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CONSPIRING AGAINST THE GULLIBLE: NOTES ON *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS* AS UNIVERSAL SATIRE IN THE GUISE OF PARANOID DISCOURSE

Abstract

Readers and critics alike have bickered over the verisimilitude of *Gulliver's Travels* since it was first published in 1726. No critical consensus has ever been reached even on some very fundamental interpreting issues. While several particulars of Swift's satire appear to have been decoded and agreed upon, such as the parody of travel literature and the attack on Walpole's corrupt administration, some others are still debated over, even after more than a century of modern criticism, such as the overall object of the universally reverberating satire and what it teaches us about Swift's own values and worldview. Fully aware of the Gulliverian critical deadlock the world is still in, we suggest in the present article that the narratorial duet Swift-Gulliver 'conspires' against readers, be they innocent (gullible) or competent (lucid): by construing the latter as a microcosm who explores the world in order to gain identity, the former stages an elaborate hoax in which a potentially paranoid narrative is cunningly brought within the boundaries of acceptable, coherent discourse, with a view to achieving his far-reaching satire.

Keywords: Gulliver's Travels, innocent readers, verisimilitude, contract of fiction, universal satire

Taken at face value, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a book of adventures at sea, a collection of impressions about man and his institutions, depicted in a realistic manner and abounding in matter-of-fact accounts of social interactions that occur during the protagonist's *peregrinatio* into several remote nations of the world. Swift follows in the footsteps of the travel book tradition, previously illustrated by Dampier's *A Voyage to New Holland* (1703) and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), but unlike his predecessors, his overarching preoccupation for factual reports and realistic detail does not suppress the notion of double entendre, but cultivates it. Whereas Dampier's and Defoe's travellers can trace their route on an actual map (New Holland stands for the western coast of Australia and Robinson's island is near Trinidad) and integrate with ease into the social climate upon return having experienced adventures that do not exceed the realm of normality, Gulliver's remote nations, such as Lilliput and Brobdingnag, exist only by way of literary convention, and their fictitious character may well be a match for the narrator's neurotic persona.

That Swift's novel is copiously furnished with maps of Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, Balnibarbi, Glubbudbrib, Luggnagg and Houyhnhnmland signals the writer's intention to tap into the realistic vein of the travel books' style only to help his fictitious locations pass as true, while at the

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same time it denounces the conventional nature of literary realism and the limited reliability of any first-person narrator. These maps observe the rules of cartography and their fastidious documentation includes dates of discovery, positions in relation to known lands and even spouting whales, in an effort to offer a modicum of legitimacy to the realistic convention that Swift exploits for satirical purposes.

The novelist mockingly kowtows to the tyrannical myth of textual coherence and endeavours to keep the strange, eerie and deviant elements within the boundaries of an acceptable order of discourse. The reader, constantly challenged to engage in decoding socio-cultural meanings, follows the text's trail of vraisemblance, convinced that even under extraordinary circumstances, prose is a vehicle for truth and Swift's fiction must needs be Captain Gulliver's travelogue; as such, the writer "insinuates his classic of satire into the precincts of fiction" (Horrell, 1964: 55). It takes a competent reader to follow Gulliver in his road of tribulation, a reader who, unlike W. Thackeray¹, can realize that this unlikely travelogue serves a greater purpose than that of satirizing the political and socio-cultural establishment of early 18th-century England. With such a reader in mind, Swift had to think of ways of tackling issues like the omnipresence of political corruption, the wantonness of tyrants and the marginalization of merit and virtue, without fear of reprobation, and the closest paratextual artifice at hand was to try to inculcate his contemporaries with the truthfulness of Gulliver's narrative.

The textual experience is enhanced by appeal to the readers' individual code of morality which guarantees satisfaction through analogy. If "to understand another culture is a feat of analogical ingenuity" (Wood, 1986: 75), then Swift fuels his readers' curiosity about the alien cultures presented in the book so as to meet with their expectations regarding the home reality. This is probably why the first generations that read the *Travels*, 'from the Cabinet Council to the Nursery', as John Gay put it, were seduced, if not metatextually subdued, by the writer's precautions to hide the explosive truths of his satire under a veil of understatement. The typical response of the said generations, attesting to the extent to which the *Travels* manipulated its contemporary readers, is encapsulated in Dr Arbuthnot's genuinely innocent remark in a letter penned to Swift after the unexpected editorial success of the first edition: "I will make over all my profits to you for the property of Gulliver's Travels; which, I believe, will have as great a run as John Bunyan. Gulliver is a happy man that at his age can write such a merry work."²

While the politically savvy contemporaries equated merry with subversive, reading the *Travels* as a roman à clef whose political allegory pointed the finger at the corruption of Robert Walpole's Whig administration, the innocent reader is thoroughly misled by Swift's textual strategy of advocating complete ethical impartiality, by seldom approving or disapproving of his hero's deeds and attitudes. The innocent reader is further ensnared by the fact that the author does not encourage any biographical interpretation, suggesting that Gulliver's adventures render their literal truth only on the assumption that they really happened someplace in an alien culture at the antipodes. Judging by the way in which readerly competencies are challenged in the novel,

What Swift accomplishes in Gulliver is nothing less than a radical reassessment of humane norms through the constant reminder that what we 'know' of Gulliver is only his written testimony and, farther, what we read may be playful, contradictory and delusive rather than factual, consistent and ethical. (*Ibidem*: 64)

Innocent reading may well represent a form of defence against the writer's satirical onslaught, but it rarely grants access beyond the text's first layer of meaning. When Gulliver is bound up with filamentous strings on the seashore of Lilliput, the first impression one gets about his impossibility to move is unspeakably comic, but the innocent reader is vindicated shortly after and may react sympathetically when Gulliver, still in much distress, seems to have recovered his vitalistic force and admits: "I confess I was often tempted, while they were passing backwards and forwards on my body,

¹ Victorian novelist William Makepeace Thackeray attacked *Gulliver's Travels* in *The English Humourists* (1851) as 'horrible, shameful, unmanly, blasphemous'.

² In *The Works of the Rev. Jonathan Swift, D.D., Arranged by Thomas Sheridan, A.M., with Notes, Historical and Critical*, Volume XVII, Letters, London. 1803, p. 96 (Letters to and from Dr. Swift, From Dr. Arbuthnot, London, Nov. 8, 1726).

to seize forty or fifty of the first that came in my reach, and dash them against the ground” (GT: 15). Although Swift frustrates all attempts at biographical reading, a deeper layer of meaning might give this scene some insightful perspective on the author’s own injured pride and disappointment experienced after trying to make an honest political career at the court of William III, who, instead of offering Swift a position, promised to appoint him as a cavalry captain and instructed him on how to cook asparagus by a Dutch recipe.³

One of Swift’s most effective tools in obscuring secondary layers of meaning is the indiscriminate treatment of all the characters in the novel as satiric subjects: through this process of “satiric deauthentication” (Seidel, 1996), the decidedly detached mode of narrative turns against characters’ professed pretences as the author spares no effort to make them discredit themselves with their own words and actions. Not surprisingly, Gulliver is the first to receive such treatment, as he stands for the individual(istic) voice that is completely subordinated to the subjective experience that pervades the narrative of adventure.

The 18th century is, one feels, a fertile ground for the rise of the individual, and Swift grudgingly makes a note of the fact by summarizing the content of each chapter in a short prefatory note in which the Author (always in capital letter) is omnipresent in a pompous or dramatic pose, aimed at impressing the innocent reader, as can be seen from the following examples: “The Author gives some account of himself and family” (Part I, Chapter 1); “The Emperor of Lilliput attended by several of the nobility, come to see the Author in his confinement” (Part I, Chapter 2); “The Author, by an extraordinary stratagem, prevents an invasion” (Part I, Chapter 5); “The Author shows his skill in navigation” (Part II, Chapter 5); “The Author’s love of his country” (Part II, Chapter 6); “The Author sets out on his third voyage, is taken by pirates” (Part III, Chapter 1); “Several Houyhnhnms of quality come out of curiosity to see the Author” (Part IV, Chapter 3).

Sheltered by the pretence of verisimilitude afforded by his first-hand authorial experience, Gulliver acts as the “mouthpiece” of the individualistic spirit of the age while simultaneously programmed to berate the shortcomings of English society, rooted, it seems, in the defective manner of adjusting individual consciousness to the realities and mandates of social, political and cultural life. Swift manages an exquisitely impersonal narrative discourse, which turns into a vehicle for ruthless satire against societal evils, from the paradoxical standpoint of a writer who doesn’t try to conceal his mistrust in the novelistic genre’s ability to mediate between the taste of the reading public and the writer’s commitment to the truth. For all his remarkable zeal as a novelist, Gulliver is, by Swift’s design, a Trojan horse undermining the genre from within; his factual reporting meant to appropriate textual reality as truth is, after all, a parody of previous attempts to ensign realism as the driving force of the novelistic art. As M. Seidel put it,

For Swift, the early novelistic experiments of the 1720’s in England proved a tantalizing space for his satiric powers to run loose over new terrain. He distrusted virtually everything represented in the early novel: its individualistic psychology; its brief for class mobility; its delight in a burgeoning of the British economy; its adjustable ethics and morality; its increasing tolerance of opinion; its role in the proliferation of knowledge; its success as a product of the increasingly commercial literary industry. For Swift the novel was exactly the narrative form his age deserved, one that removed the time-tasted values of cultural inheritance and substituted the subjective experience of a serviceably dim and limited commercial intelligence. (Seidel, 1986: 73)

In the name of this subjective experience, and following the conventions of a genre which he mistrusts, Swift increasingly abuses the innocent readers’ willingness to believe up to the point where they are prepared to accept Gulliver as the undeniably authoritative voice of the narrative. On the other hand, he would have us think that Gulliver suffers from a form of societal short-sightedness in that he invariably holds the conviction that the civilization he belongs to is inherently superior to the ones encountered in his adventures. The social systems he comes across are not dissimilar to those in Europe, which ought to make him give up on his patronizing attitude towards them. Instead, he fails miserably when it comes to convincing his alien interlocutors of this superiority (i.e. the gunpowder experiment at the court of the Brobdingnagian king), and the writer “invariably denies him full

³ *The Life of Swift*, by the Rev. John Mitford (ix-cxiv), in *The Poetical Works of Jonathan Swift. With a Life by Rev. John Mitford. In Three Volumes*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1864.

readerly assent” (Wood, 1986: 75) when as an Englishman abroad he is uninspiredly inclined to compare home reality with that of the visited country, most of the times in favour of the former. Especially with the King of Brobdingnag Gulliver’s patriotic endeavours to emphasize the superiority of English social organization come to naught in that the King’s response to Gulliver’s arguments is nothing short of an outright indictment:

He was perfectly astonished with the historical account I gave him of our affairs during the last century, protesting it was only an heap of conspiracies, rebellions, murders, massacres, revolutions, banishments, the very worst effects that avarice, faction, hypocrisy, perfidiousness, cruelty, rage, madness, hatred, envy, lust, malice, or ambition could produce. (*GT*, Book II, Chapter VI, p. 139)

By the letter of the travel book convention, the European explorer always reaches exotic shores inhabited by the noble savages described in Rousseauistic terms as innocent children of nature. Swift, however, goes against the grain of this convention and casts Gulliver among people who live in highly organized societies, governed by complex institutions that the narrator goes to great lengths to describe. If Gulliver comes to reject all social contact upon return home, it is because England fails to live by the civilizational standards he experienced in the voyages, falling into a “state of degenerate corruption” (Quintana, 1966: 157). To confound innocent readers, Swift organizes Gulliver’s fictional discourse in such a manner that its satiric consistency resides not only in his description of European civilization but also in what his adventures tell such readers about Gulliver as representative of this civilization.

For instance, the inventory performed on Gulliver’s possessions by the Lilliputians brings out first a “great silver chain with a wonderful engine at the bottom” (*GT*: 28) and “several massy pieces of yellow metal” (*Ibidem*: 29). In other words, time and money – the metonymic coordinates of English civilization, neither of which is going to be of assistance to him during his stay in Lilliput. Gulliver’s narrative *bona fides* (Seidel, 1986) is systematically undermined by the writer, who grudges no pain in his attempt to persuade the reader of the protagonist’s unreliable nature. The same inventory mentioned above fails to record several other concealed objects, which are indicative of Gulliver’s willingness to scrutinize Lilliputian society, as well as of the improbable character of his scrutiny: “I had, as I before observed, one private pocket which escaped their search, wherein there was a pair of spectacles (which I sometimes use for the weakness of my eyes), a pocket perspective, and several other little conveniences...” (*GT*: 31). That Gulliver confesses to the weakness of his eyes is not a random detail: it further signals Swift’s diffidence of the nature of literary character and subverts the readers’ confidence in the narrator, whose poor eyesight may not prove the best asset when it comes to observing the social organization and mores of a diminutive civilization.

Last but not least, the ‘Letter from Captain Gulliver to His Cousin Sympson’ featuring at the beginning of the novel, and followed by Sympson’s note to the reader, stands out as another decisive element in corroding Gulliver’s narrative *bona fides*. The letter, it is implied, is post-textual, penned in the wake of Gulliver’s Houyhnhnmland experience, and attempts to vindicate his authorship by correcting several editorial errors that may have altered the intended meaning (for instance, the land of giants is called *Brobdingrag*, not Brobdingnag). Such errors, Gulliver the author suggests, cast a shade of doubt upon his veracity; technically, they are, in Houyhnhnm parlance, the thing that was not, which Gulliver is incapable of both speaking and writing after his Houyhnhnmland experience. He is constantly suspicious of the written account of his adventures which, in contact with potentially malignant readers, can be turned into an unnatural corruption of the original meaning. On the face of it,

Gulliver regrets not that he wrote his memoirs but that he ‘suffered his Travels to be published’. His wistfulness is for a text that is written but unread, or at least unpublished; in his fantasy of pure authorial control over reading circumstances and consequences, an author need never become a character in another’s fiction or allow a reader to transmogrify into author. (Rodino, 1991: 1060)

The readers who accept at face value the existence of a race of people six inches tall as well as of a neighing language spoken by rational horses would suffer an offence to be called credulous

since Gulliver the author is chiefly concerned with persuading them that he is practically obsessed with truth. The same readers, who try hard to equate their textual world of reference with Gulliver's, are thoroughly disorientated when the narrator frustrates their efforts and disregards their readerly condition by stating: "... I should have great reason to complain that some of them are so bold as to think my book of travels a mere fiction out of my brain..." (GT: 4).

Exasperated by Swift's relentless (con)textual teasing, the readers who take things at face value and whom we dubbed innocent, fail to grasp the essence of the conflict between Gulliver the author and Gulliver the character. According to M. Seidel, the author-reader relationship in *Gulliver's Travels* can be defined as a 'contract of fiction' (Seidel, 1996); it is a contract that affords the author a great deal of textual freedom ranging from fulfilling down to deluding the readers' expectations. Its verbatim enforcement implies that the narrated adventures are *vraisemblable*, or, even more so, that they really happened. However, the same contract of fiction can be simply dismissed by alleging, along with the not-so-innocent reader, that Gulliver never left England and that the Travels is the fabrication of his mind, the improbable reverie of an armchair explorer.

If Gulliver deludes the reader on purpose, then he is a liar – the *Splendide Mendax* cognomen printed under the author's engraving in the first edition. But what if he is not a liar? What if the inadvertences in the letter to Sympson, the relatively many behavioural oddities Gulliver displays throughout his adventures and his violent estrangement from the humankind at the end of the novel are symptoms of a mental disorder? Gulliver's original enthusiasm for narrative output, along with his prodigious appetite for accurate details, all followed by bouts of depression, may be indicative of paranoia, as "the delusion of special grandeur brings all paranoid experience into its own special compass, and imposes its vision upon the world as a form of power, the power of self-projection" (*Ibidem*: 80). Furthermore, if the *Travels* is the homemade product of a deranged mind and Gulliver's inspiration is drawn from alienation and societal incongruity, then the narrated adventures become a parabolic projection of the story-teller's existence: unable to adapt himself to the rigours of social life and to the cultural advancements of his age, Gulliver embarks on an imaginary trip as far away from England as possible, where he entertains royalty and his merits are acknowledged and rewarded.

In the said scenario, a paranoid Gulliver, puppeted by a razor-sharp satirist of Swift's calibre, attacks indiscriminately all European civilization; he may well befuddle the innocent readers (the Dr. Arbuthnot type), and scandalize the lucid ones, turned detractors (the W. Thackeray type), but the Gulliverian satire reverberates universally not as much as an elaborate hoax at the expense of the gullible, but more as an antidote against the novelist's cruel disappointment inflicted by the realization of the fact that humans are fundamentally the same, no matter what part of the Earth they inhabit. In identifying Gulliver as a neurotic who undergoes an inner conflict, we, as readers, become trapped in his mode of discourse, or in Freud's famous phrasing, "we forget that he is a sick man, just as, if he himself recognizes it, he ceases to be ill" (Freud, 1997: 93). Ultimately, if Gulliver is paranoid and his adventures methodically organize his inner void elaborating on a delirious system of discourse, then readers, innocent and lucid alike, under Swift's masterful direction, remain indeterminately entrapped in a web of apparent causality as they have already validated Swift's contract of fiction by previously acknowledging the *Travels*' verisimilitude.

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