

Warren Tallman

SWIFT'S FOOL: A Comment upon Satire in *Gulliver's Travels*

TO APPROACH THE GULLIVER SCENE in search of satire is to approach a place of seeming wonders which become increasingly unwonderful the more closely they are examined. Intensifications, exaggerations, and distortions are jammed like so many gouging knees and elbows into what is only seemingly a conventionally spaced world. The *narrative* appears to open out ordinary time-space vistas as Gulliver journeys across many years to some far-away places. But all that extent is illusion. Measured by paragraph space and reading time, the scene is crowded as in few other books, with Brobdingnag seven months and thousands of sea-going miles from Lilliput by narrative measure but actually five paragraphs and several reading minutes away. This crowding—practised throughout—makes *Gulliver's Travels* something like some of those equally crowded and similarly distorted scenes that Breughel painted—Mad Maggie, for example. That Maggie strides through Breughel's painting with the same rapt intensity that characterizes Gulliver reminds us that there is a madness loose in Swift's book which gathers force as it closes in and finally overwhelms poor Lemuel.

Yet to enter the scene on the lookout for the madness is to meet, instead, miraculous clarity of control. All the seeming ease with which Swift moves Gulliver through the constantly shifting multiplicities of each new moment argues obvious mastery. His simple-seeming language is actually so plastic that the intricate oddities of the place reach the reader as straight-forward documentation by Honest-John Gulliver, who not only believes that all he says is Gospel but writes that way too. Such sure control argues concentrated clarity of purpose, since no man can be consistently clear unless he is consistently sure of what he is about. And in works of art, as in life, motives can be inferred from events and actions. Swift's main motive, his main manoeuvre, is established almost at once, I think, four paragraphs along, when Gulliver emerges dripping from the sea and lies down in deep slumber upon Lilliput shore, to awaken *bound*.

I pass over the details by which he frees his left arm—necessary if he is to act at all—and pick up the series which begins when conversation is attempted. He stares at the sun. Infantlike, he puts his finger in his mouth. Next, he eats. Then he drinks. Then he urinates, and—as he is being hauled to the city—he falls asleep, but sneezes himself awake. Once domiciled in “an ancient temple . . . the largest in the whole kingdom”, he looks about, then crawls in on all fours and defecates. Stare, finger in mouth, eat, drink, urinate, sleep, sneeze, crawl, defecate: thus do Gulliver’s travels begin, as might an infant’s, the body’s machinery in excellent running order, all orifices functioning. Yet already Gulliver begins to tamper with this physical well-being in a way that establishes both the importance and the drift of such acts. For when he has defecated, he feels obliged to assure the reader that,

I would not have dwelt so long upon a circumstance, that perhaps at first sight may appear not very momentous, if I had not thought it necessary to justify my character in point of cleanliness to the world.

This remark echoes ahead to the rampant physical revulsions which grip him in Houyhnhnm land, and the “circumstance” which only *appears* “not very momentous” is of course decisive. At the outset of his journeys Gulliver is born into, bound into the body, and though at ease is confronted by a need, later a mania, to explain that inconvenience away.

But of course there is small chance in Lilliput, where a chief use of the diminutive is to heighten the reader’s awareness of Gulliver’s body. Much of the effectiveness of the scenes in which physical immediacy is established traces back to the reader’s amused awareness and Gulliver’s enthusiastic forgetfulness of the incongruities involved. With what transports of homage does he extend himself prone the more reverently to touch his suitcase lips to the extended finger of a postage-stamp queen, or to defend with earnest indignation his six-foot length against allegations of improper conduct with Flimnap’s five-inch wife, or to recount sidling cautiously down the main street past hundreds of thousands in order to clamber on stools over castle walls and then to lie prone and peer through peep-hole windows at doll-house rooms, deliciously unaware that the chief spectacle in all this is himself. His wonderfully sustained forgetfulness of bodily presence reaches its height of absurdity when he rushes ashore, hauling the Blefuscu fleet along behind—so many toy ships—thundering, “Long live the most puissant Emperor of Lilliput”—who is actually one-half fingernail higher than his less puissant countrymen. But Gulliver’s unawareness is finally broken through, of course, when he floods the castle and is astonished and mortified that the queen is not pleased. He is, in sum,

the only giant in history who so long wards off the effective realization that he is in fact a giant—a man-mountain to the increasingly unhappy Lilliputians, and to the reader a bulky but most obliging boy.

Why does Swift put Gulliver through the paces of the body's functions and then present a protracted series of incidents which point up marked unawareness of his deliberately exaggerated bodily presence? Surely in order to reveal a stage of consciousness not much beyond the infancy his initial actions suggest, not much more than the childish enthusiasms and lapses of judgment his subsequent actions confirm. He is a *naïf* after the fashion of extremely young years, and if his *naïveté* centres about the man-mountain bulk he cavorts in, it also includes the something less than monumental mind with which he only somewhat controls his actions. *Lilliput is a scene of both physical and mental naïveté.* This is important, for as I see the voyages they now move from Lilliputian *naïveté* about body to bodily experience and disillusionment in Brobdingnag, and from Lilliputian *naïveté* about mind to mental experience and disillusionment in Laputa.

Repeatedly in Brobdingnag, Gulliver undergoes bodily threat, insult, humiliation. The birds bedew him, the frogs beslime him, the monkey stuffs ordure into his mouth, even the flies driddle on him. Meanwhile, rats try to devour him, dogs grab him, bees buzz him, local juvenile delinquents try to brain him with bowling balls, and the teen-age girls give him the business—he is their slapnuck boy. The grownup giants? The grownups chuckle and chortle with condenscending glee. It needs to be said this way because it is comedy. But it is necessary to correct because it is not comedy for Gulliver. He plays it straight, and out of his seriousness emerges a protagonist who is trying his best to stand up for man. In Brobdingnag Gulliver consistently demonstrates those main-line physical virtues that can distinguish man, notably courage, dignity, and magnanimity in face of the miasmatic insect, bird, rodent, reptile, animal, human onslaughts and mockeries he steadfastly endures and combats. All of his human force, all his physical force, is directed to outfacing the rejections and humiliations he endures. But "the odds is gone." He cannot jump over the cow pie.

Worse still, at the other, mental level, he cannot get past the king. Just as impeachment in Lilliput taught Gulliver that he could not take body for granted, the king's indictment teaches him that he cannot take mind for granted. Their conversation is as good a place as any to throw the SATIRE switch in order to point out how a too sedulous search for satiric elements can sidetrack comprehension of what is at stake. To see the conversation with the king as satiric is to see Swift's straight-

man, Mr. Gullible, over-praising the institutions of his "own dear native land" so egregiously that the king easily flattens him. This is one up for Swift. Surprised and stung, Gulliver comes up off the deck with even more addle-headed proof of English superiority, his infamous gunpowder proposal. The good, wise king, already convinced that Gulliver belongs to "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered", is now totally horrified that "so impotent and grovelling an insect" as Gulliver "could entertain such inhuman ideas." Down goes Gulliver again, and it is a great day for the Irish. Yet, as satire, this is superficial. If we are to take the king's indictment seriously we must accept the force of Gulliver's account as the king does—as the odious deceptions and vituperations of a grovelling and inhuman insect. But this is nonsense. The force that animates the conversation is not dark with human viciousness. It is jumping with the comic enthusiasm that accentuates Gulliver's *naïveté* and ineptitude of mind. He honestly thinks that the king will be favourably impressed with his native land; and when the king is not, he sets off the gunpowder proposal on the unsound but well-known principle that if ordinary demonstrations fail to convince, one can always try fireworks. The fireworks go off in his face, robbing him of his *naïveté*. The shock of the king's scorn opens out Laputa, in which Gulliver's illusions about the life of the mind take the same merciless drubbing that his illusions about the life of the body have taken in Brobdingnag.

Small comment is needed to point up the ways in which Gulliver becomes disillusioned while in the countries of Laputa. But it is important to realize that in his progress from place to place throughout his travels in the more and more deeply shadowed valleys of a world not made for man, each new step is a consequence and outgrowth of previous steps. The flop-headed inhabitants of the flying island who have almost completely separated their minds from their bodies, their kingdoms from earth, their speculations from either the human or the natural universe, are simply a projection of Gulliver's response to his experiences in Brobdingnag. His realization that body is not enough causes him to turn to mind—which also is not enough. In Laputa, Balnibarbi, and Glubdubdrib his mind is worked over with the same effects that his body was in Brobdingnag. And it is important to realize that, just as the impeachment in Lilliput is an end to bodily *naïveté*, and the conversation with the Brobdingnag king an end to mental *naïveté*, the Struldbrug incident in Luggnagg, the climax of the voyages, is again (and with a devastating double impact) an end to innocence. News of their immortality excites in Gulliver heightened hopes of resolving all that he has discovered to be wrong

elsewhere. If body and mind can stand up forever, there will be world enough and time for immortal vigour and seasoned wisdom to work out a reconciliation. But that, alas, is not the way the story runs. His forward rush to embrace a human ultimate carries him into the presence of an ultimate horror, a fusion of the worst he has discovered in either of the other lands—gummy senility of mind wedded to gummy senility of body, forever. For Gulliver this is the end of hope for mankind as he has experienced it, *bon voyage* for the journey into the final dimension of his "evil destiny." Meet and greet a Struldbrug and thereby obtain a one-way, no-return ticket to Houyhnhnm Land, underwritten by the absolute guarantee that henceforward there will be no more meetings of body and mind: permanent dissociation, perfect enmity—madness.

In Houyhnhnm Land the conflict that began to assail Gulliver from the moment he was bound into body upon his arrival at Lilliput reaches its culmination. Here, body has been driven to that narrow ledge of being—more like a ditch—where it must go when repudiated by mind. And mind has retreated to an opposite but even more narrow ledge which the Houyhnhnms please to call "reason". The surprise is Lemuel Gulliver, who arrives on this far-out shore like some demented Quixote, without Sancho or Rosinante, after journeys more dreadful than any the old Hidalgo ever took. The surprise comes when he finds and kneels down in reverent homage before a stately but complacent and stupid nag, his not even female, not even human Dulcinea. For this reader, this is Gulliver's defeat. The Houyhnhnms, new and final ultimates in the journeys of a man who had sought ultimates, are certainly all of that, being ultimate fools. Claiming absolute powers of reason, they are too obtuse to grasp the obvious differences between the scrounging Yahoos and the worshipful Gulliver. Claiming perfection of nature, they are without the pinch of salt of the old equine Adam, but are merely perfect eunuchs of horses. Claiming a monopoly upon benevolence, they blandly exhort Gulliver, across a sea in which they do not believe, for dalliance in their ceremoniously unceremonious ceremonies, fearful that he will conspire with Yahoos whom he cannot abide to create a rebellion he cannot imagine. But what the reader sees as Gulliver's height of human folly, Gulliver sees as his height of triumph—man come round at last to the best of all possible Americas, there to discover beings of this earth whom he can worship with all of the constantly defended and finally released force of his human well-wishing. That is what he had always wanted, some ultimate being he could worship, and that is what he finds in Houyhnhnm Land where

he takes his final stance, that of reason's Caliban too wrapped up in his demented dream of excellence to be aware that he worships the dullest of fools.

It takes one to know one, and Gulliver is just that, Swift's fool. His last, most egregious blunder only reminds us that his entire voyage has been a long series of blunders, constant misapprehensions, idiotic mistakes. He is the perfect goof. Nor is the source of his foolishness far to seek. The ship in which this fool sets sail is that of man-alone and here-below. Gulliver is the Nazarite motioned of man and motioned toward human objects of worship. Never once throughout journeys which would provoke an atheist to fervent prayer does fool Gulliver entreat divine guidance, protection, intervention, mercy, justice. In all this scene God is as though he were not. It is this lack which brings Gulliver ashore in Lilliput, body-bound, this lack that casts him upon his human resources of courage, dignity, and magnanimity, this lack that causes him to construe bodily immortality as ultimate good. And, when his human resourcefulness proves inadequate in confronting the terrors of the world, it is this lack which causes him to withdraw into increasingly private dimensions of self until at last he is hand-in-hoof with a Houyhnhnm called "perfection" upon an island called "reason" totally dissociated from human kind, haunted by those *seeming* apes of man, a Yahoo, a Struldbrug, and a Laputan, who figure forth a vision of life as it must ultimately appear to such fools as Gulliver who think to find their objects of worship here below. Or at least, so says the gloomy dean.

II

It is as useful and useless to approach the scene I have been trying to describe as satire as it would be to approach life as satiric. The weight and flow of life in its fluctuating multiplicity can be only partially met by the satiric stance, if only because that glint or glare in the satirist's eye is invariably antagonistic, fixed upon objects of opposition.* Certainly *Gulliver's Travels* is rampant with antagonisms, it being obvious that Swift was a good hater, a mean man in a fight. However, active as antagonism is on the Gulliver scene, it is subordinated to that other, more basic motion which carries Gulliver in his foolishness along: not to surge out at dreadful mankind with mounting waves of darkening blood, but to move his fool along from station to station in his progress toward an ultimate foolishness. This is the inner pulse and shaping motion of the book. The Lapatans, Struldbrugs, and

*Attempts to define satire as a form are sure to fail if only because English literature has always been "magnificently dishevelled."

Yahoos, for example, are *not* obscene apes of human kind, savage jibes that Swift thrusts into view revealing ourselves to ourselves. These horrors hang around Gulliver's neck as direct consequences of his central foolishness, his belief that man alone and here below can find human objects to worship. It is to show his fool how dangerously wrong he is that Swift binds him into body that first day on Lilliput shore. The most severe distortions that appear on the scene, far from being projections of satiric antagonistic force, are projections of Gulliver's intensified efforts to live *with* and later on *without* the body—the dying animal wall that separates men from gods in the here-below. The fool's way around that wall is trot, trot, trot to Houyhnhnm land where live the apostles of anti-body, fully devoted to reason only, purely dissociated, the last and most futile of gods in the here-below—nose stuffed with snuff against mortality's smell, head stuffed with reason's pride against all hint of error, face averted from human kind sits the fool, wrapped up in a fullness of worship.

And where is the fool's friend, Swift? He is off at one side, wrapped up in "An Evening Prayer", intoning,

We know, O Lord, that while we are in these bodies, we are absent from the Lord, for no man can see thy face and live. The only way that we can draw near unto thee in this life, is by prayer; but oh Lord we know not how to pray nor what to ask for as we ought.

Here Swift is remembering what the fool had forgotten. Gulliver's forgetfulness of God carries him to madness. Because it is a comic madness, we can assume that Swift is laughing at Gulliver. But he is scarcely satirizing. A man does not send his enemy down those paths which lead to inmost stations of his own being. He sends instead his fool. And he does not antagonize against his fool, for his fool is himself at the remove of foolishness. Every man is bound into the body, none more so than Swift who created those imbecilities, senilities, and obscenities which madden Gulliver. And Swift is also man-alone and here-below, aware that "while we are in these bodies, we are absent from the Lord." Nor does he know "how to pray" or even "what to ask for." But he is not so foolish as to believe that he can find a king, a Houyhnhnm, or a human who can sustain the full force of worship. That fate is reserved for the fool.

I have said that satiric devices are projections on the art scene of antagonistic force and have tried to show why Lemuel Gulliver is largely exempt from such opposition. Where, then, does the antagonism go? I take a simple view. There is every kind of satiric weapon, ranging from open insult to deft concealments of ironic

point. And all of them are aimed, full force on, at the public body of man, with the heaviest antagonism reserved for those who head us up here below—kings and their ministerial arms, and the institutions through which such heads and arms exert and impose their will. Thus, those experiences which pertain to Gulliver's own body and mind are paralleled by a series of experiences which pertain to the public body and mind in the form of the kings, courts, and institutions he visits. However, his contacts with the public body are subordinated to the more private and indwelling journey inside his own skin. It is because he is searching for human ultimates that he seeks out all of those kings. And if he demonstrates the same foolishness of enthusiasm for the Lilliput king at the outset, his program is toward complete disillusionment. Just as his private journey into disillusionment reaches its climax in Luggnagg when he meets the Struldbrugs and realizes that neither body nor mind will sustain him, so does his public journey reach the climax in the same place during the parallel visit to the ruler of Luggnagg, most vicious of the monarchs he has met, whose seal bears the impression of "a King lifting up a lame beggar from the earth." The promise here is that the King will lift us up to some greater life. But this king's practice tells us that the only portion of his kingdoms that he or any other king can truly give is the dust he requires that all who come into his presence shall lick while crawling in attitudes more abject than prayer—our feast of death. One might well place his inscription over the entrances to all public places in *Gulliver's Travels* as the sardonic "abandon hope" for all persons so foolish as to believe that the kings of earth can lift up the beggars. Beyond this point, the most that Gulliver can hope is that, if he is lucky enough and tricky enough, he will be able to avoid trampling the crucifix. Or let us say he does not hope even for that. Instead, he clears out for Houyhnhnm land, beyond mankind.

If the distinctions that I have attempted to make have validity, Gulliver's journeys might be taken as a testimonial to Christian truth in which Swift is saying to the fool: lift up thine eyes. Or as testimonial to Christian tragedy in the here-below where all hands smack of mortality. Or as testimonial to a personal psychopathology in which the generative function has been overpowered by the excremental so that body becomes a ship of death rather than a vessel of life. The excremental excesses are too obvious to need more than mention. However, I think they are subordinated to purposes of Christian testimony, which they, alas, only too neatly if not nicely support. As a metaphor for death, the excremental lends force to *Gulliver's Travels* seen as a work of Christian tragedy—testimonial to the problems that Christianity has in part created for man by interpreting death as a punishment for sins rather

than as a natural process, a knitting up of ravelled sleeves. This may be excessive. Yet whichever way one reads the testimonial, it comes out dark, the scene distorted, without beauty, without joy.

Let me depart by way of two scenes, briefly noted. The first scene is life just as we know it, all those phenomena riding in on the crest of the always arriving, always departing present moment. This life scene is shared, catch-as-catch-can, by writer and reader alike. The second scene is art just as we know it, an extension of the first. Here the phenomenal multitudes of the moment are steadied by the controlled beat of the writer's blood and breath and brains and carried across into a permanent presence of words. The art scene is also shared, catch-as-catch-can, by writer and reader alike. To be effective as an extension or projection of life, the art scene will need room for a full play of life forces as the artist knows and experiences them in the act of living and writing. *Any art scene built up as an extension of antagonistic forces only will inevitably be severely limited.* For this reason, I have tried, but have only *tried*, to extend the Gulliver scene outside the antagonistic field, outside that limitation. I do not think I have succeeded. To some extent Gulliver *can* be taken as the foolish protagonist of man in the here-below rather than as pawn to Swift's antagonisms. And better a fool of man than a pawn of man's antagonisms. But Gulliver is not a fulsome enough fool, not completely enough the fool of man. He is too much alone in the strange world in which he wanders, a sign, I suppose, that the antagonisms win out, defeating fool and limiting the play of life on the Gulliver scene. "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean"—again.