Whether Gulliver has a character to be out of is another crux. Claude Rawson argues that "we do not . . . think of him as a 'character' at all in more than a very attenuated sense . . . Swift's ironic exploitations of the Gulliver-figure . . . flout our most elementary expectations of character consistency."⁷ But when it suits Swift's purpose he characterizes Gulliver, at least for the moment, as he does in the quoted passage, and a good many of his characteristics remain essentially unchanged. The dislocations of characterization are part of the overall assault on the reader, and for this to work most effectively the reader must be drawn to share Gulliver's experience, before being betrayed in his expectations of character, as he is betrayed by the allegedly imaginary worlds that Gulliver describes.

Returning to the second chapter of the First Voyage we find another discordant note in Gulliver's description of the Emperor of Lilliput: "He is taller by almost the Breadth of my Nail, than any of his Court; which alone is enough to strike an Awe into the Beholders" (p. 13). This is the first of many times that Gulliver will slip into seeing things through the eyes of the natives, forgetting how inappropriate such a view is to his own perspective. The effect of this lapse is to emphasize the pettiness of the Lilliputians' pride by inadvertently sharing it. The most striking example of customary thought disguising transparent absurdity in this First Voyage is Gulliver's defence of the reputation of the Treasurer's wife when she is suspected of an affair with him. Gulliver's defence ignores the size discrepancy, which renders

7 "Gulliver and the Gentle Reader" in *Imagined Worlds*, ed. M. Mack and I. Gregor (London 1968), pp. 79-80.

the suspicion ludicrous, and is instead exactly the kind of defence a Lilliputian (or European) courtier might make: "I should not have dwelt so long upon this Particular, if it had not been a Point wherein the Reputation of a great Lady is so nearly concerned, to say nothing of my own; although I had the Honour to be a *Nardac*, which the Treasurer himself is not; for all the World knows he is only a *Clumglum*, a Title inferior by one Degree, as that of a Marquess is to a Duke in *England*; yet I allow he preceded me in right of his Post" (I, vi; p. 46). The neat juxtaposition of "all the World knows" with an explanation for the benefit of English readers, shows Gulliver deeply immersed in the trivialities of the Lilliputian pecking order, while reminding the reader that Lilliput and England are the same. The reader's smile of amused contempt at the diminutive pretensions of such toy people, and at Gulliver for sharing them, fades with the reminder that we are all in the ridiculous business together.

In Brobdingnag Gulliver becomes the toy of a giant people, as he almost became the blind Samson of the Lilliputians, who were human enough to reward his services in the manner of larger politicians. The narrative emphasis in the Second Voyage falls on the perils of living in a huge world, and Swift manages the imaginative visualizing of those difficulties with great skill. Gulliver's conversations with the King of Brobdingnag, which carry much of the satire of the Second Voyage, are set against his fearful encounters with a cat, a rat, some wasps, a monkey, and the Queen's Dwarf, who drops him in a bowl of cream. The physicality of Gulliver's experiences, from building a furnished box in which to live to observing the grossness of the Brobdingnagians and being sexually fondled by the Maids of Honour, is intensely imagined. The reader once again finds himself involved in a compelling narrative, only to be jolted out of it by judiciously placed discrepancies. Gulliver begins his chauvinistic account of England and Europe to the King by being, as he says, "a little too copious in talking of my own beloved Country; of our Trade, and Wars by Sea and Land, of our Schisms in Religion, and Parties in the State" (II, iii; pp. 84-5). When the King comments on the true state of England, which Gulliver has revealed in spite of himself, Gulliver retreats into a last refuge of banal rhetoric: "my Colour came and went several Times, with Indignation to hear our noble Country, the Mistress of Arts and Arms, the Scourge of *France*, the Arbitress of *Europe*, the Seat of Virtue, Piety, Honour and Truth, the Pride and Envy of the World, so

contemptuously treated" (p. 85). These sentiments are out of character even for the usually simple, patriotic Gulliver, who feels obliged to defend his country as earnestly and inappropriately as he defends himself. When the King asks for an exact account of the government of England, Gulliver is again fulsome: "Imagine with thy self, courteous Reader, how often I then wished for the Tongue of *Demosthenes* or *Cicero*, that might have enabled me to celebrate the Praise of my own dear native Country in a Style equal to its Merits and Felicity" (II, vi; p. 103). This demonstrates the reflex action to which travellers are prone of blindly defending the homeland they have left allegedly to broaden their minds. In the Fourth Voyage Gulliver goes to the other extreme, blindly espousing the foreign virtues of the Houyhnhnms while ignoring the domestic virtues of Captain Pedro de Mendez and his own family.

When the astute King draws correct if severe conclusions from Gulliver's biased apologia, Gulliver dismisses him as a narrow and prejudiced provincial. In a passage of simple but powerful irony, Gulliver tries to recover the esteem of the King by offering to acquaint him with the secret of gunpowder. When the King indignantly refuses the offer, Gulliver is amazed:

A strange Effect of *narrow Principles* and *short Views!* that a Prince possessed of every Quality which procures Veneration, Love and Esteem; of strong Parts, great Wisdom and profound Learning; endued with admirable Talents for Government, and almost adored by his Subjects; should from a *nice unnecessary Scruple*, whereof in *Europe* we can have no Conception, let slip an Opportunity put into his Hands, that would have made him absolute Master of the Lives, the Liberties, and the Fortunes of his People.

(II, vii; pp. 110-11)

The Second Voyage ends on this strong and uncomplicated note. Gulliver is a fool, who stupidly prefers the immoral practices of Europe to the wise government of Brobdingnag. For once the reader knows exactly where he stands, and precisely what Swift means. In Lilliput Gulliver was half in and half out of an essentially European political system. In Brobdingnag he is physically insignificant and morally odious: his exile from its enlightened monarch and polity is inevitable, but it leaves European man out in the cold.

The Third Voyage is customarily dismissed as the least unified section of the work, but if, as I have suggested, *Gulliver's Travels* is a book of local strategies and individual effects which are designedly discontinuous, then this need not be a fault. Certainly

there are some striking local effects. For most of his tour of the Academy of Lagado Gulliver simply describes the absurd and disgusting "scientific" experiments in a deadpan manner. Realizing that the law of diminishing returns is beginning to rob this technique of its effect, Swift has Gulliver abruptly change from passive recorder to active satirist when he visits the School of political Projectors, whose professors

were proposing Schemes for persuading Monarchs to chuse Favourites upon the Score of their Wisdom, Capacity and Virtue; of teaching Ministers to consult the publick Good; of rewarding Merit, great Abilities, and eminent Services; of instructing Princes to know their true Interest, by placing it on the same Foundation with that of their People: Of chusing for Employments Persons qualified to exercise them; with many other wild impossible Chimaeras that never entered before into the Heart of Man to conceive; and confirmed in me the old Observation, that there is nothing so extravagant and irrational which some Philosophers have not maintained for Truth. (III, vi; pp. 159-60)

The impact of this passage is increased by the disruptions it embodies. Gulliver changes from a passive observer into a satirist, and a fulsome, sarcastic satirist at that. Having chosen not to ridicule the offensive experiments of the physical scientists, he now gratuitously attacks the eminently desirable reforms of the political projectors. More locally, the reader is wrong-footed at every stage. When Gulliver begins by observing that "In the School of political Projectors I was but ill entertained; the Professors appearing in my Judgment wholly out of their Senses" (p. 159), the reader initially interprets this as referring back to the crazy scientists, of whom it is true but to whom it is not applied, and not forward to the political philosophers, to whom it is applied but of whom it is not true. When the projects are listed, the reader protests that they are not only not insane but highly desirable, but when Gulliver calls them "wild impossible Chimaeras" the reader is obliged to admit that they are Utopian projects and not realities. Gulliver then gets carried away with his own rhetoric and the reader is obliged to correct him by asserting that man can readily conceive of such political sanity, though he has seldom if ever brought it into existence. The cliché with which Gulliver ends is splendidly inappropriate, and the reader is again obliged to contradict it in context, while accepting its general validity.

The best example of reader betrayal in the Third Voyage is the episode of the Struldbruggs of Luggnagg. When Gulliver is apprised of their existence he is highly excited:

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I cried out as in a Rapture; Happy Nation, where every Child hath at least a Chance for being immortal! Happy People who enjoy so many living Examples of antient Virtue, and have Masters ready to instruct them in the Wisdom of all former Ages! But, happiest beyond all Comparison are those excellent *Struldruggs*, who being born exempt from that universal Calamity of human Nature, have their Minds free and disingaged, without the Weight and Depression of Spirits caused by the continual Apprehension of Death.

(III, x; p. 178)

Gulliver is encouraged by his audience to imagine how he would live if he were immortal, and he creates a fantasy life for himself which is undeniably attractive. The reader has been alerted to the fact that Gulliver will be disillusioned by the amusement of the natives at his flights of enthusiasm, but the preparation is in no way commensurate with the searing vision of unending old age which follows when Gulliver is told the truth about the *Struldruggs*. The appalled reader gradually realizes that the fable of the *Struldruggs* is not concerned with immortality at all, but with the fear of death, which leads man to wish to prolong his life after its natural term, and despite the accumulated maladies and miseries of age. We are drawn to participate in Gulliver's vision, while imagining ourselves at a safe ironic distance from his more extravagant fancies. When his and our illusions are confronted with the grisly reality, the shock is all the more effective.

Gulliver's Fourth Voyage is by common consent the most controversial, and more ink has been spilt on interpreting it than on all the rest of Swift's work. It begins by establishing the imaginative reality of a land of rational horses and brutish men. This is a more difficult world to create than those of the earlier Voyages because horses cannot do what men can do with their hands, and some pretty far-fetched expedients have to be realized. Nonetheless Swift succeeds by allying the reader with Gulliver's point of view, and allowing Gulliver to be as unbelieving, initially, as the reader must be. As Gulliver gradually loses his disbelief in this incredible world, the reader is drawn to visualize it as physically existing. Their views are not synonymous, however, since the reader remains aware that what Swift has imagined is initially, and essentially, a clever inversion designed to shock the reader out of his conventional assumption that man is qualitatively superior to animals because of his reason.⁸ Gulliver does

8 R. S. Crane has pointed out that the formula *Homo est animal rationale* was a staple of logic textbooks in the period, and thus

not share this awareness. Indeed, one of the strangest aspects of this last Voyage is the way in which Gulliver entirely loses his spectator status, becomes fanatically partisan, and remains so long after his return to Europe. Swift's strategy here, at variance with the earlier Voyages, suggests that Houyhnhnmland represents an ultimate experience from which there is no return, a suggestion which has led to much of the debate about the imbalance of the Fourth Voyage. The juxtaposition of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos is certainly the most radical disjunction in a book full of disjunctions, and the fact that Gulliver chooses one of two impossible alternatives gives support to the critical argument that he is ultimately deranged by his travels. The imaginative and the intellectual components of Swift's book come together in a very disconcerting manner in Gulliver's ultimate fate. A man who chooses reason, and the virtues reason sponsors, in preference to his apparent animal nature ends up by haunting a stable and talking to horses. And not in a distant land, but at home in England. Gulliver's fate leaves the reader with some unappetizing choices. If he opts for the virtues of the Houyhnhnms, he cuts himself off from the affections and comforts of animal humanity. If he agrees that men are sophisticated Yahoos he has no choice but to isolate himself from them. If he judges that truth lies somewhere in the middle, with men like the generous Pedro de Mendez, he has to resist the polarizing vision of the Fourth Voyage which separates reason and animality with frightening rhetorical power and fierce conviction.

Gulliver's Travels is not a comfortable book to read. It is not the reassuring kind of satirical glass in which "Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own."⁹ It is built on a series of disjunctions which violate the implicit contract between writer and reader. In place of formal unity with consistent characters and a unified theme is a disparate collection of episodes with discrete effects and local strategies. While the narrative engages the imagination of the reader, the satire alienates it from the fictive world. These contrary aspects of the work

9 The Preface to *The Battle of the Books*, in *A Tale of a Tub With Other Early Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford 1957), p. 140.

familiar to contemporary readers. See "The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and the History of Ideas" in *Reason and the Imagination*, ed. J. A. Mazzeo (New York 1962), p. 245.

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are never harmonized: indeed it is their function to be discontinuous, and so to interrupt one another that the real and imagined worlds persistently overlap. The various voices of Gulliver, curious, quick to learn, childlike, patriotic, opinionated, bewildered, and finally deranged, are interrupted by the author with a clear-eyed contempt for folly, vice, and hypocrisy, and an unmatched talent for ironic exposure. The reader is never allowed to settle for long into an imagined world, or an opinion, and he finishes, if not as disturbed as Gulliver, then certainly unsure and disconcerted. What *does* Swift mean us to think? If there is any sure answer to that question it must be in general terms: he challenges us to defamiliarize our view of ourselves, to see our human nature not as we have been taught and have become accustomed to see it, but as it might appear to an outsider, who viewed it afresh. Though the challenge is unsettling, and at times very unpleasant, it is serious and necessary, and it is put to us with such blazing indignation, compelling imaginative force, and dazzling ironic wit, that we can neither evade nor ignore it.