

THE LENS REVERSED: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES FOR AN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*

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ABSTRACT

Gulliver's Travels is a hallmark in English and world literature because of its popularity among young readers; it has even been interpreted as being written especially for children. However, its complexity and real purpose invest it with a very different character. In fact, it is one of the best examples of satirical works, and its social and political criticism is clear.

In this essay we outline the approaches necessary for the students to be aware that the transition from absolute regimes to modern democracy has been gradual. Through the analysis of Swift's work we can realize that the Illustration was one of the key periods in this process, for the importance given to the ideas of moral relativity, tolerance and balance of power, so important in our contemporary society.

RESUMEN

Los viajes de Gulliver es una de las obras más significativas de la literatura inglesa y universal que debe en parte su popularidad al hecho de que los lectores toman contacto con ella a edades muy tempranas, ya que ha llegado a ser considerada como una obra para niños. Sin embargo, su complejidad y los fines para los que fue escrita distan mucho de este carácter. De hecho es una de las obras cumbre de la sátira y contiene una agria crítica social y política.

En este artículo se exploran las posibilidades que ofrece el texto para que el alumno se haga consciente de que el tránsito desde los regímenes absolutistas hasta las democracias modernas ha sido muy gradual y cobró en la Ilustración uno de sus impulsos fundamentales. A través de la obra de Swift podemos apreciar que en ese momento histórico comienzan a valorarse conceptos

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como el de relativismo moral, tolerancia o equilibrio de poderes, que es necesario seguir reivindicando en el momento actual.

RÉSUMÉ

Les Voyages de Gulliver est une des oeuvres les plus significatives de la littérature française et universelle et qui doit sa popularité aux jeunes lecteurs. De cette manière, l'oeuvre est considérée une oeuvre pour les enfants.

Malgré tout, sa complexité et ses fins ne résident pas dans son caractère. C'est une des oeuvres satyriques les plus importantes qui contient aussi une aigre critique sociale et politique. Dans cet article, nous explorons les possibilités que le texte offre pour comprendre le pas graduel allant des régimes absolutistes aux démocraties modernes.

Analysant l'oeuvre de Swift les élèves verront que l'illustration a été un période très importante pour ce procès à cause du relativisme moral, la tolérance et l'équilibre ou bilan de pouvoirs, qu'on doit continuer à revendiquer actuellement.

I

Traditional methodological approaches to literature teaching, based on a long listing of authors, periods or movements are now openly criticized, considering this is an activity more closely related to historical or sociological studies than to literature itself. As David Daiches states:

The slow patterning of English literature into movements, with their precursors and successors, the isolation of separate periods, each with its own characteristics... all this had been going on steadily in the work of a host of scholars and critics and historians, until by the end of nineteenth century the "history of English literature" (or of any national literature, for that matter) was a fairly stereotyped affair of movements and periods, each illustrated by its own "characteristic" group of writers (p. 314).

The reaction against this teaching practice was to be expected, as Daiches admits: "The rebellion was understandable enough. We may not agree that a survey course in itself is a bad thing; we may recognize the value of general notions about the climate of opinion in a given period and the relation of writers to their age; but most of us will agree that the run-of-the-mill survey course was an uninspired hodgepodge of no real value to anybody" (p. 315). This rebellion was more evident among the *new critics*, who thought the literary work should be isolated

from its social or historical context, and even from the biographical circumstances of its author. Daiches mentions two of the best known figures of the traditionalist and reformist quarters, to suggest that an eclectic approach, combining different critical perspectives should serve the literary analysis better: "The modern controversy between what used to be called the 'new criticism'... and historical criticism thus centers on the question of emphasis and proportion. Arguments such as that between Professor A. S. P. Woodhouse and Professor Cleanth Brooks never really meet... One must surely agree with both" (p. 320), an opinion we can also subscribe in general terms.

One of the most sensitive issues in classroom planning is the choice of primary reading. Among the criteria for such a selection we should count on the following:

1. Linguistic competence of the student and his critical ability.
2. Relevance of the author in the canonical tradition and of the work within the author's own production.
3. Contribution of the work to the acquaintance of students with the different English-speaking countries and their cultures.
4. Selection of assorted literary genres and styles.
5. Current reception of work and author.

These criteria leave a great freedom of choice; this means that any selection should not be considered as permanent and should be open for periodical reconsideration. One of the most problematic issues mentioned above has to do with the canon. In spite of the existing controversial debate, the fact is that there is a general consensus on the relevance of certain works and writers. This can be easily checked in collections and anthologies, bibliographical compilations, publisher's catalogues, and university syllabi. In his article "English Literature and the University Curriculum", professor Wolfgang Zach collects data from over 28 higher education institutions in 20 countries which leads us to conclude that there is a core group of authors and literary works written in English taught all over the world (pp. 53-57). If we consider literature from Britain, Ireland and the Commonwealth, the writers who gather most references (number of mentions stated) are:

34. William Shakespeare; 30. James Joyce; 20. Jonathan Swift; 17. Joseph Conrad; 17. Patrick White; 17. W. B. Yeats; 16. Charles Dickens; 16. Samuel Beckett; 14. Chinua Achebe; 13. T. S. Eliot; 13. John Milton; 13. Virginia Woolf; 13. Margaret Atwood; 12. Henry Fielding; 12. D. H. Lawrence; 12. V. S. Naipaul; 12. Wole Soyinka; 12. Laurence Sterne;

12. J. M. Synge; 11. Daniel Defoe; 10. Emily Brontë; 10. Geoffrey Chaucer; 10. Margaret Laurence; 10. R. K. Narayan; 10. Sean O'Casey; 10. Salman Rushdie.

As far as the works are concerned, the mentions are as follows:

16. *Gulliver's Travels*; 14. Yeats' Collected Poems; 13. *Ulysses*; 11. *Paradise Lost*; 10. *Wuthering Heights*; 10. *Things Fall Apart*; 10. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 9. *Robinson Crusoe*; 9. *Middlemarch*; 9. *Midnight's Children*; 9. *Tristram Shandy*; 8. *Canterbury Tales*; 8. *Great Expectations*; 8. Shakespeare's Sonnets; 8. *To the Lighthouse*; 8. *Surfacing*; 8. *Waiting for Godot*.

We can conclude from the preceding study that *Gulliver's Travels* is not only one of the most widely read works in English literature but also frequently prescribed reading at universities. One of its peculiarities lies in the fact that it has long been considered adventure or children's literature. No doubt, *Gulliver's Travels* is part of a long list of works in English which have drawn the imagination of young readers over several generations, among other titles such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Catcher in the Rye*.

It is not easy to define what we understand as children's or juvenile literature and specialists do not agree on the issue. Barbara Wall states that "adults... speak differently in fiction when they are aware that they are addressing children... [This is] translated, sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, into the narrator's voice" (pp. 2-3) in this way we might account for the fact that this is a distinct kind of literature. On the contrary, Nicholas Tucker questions this opinion since "although most people would agree that there are obvious differences between adult and children's literature, when pressed they may find it quite difficult to establish what exactly such differences amount to" (p. 8).

In turn, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein in "Defining Children's Literature and Childhood", taking into account such diversity of opinions concludes that the best definition for children's literature should be stated as follows: "For this is what 'children's literature' means in its most fundamental sense to every critic who uses the term: books which are good for children, and most particularly good in terms of emotional and moral values" (p. 17). In this line, Myles McDowell says that "Children's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection"; McDowell's words serve to reject the idea that *Gulliver's Travels* is a book that can be labelled simplistically as children's

literature: "child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive" (p. 31).

In fact, *Gulliver's Travels* is an extraordinarily complex work, and some aspects such as political and explicit sexual references are alien to the tradition of children's literature and have been actually expurgated or censored in some editions (We should note that Peter Hunt remarks that in totalitarian regimes even children's books have been censored). In the prologue to a Spanish translation of the work, the Galician writer Álvaro Cunqueiro refers to the ambivalence of *Gulliver's Travels*, that can be alternatively been considered as a satire or reading for young readers although, quoting Entwistle and Gillet, he points out that in the latter case children notice, at some moment or other, the gap between the facts they are reading about and their own world, in what would constitute their initiation to social criticism (p. 12).

II

In linguistic communication, and consequently in literary communication too, when the sender addresses a message to the receiver, the latter has to make a series of associations, based on previous experience; this enables him to understand the information sent. However, the process may be hindered as the code, which should remain constant and common to both participants in the process of communication, is liable to undergo changes because of the denotative quality of expression and the connotation of linguistic expression.

In the case of the literary message, and particularly of texts in a foreign language, we should note that Jakobson's model has to be qualified to account for the fact that, as we have already mentioned, the code used by sender and receiver may have little in common. We should not forget that sometimes we have to teach English literature to students whose competence in this language is not good and, obviously, very different to that of the writer of the work. Thus, when we consider what is the role played by literature in a foreign language within the syllabus, we have to be aware of the fact that students have to cope with extra difficulties which may result in the failure of the communicative process. Therefore, we must devise distinct methods, approaches and even objectives.

In any case, when the student tries to read a literary text written in English he should have a degree of proficiency in this language which enables him to understand its meaning or meanings in a reasonably brief period of time. When the difficulties are serious we should turn to philological analyses which contribute to solving the problems of decoding. With non-contemporary works additional problems may arise, since we have to be acquainted with different historical and cultural sub-codes. Such is the case with *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726. Since then, the English language has undergone phonological, lexical and spelling changes, which pose serious difficulties for the average student. The choice of a suitable edition will prove essential. Oxford University Press has published in the World's Classics collection an edition based on that prepared by Herbert Davis of *Prose Writings* by Swift, very close to the original by the Anglo-Irish writer; thus, we find spellings no longer used ("chusing" instead of "choosing", "publick" for "public", different capitalization convention). Penguin, on the contrary, has spellings more familiar to the students, although some forms may still need explanation ("frighted" for "frightened" or "broke" as past participle instead of contemporary "broken").

An additional element which may constitute a hindrance to understanding of the text may be due to the fact that the literary message, unlike ordinary language which is mainly referential, has greater layers of ambiguity since it is more denotative. In the case of *Gulliver's Travels* interpretation may be conditioned by this circumstance, as Edward J. Rielly has pointed out: "satire –and Swiftian satire in particular– is especially challenging to teach. Its comic veneer readily induces undemanding or inexperienced readers to ignore its serious core and intention" (p. viii).

All the issues lead us to reconsider what the role of literature teaching within the whole teaching/learning process is. Some would suggest literature should be integrated into language teaching, eventually including some cultural notions. In some cases, this subsidiary role was further played down at the time when methodologies that gave prominence to oral activities were in full swing in academic circles. Writing and reading were merely put aside as marginal elements in the process of language acquisition. On the other hand, some authors have clearly expressed the need to integrate literature into foreign language teaching planning, since "The inclusion of literature in the curriculum helps to train students in the skill of reading, and perhaps a little in listening, speaking and writing" (Moody, p. 7).

In general terms, we can attest to the existence of two main lines as far as the integration of literary texts in the syllabus. As David A. Hill affirms:

It is apparent that there are two main groups of practitioners in our profession who use "literature": those who work in a system which requires them to deal with the Literature of the English-speaking world, from Chaucer to Eliot via Donne, Shelley, Dickens and Lawrence, and those who teach general English and would like to give their learners something different, authentic, interesting and amusing to supplement the constructed-for-language-learning texts of the everyday course book (p. 52).

In spite of admitting the relevance of using literary texts in the language acquisition process, we must claim the autonomous entity of literature within the general educational purpose. This idea is supported by Brumfit, who considers literature as an independent field with its own methods and objectives, its artistic quality being of paramount importance: "A true literary syllabus will not be simply the use of literary texts for advanced language purposes, but an attempt to develop or extend literary competence". This author expands the idea as the acquisition of codes that must imply "the interplay of event with event, relationships between characters, exploitation of ideas and value systems, formal structure in terms of a genre or other literary conventions, and relationships between any of these and the world outside literature itself" (p. 185).

III

The approach we now put forward and its ideological orientation will require that the student be acquainted with the contextual aspects of the work. Therefore, we should start by explaining that *Gulliver's Travels* was published at a time known as the Augustan Age of English literature, a period also marked by the Illustration, which prevails in artistic and intellectual circles in XVIII century Europe. All kinds of studies related to the human being, especially in its social dimension, feature prominently. Classical culture is another source of inspiration (in fact we also label the period as Neoclassical). In terms of writing, we have to notice the importance given to essays and a new narrative which has many of the characteristics of the modern novel. Among the best known authors we can mention Samuel Johnson, who wrote the *Dictionary of the English Language*, a series devoted to literary celebrities and

satirical poetry. Thomas Gray's relevance is mainly due to his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". Oliver Goldsmith is one of the best representatives of the sentimental novel, especially for *The Vicar of Wakefield*. However, the main literary feature in XVIII century literature is conditioned by the emergence of a new urban bourgeoisie eager for writing; this social middle-class claims the importance of intellectual and moral improvement, both in an individual and a social scale and gives rise to the original narrative by Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau in France or by Swift, Defoe, Fielding and Sterne in Britain.

The basic information for the student to contextualize *Gulliver's Travels* adequately should also include references to the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, sanctioning the role of Britain as the new European superpower and marking the decline of Spain. We have to add that the British economy is at a moment of great expansion (mainly in agriculture and trade), although the distribution of national wealth is not egalitarian and Daniel Defoe goes to the extent of naming up to seven social categories, from those at the top, living in luxury, to the bottom of the ladder, with the extremely poor and needy. On a political scale, the students should be familiar with the two parties which dominated political activity for most of the XVIII and the following century and a half, the *Tory* and *Whig*. We should note that it is difficult to make comparisons with present-day organizations, although we still know the Conservative Party of Britain with the by-name *tory*, and *whig* is used as a synonym of "liberal". The fact is that not only was the tory party of Swift's time less tolerant about religious freedom than the whigs, it was also less interested in taking part in European affairs. The Whig Party (in power for most of the first half of the XVIII century and bitterly antagonized by Swift) represented almost exclusively the political and social elite. In this sense, a special emphasis should be put on the fact that the political system based on the alternation of parties in power and the existence of a parliament which counterbalanced royal power (a great achievement for continental standards, since many countries were still governed by absolute monarchs) was not yet fully democratic or representative. In fact, it is not until the late XIX century when universal suffrage comes to Britain and, even in this case, to the exclusion of women who will not achieve the right to elect and get elected until the early XX century.

Some biographical information about Jonathan Swift is very importance for the correct interpretation of his work. He was born in Dublin in 1667, although he was not a Gaelic speaker, neither did he practise

the national faith of the Irish, Catholicism. In fact, Swift was a member of the elite of British origin who had come to Ireland to perform official duties in the judiciary and administrative service, according to the colonial status of this country. However, with the passing of time those Anglo-Irish came to realize that, in the long dispute between the two nations, they would end up by suffering various forms of discrimination due to their connection with the land they were ruling. As Irvin Ehrenpreis states,

From the Glorious Revolution to the passage of the Declaratory Act, the British Protestants of Ireland had forty years in which to learn that the fate they were imposing on the native Roman Catholics was to be their own. Just as they excluded the great bulk of the people from the government and arrogated to themselves the responsibility for the whole population, so the English assumed an authority over them. Just as they denied to the natives any source of wealth that they wished to possess themselves, so the English denied to them any property that could be exported (p. 153).

Swift's biography bears testimony to such forms of underprivileging, and his career in the Church was probably hindered by his condition as an Anglo-Irish, never attaining the bishopric he was looking for. It was no wonder that the writer was becoming increasingly more aware of the situation of a country he came to perceive as his own. Although he never paid much attention to Gaelic culture, critics as Victoria Glendinning believe that some of the strange-sounding words in *Gulliver's Travels*, apparently made up by Swift, are in fact adaptations from the Irish language: the "luhimuhs" eaten by Yahoos get their name from a combination of nouns meaning "mouse" ("luc" in Gaelic and "mus" in Latin). Likewise, the place-name "Trildrogdrib" is apparently derived from Gaelic "triall" (slave), "droch" (wicked) and "drib" (dirt); (p. 164).

IV

We will consider now different approaches for the analysis in the classroom of *Gulliver's Travels*. In 1988, edited by Edward J. Rielly, the MLA published *Approaches to Teaching Swift's Gulliver's Travels*, a volume long overdue since, as stated in the introduction, "few other works of the imagination have aroused such sustained interest, enthusiasm, and controversy" (p. viii).

John F. Sena points out in one of the articles that *Gulliver's Travels* is not only a literary masterpiece but also a pedagogical piece of outmost importance: "For students it is a joy to read. The narrative is lively and exciting, the prose is accessible, and the issues raised are often ones they care about. One does not have to persuade students to read the book; they have generally heard so much about the *Travels* that they want to experience it for themselves" (p. 44).

In this compilation of articles, different strategies for the study of the work by Swift are put forward. Sena himself suggests the combination of different approaches; thus, the first book in *Gulliver's Travels* would deserve full-length treatment of historical issues. The analysis of the second, following the model of the *new criticism*, might be devoted to a textual close-reading structured along semantic fields ("pain" is one of them), so as to make evident the theory of the body present in the tale and in this way account for the vulnerability of the protagonist (symbolising all humankind) and the anti-romantic perception of man's physical structure. Similarly, Christopher Fox concentrates on the analysis of the treatment of the body and sexuality, explaining that Gulliver seems to reject all aspects connected to physiological activities (especially when the subject is a female) and seems to follow a pattern of narcissistic love. Richard H. Rodino suggests that each student should read a different essay or article on *Gulliver's Travels* so that they may debate about it in the classroom. In this way, all the necessary information about the literary, biographical or historical context of the work would be provided to the students. Janet E. Aikins considers the figure of the reader or implicit reader in the work. In her articles she explains that the students should document all the instances when the narrator addresses the reader, describing him or making assumptions about his condition or identity; the conclusion should be that Swift did not have a single reference or model of reader in mind, so we can find that the text is not consistent throughout. Sidney Gottlieb poses the question of how to consider satire in Swift, as some of us have been doing over the years, his proposal is to start analysing "A Modest Proposal" before *Gulliver's Travels*. The pamphlet renders in a clear way the satirical intention in Swift since the prose used reminds us of the economic or scientific treatise and the role of the narrator is emphasized, as a rational and intelligent person who lacks human feelings.

Among the most valuable articles in the volume is Frederik N. Smith's; his approach is deeply rooted in the premises of *reader oriented criticism*, so the emphasis of the analysis is placed on the reader and his

reactions to the text, rather than on the text itself. Thus, he asks his students to write a kind of diary recording their attitudes to the work while in the process of reading. Along similar lines, John F. Sena writes that when his students write about the most relevant issues in the work, they tend to pay more attention to socio-political issues, relating them to affairs highly relevant at that time: Watergate (leading to a discussion on corruption); the crisis in Central-America, with a debate on the abuse of power; or recent films such as *Planet of the Apes*, that can be easily compared to book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*.

V

Similarly, we suggest asking our students to discuss openly Swift's social and political perceptions, mainly through the analysis of books I and II of *Gulliver's Travels*, so that we can reappraise the basis of our Western democratic system which determines our social and political relationships. In this way, alongside the aesthetic and artistic achievements of the text, we can debate on issues such as tolerance, freedom of speech and other hallmarks in democratic societies. Chilean writer Jorge Edwards points out in the prologue to a Spanish edition that reading *Gulliver's Travels* fosters tolerance and exposes fanaticism as futile (p. 6). In the context of increasing political non-participation and refusal to take part in elections and political processes by young people in European democracies, precisely at a time of increasing activity of fundamentalists and right-wing extremists, it seems important to consider the situation in a pre-democratic society, such as the one Swift knew. His portrayal should serve us to pay tribute to all those who have over the centuries denounced the submission, exploitation or political marginalization of citizens. After the exhaustive research undertaken on the issue, it seems clear that Jonathan Swift was not a revolutionary; Pat Rogers has said that "Swift cherished authority... He was in general an adherent of established and particularly institutionally established authority; in church and state, in questions of style and linguistic usage," however, the same author admits that some of Swift's writings "go surprisingly far in some ways in rejecting arbitrary power (though Swift's tactical purposes partly explain this)" (p. 27). Similarly, George Orwell questions Swift's democratic feelings but does not hesitate to express that "Swift's greatest contribution to political thought in the narrower sense of the word, is his attack, especially in part III, on what would now be called

totalitarianism" (p. 199); something Orwell valued to a great extent, if we consider his own intellectual and artistic oeuvre. Michael Foot, one of the leading leftist intellectuals in Britain who rose to the leadership of the Labour Party in the 1980's, has summed up the message of Swift's work, in terms which are surprisingly modern and, no doubt, appealing to the wide sections of contemporary Western societies:

No one indeed has ever lashed the brutalities and bestialities which men inflict upon one another with a greater intensity. He loathed cruelty. He was enraged by the attempts of one nation to impose its will on another which we call imperialism. He exposed, as never before or since, the crimes committed in the name of a strutting, shouting patriotism. He had a horror of state tyranny and, as George Orwell has underlined, an uncanny presentiment of totalitarianism and all the torture it would brand on body and mind. Above all, he hated war and the barbarisms it let loose. War, for him, embraced all other forms of agony and wickedness. *Gulliver's Travels* is still the most powerful of pacifist pamphlets (p. 25).

It seems necessary to consider the ideas of George Lukács about social and political reform to assess Swift's relevance adequately. Lukács thought that the ultimate role of the artist is the faithful portrayal of reality, both in its appearance and the inner layers. In turn, Bertold Brecht considers that realism is not intrinsic to the literary work itself, instead it depends on the effect it has on the reader and his interpretation of the world around him. This is the reason why parody and satire, both clearly departing from the model of close imitation of reality, may result in a very realistic effect as they motivate the reader to engage in a close scrutiny of facts, people or ideas.

It is clear then that although *Gulliver's Travels* is not a realistic work (and references to reality are not always direct, as we also notice in "A Modest Proposal") we should admit that its main intention and achievement lies in its capacity to portray the social and political circumstances in Britain. In the first book of *Gulliver's Travels* criticism is based on a kind of parallelism: two societies are engaged in an absurd dispute the worst consequences of which are borne by ordinary citizens. In the second book criticism is more direct; it is the king of Brobdingnag who utters severe comments on English society. The third books contains an array of criticism of philosophers, scientists and intellectuals. The last book is dominated by contrastive criticism; the yahoos (resembling humans in physical appearance) are despicable beings; the horses are virtuous, although their lives are boring and uneventful, as we tend to appreciate in utopian fictional communities.

Swift's critical procedure can be analysed through a myriad of passages and excerpts from the work, as happens in the following fragment from book II, containing a description of a young nurse:

When dinner was almost done, the nurse came in with a child of a year old in her arms, who immediately spied me, and began a squall that you might have heard from London Bridge to Chelsea, after the usual oratory of infants, to get me for a plaything. The mother out of pure indulgence took me up, and put me towards the child, who presently seized me by the middle, and got my head in his mouth, where I roared so loud that the urchin was frighted, and let me drop, and I should infallibly have broke my neck if the mother had not held her apron under me. The nurse to quiet her babe made use of a rattle, which was a kind of hollow vessel filled with great stones, and fastened by a cable to the child's waist: but all in vain, so that she was forced to apply the last remedy by giving it a suck. I must confess no object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with, so as to give the curious reader an idea of its bulk, shape and colour. It stood prominent six foot, and could not be less than sixteen in circumference. The nipple was about half the bigness of my head, and the hue both of that and the dug so varified with spots, pimples and freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous: for I had a near sight of her, she sitting down the more conveniently to give suck, and I standing on the table. 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 through a magnifying glass, where we find by experiment that the smoothest and whitest skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured (p. 130).

The text above contains some of the most remarkable technical features in the work, since we can perceive the importance of the observer's perspective in assessing the reality. Gulliver makes us aware of the fact that if we change our point of view our opinion can be modified. We read that a baby, an archetypal image of weakness and innocence, may result in a dangerous person for inferior beings, as Gulliver himself (in this sense, it would be appropriate to consider that children in fact may exert in every-day life their superiority, even in a cruel way, over pets or small wild animals). More significant is, for our purposes, the physical description of this young woman's breasts. Traditional canons of beauty make us expect a favourable portrayal. However, we are provided with an unpleasant description of her mammary glands, which appear as disgustingly monstrous. We are led to understand that different perspectives render different interpretations: even

the fine faces of English ladies might seem unpleasant if under the scrutiny of a lens.

In fact, the magnifying glass will act throughout books I and II as a metaphor or simile of perspectivism. In book I, Gulliver travels to a land of dwarfs where he will see reality as if reduced twelve times. In the second book, the opposite happens and reality is enlarged. The sudden transition from one tale to another emphasizes the contrast and highlights the fact that the same 1/12 scale applies, although in reverse order, no sooner our retinas behold the tiny lilliputians than the giants from Brobdingnag are in the limelight. Gulliver makes explicit his view that perspective is instrumental in any process of assessment by reminding us that even his face appeared much fairer and smoother to Lilliput's king when he looked on him from the ground, that it did upon a nearer view. It should be noted in passing that physical description in Swift easily verges on caricature. The predominance of physical aspects in descriptions of humans, sometimes to the complete exclusion of abstract or spiritual features, creates a negative bias, as can be seen in the passages devoted to the yahoos.

In the text from *Gulliver's Travels* considered above, we may also note that there are some significant references to London place-names; that is how the narrator conveys an idea of the distance from which the child could be heard shrieking (Chelsea and London bridge are the references). These allusions, as well as the passing reference to the apparent beauty of English ladies, are clearly intended to establish links or bridges with European reality, as an indication of Swift's real purpose to portray in an ironic or satirical way British and European society. However, the formal construction of the work is meant to produce an estrangement, apparently trying to flee from any known geographical name by placing the narrative in exotic lands, and using eccentric place-names such as Lilliput, Blefuscu, or Brobdingnag; there is also mention of non-existing prophets (Lustrog), sacred books (Brundecral) or weights and measures (moons), sometimes conveniently explained, so that we have an idea of the equivalence: "durr is a measure about the fourteenth part of an inch" (p. 85). Lilliput's king dresses very plainly "the fashion of it between the Asiatic and the European" (p. 65); communication is difficult since the inhabitants in that country do not speak any of the languages of the vast array Gulliver commands: German, Dutch, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian and even a general "Lingua Franca"; no wonder this is the case since the examples of the local language we are provided with relate it with none of the tongues known: "lumos kelmin

presso desmar lon emposo”, later translated to us as “swear a peace with him and his kingdom” (p. 68). Some of the contextual elements have the same effect of making the two poles of action, the real one (Britain) and the fictional one as much unlike as possible, as when we read that Wednesday is the holy day in Brogdingnag:

It is the custom that every Wednesday (which as I have before observed, was their Sabbath), the King and Queen, with the royal issue of both sexes, dine together in the apartment of his Majesty, to whom I was now become a great favourite; and at these times my little chair and table were placed at his left hand before one of the salt-cellars. This Prince took a pleasure in conversing with me, enquiring into the manners, religion, laws, government, and learning of Europe, wherein I gave him the best account I was able. His apprehension was so clear, and his judgement so exact, that he made very wise reflections and observations upon all I said. But I confess, that after I had been a little too copious in talking of my own beloved country, of our trade, and wars by sea and land, of our schisms in religions, and parties in the state, the prejudices of his education prevailed so far, that he could not forbear taking me up in his right hand, and stroking me gently with the other, after an hearty fit of laughing, asked me whether I were a Whig or a Tory. Then turning to his first Minister, who waited behind him with a white staff, near as tall as the mainmast of the *Royal Sovereign*, he observed how contemptible a thing was human grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive insects as I: And yet, said he, I dare engage, these creatures have their titles and distinctions of honour; they contrive little nests and burrows, that they call houses and cities; they make a figure in dress and equipage; they love, they fight, they dispute, they cheat, they betray. And thus he continued on, while my colour came and went several times, with indignation to hear our noble country, the Mistress of Arts and Arms, the Scourge of France, the Arbitress of Europe, the Seat of Virtue, Piety, Honour and Truth, the Pride and Envy of the World, so contemptuously treated (pp. 145-146).

In the text above we notice the strategy of distancing, combined with frequent references and comparisons to Britain and Europe. The satirical intention is clear; this work tries to denounce the social and political situation of its time, and the main instrument for the satire is irony. The position of authority of the monarch, a superhuman or god-like figure, for Gulliver, provides an ideal framework for the ironical strategy of the author. The king will criticize the European customs and traditions openly, and will reduce its citizens to the condition of inferior animals, inhabiting burrows and nests. Compared with previous instances of criticism shrouded in parallelism or indirect comments, this

is the most outspoken instance of direct criticism of Britain we find in the work.

In order to account for this satirical intention, it seems necessary to mention Swift's national affiliation once more. England was his homeland and the one he should recognize as his own in his condition as Anglo-Irish. However, in his *Letter to the Whole People of Ireland*, Swift seems to side with this country and his allusions to a king of Ireland, obviously an unconstitutional figure, earned the pamphlet accusations of being illegal and seditious. George Orwell has stated that the real target in Swift's criticism is England, to the point that he suspects that Swift wanted France to defeat his country in their long war: "When Gulliver flees from Lilliput (England) to Blefuscu (France) the assumption that a human being six inches high is inherently contemptible seems to be dropped. Whereas the people of Lilliput have behaved towards Gulliver with the utmost treachery and meanness, those of Blefuscu behave generously and straightforwardly, and indeed this section of the book ends on a different note from the all-round disillusionment of the earlier chapters" (p. 194). Orwell concludes that Swift's "debunking of human grandeur, his diatribes against lords, politicians, court favourites, etc., has mainly a local application and springs from the fact that he belonged to the unsuccessful party. He denounces injustice and oppression, but he gives no evidence of liking democracy" (p. 195).

We can also see that in the passage analysed above, the pretended naïveté that leads the protagonist to provide "the best account I was able" about England, does not assuage our suspicion that his real intention is very different and a subsequent *understatement* warns us that he was actually playing his critical role too cunningly "I had been a little too copious in talking of my beloved country." His apparent love towards the mother land is conveyed through a clear parody by means of a repetition of pompous and outlandish adjectives and nouns, producing an overall ridiculous effect.

In this way then, Gulliver and Swift frown upon their homeland while, once more, criticism is conveyed in an indirect ingenious form, as the rules of irony prescribe. Unlike what happened in most of books I and II, we have explicit criticism, uttered by the king of Brobdingnag and particularly focused on the institutions and facts Swift hated most, such as political parties and disputes between different religious denominations. This is probably the reason why *Gulliver's Travels* was published anonymously (this opinion is upheld by J. A. Downie,

who considers that Swift had already been admonished for the ideas expressed through his pamphlets and he would think it wiser to hide his identity).

A similar technical strategy, based on accumulation of epithets and bombastic adjectives and nouns, creating a derogative effect for their improbability, had already been used in the "Voyage to Lilliput," this time with the intention to ridicule absolute rulers; even typography serves the purposes of the succession of hyperboles:

GOLBASTO MOMAREN EVLAME GURDILO SHEFIN MULLY ULLY GUE, most mighty Emperor of Lilliput, Delight and Terror of the Universe, whose dominions extend five thousand blustrugs (about twelve miles in circumference), to the extremities of the globe; Monarch of all Monarchs, taller than the sons of men; whose feet press down to the centre, and whose head strikes against the sun: at whose nod the princes of the earth shake their knees; pleasant as the spring, comfortable as the summer, fruitful as autumn, dreadful as winter (p. 79).

One more time we have to stress the importance of perspective and distance to achieve the intended satirical and critical effect. In fact, Gulliver is astonished at confronting court protocol in Lilliput with the fact that this is a tiny kingdom whose monarch he beholds as having no more stature (physical and moral) than that accorded to the Europeans by giant king of Brobdingnag. As we have previously stated these are instances where Swift is attacking absolute monarchies, and authors such as Irving Ehrenpreis suggest that Swift believed there should be a balance of powers in the State, an idea supported by Charles H. Hinnant who traces Swift's anti-absolutist ideas in the references to Lilliput's "original Institutions". In this theorization of the ideal State, Hinnant thinks that "we find a society that reflects the unsettled situation of England in the Age of Walpole. In this society positions of authority are open to competition, hard to maintain and always liable to corruption by the court. Rather than affirming the validity of a divinely instituted monarchy, the utopian institutions of the Lilliputians are framed in the language of what has been called a 'country ideology'... the view that a balance of power was essential if the absolutist tendencies of the king and his ministers were to be checked" (p. 22).

It would be appropriate to take into account that many intellectuals during the Illustration thought that this form of institutional arrangement would lead to social progress and political stability; the same formula might be applied in the field of foreign affairs, so that a coexistence of European powers of similar military and political potential, without any

one of them being overtly hegemonic, was advocated. As Henry Kissinger states in his book *Diplomacy*, these ideas would prevail in Western foreign affairs for the following two centuries.

VI

As a conclusion, we can say that Swift's critical strategy allows for the occasional direct criticism of European customs and political organization, as happens when this critical role is assigned to the king of Brobdingnag. However, the narrative abounds in indirect critical methods, such as the portrayal of fierce disputes between political parties, neighbouring countries or religious denominations, which are held up to ridicule when seen from a distance or from different perspective. This brings about feelings of condemnation when related to the suffering it causes to individuals and societies. Swift's message is clearly relativistic and is related to the democratic and modernising effort that springs in the Europe of the Illustration period. Our students should know, by now, that the democratic system that prevails in contemporary Europe and other parts of the World, is the result of a gradual process which also had setbacks and dark aspects, such as some of the cruel events during and after the French Revolution. Most of our students have known no other political regime or social systems but one based on the principles of the rule of law, freedom of speech and participation in the political events of the country through elections. For some of them, this may have resulted in indifference and apolitical attitudes, an attitude that has been reinforced by the inconsistencies of the democratic system itself and the lack of satisfactory answers to some of the problems deeply felt by young people, such as unemployment or the environment.

We should note that our political system is not irreversible, let alone universal. In fact, a vast majority of people in the world are currently living under totalitarian regimes and dictatorships. In the effort to achieve and preserve social organizations based on freedom and participation of the citizens in their government, the involvement of citizens and institutions, among them academia, is instrumental. The analysis of Swift's work along the lines expressed in this essay may provide the students with a unique aesthetic experience, given the quality of the prose, and also with the starting point for a debate on ethic principles and the basis of democratic society and the dangers posed by fundamentalism and radicalism.

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JESÚS VARELA ZAPATA

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