

SWIFT'S TROJAN HORSES: THE ROLE OF
THE HOUYHNHNMS IN GULLIVER'S
FOURTH VOYAGE

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Laocoon to the Trojans:

'O wretched countrymen! what fury reigns?
What more than madness has possess'd your brains?
Think you the Grecians from your coasts are gone?
And are Ulysses' arts no better known?
This hollow fabric either must inclose,
Within its blind recess, our secret foes;
Or 't is an engine rais'd above the town,
T' o'erlook the walls, and then to batter down.
Somewhat is sure designed, by fraud or force:
Trust not their presents, nor admit the horse.'
Thus having said, against the steed he threw
His forceful spear, which, hissing as it flew,
Pierc'd thro' the yielding planks of jointed wood,
And trembling in the hollow belly stood.
The sides, transpierc'd, return a rattling sound,
And groans of Greeks inclos'd come issuing thro'
the wound.
And, had not Heav'n the fall of Troy designed,
Or had not men been fated to be blind,
Enough was said and done t' inspire a better mind.

--John Dryden, Virgil's Aeneid, II.

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

In an article published in 1938, George Sherburn wrote:

Of the making of many books about Jonathan Swift there is no end, and the reason is perhaps obvious: each admirer feels that he alone really understands Swift. And so by an irony which he would not appreciate, the great believer in the common sense of all intelligent men becomes the preoccupation of the private sense of some well read professors and amateur biographers.¹

And a little over two hundred years before, Lemuel Gulliver had complained to his cousin Sympson:

... you are loading our carrier every week with libels, and keys, and reflections, and memoirs, and second parts; wherein I see myself accused of reflecting upon great states-folk, of degrading human nature (for so they have still the confidence to style it), and of abusing the female sex. I find likewise that the writers of these bundles are not agreed among themselves; for some of them will not allow me to be author of my own travels; and others make me author of books to which I am a total stranger.²

Had this been a prediction, it were surely worthy of that eminent Protestant Astrologer, Squire Bickerstaff. At any rate, the student of Swift can attest that both complaints are amply justified. If it is permissible to paraphrase Professor

¹"Methods in Books about Swift," Studies in Philology, XXXV (October, 1938), 635.

²Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels: A Tale of a Tub: Battle of the Books: Etc., ed. William Alfred Eddy (New York, 1933), p. 5 (italics mine). Unless otherwise noted, this edition is used throughout and will be referred to as Travels.

Sherburn, of the offering of interpretations of Gulliver's Travels, especially of the climactic fourth voyage, there is no end, and the reason is perhaps obvious: a satisfactory one has not been found.

This is perhaps not as unreasonable as it appears at first glance, for, once the greatness of Swift's best-known work is admitted, several attributes follow, one of which is that quality of universality which lets the work mean many things to many men. Surely it is platitudinous to say that great works of literature may contain diverse meanings, or meanings not consciously intended by their authors. Speculation, however reprehensible it may be to the scholar when indulged in idly or without proper criteria, becomes a duty if undertaken properly and if it seems to offer a solution to what have, in the past, been considered inconsistencies.

In 1949 Edward Stone wrote:

Some thirteen years ago Ricardo Quintana attempted to raise the siege that criticism has laid to Part IV of Gulliver's Travels. [In The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift.] He balanced Swift's "misanthropy" with a reminder that Swift "was also bent upon creating a work which should win universal acclaim," and, in attempting to account for the abuse heaped upon the Travels since the original acclamation, suggested that "the softening of ethical doctrine and the rise of sentimentalism induced a certain amount of the horror which critics began to feel for Gulliver's Travels, particularly part IV."

It is regrettable that the challenge implicit in Professor Quintana's reminder has not been accepted by Swift scholars. Their task would obviously be both difficult and unenviable, to be sure: it would be undertaken in defiance of the long tradition of critical disparagement ranging from Johnson's impersonal reproval to the vituperation of Thackeray, and would necessitate venturing into the illusive field of the aesthetics of an age removed from our own by two hundred years. Nevertheless, it is time that at least a brief attempt be made to question the justice of the over-all verdict that part IV of the Travels was an unprovoked outburst of misanthropy, that its chief merit was the doubtful one of

not having succeeded in damaging the comic success of Parts I and II.³

Stone then gave his reasons for believing that Swift's primary purpose in the voyage to the land of the Houyhnhnms was to laugh at, rather than to lash the world. After finding that the exaggerations of Gulliver's unbalanced views and actions among the horses and after his return to England indicated a comic rather than an embittered spirit, Stone concluded:

This is, of course, not to infer that Swift conceived of Houyhnhnm-land solely as benevolent comedy, or that his audience received it only as such. Actually, so brief a study as the foregoing is but a preliminary step toward the re-discovery of what Swift was trying to say and of how it was received by the audience. Surely the greatness of the Travels makes it a step worth taking.⁴

Readers at all conversant with the welter of conflicting interpretations, though some may cavil at the prefix to "discovery," will heartily agree that the step is worth taking, provided it is along a path which avoids some of the difficulties previously encountered, and promises a way out of the maze of opposed opinion. The present study, also necessarily too brief, will not concern itself with the reaction of Swift's audience, nor should it be called a step, preliminary or otherwise, in any direction. It might better be compared to a pause, to the climbing of a tree to look for some landmark, for some perhaps previously-overlooked sign or for some hidden

³"Swift and the Horses: Misanthropy or Comedy?" Modern Language Quarterly, X (September, 1949), 367.

⁴Ibid., p. 376.

path by which a reader may follow Gulliver through the land of the Houyhnhnms with somewhat less sense of having missed his way and of being lost in an alien world. A word of warning is necessary--a little-traveled path will not mean a comfortable journey. If the path glimpsed in this survey is followed, be sure the traveller will not escape the brambles of Swift's scorn; the reader cannot hope to accompany Gulliver and escape unmarked. It may, however, help to assuage the fellow-traveller's pain if he realizes that what stings him so tormentingly is not the poisoned fang of an unseen adder striking blindly and viciously from a muck of misanthropy, but is rather a thorny branch of wit swinging in the clear light of a penetrating understanding of human nature.

What are some of the obstacles encountered in Houyhnhmland? What has misled or puzzled previous travelers who have accompanied Gulliver on his final voyage? While it is entirely beyond the scope of the present study to attempt a comprehensive review of the various interpretations, or a resume of the historical criticism of the fourth voyage, the answer to these questions must be indicated, and no one has done it more succinctly, perhaps, than Merrell D. Clubb, formerly head of the English Department at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College. His study, printed in 1941, "The Criticism of Gulliver's 'Voyage to the Houyhnhnms,' 1726-1914," a very helpful digest for the student of Swift, had these things to say:

The truth is, in recounting Gulliver's experiences among the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos, not only did Jonathan Swift

"divert" thousands of readers in spite of himself, and "vex" thousands of others as he intended, but he also purveyed an exquisite blend of pleasure and instruction to the few readers blessed with sufficient candor and sense of humor to understand him. At the same time, he has puzzled every one who has attempted to work out his exact meaning consistently with the details of his allegory and with the known facts of his life and character.... There is something esoteric about it which as yet the best-disposed critics have not quite caught. ... The longer one studies Swift, the more obvious it becomes that the interpretation and verdict to be placed on the "Voyage to the Houyhnhnms" is, after all, the central problem of Swift criticism.... All the evidence goes to show that the "Houyhnhnms" was due ultimately neither to the retaliation of personal disappointment nor to the raving of incipient madness, but that it contained the core of Swift's deepest and ripest thought about human nature. Nevertheless, its wisdom has proved to be a nut which has cost the critics many a tooth and paid the majority of them with nothing but a worm. For one reader who has fancied that Swift modestly, but withal seriously, proposed the consumption of the surplus of Irish infants for food, there have been thousands who have accepted with no discriminating qualification the almost equally naive notions that the sagacious Houyhnhnms are animals, that the Yahoos are men, and that Gulliver is always Swift.... [But before exploring the criticism] it would be clarifying to list the objections and misunderstandings which the hostile carry away from reading part IV, and which its defenders seek to remove: first, sweeping condemnation of the "Voyage" as a libel hurled against human nature, and often, as a sacrilege committed against God; second, and almost always in combination with any form of the first, unqualified, or only clumsily qualified, identification of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos with the actual zoological genera homo and equus, and of Gulliver with Swift; third, the inference that in writing part IV, a personally disappointed, gloomy, morose, mentally unhealthy, or even maniacally insane man, was paying off old scores; fourth, dissatisfaction with the Houyhnhnms as anything but the "perfection of nature" implied in Swift's etymological explanation of the proper noun; fifth, repugnance to the filth and violence of some sections of the book, and total or relative misunderstanding of the intentions and methods of Swift's humor; and sixth, the verdicts of failure as narrative, inconsistency as allegory, and moral ineffectiveness or unwholesomeness as satire.⁵

Clubb, disclaiming any present intention of offering his

⁵In Stanford Studies in Language and Literature, ed. Hardin Craig (Stanford University Press, 1941), pp. 204-207, 212-213.

own interpretation, though admitting that such was the ultimate aim of the study--a consummation devoutly to be wished--quotes from critics and commentators from Swift's day to 1914. The main question at issue in Clubb's study is the degree of Swift's misanthropy, or his filth and violence. The majority of the critics so quoted sustain the charge of misanthropy; a few oppose it, defending Swift in general on the grounds that human nature amply justifies a savage attack, that it is the truth that hurts, that only man is vile. The study throws little light on the reasons for these various "misunderstandings," but it offers an invaluable listing of various criticisms.

The present study will concern itself mainly with Clubb's second and fourth misunderstandings: the identification of the Houyhnhnms with the genus eguis, and their role as perfect beings. The reader will notice that Clubb uses the word "Swift's," when writing of the etymological explanation of the name Houyhnhnm as meaning "perfection of nature." But this is Gulliver's explanation, and Swift's only in the sense that Gulliver is a creation of Swift's. Clubb also has listed as an error the confusion of Gulliver with Swift, yet, as many others do, unconsciously falls into it himself. This is an error which, it can be demonstrated, occurs time and time again, even in the works of those critics who warn against it. It is an error almost impossible to guard against completely, and allowances should be made for natural slips or associations of ideas, in naming either Swift or Gulliver as

author. The reader will notice, throughout the quotations used herein, such terms as "Swift's ideal Houyhnhnms," etc., and this lack of precision, the author maintains, is one of the reasons for much of the misunderstanding of the work. Probably the only safe way to read or criticize the work is to regard Gulliver as an actual person, entirely separate from his creator, and, when Swift's opinions are at issue, simply ask the question, "Would Swift agree?" For it can readily be seen that in places Gulliver, if not speaking for Swift, is at least uttering sentiments with which it may reasonably be thought that Swift would agree, just as, at times, he utters ideas from which the reader is certain Swift would violently dissent. The question, then, is when do Swift and Gulliver agree; when do they not? Is one justified in speaking of Swift's ideal Houyhnhnms? Which brings up the obvious corollary: if the Houyhnhnms were not ideal creatures to Swift, what were they? The answer to this question, or an answer which will remove some of the inconsistencies or explain some apparent discrepancies, may conceivably serve to indicate a path to those who will undertake a definitive interpretation of the fourth Voyage or of the book as a whole.

If a more satisfactory role can be found for the horses, we should have a little more tolerance for poor Gulliver, for the Yahoos, for Swift--even for the passionless Houyhnhnms. Either that, or we must be intolerant of ourselves, for to look at a Houyhnhnm closely and see him clearly is to look into a small but very accurate mirror which reflects an extremely important part of the great majority of ourselves.

The Houyhnhnms show us some of the ways in which we think we think. They demonstrate dramatically the fallacy of the proposition: "I am capable of thought, therefore I think." As will be seen, the demonstration of this proposition was Swift's avowed purpose in writing the Travels. To substantiate his argument he created among other things, a wondrous race of horses---true Trojan horses in that they were deliberately fabricated to deceive and to conceal his most telling attack on man's pride, and in that they, like their famous prototype, have caused controversy and dissension among readers and critics. They, like the wooden horse, dedicated to the Goddess of Wisdom, even have their ardent advocate. Though Gulliver is no treacherous Sinon, his fatuous praise and blind idolatry have apparently been as successful in gaining acceptance for the horse as was the guile of the Greek. To many, the Houyhnhnms have seemed exactly what Gulliver claimed. To fully appreciate Gulliver's success in misdirection, however, and before attempting to establish the role of false idols for his beloved horses, it will be necessary to explore, as briefly as is consistent with integrity, some of the chief roles which have been assigned to the Houyhnhnms.

CHAPTER II

BRIEF HISTORY OF CRITICISM

In any evaluation of a part of Gulliver's Travels it is both impossible and undesirable to completely isolate a part from the whole, but the fact that the present study must necessarily confine itself as much as possible to the fourth voyage and the part played by the Houyhnhnms makes it advisable to include here the same warning issued by Clubb in his study:

... In the ensuing pages, among the hostile criticisms of the fourth "Voyage," many an author will be done a grave injustice if his remarks on Part IV are accepted as representing his total attitude toward Swift. That attitude may be generally fair, or sympathetic, or even tender; but the appraisal of these complete viewpoints in the present monograph would be both cumbersome and confusing to the main issue.¹

Thus it must not be taken for granted that because a critic disapproves of part IV, his attitude toward the Travels, or toward Swift, is generally condemnatory. That the caution is necessary the reader will realize when he encounters the almost fanatical tone of many of the derogatory comments.

In one of the earliest criticisms we find a major and long-lived error apparently making its first appearance when Pope and Gay report that "Lord [Bolingbroke] is the person who least approves it, blaming it as a design of evil consequence

¹Note 35, p. 215.

to depreciate human nature," and later Bolingbroke wrote: "Gulliver's horses made a very absurd figure in the place of men, and men would make one as absurd in the place of horses."² This idea, that Swift erred in choosing horses to represent reasoning creatures, can only be called apparent when applied to Bolingbroke's criticism, for there is now no way of ascertaining the exact application of his designation "absurd." The idea, which recurs in one form or another to the present, is called an error because it fails to take into account what seems to the present writer a far more likely possibility, that Swift made the choice with a deliberate end in view. It is part of the contention in the present study that Swift is using the readers who miss his point as part of his demonstration. But, to do this, it is necessary for him to play fair, so to speak, and warn the reader that irony is intended. Swift's own lines from Cadenus and Vanessa are singularly appropriate:

But those who aim at ridicule
Should fix upon some certain rule,
Which fairly hints they are in jest....

If, having been duly warned, the indignant critic persists in taking seriously what is intended as ridicule, he becomes an active part of Swift's demonstration of the curious blindness of man where his own ego is concerned--becomes an additional proof that man's pride in his perception and reasoning power rests on very sandy foundations indeed. Thus the choice

²Clubb, pp. 210-211.

of the horse, the classical symbol of fiery spirit and passion (as in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis and elsewhere), to represent a calmly reasoning creature, is very likely intended as a signal to the perceptive reader that irony is intended.³ The very absurdity of which Bolingbroke complains seems, to the present writer, to be an essential part of Swift's design. Of course the horses are absurd, simply because they are intended to be absurd. Just as, to Swift at least, man is absurd when he claims to be a creature guided by reason.

The Earl of Orrery, attacking "what he calls an 'intolerable' misanthropy and believing that the fourth Voyage was 'a real insult to mankind,'" was nevertheless unconsciously close to the mark when he said:

Nor is the picture he draws of the Houyhnhnms inviting or amusing....[For in them] we view the pure instincts of brutes ... acting within their own narrow sphere merely for their immediate preservation.... Their virtuous qualities are only negative....⁴

In 1776 and 1781 respectively, James Beattie and James Harris joined the attackers of "this abominable tale" and "this unnatural Filth." Beattie believed the Houyhnhnms to have been presented as "'patterns of moral virtue, as the greatest masters of reason.'" Harris felt that

One absurdity in this Author (a wretched Philosopher, though a great Wit) is well worth marking--in order to render

³Another such "warning" to the reader that the horses are not to be taken seriously is probably to be found in Gulliver's comparison of the language of the Houyhnhnms to High Dutch. Travels, p. 278.

⁴Clubb, p. 214.

the Nature of Man odious, and the Nature of Beasts amiable, he is compelled to give Human Characters to his Beasts, and Beastly Characters to his Men--so that we are to admire the Beasts, not for being Beasts, but amiable Men; and to detest the Men, not for being Men, but detestable Beasts.⁵

Again, a near miss, in that Harris recognizes that the Houyhnhnms are intended to represent man but apparently misreads the intent behind the representation, for it was not Swift's intention to render the nature of man odious, but merely to show it clearly. If, when seen clearly, it is odious, the reaction is in the observer and is not necessarily Swift's reaction.

Occasionally Swift has had his defenders, but these too, unfortunately, have frequently overlooked important parts of the satire. Thus Thomas Sheridan errs in saying "The Yahoo ...has no resemblance to man," for, while he is undeniably correct in calling attention to the fact that the Yahoo cannot possibly represent a creature rationis capax, because "it has no ray of reason, it has no speech, and it goes like other quadrupeds, upon all four," certainly some of the qualities exhibited by the Yahoo resemble those which are the exclusive property of man: greed, drunkenness, melancholy, etc. These are human qualities, and Swift allows Gulliver to attack them freely, reserving for himself the privilege of aiming his shafts at the more elusive game, man's inability to see clearly or to think straight. So that, though missing the gold, Sheridan scores a good hit when he says:

⁵Ibid., pp. 215-216.

Is it not very extraordinary that mankind in general should so readily acknowledge their resemblance to the Yahoo, whose similitude consists only in the make of its body, and the evil dispositions of its mind; and that they should see no resemblance to themselves, in a creature possessed of their chief characteristic marks, reason and speech, and endowed with every virtue, with every noble quality, which distinguish and elevate the human above the brute species?...But if there are any still who will persist in finding out their own resemblance in the Yahoos, in the name of God, if the cap fits, let them wear it and rail on.⁶

But the defense made little headway against the tremendous influence of two men. Sir Walter Scott thought that the fourth Voyage was

beyond contest, the basest and most unworthy part of the work. It holds mankind forth in a light too degrading for contemplation.... As no good could possibly be attained by the exhibition of so loathsome a picture of humanity, the publication has been justly considered as a stain upon the character of the ingenious author.⁷

In similar vein Thackeray, whom Clubb calls "hysterical," with what justice the reader may decide for himself, said:

...as for the moral, I think it horrible, shameful, unmanly, blasphemous; and giant and great as this Dean is, I say we should hoot him. Some of this audience mayn't have read the last part of Gulliver, and to such I would...say 'Don't.' ...It is Yahoo language: a monster gibbering shrieks and gnashing imprecations against mankind...filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene....[the meaning is] that man is utterly wicked, desperate, and imbecile, and his passions are so monstrous, and his boasted powers so mean, that he is and deserves to be the slave of brutes, and ignorance is better than his vaunted reason.⁸

Clubb calls attention to the irony involved in such misreading by Scott and Thackeray, men "normally so astute...by no

⁶Ibid., p. 218.

⁷Ibid., p. 220.

⁸Ibid., p. 221.

means poorly endowed in the sense of humor, one of whom had indeed already proved himself inimitably ironical, caustic, nay, even sarcastic, toward the bagatelles of *Vanity Fair*," and points out the tremendous effect these two great names had on later criticism.⁹

One of the first to voice a modern viewpoint was Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

The great defect of the *Houyhnhnms* is not its misanthropy, and those who apply this word to it must really believe that the essence of human nature, that the anthropos misoumenos, consists in the shape of the body.... But the defect of the work is its inconsistency; the *Houyhnhnms* are not rational creatures, i.e., creatures of perfect reason; they are not progressive; they have servants without any reason for this natural inferiority or any explanation...and, above all, they--i.e., Swift himself--has a perpetual affectation of being wiser than his Maker....¹⁰

Thus it seems that Coleridge was one of the first to spot some of the inconsistencies in the fourth voyage, and also one of the first to regard this inconsistency as a defect, rather than as a deliberate effect planned by Swift and perpetrated by Gulliver. These remarks by Coleridge, it must be noted, were not published, but came into the possession of Mr. Aitken in the leaves of a volume from Wordsworth's library. In his lectures on the subject of Swift, Coleridge had been content to say:

In Swift's writings there is a false misanthropy grounded upon an exclusive contemplation of the vices and follies of mankind, and this misanthropic tone is also disfigured by his

⁹Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁰S. T. Coleridge, as quoted by G. A. Aitken, "Coleridge on 'Gulliver's Travels,' Athenaeum, No. 3590 (August 15, 1896), p. 224.

obtrusion of physical dirt and coarseness. I think Gulliver's Travels the great work of Swift. In the voyages to Lilliput and Brobdingnag he displays the littleness and moral contemptibility of human nature; in that to the Houyhnhnms he represents the disgusting spectacle of man with the understanding only, without the reason or the moral feeling, and in his horse he gives the misanthropic ideal of man--that is, a being virtuous from rule and duty, but untouched by the principle of love.¹¹

Coleridge realized, as is shown by both passages, that the Houyhnhnms, not the Yahoos, were of primary satiric importance.

Although Coleridge's remarks on the poor rationality of the Houyhnhnms were unpublished, from the mid-nineteenth century on the observation that the Houyhnhnms are not quite the great reasoners Gulliver claimed them to be is encountered with increasing frequency, usually with the repetition of the assumption apparently made by Bolingbroke, that the inconsistencies between what is claimed for them by Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms' actual performance are errors by Swift. Thus, "Craik considers the fable of the horse rulers 'clumsy,' and raises the shrewd question whether the picture of the Houyhnhnms is not simply another side of the satire on humanity,"¹² and in 1883 Churton Collins notes: "In the brutal passages ridiculing the construction of the human body, the satire glances from the creature to the Creator, and is in truth as impious as it is absurd...."¹³

¹¹S. T. Coleridge, Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists (New York, 1907), p. 264.

¹²Clubb, p. 225.

¹³Ibid., pp. 225-226.

In 1896 G. A. Aitken can say:

It is difficult to believe that, as some have said, the Houyhnhnm represents Swift's ideal of morality. Houyhnhnm and Yahoo alike are imperfect, and Swift falsely assumes that natural affections are opposed to reason, instead of showing how the one should be influenced by the other. It is a counsel of despair.

Seventeen years later he can only add:

But, in the attacks on the Yahoos, consistency is dropped; The Houyhnhnms are often prejudiced and unreasonable, and everything gives way to savage denunciation of mankind. It is only a cynic or a misanthrope who will find anything convincing in Swift's views.¹⁴

And, in spite of an occasional dissenter such as R. D. C'Leary, to whom the Houyhnhnms "are horses, but...not animals; they are embodied rationality and virtue,"¹⁵ this view, a modification of Bolingbroke's, that Swift erred when he failed to make the Houyhnhnms as intelligent as Gulliver claimed them to be, prevailed and was put into its most positive and comprehensive form in 1923 by William Alfred Eddy. Despite his eminence as a Swift scholar, he succeeded in going a step beyond confusing Gulliver with Swift and attributed the master Houyhnhnm's thesis to Swift, thus:

It must be admitted by every thoughtful reader that Swift's narrative machinery in this voyage is a clumsy and unconvincing vehicle for the satire. The proposition which Swift attempts to prove is that man is an ungainly, ill-constructed creature, and the horse a physical paragon. Anyone might well be excused for failure to demonstrate this postulate satisfactorily, but the blunder of setting up so impossible a theorem remains to plague the inventor.... The Governor of the Houyhnhnms repeatedly criticizes the human form, alleging it to be unfit for the elemental needs of life, and ill-adapted

¹⁴Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 231-232.

for the service of reason, but the argument is absurd.... Passages of this sort tend to disprove the sound common sense to which the Houyhnhnms lay claim, and serve to discount the value of their criticism of mankind in general. Swift tells us that the Houyhnhnms are more reasonable than Gulliver, but the Houyhnhnms do not bear him out. To me the defect of the fourth voyage, is not the brutality of the satire, but the stupidity of the Houyhnhnms, whose judgments of Gulliver prove nothing beyond their own incompetence to judge. Gulliver is quick to recognize the excellent qualities of the horses. How is it then that the Houyhnhnms, who we are assured are so much more sensible, are unable to realize that the human body is much more suitable than their own for the common needs of life? Some one has blundered, and I fear me it is Swift.¹⁶

Perhaps, but if blunder is piled on blunder throughout the work, the possibility becomes more and more of a probability that the "errors" are deliberate and that the reader has fallen into the pitfall of irony in taking the apparent author too seriously--in believing that Swift shares Gulliver's blind admiration for the Houyhnhnms. Ricardo Quintana, who said of the same passage that humor was its principal ingredient and that in such passages "the satirist sometimes winks at us," believed that "the satiric intention presiding over *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* can be summed up in a single phrase: an assault upon man's Pride by way of le mythe animal." To him the Houyhnhnms were more or less as Gulliver presents them, "admirable," possessed of "gravity, common-sense... and truthfulness," serving chiefly as proponents of the life of reason and as foils to the bestiality of the Yahoos.¹⁷

In substantial agreement with this view is John F. Ross,

¹⁶Gulliver's Travels: A Critical Study (Princeton, 1923), pp. 188-189.

¹⁷The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift (New York, 1936), pp. 319-322.

who says:

[Swift] sharply cuts human nature into two parts. He gives reason and benevolence to the Houyhnhnms. Unrestrained and selfish appetites, and a mere brutish awareness, are left for the Yahoo. Since he is writing satire rather than panegyric, the good qualities are given the nonhuman form of the horse, and the bad qualities the nearly human form of the Yahoo. Consider how much less effective the satire would have been had the Houyhnhnms been merely a superior human race--the reader would naturally evade the satiric attack by identifying himself as a Houyhnhnm.... Yet Swift cannot resist an occasional bit of fun at the expense of the Houyhnhnm.... While Swift, in pursuit of his purpose, is chary of making the horses absurd, there are enough comic touches to guard the attentive reader from assuming that Swift accepts Gulliver's worshipful attitude.... Swift offers no answer of his own, no solution. But he does transcend the misanthropic solution. He could see that his own severest satire was the result of a partial and one sided view, which was therefore a subject for mirth.

This seems to me the final comedy of Lemuel Gulliver--that Swift could make an elaborate and subtle joke at the expense of a very important part of himself. We may leave Lemuel in amiable discourse in the stable, inhaling the grateful odor of horse. But Swift is not with him, Swift is above him in the realm of comic satire, still indignant at the Yahoo in man, but at the same time smiling at the absurdity of the view that can see only the Yahoo in man.¹⁸

Arthur B. Case, in his edition of Gulliver's Travels, though defending Swift against the charge of identifying man with the Yahoos, apparently was not so incisive in the other direction, for after noting that the second voyage presented a "modified Utopia," he said:

The fourth voyage, which was Swift's goal from the beginning, and which is perhaps his greatest literary achievement, is a Utopia of another sort in which the ideal virtue of the Houyhnhnms is heightened by contrasting it with the degradation of the Yahoos.... [Swift] did not identify the Yahoos with mankind, although to enforce a partial likeness he sometimes allowed Gulliver to speak of himself and other 'civilized' men as Yahoos. Yahoos and Houyhnhnms are, in fact, the

¹⁸J. F. Ross, "The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver," Studies in the Comic (University of California, Publications in English, VIII, No. 2 [Berkeley, 1941]), pp. 187-196.

symbols of the opposite ends of a scale, the one totally without reason, and consequently, according to Swift's theory, utterly brutish and evil; the other perfectly reasonable and therefore of necessity perfectly good, requiring no government from without.¹⁹

Five years later Case calls attention to the fact that:

Gulliver is all too often identified with Swift himself. No single misinterpretation of Swift's intentions has done more to obscure the real purpose of Gulliver's Travels.²⁰

And yet, so insidious is the error, Case also refers to "Swift's ideally good Houyhnhnms,"²¹ says of Gulliver, that he was "a somewhat-above-average Englishman [who] was not altogether unacceptable company for a perfect being,"²² and sums up:

...Swift shows us at the end of the fourth voyage his conception of the effects which would be produced in the mind of an intelligent man who spent a long period in the company of creatures who were perfect in every way.²³

Surely, in the light of his own warning, Mr. Case might more accurately have phrased his statement: "in the company of creatures whom he thought to be perfect in every way." And the very fact that this is what Gulliver thinks will cause many readers to question Case's appellation of "intelligent."

In 1953 John W. Bullitt, though astutely observing that "of all man's limitations, the one which most concerned Swift

¹⁹Arthur E. Case, ed., Gulliver's Travels (New York, 1940), pp. 344-346.

²⁰Arthur E. Case, Four Essays on Gulliver's Travels (Princeton, 1945), p. 114.

²¹Ibid., p. 111.

²²Ibid., p. 119.

²³Ibid., p. 120.

was man's self-deception,"²⁴ believed that

...Gulliver--and Swift--identified man's actuality with the Yahoos, and the sweet reasonableness of the Houyhnhnms (even if not entirely faultless in Gulliver's eyes) remains an unattainable and desirable ideal.²⁵

As a perfect example of the force of preconceptions, put into immediate juxtaposition with the sweetly reasonable and ideal Houyhnhnms some of Bullitt's comments on man:

The two most frequent departures, then, from an ideal rationality may be summarized as (1) man's refusal or inability to "inspect beyond the surface and the rind of things"--that is, man's tendency to confuse the external appearance of a thing with its internal meaning and value; (2) man's rejection of all sensory evidence in favor of some subjectively conceived system or interpretation into which all things are fitted, if necessary by force and always after dispute and argument.²⁶

Both these comments are demonstrably true of the Houyhnhnms, as we shall see. Indeed, (2) may be taken as an apt description of the way the orthodox view of the Houyhnhnms retains its hold.

The author of an excellent study on the various personae created and used by Swift sums up some of the criticism:

Despite Swift's depicting the Houyhnhnms as "the perfection of Nature" their excellence has not always been appreciated. Coleridge disliked them for their lack of progressiveness and affection....Professor Eddy says they are stupid, ignorant, and incapable of seeing that Gulliver's body is better than theirs for "the common needs of life." These statements could be possibly valid only if one were testing the Houyhnhnms by the standards of imperfect human life, which Swift is not doing....²⁷

²⁴Jonathan Swift and the Anatomy of Satire: A Study of Satiric Technique (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953), p. 8.

²⁵Ibid., p. 15.

²⁶Ibid., p. 126.

²⁷William Bragg Ewald, Jr., The Masks of Jonathan Swift (Oxford, 1954), p. 161.

But a reader may well ask, by what other standards can they be judged, since they are supposedly rational creatures? Also, it is only when judged by human standards that the Yahoos can appear detestable. Further, that part of Professor Eddy's comment which is quoted is not a question of judgment, but of fact. The Houyhnhnms can not see the advantages of Gulliver's body. Nor is it Swift who is testing the Houyhnhnms; it is Gulliver and the reader who should be doing so. Need the reader's judgment coincide with Gulliver's?

✓ An explanation which, if accepted, will do much to remove many of the inconsistencies and apparent contradictions of voyage Four, lies in the definition of the word reason or rationality. This view, similar to the one by Ewald just cited, that the Houyhnhnms are not to be judged by human standards, is simply that Houyhnhnm reason is not the same thing as human reason. One aspect of this view was expressed by John Middleton Murry:

The possibility which so disturbs the Houyhnhnm is that the faculty which the sophisticated Yahoos [such as Gulliver] possess may be a corruption of "reason." But he comes to rest in the confidence that it is a different faculty altogether.

Quite rightly, for it is evident that the "reason" which the Houyhnhnms possess ... is not the faculty of ratiocination at all. It is the gift of discerning and doing what is good.²⁸

This seems in effect to say not only that Houyhnhnms cannot be judged by human standards, but that to be good is to be wise. The latter proposition will be granted by most readers,

²⁸ Jonathan Swift: A Critical Biography (London, 1954), p. 339.

but it must be noted that this explanation is also very close to Gulliver's own, with one important difference. Gulliver explained, "Neither is reason among them a point problematical as with us, where men argue with plausibility on both sides of the question; but strikes you with immediate conviction."²⁹ And a little earlier the master Houyhnhnm had explained to Gulliver that "our institutions of government and law were plainly owing to our gross defects in reason, and by consequence, in virtue..."³⁰ thus reversing the proposition with which the reader might have agreed and presenting a plausible but illogical converse, which, if closely examined very few would accept--a favorite device of Swift's.

One more criticism remains to be discussed. In a study which anticipated the present one in all but one important respect, Kathleen Williams, pointing out the inconsistencies of the tale and the ambiguities of Houyhnhnm nature, wrote:

Possibly, then, the effect is a deliberate one, and the Houyhnhnms, far from being a model of perfection, are intended to show the inadequacy of the life of reason. This would be in keeping with the usual method of Swift's satire, and the negative quality which has been observed in it...it is foreign to that method to embody in one person or one race a state of things of which he fully approves....

The Houyhnhnms are alien and unsympathetic creatures, not man at his best, as Godwin suggested, or man as he might be, but a kind of life with which humanity has nothing to do....The Houyhnhnms can live harmlessly by reason because their nature is different from ours....as a whole they represent an inadequate and inhuman rationalism.³¹

²⁹Travels, p. 318.

³⁰Ibid., p. 308 (italics mine).

³¹"Gulliver's Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," English Literary History, XVIII (December, 1951), p. 227 (italics mine).

There are many points of agreement between the Williams position and that of the writer, who believes that it is almost a certainty that the effect was deliberate; that the Houyhnhnms are far from being a model of perfection; and that they are intended to show the inadequacy of the "life of reason."

This is consistent with Swift's method and the Houyhnhnms are unsympathetic creatures, but here the agreement with Williams' position ends. They are alien only in that they are apparently unemotional and passionless. They are definitely not "a kind of life with which humanity has nothing to do," and they do not display "an inhuman rationalism." On the contrary, their thought-processes are so typically human that one may question the meaning of the name Swift chose for them. Does Houyhnhnm stand, as many have believed, for whinny, "?" or is it a transposition of consonants intended to be read hunam?

Certainly much Houyhnhnm thinking is uncomfortably human.

The horses satirize the "life of reason," not because Swift thought the less of reason, but because he realized only too well the enormous amount of muddled thinking which masquerades under the name, and knew that it is in the name, rather than the act, that the human takes such pride.

CHAPTER III

SWIFT'S VIEWS ON REASON

Before one can venture the problematical assertions that "Swift thought" or "Swift knew" this or that about reason or the life of reason, he should try to answer two questions. First, what was meant by the terms? Second, were they of sufficient interest at the time of writing that Swift would devote a large part of one of his major works to an exposition, however disguised, of his views? The answers to these questions are so interrelated that they can hardly be considered separately, for what Swift meant by the words becomes more apparent as his use of them is investigated.

Gulliver's Travels was planned and written about midway through the era which has been called, among other things and somewhat misleadingly perhaps, the Age of Reason. Alan D. McKillop, discussing the literature of the period, says:

It is always hard to describe the dominant attitude of an age--such oversimplification distorts the facts--but we may say that the early eighteenth century emphasized the restriction of man's activities to what he was certain to attain and what he was certain would be of use to him. Men professed to be looking for the useful or practical; they fought and wrote towards sharply defined ends, so that their purpose in science was utilitarian and in literature didactic and moralizing.... "common sense," a feeling that what is possible or desirable for man in general puts sharp limits on the individual, ruled the day; this same doctrine or concept was often called "reason," but it has little in common with the speculative reason of the scientist and the philosopher, so limited is it by the restrictions imposed by the rule

of the useful and practical....the cardinal doctrine of Swift is that the truth we need must be plain and nontechnical, easily obtainable by man were it not for his incorrigible pride.¹

And elsewhere in the same volume we find:

Swift is of his age in his devotion to the ideals of simple reason and good sense....his philosophy, so far as he had one, can be expressed in words which sound like Augustan commonplace: right reason is uniform and simple, and man as far as he is rational has the good life within his grasp. And at least man is capable of reason. How, then, can he fall short of attaining a rational ideal? Some of Swift's contemporaries ...give a hopeful and optimistic answer to this question. But Swift devotes himself to explaining in what various ways, by what various illusions, perversities, and follies, man sins against the clear light of nature and his better judgment.²

To which quotation might be added the qualification that Swift's "explaining" frequently takes what he believed to be the most effective form, ironic wit. It will do no harm to stress here that of all the "illusions" exposed, one of the most troublesome and dangerous, as Swift thought, is man's cherished illusion that he is reasoning when actually he is indulging in some other form of mental or emotional activity. This, man's mistaken belief that he is reasoning when he is not, together with his inability, or unwillingness, to see clearly, to penetrate below the surface, are two of the things Swift consistently attacked from the time of writing of the Tale of A

¹Eighteenth Century Poetry and Prose, ed. Louis I. Bredvold, McKillop, and Lois Whitney (New York, 1939), pp. xvii-xviii. In connection with the concern of the age for the useful and the practical, and in the interests of a full appreciation of the timeliness of Swift's message, it may be well to note the comment, the epitome of many such remarks, made by Percy Hazen Houston in Main Currents of English Literature: A Brief Literary History of the English People (New York, 1927), p. 226: "Indeed, the eighteenth century parallels our own times astonishingly."

²*Ibid.*, p. 172 (italics mine).

Tub to the end of his active literary life.

Now the role of reason in man's life has occupied a prominent place in the speculations of philosophers since philosophy has existed. In all ages there have been those who have believed man capable of arriving at truth, or of governing his daily life, by the unaided use of his reason, while at the same time there have been those who disagreed. No one volume could begin to do justice to the endless variations of controversy between adherents of the two rival camps, the rationalists and the anti-rationalists. Their differences and arguments enter into almost every conceivable field of human activity and partake of every degree of feeling. Comprehensive definitions of the terms "rationalist" and "anti-rationalist" are, therefore, almost impossible. The nearest practical approach, for the purposes of this study, would be perhaps to say simply that the rationalist places more reliance in the powers of reason than the anti-rationalist, who may attack his opponent solely on the grounds that reason has its limitations. A rationalist, then, may be an ancient Stoic or a Descartes seeking to establish a mathematically certain basis for knowledge, while the anti-rationalist may be as virulently so as John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, who, in his Satire Against Man (line 75) says: "and 'tis this very reason I despise." Or the anti-rationalist may be as mildly admonitory as the shy and gentle William Cowper, whose Task points out that "God never meant that man should scale the heavens/ By strides of human wisdom." (Book III,

lines 222-223).

Though it might be difficult to fix with any certainty Swift's position in the whole scheme of rationalistic thought which gave the age its name, and is certainly beyond the scope of this study, a hint as to his general attitude may be inferred from a comment he made about Locke: "People are likely to improve their understanding much with Locke; It is not his 'Human Understanding,' but other works that people dislike, although in that there are some dangerous tenets, as that of [no] innate ideas."³ Here Swift shows his sympathy with Locke's reasoning at the same time that he reveals his conservatism and his more immediate concern with practical effects and behavior. Fortunately it will not be necessary to attempt to fix Swift's position in respect to all aspects of the thought of his time, for there is one important part of it with which this study must be directly concerned and in which he can be placed with reasonable accuracy. That is in the relation of reason to religion. Prolonged controversy over this point was typical of the age, and the fact that Gulliver's beloved horses had no religion whatsoever makes Swift's place in this phase of the rationalistic controversy significant.

This form of the controversy between rationalist and anti-rationalist which flourished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while perhaps not as meaningful for posterity,

³"Remarks Upon a Book, Intituled, 'The Rights of the Christian Church,' etc.," The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, Vol. III: Writings on Religion and the Church, ed. Temple Scott (London, 1909), pp. 113-114.

was the one which perhaps drew more contemporary attention and became more vocal than any of the others. One of the early indications of the shape the controversy was to take may be found clearly stated in 1682 by John Dryden in his Religio Laici (lines 68-79):

Reveal'd religion first informed thy sight,
 And Reason saw not, till Faith sprung the light.
 Hence all thy natural worship takes the source:
 'Tis Revelation what thou think'st Discourse.
 Else, how com'st thou to see these truths so clear,
 Which so obscure to heathens did appear?
 Not Plato these, nor Aristotle found;
 Nor he whose wisdom oracles renown'd.
 Hast thou a wit so deep, or so sublime,
 Or canst thou lower dive, or higher climb?
 Canst thou, by Reason, more of Godhead know
 than Plutarch, Seneca, or Cicero?

And this sentiment was reinforced, albeit in behalf of a different sect, five years later in the same author's The Hind and the Panther (lines 118-121):

...man is to believe
 Beyond what sense and reason can conceive,
 And for mysterious things of faith rely
 On the proponent, Heav'n's authority.

Lines such as these may be among the portents which Sir Leslie Stephen had in mind when he said:

Though there had been premonitory symptoms of the coming storm, the controversy may be said to have first come definitely to life in the last years of the seventeenth century. Two books appeared in 1695 and 1696 respectively, whose titles are curiously significant: Locke's "Reasonableness of Christianity," Toland's "Christianity not Mysterious." The conjunction was rather unfortunate, though not accidental. Toland attempted to gain a place in social and literary esteem by boasting intimacy with Locke, and by engrafting his speculations upon Locke's doctrines. Locke emphatically repudiated this unfortunate disciple.... [but] like Chillingworth...he accepts the authority at once of reason and the Bible; and never suspects that there will be any difficulty in

serving two masters.⁴

Stephen then goes on to express his belief that Locke, "the typical thinker of the age" and "a rationalist to the core" here laid down the thesis which was "to be incessantly attacked and defended through the next century."⁵ He notes that in Christianity not Mysterious the author, Janus Junius Toland, demanded that "a revealed truth must be distinctly proved, and must show 'the indisputable characters of divine wisdom and sound reason.'"⁶ He calls the book "the signal gun which brought on the general action" between the orthodox and the Deistic writers in which one of the main bones of contention was reason and its abilities and functions. Reason, Toland believed, must be the only foundation of all certainty. He maintained that there was nothing "above reason" in the Gospel.⁷

Toland, according to Stephen, was answered by such men as John Norris, author of the Ideal World, and Peter Browne, while Bishop Stillingfleet attacked the innocent Locke and the battle was on.⁸ And here Stephen shows us one good reason for not applying indiscriminately the label "Age of Reason" to the period, especially in England.

⁴History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (3rd ed., New York, 1902), I, 93-94.

⁵Ibid., p. 100.

⁶Ibid., p. 107.

⁷Ibid., p. 106.

⁸Ibid., pp. 111-113.

...the most eminent English thinkers were generally arrayed upon the orthodox side. They could find liberty enough to satisfy their logical instincts within the old lines; and saw no sufficient advantage in pushing forwards into the unknown regions of Deism. The orthodox party had thus every advantage which could be given by ability, learning, and prestige. It would be difficult to mention a controversy in which there was a greater disparity of forces.... On the side of Christianity, indeed, appeared all that was intellectually venerable in England.⁹

Stephen then lists among the champions of orthodoxy such names as Bentley, Locke, Berkeley, Clarke, Butler, Waterland, Warburton, Sherlock, Gibson, Conybeare, Smalbroke, Sykes, Balguy, Stebbing, Leslie, Law, Leland, Lardner, Foster, Doddrige, Lyttelton, Barrington, Addison, Pope, and Swift. Of the Deists he says:

The ordinary feeling for the deist was a combination of the odium theologicum with the contempt of the finished scholar for the mere dabbler in letters. The names indeed of the despised deists make but a poor show when compared with this imposing list. They are but a ragged regiment, whose whole ammunition of learning was a trifle when compared with the abundant stores of a single light of orthodoxy; whilst in speculative ability most of them were children by the side of their ablest antagonists.¹⁰

Another of Stephen's remarks testifies not only to the disparity of forces but also to the attention focused upon the subject: "Swift's sneering assertion, that their literary power would hardly have attracted attention if employed upon any other topic, seems to be generally justified."¹¹

⁹Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 87. The collection, however, is illustrative of the difficulty encountered in endeavoring to place individuals in a general climate of opinion, as is shown by finding men such as Bentley and Swift in the same camp, to name only two.

¹¹Ibid., p. 107.

In 1713 Anthony Collins' Discourse of Freethinking earned its author "the sledge-hammer of Bentley's criticism"¹² and the contempt of Swift, "the keenest satirist, as well as the acutest critic, in the English language...."¹³ This book, says Stephen, was

directed to establish two propositions....the fundamental tenet of rationalism, namely--that all sound belief must be based on free enquiry....[and]that the adoption of rationalist principles would involve the abandonment of a belief in supernaturalism.... His book is concluded by a singular list, stretching from Socrates to the Archbishop (Tillotson), "whom all English Freethinkers own as their head."¹⁴

A later book by Collins, published in 1724, called A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion, "excited the most vehement controversy that had hitherto taken place. In the preface of his next performance...he had the pleasure of giving the titles of thirty-five treatises arising out of the discussion."¹⁵ Stephen continues: "In 1730 appeared a book, which may be said to have marked the culminating point of the whole deist controversy." Matthew Tindal, in Christianity as Old as the Creation, claimed that "reason, the only faculty granted to all men, must of necessity be sufficient to guide all men to truth."¹⁶ This is

¹²Ibid., p. 204.

¹³Ibid., p. 209.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 205-206.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 134-138.

one of the central arguments of the deists and freethinkers to the refutation of which, three years earlier, Swift had dedicated *Gulliver and his Houyhnhnmas*, the nobly ridiculous "reasoners" who demonstrated thoroughly the fallacy involved.

If confirmation of Swift's place in the battle-line is necessary, Louis A Landa has observed: "Swift's anti-rationalism is well-known from his other works," for, although believing that reason is dependable and that man is bound to follow it, he believed that man had only "'a measure of reason'...a narrow and circumscribed capacity."¹⁷ In agreement with Landa is George Macaulay Trevelyan, the historian, who says: "In his dislike of Papists, Dissenters and Deists, of Whig Bishops and Dutch allies, Swift was at one with his high-flying brethren, and has become their spokesman for all time."¹⁸

And George Sherburn, in the work previously quoted, reviewing Die Weltanschauung Jonathan Swifts, by Max Armin Korn, notes that "Korn constantly sets Swift down as a rationalist, but actually the dean is more commonly anti-rationalist....Swift hates logic, rationalizing divines, and all needless intellectual sophistications."¹⁹ John M. Bullitt writes of Swift's

¹⁷"Swift, the Mysteries, and Deism," Studies in English (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1944), pp. 248-249.

¹⁸England Under Queen Anne, Vol. I: Blenheim (New York, 1930), p. 61. "High-flying brethren" refers to members of the High Church party, to such men as Sacheverell and Bishop Trelawny, or to those in general who were ambitious for a return of strict church discipline and a rise in power for the clergy. See p. 53, et passim, of the same work.

¹⁹"Methods," p. 653.

"skeptical anti-rationalism" and says that "his most bitter criticism was often directed against ideas and beliefs which are commonly thought typical of the Age of Reason."²⁰

And yet, in spite of testimony such as this, we will find Swift sometimes classified, rightly, as a rationalist. He was, at the same time, both "the great believer in the common sense of all intelligent men" which Sherburne has called him, and a bitter foe of some forms of what has been called rationalism. One reason for the seeming contradiction becomes apparent with a study of his writings and is fairly well-stated by two critics, Ricardo Quintana and T. O. Wedel. The former writes: "Swift's thought, a unified whole as entertained by him, presents from the point of view of the history of ideas two different sides. In a number of respects we may say that he embodied the characteristic rationalism of the Enlightenment."²¹ But in a recent book the same author cautions that "we must not overlook the restrictions which were still placed upon reason and human knowledge.... The argument against deism as presented by Swift and the rational divines...rests upon this emphatic delimitation of reason."²²

Wedel says:

Animal rationale--animal rationis capax! Swift's somewhat scholastic distinction turns out, in the light of seventeenth century thought, to be by no means scholastic. It symbolizes,

²⁰Anatomy of Satire, pp. 16, 22.

²¹Mind and Art, p. 51.

²²Swift: An Introduction (London, 1955), p. 35.

in fact, the chief intellectual battle of the age. Swift seems to have seen clearly enough that in assaulting man's pride in reason, he was attacking the new optimism at its very root. His enmity to rationalistic dogmatizing was the one enduring intellectual passion of his life.... Eighteenth century orthodoxy, itself turned rationalist and optimist, found no weapons adequate to fight the Deists. Swift was one of the few bold enough to oppose them squarely with an appeal to the weakness of human reason.... He was a rationalist with no faith in reason.²³

If the reader will substitute "dormancy" or "misuse" for the word "weakness" in the above, and will read the last paradoxical sentence: 'he was a rationalist who did not believe that many men used their reason,' he may see at once the explanation for Swift's at-times anomalous position and the strength of the ground on which he stood when attacking all who claimed wonders for human reason. This may or may not be what Wedel meant, but, with this interpretation, his observation agrees with the view of Swift maintained in this study. The entire question of the role and powers of human reason, Swift saw clearly, must remain wholly academic so long as man continued to demonstrate his misuse of, or his failure to use, the reason God had given him, or as long as he depended on it in matters inappropriate to its proper function. Worst of all to Swift was man's self-deception in thinking that he was reasoning when he was not. Of what use to argue about reason's place or power when men substituted prejudice, habit, desire, custom, or almost any other mental or emotional activity and boastfully called it reason?

²³"On the Philosophical Background of Gulliver's Travels," Studies in Philology, XXIII (October, 1926), 443, 448-450.

When we attempt to let Swift speak for himself about his beliefs on reason, we encounter one difficulty in the fact that he wrote very little in the form of straightforward exposition of his ideas. Fortunately, however, that little is clear and explicit. In his sermon "On the Testimony of the Conscience" he says:

Therefore, my discourse at this time shall be directed to prove to you, that there is no solid, firm foundation for virtue, but on a conscience which is guided by religion.... I will shew you what I mean by an example: Suppose a man thinks it his duty to obey his parents, because reason tells him so, because he is obliged by gratitude, and because the laws of his country command him to do so; but, if he stops there, his parents can have no lasting security; for an occasion may happen, wherein it may be extremely [sic] his interest to be disobedient, and where the laws of the land can lay no hold upon him: therefore, before such a man can safely be trusted, he must proceed farther, and consider, that his reason is the gift of God; that God commanded him to be dutiful to his parents; after which...he will probably continue in his duty to the end of his life.²⁴

And in "The Sermon on the Trinity":

First: It would be well, if people did not lay so much weight on their own reason in matters of religion, as to think everything impossible and absurd which they cannot conceive. How often do we contradict the right rules of reason in the whole course of our lives? Reason itself is true and just, but the reason of every particular man is weak and wavering, perpetually swayed and turned by his interests, his passions, and his vices. Let any man consider, when he hath a controversy with another, although his cause be ever so unjust, although the world be against him, how blinded he is by the love of himself, to believe that right is wrong, and wrong is right, when it maketh for his advantage. Where is then the right use of his reason, which he so much boasts of, and which he would blasphemously set up to control the commands of the Almighty?²⁵

If it is objected that Swift, in his sermons, was not expounding his innermost thoughts, that his belief in the

²⁴ Prose Works, IV, 122-124.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 135.

necessity for faith was insincere, that privately he was an unbeliever, then the reader may only weigh in the balance his known conservatism, his steady refusal to grant the "right" of unlimited free speech, his utter agreement with a sentiment Dryden expressed in Religio Laici (lines 445-450):

And after hearing what our Church can say,
 If still our Reason runs another way,
 That private Reason 't is more just to curb,
 Than by disputes the public peace disturb.
 For points obscure are of small use to learn:
 But common quiet is mankind's concern.

This agreement, Swift's conviction that established institutions took precedence over private beliefs, is shown in one of his few serious statements:

I am not answerable to God for the doubts that arise in my own breast, since they are the consequences of that reason which he hath planted in me, if I take care to conceal those doubts from others, if I use my best endeavors to subdue them, and if they have no influence on the conduct of my life....

Liberty of conscience, properly speaking, is no more than the liberty of possessing our own thoughts and opinions, which every man enjoys without fear of the magistrate: But how far he shall publicly act in pursuance of those opinions, is to be regulated by the laws of the country. Perhaps, in my own thoughts, I prefer a well-instituted commonwealth before a monarchy; and I know several others of the same opinion. Now, if, upon this pretence, I should insist upon liberty of conscience, form conventicles of republicans, and print books preferring that government and condemning what is established, the magistrates would, with great justice, hang me and my disciples. It is the same case in religion...where liberty of conscience...equally produces revolutions, or at least convulsions and disturbances in a state....²⁶

There is, moreover, fairly reliable evidence that Swift's private views on reason corresponded with those he expressed publicly. The best known statement, perhaps, is that statement

²⁶"Thoughts on Religion," Satires and Personal Writings by Jonathan Swift, ed. William Alfred Edzjy (London, 1932), pp. 418-419.

of the thesis of Gulliver's Travels found in his letter to Pope of September 29, 1725: "I have got materials toward a treatise, proving the falsity of that definition animal rationale, and to show it would be only rationis capax. Upon this great foundation of misanthropy, though not in Timon's manner, the whole building of my travels is erected."²⁷

It was in the same letter that Swift bemoaned the scarcity of reasonable and reasoning men with the famous "Oh! if the world had but a dozen Arbuthnots in it, I would burn my travels." This is an extravagant statement, of course, and not to be taken seriously as evidence of anything but the fact that Swift's private views on the intelligence of the general run of mankind coincided with published writings. One later letter, also to Pope, bears out the point. On November 26, 1725, he wrote: "I tell you after all, that I do not hate mankind: it is vous autres who hate them, because you would have them reasonable animals and are angry for being disappointed."²⁸ It must be admitted, however, that straightforward exposition of his views was not common with Swift. Once he had found his proper métier, satire, and had developed his favorite method, irony, he stuck with it almost exclusively. But this very predilection for irony is an excellent argument in favor of the contention that the horses of the fourth voyage are not intended to be ideal creatures--

²⁷The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D.D., ed. F. Elrington Ball (London, 1912), III, 277.

²⁸Ibid., p. 293.

an argument which, as we shall note, has been (as Holmes might put it to Watson) seen but not observed by several critics.

The Swiftian method of damning the freethinkers is to present their own arguments in such a way as to render them absurd, rather than by attacking them directly. He creates an ardent, freethinking admirer of the great Collins who, anxious that all the world may understand the message of his hero, "translates" his work into "plain English for the benefit of the poor" and in so doing manages to render it utterly ridiculous without ever relaxing in his pious praise of the author. Swift's reply to Collins will well repay reading by anyone interested in arriving at a plausible interpretation of the fourth voyage of Gulliver's Travels, for in it he will find well-nigh prophetic language. The freethinking "author" merely anticipates the more famous Gulliver when he says: "...wherever there is no lawyer, physician, or priest, the country is paradise,"²⁹ and the treatise abounds in "Gulliver-Houyhnhnm" logic like the freethinker's proof that Socrates was a good Christian:

Socrates was a free-thinker; for he disbelieved the gods of his country, and the common creeds about them, and declared his dislike when he heard men attribute "repentance, anger, and other passions to the gods, and talk of wars and battles in heaven, and of the gods getting women with child," and such like fabulous and blasphemous stories. I pick out these particulars, because they are the very same with what the priests have in their Bibles, where repentance and anger are attributed

²⁹Swift, Mr. Collins's Discourse of Free-Thinking Put into Plain English, by way of Abstract, for the Use of the Poor, Prose Works, III, 185.

to God; where it is said, there was "war in heaven;" and that "the Virgin Mary was with child by the Holy Ghost," whom the priests call God; all fabulous and blasphemous stories. Now, I affirm Socrates to have been a true Christian. You will ask, perhaps, how that can be, since he lived three or four hundred years before Christ? I answer, with Justin Martyr, that Christ is nothing else but reason, and I hope you do not think Socrates lived before reason.³⁰

In his "abstract" Swift has typically chosen to put his own views in the mouth of an objector. The worshipper of free-thought continues:

From these many notorious instances of the priests' conduct, I conclude they are not to be relied on in any one thing relating to religion; but every man must think freely for himself.

But to this it may be objected, that the bulk of mankind is as well qualified for flying as for thinking, and if every man thought it his duty to think freely, and trouble his neighbor with his thoughts (which is an essential part of free-thinking), it would make wild work in the world. I answer; whoever cannot think freely, may let it alone if he pleases, by virtue of his right to think freely; that is to say, if such a man freely thinks that he cannot think freely, of which every man is a sufficient judge, why, then, he need not think freely, unless he thinks fit.³¹

This is one way in which Swift attacks those who believe that man's reason is sufficient guide for his conduct, "and I hope you do not think" Swift is admiring the freethinkers. Yet we are asked to believe that Swift, at the height of the controversy between orthodox and deist, would produce a long and carefully planned work which has at its climax a race of creatures who so far outdo the freethinkers of the day as to have no religion whatsoever. Are we seriously to believe that Swift, having flayed Tindal and Collins unmercifully,

³⁰Ibid., p. 185.

³¹Ibid., pp. 181-182 (italics mine).

would completely reverse his position and outdo them by maintaining as ideal the Houyhnhnms, who guide their conduct solely by their reason? that he would idealize a race in which every individual is sufficient judge of right and wrong, good and bad? would idealize creatures who have no fear of death because they have no belief in an after-life, no thought of future reward or punishment, no obligation to a higher power, creatures with no faith, no hope, no charity?

Does it not seem far more likely that Swift, just as he created the admiring freethinker, also created, in a far subtler attack on the more rabid rationalists, a Gulliver to abjectly worship these strong reasoners, the Houyhnhnms? Certainly, if we are to take the Houyhnhnms seriously they must deserve at least a measure of Gulliver's adoration. We need not be so fulsome as Gulliver was, but if we fulfill his prophecy and persistently will not allow him to be the author of his own travels, but insist on calling the horses "Swift's ideal Houyhnhnms," then surely, in justice to Swift, we must find that their reasoning and virtue will stand scrutiny, that their private lives will be such as to demonstrate the highest kind of wisdom or, if we cannot find these things in them, use every endeavor to find a good reason for the difference between what Gulliver thought of them and what they seem to us.

CHAPTER IV

HOUYHNHNM THOUGHT AND VIRTUE

Many readers of the fourth voyage of Gulliver's Travels will encounter puzzling inconsistencies between what Gulliver claims for his ideal creatures and what seem to be the facts about them. The Houyhnhnms, claims Gulliver, are infallible reasoners and by far the most intelligent creatures on earth, and his opinion seems credible because of his wide travels. They are, says Gulliver significantly, utterly good because they reason well and reason is sufficient to regulate conduct and indicate the path of righteousness. Yet at times the Houyhnhnms may seem to the alert reader to be sly, dishonest, and hypocritical. They sometimes seem to be, not sinners in the grand manner of Milton's Satan, but petty Pharisees possessed of the faults which make man contemptible. Why, then, the reader may ask himself, do the critics, who have repeatedly warned against confusing Gulliver with Swift, continually refer to "Swift's ideal" Houyhnhnms? As we have seen, not all Swiftian commentators feel that the Houyhnhnms are ideal in any sense, but even the recent interpretations which somewhat hesitantly propose the possibility that the horses may carry some of the satire aimed at man fail to see anything typically human in them. Yet

the inconsistencies remain, and there have been various reactions to them. Perhaps by far the most common is to ignore them; to assert bluntly, like Carl Van Doren:

Now for the antipodes of misanthropy. Among the Houyhnhnms Gulliver was almost undisguisedly Swift, on an imagined island where the horses were as much wiser and nobler as they were stronger than the men....

On his icy, fiery travels among the Houyhnhnms Swift (why call him Gulliver?) did not bother to observe such stinging likenesses to particular English persons and episodes as he observed among pygmies and the philosophers.... To be fully reasonable was to be like the Houyhnhnms. They did not know what lying was.¹

But when the reader finds that, to see the Houyhnhnms thus, he must make himself as gullible as Gulliver, and must blind himself to the hard fact that, though the Houyhnhnms had no word for lying, they understood, and practiced, the action well enough, he can hardly fail to wonder. Such critics, and it is astonishing to find some of the most eminent among them, can only see the Houyhnhnms as ideal by blinding themselves to certain facts or by using an esoteric definition of "ideal."

Others, as we have seen, aware of the inconsistencies, attempt to account for them in a number of ways. One of these ways, expressively stated by William A. Eddy,² might be called the "blunder" method and would be aptly named though, perhaps, misapplied. It simply suggests that Swift erred in some places in his attempts to show the Houyhnhnms as reasoning creatures.

¹Ed., The Portable Swift (New York, 1948), pp. 37-39.

²See above, pp. 15-16.

To judge the efficacy of this explanation, it is necessary only to count the number of blunders encountered, and, as they increase, calculate the probability that one of the greatest of the Augustans blundered his way through the climax of his masterpiece.

Another of the attempted explanations is, actually, the one suggested by an embarrassed Gulliver who could hardly fail to realize that many of the things he told about the horses were hardly to be reconciled with good human reasoning. Gulliver explained:

Neither is reason among them a point problematical as with us, where men can argue with plausibility on both sides of the question: but strikes you with immediate conviction; as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by passion and interest. I remember it 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; because reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain, and beyond our knowledge we cannot do either. So that controversies, wranglings, disputes, and positiveness in false or dubious propositions, are evils unknown among the Houyhnhnms.³

On this explanation by Gulliver--an explanation, by the way, which needs and which will receive later, some examination--the critics have based an elaboration to show that Houyhnhnm reasoning is a faculty beyond and above that of human wisdom--that it is a kind of intuition or instinctive recognition of Truth which cannot be judged by human standards. This will explain much, if, again, it fits the facts. But when the reader finds the Houyhnhnm voicing what can only be opinions, and erroneous opinions at that--when he finds him

³Travels, p. 318 (italics mine).

failing to see what the reader well knows to be the obvious truth--then surely the explanation fails to explain.

An interesting variation of this attempted explanation might be known as the "handsome-is-as-handsome-does" theory. According to the proponents of this theory, the proof of the superior wisdom of the Houyhnhnms might lie in the greater moral excellence of their lives. They are good; therefore they are wise. Now, even though this explanation reverses the explicitly-stated Houyhnhnm position,⁴ even though it puts, if we may risk offending Gulliver's master, the cart before the horse, it too, might be allowed if it fits the facts. But the reader is certainly justified in scrutinizing the actions as well as the thought processes of the Houyhnhnms to see if they are, indeed, as noble, as high-minded, as incorruptible and honest and worthy of emulation as Gulliver holds.

As the reader scrutinizes these controversial Houyhnhnms, then, several questions, or tests, may well be applied to their thoughts and actions. Questions such as: Does this indicate a high degree of sagacity or wisdom as we know it? Is this good human reasoning or display of common sense? Or, does this indicate a superior kind of wisdom? Does the Houyhnhnm here reach Truth instantly, without recourse to ratiocination? Or, does this action accord with what I think is the right way to live--does it display the qualities I have

⁴See below, p. 64.

come to call good, or charitable, or kind? Is the Houyhnhnm as virtuous as Gulliver paints him? Let the reader, as he accompanies Gulliver through Houyhnhnm-land, simply refuse to be as gullible as his companion.

Perhaps the first outstanding example of an all-too-common human kind of thinking on the part of a Houyhnhnm occurs when the Houyhnhnm who is to become Gulliver's master introduces him to his household. The reader will recall that the master Houyhnhnm and his friend have spent some time on the road, while bringing Gulliver home, in examining him and his clothes. It is implied, though not directly stated, that they have been endeavoring to arrive at some rational explanation of his nature and species. They have listened to his speech and have been interested in and puzzled by his clothing. By their use of the word Yahoo it is evident that they suspect that he may be related to this odious race, but they are obviously far from certain. When Gulliver is presented to his master's wife, however, the situation is far different. She shows no hesitancy whatsoever.

The mare soon after my entrance, rose from her mat, and coming up close, after having nicely observed my hands and face, gave me a most contemptuous look; then turning to the horse, I heard the word Yahoo often repeated betwixt them....⁵

Nowhere in the fourth voyage does Gulliver distinguish between the intelligence of the sexes. Now, while this may be simply Swift's humorous comparison of male and female methods in arriving at judgments, there are several very suggestive

⁵Travels, p. 272.

and pertinent facts to be noted about this one small bit of by-play. First, it shows a Houyhnhnm making a snap judgment based on a superficial examination of appearances only. Is this a reasoning creature seen in the process of using its reason? Obviously, not in the sense in which we think of reason. Is it, then, a display of some kind of superior intelligence, intuition, or insight? It could be, if Gulliver is a Yahoo. But Gulliver's identity is, for our purposes, not important at this point. The point is that the two males do not share the female's mental processes, but appear to proceed by what we think of as a reasonable method of careful investigation. Not only do they not share her thought processes; they do not agree with her conclusion. The master Houyhnhnm, indeed, remains doubtful for many weeks. Would it be characteristic of Swift, especially if presenting an ideal, to represent the female of the species as being more intelligent than the male, in any society? Many readers will think not. And in any case, the really important thing to note here, as elsewhere, is that whichever one is right, and whatever the process by which the conclusion is reached, the wisdom of the Houyhnhnms is not shared equally--does not impress with the obviousness of its truth, as Gulliver claims.⁶

The master Houyhnhnm, stubbornly--and very humanly--not convinced by the mare's arbitrary classification, proceeds to a closer, more exhaustive examination and a comparison of

⁶See above, p. 43.

Gulliver with the Yahoos stabled in his yard. And immediately the reader encounters another point of great significance: the cause of this lack of unanimity of opinion among the horses.

The great difficulty that seemed to stick with the two horses, was to see the rest of my body so very different from that of a Yahoo, for which I was obliged to my clothes, whereof they had no conception.⁷

Yet we have just learned that the great reasoners had arrived at ideas of the advisability of shelter in the form of houses and protection in the shape of mats. But again, there are more significant implications here than the mere fact that clothing had not been invented by the horses. Many readers may well believe that the horses' lack of clothing indicates true wisdom. What matters is this continued preoccupation with surface coverings and appearances. The matter of clothing puzzles not only the master and his friend, but the visiting Houyhnhnms who come to marvel at Gulliver. They "could hardly believe me to be a right Yahoo, because my body had a different covering from others of my kind."⁸

This matter of surface covering carries more weight with most of the Houyhnhnms, it would seem, than all of the less conspicuous but more important differences between Gulliver and the Yahoos such as posture, diet, speech, and "glimmerings of reason." Nor is there any indication that the clothing is ever seen in its true significance, as evidence of non-Yahoo

⁷Travels, pp. 273-274.

⁸Ibid., p. 280.

characteristics. It simply remains a baffling puzzle until it is accidentally solved, and is then dismissed contemptuously as a mere eccentricity. It continued to baffle Gulliver's master until the servant happened on the sleeping Gulliver when he was uncovered. Until this happened, Gulliver tells us, "he was most perplexed about my clothes, reasoning sometimes with himself whether they were a part of my body..."⁹ and this in spite of the fact that the Houyhnhnm had, early in his acquaintance with Gulliver, seen him remove and replace his hat¹⁰ and his gloves.¹¹ Is this preoccupation with clothing superior reasoning, or does it display any form of acute perception or wisdom which arrives swiftly and unerringly at truth? Or is it that purblindness decried by the author of A Tale of a Tub¹² and others of Swift's narrators and later elaborated so effectively by Carlyle in Sartor Resartus?

And since the reader is examining Houyhnhnm virtue as well as Houyhnhnm wisdom, note should be taken of some of the results of the final solution of the puzzling clothing.

Once the secret is out, Gulliver tells the reader,

I requested likewise that the secret of my having a false covering to my body might be known to none but himself, at

⁹Ibid., p. 278 (italics mine).

¹⁰Ibid., p. 268.

¹¹Ibid., p. 275.

¹²Swift, ed. W.A. Eddy (New York, 1933), pp. 424-427, 494-497, et passim.

least as long as my present clothing should last; for as to what the sorrel nag his valet had observed, his Honour might command him to conceal it.

All this my master very graciously consented to, and thus the secret was kept....¹³

Kept by creatures who have no word for lying, but who apparently do not boggle at deception. Nor is this an isolated instance, for not only do the Houyhnhnm servant and master conspire to conceal the truth from their own kind, they immediately are seen conspiring with their own kind to conceal a truth from Gulliver. Indeed, it is questionable whether the deception which follows hard on the heels of this one could be accomplished without resort to outright falsehood. For, with the puzzle of the outer covering solved, the

Houyhnhnm master

... was more astonished at my capacity for speech and reason than at the figure of my body, whether it were covered or no;

From thenceforward he doubled the pains he had been at to instruct me; he brought me into all company, and made them treat me with civility, because, as he told them privately, this would put me into good humour and make me more diverting.¹⁴

The master Houyhnhnm, Gulliver tells us,

...was extremely curious to know from what part of the country I came, and how I was taught to imitate a rational creature; because the Yahoos (whom he saw I exactly resembled in my head, hands, and face, that were only visible), with some appearance of cunning, and the strongest disposition to mischief, were observed to be the most unteachable of all brutes. I answered that I came over the sea from a far place, with many others of my own kind, in a great hollow vessel made of the bodies of trees. That my companions forced me to land on this coast, and then left me to shift for myself. It was with some difficulty, and by the help of many signs, that I brought

¹³ Travels, p. 282.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 282-283.

him to understand me. He replied, that I must needs be mistaken, or that I said the thing which was not. (For they have no word in their language to express lying or falsehood.) He knew it was impossible that there could be a country beyond the sea, or that a parcel of brutes could move a wooden vessel whither they pleased upon water. He was sure no Houyhnhnm alive could make such a vessel, nor would trust Yahoos to manage it.¹⁵

Here, in the last two sentences, is typical Houyhnhnm thinking, and it must have a disturbingly familiar ring to almost any reader. The reader knows that Gulliver is stating only simple facts. The Houyhnhnm is clearly in error, and the cause of his error is shown in the last sentence. The Houyhnhnms are the rational creatures, far superior to Yahoos; a Houyhnhnm could not build such a vessel, therefore Gulliver is lying or mistaken. Not good reasoning, but very human. And certainly no example of wonderful insight or intuitive perception of the truth. Here is a question of verifiable fact about which, the reader knows, the Houyhnhnm is mistaken. The reader is here in a position to see that the Houyhnhnm is obviously stating as a certainty a clearly erroneous opinion, and he should remember this when Gulliver informs him later:

I remember it 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; because reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain, and beyond our knowledge we cannot do either.¹⁶

So glaring an example of faulty thinking on the part of the Houyhnhnm is this imputation of lying that it forces Swift

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 279-280.

¹⁶See above, p. 43.

into an awkward position. Gulliver can take no notice of it without risking a doubt of the wisdom of his beloved horses, yet it is hard to overlook, so he launches immediately into his famous etymological explanation of the name Houyhnhnm which so many have accepted at face value and as the statement of Swift. Houyhnhnm, Gulliver tells us, means the perfection of nature.¹⁷ This juxtaposition of Houyhnhnm fatuity, Houyhnhnm conceit, and Gulliver's blindness to both can hardly be accidental.

Later, when Gulliver has perfected himself in the language to the point of being able to tell his master of the wonders he promised him, and again insists upon his truthful account of his origin and manner of arriving at the land of the Houyhnhnms, he tells us:

My master heard me with great appearances of uneasiness in his countenance, because doubting, or not believing, are so little known in this country, that the inhabitants cannot tell how to behave themselves under such circumstances.¹⁸

Here the Houyhnhnm is reacting in a very human fashion. He is uneasy in the face of evidence which seems to challenge his beliefs. His earlier instinctive reaction, that those who challenge accepted beliefs are lying or mistaken, is so typically human as to be positively embarrassing. We know that certainty is not a necessary concomitant of reason. In fact, just the opposite may be the case. James Harvey Robinson has stated it thus:

¹⁷Travels, p. 280.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 285.

The "real" reasons for our beliefs are concealed from ourselves as well as from others. As we grow up we simply adopt the ideas presented to us in regard to such matters as religion, family relations, property, business, our country, and the state. We unconsciously absorb them from our environment. They are persistently whispered in our ear by the group in which we happen to live. Moreover, as Mr. Trotter has pointed out, these judgments, being the product of suggestion and not of reasoning, have the quality of perfect obviousness, so that to question them "...is to the believer to carry skepticism to an insane degree, and will be met by contempt, disapproval, or condemnation, according to the nature of the belief in question. When, therefore, we find ourselves entertaining an opinion about the basis of which there is a quality of feeling which tells us that to inquire into it would be absurd, obviously unnecessary, unprofitable, undesirable, bad form, or wicked, we may know that that opinion is a non-rational one, and probably, therefore, founded upon inadequate evidence."¹⁹

That Swift understood the delusion of certainty is clear from one of his "Thoughts on Religion": "I am not answerable to God for the doubts which arise in my own breast, since they are the consequences of that reason which he hath planted in me...."²⁰

Since it is here that the Houyhnhnm offers an explanation of his inability to comprehend Gulliver's talk of lying, it may be well to examine it as an example of plausible but faulty Houyhnhnm logic. Gulliver, after noting the distress of his master at the unbelievable account of Yahoos building ships, continues:

And I remember in frequent discourses with my master concerning the nature of manhood in other parts of the world, having occasion to talk of lying and false representation, it was with much difficulty that he comprehended what I meant, although he had otherwise a most acute judgment. For he argued thus:

¹⁹The Mind in the Making: The Relation of Intelligence to Social Reform (New York, 1921), pp. 42-43.

²⁰Satires, p. 418.

that the use of speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive information of facts; now if any one said the thing which was not, these ends were defeated; because I cannot be properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving information, that he leaves me worse than in ignorance, for I am led to believe a thing black when it is white, and short when it is long. And these were all the notions he had concerning that faculty of lying, so perfectly well understood among human creatures.²¹

Leaving for the moment the question of how accurately this describes Houyhnhnm nature--though it has been indicated and will be elaborated later that the Houyhnhnm is perfectly capable of deceit--and disregarding the speciousness of the argument, comparable to Ben Franklin's politic defense of honesty, the reader may consider this as an example of logical argument. Granting that the use of speech is to make us understand one another, will the reader take the further-step, an apparently simple but enormously deceptive step, of granting that it is also "to receive information of facts"? Grant this, then stop and think, and one must see that conversation would be rare indeed, and barren in the extreme. Language, in fact, could hardly exist except in mathematical terms, and the projectors of Laputa, who substituted objects for words, would come into their own. And we have just seen the master Houyhnhnm giving the lie to his own words, when he commanded his friends to deceive Gulliver for the purpose of rendering him more tractable, or when he commanded his servant to keep Gulliver's secret. Innocent as these deceptions are, and in the one case, the reader feels, graciously

²¹Travels, p. 285.

generous, they certainly involve more than correct understanding or the imparting of facts.

There are other places in which the reader finds the Houyhnhnm very positive about a matter in which he is clearly in error. One such occurs when "my master...wondered how we dared venture upon a Houyhnhnm's back, for he was sure that the weakest servant in his house would be able to shake off the strongest Yahoo, or by lying down and rolling on his back squeeze the brute to death."²²

But these minor errors pale into insignificance beside the next and most frequently noted example of faulty Houyhnhnm thinking--the passage which has been a stumbling block to many interpretations based on Houyhnhnm infallibility. Because there are significant lines in it which will be referred to later, aside from the examples of faulty reasoning under immediate examination, the passage will be quoted in greater detail than would be necessitated by the immediate subject. Gulliver says:

It put me to the pains of many circumlocutions to give my master a right idea of what I spoke; for their language doth not abound in variety of words, because their wants and passions are fewer than among us.²³ But it is impossible to represent his noble resentment at our savage treatment of the Houyhnhnm race, particularly after I had explained the manner and use of castrating horses among us, to hinder them from propagating their kind, and to render them more servile. He said that if it were possible there could be any country where Yahoos alone were endued with reason, they certainly must be the governing animal, because reason will in time always prevail against brutal strength. But considering the

²²Ibid., p. 286.

²³Evidently Gulliver, at least, believes that the purpose of language is not solely the communication of factual knowledge.

frame of our bodies, and especially of mine, he thought no creature of equal bulk was so ill contrived, for employing that reason in the common offices of life; whereupon he desired to know whether those among whom I lived resembled me or the Yahoos of his country. I assured him, that I was as well shaped as most of my age; but the younger and the females were much more soft and tender, and the skins of the latter generally as white as milk. He said I differed indeed from other Yahoos, being much more cleanly, and not altogether so deformed, but in point of real advantage he thought I differed for the worse. That my nails were of no use either to my fore or hinder-feet; as to my fore-feet, he could not properly call them by that name, for he never observed me to walk upon them; that they were too soft to bear the ground; that I generally went with them uncovered, neither was the covering I wore on them of the same shape or so strong as that on my feet behind. That I could not walk with any security, for if either of my hinder feet slipped, I must inevitably fall. He then began to find fault with other parts of my body, the flatness of my face, the prominence of my nose, my eyes placed directly in front, so that I could not look on either side without turning my head; that I was not able to feed myself without lifting one of my fore-feet to my mouth; and therefore nature had placed those joints to answer that necessity. He knew not what could be the use of those several clefts and divisions in my feet behind; that these were too soft to bear the hardness and sharpness of stones without a covering made from the skin of some other brute; that my whole body wanted a fence against heat and cold, which I was forced to put on and off every day with tediousness and trouble.²⁴

Here is an example of faulty thinking, worse than we would expect from almost any reasonable human. Despite the typical Swiftian mixture of just enough truth to obscure the nonsense, this passage has been noted and commented on to the disadvantage of the Houyhnhnms. Humans readily acknowledge, and sometimes envy, the superior physical endowments of other animals. We envy animals their abilities to fly, to swim, to swing through the trees, or to run for great distances at speeds beyond our own. But we are certain, and justifiably

²⁴Travels, pp. 287-288.

so, that for carrying out the dictates of reason, man is uniquely suited. The very things which the Houyhnhnm sees as handicaps we know to be immense advantages. Though anthropologists, scientists, and thoughtful men of all walks of life are undecided as to which was cause and which was effect, man's mind or his physical equipment--though they debate as to whether it was the formation of his hand and his ability to walk erect that caused his mind to develop, or whether the growth of his reason called into being his opposing thumb and other distinguishing physical characteristics, the fact remains that man's mind and body cooperate admirably. His ability to use two limbs for locomotion or standing, leaving two marvelously adapted "fore-feet" free for carrying or using tools or weapons directed by a rational brain, has placed man where he is, at the top of the animal kingdom or, as he himself puts it, as "the perfection of nature."

We have previously examined W. A. Eddy's reaction to this passage and selected it as the typical expression of the theory that Swift bungled the job of making the Houyhnhnms appear to be strong reasoners.²⁵ We noted that Eddy's position, summed up in his sentence "Someone has blundered, and I fear me it is Swift," went beyond the usual confusion of Gulliver and Swift and attributed to Swift the postulate that the master Houyhnhnm is maintaining, that man's physical

²⁵See above, p. 16.

equipment is inferior to the horse's. Granted that the Houyhnhnms blunders, and that the Houyhnhnm is Swift's creation, the question is whether or not the blunder is deliberate on Swift's part.

Once the reader enters Houyhnhnm-land with the idea that the inhabitants are as much a part of the satire as the Yahoos or Gulliver, what seem to be blunders become telling and truly humorous attacks on humanity. The attack loses much of its bitterness, though it demands, of course, the true sense of humor if, with Swift, we can laugh at the dearest pretension of humanity. For the horse is not here exhibiting merely a failure to penetrate to a well-hidden truth; he is exhibiting a marvelous degree of obtuseness.²⁶ He has watched Gulliver daily performing with ease, by the use of his hands, tasks which he has admitted are beyond the capabilities of his own kind. Yet, because Gulliver is not made in his own image, and because he believes his race to be the reasoners, he draws the absurd conclusion that Gulliver's body is not suited to carry out the functions of the mind.

Further, if this passage is a blunder on the part of Swift, the reader must realize by now that it is only one of many, for Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms have blundered their way through the fourth voyage from their first meeting. Any

²⁶Cf. the intense preoccupation of Laputans with mathematics and their gross mechanical inefficiency, in the third voyage, pp. 187-193 et passim.

author may perhaps be forgiven one blunder, or two, but when blunders pile up to such an extent as we have seen, and will see, it should require a courageous critic to attribute them to a satirist as careful and incisive as Jonathan Swift. It would seem less Houyhnhnm-like to carefully consider one's own assumptions and prejudices in the reading of a work designed to prove that man is not "animal rationale, and to show that it would be only rationis capax," lest he, the reader, become an active participant in the demonstration of the postulate which Swift is setting out.

We have seen that many critics warn against the mistake of confusing Gulliver with Swift, only to disregard their own warnings, but it is necessary here to utter another similar warning. It was stated earlier that the reader should not make the mistake of supposing that, because Swift does not share Gulliver's admiration for the Houyhnhnms in all respects, he therefore condemns them utterly, or is in every respect at odds with poor Gulliver. There can be little question that Swift allows Gulliver to speak for him at times. The important thing to bear in mind is that each item must be considered on its own merits, and to determine when Swift would agree with Gulliver, and when he would not. We can find times when agreement and utter disagreement are cheek by jowl. For example, Gulliver's diatribes against lawyers and physicians are, with one important difference, but expanded echoes of Swift's sentiments expressed to Pope in the letter of September 29, 1725:

I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, all all my love is toward individuals: for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love Counsellor Such-a-one: so with physicians--I will not speak of my own trade--soldiers, English, Scotch, French, and the rest. But principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth.²⁷

Gulliver attacks lawyers and physicians, and in the same order, but he makes no distinctions in favor of individuals, as does Swift. Indeed, by his blanket endorsement of all things Houyhnhnm, he implies an attitude sharply at variance with Swift's expressed and demonstrated position. The Houyhnhnms "will have it that nature teaches them to love the whole species, and it is reason only that maketh a distinction of persons, where there is a superior degree of virtue."²⁸ Here Swift would doubtless agree with half of the Houyhnhnm position while rejecting the other half. He saw no necessity for liking the species because he was fond of individual members of it.

Again, in this examination of the position of Swift with reference to that of Gulliver, there can be little doubt that Swift would heartily endorse Gulliver's and the Houyhnhnms' indictments of Yahoo nature and the bestiality of man, especially as exhibited in his acquired vices. Remembering that it does not follow that Swift shares Gulliver's views of the Houyhnhnms, the reader may allow him to admire their educational theories or to share Gulliver's view of the Yahoos

²⁷Satires, p. 429.

²⁸Travels, p. 319.

and of some of the typical human characteristics they display.

As Professor Eddy has pointed out,

Swift was a rebel of uncommon courage, even for satirists. Instead of rebelling against out-moded traditions (the pastime of pseudo-satirists) he rebelled against the latest idiocies of his own fashionable society. We have today adolescent journalistic satirists who solicit our applause for their novels or their parlor-dramas in which they valiantly club to death Victorian conventions and medieval superstitions already moribund. This is not rebelling, but lynching; the odds are a thousand to one; the victory is foreknown and approved by the mob.... But the rebel worthy of the name is the one who can turn on his own pack, see the follies of his confederates, the hypocrisies of his own profession, and the superstitions peculiar to his own generation.²⁹

It may well be that the mere lashing of man's lower instincts, agreeable as it would have been to Swift, presented too easy a target, too simple a task. This lashing, therefore, he is content to leave to the simple-minded Gulliver and his equally simple-minded Houyhnhnm idols, reserving for himself the more difficult task of demonstrating that man is not (though he could and should be) a reasoning animal. After this digression, undertaken to emphasize the necessity for careful consideration of each item on its own merits, it is time to return to the matter in hand, the survey of faulty Houyhnhnm thinking and opinion.

Another erroneous opinion, and one which the master Houyhnhnm entertains in spite of clear evidence to the contrary, is found in the discussion of war between Gulliver and his master.

What you have told me, (said my master) upon the subject of war, does indeed discover most admirably the effects of

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Satires, pp. xvii-xviii.

that reason you pretend to: however, it is happy that the shame is greater than the danger; and that nature hath left you utterly incapable of doing much mischief.

For your mouths lying flat with your faces, you can hardly bite each other to any purpose, unless by consent. Then as to the claws upon your feet before and behind, they are so short and tender, that one of our Yahoos would drive a dozen of yours before him. And therefore in recounting the numbers of those who have been killed in battle, I cannot but think that you have said the thing which is not.³⁰

Here again is opinion, and, as the reader well knows, erroneous opinion from which Gulliver frees his master instantly with his descriptions of weapons of war. But the opinion is the more remarkable in its obtuseness because the master Houyhnhnm had access to the best of evidence to the contrary. Gulliver has earlier spoken of defending himself with his hanger, to good effect, against not only one, but as many as forty Yahoos.³¹

One of the most direct contradictions of a position plainly expressed by Swift occurs in Chapter VII when Gulliver explains the Houyhnhnm equation of reason with virtue. The argument sounds plausible, and its contrary might be allowed, but as it is stated, we know that Swift did not grant its major premise. The master Houyhnhnm here tells Gulliver:

That our institutions of government and law were plainly owing to our gross defects in reason, and by consequence, in virtue; because reason alone is sufficient to govern a rational creature; which was therefore a character we had no pretence to challenge.... He was the more confirmed in this opinion....³²

³⁰Travels, pp. 293-294.

³¹Ibid., p. 267.

³²Ibid., p. 308 (italics mine).

Here the reader may also see that it is not opinions which the Houyhnhnms lack, but merely the name for them.

In the same chapter, VII, where we find the humanized vices of the Yahoos which rule out the possibility that they are not a part of the attack on man, is a revealing insight into the curiously human-Houyhnhnm mental processes. The master Houyhnhnm has long since convinced himself that Gulliver is a true Yahoo. Near the end of the descriptive talks between Gulliver and his master occurs this passage:

As to learning, government, arts, manufactures, and the like, my master confessed he could find little or no resemblance between the Yahoos of that country and those in ours. For he only meant to observe what parity there was in our natures.³²

Is this a superior being intent on making a reasonable comparison and giving due weight to the really important points, the differences? Or is it a very human-like creature seeking to bolster a preconceived opinion based on surface appearances? Let the reader judge.

But not all of Swift's "blunders" require even this much thought. In Chapter Eight, which contains Gulliver's eulogistic account of Houyhnhnm society, there occurs one of the most egregious of all. Here is a curiously little-noticed piece of nonsense which should have been recognized as indicating a total lack of common sense by the most unlettered farmer in England. Perhaps it would have stood out sharply had it not been buried in the midst of Gulliver's panegyric. He is describing Houyhnhnm education of their youth in terms

³²Ibid., p. 311 (italics mine).

which almost any reader will grant are admirable, when Swift inserts this detail:

But the Houyhnhnms train up their youth to strength, speed, and hardiness, by exercising them in running races up and down steep hills, and over hard stony grounds; and when they are all in a sweat, they are ordered to leap over head and ears into a pond or river.³⁴

Such a physical training regimen would hardly qualify as "horse sense," even in Swift's day.

After this example of superior Houyhnhnm reasoning, or intuition, there occurs the only debate the Houyhnhnms ever have. At one of their grand councils they debate an old subject, one which must have been troubling the reader ever since he arrived in Houyhnhnm-land with Gulliver. It is the one question which, above all others, should give rise to serious suspicion of Houyhnhnm intelligence, even to the naive Gulliver. Annually the Houyhnhnms are divided on the question of whether or not to exterminate the Yahoos. The question is never settled, despite the ingenious expedient borrowed from Gulliver and suggested by his master, and the reader should note that Gulliver gives only the arguments which favor the abolishment of the Yahoos. Neither he nor the Houyhnhnm tells on what grounds the Yahoos' continued existence is defended. It must be difficult for the reader to supply such grounds. What earthly, or reasonable, excuse can the Houyhnhnms have for allowing the Yahoo race to exist? There is not a single logical reason that the Yahoos should be

³⁴Ibid., pp. 320-321.

allowed to live. The fact that some Houyhnhnms, including Gulliver's master, argue for elimination of the Yahoos shows that they are capable of using their reason, but the fact that these obviously have not prevailed shows that the majority have not used it. It is as if the human race had decided to deliberately cultivate the breed of rats, for by every description, the Yahoos qualify as vermin and pests. Their very existence gives the lie to Houyhnhnm claims of reason, common sense, superior wisdom, or infallibility.

Furthermore, in the progress of the debate over the extermination of the Yahoos there is more proof of the devious and hypocritical Houyhnhnm thinking processes. What could be more typically human, also, and less reasonable, than the ingenious shifting of position shown by Gulliver's master when he proposes as an ideal solution the very expedient which, in milder form, had so shocked him when he learned of it from Gulliver? Gulliver is speaking of his master:

But it is impossible to represent his noble resentment at our savage treatment of the Houyhnhnm race, particularly after I had explained the manner and use of castrating horses among us, to hinder them from propagating their kind, and to render them more servile.³⁵

Yet in the grand debate the master Houyhnhnm, graciously, it is not to be denied, giving Gulliver the credit for the suggestion (in case it inspire his hearers with horror?) proposes that the same procedure be practiced on the Yahoos. Horrible crime that it is when used on Houyhnhnms, it is

³⁵Ibid., p. 287.

legitimate and reasonable when used on Yahoos. Though the Houyhnhnm, because of the difference between the species, speaks with more justification than does a human speaking of another race or nationality, Swift has left nothing to chance here. The Houyhnhnm's exact proposal needs examination:

That this invention might be practiced upon the younger Yahoos here, which, besides rendering them tractable and fitter for use, would in an age put an end to the whole species without destroying life³⁶

Here, surely, is equivocation worthy of the most able of Gulliver's despised counsellors-at-law. Nor can the reader fail to note the unreasonableness of the terms of the suggestion. Had Swift been trying to make the Houyhnhnm sound reasonable, he might have had the suggestion couched in terms which would take life without causing needless pain or suffering, but to put an end to a species without taking life is, to say the least, slightly contradictory. Little more so, however, than the mutually contradictory objectives stated in the proposition; rendering them tractable and fitter for use, at the same time putting an end to them.

At the same time that it is specious and contradictory, the suggestion is also superfluous in the light of Houyhnhnm nature. The reader knows that the Houyhnhnmas, if not actually having small regard for their own lives, at least take death calmly. Are they likely, then, to be over-much disturbed at the prospect of taking Yahoo life? He knows that the

³⁶Ibid., p. 324.

earlier Houyhnhnms ruthlessly exterminated Yahoos.³⁷ Then, since the suggestion is specious, contradictory, and superfluous, why is it here? Is it an example of clear, rational thought? Does it indicate superior knowledge or insight? Hardly, for the Houyhnhnm learned it from a lowly Yahoo. Is it another blunder by Swift? If so, it seems dragged in by the heels. And yet, withal, there is a kind of grim sense to it, in spite of its speciousness. But the Houyhnhnms do not adopt it. As far as we know they continue, year after year, persisting in the error of their ways, following custom and tradition in a most human manner.

After the rejection by the council of the master's proposal, the master treats Gulliver to a specimen of the traditional knowledge of the Houyhnhnms, backed up by Houyhnhnm logic:

He took notice of a general tradition, that Yahoos had not always been in that country; but that many ages ago two of these brutes appeared together upon a mountain, whether produced by the heat of the sun upon corrupted mud and slime, or from the ooze and froth of the sea was never known.³⁸That there seemed to be much truth in this tradition, and that those creatures could not be Ylahniamschy (or aborigines of the land), because of the violent hatred the Houyhnhnms, as well as all other animals, bore them; which, although their evil disposition sufficiently deserved, could never have arrived at so high a degree, if they had been aborigines, or else they would long since have been rooted out.³⁹

³⁷Ibid., pp. 322-323.

³⁸The presence of either mud and slime or ooze and froth upon a mountain top indicates very little more transcendent wisdom than that contained in similar human legendary originations.

³⁹Travels, pp. 322-323.

But Houyhnhnm knowledge is supposed to be infallible. According to Gulliver the truth is always obvious and never a matter of degree. Why, then, does the Houyhnhnm master say that "there seemed to be much truth in this tradition"? Gulliver tells us that all Houyhnhnm knowledge is traditional. The Houyhnhnms have no written histories, no written body of knowledge of any kind.⁴⁰ Is this a fair sample, then, of all their knowledge? Is much of it no sounder than this?

Now this tradition, its immediate context, and the "argument" offered in its support, deserve careful note. In the tradition, for example, it is noteworthy that Swift has transported elements from their proper setting to a more unlikely one, the top of a mountain, which renders the legend a little more absurd, even, than its counterpart in man's mythology. In the context, the master Houyhnhnm, on the same page, contradicts what he has said about the apparent truth of the legend by declaring that the two Yahoos came from over the sea (adopting Gulliver's story as his own, with embellishments--a story, incidentally, which he had once declared to be impossible). And the argument, ostensibly offered in defense of the idea that the Yahoos could not have been aborigines of the land, actually is no argument at all. Like many human arguments, it has the form only. It is beside the point, for what possible connection can there be between who was first in the land and any conceivable degree of hatred

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 279, 325.

which must inevitably have started at first contact, regardless of who was there first? Swift would be the first to hoot at the critic who would attempt to pin the proper labels on this argument; who would try to classify it according to fallacy, as ignoratio elenchi or non sequitur, though he might chuckle at the recognition of the element of ad hominem, but he would also be the first to look down his nose at one who could not see that the argument is not to the point. But, more important than the fallacious argument itself are the facts surrounding it. First, it is apparent that the whole episode is dragged in by the heels, so to speak. It has no clear connection with the thread of the story. It had to be invented, and the ridiculous legend of generation and the seeming argument which is not argument at all had to be carefully constructed. All this lessens tremendously the chance that here is another blunder by Swift. It can hardly be anything but deliberate exposition of Houyhnhnm thinking as typically human--a faulty, mislabeled, misleading, high-sounding but meaningless appeal to prejudice and personal feeling. A perfect example of the reasoning of "the perfection of nature."

"This was all my master thought fit to tell me at that time of what passed in the grand council. But he was pleased to conceal one particular...."⁴¹ and this concealment, by the creature who had no conception of lying, and which

⁴¹Ibid., p. 324.

concerned a matter of life or death for Gulliver, offers another sterling example of good, sound, constructive Houyhnhnm thought at the same time that it reveals its bases.

The grand council has decreed Gulliver's fate. He must be employed like the other Yahoos or commanded to swim back to his own land. Why? Here are the reasons given:

... the representatives had taken offence at his keeping a Yahoo (meaning myself) in his family more like a Houyhnhnm than a brute animal. That he was known frequently to converse with me, as if he could receive some advantage or pleasure in my company; that such a practice was not agreeable to reason or nature, nor a thing never heard of before among them. The assembly did therefore exhort him, either to employ me like the rest of my species, or command me to swim back to the place from whence I came. That the first of these expedients was utterly rejected by all the Houyhnhnms who had ever seen me at his house or their own: for they alleged that because I had some of the rudiments of reason, added to the natural pravity of those animals, it was to be feared I might be able to seduce them into the woody and mountainous parts of the country, and bring them in troops by night to destroy the Houyhnhnms' cattle, as being naturally of the ravenous kind, and averse from labour.⁴²

So Gulliver is banished from the company of his beloved Houyhnhnms. On reasonable grounds? Certainly not. His sentence is based on mental attitudes such as might have been classed as reason during a witchcraft trial. The language of the passage is reminiscent of just such outstanding examples of human reasoning: "known frequently to converse" with animals; "never heard of before"; "exhort--pravity--seduce--ravenous." We can almost see the learned justices, at any period of time from the middle ages to the seventeenth

⁴²Ibid., p. 333.

century--from Europe to Massachusetts--addressing the serious and reasonable jury. Gulliver's fate is just as reasonable as that of Bridget Bishop.⁴³ Had the Houyhnhnms been consistent in the application of their own principles, they would have had to admit that even a rudiment of reason must predispose to at least a rudiment of virtue. Was their decision based on any evidence at all which would lead them to believe that Gulliver would side with what they took to be his own kind against themselves? Only the reverse could have been the case. Gulliver, apparently, hated the Yahoos worse than his masters did. Nowhere did he evince anything but loathing for them. The Houyhnhnms say they fear that he would lead a marauding band. Yet since when had any Houyhnhnm feared any number of the contemptible Yahoos?

From a common sense viewpoint, what would we expect humans to do in a similar situation. If it is possible to imagine man endeavoring to utilize as beasts of burden a species of stubborn, intractable, unteachable, mischievous, filthy animals when they have at their disposal a large segment of their own kind willing and able to perform any tasks, what would man do if he came into possession of a member of the despised race which was sufficiently intelligent to converse with him, which worshipped him, which would gladly carry out any wishes just to be allowed to remain in his vicinity? Would not man, even Gulliver's barbarous man, have enough sense to make use of this prodigy, either to improve the breed, or as an example

⁴³Hanged for witchcraft at Salem, Massachusetts, June, 1692.

and an intermediary? In fact, does not man do just this, using tame animals as softening influences? Tame elephants help capture and train wild ones; tamed horses aid in the instruction of their wilder fellows. Unintelligent as he may be, or as Gulliver may deem him, man has, at least, not banished from his presence any animal he can make use of. He has kept some solely for purposes of companionship, banishing only the most noisome and verminous. In this class, by all accounts, the Yahoo falls, yet the Houyhnhnm deliberately cultivates him and decrees what amounts to death for the wiser, gentler, cleaner, more capable and thoroughly devoted Gulliver. If this is not the supreme example of Houyhnhnm "no-thinking" it is close to it. The simple idea of making good use of Gulliver never occurs to the super-intelligent, supremely reasonable Houyhnhnms, who prefer to decide on the basis of custom, prejudice and groundless fears.

Yet Gulliver says: "...I knew too well upon what solid reasons all the determinations of the wise Houyhnhnms were founded, not to be shaken by arguments of mine, a miserable Yahoo...."⁴⁴ And this is the Gulliver who, some critics say, has been improved in intelligence by his contact with the wonderful Houyhnhnms; the Gulliver whose word we are to take for the wisdom, the good sense, the infallible reasoning power of the Houyhnhnms. This, we are told, is Jonathan Swift. Not so, some readers may say, this is not Swift, but Gulliver

⁴⁴Travels, pp. 334-335.

at his most abject, not speaking for Swift, but, by his very blindness, pointing out Swift's true message which lies in a reversal of the Houyhnhnm formula: wisdom is virtue. It is not, these readers will claim, that Swift is holding that reason is a sufficient guide to conduct, but that the living of a virtuous life indicates the highest type of wisdom. The Houyhnhnms, whatever they say, act virtuously, so they must be wise. Now of course this will involve the reader in definitions of wisdom and virtue, the ramifications of which would be endless, but it is necessary to examine the boasted Houyhnhnm virtue briefly. Is it sufficiently outstanding to be substituted for a high degree of intelligence? Only, the reader will quickly see, if the wisdom possessed by any of the animals is likewise equated with virtue. For examples are not needed to show the negative character of Houyhnhnm virtue. They do not make war on their own species. Neither do many of the animals we know who lack the supposed advantages of the Houyhnhnms. They have none of the doubtful benefits of civilization, but neither do the wild animals of our own world know the evils of law courts or quacks.

Gulliver makes much of the fact that the Houyhnhnms have no word for lying, but it is a non sequitur to say, further, that they have no conception of the thing itself. That they know what it is, is shown by the fact that the master Houyhnhnm frequently accuses Gulliver of "saying the thing which is not" and is usually mistaken (and therefore, saying the thing which is not, himself) when he does it. And the

Houyhnhnms, though they may be averse to saying the thing which is not, certainly have no aversion to not saying the thing which is, or to acting the thing which is not. Many readers will question the nobility of the nature which will casuistically balk at the telling of a lie and hesitate not a whit at acting one or at concealing the truth. When the Houyhnhnm master agreed to Gulliver's plea to conceal the secret of his clothing, he and his servant were concealing the truth.⁴⁵ When Gulliver's master kept from him, for no apparent reason, the decision of the council as to his fate,⁴⁶ he was concealing the truth. When the master Houyhnhnm and his friends treated Gulliver with civility in order to render him more tractable, they were obviously acting lies, and probably speaking them, also.⁴⁷

Whether or not these deceptions are innocent is beside the point. Gulliver is saying the thing which was not when he says that the Houyhnhnms have no conception of lying. Their regard for the truth is, very humanly, regulated by self interest. They adhere to it or depart from it as suits their convenience, not even paying particular attention to their own extremely specious explanation of the need for truthfulness--the necessity of clear communication.⁴⁸ Obviously,

⁴⁵ See above, p. 50.

⁴⁶ See above, p. 71.

⁴⁷ See above, p. 51.

⁴⁸ See above, p. 55.

speech can serve other ends.

What, then, are these Houyhnhnm virtues? Gulliver tells us that "friendship and benevolence are the two principal virtues among the Houyhnhnms,"⁴⁹ and that "temperance, industry, exercise and cleanliness, are the lessons equally enjoined to the young ones of both sexes...."⁵⁰ And he has given us the all-important reason for these virtues in the earlier words: "As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by nature with a general disposition to all virtues, and have no conceptions or ideas of ... evil in a rational creature."⁵¹ The Houyhnhnms, then, are in much the same state as our first parents before the fall--good solely because they lack temptations. Their virtue is negative, and Swift stresses this point by having Gulliver carefully list the reasons for his happiness in Houyhnhnm-land. He is happy there only because of a long list of evils which are absent:

... I did not feel the treachery or inconstancy of a friend, nor the injuries of a secret or open enemy. I had no occasion of bribing, flattering, or pimping to procure the favour of any great man or of his minion.... here was neither physician to destroy my body, nor lawyer to ruin my fortune; no informer to watch my words and actions, or forge accusations against me for hire.... no lords, fiddlers, judges, or dancing masters.⁵²

Which is surely reminiscent of the great admirer of the free-thinker Collins, who said:

Therefore, do not trust the priest, but think freely for

⁴⁹Travels, p. 319.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 320.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 318 (italics mine).

⁵²Ibid., pp. 329-330.

yourself, and if you happen to think there is no hell, there certainly is none, and consequently you cannot be damned; I answer further, that wherever there is no lawyer, physician, or priest, the country is paradise.⁵³

If Gulliver's existence in Houyhnhnm land is an ideal existence and the Houyhnhnms are ideally virtuous creatures, it is hard to see in what respects they or their existence differs from any animal existence. We have such creatures and their lives all about us, creatures who know none of the evils Gulliver is glad to escape--creatures who are industrious and clean, who are benevolent among their own kind. But these creatures are not men. Any desert island will qualify for a Gulliverian paradise. But man cannot live on a desert island, and Swift well knew it. What lesson for men is there here, or what lash or laugh? There can only be one, the fact that the Houyhnhnms themselves claim the credit for their virtuous existence and attribute it to reason.

Men cannot live like Houyhnhnms. To win credit, they must be subject to temptation, they must have the choice of good and evil, and their wisdom consists of the ability to choose wisely. For this ability man acknowledges his debt to a power beyond himself. Or, Swift is saying, he should. The Houyhnhnms do not. Gulliver and critics have said that the Houyhnhnms have no pride, that traditionally first deadly sin. But they have pride, to the nth degree. They take unto themselves the sole credit for any virtue they possess, while at the same time they demonstrate, for the benefit of the wary

⁵³Swift, Prose Works, III, 183.

reader, that they do not exercise the faculty they boast. Man is inordinately proud of his reason as Swift's Houyhnhnms show us, but even he knows better than to credit it with his achievement of virtue. Virtue comes to man only through desire for it. Man, if he is good, is good because he wishes to be more like a better creature than himself. To the Houyhnhnm, there is no such thing. He is the perfection of nature, and nature is the end. Man, too, deems himself the perfection of nature, but senses a greater world than that of nature and desires to attain it.

Gulliver and his master have discussed the question of good and evil, and Swift, through the blindness of both, has given us a final indictment of the Houyhnhnms and the supposed "life of reason." The Houyhnhnm master has correctly pointed out to Gulliver that man, to whom

...some small pittance of reason had fallen, whereof we made no other use than by its assistance to aggravate our natural corruptions, and to acquire new ones which nature had not given us...⁵⁴

has not cured his evils. This is a generalized indictment in which Gulliver readily joins. And the reader must join Gulliver and the Houyhnhnm--the indictment is sound. But what is the case for the Houyhnhnm? Evil exists in his land, also. He has a word for it. The word is Yahoo.

I know not whether it may be worth observing that the Houyhnhnms have no word in their language to express any thing that is evil, except what they borrow from the deformities or ill qualities of the Yahoos. Thus they denote the folly

⁵⁴Travels, p. 307.

of a servant, an omission of a child, a stone that cuts their feet, a continuance of foul or unseasonable weather, and the like, by adding to each the epithet of Yahoo. For instance, Hhnm Yahoo, Whnaholm Yahoo....⁵⁵

Now the evil in man exists partly within himself. He admits it, sometimes deploras it, sometimes endeavors, haltingly perhaps, to correct it. The Houyhnhnm lacks man's dual nature. He has no temptations, his evil is a thing apart. Which of the two then, has displayed the lesser wisdom in not weeding out evil. Man has at least a reasonable excuse. Evil is sometimes attractive to him. The Houyhnhnm does not have this excuse. Evil is always repulsive; it is not inside, but outside him, yet he cultivates and maintains it as assiduously as man. He can detect the mote in Gulliver's eye only by conveniently peering past the inexcusable bean in his own. Like most of us, only to a greater extent, he can see the fault in others which he cannot see in himself. The only Houyhnhnm who shows any glimmering of the intelligence Gulliver attributes to the race is the sorrel nag, the servant who helped Gulliver build his boat. Though the master Houyhnhnm has pompously informed Gulliver that the servant class is not "born with equal talents of the mind, or a capacity to improve them,"⁵⁶ the servant is the only one who is capable of entertaining a new thought. The import of his significant farewell, the apparent contradiction in terms, is lost on Gulliver, the Houyhnhnms, and, perhaps, on some readers as he calls after the departing

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 327.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 304.

Gulliver:

"Houy illa nyha majah Yahoo, take care of thyself, gentle Yahoo."⁵⁷

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 338.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

We have had a brief glimpse of the multiplicity and wide range of criticism of what many feel to be Swift's masterpiece. This very range, from highest praise to bitterest condemnation, proves that the work is many things to many men, while at the same time it indicates that, if it is intended to hold up the mirror to man, it has not presented too clear an image. But the reader must remember that in the perception of images two elements are involved. Either the mirror or the viewer's vision may be faulty. And a mirror which penetrates the surface and shows us what lies beneath is rarely encountered. When it is, we may be more inclined to call it a distorted mirror than to face the prospect of the accuracy of an unfamiliar image, especially if it makes us seem ridiculous.

Swift has been accused of using the travels of his creation, Gulliver, to attack mankind with every conceivable weapon from laughter and the lash of ridicule to the brutal bludgeon of denigration and the savage stab of a misanthropically poisoned dagger. Because of his book, particularly the climactic fourth part, Swift has been placed everywhere on the scale of being from saint to devil. Why is there such divergence of opinion?

In seeking an answer to this question and in trying to propose a thesis which might permit some narrowing of the gap between the widely divergent opinions, we have seen that at least one answer may lie in the interpretation of the puzzling fourth voyage, where apparent inconsistencies seem to have cast some doubt on Swift's meanings. Most of the controversy centers on this voyage, and especially in the part to be played by the amazing horses. There is little serious division of opinion among critics as to the meanings of the first three voyages, though there is some disagreement as to their relative merits. In the discussions of the fourth voyage, however, the divergences of opinion, we find, began almost with the appearance of the work itself. We have seen that the resentment of the attack on human nature, coupled with the persistent belief that Swift blundered, appeared in Lord Bolingbroke's contemporary criticism.

As we follow the criticisms we find not only a growing awareness that the horses are not what they seemed to Gulliver, but also a suspicion that this discrepancy may have been deliberate on the part of Swift; a suspicion that he may not have intended to present the Houyhnhnms as an ideal, but may have meant them to play a part in the satire.

Oddly, however, in tracing the growing awareness that the problem had not been solved and in noting the growth of the realization of Houyhnhnm imperfection, we find that it has not fallen to the lot of those who are apparently most aware of the faulty thinking of the horses to connect this to

deliberate intent on Swift's part. Thus, one of the well-known critics, Eddy, points out one of the serious lapses from clear thinking by the Houyhnhnm master and believes that this lapse was caused by a blunder by Swift. Nor has it been the good fortune of those who see clearly the error of supposing that Swift would propose any ideal, those who think that the horses carry a load of satire, to see clearly the faulty thinking of the Houyhnhnms. Miss Williams, who proposes that the Houyhnhnms may be intended to be a part of the satire on humanity apparently still believes that they can live by reason and are quite competent thinkers.

Despite what seems a rather obvious objection, that an unrealistic ideal can have little satirical effect, nowhere have we encountered the seemingly simple idea that, if the Yahoos satirize the emotional side of man, the Houyhnhnms satirize his intellectual side; that Houyhnhnm thinking, so admired by Gulliver, is really very human thinking, usually grossly mislabeled by Houyhnhnm and human alike, as reason. That the Houyhnhnms not only play a part, but a leading and vital part, in the satire--that they hold up to man a mirror so accurate and so penetrating that in it he can see a great deal of what goes on just behind the eyes that peer into it--has been the contention of this study. Swift held up this mirror a century or so before modern psychologists were writing learned treatises on the extent of what we now call rationalization.

We have seen that the subject matter, human thinking, or

Reason, was of intense interest at the time, and we have seen that Swift was on record as not believing that the human mind alone was sufficient guide to virtuous living. He was not convinced that even the most moral philosophy was enough to guarantee right conduct for the majority of men. He saw clearly the dangers inherent in the ideas of the relativity of good and evil implicit in the doctrines of the freethinkers. He anticipated, we must now admit, the strength of the appeal which makes the Communist ideology such a present danger--the appeal to the self-sufficiency of man, to his ability to manage his own fate. With characteristic vision and because of natural bent, and perhaps delighted to kill two birds with one stone, he chose the weapon of ridicule and irony to combat the threat to religion and authority, combining it with his favorite pastime, the ridicule of man's greatest source of pride, his intelligence. He saw clearly that the whole argument of the part to be played by man's reason became academic (and therefore, to Swift, doubly nonsensical) if it could be shown that man simply did not use the reason he possessed. And he stated, unequivocally, that that was precisely the intention of his book: "Proving the falsity of that definition animal rationale, and to show it would be only rationis capax."

To demonstrate that proposition he created Gulliver and sent him into little known parts of the world. As has been said, it is no part of this study to attempt an exposition of all the means Swift used to accomplish his purpose.

Obviously, the contradictory but very human Gulliver himself, with his loyalties and blindness and apparently sturdy common sense, carries a great deal of the burden of convicting man. But it is in his final loyalty, his last great lack of perception, that Swift hammers home the message with the creatures which Gulliver comes to worship. The Yahoos play their part in attacking man's nature, but obviously creatures with no glimmerings of reason can have no part in establishing the thesis that man, though possessed of the ability to reason, does not use it. Here it can only be Gulliver, the horses, and any additional characters that enter the story who carry the message. And no discussion of Gulliver's fourth voyage would be complete without mention of Captain Mendosa and the contrast he provides to Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms. Here is Swift's man--an individual, not mankind en masse, but a good, kind, sensible Christian. What purpose can he serve but to draw attention to the absurdity of Gulliver's extreme, irrational view, his worship of horses?

We examine the Houyhnhnms, these allegedly great reasoners and examples of virtue, and find them, among other things, doing the following very human things: making hasty judgments based on cursory inspection and some similarities of appearance, while ignoring what must have been more fundamental differences [i.e., the difference in posture is completely ignored by the Houyhnhnm mare]; exhibiting an intense preoccupation with surface appearances, that is, with Gulliver's clothing, and being unable to solve the puzzle despite the

various pieces such as hat and gloves, which Gulliver doffs and replaces in their presence; we find them failing to see that this very clothing sets Gulliver's race apart from all others, whether it is admired as practical or not. We see the Houyhnhnms, though Gulliver solemnly assures us that they have no conception of the meaning of the word opinion, continually expressing erroneous opinions based solely on their own totally inadequate experience; we see, and indeed Gulliver assures us, that the horses are incapable of creative thought or real reasoning--they can entertain no ideas outside their own limited experience ["...because reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain, and beyond our knowledge we cannot do either."]¹ So that they must rest on the assumption that any hypothesis outside their experience is mistaken or a lie. We see them exhibiting a very human trait when they are uneasy in the presence of a new or unfamiliar idea. We see the Houyhnhnms, in their explanation of their supposed truthfulness, engaging in the most specious argument; argument, moreover, which rests solely on their one huge and erroneous assumption, that Houyhnhnms are in possession of facts. The Houyhnhnms, that is, justify truthfulness on the grounds that to be untruthful interferes with the clear communication of factual information, taking for granted that such is the sole purpose of communication and assuming that all Houyhnhnm knowledge is accurate, a fallacy which

¹See above, p. 52.

Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms demonstrate repeatedly. The Houyhnhnms are frequently mistaken, and, in communicating their ideas must of necessity be convicted on their own principles of "saying the thing which is not." And nowhere have they said it more completely than in claiming to be superior thinkers.

We find them utterly incompetent to draw the simplest and most inescapable of conclusions from the most obvious of facts. Because of prejudice and habit, they cannot see the superiority of Gulliver's body for carrying out the dictates of reason. † Because Gulliver's body resembles that of the hated Yahoos, and because it is less fitted for certain physical pursuits, the Houyhnhnms indulge in argumentative leaps which rise to gymnastic heights in concluding that their own bodies are better servants of the mind than Gulliver's. And this despite their own admission that they cannot do things which Gulliver has done and is told to do again, such as to build a boat. They are utterly blind to the great advantages of Gulliver's posture, hands, and clothing. The Houyhnhnms build shelters for themselves, but cannot see clothing as anything but a handicap. We see the Houyhnhnm master admitting that, in comparing Gulliver to the Yahoos, he is looking only for similarities and therefore disregarding the important things, the differences. In other words he is indulging in the very human mental exercise of looking for evidence which will bolster his preconceived opinion and is disregarding any which would tend to destroy it. We see the

Houyhnhams exhibiting the grossest lack of even elementary common sense in insisting that their youths plunge into water immediately after violent exercise. We see them exhibiting perhaps the most distinctively human of all traits in their perverse cultivation of the only thing which, to them and to Gulliver, keeps Houyhnhnm land from being paradise--the Yahoo. Not only do they cultivate their own brand of evil, but they exhibit a remarkable blindness and Pharasaical smugness when they accuse man of doing what they themselves do with far less excuse. That they can twist an argument with the most devious and unscrupulous sophist who ever reversed his field is seen when the Houyhnhnm master proudly proposes Gulliver's once-horrible castration policy as a benigna public service, with his proposal couched in the most absurdly specious and contradictory terms. Yet, sensible as the result would be, we see the Houyhnhams refusing to accept it and deciding to persist in the error of their ways. Custom and precedent win out over good sense. We see them resorting to the forms of logic as substitutes for good sense when the master Houyhnhnm produces, in correct argumentative form, asinine nonsense in support of his contention that the Yahoos could not have been aborigines of the land. We see the Houyhnhams blandly reversing previous stands with no acknowledgment of error--freely adopting as their own the theories of Gulliver. We see the virtuous Houyhnhams concealing the truth and acting lies. We see them demanding total conformity from Gulliver's master and, in their blind reverence for tradition and custom,

deliberately throwing away their opportunity to put their unique captive to practical use in training, improving, or reforming their one source of trouble. And, in final support of Swift's rationis capax thesis, Gulliver himself gives us the proof that at least one member of the Houyhnhnm race possesses the ability to reason. Gulliver's helper, the sorrel nag, a supposedly inferior member of a lower caste, is the only Houyhnhnm who has observed accurately and drawn correct conclusions from his observations. He is the only one not afraid to follow the dictates of his reason--able to comprehend and willing to express a totally new concept even though it involves an apparent contradiction of all his experience--a gentle Yahoo. The lesson is plain. An individual Houyhnhnm, and he need not be of the nobility, may think clearly now and then, but the great majority merely let their intellects run in the well-worn ruts and familiar patterns of custom, habit, and prejudice. When they, and Gulliver, dignify this unquestioning acceptance of traditional views with the name of reason, is Swift agreeing with them, or is he chiding those who do? ^{or} Did he create the Houyhnhnms to represent his ideal of reasoning creatures, or are they incredible blunders? It seems far more likely that Swift, taking a page from the classics and emulating the wily Ulysses presenting his tempting wooden horse before the towers of Ilium, erected for our acceptance an apparently noble creature who conceals within its hollow being a deadly attack on the very citadel of man's ego, his pride in his reason.

Certainly the horse has been accepted at face value and hauled within the gates as Swift's tribute to the Goddess of Reason by many an eminent critic. Most of those who have perceived that the Houyhnhnm is not a great thinker have supposed that Swift, in trying to make him so, erred badly. Yet surely any critic, especially when dealing with ironic wit of the caliber of Swift's, might well consider the warning uttered by one of Swift's famous contemporaries in An Essay on Criticism:

Those oft are stratagems which error seem,
Nor is it Homer nods, but we that dream.

--Alexander Pope

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