

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# *Gulliver's Travels:*

## The Stunting of a Philosopher

RICHARD BURROW

Gulliver is not Everyman: Both his inquisitiveness and his power of memory are exceptional. When we first see him he is "applying himself close to his Studies" at Cambridge.<sup>1</sup> These are cut short at the age of seventeen because of his father's poverty, and he is apprenticed to a surgeon for four years. During this period his father sends him money, but he lays this out in "learning Navigation, and other Parts of Mathematicks, useful to those who intend to travel, as he always believed it would be some time or other [his] Fortune to do." After his apprenticeship he scrapes together enough money from various relatives to study "Physick two Years and seven Months, knowing it would be useful in long Voyages" (p. 19). In short, despite his poverty, the youthful Gulliver is more concerned with seeing the world than securing his future.

Gulliver returns from his first voyage of three and a half years, having "resolved to settle in London, to which Mr. Bates, my Master encouraged me." He is "advised to alter [his] Condition," and takes a wife, "with whom [he] received four Hundred Pounds for a Portion" (pp. 19–20). At the age of twenty-seven, conventional opinions combined with his own desire for financial and domestic security have induced Gulliver to turn away from his desire to travel, which has in any case been temporarily sated. His business fails, however, since he is unwilling "to imitate the bad Practice of too many among [his] Brethren." Gulliver lacks common worldliness, that small-mindedness which enables his rivals in business to put preservation of self and family at the top of their list of priorities. Not surprisingly, he decides to return to the sea in order to restore his fortunes. Although the overt purpose of this second voyage is to ensure the financial security of his family, Gulliver chooses this moment to reveal the intellectual pleasures which his travels afford him:

My Hours of Leisure I spent in reading the best Authors, ancient and modern; being always provided with a good Number of Books; and when I was ashore, in observing the Manners and Disposition of the People, as well as learning their Language; wherein I had a great Facility by the Strength of my Memory. (P. 20)

Nevertheless his voyages are now also financially successful, and when they cease to be so he returns home, growing "weary of the Sea, and intend[ing] to stay at home with [his] Wife and Family." However, Gulliver's continuing

hankering for the sea is shown by his decision to move his practice to Wapping, "hoping to get Business among the Sailors." Once again he fails—whether despite or because of this move is not made clear—and once again he resolves to set sail, "after three Years Expectation that things would mend" (p. 20).

Gulliver's trip to Lilliputia is therefore his third major voyage. He embarks on it at the age of thirty-eight, having already spent nearly ten years at sea, reading and observing foreign customs. It would not be the full truth to say that he is once again forced by financial necessity to leave his family, since his poverty is the result of his distinctive nature, and his attempts to remedy it are so thoroughly in accord with that nature. Although at this stage the main motive of which Gulliver is aware is his desire to provide for his family, his sub- or superconscious yearnings seem to be a match for the opinions and impulses which "turn downward the vision of the soul."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately he resists all encouragements to settle into a domestic, acquisitive life.

In Lilliputia Gulliver's nobility is emphasized as well as his intelligence. He is immediately willing to risk his life to defend the Lilliputian emperor, for which his reward is "the highest Title of Honour" and "all possible Encumbrances" (pp. 50, 53). His underlying motive seems to be the desire for such honor, for he would have gone "to congratulate with the Emperor" had he not suspected that the manner in which he had extinguished the flames might be resented. It is precisely his superior intellectual ability—beyond the "common Size of human Understandings" which the Lilliputians favor (p. 59)—that prevents him from achieving his goal. His urination on the palace reveals a disregard for "the fundamental Laws of the Realm" which arises from a clear view of what is beneficial to the state. His refusal to assist the emperor in his project of conquering the world is based on "many Arguments drawn from the Topicks of Policy as well as Justice" (pp. 53, 56). These two actions, which most clearly reveal Gulliver's large-mindedness, are the very two that eventually form the principal grounds of his impeachment (pp. 68–69).

Gulliver's experiences among the Lilliputians affect him deeply in ways that are not all immediately obvious. At first he feels bitter—"Of so little Weight are the greatest Services to Princes, when put into the Balance with a Refusal to gratify their Passions"—while at the same time recognizing that his understanding of political life has been deepened: "This was the first time I began to form some imperfect Idea of Courts and Ministers" (p. 54). But the more far-reaching consequence of his disillusionment only begins to emerge during his return voyage. When he realizes he is about to be rescued he is joyful at the prospect of seeing his "beloved Country, and the dear Pledges [he] had left in it." His joy increases when he sees the ship's "English Colours." Nevertheless it soon becomes clear that his attachments to his family and country have been weakened: He stays a mere two months with his wife and children before his "insatiable Desire of seeing foreign Countries would suffer [him] to continue no

longer," though there are "Tears on both Sides" when he departs (pp. 79–80). This time profit is not the main motive for the voyage, as his wealth has increased considerably, though he is still "in Hopes to improve [his] Fortunes" (p. 80). He sets sail "against the Advice of all [his] Friends and Relations" (p. 86).

This change in Gulliver—which could best be described as the unleashing of a boundless curiosity—becomes even more evident during the voyage to Brobdingnag. For the first time Gulliver shows a clear awareness of his own distinctive nature, referring to himself as "having been condemned by Nature and Fortune to an active and restless Life" (p. 83). Significantly, his ship is called *The Adventure*. It is his inquisitiveness that leads to his encounter with the Brobdingnagians in the first place. While a group of his shipmates were exploring the island, "well armed" and driven only by the need to find water, Gulliver requests "Leave to go with them, that [he] might see the Country, and make what Discoveries [he] could." He returns, "seeing nothing to entertain his Curiosity," to find that he has been left stranded by his more prudent companions in their hurry to escape from a Brobdingnagian. Gulliver's appetite for knowledge seems at such times to override his instinct for self-preservation as well as his patriotic and domestic feelings, though fear for his own life and regret at the prospect of his "desolate Widow, and fatherless Children" return briefly (pp. 86, 92). His curiosity, which had hardly been mentioned in Book I, now becomes a constant feature (pp. 106, 110, 113, 114, 119, 137, 138).

The voyage to Lilliputia therefore constitutes a decisive stage in the unfolding of Gulliver's nature. In Lilliputia he learns that even acts of the most uncommon nobility rely on understandings of the "common Size" for their reward. Since honor is the highest worldly goal, an understanding of its limitations calls into question all worldly attachments. The philosopher's purely intellectual desires emerge more powerfully as he begins to see the vanity of his other motives. Events in Book II reveal that Gulliver is now ready to embark on a deliberate enquiry into the best regimes of the past and present.<sup>3</sup>

The conversations between Gulliver and the Brobdingnagian king reveal the extent to which Gulliver's patriotism has been weakened. The king's own interest in the English political system is not theoretical, but arises from a practical concern as to whether anything about it might "deserve Imitation," which temporarily overrides his fondness for his "own Customs" (p. 127). In contrast Gulliver's very presence in Brobdingnag is evidence of a much more profound detachment. Nevertheless his continuing loyalty to his native regime is more apparent in the subsequent dialogue. He is deeply wounded by the king's mockery of his "beloved Country" (p. 106). His "Colour came and went several Times, with Indignation to hear our noble Country, the Mistress of Arts and Arms . . . the Pride and Envy of the World, so contemptuously treated" (p. 107). He displays what he calls a "laudable Partiality" to his "Political Mother," which leads him to "artfully elude" many of the king's enquiries and

to give “to every Point a more favourable Turn by many Degrees than the Strictness of Truth would allow” (p. 133).

However, Gulliver tells us that on “mature Thoughts” and having been “accustomed several Months to the Sight and Converse of this People,” his sense of proportion was so altered that he too began to find the pride of the English ruling class ridiculous, and even “to imagine [him]self dwindled many Degrees below [his] usual Size” (p. 107). The king himself considers that, having “spent the greatest Part of [his] Life in travelling,” Gulliver “may hitherto have escaped many Vices of [his] Country” (p. 132). The tension between Gulliver’s patriotism and his curiosity is illustrated by his admission that “nothing but an extreme Love of Truth could have hindered me from concealing this Part of my Story” (p. 133).

Gulliver’s behavior during and after his return to England confirms that his conversations with the king have further weakened his attachment to family and country. The sailors who rescue him appear “the most little contemptible Creatures [he] had ever beheld.” The sight of them fills him with “Laughter” and “a Sort of Wonder” (p. 147). To Gulliver, England seems as tiny as Lilliputia. Thinking himself a giant, he behaves so peculiarly that his family and friends are at first convinced that he has lost his wits (pp. 148–49). From the perspective of the ordinary citizen, who is dominated by “the great Power of Habit and Prejudice” (p. 149), even a partial emancipation from political and domestic loyalties seems monstrous.

What Gulliver now calls his “evil Destiny” has gripped him firmly, and his “violent Thirst . . . of seeing the World” grants him only ten days respite before he agrees to set sail once again. This time his wife protests vehemently and is only persuaded to agree to his departure by “the Prospect of Advantage she proposed to her Children” (pp. 149–54). As experience and a study of the political alternatives have diminished Gulliver’s respect for the highest goals of the active life, his purely intellectual desires have increasingly been given free rein. In Book III he begins a conscious examination of the merits of the philosophical life.

Gulliver’s curiosity has clearly been shaped by the dominant intellectual tradition of his time. In Brobdingnag his assumptions and methods are those of the New Science: He removes, measures, preserves, and later exhibits internationally, the stings of the gigantic wasps that attack him, donating three of them to Gresham College (p. 110). His familiarity with the scientific method is shown by his reaction to the gigantic limbs of the Brobdingnagian lice, which he says he can examine “much better than those of an European Louse through a Microscope” (p. 113). He criticizes the Brobdingnagian king’s ignorance of technology and refusal to “reduce Politicks to a Science, as the more acute Wits of Europe have done” (pp. 134–35).

In Laputa Gulliver comes to realize that the Modern intellectual tradition drastically limits the scope of philosophy. While Gulliver himself is, as always,

eager to see the “Curiosities of the Island,” the Laputian king “discovered not the least Curiosity to enquire into the Laws, Government, History, Religion, or the Manners of the Countries where [he] had been; but confined his Questions to the State of Mathematicks” (pp. 166–67). Soon Gulliver grows weary of such “disagreeable Companions” and begins instead to converse with the uneducated populace, who will at least give him a “reasonable Answer” (p. 173). His desire is not merely for knowledge, but for a philosophical friendship, and this cannot be satisfied within the Modern tradition.

After his encounter with the Laputians Gulliver represents himself as someone who has outgrown his fascination with the New Science (p. 178). In Glubbudbrib, when he has the opportunity to summon up the ghosts of eminent figures from the past, his first impulse is to see Homer and Aristotle rather than Descartes and Gassendi (p. 197). Here Gulliver confronts the characteristic Modernist preference for the absolute certainty of mathematical systems over the partial validity of common opinions, which the classical tradition accepted as the necessary starting point for philosophical discussion.<sup>4</sup> We can note, however, that Gulliver remains a Modern in many respects even at the end of Book III, as is evident from the confidence with which he looks forward to the discovery of “perpetual Motion” and “the universal Medicine” (p. 210). Swift's increasing concentration on this theme in the latter half of the work indicates a conviction that the development of a philosopher in modern times is impossible without a radical critique of the Modern philosophical tradition.

Gulliver's encounter with the ghosts of Glubbudbrib allows us to gauge the extent of his continuing attachment to the political sphere. In fact the ghosts of the ancient and modern philosophers are not the first he asks to see. As soon as his “Curiosity has prevailed over [his] Apprehensions” (which, typically, does not take long), he wants to conjure up “Scenes of Pomp and Magnificence” and to meet those who are distinguished by their “Love of . . . Country, and general Benevolence for Mankind” (pp. 195–96). Insofar as Gulliver has articulated his thoughts on the subject, he still considers the glory of a life sacrificed for the benefit of one's country to be the supreme good. He passes on surprisingly quickly from the great patriots, however, and in fact spends much more time conversing with the “antient Learned” (pp. 197–98). A voracious, if indiscriminate curiosity is now his primary characteristic.

During his final conversations in Glubbudbrib Gulliver comes to question his veneration for the political sphere as a whole. A study of modern history reveals “how great a Share in the Motions and Events of Courts, Councils and Senates might be challenged by Bawds, Whores, Pimps, Parasites and Buffoons” (p. 199). In every age he finds virtue threatened or extinguished by corruption. By the end of his stay his initial reverence for the civic virtues has given way to “melancholy Reflections” on the ephemerality of the greatest civilizations (p. 201).

Gulliver is overjoyed when he hears of the existence of a race of immortals

called Struldbruggs. Here are beings who “have their Minds free and disengaged, without the Weight and Depression of Spirits caused by the continual Apprehension of Death” (p. 208). When asked what he would do with his time if he himself were immortal he can answer at length:

I answered, it was easy to be eloquent on so copious and delightful a Subject, especially to me who have been often apt to amuse myself with Visions of what I should do if I were a King, a General, or a great Lord: And upon this very Case I had frequently run over the whole System how I should employ myself, and pass the Time if I were sure to live for ever. (P. 209)

As an immortal Gulliver would pursue three goals, which correspond to his threefold interest in “Pomp,” “consummate Virtue,” and “Wit and Learning” in Glubbudubdrib (pp. 195–97). His first aim would be to become “the wealthiest Man in the Kingdom,” his second, to serve the public, both by convincing “hopeful young Men of the Usefulness of Virtue” and by keeping a careful record of political and cultural changes as a means of opposing corruption as it “steals into the World.” Thirdly Gulliver would simply enjoy the sheer “Pleasure of seeing the various Revolutions of States and Empires . . . Barbarity overrunning the politest Nations, and the most barbarous becoming civilized” (p. 210).

Gulliver is horrified when he actually meets the Struldbruggs, for they turn out to possess “not only all the Follies and Infirmities of old Men, but many more which arose from the dreadful Prospect of never dying” (p. 212). His “vision” of a “hospitable . . . yet . . . saving,” magnanimous and wisdom-loving race is in direct contrast to the truth, which is that the Struldbruggs are infinitely covetous, small-minded and incurious. We learn that they are “unable of Friendship,” and “although they were told that I was a great Traveller, and had seen all the World . . . had not the least Curiosity to ask me a Question (pp. 212–13).

It is the “natural Desire of endless Life and sublunary Happiness” that impelled Gulliver to expound his fantasies so gleefully (p. 210). Swift sees an inseparable connection between the pursuit of “sublunary Happiness” and the desire for immortality, since a life devoted to such a pursuit involves attributing a significance to human existence which a sober consideration of mortality reveals to be disproportionate. The recognition that the human condition is such that, even leaving aside death, passions become jaded or physically impossible to satisfy in time is bound, therefore, to reduce the intensity of all worldly desires. Gulliver “grew heartily ashamed of the pleasing Visions [he] had formed” (p. 214). His mortification reveals an awareness that he has been governed by pride. He has “frequently run over” his “Visions,” which have involved imagining himself as “a King, a General, . . . a great Lord,” or “the Oracle of the Nation” (p. 209). He now begins to view his passions in a much more detached light, as he comes to appreciate the extent to which they are rooted in an irrational sense of his own significance.

Now more “free and disengaged” in mind, Gulliver can begin to contemplate the *summum bonum* dispassionately. The three basic options correspond to the three projects he imagines himself pursuing if granted immortality. Although it might appear that all of Gulliver’s “Visions” are equally deflated by his encounter with the Struldbruggs, this is in fact not the case. His patriotic fantasies have much in common with his desire to become the “wealthiest Man in the Kingdom,” just as in Glubbdubdrib his desire to see “Scenes of Pomp” is scarcely distinguishable from his admiration for “consummate Virtue” (pp. 195–96). Both arise from pride and involve forgetting the transient nature of “sublunary Happiness.” Gulliver could only imagine himself devoting “about two Hundred Years” to the acquisition of riches before achieving his goal of excelling all others in wealth (p. 209). To achieve his second goal of instilling virtue in “hopeful young Men,” he would have to become reconciled to their eventual death. The difficulties here are only partially concealed by Gulliver’s optimistic account: “Length of Time would harden me to lose [them] with little or no Reluctance just as a Man diverts himself with the annual Succession of Pinks and Tulips in his Garden, without regretting the Loss of those which withered the preceding Year” (p. 210). All this vigilance would only “probably prevent” the onset of corruption.

The sense of the ephemerality of all civilizations which Gulliver acquired in Glubbdubdrib now comes to the fore, as he begins to discuss the third way in which he would occupy his time as an immortal, namely with:

The Pleasure of seeing the various Revolutions of States and Empires; the Changes in the lower and upper World; antient Cities in Ruins, and obscure Villages become the Seats of Kings. Famous Rivers lessening into shallow Brooks; the Ocean leaving one Coast dry, and overwhelming another: The Discovery of many Countries yet unknown. Barbarity overrunning the politest Nations, and the most barbarous becoming civilized . . . the Progress and Returns of Comets, with the Changes of Motion in the Sun, Moon and Stars. (P. 210)

Although this is added almost as an afterthought by Gulliver, it in fact contradicts rather than supplements the previous, patriotic fantasy, for where, in his capacity as a defender of liberty, Gulliver would resist “continual Degeneracy,” as a lover of knowledge he would take positive pleasure in observing the cyclical decay and rebirth of “Politeness.” To a lover of knowledge all human activities would appear merely as one aspect of a great pageant of mutability, which ultimately includes the galaxy itself. Unlike Gulliver’s previous fantasies this “Pleasure” does not involve a sense of superiority to others, which distinguishes it even from the noblest of ordinary human motives. The potential antidote to Gulliver’s pride lies in his philosophical disposition, which leads him to embrace the largest perspective from which others shrink. It is hard to see how a Struldbrugg who possessed and cultivated a nature similar to Gulliver’s could become jaded.

By the end of Book III Gulliver is on the verge of making a conscious

choice of the contemplative life. Swift allows us to calculate that Gulliver is roughly fifty years old at the end of the voyage to Laputa. His ripeness for philosophy is once again reflected in his ever-increasing detachment from ordinary, domestic ties. Although he remains at home for five months this time—a longer interval than that which preceded either of his two previous voyages—and in a “very happy Condition,” eventually he embarks once again on *The Adventure*, and this time he leaves his “poor Wife big with Child” (p. 221). The implication is that his curiosity is now in a sense both less passionate and more concentrated as a result of his third voyage.

Although appearances suggest otherwise, the Houyhnhnms’ way of life is in fact governed by eros, but a rational eros, which distinguishes carefully between real and apparent satisfactions. Their complete liberation from pride is in fact the result of their complete dedication to the pursuit of knowledge. Swift refers insistently to their inquisitiveness concerning Gulliver. They are said to show “manifest Tokens of Wonder” and then “new Signs of Wonder” at his clothing, which they examine very closely, “using various Gestures, not unlike those of a Philosopher, when he would attempt to solve some new and difficult Phaenomenon” (pp. 224–26). The first we see of Gulliver’s Master is his “Signs of Wonder” at Gulliver’s gloves. Behind his concerted effort to teach him the Houyhnhnm language is a great “Curiosity and Impatience.” He is “eager to learn” everything about Gulliver (p. 234). In particular he reveals “great Signs of Curiosity and Admiration” when he sees him undressed at last (p. 237). After the revelation of Gulliver’s true appearance he is even more astonished at his reasoning powers, and urges him to exert “the utmost Diligence” to acquire the language, so that his “Impatience to hear . . . Wonders” might be eased as quickly as possible (pp. 237–38). When Gulliver is able to communicate his thoughts (as always he picks up the language quickly), his Master badgers him with frequent questions and interruptions, often desiring “fuller Satisfaction” as Gulliver’s vocabulary improves (p. 244–45). He does not rest until his “Curiosity seemed to be fully satisfied” (pp. 259–60).

The Houyhnhnm is the first being Gulliver has met whose inquisitiveness matches his own. If his dedication to the pursuit of knowledge is even greater than Gulliver’s it is because he has had the advantage of being brought up in a society where the “grand Maxim is, to cultivate Reason” (p. 267). Friendship and benevolence are mentioned first among the Houyhnhnms’ virtues. Although neither of these are “confined to particular Objects, but universal to the whole Race,” it soon emerges that only benevolence is truly indiscriminate: “They will have it that Nature teaches them to love the whole Species, and it is Reason only that maketh a Distinction of Persons, where there is a superior Degree of Virtue” (p. 268). Since there is no evidence that any Houyhnhnm falls short of perfection in the moral virtues, it is clear that the “Distinction of Persons” that leads to special friendships must be founded on some other criterion. We have already been told that the Houyhnhnms differ greatly in intellec-

tual ability (p. 256). The suggestion is that the Houyhnhnms who possess "Talents of Mind [and] a Capacity to improve them" are drawn into friendships, the purpose of which is to exercise their intense curiosity. Philosophical conversation is the only activity specifically mentioned as giving the Houyhnhnms pleasure: "No Person spoke without being pleased himself, and pleasing his Companions" (p. 277). Swift's description of their discourses on "Friendship and Benevolence; on Order and Oeconomy; sometimes upon the visible Operations of Nature, or ancient Traditions; upon the Bounds and Limits of Virtue; upon the unerring Rules of Reason," and on many other subjects, including Gulliver himself, forms the culmination of his account of the Houyhnhnms' way of life (pp. 277-79).<sup>5</sup>

Gulliver's encounter with the Houyhnhnms should also constitute the culmination of his education. They are free from all the passions which are rooted in self-love, including the domestic and patriotic attachments which have hitherto formed the chief obstacle to Gulliver's development as a philosopher (pp. 268-69). This is most clearly illustrated by their calm acceptance of death (p. 275). Gulliver himself now seems ready to appreciate and imitate their virtues. The account of the human race which he gives his Master is much less eulogistic than his description of England in Book II, as he himself is aware: "The Reader may be disposed to wonder how I could prevail on myself to give so free a Representation of my own Species, among a Race of Mortals who were already too apt to conceive the vilest Opinion of Human Kind" (p. 258). The explanation for his indiscretion is as follows:

The many Virtues of those excellent Quadrupeds placed in opposite View to human Corruptions, had so far opened mine Eyes, and enlarged my Understanding, that I began to view the Actions and Passions of Man in a very different Light; and to think the Honour of my own Kind not worth Managing. (P. 258)

He is led to find a "thousand Faults" in himself "which with us would never be numbered even among human Infirmities." This partial overcoming of pride is accompanied by an "utter Detestation of all Falsehood and Disguise." He tells us, "Truth appeared so amiable to me, that I determined upon sacrificing everything to it" (p. 258).

This further weakening of Gulliver's attachment to the sphere of human "Actions and Passions," and the concomitant intensification of his devotion to the pursuit of knowledge, are caused less by his new understanding of the pervasive power of self-love, or by an abstract love of truth, than by what he calls "a much stronger Motive," namely, "his Love and Veneration" for the Houyhnhnms. It is this above all which leads him to resolve "never to return to human Kind, but to pass the rest of [his] Life among these admirable Houyhnhnms in the Contemplation and Practice of every Virtue" (p. 258). Love for one's instructors—including admiration for the great classical authorities—is a great part of the joy of philosophy, one can conclude.

However, Gulliver's patriotism is still very much in evidence:

In what I said of my Countrymen, I extenuated their Faults as much as I durst before so strict an Examiner, and upon every Article, gave as favourable a Turn as the Matter would bear. For, indeed, who is there alive who would not be swayed by his Byass and Partiality to the Place of his Birth? (Pp. 258–59)

He resents the “malicious” comparisons that the Houyhnhnm draws between man and Yahoo, and is at times “silent out of Partiality to [his] own Kind,” though he could “plainly discover” the truth of what was being said (pp. 263–64). His pride in the “Actions and Passions of Man” is finally overthrown only by an accident which occurs while Gulliver is out on an expedition to observe the Yahoos. A female Yahoo is attracted by the sight of Gulliver naked as he is about to bathe and leaps on him passionately. Gulliver finds this experience both terribly frightening and mortifying, as he could now “no longer deny, that [he] was a real Yahoo, in every Limb and Feature” (p. 267).

Gulliver’s eulogistic account of the Houyhnhnms begins immediately after this episode, and with a curious abruptness. The implication is that he can for the first time appreciate fully their virtues now that his pride has been rooted out. From now on he views any contribution of his own to their conversations as “a Loss of so much Time for improving myself: But . . . was infinitely delighted with the Station of an humble Auditor” (p. 277). He regards the Houyhnhnms as the source of “all the little Knowledge . . . of any Value” that he possesses, and was “prouder to listen, than to dictate to the greatest and wisest Assembly in Europe.” He is both awestruck at their wisdom and filled “with a respectful Love and Gratitude, that they would condescend to distinguish [him] from the rest of [his] Species” (p. 278).

Gulliver’s “enlarged understanding” is now seemingly free from self-love in all its disguised and extended forms:

When I thought of my Family, my Friends, my Countrymen, or human Race in general, I considered them as they really were, Yahoos in Shape and Disposition, perhaps a little more civilized, and qualified with the Gift of Speech, but making no other Use of Reason, than to improve and multiply . . . Vices. (P. 278)

In contrast to his behavior at the end of the voyage to Brobdingnag, he does not “wink at his own Littleness” (p. 148), but is filled with even more “Horror and Detestation” at the sight of his own reflection than at the sight of a “common Yahoo” (p. 278).<sup>6</sup> Gulliver also reveals a new, Houyhnhnm-like indifference to his own death. When forced to depart from Houyhnhnmland his “utmost Grief and Despair” are caused less by the “certain Prospect of an unnatural Death” than by the danger of relapsing into [his] old Corruptions” (p. 280).

Thus the attempted rape of Gulliver represents a crucial moment in his education. It is in many ways the most dense and enigmatic episode in the book. The fact that it is Gulliver’s nakedness that arouses the lust of the Yahoo is

significant, for Gulliver's clothes play a central role in the allegory of Book IV. When he arrives in Houyhnhnmland he is wearing his "best Suit of Cloaths." He is allowed to do so only because of some curious behavior on the part of his mutinous crew, who treat Gulliver with astonishing leniency as they set him ashore in Houyhnhnmland, even though they have successfully seized control of his ship and have previously subjected him to many violent threats and a long imprisonment (pp. 221–22). Not only do they let him change into his best clothes before being marooned, but they are even "so civil as not to search [his] Pockets," though they contained money. As they set him down ashore they advise him to "make haste, for fear of being overtaken by the Tide" (pp. 221–22). Their contradictory behavior becomes explicable if one remembers that the crew itself is composed of two groups. The mutiny was led by "Buccaneers" whom Gulliver recruited in the West Indies to replace members of his crew who had died during the voyage from England. These "debauch" the surviving members of Gulliver's original crew. It is surely this latter group who treat Gulliver in such a merciful way, for Gulliver asks them "who their new Captain was" (p. 222). The motive for their civility is guilt and a desire to avoid a feeling of responsibility for Gulliver's death. From the start, then, Gulliver's clothes are linked with the moral and religious opinions which restrain man from barbarism. The traditional character of these opinions is suggested by the fact that they seem not to be shared by the rootless "Buccaneers" who lead the mutiny.

As has been mentioned the Houyhnhnms are much puzzled by Gulliver's clothing (pp. 225–26). He is "obliged to [his] Cloaths, whereof they had no Conception" for their initial uncertainty as to whether or not he is a Yahoo (pp. 230–31). He keeps "the Secret of [his] Dress" as long as he can, in order to "distinguish [him]self as much as possible, from that cursed Race of Yahoos." His Master is fascinated both by his clothes and his body when the truth is revealed, and after a careful examination concludes that he is indeed a Yahoo. Gulliver's response is to express "Uneasiness at his giving me so often the Appellation of Yahoo, an odious Animal, for which I had so utter an Hatred and Contempt," and to request that the secret of his "false Covering" be kept for as long as possible (pp. 236–37). The power of Gulliver's clothes to conceal the fact that he is a Yahoo "in every Limb and Feature" from the Houyhnhnms, and from Gulliver himself to a large extent, may remind us of the embroidery on the brothers' coats in *A Tale of a Tub*, which "served to hide or strengthen any Flaw."<sup>7</sup> The religious tradition restrains man's bestial nature partly by concealing it, and emphasizing his unique status within the divine scheme. It obstructs the philosopher's progress towards self-knowledge because it masks the extent to which self-love underlies even some of the most noble motives.<sup>8</sup> In a sense then, the attempted rape of Gulliver completes his education, since it must finally lead to the rooting out of his patriotism and desire for honor, which have up to now formed the chief obstacles to a thorough "enlarg-

ing” of the understanding and a radical detachment from all that is local and transitory.

The difficulty is that Gulliver’s efforts to cling to his best suit seem entirely justified in the light of subsequent events. The revelation that he is a Yahoo “in every Limb and Feature” leads to his exile from Houyhnhnmland and to his final misanthropism and self-loathing. The eradication of his worldly pride does not clear the way for his characteristic love of knowledge to become the dominant force in his soul in the way one might expect. The implication is that the female Yahoo’s assault on Gulliver not only facilitates but also radically distorts his development as a philosopher. The reason for this is hinted at in the opening sentence of the episode, where Gulliver explains the motive behind his expedition.

As I ought to have understood human Nature much better than I supposed it possible for my Master to do, so it was easy to apply the Character he gave of the Yahoos to myself and my Countrymen; and I believed I could yet make further Discoveries from my own Observation. (P. 265)

These lines reveal that Gulliver’s basic intellectual assumptions are still derived from the Modern tradition. His earlier rejection of the Cartesianism of the Laputians has not affected his adherence to the new scientific method, which leads him to favor observation and experience over reason. Although the classical tradition provides the theoretical starting point, its lofty, contemplative character is presumed to render it unsuited to a detailed understanding of man’s bestial drives. Ironically, it becomes a matter of pride for the Modern philosopher to uncover the most mortifying truths, and to find clear and direct proof of man’s bodily affinity to the beasts. Although this facilitates enlightenment in a sense, by creating an atmosphere in which the common opinions that mask this affinity are easily discredited, the price to be paid is a major distortion of emphasis in the philosophical account that replaces these opinions, which is brought about by too exclusive a concentration on the lowest elements in human nature. In deciding that he is a “real Yahoo in every Limb and Feature,” Gulliver leaves his own characteristic, intellectual desires out of the account. The shock of Gulliver’s enlightenment initially serves to open his eyes fully to the virtues of the Houyhnhnms, but ultimately closes the door to his participation in their happiness, for he has defined his nature in terms that deny the possibility of his imitating them. His exaggerated humility leads him to accept the justice of the decision to banish him much more readily than his Master does (p. 280). It leads also, paradoxically, to his eventual isolation from his fellow men, whom he now views as “a Species of Animals utterly incapable of Amendment” (p. 6).

Neither the “soft” nor the “hard” school of *Gulliver’s Travels* criticism takes into account the gulf between the philosopher and the nonphilosopher in their interpretations of Book IV.<sup>9</sup> While there is no reason to doubt that Swift

equates the essential motives of the nonphilosopher with those of the Yahoo, there is every reason to suppose that he considers the potential of Gulliver in particular to imitate the Houyhnhnms to be very great indeed. The increasing dominance of the sense of wonder and the progressive subordination of pride in his soul are arrested only by a failure to become aware of himself as a philosopher. The implication that the philosopher's education should culminate in an explicit recognition that his soul is characterized by a desire for knowledge is one of many indications that Swift's teaching is fundamentally Platonic.<sup>10</sup> After Gulliver's traumatic enlightenment Swift draws a contrast between the Houyhnhnms, who are "wholly governed" by reason, and Modern "Systems of Natural Philosophy." Gulliver's Master agrees with Plato (the "highest Honour" possible) that knowledge of such systems, even "if it were certain, could be of no Use" (pp. 267–68). Gulliver adds that "many Paths to Fame would be then shut up in the Learned World" were this advice heeded. These systems facilitate the enlightenment of nonphilosophers and potential philosophers who are not yet consciously ruled by the love of knowledge. In such circumstances the fact that man's kinship to the Yahoo is only partial (in "every Limb and Feature") can easily be forgotten. In Platonic terms the most useful knowledge is that which contributes to a life "wholly governed" by reason. The fact that the systems of the Moderns—like Gulliver's expeditions to observe the Yahoos—stem from pride rather than curiosity is itself evidence of their uselessness in this sense.

In contrast, Gulliver's Master's approach represents the classical, especially the Platonic, stance. From the start he is convinced that Gulliver is a Yahoo, but tactfully conceals this fact (p. 234), placing more emphasis on his "Teachableness, Civility and Cleanliness," which "astonish" him. As we have seen, he is consumed with curiosity; fascinated both by Gulliver's clothes and his body, and by the distinction between the two, but even more "astonished at my Capacity for Speech and Reason, than at the Figure of my Body, whether it were covered or no" (p. 237). He agrees to keep the secret of his "false Covering," a promise that he seems to break only when directly challenged by his peers, by which time the truth has been revealed (pp. 272, 279). In fact he considers it wise for all Yahoos to "conceal many . . . Deformities . . . which would else be hardly supportable" (p. 260). In brief, his enquiries into human nature are contrasted to Gulliver's in several ways: His motive is curiosity rather than pride; he is interested rather than repelled when Gulliver's nakedness confirms his physical affinities to the Yahoos; and at the same time he recognizes that Gulliver's own attitude is very different, and so seeks to soften and delay his full enlightenment (p. 237).

One of the Houyhnhnm's aims in his conversations with Gulliver is to lead him gradually towards a sober and measured assessment of his own nature. Gulliver's concern with clearly observable phenomena, which causes him to identify himself as a Yahoo solely on the basis of external resemblances, is

contrasted with his Master's attempt to encourage him to examine and discuss his own distinctive disposition. Such a self-examination, which might eventually have led Gulliver to a full awareness of the thirst for knowledge that has always been his underlying motive, could only be conducted through philosophical conversation. The Houyhnhnm's intention was for Gulliver to move gradually towards an understanding both of the bestial and the rational elements in his nature. An analysis of his desire to grasp the most mortifying truths even as he was investigating them would have reduced their power to mortify. As it is, his typically Modern concentration on the commonest human passions leads him to finalize his account of his own nature before he has fully purified and articulated the motives behind his enquiries.

Evidence of the Houyhnhnm's fundamental optimism concerning Gulliver's nature and his desire to teach him can be found throughout Swift's account of their developing relationship. Right from the start, as has been said, the Houyhnhnm is much more interested in Gulliver's "Capacity for Speech and Reason" than his body or clothes (p. 237). In fact his astonishment at Gulliver's rationality increases when his physical kinship to the Yahoos is confirmed, for "he doubled the Pains he had been at to instruct me," even deceiving his friends as to the reason for introducing him into their company in his anxiety to have him always present (pp. 237–38). In the course of Gulliver's relatively honest account of his species, the Houyhnhnm pays him an unexpected compliment, declaring that he must be "born of some noble Family" in his own country, so superior is he both physically and mentally to common Yahoos (p. 256). He draws a parallel to Houyhnhnm society, where "the White, the Sorrel, and the Iron-Grey, were not so exactly shaped as the Bay, the Dapple-grey, and the Black; nor born with equal Talents of Mind, or a Capacity to improve them." (Swift never makes it explicit that Gulliver's Master shows him more respect than many, if not most, of his fellow Houyhnhnms in introducing him to his circle of philosophical friends [p. 277]). His wish to learn from Gulliver is inextricable from a desire to teach him. As we have seen, he "daily convinced [him] of a thousand Faults in [him]self," during which time Gulliver is also learning by example to love truth (p. 258). Before stating his final verdict on the human race—namely, that almost all its characteristic passions originate in a Yahoo-like self-love—he commands Gulliver to "to sit down at some Distance, (an Honour which he had never before conferred on me)" (p. 259). His aim seems to be to make it clear that he now considers Gulliver to be ready to accept the truth. During the course of his speech he distinguishes carefully between Gulliver and his countrymen, criticizing the latter for their misuse of reason, but the former only for his physical defects (p. 259).

The intensity of the friendship between Gulliver and his Master is eventually recognized by the Houyhnhnm assembly, who censure the latter for appearing to receive "some Advantage or Pleasure" from his conversations with Gulliver

(p. 279). While telling Gulliver about this and the decision to exile him, the Houyhnhnm is careful to distance himself from the general view:

He concluded, that for his own Part he could have been content to keep me in his Service as long as I lived; because he found I had cured myself of some bad Habits and Dispositions, by endeavouring, as far as my inferior Nature was capable, to imitate the Houyhnhnms. (Pp. 279–80)

Further evidence of the Houyhnhnm's esteem for Gulliver emerges as the latter is preparing to depart. Resisting Gulliver's humble efforts to bid him farewell at his home, "his Honour, out of Curiosity, and perhaps (if I may speak it without Vanity) partly out of Kindness, was determined to see me in my Canoo," even going so far as to bring along "several of his neighbouring Friends" (p. 282). Before Gulliver can kiss his hoof as a final gesture of respect, his Master "did [him] the Honour to raise it gently to [his] Mouth." Gulliver sees this act—which is quite remarkable in the context of Book IV—as a sign of a "noble and courteous Disposition"; that so "illustrious a Person should descend to give so great a Mark of Distinction to a Creature as inferior as I," but it seems to have been intended rather as an expression of friendship and even respect. This is one of the many indications that the Houyhnhnm considers Gulliver to be a fundamentally rational being which the latter's dogmatic humility leads him to ignore or misinterpret.

The effects of the new, reductive analysis of human nature are illustrated by the Houyhnhnms' decision to banish Gulliver. Now that Gulliver's clothes have worn out it is commonly believed that he is a Yahoo (pp. 276, 279). Once the learned world has accepted that the nature of man is fundamentally bestial, the philosopher is denied the opportunity to form the philosophic friendships, which, in the Platonic view, represent his ultimate goal. Whereas the classical tradition had cultivated the love of knowledge by providing a theoretical account of its nature and ultimate goal, the Modern philosopher denies its very existence, even though it may constitute his fundamental motive. Thus Gulliver's eventual conception of himself as a fearless and solitary pursuer of loathsome truths represents a characteristically Modern distortion of the joyous and sociable openness to experience which initially distinguishes the potential philosopher. The consequences of a general unmasking of the common opinions that provide a "false Covering" (p. 237) for human nature are, in the end, as far-reaching for the philosopher as they are for the nonphilosopher.

At the end of Book IV Gulliver exhibits the despair and nausea which, Swift implies, were the original and natural reactions to the new account of human nature. One might wonder why he remains so dedicated to truth, since it is so clearly of no use to him in securing happiness. Like the narrator of *A Tale of a Tub*, one might expect him to search longingly for "an Art to sodder and patch up the Flaws and Imperfections of Nature," rather than continually "widening and exposing them."<sup>11</sup> The fact that he does not do so is partly due to his

devotion to the Houyhnhnms, but his more fundamental motive turns out once again to be pride, though in an uncommon form. We are alerted to this in the final paragraph of the book, where he entreats Yahoos who themselves display this “absurd Vice” not to “presume to appear” in his sight (p. 296). His feeling of superiority extends even to the Houyhnhnms themselves. He remains convinced that they

were not able to distinguish this [vice] of Pride, for want of thoroughly understanding Human Nature, as it sheweth itself in other Countries, where that Animal presides. But I, who had more Experience, could plainly observe some Rudiments of it among the wild Yahoos. (P. 296)

The Modern philosopher assigns to himself a unique position in the history of thought. All previous philosophical traditions have been insufficiently radical in their analysis of the pervasive power of self-love, since they have relied on meditation and discussion rather than observation and common experience.<sup>12</sup> Gulliver forgets that his Master had arrived at a knowledge of a “thousand Faults” of which he himself “had not the least Perception before” (p. 258) purely by discussion and meditation, and had discovered many “Vices and Follies” in humanity which had never even been mentioned to him (p. 278). One may conclude that the Modern philosopher’s despair is tempered, and indeed fuelled, by a perverse pride in his stern refusal to lose sight of the most painful truths, which he contrasts to the unthinking complacency of common folk and, in particular, to the cosiness and naivety of the classical tradition. However, once this pride has faded away along with memories of the tradition itself, Swift implies that the Moderns’ discovery of self-love at the root of all action and thought will lead them to question both the possibility and the use of reason.

Gulliver’s experiences reveal that premature enlightenment is more dangerous to the philosopher’s development than the more traditional obstacles, the moral and religious traditions which form the principal subject of the first three books. Gulliver’s desire for knowledge grows as experience, study and meditation on the approach of death expose the vanity of the noblest forms of human endeavor, and is further cultivated by his final encounter with philosophy in its classical form. His intense curiosity is ultimately a match for all distractions save those that present themselves as a part of his education.

## NOTES

1. *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, Vol. 11, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1965), p. 19. All further references are given in the text.

2. See Plato’s *Republic*, 519a–b.

3. For the resemblance between Brobdingnag and the Greek *polis* see Allan Bloom, “An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*,” in *Ancients and Moderns*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (London, 1964).

4. See Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, trans. E. Sinclair (Chicago, 1952), pp. 136–53.
5. The implication of this interpretation is that it is both desirable, and in some cases possible, to imitate the Houyhnhnms. Most twentieth-century critics deny this, or deny that it is Swift's view. See, for instance, K. Williams, *Jonathan Swift and the Age of Compromise* (London, 1970), pp. 187–91; C. Winton, "Conversion on the Road to Houyhnhnmland," *Sewanee Review*, 68 (1960): 20–33; Ernest Tuveson, "Swift: The Dean as Satirist," in *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ernest Tuveson (London, 1964), p. 107. There have been some dissenting voices, however: see particularly John Morris, "Wishes as Horses: A Word for the Houyhnhnms," *The Yale Review*, 62 (1972–73): 354–71.
6. The evidence seems to me to be clearly against those critics who argue that Gulliver is proud in the common sense of the word at the end of Book IV: See Winton, cited above in note 5, and Edward Rosenheim, *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago, 1963), p. 222.
7. Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, ed. A.C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith (Oxford, 1958), p. 136.
8. Some of these points are made by Max Byrd, "Gulliver's Clothes: An Enlightenment Motif," in *Enlightenment Essays*, 3 (1972): 41–46.
9. The "hard" school maintain that Swift finds man wanting according to the highest standards of rationality, while the "soft" critics deny that the Houyhnhnms represent such a standard and argue that he takes a more liberal view of human nature. See, for example, R.S. Crane, "The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos and the History of Ideas," in *Reason and the Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas 1600–1800*, ed. J. Mazzeo (London, 1962), and K. Williams, cited above in note 5. My own approach owes more to Allan Bloom, cited above in note 2.
10. See D. Hyland, *The Virtue of Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's "Charmides"* (Ohio, 1981).
11. *A Tale of a Tub*, p. 174.
12. See Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago, 1983), p. 212.