

## APPEARANCE AND REALITY IN *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*

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The theme of the discrepancy between appearance and reality is a major one in the world's literature. It lies at the core of two great 18th century novels : *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Pride and Prejudice*, written respectively in the middle and at the end of the 18th century. *Gulliver's Travels* which was published in 1726 reveals the same preoccupation. To most readers, it is obvious from the start that *Gulliver's Travels* lays emphasis on the discrepancy between appearance and reality, since the book is not what it pretends to be, i.e., a truthful account of "Captain Lemuel Gulliver's travels into several remote nations of the world".

The purpose of this study is to examine whether this preoccupation with appearance and reality remains on the surface and is confined to the veracity of Lemuel Gulliver's account and to the authorship of the *Travels*, or whether it goes deeper, informing Swift's style, permeating his outlook on human affairs and his vision of human beings.

In his letter to Cousin Sympson, Gulliver declares :

Indeed I must confess that as to the People of Lilliput, Brobdingrag (for so the word should have been spelt, and not erroneously Brobdingnag) and Laputa, I have never yet heard of any yahoo so presumptuous as to dispute their Being, or the Facts I have related concerning them ; because the Truth immediately strikes every Reader with conviction (1).

Thus Gulliver emphatically proclaims the reality of the strange places he discovered. In the course of the narrative, no details are spared to prove this point. They range from the position on the map of those unknown lands, to samples of the languages spoken by their inhabitants or to factual information concerning Gulliver's accommodation, clothes and diet during his sojourns in these countries. For instance, a prominent device to give reality to Lilliput or Brobdingnag is the use of figures expressing the measures of various objects. Thus the sword of the Lilliputian Emperor "is almost Three inches long" (2) and the sting of a Brobdingnagian wasp "an inch and a half long" (3).

These details were sufficiently realistic to convince some 18th century readers of the existence of those fantastic lands, if one is to believe reports by Swift's contemporaries about a gentleman who searched for Lilliput on his map, and an anecdote related by Swift himself in a letter to Pope about an Irish bishop who said "that the Book was full of improbable lies, and for his part, he hardly believed a word of it" (4).

The more perceptive and less credulous readers can discriminate between appearance and reality. They know that Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa and Houyhnhnmland are not what they appear to be, i.e., fantastic but real places. They know that they germinated in Swift's mind, and that they are in fact imaginary places. Or are they? Lilliput looks conspicuously like England, the Lilliputian Emperor with an Austrian lip (5), who is fond of military parades (6) is a miniature George I, the Big-Endians and Little-Endians whose feuds caused eleven thousand deaths (7) are a replica of the Catholics and the Protestants, the High-Heels and Low-Heels are modelled on the Tories and the Whigs. In part 3, chapter 3, Lindalino stands for Dublin, and the story of the king's incapacity to quell the Lindalinians' rebellion allegorizes England's withdrawal of Wood's patent. These are a few examples out of many which show that behind Lilliputian or Laputan adventures lies English political life.

Reality in *Gulliver's Travels* is a complex matter, if only for safety reasons. The reader who lifts a corner of the veil of appearances does not discover the naked truth but more appearances, and he is never sure of grasping the reality of the *Travels*. Who will know for a certainty the reality that is hidden beneath Gulliver's method of extinguishing the fire of the Lilliputian imperial palace, thus incurring the Empress's displeasure? Is this incident an allusion to *A Tale of a Tub* which displeased Queen Anne, or to the Tories' negotiations with France which incensed the Whigs? The quest for the real meaning of Houyhnhnmland gives rise to another controversy. Is Houyhnhnmland Swift's Utopia as it appears to be, if we are to believe Gulliver's eulogistic descriptions, or is it in reality a mock utopia, as some critics maintain it is? It may seem strange that those rational horse-shaped creatures, without passions or strong emotions, who marry "because it is the determination of their parents and friends" (8) and who feel no love either for their consorts or children, should represent Swift's ideal. Yet knowing Swift's distrust of passions, his shrinking from man's physicality, it is conceivable that a place whose inhabitants are entirely governed by reason should offer a strong attraction to an oversensitive mind. Could the truth be half-way, Swift embodying his utopian dreams in Houyhnhnmland, but satirizing the Houyhnhnms' limitations, and not totally sharing Gulliver's admira-

tion for these creatures ? It would be easier to answer this question if we knew Swift's exact position regarding his narrator/character, and if his relations with Gulliver were not so shifting and complex.

We know that Gulliver is not what he appears to be, i.e., a real person, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, though a great deal of factual information is supplied in the course of the story to give credibility to this assertion. External evidence is provided by the letter of the editor, Gulliver's Cousin Sympson, prefacing the first edition and giving various particulars about Gulliver. The same Sympson had written to the publisher Benjamin Motte, asking him if he would publish *Gulliver's Travels*. Internal evidence is offered from the introductory pages onwards. In part I, chapter 1, the reader is given information about Gulliver's father, brothers, about Gulliver's education, marriage, occupations, the places where he lived, and so on. The reader is also told of the practical nature of Gulliver's studies, and of Gulliver's practical qualities. Gulliver can make utensils, furniture and clothes, he can cook, build a shelter or a boat. This information is intended to give reality to his character. Moreover, since Gulliver is not given to speculation, he can be regarded as a reliable observer who tells the truth. Throughout the Travels, Gulliver himself proclaims his truthfulness, and he is particularly insistent in the concluding chapter. Cousin Sympson also praises Gulliver's reliability and declares that "the Author was so distinguished for his Veracity, that it became a sort of Proverb among his Neighbours at Redriff, when one affirmed a thing, to say it was as true as if Mr Gulliver has spoke it (9)". But these assertions are belied by the Latin inscription beneath his portrait in the 1735 edition, "splendide mendax" (a magnificent liar), and by the fantastic aspect of Gulliver's adventures.

Yet to regard Gulliver as a fictitious character, albeit realistically conceived, the brain-child of Dr Swift, is too simple. Once more, reality is more complex than it seems at first. True, Gulliver is a mask worn by Swift, a disguise that enables him to voice his opinions. But the mask is only worn part of the time, Swift being a great manipulator and using Gulliver to suit his satiric intent, making him at times his spokesman, at others, the butt of his satire. Because we cannot identify Gulliver with Swift, the difficulty lies in recognizing whether or not Swift is impersonating Gulliver in various passages of the *Travels*. In part I, Swift voices his ideas through Gulliver. This is no longer true in part II, where Swift's mouthpiece is the king of Brobdingnag. In part III, Gulliver generally expresses Swift's ideas, but Gulliver can be unpredictable and hold views opposite to those of Swift, as in the introductory lines of chapter 6 in which he remarks :

In the school of political Projectors I was but ill entertained ; the Professors appearing in my Judgment wholly out of their senses (...) These unhappy People were proposing schemes for persuading Monarchs to choose Favourites upon the score of their Wisdom, Capacity and Virtue (10).

In part IV, Swift's position is hard to assess. True, Swift makes fun of Gulliver, whose devotion to the Houyhnhnms is so great that he tries to trot like them and to imitate their neighing (11), who, once returned to England, spends four hours every day in the stable conversing with his horses and inhaling the smell of his groom.

Yet, it is too easy to dismiss Gulliver as a fool. These comic touches may be meant to enliven part IV which would otherwise be too sombre for the rest of the book. Without going to Gulliver's length in his admiration for the Houyhnhnms, Swift may share the view that Houyhnhnmland is a model for the rest of the world. It would appear then that Gulliver, in spite of his eccentricities, is presented as an enlightened man, one who has lived among admirable beings for more than three years, and who has profited from their example ; though others argue that these were not Swift's intentions, and that in reality, he wanted to portray a man who carried his misanthropy to the point of madness.

Whatever intentions Swift may have entertained regarding Gulliver, the least we can say is that they appear ambiguous. Even when the reader feels confident that Swift's views diverge from those of his narrator, as in part II, chapter 7, when Gulliver offers the king of Brobdingnag the secret of gunpowder, Gulliver's gusto in portraying the horrors of war strikes a disturbing note and leaves the reader wondering whether this touch of cruelty is imputable to Gulliver alone. The reality of Gulliver's status is complex ; in addition to being Swift's part-time spokesman, as well as the target for the author's satire, he may be the mask behind which Swift expresses unconscious impulses.

The intricacy of the relationship between Swift and Gulliver is revealed in the style of the *Travels*. Irony is the means which allows Swift to disclose the discrepancy between his perspective and that of his narrator, Gulliver presenting things as he sees them, and often contenting himself with appearances. Gulliver frequently says one thing when Swift means the opposite. An illustration is offered in part II, chapter 7, when the narrator accuses the king of Brobdingnag of having "narrow Principles and short Views" (12). Gulliver's blame is in fact disguised praise since the king of Brobdingnag is presented in a highly favourable light. The author's point of view and that of his narrator are at variance, which is often the case in part II. In part I, they frequently

coincide, as in chapter 7 when Gulliver underlines the contrast between the appearance of a situation, i.e., the clemency of the Lilliputian Emperor, and the reality that underlies it, i.e., cruelty

nor did any thing terrify the People so much as those Encomiums on his Majesty's Mercy ; because it was observed, that the more these Praises were enlarged and insisted on, the more *inhuman* was the Punishment, and *the Sufferer more innocent* (13).

The disparity between appearances and reality may be emphasized for comic purposes. This happens in part I, chapter 2, when two Lilliputian clerks make the inventory of Gulliver's pockets and apply their own standards to the description of Gulliver's possessions. In the process, Gulliver's handkerchief becomes a carpet for the Emperor's chief room of state, and the clerks conjecture that Gulliver's watch which makes a noise "like that of a Water-Mill" is "either some unknown Animal, or the God that he worships (14)".

On the other hand, the disparity between appearances and reality can be deliberately ignored for satiric purposes, as when Gulliver feigns to consider symbols literally. In part IV, chapter 5, transsubstantiation is reduced to ordinary bread and wine, and a crucifix to a post. This reduction is, of course, a way of showing the absurdity of religious wars. The same technique is used in chapter 7, when the Houyhnhnm master takes precious stones at their face value, and mentions "*shining stones* of several Colours, whereof the *Yahoos* are violently fond (15), thus enabling Swift to allude to the vanity of material possessions and to convey the idea that if you scratch the varnish of civilised manners, you find the Yahoo in man.

Throughout the *Tales*, Swift goes beneath the glossy surface of human affairs in order to show their contemptible reality. The differences between rival political parties are reduced to a difference in the size of shoe heels. Ministers of state and high court officials are chosen for their agility, decorations are awarded to those who "hold out the longest in leaping and creeping" (16), parades are performed on Gulliver's handkerchief. Gulliver's picture of the English Parliament "partly made up of an illustrious Body called the House of Peers, Persons of the noblest Blood, and of the most ancient and ample Patrimonies (17)" is shown to be idealised. The king of Brobdingnag goes beneath the surface of things and discovers, for instance, that Lords can be bribed, that new Lords are not created for their merit, but because it is the Prince's pleasure, or because of bribes given to a Court Lady or to a Prime Minister, that Commoners have not been freely elected as Gulliver pretended, but that the voters have been bribed to choose "the most considerable Gentleman in the Neighbourhood" (18), and that various

factors prevent the Courts of Justice from being impartial. The king's views differ from those of Gulliver, and his enlightened judgement is that "Ignorance, Idleness and Vice are the proper Ingredients for qualifying a Legislator ; that Laws are best explained, interpreted and applied by those whose Interest and Abilities lie in perverting, confounding and eluding them" (19).

Overlying appearances are further removed in part IV, chapter 6, when Gulliver portrays a First or Chief Minister of State who "never tells a *Truth*, but with an intent that you should take it for a *Lye* ; nor a *Lye*, but with a Design that you should take it for a *Truth* ; that those he speaks worst of behind their Backs, are in the surest way to Preferment ; and whenever he begins to praise you to others or to yourself, you are from that Day forlorn (20)" Swift aims at showing that this world is topsy-turvy, and that reality is the opposite of what you would reasonably expect ; for instance, that lawyers have been trained to prove that "*White is Black*, and *Black is White*, according as they are paid (21)", that the true mark of noble blood is not a healthy appearance, "but a weak diseased Body, a meagre Countenance, and sallow complexion (22)."

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift cautions his readers against trusting appearances, and he sets out to disclose the truth about human institutions and also about human nature. Because of his pride, man deceives himself and exaggerates his importance. Swift strives to make him realize that his grandeur is illusory and that he should know himself. The use of a double physical scale is paramount to the achievement of this aim. Thus Lilliputians are seen as diminutive beings who mimic human behaviour, and through them, Swift proposes to reveal man's insignificance and pettiness. The Emperor of Lilliput who is described as "most Mighty Emperor of Lilliput, Delight and Terror of the Universe (...) Monarch of all Monarchs : Taller than the Sons of Men ; whose Feet press down to the Center and whose Head strikes against the sun (23)", is only six inches tall. The same Emperor fiercely clasps his three-inch sword, ready to defend himself against Gulliver. This scene is reversed in part II, chapter 6, when Lilliputian Gulliver fiercely clasps his hanger and boasts that he could have put the gigantic monkey to flight, had not fear distracted him. The loud laughter which greets Gulliver's declaration shows that he is not taken seriously.

Gulliver is the instrument used by Swift to deflate man's pride. All the ridiculous accidents to which Gulliver is exposed are meant to stress man's littleness. Thus Gulliver stumbles on a crust of bread, he is attacked by a rat, carried away by a spaniel, he breaks his shin on the shell of a snail, his fingers are pecked by little birds and he jumps up to his knees in cow-dung. In "A Voyage to Brobdingnag", Swift sets out to cure man of his pride by focusing on the humiliations that Gulliver has

to go through. Because of his size, Gulliver is treated like a small child, he is looked after by a nine-year old girl whom he calls his nurse. He is not only divested of his manhood, he is dehumanized ; he is first taken for a small animal by farm- labourers, then for a piece of clockwork by the king of Brobdingnag, and in chapter 5, a monkey takes him for a young one of his own species. This dehumanizing process is carried on in part IV when Gulliver is compared to a Yahoo, a human-shaped creature described as a most odious animal.

Man's self-deception is still the subject of the closing pages of *the Travels* as Gulliver declares : "But when I behold a Lump of Deformity, and Diseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with *Pride*, it immediately breaks all the Measures of my Patience ; neither shall I ever be able to comprehend how such an Animal and such a Vice could tally together (24)." Gulliver's journey of exploration takes him inside man's mind, from appearances to reality. In Lilliput, his naïve complacency is shaken by the discovery of the treachery and cruelty of tiny human beings ; in Brobdingnag, he is shocked by the coarseness and grossness of human flesh, and he comes to realize his relative smallness ; in Laputa, he witnesses human irrationality, and in Houyhnhnmland he becomes aware of human corruption. So Gulliver travels from illusion to self-awareness. But does he ? Delusion rather than enlightenment might be the cause of his bitter misanthropy at the end of "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms". In the closing chapter of part IV, Gulliver sees only the Yahoo in man. To quote the French philosopher Pascal : "Il est dangereux de trop faire voir à l'homme combien il est égal aux bêtes sans lui montrer sa grandeur". Pascal also says : "L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête, et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête" (25).

Swift had certainly read Pascal, but being a satirist, he exaggerated the truth and distorted reality so as to shock man into rejecting his pride, which induced him to trust flattering appearances. Yet to modern readers, reality in *Gulliver's Travels* is elusive, and they run against more appearances when they think that truth is within their reach. One of the reasons is the many years which stand between the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* and their own age. Thus disguised historical allusions are not always clear to modern readers.

Another factor which complicates the quest for reality in *Gulliver's Travels* is the evolution of the readers' sensibilities. For instance, Gulliver's behaviour at the end of part IV, which may have struck eighteenth century readers as broadly comical, does not appear so nowadays. Swift's intentions are no longer obvious, if indeed they ever were ; some issues remain uncertain. One certain thing though is that

in *Gulliver's Travels* Swift wanted men to see themselves clearly, without pride, and to become aware of the relativity of things. As Gulliver learns in Brobdingnag "nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison (26)." If men were capable of knowing themselves, of seeing through the deceptive appearances surrounding their laws, customs and institutions, then the truth about their own corruption would dawn upon them. To achieve this aim, Swift placed before their eyes a picture of human nature that reflected his sombre vision of mankind.

### NOTES

1. *Gulliver's Travels*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1986, XXVIII
2. *Id.*, part 1, chapter 2, 16.
3. *Id.*, part 2, chapter 3, 101.
4. *Swift, Gulliver's Travels*, A selection of Critical Essays, Macmillan, Casebook Series, 1974, 33.
5. *Gulliver's Travels*, part 1, chapter 3, 15.
6. *Id.*, chapter 3, 28.
7. *Id.*, chapter 4, 36.
8. *Id.*, part 4 chapter 8, 274.
9. *Id.*, XL.
10. *Id.*, part 3, chapter 6, 187.
11. *Id.*, part 4, chapter 10, 286.
12. *Id.*, part 2, chapter 7, 129.
13. *Id.*, part 1, chapter 7, 60.
14. *Id.*, part 1, chapter 2, 21.
15. *Id.*, part 4, chapter 7, 265.
16. *Id.*, part 1, chapter 3, 26.
17. *Id.*, part 2, chapter 6, 121.
18. *Id.*, 123.
19. *Id.*, 126.
20. *Id.*, part 4, chapter 6, 259.
21. *Id.*, part 4, chapter 5, 252.
22. *Id.*, 261.
23. *Id.*, part 1, chapter 3, 29
24. *Id.*, part 4, chapter 12, 304.
25. Pascal, *Pensées, Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1963 ,67 7 p., 513 (fragment 121) et 590 (fragment 678).  
The whole 'fragment 121' reads like this : "Il est dangereux de trop faire voir à l'homme combien il est égal aux bêtes, sans lui montrer sa grandeur. Et il est encore dangereux de lui trop faire voir sa grandeur sans sa bassesse. Il est encore plus dangereux de lui laisser ignorer l'un et l'autre, mais il est très avantageux de lui représenter l'un et l'autre.  
Il ne faut pas que l'homme croie qu'il est égal aux bêtes ni aux anges, ni qu'il ignore l'un et l'autre, mais qu'il sache l'un et l'autre".
26. *Gulliver's Travels*, part 2, chapter 1, 77.