

Gulliver's Travel, Book Four: A Timeless Vision of Man The Moral Philosophy of Gulliver's Travel. BK. 4.

Dr. Ahlam SALMAN*

□ ABSTRACT □

The aim of this paper is to consider a programme of empirical investigation into human nature in Gulliver's Travel, one of the Eighteenth Century's major works. The concept of 'human nature' presents itself to Swift as a prime subject of an inexhaustible inquiry in an attempt to know whether it is good or evil, rational or depraved. The work studied here tends to rework these questions over and over again: What are we like? and what constitutes the essentially human? As a moralist, Swift took on the task of searching into the most retired recesses of human nature. He embodied his philosophy in a work of creative imagination and presented the moral drama of the individual enacted within and conceived in terms of social order and Christian humanism. His claim was to display examples of virtue and make them the goals of a good and just society.

* Lecturer at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Tishreen University, Lattakia, Syria.

**كتاب *Gulliver's Travel* الرابع: رؤيا خالدة للإنسان،
الفلسفة الأخلاقية كما تدونها رواية جوناثان سويف *Gulliver's Travel***

الدكتورة أحلام سلمان*

□ الملخص □

يناقش هذا البحث دراسة عملية للذات البشرية كما تدونها رواية جوناثان سويف *Gulliver's Travel* في القرن الثامن عشر. يحاول سويف أن يحدد فيما إذا كانت الطبيعة البشرية خيرة أم سيئة، عقلانية أو عاطفية. يقدم الكاتب فلسفته في عمل الخيال المبدع يصور فيه الصراع الأخلاقي داخل الفرد ثم يضعه في إطار اجتماعي، ديني وفلسفي، موضحاً بذلك مفهومه "للطبيعة" المفهوم الذي تناوله الكثير من كتاب القرن الثامن عشر.

* مدرسة في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية - جامعة تشرين - اللاذقية - سورية.

Although Swift made experience the basis of every endeavour as to the reality of human life and existence, yet he paid due attention to the major philosophical trends of the time: those of the materialists and cynics on the one hand, and those of the naturalists and benevolists on the other. An examination of the social and moral ideologies of Hobbes, Mandeville and Shaftesbury is essential to the understanding of the writer's conception of human nature.

In Leviathan Hobbes imagines men, in their natural position, as incapable of any social behaviour. Hobbes abandons forever the possibility of holding our moral principles above our desires and slips into the idea that all desires are equally authorized temptations. He accounts for Man's flaws by the myth of the Fall and the decay of nature, holding that man can demand no right to paradise by virtue of his rightness but only by the free grace of God or a miracle working for his salvation through Christ. He introduces his famous laws of nature "to seek peace and follow it,"(1) of which God is no longer the author, which invoke a problematic relationship of obligation and merely suggest that virtue is an impossible ingredient of human activity.

The humanity Mandeville represents is similarly crushed. His tactic is to reduce human beings to bees who would work efficiently if left to follow their instincts, which are not necessarily good. He cunningly manages to equate self and social-love rendering the individual as subservient to, not an essential part of, the work.

Shaftesbury comes to clear human nature from the charge of depravity. He satirizes an initial admission of determinism which is so absolute as to predicate the future of man before he is even born. In his conception, the economic political ego in quest of wealth and power, governed by selfish desires (in Hobbes's state of nature) becomes the rational soul in quest of virtue and happiness governed by beneficent laws of nature. He builds his ethics on the essential goodness of man, and he reads the Fall as a study of individual destiny rather than a universal truth about our creation. He conceives human corruption to be only skin-deep in the new redemptive world where Man is likely to regain Paradise by virtue of his reason.

It was against this background that Swift expressed himself in a work of exuberant humour. Through the character of the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms he represented these ideas in fictional forms in order to explore them and study their different applications and sequences. But, though aware of both sterile extremes, Swift, I argue, is neither Hobbesian nor Shaftesburian in Tendency; he chooses to steer between these dangerous extremes taking an intermediate sceptical attitude. He seems to waver between pessimism and optimism, but the bitter tone of satire could not blot out some vestiges of Man's dignity even among his most dark sketches of life and human nature.

Gulliver's Travels is an effective fable and argumentative novel which subtly dramatizes Swift's conception of human nature. For Swift, Nature might be known from what we see of the state of all creatures and of Man himself, when unprejudiced by a vicious education. Swift understands that Nature has allowed some scope for many blunders and complexities, the first of which is Man, a fatal weakness in the workmanship of nature. He does not see Man as being at home in the universe, but as being caught in the grip of an inescapable deceit and self-defeatism, so that he may easily mistake what prejudice or sin are. Through his satire. Swift tries to adjust Man to Nature and convicts him of his sins by dwelling upon supposedly ideal society brought into sunshine in the new land. The contrast he provides between the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos is not the contrast between Man and animal, but the

universally discussed contrast between Man governed by reason and Man given over to his irrational instincts. This contrast is Swift's device for shocking the demoralized race into seeing the consequences of its actions and for inducing an alteration of conduct.

The creation, the temptation, and the Fall-major factors on which Hobbes builds his conception of the state of nature - are evoked and parodied by Swift in the characteristics he gives to the Yahoos. Swift's method is to deaden our sensibility at the very outset, and to get us to accept his major premise, that Man is an irrational Yahoo, before he delivers his stabs one after the other. His idea is that Man, in his development from primitive forms of life, has achieved only a limited rationality so that a measure of failure must be expected. Like Hobbes, he seems to believe that egoism is the innate drive that seizes Man; he represents the Yahoos as splenetic, malicious, credulous and envious creatures, "the Yahoos were known to hate one another more than they did any different species of animals". (2) Swift has taken evil actions from the external world and located them in the human consciousness. The pathetic situation of Man is real enough, but the evil Swift dramatizes is in the state of mind which allows it to flourish. The coquetry of the Yahoo woman for instance, indicates Hobbes's vice instinctively placed in Mankind, "the rudiments of Lewdness, coquetry, censure and scandal, should have place by instinct in womankind". (Gulliver's Travels, p. 312)

Swift seems to share Hobbes's belief that our life is moulded by the unconscious as against the active will, the role of which is reduced to a helpless observer of events. The theme of human limitation is incorporated in the image of the frailty of Gulliver's body, mostly in the last voyage, when Gulliver does far more suffering than acting. In this perspective, reason is conceived as the art which invites blindness of understanding and presents "that which is good, in the likeness of Evil, and Evil, in the likeness of Good". (Leyiathan, p. 226) In fact, Gulliver's account of the state of England visualizes Hobbes's state of nature where people are misled by their reasons to fight over trivialities. Their passions defy their understanding when sensual gratification conflicts with virtue. Living in this state, one has no hope of achieving anything to promote his position, one only has cause to despair and decay.

On the contrary, the Houyhnhnms are those rational creatures living in harmony with the whole, loving not individual men but species. They live according to Shaftesbury's nature, "Friendship and benevolence are the two principal virtues.... universal to the whole race". (Gulliver's Travels, p. 316) They are one of the finest compliments ever paid to human nature, honoured with the task of imposing unity on the multifarious world. They do not consider the divine mind, but we feel the grace given to them exhibited in their capacity for rational self-mastery which is, in a way, a modest approximation to the will of God and natural order. The Houyhnhnms admit no sort of debate or discussion, for truth strikes them with immediate conviction beyond which nothing can be known. They regard each other with respect and awe but never with affection which is only the way to error.

Crammed with philosophical ideas of radical power and importance, the forth voyage of Gulliver's Travels appears to be our route to a more complex reading of the major social ideologies of our own past. Moreover, though conveyed in the particular situation of Swift's scientific and rationalistic age, Gulliver's Travels is timeless in its vision of the new spirit breathed into the inner life of Man. A Twentieth Century reader may not read the story in terms of the dominant issues in the moral speculation of the Eighteenth Century. He is likely to see in the travels an illumination of both the tragic slip that befall Man and the intellectual crisis from which he suffers, two factors

working to demean his status in the scale of existence. On the one hand, there is nothing tangible in the text which forces us to see in those strange contrasting creatures anything but two species of animals, real species for Gulliver, hypothetical species for us. Gulliver's account of his journey may help to reveal the relentless images of our life and values, but it is not the source of our knowledge of the world and its inhabitants. Gulliver was not the pioneer to discover a deeply disturbing truth about humanity. What he says has been known long enough but nobody dares or even wants to declare it, for we live in a world too frightened to be honest, a world which even conspires against honesty because it is uncomfortable and demanding. On the other hand, we can nearly see Swift winking his eye, telling us to see in the travels a clear-headed analysis of human nature, a generous indignation at vice and an ardent love of what is excellent and honorable. The condition of the present time makes necessary this example of the viciousness and misery into which Man can be led by a misunderstanding of his own nature. This case against Man - being described as an animal leading an absurd life - is meant to implicate him, bring his conscience alive, and draw him into a situation in which he can know himself better. Once the ground work is laid, by achieving a proper understanding of the nature of human mind, the larger task could begin: drawing out the implication of this understanding for a sincere life and a proper course of living.

In our own times, the concept of the absurd has its roots in metaphysical anguish, because Man ceased to believe in Man, having already ceased to believe in God. The dismay of the intellect when faced at once with all that is inexplicable in human suffering - Gulliver's inability to account for the Yahoo-side in human beings - forces a painful self-examination. With savage satire tempered with humour. Swift stimulates us to risk a similar journey into ourselves and our possibilities of good and evil. His psychological analysis shows man as a presumptuous creature always seeking metaphysical reasons for his situation and always asking why he is not placed higher but never asking not lower. The scourge of satire is brandished at Gulliver's pride which turns him into a dupe. With inexorable logic Gulliver reasons from the most outrageous premise linking human beings with the Yahoos, only himself being excepted. His self-proclaimed moral superiority ends in his insanity. Whatever gain he pretends to, he ends up not as a rational creature, but like a horse. He becomes, for Don Pedro and his own family, a splenetic unsociable Yahoos. His higher mental qualities are crippled by the lower physical ones and he comes to imitate everything that is inessential, "By conversing with the Houyhnhnms, and looking upon them with delight, I fell to imitate their gait and gestures". (Gulliver's Travels, p. 327) Swift might be suggesting that to be sceptic is the first and most essential step towards being a sound human being. He insinuates the impossibility, which may be tragic, of dominating a human situation by means of intelligence, when that intelligence is warped by the excessive exercise of its own whims. Being exposed to all the incoherence of things, men construct system which range them one against the other to the point of hatred. Swift thinks that the absurdity of Gulliver's illusion might constitute an instrument, for us, to draw some logical conclusions. His chief grudge against men is that they refuse, out of vanity and egoism, to see reality as it is, and that their systems are nothing but pernicious and ridiculous shadows of a reality that escapes them.

But one may wonder why should we accept Gulliver's arbitrary judgement to decide for all humanity? After all, it is our own minds and consciousness which are the measures of our realities, and this is another prospect of the travels. Swift encourages us to think and consider the private areas of ourselves. To know oneself

thoroughly, to be fully aware of one's lowly position in the scheme of creation, one must have a conception of the 'higher' elements as well as the 'lower', and thus the Houyhnhnms are created. Everyone, like Gulliver, wishes and ought to be honest, but to surpass the harsh limitations imposed on human beings is to fall into contradictions. Similarly, to complain of evil in the world is implicitly to require that God should not have created the world at all, and to this purpose, the Yahoos are introduced.

One may venture to say that the Houyhnhnms belong to the worlds of both fantasy and morality. In one way, the 'ideal' they supposedly stand for is the classical technical device used to expose the deistic thoughts of self-sufficiency and disinterested virtue. They constitute Swift's transcendent standard of comparison, a torch set against our artificial enlightenment, holding it for an ideal thing not profound enough to save many Christians from the anguish over their sins. In many other ways, the Houyhnhnms are admirable enough with the full range of their moral behaviour effectively governed by wholly natural impulses. In this sense, they are used not only as a satiric norm against which to show up the despicable deeds of Mankind, but to glorify a set of reasonable virtues such as honesty, honour, and the system of their education. But to share Gulliver's unqualified worship of them, is to point out the striking fact that such dignity is not inherent in Mankind as it is in the Houyhnhnms. Their perfection raises the question of how far we are capable of grasping a vision of the divine truth by the aid of our reason. The question brings to mind a shifting factor in the debate over reason and instincts, namely the Fall of Man. In fact, it is not only Man who has fallen, but nature in a manner fell with him too. Nature, sought by reason in the old sense, is being lost behind the growing philosophical conception of savage nature. The world is seen as paradisaical no more and virtue is no longer natural and easy.

Abstraction defines the Houyhnhnms' character in every aspect. Their physical differences from human beings indicate that their rigoristic virtue is of an order completely alien to Mankind, "As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by Nature with a general disposition to all virtues... so their grand maxim is, to cultivate Reason, and to be wholly governed by it". (Gulliver's Travels, p. 315) The two words, 'as' and the naturally following 'so', are suggestive of that unique nature distinguished by God to be the message of peace and benevolence. The sentence forces us to acknowledge that something has gone wrong in the universe and to admit that self and social-love are no longer the same, neither is the belief that 'whatever is, is right'. It is with a sense of loss and nostalgia that we watch their different activities. Now, we feel that we are isolated, lost and mocked by events, as if suspended in absurdity by some decision that we cannot escape. At every moment we may become the victims of some upheaval in the moral order of things, caused by some negligible trifle. Unlike the Houyhnhnms, we have a natural bias towards private interest; civic corruption occurs naturally, while civic virtue is achieved and maintained only by constant vigilance. A bold return to that old conception of nature would be ridiculous and irreconcilable with the utilitarian principles by which the world is inevitably controlled. The reason of human beings is evocative of old doubts; it has fallen from a state of certainty to a state of scruple, so that we must surrender our static postulate of the world as a perfect copy of heaven to a dynamically changing one in which truth is deluded by personal interest. We are particularly defeated by our initial awareness of the increasingly prominent flaws of human beings. The nature of the Houyhnhnms is constant, always tending towards detachment and benevolence, while our nature degenerates every day by our folly, perverseness and avarice. Reason which produces bad results in the common conduct of life must be in error; our reason, like Gulliver's,

becomes a delusive agency, weak and wavering, always adding to the universal confusion and the sums of error and absurdities of which the human race is a victim.

Swift, I think, intends to impose upon us the idea of Man's weakness and the destructive power of flesh and sensual gratification in order to highlight our awareness of sin and the consequent possible redemption. To do so, he turns to the other face of the coin and deliberately emphasizes the least attractive qualities of the Houyhnhnms. He argues us into seeing whether this surface order may not point out an internal confusion worthy of some attention. He wonders whether we can account for the evil of the parts by the perfection of the whole, or whether this system is applicable to the fluid matter of life. The problem he often cites is the rigid and uncritical use of reason. The Houyhnhnms claim that the only sound reason is their own because it is one and certain. They fix strict limits to every kind of speculation because truth is either self-evident or undiscoverable at all; yet, they have a Parliament-like assembly where they discuss controversial matters such as Gulliver's or the Yahoo's fates. What seems doubtful to us is the fact that the truth they are supposed to perceive by intuition is religious or moral and has nothing to do with the existence of people beyond the sea or the activities of European Yahoos. This is reason confined to its own sphere, governed by its own premises, limited to mere deduction and having claim only to a certain simplification of truth. Their perfect reason is free from all human attachment, while our reason, though more comprehensive, plays only a limited part in the encouragement of virtue.

To the Houyhnhnms, the converting of human nakedness is incomprehensible since they have no conception of sin and consequently of shame. Their virtue grows as naturally as a tree because "they have no conception how a rational creature can be compelled, but only advised, or exhorted." (*Gulliver's Travels*, p.328) The so-called 'public opinion' and the exhortation they practice illustrate a totalitarian tendency possible only in a pacifist society. The urgent need for conformity seems less tolerant than any police-governed system. A Houyhnhnm cannot practise any sort of eccentricity, like an ordinary human being governed by social laws and institutions, because he is under a continuous pressure of behaving and thinking in line with the common standards. Gulliver's master is unwilling to part with him, but cannot express a wish completely disagreeable to reason and nature, "that for his own part he could have been content to keep me in his service as long as I lived". (*Gulliver's Travels*, p. 328) In a modern sense, this exertion of authority would obliterate rather than support virtue, and 'exhortation' must leave out of its command much that is essential to the maintenance of ethical values.

If the Houyhnhnms do not admit the existence of inequality in education and standards of thinking, why do they admit the existence of various conditions among them? They have no wars among themselves, but in order to quell the Yahoos' sinful passions they exercise a sort of tyranny over them falling into a state similar to that envisaged by Hobbes. Their rational benevolence and intellectual passion which extend to every individual of their species can find no place for the representative of Man. It is this cruelty and pretence, offering themselves as a clear-thinking philanthropy, that Swift demonstrates. For him, the real deviation that is easily seen is certainly less dangerous than the plausible appearance of reason and moral order. Nowadays, we notice that our efforts to impress harmony on this fortuitous world can only be imperfect since we are necessarily in a state of deception and since life refuses to submit to any hypothesis. We are conscious less of a desirable unity than a chaotic condition of life which makes such unity impossible. The system and government of the Houyhnhnms -with their overt justice that is a mask for their

implied authority- are at the best anarchistic, at worst incoherent. They exploit and enslave those who are physically weaker, reflecting exactly the mood or policy by which our modern world is governed. That those who are less powerful or less scientifically developed, in contemporary circumstances, should be made legally inferior, is a reminiscent of a capitalist complacent code. We cannot accept a policy which allows any portion of species to decide for another species what is and what is not its proper sphere. The proper sphere of all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain with a complete liberty of choice. Justice is the primary virtue, grounded on sympathetic associations and equal measures that extend to all individuals. Command and obedience are but unfortunate necessities of our life where the morality of submission replaces the morality of justice. When times are out of joint, it is highly recommended that we look forward to device a new faith that would temper the corrupting effect of power and make it compatible with goodness. We struggle against determining conditions in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error and illusions. We remain half-hearted rationalists, but a parody of the Houyhnhnms' rigoristic world will be the product of a highly irrational dream. The constant shuttling back and forth of Swift's satiric rays makes travesty of their rational world. All their solemnity is forfeited for laughter when Gulliver kisses his master's hoof; their reverence is departed and we come to see them as a fragile vision of Utopia, not only impossible, but highly undesirable.

The case of Gulliver's delusion has proved that evil enters with a consciously deviant choice. In fact, Hobbes's argument that "of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some of Good to himself"(Leviathan, p. 192), is a mere hypothesis put forward without any evidence other than a series of epigrams on general psychology. Like Mandeville's Fable, Swift's picture of the Yahoo is an ironic attempt to show the danger of reducing much of the human paradox to a few principles of compulsion; without the opposed simplification of the Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos can exist by no means. They live in a state of instinct as easy and naturally as the Houyhnhnms do in their state of reason. The Yahoos are naked as well and in a way sinless for they, as much as the Houyhnhnms -Gulliver's master tells us- act according to their nature and are no more to be blamed for their odiousness than a beast.

Self-love is many times an unfortunate name for self-maintenance and fulfillment. Their lack of reason could hardly be called a sin. It is granted that they are a fallen species, but the Fall does not account for every flaw; it did not doom us sinners neither did the crucifixion redeem us. Such a view of human nature is profoundly conservative verging on the tragedy that befell the human race. God foresaw that Adam and Eve were going to fall, and he could have prevented it, but he left them to choose their destiny. In our turn, we had two examples to follow: the obedience of Christ and the rebellion of Satan. Hence, it is assumed that not all men are Yahoos equally when each individual should answer for his dignity which consists in the free will to make a choice between good and evil. It is our responsibility to meliorate our own kind and raise prosperity from the grovelling state and despicable condition in which we live. Our society is fractured and our humanity is prevented by the willful subservience of mental faculties to animal instincts and unbridled self-love. Yet, there is a chance left for man; the more coarse and disgusting the Yahoo's picture, the more impressive the moral to be deduced from it. If man's reason cannot be reconciled with self-love, faith, religion and wisdom could certainly be, and so the way is opened again for turning his degraded nature into the service of God. Our heavy task should be the unflinching exploration of our own nature in a desperate attempt to find a mode of discourse in which such unseemly failure as the

Houyhnhnms and Yahoos will not obtrude. Swift's Utopianism is the product of wishful thinking; he creates the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos to shoot them down again.

Swift's system is Utopian, but he could balance all the extremes which issued in his mind; Grace and work, emotion and reason, conservatism and change, conformity and rebellion could finally be held in equipoise. As a practical and reasonable man, he does not expect the cosmos to be perfect, and he understands that all schemes which ignore the muddled life of Man and claim to have found the single truth are doomed to failure. Through Gulliver, he recommends a state of human fallibility, seen neither as a collection of economic units (Hobbes) nor as a host of disinterested rational beings (Shaftesbury), but flexible enough to allow for human oddity and paradox. The assumption is that every one possesses a common sense of truth, but some, out of perversity, greed or lust, have turned their backs on it. Gulliver shares the Yahoos' propensity for evil, yet he enjoys some saving qualities to surpass the dull virtue of the Houyhnhnms. He always aspires to the angelic side, but he is always tempted to the brutal. All one needs in this case is to evoke the guidance of the archetypal image of the wise man, the saviour or the redeemer which lies dormant in one's consciousness. But it is this sole positive representation in the book that Gulliver rejects and proceeds to worship one extreme. Swift cannot be satisfied with any single perception, and his awareness of incongruity appears even among the Houyhnhnms when he endows the Sorrelnag with some near-human warmth and tenderness. Had Gulliver been sensible enough, he would have retained the Sorrel's voice: "Take care of thyself, gentle Yahoo". (Gulliver's Travels, p. 332) to convince him that pure rationality is never available among human beings.

Truth remains double-sided, and this duality allows Swift to treat Man as a major Paradox, a mighty curious creature, reasonable and passionate, sound and morbid, fallible and self-destructive, but inspired with saving qualities as well. Pope might be considered the poet who tried to explore Man's nature in these terms:

"Chaos of thought and passion all confused".

Passion must be granted a larger significance than a single opposition with reason would permit. The usurpation of reason by passion begins as whims of self-love; but although we may be pushed this or that way by our desires, we are also rational beings who are able to reason our desires, and thus to decide whether to surrender or not. Virtue is an essential ingredient of any beneficent order and it arises from passions which come under the care of reason. Gulliver's Travels is a tribute to this mixed state. 'Because the actual society delights him not. Swift escapes to a satirical fictional-land in order to find a good man on the purely human level. The wretchedness that surrounds men is a melancholy object to him and the more melancholy the object, the greater Swift's anger and bitterness. Swift did not intend to prescribe for the sickness of humanity but he could not refrain from probing its malady. He brings fully to the reader's consciousness what he originally evades or sees only with a feeling of dull discomfort. Had Swift been willing to denounce vices or the society which encourages them, he would have won the verbal agreement of most of his readers although he would not probably have been successful. Instead, he blows society into pieces, creates a moral dichotomy, and, through Gulliver, he offers the most powerful indictment of Man's inhumanity in order to castigate it.

Those philosophers and writers who search for a remedy to cure diseased humanity seem to fight a losing battle; in order to be saved we do not need so much knowledge to tell us what to do as wills to do what we may know. The condition of Man, in these

terms, is the same everywhere, and the nature of human existence, which is anything but happy, is to be endured rather than enjoyed. To read Gulliver's Travels, Book Four, in the light of the moral philosophy of Hobbes, Mandeville and Shaftesbury is thus to recognize the context for Swift's engagement with the paradox of Man.

Notes

- (1) Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed., C. B. Macpherson (England, Penguin Books, Ltd, 1968), p. 190. All later references are given within the text.
- (2) Jonathan Swift, Gullivers Travels (England, Penguin Books Ltd, 1967) p. 307. All later references are to this edition are given within the text.
- (3) An Essay on Man, ed., Maynard Mack, (London, Methuen and Co. Ltd, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), Epistle II, p. 55.

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