

Swift's Prophetic Vision of the Postmodern Age: the Example of Gulliver's Travels

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Abstract

Jonathan Swift is one of the major writers of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish literature. He writes in a context marked by the ideals of modernism. However, he satirizes in his masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*, the basic principles of modernism and, by extension, the Western society which is both the fruit and proponent of this ideology. In his overtly critical look at the universalizing vision of modernism the limits of which he keeps underscoring in different ways, Swift predicts the end of this great period in western and even worldwide history. At the same time, he underlines the main features of a new world that will be, over two centuries later, that of the contemporary era commonly known as the postmodern one. This article is therefore an attempt to bring out this prophetic vision of Swift expressed in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Keywords: modernism, science, universalism, postmodernism, relativism, cultural dialogue, identity crisis

Introduction

A genius and classic of Anglo-Irish literature of the eighteenth century, the Dean of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Reverend Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), can be ranked among these great men of whom the American thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, said that they are always misunderstood. For a long time, his character² has been confused with the dark substratum that permeates his satiric works including, among others, *A Tale of the Tub* and *The Battle of the Books* (1704), *The Conduct of the Allies* (1711), *The Public Spirit of the Whigs* (1714), *A Modest Proposal* (1729). However, Swift's main work of satire is *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) in which captain Lemuel Gulliver narrates his adventurous travels to different corners of the world.

The book is divided into four parts, representing the account of the narrator's experiences in the four main nations where his adventure led him to, namely Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the country of the Houyhnhnms. Using most of the time a coarse language, Gulliver mocks many aspects of the various societies he encountered and also those of his native England which not only appears in the background of the whole narration, but also is, at times, explicitly mentioned by the narrator. Critics agree that this derision largely operates as a harsh indictment of the eighteenth-century Western world in its political, social, economic, religious, scientific and judicial dimensions. Yet, as Christopher Durer acknowledges, Swift's ideas are still very relevant in the contemporary world: Today our interest in Swift has not waned because of the passage of time. On the contrary, it has waxed, and the imposing figure of the Dean attracts new partisans and detractors.

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² "Jonathan Swift is often spoken of as a renegade in politics and a hypocrite in religion ; as brutal in private life, and filthy in tastes and ideas ; as tyrannical to his inferiors, servile to his superiors, and misanthropical always. He is regarded as an outlaw, whose hand was against every man, and to whom no man should show mercy, now that he is dead. It has fared with his character as with his personal appearance". The North American Review, University of Northern Iowa, Vol. 106, No. 218 (Jan., 1868), pp. 68-69.

In fact Swift's worldview is fully relevant to new cultural situations in which a host of twentieth-century writers, Gunter Grass or Norman Mailer, Malraux, George Orwell or Solzhenitsyn, place their works. The polarities of rationality and bestiality, the plights of reason, the hankering after fixed standards in the face of shifting ethical norms, and the perennial probing of man's true nature, present in the *Travels*, bring Swift more closely to our own century than any other major eighteenth-century English author.³

The conspicuous topicality of Swift's worldview in *Gulliver's Travels* particularly should lead us to reconsider our interpretation of that major book. Swift's primary goal is not to attack European institutions, but to warn his compatriots against the serious limits of the basic ideology, modernism, that underlies these institutions and the European civilization as a whole. Indeed, Swift calls into question the main ideal of modernism according to which the practical use of reason will inevitably lead to the progress of civilization for the benefit of mankind. About two hundred years later, his suspicions and convictions proved to be true. Actually, the post-war world is the very witness of the failure of all modernist ideals: though science has much improved the living condition of man, it has engendered many other serious problems to humanity and contributes to rendering it more than ever fragile. Moreover, a totalizing vision of the world is a deep mistake, since this one is a multicultural space with a variety of civilizations of equal merit. The modernist idea that man is an autonomous subject who takes on the responsibility for the control of the world is a pure illusion. Man is the product of different situations that determine his behaviour and identity. These are, in short, the main features of the present age commonly known as the postmodern era. These are also the main ideas that pervade *Gulliver's Travels*, which gives the vision of Swift a prophetic character. I am then going to examine the characteristics of the postmodern world as prophetically described in Swift's novel.

1. The illusions of modernist ideals: the hideous face of science

One of the main features of modernism is the belief in the boundless power of reason. The eighteenth century, thanks to its ambitious "enlightenment project", lays the definitive foundations of a world governed by the sole power of reason, thanks to which man hoped to extend as much as possible his knowledge and be "master and owner of the world". The immediate consequence of this is the unprecedented scientific and technical progress that was at its peak in the nineteenth and twentieth century's. The faith in science, which positively transformed human life, came to replace the faith in the non-practical Christian God of the middle Ages. "God is dead", Nietzsche later concludes.

Paradoxical as it may be, the great disillusion, born in the twentieth century, result, in a larger extent, from the development of science and technology. In fact, the incalculable human and material losses during the two world wars, caused mainly by the use of mass destructive weapons, are directly the result of scientific revolution. The expansion of totalitarianism in the world, combined with the threat of nuclear weapon and the numerous dangers inherent in the development of science, continuously feed a general feeling of anguish and disappointment, giving then reason to Rousseau who kept warning that scientific and technical advancement does not forcibly lead to progress. Even if the postmodern world takes full advantage of the products of science and techniques, it is very sensitive to the various threats represented by modern technologies, but more interestingly to science's inability to fulfill its promises for a better world. Besides, the long-held idea of the infallibility of science has proved to be totally wrong, as demonstrated by renowned scientists. For these reasons, science can no longer be viewed as it used to be in the past, in the eighteenth century for example. Yet, it is in this very period, where only science mattered, that Swift, as a good visionary, cast a critical look at it by revealing its hideous face in *Gulliver's Travels*. Right from the outset of the novel, Gulliver specifies that he is a surgeon in ship and studied mathematics. He is then knowledgeable about science, which is certainly in the air at that time. In this regard, it is not fortuitous that all the societies he ventures in, except the Houyhnhnms, attach a certain value to science, even if this importance varies in degree from one society to another. Moreover, his knowledge of mathematics, as he confesses, will help him in his different travels; it will also enable him to give a painstaking description of things, particularly of scientific realities that he discovers as he journeys.

³ Christopher S. Durer (reviewer): *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Winter, 1985), p.547.

Nowhere is this ability more blatant than in his third voyage, precisely in the floating island of Laputa. In a typically eighteenth-century style, Gulliver describes in detail the island, the inhabitants of which are concerned only with music and mathematics. Nearly everything that exists in Laputa bears the mark of these two branches. Musical instruments and mathematical figures are drawn on all clothes and on the King's kitchen. The served food, meat and bread as well, espouses various shapes ranging from equilateral triangle to cycloid and rhomboids, fiddles, flutes, cylinders, harp, parallelograms "and several other mathematical figures (P.115). Their phraseology is much dependent on music and mathematics which are also used to express the beauty of a woman or an animal. Such beauty is described "by rhombs, circles, parallelograms, ellipses, and other geometrical terms; or else by words of art drawn from music" (P.117). The omnipresence of science in the life of the inhabitants of Laputa, which can be observed in the least important things, is expressive of Swift's scornful look at the exaggerated importance given to science in his time.

The practical dimension of science accounts for the high interest that it arouses among people. As opposed to metaphysics and religion that are only speculative, science is rooted in reality and is able to act concretely on human life and betters it. Swift derides this widespread idea. He reveals that the attachment to science, if pushed too far, can be in danger of turning the latter into a form of religion or metaphysics. The irony is striking if we know that positivism and scientism both held metaphysics and religion as the responsible couple for the dark period of humanity, preventing then the latter from entering an age of maturity and light. Given a rather sacred dimension, as is the case here, science can but be expected to be so abstract as religion and metaphysics. This is what can be drawn from the narrator's accounts of facts in Laputa and the other parts of the kingdom which is named Balnibarbi. The speculative nature of science is first expressed by the symbolism of the flying island. Indeed, as the island cannot land on the ground and keeps flying above its dominions, so is the scientific conjectures of its inhabitants completely out of touch with reality. The images of suns, moons and stars with which the Laputians decorate their garments indicate that they are more concerned with celestial matters than with down-to-earth issues. Their particular look, "one of their eyes turned inward, and the other directly to the zenith" (P.114) is also suggestive of their being both introverted (one "eye turned inward") and lost in daydreaming ("the other directly to the zenith") and then of their inability to be fully awoken to the day-to-day happenings in their life. This is all the more true as women can easily have affairs with their foreign lovers under the very nose of their husbands who, because they are wrapped in speculation, can realize nothing.

Gulliver underscores that the houses of these scientists, the Laputians, "are very ill built, the wall bevil, without one right angle in any apartment" (P.117), demonstrating further the divorce between science and reality. The academy of Lagado, located under the island and that he visits later, is a perfect example of the unpractical nature of science. It is no surprise if we know that the academy has been set up by some people from the city on their return from a stay in Laputa. They hoped to make use of the new scientific knowledge acquired in Laputa to improve the living conditions of their fellows by developing a variety of scientific theories. Commonly held by critics to be the ironic representation of the Royal Society¹, the Academy of Lagado is a concentration of scientific laboratories where various experiments are being made. Huge sums of money are invested in this academy while the population gets poorer and poorer and the agriculture is on the verge of collapse. Such a paradoxical situation is a common fact in our days. While a large number of the worldwide population is doomed to live in total poverty, the expenses related to scientific projects keeps increasing in most developed countries. What is worse, many of these projects, like those of the Academy of Lagado, have no direct positive impact on the living condition of people. In this regard, science is more a parasite than a factor of development.

That obnoxious face of science is expressed with more radicalism in *Gulliver's Travels* since it affects the academicians themselves. They are actually so destitute that they are reduced to beg for few coins from whoever makes the mistake to venture in their realm. Far more disconcerting is the absurdity of the scientific projects they work on. Few of these stupid projects include an attempt to extract sunbeams out of cucumbers, to make human excrement become food again, to build a house by beginning from the roof to the foundation, to distinguish colours by feeling and smelling as one is blind, to improve speculative knowledge by mechanical operation.

This last example tells us much about the ultimate purpose of the academy which is the development of knowledge in favour of human progress, as the scientist specifies it: "But the world would soon be sensible of its usefulness" (P.135). This far ambitious project reflects with no mean irony all the pretension of the Enlightenment age that is alluded to here.

However, postmodern thinkers have revealed the true stake of this pressing need to push back the boundaries of ignorance. They argued that "rationality had no firm foundations, and was itself merely one narrative among others. Hence, they presented the Enlightenment not as a common project of the advancement of knowledge, but as a vehicle of power"⁴. Swift brings to the fore this image of science through the observation of his narrator. The latter mentions that the floating island is dependent for its existence on the taxes that it obliges people below to pay. Taking advantage of its technologic superiority, the island submits the downstairs inhabitants into continual threat in case they shy away from their duty. The domination of Laputa over the other parts of the kingdom is reminiscent of colonization that many countries in the world, above all African ones, were victim of. Colonization in Africa resulted from the wish of technologically developed European countries to extend their power. They strategically wrapped their ultimate goal in a supposed mission of civilizing a people that is not yet in the era of rationality, a backward people with a dire need to be ushered by all means in the new epoch of modernism.

In short, science or rationality is a means of acquiring power, which entails submitting and exploiting those who are devoid of it or who are less endowed with it. If this domination cannot be achieved by the power of words, man will not hesitate to make use of technology, of more practical means. Thus, science takes on a face of a murderer insofar as it becomes instrumental in creating weapons meant to subdue others. In this respect, we understand why the lexical field of war occupies a central place in human language. Gulliver points this reality out to his master Houyhnhnms in the fourth chapter of the novel:

And being no stranger to the art of war, I gave him a description of cannons, culverins, muskets, carabines, pistols, bullets, powder, swords, bayonets, sieges, retreats, attacks, undermines, countermines, bombardments, sea-fights; ships sunk with thousand men; twenty thousand killed on each side; dying groans, limbs flying in the air; smook, noise, confusion, trampling to death under horses feet: Flight, pursuit, victory; fields strewd with carcasses left for food to dogs, and wolves, and birds of prey; plundering, stripping, ravishing, burning and destroying. (Pp.185-186)

In listing the rich lexical field of war, Gulliver succeeds in crystallizing the harmful effects of weapons through a powerful image of an apocalyptic world where "limbs fly in the air". The sad atmosphere conveyed here anticipates that of the post-world war II era with its terrible human, social and economic consequences, aggravated by mass destructive weapons, proving then once again Swift's predictive vision. Today, more than in the past, mankind is concerned with its own security in a context of development of terrorist groups or individuals and proliferation of weapons. The world is actually so violent that one can be under the impression that human reason, with its liberating promises, has simply collapsed. Yet, as we have mentioned above and to paraphrase Hobbes, this violence is the result of the inclination of man, that rational being, to gain more power. This is confirmed by the master Houyhnhnms in these terms addressed to Gulliver: "what you have told me, upon the subject of war, doth indeed discover most admirably the effects of that reason you pretend to" (P.185).

In a biting style, Swift points up the absurdity of the human being's will to dominate. He achieves this thanks to what we can call an opposition game that can be also read as an allegory. He contrasts the much limited size of man with his limitless ambition to master a world that is visibly beyond his understanding and control. This image is expressed through the attempt of Lilliputians, a tiny people of only 6 inches tall, to subdue and enslave Gulliver in his first travel. Twelve times taller than each of these human species who besides refer to him as "the Man-Mountain", Gulliver could effortlessly destroy this whole society, as he even confesses: "for while I had liberty, the whole strength of that empire could hardly subdue me, and I might easily with stones pelt the metropolis to pieces" (P.45).

⁴ Nick Turnbull. "Postmodern and Rationality" in *Association Revue internationale de philosophie* 2010/1 n° 251, p.6.

His successful attempt to extinguish, with his mere urine, the fire that breaks out in the empress's apartment, confirms this fact, as does the important victory he obtains for the benefit of Lilliput over Blufuesca, a neighbor island and timeless enemy; a feat that earned Gulliver the highest distinction the emperor of Lilliput has ever conferred on anyone.

These deeds of the "slave" Gulliver which are certainly insignificant in his eyes, but major exploits for the Lilliputians lay bare the funny nature of the ambition of Lilliputians. Because they "are most excellent mathematician, and arrived to a great perfection in mechanics by the countenance and encouragement of the emperor" (P.7), whom they looked upon as the "delight and terror of the universe" [...] "Monarch of all monarchs" (P.21), these too little people think they are the masters of the world. This justifies their war-like attitude that also strongly contrasts their diminutive height. It is this very contrast that the king of Brobdingnag, in the second part of the novel, finds difficult to understand. This time, however, it is Gulliver who is object of such a comparison. The "Man mountain" both admired and feared, but who lets himself enslaved by the tiny Lilliputians, is reduced to an insignificant state of a "speaking insect" in a country of extreme giants where he is spoken about in much derogatory terms. As the reader and narrator find totally absurd the warrior nature of the little creatures of Lilliput, so is the king of Brobdingnag taken aback by Gulliver and his society for the same reason. Gulliver's explaining to the king one of the scientific discovery of his people, namely a gunpowder with all its destructive capacity, produces on the latter an effect opposed to what the "little" Gulliver was expecting: "the king was struck with horror at the description I had given of those terrible engines" (P.95). What particularly disconcerts this huge man is the blatant contrast between the small size of Gulliver and his capacity for conceiving so violent an idea: "He was amazed how so impotent and groveling an insect as I [...] could entertain such inhuman ideas" (P.95).

Through the examples of the little Lilliputians and that of Gulliver in Brobdingnag, Swift proves to be very ironic about human pride nurtured by a certain scientific and technological development. His view is that no matter how sophisticated the level of human and scientific development can be, man remains an insignificant thing in a limitless and unknowable world. Man's existential position is all the more fragile because he can be so easily smashed by the least important element of this world. Gulliver reports the thought of a Brobningnagian writer who, reflecting on the weakness of mankind, wonders "how diminutive, contemptible, and helpless an animal was man in his own nature; how unable to defend himself from inclemencies of the air, or the fury of wild of wild beasts" (P.97). The correctness of this standpoint can be better measured if we contrast today's great technological progress with the multifaceted threats that hang over man, most of which ironically result from these same technologies. We mostly think of the growing threat of the nuclear weapon and the continuous destruction of the environment by modern technologies with its immeasurable consequences. This terrible reality and the fear that it inspires human beings throughout the world did not escape the prophetic vision of Swift. Most significantly, it is the floating island of Laputa - symbolizing the highest point of scientific development and mirroring then the present world - where this reality is experienced. In effect, Gulliver specifies that the Laputians are "under continual disquietudes, never enjoying a minute's peace of mind" (P.118). "Their apprehensions arise from several changes they dread in celestial bodies. For instance; that the earth by the continual approaches of the sun towards it, must in course time be absorbed or swallowed up" (P.118). The link between this catastrophe that looms large in the minds of Laputians and the unsettling question of climate change the whole modern world is seriously concerned with⁵ is too obvious to go unnoticed.

The utopian ambition of man to control the world thanks to science is replaced today by his overriding concern to ensure his own security in a world that seems to have run amok partly because of this science.

³The danger related to climate change is, for example, so serious that a convention called the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been set up in 1994 with the objective of reducing the release into the air of greenhouse gas, the major cause of global warming. At the moment these lines are being written, the Conference of the Parties (COP), which is the supreme governing body of the UNFCCC and that gathers yearly almost all nations of the world, is having its 22th session in Morocco.

It is this current feeling of uncertainty, diffused menace, and helplessness that Swift predicted in a period of rationality when man was still confident of his ability to be in control of all realities. This accounts for the contrast game mentioned above (a powerless people assuming power or a powerful society faced with a much more powerful threat) that Swift uses as a literary device to voice his prophetic vision.

2. Cultural relativism

The disappointment resulting from the failure of reason to keep its promises of a better world might have been less deep if modernism had not vowed that its progress ideal was the only valid vision for mankind. In other words, in its exaggerated ambition to form a universal community tied by the common ideal of development thanks to the practical use of reason, modernism denied and rejected *de facto* all aspects of existence and societies that did not conform to this rationalistic vision. The self-collapse of this universal culture, as shown above, revealed then to those who pretentiously assumed it the reality of what Nietzsche calls the nothingness of existence, a nothingness that they find it particularly difficult to face. On the other hand, for postmodern thinkers including anthropologists, linguists, and philosophers, this question of universalism of culture was a mere imperialist and ethnocentric discourse meant to establish the western domination over other nations. They postulate the existence of a plural world, of a multiplicity of cultures, each one being valid and no one being superior to the other. That generally accepted truth known as cultural relativism, and which is one of the basic tenets of postmodernism, is clearly expressed in the premonitory vision of Swift when the ideals of modernism were paradoxically at the height of their fame.

It is in the form of a tale that Swift rejects the totalizing vision of a universal culture. As expressly suggested in its original title which is *Travels into several Remote Nations of the World, Gulliver's Travels* is premised on the belief that the world is made up of several nations with different cultures. Actually, in his "thirst of seeing the world" (P.109) and like his fellow European explorers anxious to find out new lands for the benefit of their empires⁶, Gulliver takes the boat and sets off in search of adventure. He comes to discover in turn four remote nations including Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the country of the Houyhnhnms. What justifies the tale-like feature of this discovery is that these countries are totally unaware of one another's existence and are exaggeratedly different in many respects, including mostly the physical appearance of people, which cannot be conceived in the present globalized world. However, that particularity is to be understood as the allegoric representation of the denial of the modernist claim to universality. The fact that these nations exist independently and each one is well structured around its proper values proves that there are as many valid cultures as nations or societies in the world. Through Gulliver's detailed observation of each of these nations in its different dimensions, Swift invites the reader to witness and acknowledge the diversity of human civilization, the fact that the world is a multicultural space.

But, consciously or unconsciously, the reader goes beyond his status of witness to become a judge. In fact, we can't help forming judgments about these different nations basing on our cultural identity that we share with Gulliver. To illustrate, it is difficult for any reader to resist the temptation to laugh at the physical tininess of Lilliputians, these "diminutive people" (P.60), their claims to be the strongest people on earth as well as their political, social, and judicial systems. The Laputians' obsession with science and music, and notably the scientific experimentations of the academicians, inspire us the same feeling, while we may be horrified, like Gulliver, by the huge size of the people of Brobdingnag. It is quite obvious that this reader, who is making fun of these "strange" nations, is being laughed at too by these same nations that find him particularly odd in all respects. They respectively mock his hugeness as "great man-mountain", his chronic ignorance of science and his very tiny size that makes of him no more than "a speaking insect" or a "little rational creature". The country of the Houyhnhnms offers a much more edifying example in this regard.

⁶ The book is written in a context of imperialism, of the expansion of European empires all over the world, particularly of the First British Empire formed by its thirteen American colonies. It is then the time of the great explorers who worked hard to find out new lands for their kingdoms.

Things are completely reversed in this society where horses are the noblest beings and leaders, while human beings are yahoos, "detestable creatures" (P.172), "the most unteachable of all brutes" (P.176) at the service of the noble horses. Beyond the reality that "different nations had different customs" (P.33), the lesson that can be drawn from these various images is that any society, whatever its values, can but be utterly ridiculous if judged in the light of other values of other nations. The main theoretician of cultural relativism, the anthropologist Franz Boas, contends that "civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes"⁷. None of the different societies in the novel, including the western world represented here by Gulliver and the implied reader, is prepared to accept that fact. Each of them is convinced to be the centre of the world, and even the only existing nation and race in the universe. The following words from Reldresal, principal secretary of private affairs of the emperor of Lilliput, addressed to his friend Gulliver, are symptomatic of this too narrow vision that different societies have of the world: For as to what we have heard you affirm, that there are other kingdoms and states in the world, inhabited by human creatures as large as yourself, our philosophers are in much doubt; and would rather conjecture that you dropt from the moon, or one of the stars; because it is certain, than a hundred mortals of your bulk, would, in a short time, destroy all the fruits and cattle of his majesty's dominion. Besides, our history of six thousand moons make no mention of any other regions, than the two great empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu (P.25).

We understand then why the meeting between Gulliver and each of the societies results in a mutual astonishment, as testified by his comment after he lands on Laputa: "They beheld me with all the marks and circumstances of wonder; neither indeed was I much in their debt, having never till then seen a race of mortals so singular in their shapes, habits, and countenances" (P.113). The sudden discovery of the other in his peculiarity is not only a source of amazement; it also engenders hostile reaction from both sides. For example, Gulliver's arrival in Lilliput is greeted with a multitude of arrows discharged on him by too little species that he can't fully consider as human beings. Except in the country of the Houyhnhnms where he is excluded against his will, Gulliver cannot and does not want to be a full member of any of the societies he ventures in, just as the latter are not ready to accept him as part of them. This mutual rejection, according to Kevin Barry, finds its justification in people's inability to stand differences⁸. Such an aversion to the difference can take several forms ranging from verbal violence to physical violence. Indeed, because of difference of race, culture or even point of view, people or societies can feel deep hatred for one another or even get involved in an endless and merciless fight. It is the case of Lilliput and Blefuscu, two neighbour islands and great enemies. They have been waging war against each other for many years on account of a mere point of discord. "The animosities between these two parties run so high, that they will never eat nor drink, nor talk with each other" (P.25). The death tolls, the material loss, and the speculations resulting from this conflict are incalculable. 11,000 people are killed, a lot of thousands seamen and soldiers captured on either side as well as a good number of capital ships, many hundreds large volumes published upon the controversy.

The enormous consequence of the conflict is as regrettable as the appalling trite of its cause. In reality, the divergence of opinion behind that animosity is over a trivial question of egg breaking. Should the egg be broken at the smaller end or at the larger end before being eaten? Depending on the answer given, one is a "small endian" or a "big endian", a Lilliputian or a blefuscu. For the sake of propaganda and most dangerously, that banal issue is quickly given a political and a religious dimensions. In fact, Blefuscuans consider that the people of Lilliput, that other political faction, in choosing to break eggs at the smaller end, are "offending against a fundamental doctrine of our great prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth chapter of the Brundrecal" (P.26). In turning an insignificant issue into a serious political and religious problem with drastic consequences, Swift ironically alludes to the political and religious questions that created division and conflict among English people in his time, namely Tories versus Whigs and Protestants versus Catholics, but also between France and England, two traditional enemies.

⁷ "Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism." *Boundless Sociology*. Boundless, 12 Jul. 2016. Retrieved 01 Sep. 2016 from <https://www.boundless.com/sociology/textbooks/boundless-sociology-textbook/culture-3/culture-and-society-29/ethnocentrism-and-cultural-relativism-186-4770/>

⁸ See the article of Kevin Barry "Exclusion and Inclusion in Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" in *The Irish Review* (1986-), No. 30 (Spring - Summer, 2003), pp. 36-47

For Swift, such conflicts, like the war between Lilliput and Blefuscu, are avoidable in the sense that they are all grounded on questions that are entirely subjective before being given most perilously a dogmatic accent. We know for example that the empire of Blefuscu decided that the traditional way of cutting open eggs before we eat them, was at the larger end. Out of a small incidence (the son of a former emperor got one of his fingers cut as he was trying crack an egg at the larger end, his father decided then that his subjects, under great penalty, should then break the smaller end of their eggs), it came to change its position, engendering series of rebellion that end up dividing the empire into two rival nations. This subjective consideration and the conflicting situation it has brought about can be compared to the context of the establishment of the Anglican Church and the division of the English society that resulted from it. Like the emperor of Lilliput who decided to change the rule of the game only because his son got wounded, Henry VIII, in his ambition to have a male heir to succeed him to the throne and secure the riches of the Tudor family, decided, by the Act of Supremacy, to break with the Catholic Church and be head of the newly established Anglican Church. Henry's decision - that had nothing to do with the question of dogma or doctrine - became entirely religious and dogmatic, and those who were opposed to it were seen as dissenters or non-conformists and therefore persecuted, exactly as it is the case with the question of egg breaking.

Explaining to his master Houyhnhnms the usual causes of war in his society, Gulliver underlines, among others, the difference in opinion about very subjective things: Difference in opinions hath cost many millions of lives: for instance, whether flesh be bread, or bread be flesh: whether the juice of a certain berry be blood or wine: whether whistling be a vice or a virtue: whether it be better to kiss a post, or throw it into the fire: what is the best colour for a coat, whether black, white, red or grey; and whether it should be long or short, narrow or wide, dirty or clean, with many more. Neither are any wars so furious and bloody, or of so long continuance, as those occasioned by difference in opinion, especially if it be in things indifferent (P.184). Swift goes further than showing how absolute ideas are simply based on relative, subjective and sometimes unimportant facts. He actually doubts language's capacity to express anything absolute since words are themselves relative and can be open to different types of interpretation. This is, at least, a conclusion that can be drawn from Reldresal's following comment on the law concerning egg breaking: "For the words are these: that all true believers shall break their eggs at the convenient end: and which is the convenient end, seems, in my humble opinion, to be left to every man's conscience" (P.26). The relativity of language that Swift underlines here will become later a main question in linguistics, ethnolinguistics, philosophy, anthropology, literature, etc. For example, Nietzsche denies the possibility that language can express accurately reality, for the two have no link. Comparatively, Derrida thinks that there is no possibility of direct and immediate contact between language and reality. Edward Sapir and Lee Whorf and even the physicist Heisenberg look upon language as a cultural fact that determines the worldview of a given people. Foucault considers language as a vehicle of power that completely lacks objectivity.

Since language is relative, all truths including dogmatic ones are nothing but mere opinions that are only valid for those who hold them. In other words, truth varies according to people, societies, situations and time. "Nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison" (P.56), comments on Gulliver. Carrying on his reflection on the relativity of things, a relativity he becomes suddenly and particularly aware of after his stay in Lilliput and in Brobdingnag, Gulliver, the English adventurer, adds: this made me reflect upon the fair skins of our English ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own size, and their defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass, where we find by experiment that the smoothest skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured (P.60). It is specifically in the name of that relativity of things and of language that the proponents of postmodernism dismiss any tendency to dogmatism, absolutism and advocate new values such as democracy, plurality of visions, liberty and above all tolerance between human beings on the one hand and societies on the other. This issue of toleration, topical in Swift's time⁹ and one of the cornerstones of postmodernism, is rightly, in my opinion, the global meaning of Swift's satiric representation of the different societies in the novel.

⁹ In this period of many conflicts (Protestants vs Catholics, Whigs vs Tories, France vs England) the English thinker, John Lock wrote and published a series of Letters on Toleration. Besides the English Parliament passed a bill, The Toleration Act that gave non-conformists, to the exclusion of Catholics, freedom of worship.

The latter can be read as a call for a cultural dialogue between nations. For Swift, such a dialogue will never be effective as long as Western nations believe in the false idea of their superiority over other nations. It is then through great humiliation that is up to the haughtiness with which these nations assume their so-called superiority that Swift considers inviting the latter to have more regard for other nations and cultures. In different satirical ways, he points out all the limits and weaknesses of the Western world. In being conscious of their little foibles, Westerners can recognize the validity of the culture of other nations of the world in their own limits and weaknesses too. Passing judgment about a people and their culture becomes then absurd, since judgment is always relative. Judgment contains self-contradictory elements, which therefore automatically invalidate it. Gulliver can find the Lilliputians violent, vicious and arrogant; he can't help admiring the qualities of some of them such as his friend Reldresal. He may abhor the giant people of Brobdingnag and profoundly detest the yahoos, he can but be impressed by the kindness of his brobdingnagian caretaker and guardian, Glumdalclitch, and the Portuguese captain Don Pedro de Mendez, a yahoo that he describes as "a very courteous and generous person" (P.218). The Houyhnhnms may see the yahoos as disgusting creatures endowed with no reason; they also admire the rational attitude of the yahoo Gulliver whom they find both different from and similar to other yahoos.

Beyond the relativity of judgments, these examples underscore the limits of all human societies, limits that seem to be inherent in human nature. This is maybe the new form of universalism that Swift calls attention to; an inclusive and more humble worldview which is the parody of the exclusive and totalizing vision of modernism. In short, a form of universalism founded on the idea that societies, despite their cultural differences, share a common destiny which is the limits of human nature. It is only on that condition that peoples can transcend differences, tolerate one another and start a fruitful dialogue that will mainly focus on what they have in common, and not what makes them different.

Moreover, on further examination, these differences appear to be somewhat relative, as Gulliver, the great traveler, attempts to show through these examples: Lilliputians shot flight in the air, as we do bombs in Europe (P.4). Their manner of writing is peculiar; being neither from the left to the right, like the Europeans; nor from the right to left, like the Arabians; nor from up to down, like the Chinese; nor from down to up, like the Cascagians; but aslant from one corner of the paper to the other, like ladies in England (P.32). The people of Brobdingnag have had the art of painting, as well as the Chinese (P.96). The scientists in Laputa, like most mathematicians in Europe, are perpetually enquiring into public affairs (P.118). The language of the Houyhnhnms approaches nearest to the High Dutch or German, and any language in Europe (P.175). These comparisons are an attempt by Gulliver to reduce - by relativizing them - the cultural differences between nations. They are indeed both different and similar, but their similarities seem to override their divergences. Gulliver feels then a good opportunity to get these nations to enter into a cross-cultural dialogue, another major postmodern issue.

His role as a bridge between various cultures is facilitated by his great adaptation capacity: "Being always provided with a good number of books; and when I was ashore, in observing the manners and dispositions of the people, as well as learning their languages; wherein I had a great facility by the strength of my memory" (P. 2). He is also remarkable for his ability to express, with gestural language, his basic needs such as eating, drinking, liberty, etc., whenever his knowledge of a new language does not allow him to orally voice them. In so doing, he suggests a form of cross-cultural communication as an alternative to the linguistic barrier between nations. Above his great ability to adapt himself to various cultural spaces and his inclination to know more about the other, Gulliver is always willing to share the realities of his home country. In the same way, he strives to bring his compatriots close to these unknown nations. This is illustrated by his successful attempt to bring back at home a breed of sheep from Lilliput, but mainly by the account of his adventures meant to inform his fellows about his discoveries. He declares: "I write for the noblest end, to inform and instruct mankind" (P.223).

However, Gulliver's qualities as a promoter of cultural dialogue are contradicted by his biased vision that closes the novel. Holding in contempt the western society, he wishes it to be invaded and civilized by the society of horses, the Houyhnhnms, whose civilization he finds far better than the European one.

But instead of proposals for conquering that magnanimous nation, I rather wish they were in a capacity or disposition to send a sufficient number of their inhabitants for civilizing Europe; by teaching us the first principles of honour, justice, truth, temperance, public spirit, fortitude, chastity, friendship, benevolence, and fidelity (P.223)

These severe words about Europe and humanity that can besides be traced throughout the novel have driven a certain number of critics to accuse Swift of having aversion for mankind. But what should not be forgotten here is that the Gulliver who makes such a proposal has just come back from the country of the Houyhnhnms where he has realized that his human fellows are barbarous animals under the leadership of most elegant horses. Unable to suffer his yahoo nature and expelled by the Houyhnhnms whom he wanted to identify with, he sinks into a deep identity crisis. This leads him to reject himself and, later as he is back to England, his own wife and children and his compatriots, these "odious animals", "the very small of whom he finds intolerable" (P.220) and prefer the company of the horses in his stable that remind him of the "that magnanimous nation". He is a former yahoo in the country of the horses where he lived together with detestable yahoos; he is a yahoo cohabiting with other yahoos in England, which he can't bear. Then in a desperate attempt to deny his yahoo identity, he remains aloof from his yahoo family and strikes a relationship with horses, tries to think, speak and walk like horses, acquiring virtually another identity, that of a horse. As a result, he becomes an ambivalent and a fragmented being, separated from himself and from his environment, therefore alone and lost in the world, as exactly will be the characters in postmodern novels and plays.

As such, Gulliver heralds a new being, that of the postmodern era whom Foucault and other poststructuralists such as Lyotard, Barthes and Lacan will later describe as alienated and cut off his cultural roots. This split postmodern subject is the antithesis of the autonomous individual born with modernism and who pretentiously assumed the responsibility to order the world. From this perspective, Swift can be considered as the predecessor of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. These three thinkers that Paul Ricoeur called the "school of suspicion" and viewed as direct forerunners of poststructuralism and postmodernism as well, differently questioned the validity of the human subject of which Descartes, with his famous "*cogito ergo sum*", was one of the most famous defenders.

Conclusion

Swift is not that misanthrope that many believed him to be. The ruthless descriptions his narrator makes of the world are a warning against the contradictions and far negative consequences of the limited vision of modernism. He castigates the imperialist, dictatorial and pretentious implications of this worldview, which, he thinks, far from fulfilling its promises will prove to be detrimental to Europe and to humanity in general. He denounces too the universalizing tendency of this vision and posits that the world is and will remain always culturally plural, with various world visions. He is convinced of the necessity of the dialogue between the various nations for a peaceful living together in a world devoid of prejudices. For him, this interculturalism will inevitably yield a new man with a fragmented and plural identity that mirrors the plurality of the world. This vision expressed in the eighteenth century corresponds, in many respects, to the present world that has not yet completely got over the wounds caused by the illusory ideals of modernism. Swift's ideas were then ahead of his time and his prophetic vision makes of him an outstanding figure of the western literature.

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