Swift's Gentle Yahoo and the Arts in Our Time

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Abstract: *According to George Steiner "ours is today a civilization 'after the word'". Had Swift been alive today he would have been among the first to agree with Steiner that political propaganda and the languages of the market-place have devalued speech. The vacuum left by the death of God is occupied by science and economics. We live in a silicon world of bureaucracy, management and alienation.*

Is there a rôle for the arts in this régime? In Book IV of Gulliver's Travels *Swift guides us towards a defining point of balance which gives the basis for a revitalized argument that human nature needs the arts. Apotheosizing Science and Economics might delude us into thinking ourselves rational Houyhnhnms but we are Yahoos with a pittance of reason. The arts help us to maintain the gentleness which the Sorrel Nag, and Swift, can see in Gulliver as he leaves Houyhnhnmland to meet the grossness of his own kind.*

The wisdom of Swift is set in a broad context of other commentators and artists from Gustav Mahler to Béla Bartók, and from Henry Adams to Thomas Keneally.

> *Dr Trench*. A tragic life: Bolingbroke, Harley, Ormonde, all those great Ministers that were his friends, banished and broken.
>
> *John Corbet*. I do not think you can explain him in that way – his tragedy had deeper foundations. His ideal order was the Roman Senate, his ideal men Brutus and Cato. Such an order and such men had seemed possible once more, but the movement passed and he foresaw the ruin to come, Democracy, Rousseau, the French Revolution; that is why he hated the common run of men, – "I hate lawyers, I hate doctors", he said, "though I love Dr So-and-So and Judge So-and-So" – that is why he wrote *Gulliver*, that is why he wore out his brain, that is why he felt *saeva indignatio*, that is why he sleeps under the greatest epitaph in history. You remember how it goes? It is almost finer in English than in Latin: "He has gone where fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more".
>
> (W.B. Yeats, *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*)[1]

The French composer, Gabriel Fauré, held a forthright view of the artist's role in society: "L'artist doit aimer la vie et nous montrer qu'elle est belle. Sans lui, nous en douterions". Doubts indeed, and plenty of scope for the lacerations of Swiftian indignation: Israel versus Palestine; the Butcher of Baghdad and the gunslingers of Washington and Westminster; Yugoslavia and Zimbabwe; the indomitable fragility of Irish peace agreements; al-Qaeda; nuclear waste, and the development of unemployment as a new norm in industrialized countries. Have we not passed finally beyond the era even of doubt, into one of self-interest, cynicism and misapplied science? Are we failed Houyhnhnms or just a bunch of Yahoos?

Béla Bartók's humanism is tougher, more aggressively secular than Faurés: "That man in his misery finds precious comfort in praying to an omnipresent Being is understandable – But how unspeakably feeble! We should rejoice in life and be interested in everything that goes on in the world around us – Were I to make the sign of the Cross I would say, 'In the name of Nature, of Art, and of Science'." If this recalls Matthew Arnold's prophecy of a mounting reliance on poetry inversely proportionate to the decline in religion, do not Arnold and Bartók – tough-minded moral and cultural avant-gardists in their time – stand today revealed as romantic dreamers? What does poetry do for us at Stormont, in Dublin, in the Middle East? We may allow Bartók his putative worship of art and nature, but his exaltation of science is a classic case of the ascetic naïf. It was surely the American, Henry Adams, who got it right for our time as well as his own. In *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* Henry Adams's search for historical causality takes him to twelfth-century France. The architecture of Chartres Cathedral and the Abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel seems to him an expression of ideological unity achieved in response to "the purity, the beauty, the grace, and the infinite loftiness of Mary's nature, among the things of Earth, and above the clamour of Kings". Adoration of the Virgin impelled medieval sensibility into a unifying ideal which held life and art in a lucid harmony of love, energy, and benevolence. Adams's Mariolatry is as suspect as his peevish assessment of Robert Louis Stevenson's Vailima community in Samoa. Clerical monopoly of power in the twelfth century did not promote the Utopia he chooses to imagine, but the symbol of the Virgin remains valid as an expression of his own ideal. By comparison with the shaped, purposeful lives of the century 1150-1250, modern people merely exist, prey to blind forces and chance events. The Virgin has been replaced by the dynamo, a symbol of mechanistic force which drives people into a worship fatal to their own well-being.

In 1900 Henry Adams visited the Paris Exhibition. Describing his reactions in the third person in *The Education of Henry Adams*, he records that to him:

> ...the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross [...] one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force [...] he could see only an absolute fiat in electricity as in faith.[2]

For Adams, then, Bartók's hopeful trinity of Nature, Art, and Science, had been reduced to a single, malign term – Science – and the mass of life was black. The discoveries of Pierre and Marie Curie showed that physical matter contains its own potential for disintegration, and Radium "denied its God". By reducing all matter to molecules that collide with each other at intervals varying up to 17,750,000 times per second, the kinetic theory of gas established Adams's belief that nature is full of violence but without system:

> The kinetic theory of gas is an assertion of ultimate chaos. In plain words, Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man.[3]

In his attempt to impose order on the flux of his existence, man seems to Adams like a spider snaring the forces of nature that "dance like flies before the net" of its web. The image reappears in T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion", originally intended as a prelude to *The Waste Land*, the twentieth-century's modern period's most celebrated literary image of a world in disorder. Eliot considers the possibility that the spider might "suspend its operations", thus consigning the poem's shadowy characters to disintegration in space:

> De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs Cammel, whirled
> Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
> In fractured atoms.

In the last three or four decades science's commercial *alter ego*, technological pragmatism, has elevated the silicon chip to the bad eminence of Henry Adams's dynamo. We get chips with everything, indeed, and charm, with a little shove from James Joyce, has absconded to the domain of the quarks. We occupy a world of bureaucracy, management and alienation, which is no longer the hip thing it was even in the nineteen-eighties, but symptom of a time in which, to co-opt Tennyson, "the individual withers and the world is more and more". It is a world which slides by on grease, a savage servility like the giant finned automobiles in Robert Lowell's poem "For the Union Dead". In schools and universities career-orientation or contribution to the Gross National Product are the criteria of worthiness for a subject, a faculty, a course. This utilitarian brutality is not new. We know from *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* that Cardinal Newman realized he was up against it in the lectures he gave in 1852 as Rector-Elect of the new Catholic University in Ireland; but, despite the best efforts of the Victorians, it was the twentieth century that made it the totem before which we now fall down. In Chapter 19 *of Schindler's Ark* Thomas Keneally describes German SS preparations for the liquidation of the Jewish ghetto at Cracow. Inhabitants of the section designated Ghetto B were issued with identification cards marked W for army employees, Z for employees of the civil authorities, or R for workers in essential industries. Graft apart, workers in essential industries tended to last longest. How Swift's indignation would have run with this.

The utilitarian apotheosizing of product is a crucial stage in the movement towards an amoral society in which a concern with truth or matters of value is at best aberrant, often contemptible, or, more insidiously, just another marketable trend. To fill the space where God once was with an economic fiat is an abrogation of humanity, a reckless attempt to climb out of the "destructive element" Joseph Conrad talks about in Chapter 20 of *Lord Jim* instead of learning to swim in it. The caprice of God may have been disconcerting, but the fickleness of economics is chaos come again into the life that would be led in terms of what Newman calls real values. We may be right to give economics the credit for getting Communism on the run across Eastern Europe, but how could we condone the insertion of commercials between each movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony when television networks across the world screened Leonard Bernstein's Christmas Day 1989 performance from East Berlin's Schauspielhaus to celebrate the dismantling of the Berlin Wall? The juxtaposition of breakfast cereal, washing powder, cat meat and Schiller's "Ode to Joy" – the joy of freedom in this case – was worthy of Alexander Pope at his most satirical. A culture so pachydermal that its most potent public medium accords equal value to *Freiheit* and cat food needs more of the arts, and the arts need to be militant.

Pressed by the utilitarian insistences of our time, and under the pall of barely conceivable nuclear possibilities, what point can there be in the triumph of a Fidelio, the musings of Proust, the jollities of Dutch genre painting, the anguish of Lear, the socialist effervescences of Jorge Amado, the symmetries of Bach, or T.S. Eliot's aspiration towards the point where the fire and the rose are one? Doomed, like John Irving's Garp in his effort to protect his family from the world, the artist must take on the image of Verdi's tormented Rigoletto, the archetypal misfit. "Solo, difforme, povero". The persistence of Rigolettos testifies to an unregenerate element of the Yahoo in our make-up, but give the printed circuit a few more years and it may have us all Houyhnhnms, forbiddingly rational creatures without need of the flab of art.

Swift, as Kipling reminds us, was "scourged through life between the dread of insanity and the wrath of his own soul warring with a brutal age".[4] Out of this agony, Kipling says – and beyond the academy it is true still – there remains one little book:

> …his dreadful testament against his fellow-kind, which today serves as a pleasant tale for the young under the title of *Gulliver's Travels*. That, and a faint recollection of some baby-talk in some love-letters, is as much as the world has chosen to retain of Jonathan Swift, Master of Irony. Think of it! It is like tuning–down the glare of a volcano to light a child to bed![5]

This is a puzzling feature of the book: it is, at once, bright with fantasy, a "merry work" as Arbuthnot called it, and a volcano. But how dreadful is the testament? Its appeal is easily distinguishable: pygmies and giants; flying islands and talking horses. The detailed inventiveness; the carefully worked-out scales in Brobdingnag and Lilliput; the comedy of the Lilliputians crawling and leaping under sticks, walking tightropes,

their theological debates over the end at which eggs should be cracked; Gulliver's heroism in Brobdingnag with flies and wasps and monkeys and bowls of cream; the Laputans with their Flappers and their meals of rhomboids, equilateral triangles, cycloids and parallelograms. There is some merriment in Book IV too, but not so much, for this last book casts a long shadow backwards over the whole work.

Much of the interest in the first two books resides quite simply in the descriptive narrative and in Swift's delight in exploring the differences in scale. Book I, of course, is a satire principally on England, where Gulliver tends to be the norm and the Lilliputians' stature turns all their concerns into affectations. (Deviation into the detail of English politics towards the end of the book rather disrupts the fabric of the fiction.) In Book II it is principally Gulliver himself and what, with minute arrogance, he stands for, which are being satirized. But a strain scarcely heard in Lilliput becomes in Brobdingnag a fascinated revulsion as the human body is seen though Gulliver's microscopic eye. The nurse's breast becomes a tumid horror; the naked Maids of Honour, who make him the toy of their concupiscence, fill him with nausea. And he is himself at best a *relplum scalcath*, at worst a *splacknuck*. Book III has some knockabout fun with the Royal Society in which Swift pays off some old scores against his Dublin tutor, Narcissus Marsh. Of the whole ragbag of satirical objects in Book III it is, however, Gulliver's encounter with the Struldbruggs which has the most telling effect on him and on us. In the prospect of immortality Gulliver sees extravagant opportunities for increase in wealth, knowledge and benevolence. But he forgets the work of time and he forgets the body of flesh. Now we remember the flayed woman of *A Tale of a Tub*. Here is the Swiftian carcase again, senseless and unsavoury, rank Yahoo flesh. Beckett country isn't far away.

In Swift's polarizing of human attributes in Book IV of Gulliver's Travels the Yahoos are usually taken to be the hirsute, nodal point of the excremental vision. The book has been attacked often enough, notably by F.R. Leavis who seemed to find in the Yahoos all the life-enhancing virtues of D.H. Lawrence's hot young men: "Swift did his best for the Houyhnhnms, but the Yahoos have all the life [...] the clean skin of the Houyhnhnms is stretched over a void". But Swift is employing a kind of allegory, not writing a novel. It is supererogatory to complain that because Spenser's Red Cross Knight does not suffer from gastronenteritis he is a skin stretched over a void. Is it in any useful sense valid to say that "the Yahoos have all the life", especially when this life amounts to fighting, getting drunk, suffering disease, killing cats, and throwing excrement? It is true that the Yahoos make the deepest emotional impact on us. They appall us as they appalled Gulliver. The Houyhnhnms do live an enviably even, uncomplicated life, perhaps a little forbiddingly like the life prescribed by Nature Cure enthusiasts as advertised in the lustier magazines. Primarily a satiric construct, the purity of their appeal heightens our revulsion to the Yahoos. Simple satiric inversion has taken place. Give even a horse reason and it can do better than humans.

The most important aspect of Swift's strategy is that the Houyhnhnms are deliberately distanced through the very fact that they are horses. We cannot identify

with these rational creatures. In Book I of *Gulliver's Travels* we can identify with Gulliver himself and laugh at the trivial malice of the Lilliputians. In Book II we can slip over to the side of the King of Brobdingnag and scorn Gulliver, provisionally, as a member of "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth". But here we are trapped. The Houyhnhnms' way of life may be all right if you happen to be a horse, but we are penned in the dirt and indecorum of the Yahoo sty with Gulliver himself. And where can we go from there? Swift's printed-circuit horses may rein us in but we cannot be of them, nor should we wish to be. "The company of horses", warns America's Hugh Henry Brackenridge, "is by no means favourable to good taste and genius…and as men naturally consimilate with their company, so it is observable that your jockeys are a class of people not greatly removed from the sagacity of a good horse".[6]

Everything in Swift's work is sunk in delusion – everything but love, and kindness. In Book I there is Gulliver's own genial nature, in II that of the giant-hearted girl Glumdalclitch, and in IV the cool solicitude of his Master and the love of his friend, the Sorrel Nag who bids him farewell as he leaves, expelled from Houyhnhnmland to meet again the grossness of his own human kind. It is this last farewell from these rational creatures that we need to keep with us: "Take care of thyself, gentle Yahoo". So behind Swift's *saeva indignatio* lies this gentleness, not madness; not misanthropy but love, and a triumph, after all, for that sweet unreason that lies at the human core like ambergris in a blasted whale. Swift did his best to make his vision of humankind as disgusting as possible – the human creature as a thing degenerate, without hope of grace – but he couldn't quite bring it off. There was evidence of something else, something residual that could not be refined out of existence.

For William Faulkner this residuum was still worth calling "a spirit", that element in our make-up which tempers the Yahoo in us and would keep us from doing ourselves in:

> I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last read and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.[7]

With the "end of the American century" and the Soviet Union's bloody post mortem Faulkner's rhetoric may seem too purple, too stoical, the ding-dong of doom all too plausible, and the words "soul" and "spirit" anachronisms of an Arcadian time when the arts justified themselves. Even today, it is hard to avoid using such vocabulary; but a safer word is consciousness – neutral, inoffensive, secular. Consciousness is something

we all possess and the last thing we relinquish at death. We cling to consciousness with a tenacity that gives it pride of place over kinship, money, or sex. In Auschwitz, Thomas Keneally tells us, Clara Sternberg, a woman in her early forties, her mind blown by the living nightmare, sought to kill herself by self-immolation on the electric fence that surrounded her camp. Finding an old acquaintance from Cracow, Clara asked her "Where's the electric fence?" Keneally comments:

> In her disarrayed mind, it was a reasonable question to ask, and Clara had no doubt that this friend, if she had any sisterly feeling, would point the exact way to the wires. The answer the woman gave Clara was just as crazed, but it was one that had a fixed point of view, a balance, a perversely sane core.
> "Don't kill yourself on the fence, Clara," the woman urged her. "If you do that, you'll never know what happened to you".

Clara returned to her barracks. As Keneally says, "It has always been the most powerful of answers to give to the intending suicide. Kill yourself and you'll never find out how the plot ends".

Human consciousness demands more than the mere facts of the plot. If we were Houyhnhnms we might settle for a Gradgrindian diet of numbers, measurements, food according to our metabolic needs, useful work. But Swift knows his species better than to dream of the order mourned by Henry Adams. We are Yahoos with a pittance of reason, glandular, intransigently messy creatures. "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet are of imagination all compact", and which of us has not loved? So by Shakespeare's way of it, we are all partly mad, partly poetic. We will retain, "They fell in love and married" against all clinical pressure to factory-finish the experience into the deep freeze of psychological jargon: "Their libidinal impulses being reciprocal, they activated their individual erotic drives and integrated them within the same frame of reference". (The parody is Lionel Trilling's). This might meet the case in the novels of Harold Robbins; it might do for *Dallas*'s JR and Sue-Ellen, not for Romeo and Juliet, or for Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy, or for David Copperfield and Agnes Wickfield. Knowing the chemistry of water does not prepare us for a sensory perception of the Cataratas do Iguaçu. We want the sounding cataracts of the romantic poet to help us express our feelings. A geological history from rocks of the Lower Precambrian to those of the Cenozoic era will only go part of the way towards accounting for our apprehension in the Grand Canyon of a spectacle so awe-inspiring that we want organ glissandi or the Prelude to *Parsifal* or amplified chunks of Strauss's *Alpensinfonie* to help us say what we think we have seen and felt. Consciousness, in such cases, calls for art.

The arts are news of life, not merely exercises in aesthetics, but we must understand the aesthetics if we are to receive the news. There is something crucial to be learned from the satisfaction obtained from the balanced patterns of art. This is best understood if we think of human beings as trying to resolve the split between Houyhnhnm and Yahoo, between stability and change, as striving towards wholeness or such

integration as Swift's friend, Pope, intends when he places humankind "on this isthmus of a middle state" at the end of *An Essay on Man*. The ultimate significance of great works may lie in the fact that they are paradigms of integration, examples provided by genius of that "wholeness, harmony and radiance" which James Joyce, after Aquinas, saw as the elements of true art. If so, we need not trouble ourselves with superficial questions about the relevance of art.

When Gustav Mahler came to compose *Das Lied von Der Erde* he found himself facing death. In the last movement of the work, "Der Abschied", Mahler added some words of his own to the text he took from Hans Bethge's *The Chinese Flute*:

> Die liebe Erde allüberall
> Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs neu!
> Allüberall und ewig blauen licht die Fernen!
> Ewig [...] ewig [...]

Mahler's method of facing death required the certain consolation that when he took his farewell of the world, the dear earth would continue its endlessly renewing cycles. Had he written *The Song of the Earth* today he could not have found such consolation. Even without the apocalypse of 11 September 2001 it has not been available since Hiroshima. Yahoo excrement has turned lethal. This is the deadly distinction of our time, therefore an essential part of the context in which we must finally contemplate the function of the arts.

In his long poem *Mirabell: Books of Numbers* (1978) the American poet James Merrill holds seances with an Ouija board which bring him visitations and messages. His chief informant is agitated (Book 2) by "increasing human smog" in which is revealed only the "CONCERTED USE OF ATOMIC/WEAPONRY NOW FALLING INTO HANDS OF ANIMAL SOULS". Moving the cup among the letters of the Ouija board, the conjured spirits spell out their requirement: "FIND US BETTER PHRASES FOR THESE HISTORIES WE POUR FORTH/HOPING AGAINST HOPE THAT MAN WILL LOVE HIS MIND AND LANGUAGE". Bearing witness to the rewards as well as the perils of consciousness, the arts teach love of mind and language. Thus they offer their own potent motivations towards the maintenance of peace in a blood-stained world. "Take care of thyself, gentle Yahoo", was the Sorrel Nag's farewell to Gulliver. Yahoos all, we need the arts to nourish the gentleness Swift could find in us and to help us take care of ourselves in our time.

Notes

1 W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats.* London, 1966, pp. 601-2.
2 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams.* New York, 1931, pp. 380-1.
3 Ibid., p. 451.

4 Rudyard Kipling, “Fiction”, *A Book of Words.* London, 1928, p. 284.
5 Ibid.
6 Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815). New Haven, 1965, p. 34.
7 William Faulkner, “Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature”, *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters.* New York, 1965, p. 120.