

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS (1726)

by Jonathan Swift (1667—1745)

You may already have come across Gulliver in children's books. Swift, however, invented his "hero" and his adventures in fantastic foreign countries for the purpose of satirizing political conditions at home — in the England of the early 18th century. With King George I, the House of Hannover succeeded to the throne. The first of the «four Georges» took more interest in his German "Kurfürstentum" than in the affairs of his kingdom. He did not even take the trouble to learn English. His favourite was Sir Robert Walpole, First Lord of the Treasury, who became the first English Prime Minister. Walpole - corrupt, but a great politician - actually became the man of greatest importance. On the other hand he had to be careful not to fall out of favour with the King. Although England — in contrast to other European countries with absolute monarchies — was a constitutional monarchy, Parliament had not yet fully developed into what it is today. But there was already the two-party system, which practically still works today.

Swift at first favoured the "Whigs" (Liberals), then, out of disappointment, took sides with the "Tories" (Conservatives). He had hoped for a bishopric in England, because the position of a chaplain to the Earl of Berkeley in Dublin did not satisfy his ambition to play a role in social and political life — an ambition, by the way, not uncommon with clergymen of his day. His wish seemed to come true in the years 1708 - 1714, when he became the associate of the ministers Oxford and Bolingbroke and, as publicist of the Tories, attacked the Whigs, especially Walpole, in a series of pamphlets. The reward he finally received with the help of the Tories was — the deanship of St. Patrick's in Dublin.

These facts partly explain the satirical spirit of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift's satire was not only directed against political abuses in England; it was a revolt against the spirit of his age as well. The first half of the 18th century is called the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment. There was an optimistic trust in reason as the only instrument for understanding man, God, and the world. Religion had become a purely rational affair. Satire, in this time, was understood as a means to make man "see reason". Swift's satire, however, is more complex. Did he not take reason for an outstanding human quality, or did he want man to realize the abuse of his rational faculties — or was his message rather that human beings should simply try to be humane instead of rational?

Extract 1 Court Entertainments

From Part I: A Voyage to Lilliput

Having survived a shipwreck, Gulliver swims ashore and falls asleep. On waking up, he finds himself surrounded by a crowd of tiny men, no larger than his hand, who have fettered him with “ropes” of ridiculous thinness. By means of various gestures he manages to convince them of his good nature. So they take him to their city and put him up in a temple — the only building in the whole “empire” that is large enough to accommodate a “giant”.

The emperor had a mind one day to entertain me with several of the country shows; wherein they exceed all nations I have known, both for dexterity and magnificence.

I was diverted with none so much as that of the rope-dancers, performed upon a slender white thread extended about two foot and twelve inches from the ground. Upon which, I shall desire liberty, with the reader’s patience, to enlarge a little.

This diversion is only practised by those persons, who are candidates for great employments, and high favour, at court. They are trained in this art from their youth, and are not always of noble birth, or liberal education. When a great office is vacant, either by death or disgrace (which often happens) five or six of those candidates petition the emperor to entertain his Majesty and the court with a dance on the rope; and whoever jumps the highest without falling, succeeds in the office. Very often the chief ministers themselves are commanded to show their skill and to convince the emperor that they have not lost their faculty. Flimnap, the Treasurer, is allowed to cut a caper on a straight rope, at least an inch higher than any other lord in the whole empire. I have seen him do the summerset (somersault) several times together, upon a trencher fixed on the rope, which is no thicker than common packthread in England. My friend Reldresal, principal Secretary for Private Affairs, is, in my opinion, if I am not partial, the second after the Treasurer; the rest of the great officers are much upon a par.

These diversions are often attended with fatal accidents, whereof great numbers are on record. I myself have seen two or three candidates break a limb. But the danger is much greater, when the ministers themselves are commanded to show their dexterity: for, by contending to excel themselves and their fellows, they strain so far, that there is hardly one of them who hath not received a fall; and some of them two or three. I was assured, that a year or two before my arrival, Flimnap would have infallibly broken his neck, if one of the king’s cushions, that accidentally lay on the ground, had not weakened the force of his fall.

There is likewise another diversion, which is only shown before the emperor 40 and empress, and first minister, upon particular occasions. The emperor lays on a table three fine silken threads, of six inches long. One is blue, the other red, and the third green. These threads are proposed as prizes, for those persons whom the emperor

hath a mind to distinguish by a peculiar mark of his favour. The ceremony is performed in his Majesty's great chamber of State; where the candidates are to undergo a trial of dexterity very different from the former, and such as I have not observed the least resemblance of in any other country of the Old or the New World. The emperor holds a stick in his hands, both ends parallel to the horizon, while the candidates advancing one by one, sometimes leap over the stick, sometimes creep under it backwards and forwards several times according as the stick is advanced or depressed. Sometimes the emperor holds one end of the stick, and his first minister the other; sometimes the minister hath it entirely to himself. Whoever performs his part with most agility, and holds out the longest in leaping and creeping, is rewarded with the blue-coloured silk; the red is given to the next, and the green to the third, which they all wear girt twice round about the middle; and you see few great persons about this court, who are not adorned with one of these girdles.

Extract 2 The Political Situation in Lilliput

Reldresal enlightens Gulliver, who has learned the Lilliputian language, on the political situation.

We are threatened with an invasion from the island of Blefuscu, which is the other great empire of the universe, almost as large and powerful as this of his Majesty. For as to what we have heard you affirm, that there are other kingdoms and states in the world, inhabited by human creatures as large as yourself, our philosophers are in much doubt; and would rather conjecture, that you dropt from the moon, or one of the stars; because it is certain, that a hundred mortals of your bulk, would, in a short time, destroy all the fruits and cattle of his Majesty's dominions. Besides, our histories of six thousand moons make no mention of any other regions, than the two great empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu. Which two mighty powers have, as I was going to tell you, been engaged in a most obstinate war for six and thirty moons past. It began upon the following occasion. It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs before we eat them, was upon the larger end: but his present Majesty's grand-father, while he was a boy, going to eat an egg, and breaking it according the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the emperor his father, published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us, there have been six rebellions raised on that account; wherein one emperor lost his life, and another his crown.

These civil commotions were constantly fomented by the monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the exiles always fled for refuge to that empire. It is computed, that eleven thousand persons have, at several times, suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but the books of the Big-Endians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of

holding employments. During the course of these troubles, the emperors of Blefuscu did frequently expostulate by their ambassadors, accusing us of making a schism in religion, by offending against a fundamental doctrine of our great prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth chapter of the *Brundrecal*, (which is their *Alcoran*.) This, however, is thought to be a meer strain upon the text: for the words are these; 'That all true believers shall break their eggs at the convenient end': and which is the convenient end, seems in my humble opinion, to be left to every man's conscience or at least in the power of the chief magistrate to determine.

Extract 3 The Flying Island

(Part II tells of Gulliver's adventures in the country of the giants, who look upon Gulliver as a "Lilliputian".)

From Part III: A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, etc.

Laputa is a flying island which can be moved in every direction by means of a big load-stone (magnet). Balnibarbi is an island in the sea whose inhabitants are subject to the King of Laputa.

If any town should engage in rebellion or mutiny, fall into violent factions, or refuse to pay the usual tribute; the king hath two methods of reducing them to obedience. The first and the mildest course is by keeping the island hovering over such a town, and the lands about it; whereby he can deprive them of the benefit of the sun and the rain, and consequently afflict the inhabitants with dearth and diseases. And if the crime deserve it, they are at the same time pelted from above with great stones, against which they have no defence, but by creeping into cellars or caves, while the roofs of their houses are beaten to pieces. But, if they still continue obstinate, or offer to raise insurrections; he proceeds to the last remedy, by letting the island drop directly upon their heads, which makes a universal destruction both of houses and men. However, this is an extremity to which the prince is seldom driven, neither indeed is he willing to put it in execution; nor dare his ministers advise him to an action, which as it would render them odious to the people, so it would be a great damage to their own estates that lie all below; for the island is the king's demesne.

But there is still indeed a more weighty reason, why the kings of this country have been always averse from executing so terrible an action, unless upon the utmost necessity. For, if the town intended to be destroyed should have in it any tall rocks, as it generally falls out in the larger cities; a situation probably chosen at first with a view to prevent such a catastrophe: or, if it abound in high spires or pillars of stone, a sudden fall might endanger the bottom or under surface of the island, which although it consist as I have said, of one entire adamant two hundred yards thick, might happen to crack by too great a choque, or burst by approaching too near the fires from the houses below; as the backs both of iron and stone will often do in our chimneys. Of all this the people are well apprized, and understand how far to carry their obstinacy, where their liberty or property is concerned. And the king when he is highest provoked, and most determined to press a city to rubbish orders the island to descend with great gentleness, out of a pretence of tenderness to his people, but indeed for fear of breaking the adamantine bottom in which case, it is the opinion of all their philosophers, that the loadstone could no longer hold it up, and the whole mass would fall to the ground.