

refutation of contemporary optimism Wesley proceeds to unload upon the reader page upon page of *Gulliver*.

In the world of political thought, the clash between old and new is perhaps nowhere so concretely exhibited as in the contrasting theories regarding the state of nature. For not in *Gulliver* only are Yahoos set over against Houyhnhnms. In fact it looks like too simple a discovery to point out that in the last voyage of the *Travels* we have, designedly or not, Hobbes contrasted with Locke. And yet the parallel holds good surprisingly well. Men in Hobbes' state of nature, like Swift's Yahoos, are "in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man against every man . . . with no arts, no letters, no society, and, which is worst of all, continual fear of violent danger; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."²⁸ And while Hobbes' brevity of description with regard to his state of war prevents elaboration of the parallel, the corresponding similarity between Locke and Swift is certainly tempting. Men in Locke's state of nature, like the Houyhnhnms, are rational creatures, "living together according to reason, without a common superior,"—in a state of liberty without license, every one administering the laws of nature for himself, laws of temperance and mutual benevolence.²⁹ The relation of Swift to Hobbes and to Locke is a subject for separate investigation. On the whole, I think (and Swift's political writings would furnish evidence in abundance), he stands nearer to Hobbes. In *Gulliver's Travels*, however, Swift is clearly neither Hobbes nor Locke. Gulliver is neither Yahoo nor Houyhnhnm. He cannot attain to the rational felicity of the Houyhnhnms. Neither has he sunk to the level of the Yahoos, though this is a doubtful advantage. He lacks the strength of a healthy animal, and his glimmering of reason has unhappily burdened him with responsibility of conscience.

Indeed, if Swift's own hints regarding the meaning of his book are heeded, it is in the contrast between Yahoo and Houyhnhnm that his main thesis lies hid. Gulliver, occupying a position between the two, part beast, part reason, is Swift's allegorical picture of the dual nature of man. He is not Houyhnhnm, *animal rationale*, nor is he Yahoo. He is *rationis capax*. One could apply to *Gulliver's Travels* a passage of Cicero, quoted with approval by both St. Augustine and Bayle: "Nature has been to man not a mother, but a step-mother—sending him into the world naked, frail, and infirm, toiling under a burden of care, fearful, slothful, and given over to lust, but not without a spark of divine reason."³⁰

²⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, chap. 13.

²⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, Book II, Chaps. 2, 3.

³⁰ Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, article "Ovid," Remark E.

tolerant than any system of law."¹ This might be true if the Houyhnhnms cultivated a "general will," or if they carried on the kind of virtuous terrorism that in schools often goes by the name of "honor system." But there is no need to exert "continuous pressure" for conformity among the Houyhnhnms. They cannot but agree in all but an occasional matter, and even in the case Swift presents the Houyhnhnm master hesitates to assent only because of Gulliver's furious resistance to being sent away. Other critics have made similar objections about the religion of the Houyhnhnms. But one cannot call them conformists, as Orwell does, or Deists, as others do. Their reason inevitably produces agreement, and their piety is exemplary within the limits of their purely natural reason. We cannot blame them for finding fulfillment in what, for us, would be defects of liberty or failures of Christian faith.

Why should Swift have created these problems for us? Clearly he is demanding of his readers what he never grants to Gulliver, the power to make necessary distinctions. We must separate the intuitive rightness of the Houyhnhnms' choice from the tyranny of conformity, and we must separate natural piety from rationalistic or anti-clerical deism. Gulliver fails to make the most important distinction of all—between *animal rationale* and *animal rationis capax*. Only after long exposure to human folly and perversity does he give up the dream of man as a rational animal, but instead of coming to terms with what in fact he is, Gulliver immediately turns to truly rational animals, the Houyhnhnms, and hopes to become one of them. His pathetic whinny and canter betray the fantasy of a literal-minded convert.

The same kind of problem occurs in the realm of politics. Gulliver's account of English institutions to the King of Brobdingnag betrays the corruptibility they invite: English laws are extremely complex, and they "are best explained, interpreted, and applied by those whose interest and abilities lie in perverting, confounding, and eluding them" (II, vi). There is no reconciliation of duty and interest, but instead a systematic perversion of duty by interest. In his account of Europe to his Houyhnhnm master, Gulliver makes explicit all that he has earlier unconsciously revealed. Lawyers are now "equally disposed to pervert the general reason of mankind in every other subject of discourse, as in that of their own profession" (IV, v). This single instance is typical of all the rest. Gulliver has come to recognize the nature of corruption, but his recognition is so belated and so passionate that he despairs of all politics. When he writes an account of his travels, he expects the world to reform at once. But, in this case at least, we have

¹"Politics in Literature: An Examination of *Gulliver's Travels*," in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, 1950.

a third possibility firmly sketched in: the reformed mixed state of the Brobdingnagians, which mediates between duty and interest, conformity and freedom, and accepts the need for a power structure but diffuses its control.

Parallel to the political issues in the book is the relationship of body and reason. In Lilliput, Gulliver's body is grosser than he can imagine (although he senses it), and the Lilliputians seem more delicate than in fact they are. In Brobdingnag the human body becomes monstrous, as Gulliver confronts with microscopic acuteness its ugliness and its noisome smells. In both the Struldbruggs and the Yahoos we see bodies that are completely without control or cleanliness; in fact, the Yahoos revel in filth and use excrement as a weapon. The body becomes a physical symbol of the power drives that are seen in the body politic; in Brobdingnag there is ugliness (simply more visible to Gulliver because of his diminutive size, as his own normal human ugliness was apparent to the Lilliputians) as there is cruelty and at least some measure of corruption (the farmer's turning Gulliver into a profitable show, the court dwarf's malice), but there is also a saving control of both corruption and physical nastiness. In the Struldbruggs old age has produced physical deterioration, avarice, contentiousness, and irrationality; in the Yahoos (who seem to have degenerated from an original couple, like the human race) there is sheer abandoned animality. The Yahoos are particularly nasty animals, it should be noted, not because Swift "in his fury . . . is shouting at his fellow-creatures: 'You are filthier than you are!'" (Orwell's view) but because they are a degenerate species, which neither possesses the instinctive controls of other animals (such as seasonal mating) nor preserves the faculties by which the human animal controls itself—its rational powers. Recent experiments have shown us animals that lose the power to identify with their proper kind and cannot acquire the traits of the kind they are raised among. Something of the sort has happened to the Yahoos; and their nastiness is only a further tribute to the importance of man's rational powers of self-control.

A third pattern, related to both politics and the control of the physical body, is that of simplicity and complexity. The Brobdingnagian laws are transparently simple; the Houyhnhnms need no laws at all. So it is with their cultures. The King, whose largeness of vision has the generosity of a Renaissance humanist, reminds us that Brobdingnag is a place of cultivation. But his people do not create books in great quantity; their largest library has a thousand volumes. In their writing "they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary words, or using various expressions." They are skilled in practical arts, but utterly resistant to "ideas, entities, transcendentals, and abstractions." We see the reverse of this throughout the third voyage—

in a canoe of stitched Yahoo skins, in an actual sailing time of sixteen hours at a speed which he estimated at no more than a league and a half an hour.⁸ To be sure, Gulliver had a "very favourable wind," but his "little sail" was obviously some sort of magic carpet.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 294 [Bk. IV, ch. 11].

Roland Mushat Frye: Swift's Yahoos and the Christian Symbols for Sin

Christian symbolism has traditionally used "the flesh" as representative of man's natural propensity towards evil. Bishop Gilbert Burnet, in his *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (1699), writes in support of Article IX, "Of Original or Birth Sin," that "it is certain that in Scripture this general corruption of our nature is often mentioned." He then proceeds to quote nine typical passages which emphasize man's natural proclivity for evil, and concludes in this wise:

The flesh is weak. The flesh lusteth against the spirit. The carnal mind is enmity to the law of God, and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be: and they that are in the flesh cannot please God: *where by flesh is meant the natural state of mankind, according to those words, That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*¹

Such was the conventional division of man for admonitory purposes, with the spirit as the valuable, redeeming part, and the flesh representing all the natural inclinations to evil which warred against the higher powers.

The most definite and most complete identification of the Yahoo with Gulliver is in terms of the flesh or the body. This is clearly stated when Gulliver is first able to inspect "the beast" at close range. "My Horror and Astonishment are not to be described," he says, "when I observed, in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure."² Later, Gulliver's master among the Houyhnhnms similarly observes that Gulliver "agreed in every Feature of [his] Body with other Yahoos" (pp. 243-44).³ This perfect correspondence between

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¹ Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London, 1850), p. 132.

² *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Herbert Davis and Harold Williams (Oxford, 1941), 213-14 [Bk. IV, ch. 2].

³ [Bk. IV, ch. 7.]

man and Yahoo in the body is even further emphasized by an elaboration of how they differ. Man differs in having the gift of speech and in having some faculty of reason, even though he does abuse it. There are other minor differences, but throughout the book the reiterated identification is physical. After the episode at the river when he is the object of fleshly desire, Gulliver says "I could no longer deny, that I was a real *Yahoo*, in every Limb and Feature, since the Females had a natural Propensity to me as one of their own Species."⁴ The consistent reference is to physical similarities—in short, only one correlation seems valid, that Yahoo is man in "the flesh." . . .

The Yahoo may not only be related to Christian symbolism of the flesh, but may also be seen as embodying many of those elements of filth and deformity which are emblematic of sin throughout the Scriptures, beginning with the Levitical pollutions and carrying on far into the New Testament. Nor did Swift introduce the literary employment of dung, deformity and corruption, as is evident if we recall terms used in Milton's descriptions of Sin in *Paradise Lost*, and in Spenser's stripping of Duessa in *The Faerie Queene*.⁵ To illustrate the vitality of this tradition in England, let me begin with three examples from the pulpit. I submit that if Swift had been guilty of any one of these statements, it would have been cited innumerable times as proof of his diseased outlook. In one of his Lincoln's Inn sermons, John Donne describes man's condition in this way: "Between that excremental jelly that thy body is made of at first, and that jelly which thy body dissolves to at last; there is not so noisome, so putrid a thing in nature."⁶ Such, according to Donne, is man's mortal condition. Writing in 1667, B. Agas describes the godless who professed to be Christians: "As dross among Gold, or as scum upon a pot, such are these, a meer filth among the pure professors. They are the Gospels reproach and Religions shame, equally disgracing both the one and the other, as a dead blasted limb a living Body, or as a loathsome leperous scab a beautiful face."⁷ In the same vein, Jeremie Taylor (1613-67) asks in his *Contemplation of the State of Man*: "What is man but a vessel of dung, a stink of corruption, and, by birth, a slave of the devil?"⁸ Filth is employed in each of these three passages, in two of which terms for excrement are used. Two also employ a noisome or stinking smell as characteristic of evil, while a third adds the deformity of body and of face. . . .

⁴ *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 251 [Bk. IV, ch. 8].

⁵ *Paradise Lost*, II, 650-66, 795-800; X, 629-37, and *The Faerie Queene*, I, viii, 46-48.

⁶ John Donne, *Works* (London, 1839), IV, 231.

⁷ B. Agas, *Gospel Conversation, with a short Directory Thereunto* (London, 1667), 47.

⁸ Taylor, *The Whole Works* (London, 1880), I, 396.