



ANTI-WAR SENTIMENTS IN GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

by Herbert Marx

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*Is this an Age of the World to think
Crimes improbable because they
are great? (Swift)*

TOO frequently *Gulliver's Travels* is presented as a simple story which, as irony would have it, appeals to children. However, this book is fundamentally a poignant satire, in which Dean Swift struck at the political and moral failings of man. The most significant aspect for the modern reader of *Gulliver's Travels* is the powerful anti-war theme that Swift presents. World leaders have implied that nuclear warfare hangs like a Damocles sword over humanity — the same as the threat to Balnibarbi from Laputa, in the *Travels*. If we are to avoid the fate of the inhabitants of Balnibarbi — of “creeping into cellars or caves while the roofs of . . . our Houses are beaten to Pieces”⁽¹⁾ — we must curb our Yahooism. As the Houyhnhnm Master (the Philosopher Horse) explained — corruption of reason is much worse than mere brutality, for the former condition leads to mass brutality and destruction.

Herbert Davis noted that Swift had “a moral dislike of war.”⁽²⁾ In the *Travels* he strips war of its nobility, of its glory and he associates it with the most base passions of mankind. Primarily, Swift had no admiration for the soldier as soldier. The Brobdingnagian (Giant) King observed that no special perfection is required to become a soldier and that soldiers are not advanced “for their Conduct or Valour”.⁽³⁾ Yet, “the trade of a *Soldier* is held the most honorable of all other” and essentially “a *Soldier* is a *Yahoo* hired to kill in Cold Blood as many of his own Species, who have never offended him, as he possibly can.”⁽⁴⁾ Professor Price wrote that — “This divorces the soldier from patriotism or duty and the means of killing from the end; one need not commend war to recognize it as something more than this.”⁽⁵⁾ Swift however, quite rightly wants us to see it as “something” less “than this” — he is attacking those who would have us view soldiering as “something more.”

Gulliver is impressed with military strength. The state Militia Guard in Brobdingnag, he thought, “was the most splendid Sight that

could be ever beheld.”⁽⁶⁾ In Lilliput (the land of the pygmies), Gulliver diverts the Emperor and the court by constructing a platform on which a troop of cavalry could manoeuvre. He fixed a number of sticks in the ground and stretched his handkerchief to the sticks, forming a miniature parade ground. Twenty-four soldiers were divided into two equal parties who, “performed mock Skirmishes, discharged blunt Arrows, drew their Swords, fled and pursued, attacked and retired; and in short discovered the best military Discipline”,⁽⁷⁾ that Gulliver had ever observed. However, one of the horses ridden by a Captain, struck a hole in Gulliver’s handkerchief, and both rider and beast were overturned. This incident seems to illustrate that military exercises are comical rather than serious. Military grandeur is stripped of its glory. Two days later, the Lilliputian Emperor “took a fancy of diverting himself”⁽⁸⁾ by having a portion of his army march under Gulliver, who was to stand like a “Colossus”. The troops were ordered to behave with the greatest decency in respect to Gulliver’s person on pain of death. But this did not prevent some of the younger officers from turning up their eyes and laughing. Gulliver’s trousers were torn. Besides being somewhat frivolous, this military display is quite fruitless — and Swift would have us believe that all military displays are equally nonsensical.

Lilliput and Blefuscu

Gulliver later became involved in the petty struggles between Lilliput and Blefuscu. These two “mighty powers” were engaged in a long, obstinate war. It all began when the Lilliputian Emperor’s grand-father cut one of his fingers while breaking an egg at the larger end, as was the practice. His father published an edict commanding all his subjects to commence breaking their eggs at the smaller end. This law was resented by the people, and consequently many rebellions occurred. “These civil Commotions were constantly formented by the Monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire. “It was calculated that eleven thousand persons died, rather than submit to breaking their eggs at the smaller end. This egg breaking factionalism is comparable to man’s religious differences. It is inferred that any modern differences and our own assumptions, would be viewed as equally trivial by a superior being. Swift does not ask us to judge whether the Lilliputians or the Blefuscuans are right. “The real sentiment in Swift is that a war between these miserable pygmies is, in itself contemptible; and therefore as he infers, war between men six feet high is equally contemptible.”⁽¹⁰⁾ We despise the petty quarrelling of the Lilliputians and the Blefuscuans and thus we are prepared to despise wars carried out by our modern states. The contempt based on mere size is transferred to the motives, which are the same in both little and big men.

In the second voyage war is frequently discussed between Gulliver and the giant King of Brobdingnag. But they cannot understand each other insofar as their ethical and moral standards are diverse. For example, Gulliver cannot comprehend how the King could refuse

to use gunpowder as a means of reducing his enemies. Gulliver explains that “in Europe we can have no Conception”,⁽¹¹⁾ of such a “Scruple”; which would inhibit Europeans from destroying their neighbours to settle a dispute. Gulliver has described the effect of cannon, which he assures the King, he could produce inexpensively. Not only, Gulliver elucidates, could whole ranks of an army be destroyed, but cannons could “batter the strongest Walls to the Ground; sink down Ships . . . and when cannon balls were linked to-gether by a Chain, they would cut through Masts and Rigging; divide Hundreds of Bodies in the Middle, and lay all Waste before them.”⁽¹²⁾ The King was horrified at this description and at the proposal Gulliver had made. “He was”, Gulliver advises,

amazed how so impotent and grovelling an Insect as I (these were his Expressions) could entertain such inhuman Ideas, and in so familiar a Manner as to appear wholly unmoved at all the Scenes of Blood and Desolation, which I had painted as the common Effects of those destructive Machines: whereof he said, some evil Genius, Enemy to Mankind, must have been the first Contriver.⁽¹³⁾

Nowhere in the *Travels* is the irony stronger. Both the ideas and the terms of reference refer to contrasting political ideas and moral values. The lack of political morality on the part of man is strikingly displayed.

In the third voyage, the warfare detailed is unlike those facets of war previously explained — armies battling, ships blown out of the water or the killing of several thousands of inhabitants. The warfare indulged in by Laputa is total war — every man, woman and child suffers directly, no one is spared. Laputa can effectively punish Balnibarbi, the land below, in three distinct manners. There are three degrees of severity — each to fit the particular degree of disobedience on the part of the inhabitants of Balnibarbi. On the Island below Laputa,

If any Town should engage in Rebellion or Mutiny, fall into violent Factions, or refuse to pay the usual Tribute; the King hath two Methods of reducing them to Obedience. The first and the mildest Course is by keeping the Island hovering over such a Town, and the Lands about it; whereby he can deprive them of the Benefit of the Sun and the Rain, and consequently afflict the Inhabitants with Dearth and Diseases. And if the Crime deserve it, they are at the same time pelted from above with great stones, against which they have no Defense, but by creeping into Cellars or Caves, while the Roofs of their Houses are beaten to Pieces. But if they still continue obstinate, or offer to raise Insurrections; he proceeds to the last Remedy, by letting the Island drop directly upon their Heads, which makes a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Laputans can thus use the threat of war as a method of coercing the inhabitants on the lands below. The people of Balnibarbi are well aware of the dangers involved and they consequently understand how far to carry their obstinacy. With impunity, the Laputans have the capacity to conduct a limited or a total war. They prefer the former course of action, insofar as the latter policy would greatly reduce the benefits they derive from exploiting the inhabitants below their floating island.

It is also in this third voyage that Gulliver learns the true happenings in the past. In correcting ancient and modern history, Swift, through Gulliver, has the perfect vehicle with which to carry his repudiation of the glories of war, within the realms of human experience and human actions. Alexander the Great, we learn, died not of fever, but of excessive drinking.⁽¹⁵⁾ A General confessed to Gulliver, "that he got a Victory purely by the Force of Cowardice and ill Conduct: And an Admiral, that for want of proper Intelligence, he beat the Enemy to whom he intended to betray the Fleet."

Swift infers that a true rendition of history would show that many of those military leaders whom we revere, were actually corrupted cowards and degenerates. An honest man is shown to be used, by the powers that be, in war only so long as his services are required. When the crisis has passed, the honest fellow is disregarded, in favour of those who have ingratiated themselves in various ways with the most prominent leaders of the country. It is the historians, Gulliver advises, who have beguiled humanity, who have made the most inhuman actions of man virtuous — and it is these historians who "have the perpetual Misfortune to be mistaken."⁽¹⁷⁾ Swift would have doubtlessly wanted history to be re-written so that war would be shown as dishonourable and undignified.

We are reminded throughout the *Travels* that man is constantly at war. Gulliver's native country is always at war with one nation or another. At the beginning of book three, Gulliver begs the Dutch pirate captain for mercy, informing him that they are "of neighbouring Countries, in strict Alliance"⁽¹⁸⁾ — in alliance against France. England and France, Gulliver tells his Houyhnhnm Master, are at war almost continuously. Gulliver advises the Portuguese sailors who find him, that when he left England, Portugal and England were at peace. War is so prevalent among European nations that it would seem one is never certain who one's enemies or who one's friends are at any particular time.

Why Europeans are constantly at war is also explained by Gulliver. The causes for war are innumerable so Gulliver only mentions those that are of most importance. Often, Gulliver explains, Princes go to war because they want more land and/or people to govern. At times, a Chief Minister helps precipitate a war in order to channel the discontent of the people in another direction. And,

*Difference in Opinions hath cost many Millions of Lives:
For Instance, whether Flesh be Bread, or Bread be Flesh:*

*Whether the Juice of a certain Berry be Blood or Wine:
Whether Whistling be a Vice or Virtue: Whether it be better
to kiss a Post, or throw it into the Fire: What is the best
Colour for a Coat, whether Black, White, Red or Grey; and
whether it should be long or short, narrow or wide, dirty or
clean; with many more. Neither are any Wars so furious and
bloody, or of so long Continuance, as those occasioned by
Difference in Opinion; especially if it be in things indiffer-
ent.*⁽¹⁹⁾

Sometimes Princes quarrel concerning who shall annex the territory of a third Prince, to which neither has any claim and sometimes a Prince starts a controversy fearing that his opposite number is going to start one with him. Wars take place because one's enemies are too strong or too weak or because one nation wants what the other possesses. It is justifiable to attack a weak and faction-ridden neighbour, or too, war with an ally if it is convenient. If Princes conquer poorer nations where the inhabitants are ignorant, it is lawful to kill off half the population and enslave the remainder under the banner of bringing civilization to barbarous peoples. The keynote of this exposition and one of the chief reasons for war, evident today as well, is that: "Poor Nations are hungry, and rich Nations are proud; and Pride and Hunger will ever be at Variance."⁽²⁰⁾

The Houyhnhnms cannot understand how reasonable creatures can indulge in wars. Furthermore, Gulliver's Master fails to understand how human wars can be so destructive, insofar as humans physically are "incapable of doing much Mischief,"⁽²¹⁾ in comparison to animals that have claws, and that are capable of biting their adversaries. Gulliver "being no Stranger to the Art of War," gave him —

*a Description of Cannons, Culverins, Muskets, Carabines,
Pistols, Bullets, Powder, Swords, Bayonets, Sieges, Retreats,
Attacks, Undermines, Countermines, Bombardments, Seafights;
ships sunk with a Thousand Men; twenty Thousand killed on
each Side; dying Groans, Limbs flying in the Air: Smoak,
Noise, Confusions, trampling to Death under Horses Feet:
Flight, Pursuit, Victory; Fields strewed with Carcases left for
Food to Dogs, and Wolves, and Birds of Prey; Plundering,
Stripping, Ravishing, Burning and Destroying. And, to set
forth the Valour of my own dear Countrymen, I assured him
that I had seen them blow up a Hundred Enemies at once in
a Siege, and as many in a Ship; and beheld the dead Bodies
drop down in Pieces from the Clouds, to the great Diversion
of all the Spectators.*⁽²²⁾

Rationis capax.

It is paradoxical that man, *rationis capax*, to use Swift's definition, is capable of utilising this reason to build the most complex and destructive machines for warfare — yet man cannot bring this reason

to bear on solutions for peace. It seems that passions cloud man's reason and some of these passions are parodied in the description of the Yahoos. These portraits of Yahoo brutality underline human irrationality in all its horror.

The equivalence of the Yahoos and irrational man is skillfully established. Firstly, the physical resemblance between the Yahoo and Gulliver (and thus man) is never allowed to become stale. It is continuously brought up, so that it remains fresh in the mind and emotion of the reader. After the physical similarity is firmly established, the moral affinity is verified "as Gulliver comes to appreciate the impassive virtues of his noble masters and thereby to despise himself and his race."⁽²³⁾

The Houyhnhnm Master equating human and Yahoo dissensions, told Gulliver that in both species they stemmed from the same cause. The Yahoos were no less greedy than man. He explained that if one throws "among five *Yahoos* as much Food as would be sufficient for fifty, they will, instead of eating peaceably, fall together by the Ears, each single one impatient to *have all to itself*."⁽²⁴⁾ While feeding the Yahoos it was thus necessary to keep them tied separately at a distance. If a cow dies from old age or by accident, all the Yahoos in the neighbourhood come in herds to seize it, and a battle ensues — the type of battle, that Gulliver has described to his Master, that occurs amongst men. At times, these Yahoo battles take place without visible cause, the Yahoos of one district always waiting for an opportunity to strike when their opponents are unprepared. But if this project is not feasible, all the Yahoos return home and war amongst themselves — for want of enemies they have a civil war.

The Yahoos treasure "*shining Stones*", much as man treasures gold. These "*Stones*" are not really of any use to the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnm Master equated Yahoo collection of these "*Stones*" with the human passion of avarice. Gulliver was assured by his Master that "in the Fields where these shining stones abound, the fiercest and most frequent Battles are fought, occasioned by perpetual Inroads of the neighbouring *Yahoos*."⁽²⁵⁾ The Yahoos, it was noted, seemed to hate one another more than they did other species. They inflicted terrible wounds on each other in battle, by using their claws. However, they were seldom able to kill one another, since they lacked the lethal weapons of warfare that man had invented. Paradoxically, the Yahoos fought because they lacked reason (of the Houyhnhnms) but had they had reason (of man), they undoubtedly would have perfected instruments of death with which to destroy one another. It would seem that "human beings are superior to Yahoos, then, mainly in their capacity for mischief."⁽²⁶⁾

Swift did not rebel against shopworn traditions — but against the latest follies of his own age. Man being what he is — neither Houyhnhnm nor Yahoo — the main points made in *Gulliver's Travels* are still valid to-day. The complexities arising from the interaction of Gulliver in the four different lands, though they resemble eighteenth century problems, are in fact, timeless. It is to be hoped that when

re-reading *Gulliver's Travels*, the reader will draw the parallels between the episodes recounted and our modern problems. Cuba, Formosa, the cold war, military manouvers, aspirations of underdeveloped countries, foreign aid, colonialism, the deterrent, clean nuclear warfare, brinkmanship, the respectability of soldiering, preventative war, totalitarian society, automation — and in fact, the whole panorama of our modern dilemma can be viewed in the *Travels*.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift meant to shock our intelligence, to disturb our complacency, to prod our humanity — to have us distinguish between appearance and reality. "It is not as you think — look."⁽²⁷⁾ And if we "look" and if we act, there is hope, for —

*His satire points at no defect
But what all mortals may correct.* (28)

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- (6) *Gulliver*, p. 115.
- (7) *ibid.*, p. 40.
- (8) *ibid.*, p. 42.
- (9) *ibid.*, p. 49.
- (10) Leslie Stephen, *Swift*, "English Men of Letters Series", (New York: Harper & Brothers, n.d.), p. 174.
- (11) *Gulliver*, p. 135.
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- (13) *ibid.*, p.p. 134-135.
- (14) *ibid.*, p. 171.
- (15) *ibid.*, p. 195.
- (16) *ibid.*, p. 199.
- (17) *ibid.*, p. 199.
- (18) *ibid.*, p. 154.
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- (20) *ibid.*, p. 246.
- (21) *ibid.*, p. 247.
- (22) *ibid.*, p. 247.
- (23) Ricardo Quintana, *The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1953), p. 321.
- (24) *Gulliver*, p. 260.
- (25) *ibid.*, p. 261.
- (26) D.W. Jefferson, "An Approach to Swift", *From Dryden to Johnson*, Boris Ford, ed., (London: Penguin Book No.: A 379, 1957), p. 245.
- (27) A pet phrase utilized by Prof. Quintana in his book *The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift*.
- (28) In this poem, Swift deals with the worst and the best that can be said of him. The above quotation is amongst the best he imagines that can be said of him.