

# THE NATURE OF HUMANITY AND UTOPIA IN *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*

di Zhen Han

## *Abstract*

Thomas More's *Utopia* is the pioneer of modern utopian writings. Unlike the classical utopia found in Plato's *Politeia* or Atlantis, which only existed in myth and dialogue, More argued that Utopia exists in parts of our own world. However, More failed to demonstrate the diversity of Utopia. Meanwhile, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* demonstrated how the tension between the moderns and ancients also arises in modern utopia, especially when it comes to human nature. The initial motivation for Gulliver's wanderings is his disgust with the corrupt system of government. Gulliver hasn't found an ideal regime in Laputa, a technological polity that is highly dependent on technology and theocracy, whose technological dialectic dictates the persistence of political abuse of technology, especially the simplified language requiring the unity of mind and matter. Gulliver realizes that the good politics being sought by Laputa provide security as well as humanity. When Gulliver arrives in the land of Houyhnhnms, due to his aversion towards the bestiality of the Yahoo, he begins to close himself off and learn from the Houyhnhnms's divinity. But in the end, he is unable to reintegrate into human society. The moral of *Gulliver's Travels* is that modern utopia can only be achieved by transcending our own human nature. If we don't want to be replaced by Gulags or other communist revolutions while seeking utopia, we must understand the limits of human nature.

*Keywords:* Political Thought, Anti-Utopia, Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels

## 1. *Introduction*

The sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, when the early modern state was just emerging, gave birth to a series of writings that imagined their models and functions in a fantastic way. In contrast to

serious and intimidating theoretical writings, novels and fables are more intuitive in their approach to capturing the first impression of a modern state. This essay explores *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which was heavily influenced by Platonic political philosophy, as a case, to study the relationship between politics and literature.

In *Politeia* and *Statesman*, Plato insists that politics is a kind of art or craft dedicated to a certain function or end that simply lost its vision of wholeness. Thus, good politics should not be based in technique, but on philosophy. However, the philosopher-king was forced to rule against his will, which means that the union of politics and philosophy is subject to chance. It is this chance that imbues a certain kind of pessimism into Platonic political philosophy. For example, errors and tyranny are the inevitable outcomes of politics itself, and the only possibility of improvement depends on education and chance.

Unlike most of the research longing for the collapse of classical politeia, this article will depict a different sort of relationship between modern Utopia and nature. Thomas More's apparently radical desire to abolish private ownership is, in fact, somewhat pessimistic due to his adherence that Utopia must be ancient in nature. However, Bacon's Bensalem Island, built on advanced technology, will dispel this suspicion with a picture of universal progress brought about by technology, research based on the motive of imitation, and an exploration of nature. With that said, the domination of technology will inevitably usher in the rebellion of humanity, and the tragic consequences of modernity, namely conquest, will be fully reflected in Swift's novel.

## *2. Lilliput and Brobdingnag: The Search for Politics*

Just as Bacon and Descartes, the founders of modernity, were ambitiously embarking on a project to transform human reason at the end of the seventeenth century, they were sniped at and criticized by the conservatives, led by Sir William Temple. The debate between these two

schools of thought regarding the superiority of either the ancient or the modern continued for half a century, resulting in what is called in cultural history the “Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns”. As Temple’s secretary and a Tory penman, Swift was also involved in this controversy. His most powerful weapon, compared to Bacon’s fables, was his mockery and satire<sup>1</sup>. If, in *The Battle of the Books*, Swift graphically illustrates this struggle through a physical battle between bees and spiders (ancient and modern), his fable *Gulliver’s Travels* is much more subtle and satirical.

Alan Bloom argues that the theme of *Gulliver’s Travels*, born out of the quarrel between the past and the present, is the comparison of different political systems, namely, the political practices of British and French contemporaries and those of the Roman or Spartan ancients, respectively, in relation to Gulliver’s adventures in Lilliput and Brobdingnag<sup>2</sup>. This reading is very appropriate and still has potential for interpretation, but it is problematic to consider Brobdingnag to be a politia<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. J. SWIFT, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. by M. Walsh, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. P. HARTH, *The Problem of Political Allegory in Gulliver’s Travels*, in «Modern Philology», LXXIII, 4 (1976), pp. 40-47; A. BLOOM, *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960-1990*, Simon and Schuster, Toronto 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Why does the King want to blind Gulliver? Bloom sees it as a way for civil society to exploit genius into a complete tool. This symbolic reading is problematic, because blindness does not guarantee his obedience. An alternative interpretation is relatively reasonable. Out of Swift’s own satirical stance on the Hobbesian doctrine, like treating *The Leviathan* as *A Tale of a Tub*, it makes sense to assume that this is a satire on Hobbes’ doctrine of the state. The basic principle of modern politics, as revealed by Hobbes, is that there can be only a single Leviathan within a state, and that the natural body of the king of Lilliput is an externalization of the political body, which must be a fingernail higher in appearance than the others. However, Gulliver’s body is clearly more than a head taller than the king’s, and he challenges the Lilliputian Leviathan in terms of physical nature. So, the king had to draw up an even larger political body. In his eyes, Gulliver is just an object, like a

In Gulliver's view, the true ancients should be like heroes, exemplified by Brutus with his supreme virtue. However, the bodies of the people in Brobdingnag did not please Gulliver, and the style of their scholarship was authentically Aristotelian while their philosophy aligned with that of modern Europe in Swift's time. The greater size of the figures did not mean they were higher beings. For example, even the king is unintelligent and jealous, just as the queen's dwarf fiddler is envious of Gulliver. More importantly, the politics of the court is essentially a projection of English politics. The reasons for their frequent civil wars are the nobility's struggle for power, the people's struggle for freedom, and the monarch's demand for autocracy, the latest of which took place with the king's grandfather. Swift may have meant this as a satire on Charles I, the grandfather of Queen Anne.

So, how should we understand the relationship between the kingdoms of Lilliput and Brobdingnag? It is important to notice the following detail: Gulliver does the same thing in both of the kingdoms, he measures the land with his footsteps<sup>4</sup>. So, whether in the Lilliput and Brobdingnag, Gulliver's body provides him with the certainty that he can always measure and understand the world around him. It is perhaps more close to Swift's intentions, from the perspective of Gulliver's point of view, rather than from the specific constitutional design of Lilliput and Brobdingnag.

Gulliver's thymos is not strong. He is excited to watch the execution of a criminal and feels no shame at all, which is an important sign in classical political philosophy<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, he is willing to make a deal

tool for mailing, carrying, and measuring, and tools cannot be sovereign. Cfr. J. SWIFT, *Gulliver's Travels: Detailed Summary Analysis and Reading Guide*, Primento Digital 2019, chapter I.2.

<sup>4</sup> It was the eighth clause of his contract with the king of Lilliput, and Gulliver also measured the huge map in his own footsteps in Brobdingnag. Cfr. *ivi*, chapter I.3, II.3.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, chapter II.6.

with the king to objectify himself, namely, to use his body and labor in exchange for supplies and survival in Lilliput. But Gulliver's body is still the body of a British citizen, and his spirit is a projection of the British system. In Lilliput, he refuses to treat himself as a slave, while in Brobdingnag, he would rather die than produce his son or daughter<sup>6</sup>. Gulliver's thymos seems to be the bare minimum of that of a normal human being, but it is this insignificant thymos that awakens his memory of an enlightened British citizen. He demands to return to his motherland, which is filled with people similar to his own size as well as the security guaranteed by the Leviathan<sup>7</sup>. This safety is something that neither Lilliput nor Brobdingnag can give him, so there may be no essential difference between the two countries for him<sup>8</sup>. He was impatient to surrender his last memories of them, and rushed into the protection of the Leviathan.

That was seemingly a paradox. Gulliver's farewell to Lilliput and Brobdingnag reveals his original motivation for leaving home: a genuine dislike of his country and European politics. England, as he sees it, is a nation that is constantly at war for absurd reasons, including over whether the bread is made out of meat or flour<sup>9</sup>. Swift solemnly warned that the scenario was dangerous. The malicious struggle of many parties was a sign of the country's fall<sup>10</sup>. Feeling deep despair in response to the contemporary politics, Gulliver chooses to resolutely set sail for the first time in 1690, the year his mentor died and the year after the Glorious

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, chapter I.5, II.4.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, chapter II.5.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, chapter I.8, II.5.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, chapter III.7. Like Thomas More, Swift reflects on Baconian imperial possession. It was argued that Gulliver should go and occupy those places because any land found by the subjects belongs to the king, but this was clearly inappropriate. Cfr. *ivi*, chapter I.5, IV.12.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. J. SWIFT, *The Battle Fought Between the Ancient and Modern Books in St. James' Library*, Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish (MT) 2010.

Revolution. It is natural that good politics would pay off in Brobdingnag and Lilliput, which represent the enlargement and reduction of humanity, respectively. So, it is understandable why Gulliver bids farewell to them as he did to his motherland.

### *3. Laputa Island: Technology and Humanity*

Laputa is a flying island. Its capital, Lagado, was higher than the rest of the country. This vertical image is the basic political form of Laputa. What was floating in the air is no longer the philosopher Socrates, but a completely new technical polity created by a thoroughly modern philosopher. The whole of the island moved by bending backward and forwards while constantly tilting, a strange form of movement that resembled the swirling ascent guaranteed by Cartesianism. Furthermore, the people who live on the island are also ideal human beings in the Cartesian sense, with one eye sunken in and one looking at the zenith, concerned with the inner world while exploring the outer nature.

The primary nature of technocracy is a high degree of dependence on it. Technology gives absolute power to the rulers of Laputa, which means the island only needs to move above its enemies to win a battle. As a result, there is no need for politics to be conducted between Laputa and the ground, for politics is an art of compromise and Laputa does not need to compromise. Laputa's rule is one of brutal suppression, far from politics. If the king of the Bensalem remained hidden in the depths of Salomon's House, ruling indirectly with the announcement of experimentation and technology, by contrast, the king of Laputa abandoned this veil because of his vertical height. However, there is still a need for politics within Laputa, which is also ensured by the parity between the king and his ministers on the island and on the earth, respectively<sup>11</sup>. The king of Laputa does not need to have all the knowledge and technology

<sup>11</sup> J. SWIFT, *Gulliver's Travel*, cit., chapter III.3.

in Salomon's House. He merely needs to control those who understand the technology needed to move Laputa.

Once the sovereign could control the technology, there was a tendency towards theocracy. While the normal narrative should be that the location and distribution of the minerals that enabled the island to fly determined the domain of the island's rule, Laputa's narrative is that the king's rule and governance produced the minerals in the first place<sup>12</sup>. Regarding this point, Bloom's judgement is accurate. For the first time, there is a usurper founded on science rather than theoretical concepts serving the hopes of men and becoming a sort of passion<sup>13</sup>. Science is no longer a tool to conquer nature, but a personal emotion. Swift is perhaps warning Bacon that the neutrality of technology will lead to the political domination of technology.

The misuse of technology by politicians is perhaps not motivated by the sovereign's personal desire for power, but by the dialectic of a technological polity. At the starting point, technology is developed and created to simplify and dissolve politics; however, technology features defects of partiality, which means it can be quickly overcome by another technology. Thus, the commander of technology needs to control technologies that are as advanced as possible in order to maintain their sense of protection against possible enemies.

Driven by the paradox of technology, the genuine advantage of Laputa is the unity of mind and matter, which is similar to a kind of bread eaten by students in order to recite mathematical formulas. This new technology can be used to monitor the thoughts of citizens by analyzing the color, smell, and thickness of their excrement. In order to adapt to the simple reality under a technological polity, concepts and words must be simplified to the extreme.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, chapter III.3.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. A. BLOOM, *Giants and Dwarfs*, cit., p. 43.

This includes reducing language to just nouns or eliminating all unnecessary words from basic communication<sup>14</sup>. This strategy will ultimately reduce conceptual deduction and abstract reasoning, thus ensuring the populace's technical domination. In addition, it would eliminate all conceptions and improvements beyond reality, as well as the passion of imagination, thus establishing a solid rule based on material existence.

Living high above Laputa, ruled by the consolidation of technology, Gulliver may have somewhat realized that good politics are not only about safety, but about humanity as well. People living in Laputa were so obsessed with mathematics, celestial bodies, and music that they needed to hear the sound of a clap to remind them of reality. They felt anxiety at the very notion of the sun approaching the earth. The women on Laputa, driven by their emotional nature were averse to technology, felt tired of their boring lovers, and descended to reach the mainland<sup>15</sup>. The terrestrial Balnibarbi is also obsessed with science, and the main work of its Academy is identical to that of Salomon's House. Here, Swift seems to be mocking Bacon and the Royal Society's research from the perspective of a common man (Gulliver) in order to reveal the absurdity and closed nature of scientific research, such as reducing human feces to food, identifying colors by smell and touch, etc.<sup>16</sup>.

Gulliver could not find humanity in this Cartesian community and needed to continue his search. Unlike Odysseus, who descended into the underworld to meet with the spirits of the ancients, Gulliver uses spells to summon the spirits of the dead to ask them about historical events, which, in this empirical sense, do not prove anything, but ultimately dissolve the veneration of ideas, great men, and even the respect for history as a whole<sup>17</sup>. In Luggnagg, Gulliver again encounters the

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. J. SWIFT, *Gulliver's Travels*, cit., chapter III.5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. ivi, chapter III.2.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. J.M. TREADWELL, *Jonathan Swift: The Satirist as Projector*, in «Texas Studies in Literature and Language», XVII, 2 (1975), pp. 439–460.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. J. SWIFT, *Gulliver's Travels*, cit., chapter III.8.

Strudbrugs (i.e., men who live forever), but their excessive longevity is not as good as Gulliver had planned. It only distorts human nature. After the age of 30, the Strudbrugs become horrified by their own immortality and become stubborn, irritable, and jealous. Furthermore, they lose even the slightest regard for friendship or fraternity.

Throughout the course of his travels, the Cartesian eccentrics of Laputa and Balnibarbi remind Gulliver that humanity is something more important than politics and security. However, after what he sees and hears in Luggnagg, Gulliver loses his faith in his quest for past history and future immortality. It is understandable, then, that at the end of the third volume, in which Gulliver returns home from his wanderings, he became increasingly callous.

#### *4. Houyhnhnms: Gulliver's Wanderings and Tragedy*

As Gulliver quests for humanity, we arrive in the land of Houyhnhnms. Interestingly, this unnamed island without a political structure is filled with a being called Houyhnhnms (literally meaning, “the spirit of all things”). Their only political activity is a five-day national congress held once a year, which is governed by a general consensus. There is no need for politics in the country.

Houyhnhnms are born with all virtues. They are rational creatures who know nothing about sin. Furthermore, they not only agree with the ideas of Socrates, but have the highest respect for the king of philosophy, and even live in the same way as the guardians of Politeia. They pay attention to the color of their coat as well as the strength and beauty of their mates, in order to prevent the degeneration of their race. They also have a philosophical view of death. They believe that their friends and relatives are neither happy nor sad about death, but treat it as if bidding

a solemn farewell to their friends<sup>18</sup>. Houyhnhnms embodies not only a noble form of humanity, but also divinity.

By contrast, the human-like Yahoo shows that people in the land of Houyhnhnms are the foulest, most harmful, ugliest animals that exist within nature. At first, Gulliver was adamantly opposed to being considered a Yahoo and saw himself as a superior British citizen with the best constitution in the world. However, Gulliver gradually discovers that Yahoo is the original state of mankind, with each of them trying to monopolize all resources. Gulliver was gradually astonished by the nature of man. When he was unsuccessfully raped by a female Yahoo, he was extremely chagrined because this proved he was a Yahoo from head to toe. In contrast, he struggled to rid himself of his own Yahoo and to learn from the humanity of Houyhnhnms and find peace, which can be interpreted through a master and slave dynamic<sup>19</sup>.

But man is not destined to become a Houyhnhnm. When Gulliver was forcibly expelled after three years of residence, he had made up his mind to spend the rest of his life promoting the virtues of the Houyhnhnms. However, Gulliver realized that it is impossible to find humanity in human society and instead wished to live alone in order to preserve his love for Houyhnhnms. Gulliver knew that such a solitary island did not exist, and that he could only turn his home into a deserted island. At the end of Gulliver's Travels, Gulliver's final request, as an isolated man, is to be left alone. Whether Gulliver's ultimate end is tragic or ironic depends on whether this wandering achieves his purpose or deviates from his nature. Apart from the ultimate motive of leaving his corrupt home state, Gulliver has a more consistent purpose and nature.

From the outset, Gulliver's vocation was that of a doctor. His motivation for going to sea should be to make a living without going against his conscience, like his peers. However, if Gulliver was a man with a

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, chapter IV.8-9.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. A.C. KELLY, *Swift's Explorations of Slavery in Houyhnhnmland and Ireland*, in «PMLA», XCI, 5 (1976), pp. 846–855.

strong moral sense, how could he repeatedly leave his wife and young children behind? To his family, Gulliver was clearly an indifferent stranger, not a good husband or father. He even needed a kind of clap to interrupt his endless wanderings and return to his proper domestic duties. Gulliver maintained this indifference when he took up writing. For example, he begins the book with a sketch of his 30 years of life in just three paragraphs, in which he mentions his wife only once. A man who cares little for his past is unlikely to care for those around him. If he went to sea to make a living, why did he remain at home after his fourth voyage? So, Gulliver's constant motive to leave was not to make a living, but to enjoy the novelties of wandering and sightseeing. This led him to revert to his old ways after he had recovered his life in the name of destiny<sup>20</sup>.

Gulliver's obsession with traveling was not just a single individual choice to seek adventure, but a profound reflection of the changing nature of wandering in the past and present. Gulliver himself could not clearly express this Robinsonian willingness to wander. However, what he could feel is whatever it was that drove him out of his home. On the contrary, one of Socrates' greatest characteristics is that he hardly ever left Athens. In fact, he only ever left home to seek the perfection of his inner soul, without the need to travel the globe in a sailing ship, constantly seeking new stimuli for his eyes. Socrates knew no certain knowledge. His only skill was to educate the young through private dialectical talks, which could not be instilled and enlightened through the written word. But the classical wanderings represented by Socrates are very different from Gulliver's modern Cartesian wanderings, the goal of which was to observe the novelties of the world, wear a mask, and test his theories. Furthermore, Gulliver sought to record his discoveries in order to enlighten the public and improve the minds and interests of the people<sup>21</sup>. His search for and fascination with the universal makes him

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. J. SWIFT, *Gulliver's Travels*, chapter I.1, IV.5.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. R. DESCARTES, *A Discourse on Method: Meditations on the First*

use home more as a stopover than anything else at the end of his Ulyssesian wanderings. Ulysses' wanderings are not about something universal, but about a simple will to return home, to the oak bed in Penelope that he made with his own hands. This is why Gulliver is so taken with the universal thinking of the Houyhnhnms. They represent the very thing he has been seeking: humanity<sup>22</sup>.

This is undoubtedly the most ironic moment of Gulliver's travels, when, after sixteen years and seven months of exploring and searching for humanity, it cannot be found in the closest of homes or human societies, but finally, surprisingly, in a community of animals thousands of miles away! There is much literature discussing this setting. Arthur Case thinks it is a logical consequence of Gulliver's repulsion towards humanity. R.S. Crane further argues it is due to Gulliver or Swift's misanthropic mindset, while Edward Stone argues this interpretation is exaggerated for comedic effect rather than for any cynical reason<sup>23</sup>.

This question can be understood through the perspective of a special genre of literature (i.e., travelogues). Travel is an ancient act of movement that has taken place since the birth of human beings, while modern travel, beginning with Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, is focused on mental adventures and the broadening of one's perspective. This is

*Philosophy Principles of Philosophy*. Everyman, New York 1994; J. SWIFT, *Gulliver's Travels*, cit., chapter IV.12.

<sup>22</sup> Borges' poetry *Odyssey*, *Book XXIII*, on the other hand, conveys a universality: «But where is the man / who used to drift day and night, like a dog / wandering in the world, the man / who used to be called Nobody now?»

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. A.E. CASE, *From the Significance of Gulliver's Travels*, in *A Casebook on Gulliver Among the Houyhnhnms*, ed. by M.P. Foster, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York 1961, pp. 139-147; R.S. CRANE, *The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and the History of Ideas*, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gulliver's Travels: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by F. Brady, T. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, Hoboken (NJ) 1968, pp. 80-88; E. STONE, *Swift and the Horses: Misanthropy or Comedy?*, in *A Casebook on Gulliver Among the Houyhnhnms*, cit., pp. 180-192.

undoubtedly a tragedy caused by modern wandering. Tragedy, in the classical sense, is the moment that humanity tries to touch the divine, but fails to do so. Modern tragedy, on the other hand, lies precisely in the fact that there is no longer a God and, thus, nothing left for humanity to touch.

### 5. *Conclusions*

Even when Swift writes with irony, his heart is full of despair for humanity, as he was impressed by La Rochefoucauld's aphorism regarding his deviation from nature. It is not corruption, but human nature itself<sup>24</sup>. In this way, Swift and La Rochefoucauld are two sides of the same coin, both utterly pessimistic about human nature. The latter would die in his lust for power, while the former would continue his modern wanderings, ending in a complete loss of himself. As George Orwell suggests, Swift does not believe that life can be meaningful at all<sup>25</sup>. Perhaps his more fundamental motive is to convey a warning through this despair: if the political system cannot produce a sound human being and humanity, then humanity can only hope for the resurgence of another race to replace it with divinity.

With that said, we can be optimistic that Swift's despair in Utopia seems to be a joke. For man, unlike Houyhnhnms and Yahoo, has a dual nature that lies somewhere between god and beast<sup>26</sup>; just as man's love of lust always lies somewhere between ignorance and wisdom, so too does man's nature move between the two. Although Gulliver's writing ends in cynicism, his nature gradually tilts away from God towards humans, and eventually, at the end of his life, he reaches a sort of recon-

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. J. SWIFT, *Thoughts on Reading the Proverbs of La Rochefoucauld* (1731).

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. G. ORWELL, *Politics and the English Language and Other Essays*, Oxford City Press, Oxford 2009, pp. 223, 229.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. A. BLOOM, *Giants and Dwarfs*, cit., pp. 46, 50.

ciliation between the two, finally becoming the same person he was at the beginning of the book, a gentleman respected by his neighbors.