

JONATHAN SWIFT AND THOMAS MORE

CURRICULUM UNIT

© CTMS

Contents

- I. Jonathan Swift on Thomas More
- II. Similarities between the *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels*
- III. Essay Topics for Comparing *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels*
- IV. Topics for Other Essays on *Gulliver's Travels*
- V. Lecture on *Gulliver's Travels*

I. Jonathan Swift on Thomas More

In book three, chapter 7 of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift includes More among the six most virtuous leaders up to that time, along with Socrates, Cato, and Brutus. In another essay, Swift writes that More “was the person of the greatest virtue these islands ever produced” (*Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, v. 13, Oxford UP, 1959, p. 123).

II. Similarities between the *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels*

Narrator

In *Gulliver's Travels*, it is important to realize (but not to reveal too soon to students) that the tales are being told by an unreliable narrator – in fact, a narrator who in the end has gone mad. This technique is similar to the one Thomas More utilizes in *Utopia*. Careful readers – noticing the many internal contradictions in Raphael's account in book 2, together with the many indications given in book 1 – come to realize that Raphael cannot be completely trusted, and they must weigh judiciously all that he says.

Ending

Both books end with a denunciation of pride by the main character, a main character who has proved himself to be extremely proud.

Utopian Character

“Utopia” means “no place” and neither More nor Swift presents any of their make-believe places as a perfect model to be imitated. Careful readers are meant to see that some features are impossible or grossly lacking. This “utopian” character is designed to engage the reader dialectically, fostering the philosophic effort to think through the true nature of the person and the essential requirements of society.

Books 1 & 2 of Gulliver’s Travels

These are clearly books about getting perspective on human nature: in one, Gulliver is twelve times larger than the other inhabitants; in the other he is twelve times smaller. Throughout these books, he is generally pleasant, likeable, but naïve (we’re told that he has “weak eyes” and needs his spectacles).

What are the positive “measures” within *Gulliver’s Travels* by which the reader can gauge Swift’s understanding of what is genuinely ideal?

Book 1: Lilliput before it becomes corrupt

Book 2: the King of Brobdingnag

Book 3: Homer; Aristotle as opposed to Descartes and other modern philosophers; the English yeomen of old; Lord Munodi; Brutus, More and their companions.

Book 4: Captain Pedro

Briefly, what are the larger issues being satirized in each book?

Book 1: pride in position, power, wealth, possessions (Gulliver shares in love for these things)

Book 2: pride in bodily beauty; the virtuous, good-humored, studious, and peace-loving king of Brobdingnag (who favors limited monarchy and a citizen army) is in sharp contrast to the proud and arbitrary Emperor of Lilliput who seeks dominion over the known world.

Book 3: satirizes exaggerated expectations from applied sciences, as best seen in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*. (See separate study guides on this topic in the *New Atlantis* curriculum unit.)

Book 4: continues the satire of book 3, but from two different perspectives. First, the Yahoos represent in part the view of human nature proposed by Hobbes (who served as Francis Bacon’s secretary and who shared with Bacon the criticism

posed by Machiavelli against the overly idealistic view of virtue proposed by classical and Christian thinkers). Second, the Houyhnhnms represent the “pure reason” or extreme rationalism implied in much of modern science. In these two extremes, the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms, we see examples of what the ghost of Aristotle criticized in 3.8: “He [Aristotle] said that new systems of nature were but new fashions.”

III. Essay Topics for Comparing *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels*

1. Raphael and Gulliver both end the account of their travels with speeches against pride. Compare and contrast their treatments of pride and explain the role of pride in each of their books.
2. In *Gulliver's Travels* and in *Utopia*, compare the treatment of one of the following topics:
 - Education
 - The family
 - Politics
 - Religion
 - Friendship
 - War
 - The role of travel in education

IV. Topics for Other Essays on *Gulliver's Travels*

1. Analysis of Gulliver's character: Why does he go mad?
2. What does Gulliver most admire and why? (What is his highest good?)
3. What is missing in Gulliver's education?
4. Images of pride vs. images on disgust: What is the point?
5. King of Brobdingnag vs. Gulliver's master among the Houyhnhnms
6. Swift's use of satire regarding
 - Politics in Book 1
 - Science in Book 3
 - Ideologies in Book 4
 - Education in Book 1, 3, or 4
7. The role of the chapter on ghosts in Book 3 (chapter 8)
8. Compare and contrast views of friendship in this work
9. The role of Lord Munodi in Book 3
10. Don Pedro's role in Book 4
11. Analyze one of these themes:
 - Pride
 - War
 - Gaining perspective
 - Modern vs. ancient philosophy
 - The best place to live

V. Lecture on *Gulliver's Travels*

* This text by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, is a slightly edited version of a lecture delivered in March 1994. This document is in the public domain, released June 1999.

Introduction

...I want, by way of an introduction to *Gulliver's Travels*, to adopt the approach that Swift is reacting against the rapidly developing modernity of much of the seventeenth-century though this satire is a cry of protest in the name of an older tradition, one reaching back to Socrates, Plato, and St. Paul. And yet, Swift, as a product of the new forces, is aware that we cannot simply return to medieval or Greek times and pretend that Newton never existed.

In short, I want eventually to lead us to the fairly obvious point that *Gulliver's Travels*, one of the greatest works of protest against modernity ever written, is no exercise in nostalgia but a call to shape the rapidly growing power of European culture in accordance with some old insights. His great fear is that, in the eagerness to follow the direction indicated by Hobbes and Descartes, among others, which begins with an energetic and optimistic debunking and rejection of tradition and the enthronement of new rationality, we may be throwing out the baby with the bathwater....

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is without question the most famous prose work to emerge from this 18th century Tory satiric tradition. It is the strongest, funniest, and yet in some ways most despairing cry for a halt to the trends initiated by seventeenth-century philosophy. It is the best evidence we can read to remind us that the rise of the new rationality did not occur unopposed.

Before looking at how Swift deals with his resistance, however, I want to talk a bit about the basic techniques Swift uses to structure his satire. For *Gulliver's Travels* is not just a great work of moral vision; it is also a wonderful satire, and whatever one thinks of Swift's moral position, it is difficult not to acknowledge his supreme skill as a satirist.

Some Observations on Swift's Satiric Technique

If the main purpose of any satire is to invite the reader to laugh at a particular human vice or folly, in order to invite us to consider an important moral alternative, then the chief task facing the satirist is to present the target in such a way that we find constant delight in the wit, humour, and surprises awaiting us. Few things in literature are more ineffective than a boring, repetitive satire. So to appreciate just why some satires work and others do not, one should look carefully at how the satirist sets up the target and delivers his judgment upon it in such a way as to sustain our interest. In other words, the essence of good satire is not the complexity in the moral message coming across, but in the skilful style with which the writer seeks to demolish his target.

When we discussed Aristophanes, I suggested there that one main ingredient in satire is distortion or exaggeration an invitation to see something very familiar, perhaps even something we ourselves do in such a way that it becomes simultaneously ridiculous (or even disgusting) and yet funny, comical, something no reasonable person would engage in.

Now, the first important question to ask of any satirist is how he or she achieves the necessary comic distortion which transforms the familiar into the ridiculous. And Swift's main technique for achieving this--and a wonderful technique for satire--is the basic plot of science fiction: the voyage by an average civilized human being into unknown territory and his return back home. This apparently simple plot immediately opens up all sorts of satiric possibilities, because it enables the writer constantly to play off three different perspectives in order give the reader a comic sense of what is very familiar. It can do this in the following ways:

1. If the strange new country is recognizably similar to the reader's own culture, then comic distortions in the new world enable the writer to satirize the familiar in a host of different ways, providing, in effect, a cartoon style view of the reader's own world.
2. If the strange new country is some sort of utopia--a perfectly realized vision of the ideals often proclaimed but generally violated in the reader's own world--then the satirist can manipulate the discrepancy between the ideal new world of the fiction and the corrupt world of the reader to illustrate repeatedly just how empty the pretensions to goodness really are in the reader's world.
3. But the key to this technique is generally the use of the traveller, the figure who is, in effect, the reader's contemporary and fellow countryman. How that figure reacts to the New World can be a constant source of amusement and pointed satiric comment, because, in effect, this figure represents the contact between the normal world of the reader and the strange New World of either caricatured ridiculousness or utopian perfection.

We can see Swift moving back and forth between the first two techniques, and this can create some confusion. For example, in much of Book I, Lilliput is clearly a comic distortion of life in Europe. The sections on the public rewards of leaping and creeping or the endless disputes about whether one should eat one's eggs by breaking them at the bigger or the smaller end or the absurdity of the royal proclamations are obvious and funny distortions of the court life, the pompous pretentiousness of officials, and the religious disputes familiar to Swift's readers.

At the same time, however, there are passages where he holds up the laws of Lilliput as some form of utopian ideal, in order to demonstrate just how much better they understand true reasonableness than do the Europeans. In Book II he does the same: for most of the time the people of Brobdingnag are again caricatured distorted Europeans, but clearly the King of Brobdingnag is an ideal figure.

This shift in perspective on the New World is at times confusing. Swift is, in effect, manipulating the fictional world to suit his immediate satirical purposes. It's easy enough to see what he's doing, but it does, in some sense, violate our built-up expectations. Just how are we supposed to take

Lilliput and Brobdingnag--as a distorted Europe or as a utopia or what? This lack of a consistent independent reality to the fictional world which he has created is one of the main reasons why *Gulliver's Travels* is not considered one of the first novels (since one of the requirements of a novel, it is maintained, is a consistent attitude towards the fictional reality one has created: one cannot simply manipulate it at will to prove a didactic point).

In Book IV, Swift deals more consistently with this ambiguity in the New World by dividing it into two groups: the satirized Europeans, the Yahoos, and the ideally reasonable creatures, the horses. So here there is less of a sense of shifting purpose at work. That may help to account, in part, for the great power of the Fourth Voyage.

Now, the genius of Swift's satire in *Gulliver's Travels* realizes itself in a second feature--the way he organizes the New World in order to make it a constantly fertile source of satiric humour. His main insight, in the first two books, has the simplicity of genius. He simply changes the perspective on human conduct: in Book I Gulliver is a normal human being visiting a recognizably European society, but he is twelve times bigger than anyone else. In the second the technique is the same, but now he is twelve times smaller.

With this altered perspective, Swift can now manipulate Gulliver's reactions to the changing circumstances in order to underscore his satiric points in a very humorous way. For instance, it's clear that the main satiric target in Book I is the pride Europeans take in public ceremonies, titles, court preferment, and all sorts of celebrations of their power and magnificence. So there's an obvious silliness to the obsession with these matters when the figures are only six inches high.

But what makes this preoccupation with ceremony all the sillier is Gulliver's reaction to it. He, as a good European, takes it quite seriously. He's truly impressed with the king's magnificence, with his proclamation that he's the most powerful monarch in the world, and he takes great delight in being given the title of a Nardac. The satiric point here, of course, is not on the Lilliputians (although they are obviously caricatured Europeans) but on Gulliver's enthusiastic participation in their silliness. For example, when he's accused of having an affair with the cabinet minister's wife, he does not scoff at the biological ridiculousness of that accusation; he defends himself with his new title: I couldn't have done that; after all, I'm a Nardac. Similarly in Book II, in which the main target shifts to the Europeans' preoccupation with physical beauty, the chief sources of satiric humour are not only the gross exaggerations of the human body seen magnified twelve times but also Gulliver's reactions to it.

The Character of Gulliver

And this brings me to a key point in following *Gulliver's Travels*, namely the importance of Gulliver himself. He is our contact throughout the four voyages, and at the end he is completely different from the person he was at the start. So it's particularly important that we get a handle on who he is, what happens to him, why it happens, and how we are supposed to understand that. The single most

important thing Swift has to say in *Gulliver's Travels* is communicated to us in the changes which take place in the narrator.

Now, to get the satiric point of the changes in Gulliver across, Swift has to be careful not to give the reader an easy escape, for Swift understood very well that readers who see themselves satirized will always look for some way of neutralizing or deflecting the satire away from them. Satire, Swift observed, is a mirror in which people see everyone else's face but their own. So it's important for us to take careful stock of Gulliver, to assess just how reliable a person he is, so that we can fully understand the nature of his transformation.

At the start of the first voyage, Swift takes a few pages to establish for us that Gulliver is, in some ways, a very typical European. He is middle aged, well educated, sensible (in the best sense of the term), with no extravagantly romantic notions. He is a careful observer, scrupulous about looking after his family, and fully conversant with the importance of conducting his affairs prudently. There is nothing extraordinary about him. He's been around, and he's not a person to be easily rattled.

This is important to grasp, because in effect Swift is removing from us any possibility of ascribing the transformation which takes place in Gulliver to any quirks of his character. He is not an unbalanced, erratic, private, or imaginative person. On the contrary, he is about as typically sensible and reasonable a narrator as one could wish. And he fully supports the culture which has produced him, and has developed no critical understanding of it.

Thus, in the first two books, we can see why he would naturally fall in with the Europeanness of the new world. He has never reflected at all on the rightness or wrongness of the given order of things, so he naturally supports the authority of the king, the ceremonies of the court, and the "fairness" of the justice system.

Only when he himself is sentenced to be blinded do we begin to sense that Gulliver is learning something. Circumstances are forcing him to think about, not just his own safety, but something much bigger: the justice of the proceedings. He is, in other words, beginning to develop a critical awareness of the limitations of the values of Lilliput and, beyond that, of the way in which the Europeans reflect those same values.

These initial critical insights are temporary only, and when he returns, he is quickly reconciled to European life. But in the second voyage the critical awareness returns, especially in relation to the physical grossness of the giant Brobdingnagians. The altered perspective leads him to reflect upon the way in which Europeans have become obsessed with physical beauty, especially with the feminine body, when, from a different perspective, it is comically gross and even nauseating.

However, this growing sense of a critical awareness in Book II does not lead Gulliver seriously to question his European values, and so he is prepared to defend the sorry history of Europe in the face of the King of Brobdingnag's scorn.

For that powerful indictment of European life--which is so close in tone to the conclusion of Book IV--Gulliver is not yet ready for. His typical European consciousness is still too full of complacent self congratulation to accept this form of criticism, so he dismisses it with a snide

remark about the limited understanding of the King of Brobdingnag (reinforced by his rejection of the use of gunpowder).

Yet, it's clear that something is happening to Gulliver, because upon his return home after the second voyage, it takes him some time to readjust to European life. This is quite comical, but the point is important: in his strange new land, his perceptions are changing. At this point it is simply a matter of the physical proportions of the people, but Swift is setting up the reader for the conclusions of the book, when the transformation of Gulliver is going to involve a total alternation of his moral perspectives, so that he is no longer able to return to the calm, unreflective, typical European that he was when he started.

The Fourth Voyage

I'm moving directly to the fourth voyage, because in a sense it is the logical continuation of the Second Voyage (the Third Voyage was written later), and most of the serious arguments about Swift's satire focus on this part of the book.

In the fourth voyage, Gulliver's transformation becomes complete, and when he returns he can no longer participate in European society--not even with his friends and family--as he could before. It's as if Swift is saying that Gulliver has discovered something that makes social life in the normal sense insupportable, so that he would sooner construct his own life among his domestic horses than return to a normal European family life.

And the key interpretative questions thus arises: How are we to deal with this conclusion to the story? On the face of it, the conclusion seems an unacceptably harsh condemnation of European humanity. Their Yahoo-like nature makes dealing with them impossible, and thus the reasonable thing to do is to turn away from them. Is this not ultimately a violently misanthropic gesture, and therefore something we must turn away from?

Dealing with this question is one of the great battle grounds in the interpretation of English literature (like dealing with Hamlet or Paradise Lost). In order to clarify the issues, I'd like to review some of the positions and then suggest some of the things we need to consider in charting a way through the difficulties. I should add that I do have my own view of what is the most comprehensible interpretation (and I will add that), but I don't want anyone to think that this is not fiercely contested interpretative territory.

The first reaction to the end of the Fourth Voyage is to acknowledge that Swift indeed wants us to understand and sympathize with Gulliver's actions. The main satiric point of Gulliver's final actions was to ridicule the Europeans' pretensions to rationality; Gulliver's response is an exaggerated but still understandable way of underlining the point that, if we could come to understand true rationality, as Gulliver has done through his experience with the horses, and if we could have our eyes opened as to what we are really like underneath all our fine illusions about ourselves, as Gulliver's eyes have been opened by his experience of the Yahoos, then we, too, would turn away, and, rather like the person who has finally made it out of Plato's cave, want to spend our

time in contemplation of the beauty and truth of reason and not be distracted by the foolish pride of those gazing at the cave wall (the analogy with the Allegory of the Cave is very important here).

This interpretation was common among Swift's contemporaries and in the nineteenth century. However, many who saw this in the satire simply dismissed it as a harsh but finally erroneous vision; they believed that the promises of the new science were, in fact, being realized, that progress was possible, and that Swift was simply wrong, out of touch with the perfectibility of human nature and human social institutions, that he was simply a grumpy, pessimistic, conservative Christian. Thus, the book was simply a conservative complaining about an emerging new truth.

In addition, of course, the book had too many naughty words and rude scenes, and therefore should not be read by people concerned for politeness in literature. So those who wanted to believe in a less fiercely limited view of human nature had an easy excuse to denigrate Swift as a writer worth reading. Progress is on schedule, for all Swift's negative vision.

Now, this reaction is interesting because it does at least acknowledge that Swift had a serious purpose and that in the transformation of Gulliver he made that purpose explicit. Gulliver is, indeed, Swift's spokesman until the very end. The dismissal of the book, therefore, does not involve a denial of the full satiric intention. It does acknowledge the point of what Swift is doing. However, it claims that that is the wrong point. Swift's satire is clear, but his understanding of human nature and morality is wrong.

A second reaction is to equate Swift with Gulliver--to claim, as with the first reaction, that Swift intends us to take Gulliver's transformation seriously. Swift, however, is mad, mentally unbalanced, notoriously neurotic, and therefore we do not need to attend seriously to the ending of the book, unless we happen to be interested in clinical manifestations in literature of various mental aberrations.

Enter, from stage left, the psychoanalytic view of Swift, which quite neutralizes the satire by an appeal to various disorders. ...But what such an approach does to Gulliver's Travels is important. It replaces the moral seriousness of the satiric message with a clinical study of the deranged author. Thus, we do not have to attend seriously to any moral position at stake here.

A third reaction, common in the twentieth century, quite rehabilitates Swift from this sort of criticism by claiming that, at the end of the Fourth Voyage, we are not meant to see Gulliver's actions as the natural rational outcome of what he has been through, because Gulliver himself has here become the target of the satire. Gulliver, in other words, no longer speaks for the author. What he does is, in effect, an overreaction, and Swift wants us to understand that as such. His treatment of the Portuguese captain and his family are clear indications that Gulliver has gone overboard in his admiration for the horses and his dislike of the Yahoos, and that we are to see in his conduct a warning of sorts.

This approach to the Fourth Voyage, one should note, helps to maintain the claim that Swift was an intelligent writer, fully in command of his medium, and that we do not have to deal with the disturbing effects of the satire by writing them off as the ravings of an anally maladjusted neurotic, obsessed with the cramping in his sphincter. We simply have to understand that Swift's satiric

intentions at the end of the Fourth Voyage are not as harsh as they appear to be. What this approach does to the power of Swift's satire, however, is a question that needs to be carefully considered. How consistent is this view of the ending with the general tenor of the rest of the satire in Book IV and in the other Books?

Now debating these options might be an interesting seminar exercise. But however they are resolved, I would like to offer some things that one should bear in mind.

First, the transformation of Gulliver starts, as I observed, in Book I and becomes considerably stronger in Book II. That transformation involves a growing critical awareness of the extent to which pride rules human actions. At the start Gulliver gives no sign of ever having thought about such matters. He's a patriotic, unreflective European professional. The insights come intermittently and do not last. But to some extent, the transformation of Gulliver at the end of the fourth voyage can be seen as a logical outcome of the trend that has started before. So, however we evaluate the end of the fourth voyage, we need to measure that interpretation against the rest of the book.

This point might be connected with the growing seriousness of the initial situation that gets Gulliver into the New World: in Book I it's a shipwreck; in Book II, he's abandoned; in Book III, it's pirates; and in Book IV, it's a mutiny (and we all remember from reading Dante that a mutiny, a revolt against established authority, is the greatest crime).

Second, Gulliver's transformation in Book IV has two motives: his sudden awareness of the Yahoo-like nature of European human beings, including himself, and, equally important, his sudden discovery about what true reasonableness really means (in the lives of the horses). So in estimating how one should assess his final state, one needs to bear in mind that the issue is not just a turning away from European family and social life; it is also a turning towards what he is now fully in love with, a contemplation of the truth.

Third, one's judgment on what Gulliver has gone through does not depend upon our having to decide whether it would be rational or not for us to follow suit, abandon our families, and set up home in the nearest stable. That is not what Swift is saying. He's offering us a vision--a comic and satiric but nonetheless morally serious vision--of what would happen to a typical European (like us) if we had, like Gulliver, come to a full understanding through experience both of ourselves and of true reasonableness (which we like to think we possess).

The basic idea here is derived, quite clearly, from Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Gulliver has made it out of the cave, and having seen the sun, he's not about to pretend that looking at shadows on the wall is the right way to live. What is happening to him is, in fact, just what Plato says will happen to the person who returns: he is treated as insane because normal people (that's us) simply cannot grasp what he now understands.

(It's interesting, incidentally, to note just how popular this sort of ending is in satiric stories with a similar intent: the endings of, for example, *Heart of Darkness* and *Catch 22*, are remarkably similar. The central character, once a recognizably typical representative of his culture, has gone through a transformation which leads him to reject that culture in a way that his contemporaries do not

understand: Marlow takes to the sea for the rest of his life; Yossarian sets out in a rubber raft for Scandinavia).

Fourth, one needs also to recognize that it's no serious criticism of Swift's moral position to observe that the life of the horses is not all that attractive, that to us it seems boring. That's part of Swift's point. We, as readers, are Yahoos, irrational creatures and, beyond that, incapable for the most part of even understanding and responding to the attractions of such reasonable behaviour. For Swift's major point here is not that we should try to emulate the horses, for that's impossible, but rather that we should stop pretending that we are equivalent to them. We are not by nature reasonable creatures, and it is the height of folly and pride to assert that we are. We have to start our moral awareness with the acceptance of that truth, and our dissatisfaction with the life of the horses is not an indication that they are wrong so much as that we are unreasonable. We describe ourselves in terms appropriate to the horses, but we characteristically behave more like Yahoos. That is the source of the pride which Swift wishes to attack.

Finally, it's important to recognize that our last contact with Gulliver indicates quite clearly that what bothers him about human beings is not what they are but what they pretend to be. He would be much happier about living among human beings again, and is starting to do so, but everything would be much easier for him if their characteristic pride did not always get in the way:

My reconciliation to the Yahoo kind in general might not be so difficult, if they would be content with those vices and follies only which nature hath entitled them to. I am not in the least provoked by the sight of a lawyer, a pickpocket, a colonel, a fool, a lord, a gamester, a politician, a whoremonger, a physician, an evidence, a suborner, an attorney, a traitor, or the like: this is all according to the due course of things. But when I behold a lump of deformity, and diseases both in body and mind, smitten with pride, it immediately breaks all the measures of my patience; neither shall I be ever able to comprehend how such an animal and such a vice could tally together. The wise and virtuous Houyhnhnms, who abound in all excellencies that can adorn a rational creature, have no name for this vice in their language, which hath no terms to express anything that is evil, except those whereby they describe the detestable qualities of their Yahoos, among which they were not able to distinguish this of pride, for want of thoroughly understanding human nature, as it showeth itself in other countries, where that animal presides. But I, who had more experience, could plainly observe some rudiments of it in the Yahoos.

The point I want to stress here is that, however one navigates one's way through the interpretative waters of the ending of *Gulliver's Travels*, it is important to reconcile your view of Gulliver's behaviour with what he actually says and with the satiric momentum of the last book, as it arises out of the earlier voyages.

My own view (a common but contested view) is that Swift does want us to take Gulliver seriously right up to the end, that we are to understand his reaction as the natural consequence of a normal man who has made it out of the cave, and who now is not willing to go back to what he once was. The fact that we find this odd is a reminder to us of just how much we are the product of years of watching shadows on the cave wall. Yes, the Portuguese captain is a good person, and, yes,

Gulliver's wife and family are neglected, but when you've come to see, as Gulliver has, just what true reasonableness involves, then a normal life and normal good people are not enough. The point, to repeat myself, is not that we should try to emulate Gulliver, but that we should try to understand him--and if we do that, we may come to recognize the illusory pride which makes us claim to be rational creatures.

Of course, I have to admit that the extreme anger Gulliver displays at the end (like his extreme nausea at the human body in Book II) does invite someone to wonder about the extent to which the satiric purpose might be being subverted by an excessively strong imaginative distaste for certain elements of human life. The borderline between very strong satire and a questionable wallowing about in ugliness or pornography for its own sake is not always clearly discernible and different readers have different reactions. To that extent, I would admit that there is ground in Swift's style for certain questions to arise. However, I do not believe myself that such questions cannot be answered within the framework of the interpretation I have just outlined.

A Final Comment

For me Swift's language, though strong, is still in control. The vision is harsh, the anger extreme, but that's a sign of the intense moral indignation Swift feels at the transformation of life around him in ways that are leading, he thinks, to moral disaster. The central Christian and Socratic emphasis on virtue is losing ground to something he sees as a facile illusion--that reason, wealth, money, and power could somehow do the job for us which had been traditionally placed upon our moral characters.

In the new world, faith, hope, and charity, Swift sees, are going to be irrelevant, because the rational organization of human experience and the application of the new reasoning to all aspects of human life are going to tempt human beings with a rich lure: the promise of happiness. Under the banner of the new rationality, the traditional notions of virtue will become irrelevant, as human beings substitute for excellence of character--the development of the individual human life according to some telos, some spiritual goal--the idea that properly organized practical rules, structures of authority, rational enquiry into efficient causes, profitable commercial ventures, and laws will provide the sure guide, because, after all, human beings are rational creatures.

Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* is the most famous and most eloquent protest against this modern project. The severity of his indignation and anger is, I think, a symptom of the extent to which he realized the battle was already being lost. To us, however, over two hundred years later, Swift's point is perhaps more vividly relevant than to many of his contemporaries. After all, we have witnessed the triumphant unrolling of the scientific project, the extension of Descartes's rationality into all aspects of our lives.

And yet we might want to ask ourselves whether the cheque which Descartes wrote out for us is negotiable, whether his promise has, in fact, made us morally better creatures, more able to live the good life, more charitable to our neighbours, with a greater faith in the excellences life does make

possible, better able to work out our differences justly, and more able to achieve true happiness. Or, on the contrary, has giving the enormous power of the new science to the Yahoos not created some of the those very dangers which Swift is so concerned to warn us about will happen? The yahoos now posses the secrets of atomic energy and genetic engineering; their commercial zest is punching holes in the ozone and deforesting the planet. Meanwhile, in Moscow and Washington, DC, the life expectancy of adult males is plummeting. Has all this increase in knowledge and power made us any more just towards each other? Has it clarified the good life for me and a means of settling justly our disputes? The jury is, one might argue, still out.