

The Will to Madness: Pride and the Meaning of Gulliver's Madness

With Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift descends upon Humanity like a surgeon upon a cadaver, ruthlessly cutting and digging to uncover and display the internal mechanisms behind external actions. Most of this painful operation occurs in Houyhnhnmland where Swift lays bare the components of human nature. As part of his lecture, Swift offers Houyhnhnmland as a representation of the human mind which he saw as being "furnished like the middle Region of the Air" thus capable of glimpsing the light of reason when not clouded by the "Vapours ascending from the lower Faculties."¹ The utopian Houyhnhnms symbolize the light of reason while the ravenous Yahoos embody instinct, appetite and the resulting vices. Despite these extremes, the psychology presented by Houyhnhnmland is an ideal for here reason successfully restrains and harnesses the bestial impulses. Unhappily, Swift would assert that the reverse is true of the human world; Humanity utterly refuses to use its faculty of reason to control passion or correct vice, preferring instead to wallow eternally in its own corruption. To get at the actual core of human nature and thereby explain Humanity's irrational behaviour, Swift must turn his attention toward the affable and ordinary narrator wherein exists the one component of human psychology not adequately exposed by the Houyhnhnmland model. This hidden component and the culprit behind incorrigibility is pride. Swift illuminates this faculty by placing Gulliver in a situation where his pride has no choice but to rise to the surface in the form of madness.

Essentially, pride is the need felt by all individuals to conceive of themselves as praiseworthy within the general society of humans. It follows that a prime activity for the human psyche is the construction, maintenance and protection of a palatable self-image. Within the mechanics of self-esteem even truth is expendable as the imagination can easily supplement reality with illusion to render it more accommodating to the ego. Swift feared that the cause of amending human folly, which must in its course expose the ugly reality of the lower faculties, will always be sabotaged by this process of pride. He saw that, even under direct moral censure, personal pride will caress the ego by denying the individual's guilt while at the same time stressing the faults of others. Accordingly,

Swift's definition of satire, his tool for moral instruction, exhibits a deep sense of futility:

SATYR is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own ("Tale", p.140).

Pride becomes for Swift the arch-villain of human corruptions as it renders all other vices unassailable. Not surprisingly, it is this self-defense mechanism that Swift wishes to expose in Gulliver during the fourth and final voyage. To this end, Swift presents Gulliver as an average man with an average amount of self-esteem. Swift places this typical man into Houyhnhnmland just as an experimenter might put a rat into a maze so that, under the given conditions, a certain psychological property would be demonstrated. To demonstrate the operation of pride, Swift confronts Gulliver with the harsh reality of human nature as it is concretely presented as Yahoos in Houyhnhnmland and then rationally explained by a Houyhnhnm. As a laboratory animal, Gulliver behaves perfectly. His threatened pride recoils from reality and, in subsequently re-asserting itself, balloons into madness.

In the socratic dialogues with his Houyhnhnm master, Gulliver comes to recognize the true nature of men and their profound relation to the Yahoos:

When I thought of my Family, my Friends, my Countrymen, or human Race in general, I considered them as they really were, Yahoos in Shape and Disposition, perhaps a little more civilized, and qualified with the Gift of Speech; but making no other Use of Reason, than to improve and multiply those Vices, whereof their Brethren [the Yahoos] in this Country had only the Share that Nature allotted them.²

This is a traumatic realization as Gulliver has never overcome his initial abhorrence of these filthy creatures. Nevertheless, if Gulliver were to continue following reason he would see that it is irrational to deny the reality of the lower faculties or to expect Humanity to be other than it actually is. In time, Gulliver partially achieves this understanding and accepts the follies natural to men:

I am not the least provoked at the sight of a Lawyer, a Pick-pocket, a Colonel, a Fool, a Lord, a Gamester, a Politician, a Whoremunger, a Physician, an Evidence, a Suborner, an Attorney, a Trayter, or the like: This is all according to the due course of Things. (Gulliver, p.304)

Here Gulliver dimly mirrors the Houyhnhnm who no more blames a Yahoo for its foulness than "a sharp stone for cutting his Hoof" (Gulliver, p.251). Pursuing this line of thought, Gulliver would conclude that Humanity could no sooner shed its natural corruptions than a sharp stone might, of its own accord, lose its edge. Gulliver would thus find himself in the humbling position of accepting that Humanity, with himself included, is by nature depraved. Paradoxically, Swift saw this form of despairing acquiescence as the only possible route to a genuine improvement in the human condition. But this knowledge leaves no room for a flattering self-image which requires the myth that human vices are merely superficial errors that are easily corrected; from this assumption one can justify how one person can be superior to another. Under these perilous conditions, Gulliver's pride must take drastic evasive action.

Trapped inside Swift's dark vision of Humanity, Gulliver must retreat into absurdity and madness to effect an escape. The close relation that Gulliver actually bears to the Yahoos is so repulsive to his self-esteem that he seeks refuge in the opposite extreme, claiming the perfection of the Houyhnhnms for himself. Reasoning from the premise that humans can be easily improved by instruction, Gulliver asserts that the tutelage of the Houyhnhnms has cured him of the corruptions inherent in human nature. For this to be actually true, he would have to cease being human which is, of course, impossible. Nevertheless to prove that he has been reformed, Gulliver sets about imitating as many Houyhnhnm mannerisms as his human form will permit. Furthermore, once he has convinced himself that he is no longer strictly human but rather a rational creature, he can freely attack the vices which were so vividly incarnated in the Yahoos and which he can now safely identify in humans. By denying his humanity and thus human vice, Gulliver satisfies his pride which, now free from the taint of human error, can become swollen with the illusion of absolute superiority. It is in the absurdity of this action that Gulliver is identified as mad. It is also this action which supplies the outward characteristics of his delusion: walking with a slight trot, conversing "at least four hours every Day" (Gulliver, p.298) with his horses and having his "Nose well stopt with Rue, Lavender, or Tobacco-Leaves" (Gulliver, p.304) to fend off the odious smell of humans.

According to Swift's plan, Gulliver's decline into insanity provides a clear demonstration of how pride operates in the human mind. Gulliver, while accepting the grim truth about Humanity, has not only eluded any incrimination of himself but has actually exploited the situation to further please his pride. With his self-image not only intact but gloriously inflated, it matters little to Gulliver that he is also mad. The uniquely potent education which Swift has given to Gulliver has been utterly overturned and perverted by pride.

At the close of Gulliver's Travels, Swift brings the absurdity of Gulliver's position to a pitch so that there can be no mistaking the power of pride to render humans blind to instruction. In a magnificently ironic speech, Gulliver confesses that the one thing he cannot view without hatred is a "Lump of Deformity, and Diseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with Pride" (Gulliver, p.304). He continues with a command for all those possess this "absurd Vice" (Gulliver, p.305) to stay out of sight. Gulliver has become the thoroughly ridiculous man railing against the one vice he most practices but who, unlike Chaucer's Pardoner, is completely oblivious to his own hypocrisy. Pride has made Gulliver so far beyond reproach in his own mind that he can venomously attack himself and his corruptions without the least sensation of harm. The conclusion which Swift is leaving for consideration is that pride is utterly invincible and that it renders Humanity eternally incorrigible. Unbelievably, Swift's fury does not stop even here. There is still another regression beyond madness into which Gulliver can descend; it is this final step which reveals the true horror of pride and the one thing that Swift felt he must, in some way, resist.

Swift has asserted that Humanity is both naturally depraved and eternally incorrigible, and yet he still sets Gulliver upon the impossible scheme of weaning Humanity from its vices:

I write for the noblest End, to inform and instruct Mankind, over whom I may, without Breach of Modesty, pretend to some Superiority, for the Advantages I received by conversing so long among the most accomplished Houyhnhnms (Gulliver, p.301).

By allowing Gulliver's madness to blossom into crusading zeal, Swift is exposing the

source of what he believed to be Humanity's greatest crime. In the eyes of Swift, proponents for social reform were suffering from a form of delusion similar to and no less extreme than Gulliver's. Like Gulliver, the enthusiasts create schemes modelled upon their private illusions and then force them onto reality. Given that these plans originate in falsity, they can only fail. Disaster loomed in Swift's imagination when he realized that given the pride of enthusiasts, each successive failure which their schemes encounter, rather than drawing the projector's attention to the true error being made, will instead drive them into more radical retreats from reality and into even more dangerous proposals. Considering the spectacle of chaos in Lagado in the wake of unbridled visionary scheming in the sciences, one can hardly imagine the possible crimes which could occur under similar auspices in the human world. This is, of course, the area in which Swift later works with A Modest Proposal. Indeed, Gulliver has already exhibited the rudiments of that horror when he used the "Skins of Yahoos" (Gulliver, p.289), his brethren, to supplement his clothing and to build his canoe. Pride has taken Gulliver beyond madness and placed him on the road which leads from enthusiasm to blind cruelty. By pushing Gulliver to this depth, Swift delivers his most condemning insult against Humanity. Not only depraved and incorrigible, Humanity, in being too proud to accept that fact, is condemned to chase chimeras with elaborate reform thereby eternally inflicting atrocities upon itself.

The reader can take a small measure of consolation from the fact that, with the passing of time, Gulliver abandons "all such visionary Schemes for ever" (Gulliver, p.xxxix) and is thus disarmed. What is left for Gulliver, for Swift and for the reader is despair. The human race, by nature depraved and by the strength of pride eternally incorrigible, is also cursed for all time to be its own worst enemy. While this vision of Humanity is unspeakably bleak, Swift would be adamant that it must be accepted as the truth - only then could there be hope. It was the source of Swift's fierce indignation that Humanity not only refused to listen but could not even hear him speak. Still he would not give up and Gulliver's Travels represents his fullest attempt to introduce readers to the reality of human nature. Swift saw his war on pride as preliminary to any further advances and so it is this vice which receives special attention. Handling Gulliver like a

skilled analyst, Swift forces the contagion of pride to the surface where, in the form of madness, it cannot escape notice. By making the narrator serve as the patient, Swift hoped that readers would accompany Gulliver through to the end only then to realize that they too have taken the first steps of madness. From this point, matters are out of Swift's hands and he could only pray that the abandoned readers might be prompted into a genuine consideration of Gulliver's madness and ultimately the charges being laid against Humanity. Readers should really guard against following Gulliver's example and seeking some convenient way around Swift's message. His words are simply too prophetic to be casually dismissed.

It should be noted that Gulliver's reaction to the reality of Humanity need not be the only one; there is still the example of human compassion as found in Pedro de Mendez or, indeed, Swift himself. One can also turn to those instances in Swift's work where he offers some suggestions on how human nature might be curbed if not improved. Such is to be found in the "Digression concerning Madness" in A Tale of a Tub where he states that a liberal education can sometimes temper a man's zeal in that:

the more he shapes his understanding by the Pattern of Human Learning, the less he is inclined to form Parties after his particular Notions; because that instructs him in his private infirmities, as well as in the stubborn Ignorance of the People (Tale, p.108).

But one should not forget that this was written decades before Gulliver's Travels when Swift was young and full of hope.

Endnotes

1. Johnathan Swift A Tale of a Tub and other Satires, Kathleen Williams ed. (Dent: London, 1975), p.102. All subsequent references to this edition will be made in the body of the essay with the use of parentheses and the signification "Tale".
2. Johnathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels. Paul Turner ed. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1986), p.286. All subsequent reference will be made in the body of the essay with the use of parentheses and the signification "Gulliver."