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“The pleasing visions I had formed”: Natural Knowledge and Self-Awareness in Jonathan Swift’s Satires

Abstract: *Focusing on the relation between not yet entirely secularized scientific inquiry and the human inquirer, between scientific knowledge and self-knowledge, this essay reads Jonathan Swift’s satire A Tale of a Tub (1704) and his novel Gulliver’s Travels (1726) to explain how Swift’s textual experiments chastise those scientific voices that do not only seek to improve the human lot, but do so with what seemed to Swift undue self-confidence and pride. To study the outside world without taking into account human fallibility was – for a writer steeped in the humanist tradition and an adherent of the belief that literature had a moral agenda – an indication that human pride was once again triumphant. For Swift and his friend Pope, critical self-inspection was regarded far more essential in developing a true personality than any attempt at discovering God’s secrets through a scientific investigation of nature. Swift’s satirical portrayals of modern victims of their own curiosity bespeak this philosophical diagnosis.*

The preface to Jonathan Swift’s *The Battle of the Books* (1704) begins with a rather unconventional definition of a literary genre. Readers are informed that “Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body’s Face but their Own” (*Tale* 140). The writer does not hesitate to add that it is probably this characteristic which is responsible for the genre’s continuing success. If this definition is taken seriously, satire could appear like a welcome tool for hypocrites who always like to put the blame on somebody else. Since it does not occur to recipients that their behavior is targeted in any way, nobody will ever feel offended. In other words, satire is an instrument which stabilizes prejudices rather than inviting readers to think about their own limitations.

It may be asked, of course, why Swift decided to put such a definition before a text which is obviously satirical. For one thing, it is clear that the problem of finding faults in others while paying a blind eye to one’s own failures is by no means restricted to the reception of satires. Given

that Swift was a clergyman, we may safely assume, for instance, that he was familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, which includes the query: “[W]hy beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (St. Matthew 7,3). For Swift, such an attitude obviously represented an anthropological constant to be reckoned with at any time. In this light, it seems feasible to read the remark in the preface not so much as a definition of the function of satire but rather as a provocative statement pointing to a general human deficiency Swift regarded as widespread. Even at an early stage of his writing career, it seems to indicate the program that Swift would express much later, namely “to vex the world rather than divert it” (*Correspondence* 606).

The observation that humans are seldom willing to admit their own limitations must be viewed against the background of Christian anthropology, of which Swift had an intimate knowledge. According to an orthodox reading of the third chapter of Genesis, human imperfections were the result of “man’s first disobedience” as John Milton put it in *Paradise Lost* (114). Through this act Adam not just forfeited the perfection which God had granted to him, but his ‘original sin’ affected humanity as a whole. In a postlapsarian universe, human beings might strive to make the best of their state, notably by adhering to Christian virtues, but without the help of God’s grace, they would never be able to free themselves from the consequences of the Fall. Not accepting this fundamental insight counted as a sign of *superbia* or pride, considered as the worst of all imaginable sins.

In 17th-century England, however, such a traditional reading of the book of Genesis had already begun to compete with other interpretations which enjoyed considerable popularity especially among the promoters of the new experimental philosophy.¹ When in 1620, Francis Bacon proclaimed a “Great Instauration” of all arts and sciences, he was not only thinking of overcoming the limits of classical knowledge, but he also had in mind a particular interpretation of providential history, in which scientific progress was linked up with the promise of restoring humanity to its primordial perfect state. Among many 17th-century scientists, this view would soon assume the nature of a commonplace. Thus, it is no surprise that Swift

1 For an overview see Harrison.

would repeatedly portray the advocates of science as victims of their own impious ambitions.

Although Swift dealt with the topic of pride not only in his satires,² it was here that he most drastically exposed it as the result of a lack of self-awareness which was typically modern. In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the protagonist and first-person narrator stumbles through the world driven by his insatiable curiosity and incapable of drawing the right conclusions from what he observes. Since he makes no secret of his fascination for everything modern, he can be seen as representing the contemporary 'scientific sailor.'³ What distinguishes him from peers such as William Dampier, however, is the fact that his journey of exploration turns out to be highly ambivalent. The more Gulliver learns about the exotic inhabitants of the "remote nations" he visits, the more he finds himself confronted with the question of who he really is. Even if it eventually turns out that he will probably never discover his true self, it is obvious that the problematic relationship between scientific knowledge and self-knowledge forms a central theme of the novel. Before taking a closer look at Gulliver's ill-fated journey, however, it seems worthwhile to reconsider those elements in 17th-century philosophy which Swift found most disturbing. That the accusation of a lack of self-awareness among some defenders of the modern cause forms a recurrent theme in Swift's writings can further be demonstrated with respect to his earlier satire, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704).

1 Curiosity and the Carcass of Human Nature

As already indicated, science in the 17th century was not yet defined in purely secular terms. In their attempts to defend the new experimental philosophy against possible accusations of heresy, authors regularly referred to biblical passages which they interpreted according to their own purposes. Thus, in his *Instauratio Magna* (1620), Bacon offered a very specific reading of the third chapter of Genesis when he stated that "it was not that pure and uncorrupted natural knowledge [...] which gave occasion to the fall. It was the ambitious and proud desire of moral knowledge to judge of good and

2 On the human pride as a central issue in Swift's pulpit rhetoric, see Bullard.

3 On the scientific sailor, see Adams (162 ff.).

evil” (IV.20). A desire for natural knowledge, Bacon held, could never be transgressive. On the contrary, God had presented the world to Adam as a riddle and had invited him to partake in an innocent and pleasant game of “hide and seek.” This was also the reason why natural knowledge could still provide a path to the restoration of human perfection. Convinced that his concept of applied science contributed to the “benefit of mankind,” Bacon felt free to equate it with charity as the highest Christian virtue. “[I]t was from lust of power that the angels fell, from lust of knowledge that man fell,” he wrote with respect to the sins of Lucifer and Adam, and finished his sentence with the statement that “of charity there can be no excess” (IV.21). In other words, science was ascribed the role of an alternative form of religious practice.

It fits into this context that curiosity, which traditionally had been regarded rather as a sign of man’s sinful lust for worldly pleasures, also assumed a positive meaning (Blumenberg 401 ff.).⁴ Not only had curiosity inspired the celebrated voyages of discovery, it also formed a necessary requirement for scientific research. It is not by accident that Bacon pointed to the exploration of new worlds when he argued that a new age of knowledge was awaiting humanity. An isolated verse taken from the Book of Daniel – “Many shall go to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (IV.92) – provided enough evidence for him that the current changes in geography and science corresponded to a divine plan.

A problem to which Swift would repeatedly point in his satires, however, was that curiosity knew no boundaries. It could relate to the discovery of new territories as well as to those phenomena which traditionally had been considered too mean to create any serious interest. In the preface to his *Micrographia* (1665), Robert Hooke claimed that all these directions were of equal value. While other scientists did “neglect no opportunity to bring all the rare things of Remote Countries within the compass of their knowledge and practice,” he maintained, his own microscopic studies of insects and lifeless objects could open up “a new visible World” of its own (“Preface”). Convinced of the spectacular nature of his findings, Hooke even went so far as to promise his readers “material and sensible pleasure”, including a

4 On the changing role of curiosity, see also Benedict.

“high rapture and delight of the mind” (“Preface”).⁵ How provocative such a statement must have appeared in the eyes of some of his contemporaries, who still adhered to a traditional view of decorum, becomes obvious, if one considers the range of Hooke’s objects of investigation. Next to more pleasant things such as snowflakes, his curiosity extended not only to fleas and lice, traditionally regarded as disgusting ‘vermin,’ but also to the invisible texture of human excreta.⁶ In his *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes had only shortly before stressed the fact that decorum was a context-dependent phenomenon. “An anatomist, or a physician,” he had explained in a chapter on intellectual faculties, “may speak, or write his judgment of unclean things; because it is not to please, but profit” (III.59). However, Hobbes had also pointed to the fact that this license had clearly defined limits. On occasions where usefulness was not at stake, the anatomist’s or physician’s statements might prove utterly unacceptable, making the audience feel “as if a man, from being tumbled in the dirt, should come and present himself before good company” (III.59).

Contemporary satirists knew how to draw profit from tacitly ignoring Hobbes’ pragmatically defined distinctions. In their portrayals, the scientific virtuoso appeared as a kind of lunatic (cf. Lynall 31). What played into their hands was the fact that 17th-century scientists often did not rest content with soberly reporting their observations but also pointed to the alleged edifying quality of their presentations. If the world was God’s creation, the physico-theological argument ran, even ‘base’ things could serve as suitable instruments of worship and readers would morally profit from this. In a panegyric poem prefixed to Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society* (1667), Abraham Cowley went so far as to present Bacon as another Moses who had directed his followers to the promised land of science. Significantly, he praised the microscopists of his age for extending their “curious Sight” into “the privatest recess” of the world’s “imperceptible Littleness” (qtd. in Sprat 5).

Swift was to become one of the satirists who tried to turn such arguments against their promoters. What disturbed him was not so much scientific

5 On the spectacular quality of early modern experimental science, see Schramm.
6 Cf. for instance Hooke’s chapters on “Gravel in Urine” (81 f.) and on “Figures Form’d on the Surface of Urine by Freezing” (88 ff.).

curiosity as such, but the way in which it was advertised as a way to the salvation of humanity. Indeed, following Bacon, Hooke had declared: “at first, mankind fell by tasting of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, so we, their Posterity, may be in part restor’d by [...] tasting too those fruits of Natural knowledge, that were never yet forbidden” (“Preface”). Since Swift did not believe that humanity would ever be able to achieve its own salvation, he also rejected the claim implicit in such rhetoric, namely that moral problems would also disappear once scientific and technological progress had reached a certain level.

As a writer steeped in the humanist tradition, Swift shared the belief that literature had a moral agenda. It is to be remembered that in the late 16th century, Philip Sidney had explained that poetical works were composed not only to delight but also to teach. A poet’s aim was to “move” an audience to “take [...] goodness in hand” (103), i.e. to act virtuously. Swift would not have objected to such a view, even if it appears that he had less confidence in human educability than his 16th-century predecessor. Still, Samuel Holt Monk was probably not far from the point when he stressed Swift’s moralism, observing that while “[a]ll of Swift’s satire was written in anger, contempt, or disgust,” it was at the same time “written to promote self-knowledge in the faith that self-knowledge will lead to right action” (112).

In order to locate Swift’s view of poetry within an early modern context, it is helpful to remember that in the second half of the 17th century it had become customary to distinguish between different spheres of knowledge each of which was ascribed its own value and its own logic (cf. Shapiro). In contrast to notable changes in the sphere of natural knowledge, poetic rules were thought to be principally timeless.⁷ When in *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), Swift’s friend Alexander Pope gave poets the advice to “[f]irst follow *Nature*, and your judgment frame/By her just standard (20, emphasis in the original),” he did not think of any scientific discoveries but of poetic principles that had been established by ancient writers long before. As a true classicist, he did not forget to add: “To copy nature is to copy them” (22). Given that poetic mimesis worked on the premise of *tua res agitur*, it was

7 For a more thorough discussion, see Nate (*Wissenschaft und Literatur* 198 f.).

considered also as an instrument suitable to generate self-knowledge. Pope later expanded his classicist convictions to comprise also the ancient philosophical principle of *nosce teipsum*. In his *Essay on Man* (1732), he succinctly stated: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of mankind is man" (281). In other words, critical self-inspection was regarded far more essential in developing a true personality than any attempt at discovering God's secrets through a scientific investigation of nature.

Although Swift would not have objected to these principles, his poetical works do not necessarily reflect them at surface level. The fact that critics have warned repeatedly not to mistake the opinions of his satirical personae for the author's views, shows that Swift preferred indirect methods to articulate his anthropological convictions.⁸ His narrators are known to be notoriously unreliable. Rather than acting as the author's mouthpieces, they illustrate the follies of modern civilization. Functioning as tools of literary parody, they often fall prey to exactly those vices Swift criticized: an unreserved curiosity and selfishness.

The narrator of *A Tale of a Tub* provides a perfect example of this strategy. Although he constantly presents himself as an enlightened philosopher, writing with no smaller ambition than a "Universal Improvement of Mankind," it turns out that he is nothing but a hack writer, incapable of digesting all the information that the early modern book market holds in store for him. What he offers his readers is bits of knowledge hastily assembled from a range of mostly dubious sources he is unable to classify and assess critically. Thus, his claim to explain "human nature" suffers from a confusion between the physiological and the psychological spheres. In the tale-teller's universe, where a Cartesian distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* matters as little as that between literal and figurative meanings,⁹ body and soul are merged into just one lifeless study object. "I have [...] dissected the Carcass of *Human Nature*, till at last it *smelt* so strong, I could

8 This point has been made quite early, cf. Williams (116 f.).

9 In this respect, the tale-teller could also be characterized as a caricature of the hermetic philosopher, cf. Nate (*Wissenschaft und Literatur* 282 f.).

preserve it no longer” (77),¹⁰ the taleteller reports, in an obvious attempt to imitate the style of contemporary experimental scientists.

That the taleteller is a victim of his curiosity is indicated by his professed determination to “comply with the Modes of the World” (54). Indeed, it seems that he loses himself completely in the attempt of absorbing every intellectual fashion he meets on his way. His lack of identity perfectly illustrates what Barbara Benedict has written with respect to the early modern critique of the cult of curiosity. While those suffering from it superficially appeared “to be seeking their own identity,” she writes, they were in fact busy “annihilat[ing] any concrete self” (110). The more knowledge they acquired, the more their personality dissolved. “Their self,” Benedict goes on paraphrasing early modern critics, “becomes a vacuum whose sucking implosiveness is intensified by the novelties poured into it” (110). In *A Tale of a Tub*, this lack of self is linked to a longing for recognition which appears principally insatiable. As the taleteller’s dedicatory epistle to “Prince Posterity” and other sections of the work reveal, his true ambition is not to inform readers about the ways of the world but to gain “an everlasting Remembrance, and never-dying Fame” (77). On another occasion, he openly confesses his desire to overcome “the transitory State of all sublunary Things” (40).

Only when they are ready to accept the nonsensical quality of the taleteller’s deliberations will readers be able to avoid getting distracted by the confused organization of the text – an obvious consequence of the taleteller’s inability to stick to his subject – and detect the rather conventional moral message hidden underneath. Most of the contradictions the taleteller runs into are intended to demonstrate that he suffers from an “over-weening pride” – to use an expression with which the learned Bee in *The Battle of the Books* accuses its opponent, the self-centered Spider who is reported to produce nothing but “Excrement and Venom” (150). It is no wonder that in the final analysis, all the taleteller’s pretensions are revealed as empty and void. “I am now trying an Experiment very frequent among Modern Authors,” he declares towards the end of his text, “which is, to *write upon Nothing*. When the Subject is utterly exhausted, to let the Pen still move on”

10 Cf. Lynall (41 f.) for an explanation of how Swift made use of Robert Boyle’s *Occasional Reflections* in this passage.

(133, emphasis in the original). In other words, the taleteller reduces the creative process of writing to a dead mechanism in much the same way he has declared the soul to be a mere carcass. Apart from arousing associations of an Epicurean philosophy, which contemporaries would have regarded as genuinely un-Christian,¹¹ lines like these were obviously meant to irritate, if not to shock, readers who still expected from literature a moral edification of some kind. "If the Reader fairly considers the Strength of what I have advanced in the foregoing Section," the taleteller proclaims referring to the preceding "Digression Concerning Madness," "I am convinced it will produce a wonderful Revolution in his Notions and Opinions" (117). Given Swift's theological background, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the taleteller's "wonderful Revolution" implies more than just mental disorder. It is an indication that his intellectual cosmos is a topsy-turvy world also in a religious sense. Seen from the author's perspective, it is a world against the will of God.

2 Gulliver's Distorted Exploration of the Self

"I have got Materials Towards a Treatis, proving the falsity of that Definition animal rationale, and to show that it should be only rationis capax," Swift wrote to Alexander Pope in the autumn of 1725, referring to the manuscript of *Gulliver's Travels* (*Correspondence* 607). It seems that what disturbed the author was not so much a traditional concept, however, but the problematic conclusions which had lately been drawn from it. To take the definition as a proof that human behavior was rational at any time appeared to be just another indication of the sin of pride.¹²

Like in the *Tale*, Swift chose a defender of the modern cause as his narrator. When Gulliver declares that his "sole design" is to contribute "to the benefit of public as well as private life" (133), he is merely repeating a stock phrase of the new science. As a true modern, Gulliver is driven by his curiosity. "I stayed but two months with my wife and family, for my insatiable desire of seeing foreign countries would suffer me to continue no

11 Cf. Real ("A Taste" 89) for a thorough discussion of this background.

12 Correspondingly, Panagopoulos observes that "*Gulliver's Travels* follows traditional ethics in regarding pride as the gravest of sins," since it encourages "the moral error that comes with self-mistaking" (63).

longer” (117), he confesses after his return from Lilliput, and although his second journey proves to be even more life-threatening than the first one, he reports that afterwards his desire remained “as violent as ever” (195).

Rather than furnishing him with some undisputable facts, Gulliver’s first two journeys are more likely to confuse him. Thus, he is forced to accept that nothing seems to be fixed anymore. The whole world, including himself, is becoming dubious. Living for a time as a giant, he finds himself reduced to the size of a dwarf only a bit later. Significantly, pride plays a role in both contexts, and as it turns out it is always the less important creatures who succumb to it, thus illustrating an idea expressed in *The Battle of the Books*, where pride had already been associated with “Beggary and Want” (*Tale 141*). In Lilliput, the blame falls on Gulliver’s dwarfish hosts. By keeping the reader constantly aware of their small size, Swift manages to make the Lilliputans’ high self-esteem seem utterly ridiculous, despite Gulliver’s uncritical rendering of the seemingly indisputable “facts.” Nowhere does this become more obvious than in the king’s official title, which Gulliver renders as “Delight and Terror of the Universe [...], Monarch of all Monarchs, taller than the sons of men; whose feet press down to the centre, and whose head strikes against the sun” (79).

In the land of the giants, it is Gulliver himself who becomes the object of ridicule. The King of Brobdingnag sees in him, above all, a perfect warning against vanity, being reminded of “how contemptible a thing was human grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive insects” as Gulliver (146). Most devastating is the conclusion, which the king draws from Gulliver’s account of the current state of his home country. From the giant’s perspective, Europeans represent but “the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth” (173).

With respect to Gulliver’s scientific leanings, the country of Brobdingnag also holds some sobering lessons in store. Put into the position of a dwarf, the protagonist suddenly finds himself endowed with a microscopic vision.¹³ Other than Robert Hooke and Abraham Cowley had suggested, however, it is only nature’s ugliness which is revealed to him. In contrast

13 Cf. Smith for a detailed analysis.

to the scientist's microscopic specimen, the lice which Gulliver observes are a part of everyday life. Together with their monstrous size, this clearly exempts them from the license that Thomas Hobbes had granted to "unclean things."¹⁴ What is more, the inhabitants of Brobdingnag appear ugly under Gulliver's microscopic gaze, too. The Queen chewing a slice of bread, for instance, makes a "very nauseous sight" (145). This is the more remarkable since in many respects the giants appear as a people of noble character, well versed in terms of "morality, history, poetry, and mathematics" – a fact that only the naïve Gulliver can characterize as "defective" (176). For all its spectacular qualities, Swift seems to suggest here, a purely scientific gaze may be of little help in determining a person's character.

Book III marks the beginning of Gulliver's disillusionment. The Laputans, a bunch of speculative scientists inhabiting an artificial island, have "one of their eyes turned inward, and the other directly up to the zenith" (200). It would be misleading to take this grotesque description as an indication of their readiness for critical self-inspection and piety, since it soon turns out that the Laputans are a people lacking any sociability or compassion. Significantly, in *The Battle of the Books*, Swift had furnished the monstrous-like Goddess "Criticism" with similar features, namely eyes "turned inward, as if she lookt only upon herself" (*Tale* 154). What such a description points to is not a willingness for impartial introspection but a selfish attitude from which a lack of sociability springs almost naturally.

The practical scientists whom Gulliver meets at his next stop, the experimental Academy of Lagado, are hardly any better. The cures they suggest do not heal patients but kill them. A "universal language" they have contrived turns out to be an attempt at abolishing language altogether (226, 230). The most drastic example is probably a scientist who is busy with "an operation to reduce human excrement to its original food" (224). In Gulliver's description of the scene, there is nothing which could remind readers of Cowley's enthusiasm for the beauties of creation detected in "the privatest recess" (Cowley qtd. in Sprat 5). The scientist's chamber, we are told, is marked by a "horrible stink" (224).

14 For a more detailed account cf. Nate (*Wissenschaft, Rhetorik* 112 ff.).

The fact that Gulliver's depiction of Lagado shows traditional strategies of inversion¹⁵ should not be taken as evidence that it constitutes a *mundus inversus* only in aesthetic terms. It seems that the two islands of Laputa and Lagado represent religious counter-worlds as well.¹⁶ Not only is the claim of early modern scientists, according to which an intimate knowledge of nature would almost automatically result in a higher morality, radically questioned,¹⁷ but it is exposed also as an irreligious attitude. This becomes particularly obvious in a scene which depicts Gulliver's ultimate disillusionment after his encounter with the immortal Struldbruggs. These people, he learns, are creatures granted with eternal life. Governed by his vanity, Gulliver spontaneously imagines himself a Struldbrugg and becomes haunted by delusions of grandeur. It is significant that his first desire is to acquire riches while a study of arts and sciences follows only in a second step. And even such a study, Gulliver admits, would be pursued mainly to feed a selfish desire, namely that of becoming "the oracle of the nation" (254). The protagonist is cured from his ambitions only after he has learned that the Struldbruggs are in fact most pitiful creatures, suffering from physiological and intellectual decay beginning at the age of thirty. At this disclosure, he is forced to confess: "I grew heartily ashamed of the pleasing visions I had formed" (259).

The Struldbrugg episode is significant in that it carries to a logical extreme projects of a 'prolongation of life' that had actually been pursued by the Royal Society (cf. Webster 246 ff.). That Swift regarded any wish of overcoming death as a serious delusion is indicated by a remark in "Thoughts on Religion", where he expressed his disbelief that "any thing so natural, so necessary, and so universal as death, should ever have been designed by providence as an evil to mankind" (Irish 263).

It is in the land of the Houyhnhnms, a horse-like species endowed with the faculty of reason, that Gulliver receives his final blow. The Houyhnhnms, who refer to themselves as the "perfection of nature", are sharply

15 For historical references in Gulliver's descriptions of the Lagado experiments, see Nicolson and Mohler.

16 Cf. Todd for a similar view.

17 As Jones (76) explains, humanists had long regarded this claim as a threat to Christian tenets.

distinguished from another species, the beastlike Yahoos. Although Gulliver spontaneously classifies the Yahoos as brutes, he has to admit that they dispose of "a perfect human figure" (276). The horses, who soon become his role model, maintain that they live in perfect accordance with the principle of reason. Significantly, it is this characteristic which also seems to free them of any need for critical self-inspection. Since fallibility is an experience completely alien to the Houyhnhnms, moral discussions are reported not to play any role in their social life. Obviously, the seemingly perfect society of the horses does not provide any clue for solving the problem of human nature. On the contrary, Gulliver's contact with them results in self-alienation rather than self-inspection.¹⁸ "[M]y master," he reports, "daily convinced me of a thousand faults in myself, whereof I had not the least perception before" (305).

Neither does the species of Yahoos provide any clue. Becoming more and more aware of how much he resembles these creatures, Gulliver's self-alienation only increases. When, in a grotesque inversion of the Narcissus myth, he sees his reflection in a lake, he can only turn away "in horror and detestation of myself" (327). Blinded by the false ideal of *animal rationale*, Gulliver cannot help but perceive himself as an ugly beast.

Although there have been attempts to view the Houyhnhnms as representing an ideal society,¹⁹ they betray some highly problematic characteristics. Among these are an unwillingness to tolerate whatever contradicts their convictions, as well as a lack of self-awareness. The former trait is demonstrated by their attitude towards Gulliver, whom they continue to classify as a Yahoo, although they must admit that he is endowed with at least "some small pittance of *Reason*" (306). Since Gulliver must appear to them not only as a "monstrous hybrid" (Benedict 111) but also as a walking contradiction, their decision is to ostracize him from their community.

The horses' lack of self-awareness becomes obvious in some of the euphemisms with which they denote their behavior. Since they are worshippers of pure reason, Gulliver reports, any form of dialectics or rhetoric must appear

18 For a similar interpretation, see Weiß (219). In an early essay, Taylor has aptly characterized Gulliver's "growing self-delusion" as "the continuous current which runs throughout the whole book" (14).

19 For a summary of these early positions, see Clifford.

alien to them. “[I]t was with extreme difficulty that I could bring my master to understand the meaning of the word *opinion*, or how a point could be disputable” (315), he explains. In clear contradiction to this observation, however, they annually engage in an “old debate” (318). The issue which is at stake here appears anything but accidental. The horses discuss nothing less than the question “[w]hether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the face of the earth” (318–19). Since it is difficult to imagine a ‘debate’ without any ‘disputable points,’ it may be concluded that the horses are not always aware of what they are doing or, to put it with A. D. Nuttall: “The truth is that the Houyhnhnms are just not very clever” (278).

There are other examples which reveal a lack of self-awareness among these seemingly ideal creatures. When it turns out that Gulliver’s master Houyhnhnm has developed a certain degree of respect for his protégé, the horses see their rational principles in jeopardy. In defending their collective self-image, they even prove to be quite inventive, regardless of how absurd their arguments may appear to an outsider. It is related, for instance, that they are convinced a rational creature cannot be “compelled” to anything, since objecting to a rational decision would contradict the principle of logic (328). Thus, they confine themselves to a friendly “exhortation,” when it comes to convincing Gulliver’s master to dispense with his Yahoo pet (328). Such a euphemism has no other function than that of covering up an authoritarian policy. At least from a 21st-century perspective, it is hard to imagine that the horses are anything else but either completely unenlightened or viciously practicing some kind of Orwellian newspeak.

If Swift’s novel depicts a journey into the self rather than to the “remote countries” announced on the original title page, it is also true that his protagonist fails to reach his destination. The complaint he makes at the beginning of book IV – namely that he would have stayed with his wife and children, if he could only “have learned the lesson of knowing when I was well” (267) – does eventually not help him. Deluded by his false role model, Gulliver is not able to cope with his condition of *animal rationis capax* and ends up in a state which can only be characterized as pathological. In the end, he discloses that he prefers the company of his horses to that of his wife and children whose smell he cannot stand. “My horses understand me tolerably well,” he reports, “I converse with them at least four hours every day” (339). Not without a sense of pride does he mention the fact that since

his visit to the Houyhnhnms he has even acquired a habit of “trot[ting] like a horse” (327). At the end of the novel, readers are confronted with the sobering fact that all the while they have been following the arguments of a narrator who regards them as “stinking Yahoos” anyway. It should be remembered that in a letter to “His Cousin Sympson,” which is prefixed to the narrative, Gulliver had already declared: “I should never have attempted so absurd a project as that of reforming the Yahoo race in this kingdom” (41). This remark leaves readers in the dark for quite a while; only towards the end of book IV they are able to grasp its full meaning. While Gulliver is never cured from the ills that his belief in humanity’s unlimited capacities has procured, it is now up to the reader to draw an appropriate conclusion from his account.²⁰

3 Conclusion

Judged against the intellectual debates of his time, Swift’s outlook must be characterized as conservative. For all the artistry which his satirical works display the cultural criticism lurking behind the textual façade appears quite traditional. Essentially, it represents a warning against human vanity of the kind that biblical texts had expressed early on. Thus, it is not coincidental that the message which Gulliver receives from the deceased Aristotle in book III – namely that “new systems of nature [are] but new fashions, which [...] vary in every age” (273) – bears a strong likeness to the Preacher’s insight that “there is no new thing under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1, 9–14).

Although the scientific movement had set out to contradict such assumptions, it would be misleading to regard Swift as a radical opponent of science. First, one has to distinguish between the respect that the author still paid to philosophers such as Francis Bacon, and the utterly negative opinion he had of some of Bacon’s disciples.²¹ His sharpest criticism he kept for those followers of fashion who would merely adapt the catchphrases of modern science for their own selfish purposes. The well-read, albeit incompetent tale-teller and the ever curious but hopelessly naïve Gulliver are fictional counterparts of this type.

20 For a similar view, see Monk (118).

21 This is discussed more thoroughly in Real (“The Dean”).

Second, what Swift disliked about contemporary scientists, was not so much their intention to improve the human lot, but the self-confidence with which this aim was sometimes proclaimed. In Swift's view, scientific optimism became problematic once it ignored the ambivalence of human nature – or, as Pope would later put it, the fact that “Man [was] created half to rise, and half to fall” (281). To study the outside world without taking into account human fallibility was, in Swift's view, an indication that human pride was once again triumphant.

If Swift was convinced that taking to heart the principle of *nosce teipsum* was worthier than any desire to ‘scan God’ (cf. Pope 281), he adhered to a comparatively traditional understanding of what constituted relevant knowledge. On the other hand, the observation that, aesthetically speaking, his satires display so few traditional characteristics is not without some irony. When it came to exposing the shortcomings of the modern age, poetic traditionalism was not what was needed. Mockery suggested itself as a far more effective tool. It is probably for this reason that Swift's satires still appear so astonishingly modern. The experimental spirit which governs them, however, is not scientific but textual. This is most obvious in *A Tale of a Tub* where principles of coherence are violated throughout and any reader who is not willing to read between the lines must end up entirely frustrated.²² It is true that in comparison to the irritating structure of his earlier satire, *Gulliver's Travels* appears much more straightforward but it betrays an experimental spirit no less. Gulliver is, after all, an embodiment of the modern mind. As he proudly admits, his presentation is not meant to be of any poetic value, but is intended to meet the standards of modern scientific discourse. Paradoxically, the continuing success of Swift's novel may be due to this particular fact. After all, readers are constantly invited to share and enjoy Gulliver's curiosity,²³ thus indulging in the very sensationalism that Swift would overtly criticize. If it was really the author's aim “to vex the world rather than divert it” (*Correspondence* 606), the fact that satire was “a sort of glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face

22 Not surprisingly, the *Tale's* incoherence has invited a number of critics to read it within the context of a poststructuralist critique of authorship and representation, cf. Martin for a recent discussion.

23 Cf. also Benedict (110) on this point.

but their Own” still had to be reckoned with. Indeed, despite the scholarly attention Swift’s novel has received among 20th-century critics, it remains doubtful whether it is really received in public as that relentless exposure of human ignorance and human vices that Swift probably wanted it to be. To many readers, especially those of the bowdlerized versions which have been published since Victorian times, it may paradoxically appear as just the opposite: another ‘pleasing vision.’

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