[1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty)

Volume 1 Article 10

1994

Gullivers Travels and Lockes Radical Nominalism

Nicholas Hudson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty

Part of the Aesthetics Commons

Recommended Citation
Hudson, Nicholas (1994) "Gullivers Travels and Lockes Radical Nominalism," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 1, Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol1/iss1/10

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS AND LOCKE'S RADICAL NOMINALISM

Nicholas Hudson

Swift's interest in linguistic issues has been the subject of much modern study, though without the conclusion that Swift had many profound observations to make about the nature of words or the relationship between language and the world. The consensus has been that Swift was a naive empiricist who detested all kinds of abstruse speculation, and who was firmly convinced that the world was perfectly intelligible without language. The role of words was simply to convey information as plainly and transparently as possible. "What is true is true," summarised W. P. Carnochan, "and truth lies with things, not with words."[1] In this essay, I will contend that Swift's linguistic ideas were more adventurous and challenging than previously assumed. The satiric strategies of *Gulliver's Travels* reflect Swift's belief that language profoundly influences our perceptions and moral values, and governs our classification of

[1] W. P. Carnochan, *Lemuel Gulliver's Mirror for Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 155. See also Fredrik N. Smith, *Language and Reality in Swift's "A Tale of a Tub"* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), 9–11. The most recent and complete study of Swift's linguistic interests is Ann Cline Kelly, *Swift and the English Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). See also Kelly's article "After Eden: Gulliver's (Linguistic) Travels," *ELH* 45 (1978): 33-54; Clive T. Probyn, "Swift and Linguistics: The Context behind Lagado and Around the Fourth Voyage," *Neophilologus* 58 (1974): 425–39; Timothy J. Reiss, "Gulliver's Critique of Euclid," in *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 328-50.

nature into species. Our knowledge of things, he implies, cannot fully be separated from our use of words.

This is a doctrine which not only Swift but many other authors of the eighteenth century developed from the nominalistic theories of John Locke. That Locke was the source of a sceptical tradition in linguistic thought may surprise some readers. It is still widely assumed that the influence of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) was to confirm and propagate the Royal Society's belief that the physical world was the sole source of truth. Words were meant only communicate that truth clearly and unambiguously.[2] Yet it was Locke who directly inspired later philosophers such as Condillac and Rousseau with the belief that all knowledge depended on words, and that there could be no reason without language. Swift was among the authors who experimented with this theory, though his primary aim was not to construct a philosophical system, but to exploit the new-found power of language to satirise human pride and "vex" his readers.

Gulliver's Travels thus reflects the beginning of a new era of philosophy—a "linguistic turn" that occurred two centuries before our recent interests in semiotics and deconstruction. In the last section of this essay, I will propose that Swift's satire signals the beginning of a new *episteme* in eighteenth-century thought, and the passing of what Foucault has called the "Classical Age," with its confidence in a fixed natural order and the merely "representative" function of words. As a work that challenged this old world-view, *Gulliver's Travels* is of remarkable interest not only to literary scholars, but also to students of intellectual history and the history of linguistics. Its techniques reflect the inspirations of an author unafraid to pursue some of the most revolutionary implications of Locke's radical

[2] A good example of this view is W. S. Howell's discussion of Locke in *Eighteenth Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 259-98. Locke's "whole theory," observes Howell, is that "true understanding originates in the study of things rather than in the manipulation of words" (293). Locke's possible influence on Swift has been noted by several scholars, but usually with the assumption that the *Essay* strengthened Swift's conviction in "the propriety of our senses for the concerns of life" (Kenneth MacLean, *John Locke and English Literature in the Eighteenth Century* [New York: Russell & Russell, 1962], 168). See also Walter J. Ong, "Swift on the Mind: Satire in a Closed Field," in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univesity Press, 1971), 190-212.

nominalism.

The possible importance of Locke's discussion of "nominal essences" as a background to *Gulliver's Travels* was first described some time ago by Rosalie L. Colie and Irvin Ehrenpreis.[1] Those scholars, however, were not concerned with the sceptical implications of Locke's theories or with the language of Swift's satire. Colie pointed out that the images of drills and horses in Locke's *Essay*, and in a subsequent debate between Locke and Edward Stillingfleet, bear an interesting similarity to the creatures in part 4 of *Gulliver's Travels*. They show, remarked Colie, that Swift shared Locke's "optimism" about the reality of a physical world beyond human definitions. On the basis of the same debate, Ehrenpreis argued that Swift's intention was to question the definition of "man" as *animal rationale*, and to lead the reader to accept a new "mixed" definition that included the traits of both Yahoos and Houyhnhnms. In returning to the same set of passages here, my point will be that Locke undermines the possibility of making any correct definitions at all. He argues that the classification of humans, apes, horses and so forth into separate species is made by humans alone, and does not represent the real order of things in nature. This is not, moreover, my fashionable re-reading of Locke in the light of twentieth-century relativism or deconstruction. It is consistent with how Locke was read by both his critics and admirers in the eighteenth century.

In his chapter on "The Names of Substances" in book 3 of the *Essay*, Locke made this important claim: "It is evident, that we sort and name Substances by their *nominal*, and not by their real *Essence*...As to the latter, 'tis evident they *are made by the Mind*, and not by Nature: For were they Nature's Workmanship, they could not be so various and different in several

[1] Rosalie L. Colie, "Gulliver, the Locke-Stillingfleet Controversy, and the Nature of Man," *History of Ideas Newsletter* 2 (1956): 58-62; Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Meaning of Gulliver's Last Voyage," *Review of English Literature* 3 (1962): 18-36. We know that Swift had read Locke's *Essay*, which he discussed briefly but with familiarity in *Remarks upon a Book, intitled "The Rights of the Christian Church"* (1708). "People...are likely to improve their Understanding with Locke," he remarked (*Prose Works*, ed. Herbert Davis [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966], 2: 97).

Men, as experience tells us they are."[4] This statement contradicted the traditional assumption, still common among philosophers in Locke's time, that humans had direct acquaintance with the real order of species and genera as established by God in nature. As Locke pointed out, however, it was easy to think of examples of creatures that were so similar that it was difficult to decide whether they belonged to the same or different species.

His major and most challenging example was the problem of classifying the species "man." Travellers to distant lands testified that "there are Creatures in the World, that have shapes like ours, but are hairy, and want Language, and Reason."[5] Should such beings be called "men"? One's answer to this question, argued Locke, depended entirely on whether one made shape or language and reason more essential to the definition of a human. The same question arose in deciding how to differentiate a mute and irrational "Changeling" from an equally mute and irrational "Drill". "Shall the difference of Hair only on the Skin, be a mark of a different internal specifick Constitution between a Changeling and a Drill, when they agree in Shape, and the want of Reason, and Speech?"[6] There seemed, in fact, no good reason why drills and changelings should be placed in different categories when they agreed in everything but skin color and hairiness. Reports of still-born babies with "the Bodies of Men" but "the Heads of Beasts, as Dogs, Horses, *etc.*" raised especially knotty problems of classification. If these beings had survived and "could have spoke," theologians would have been faced with a major quandary in deciding whether they should be baptised, or whether killing them could be called "murder."

Locke's point in these illustrations was not that previous philosophers had improperly defined "man" as "animal rationale," or that we should contrive a "truer" definition. He wished to prove, rather, there was no "true" definition of "man." This position had far-reaching consequences for the understanding of language, nature and knowledge. Locke had introduced what Lia Formigari calls a "radical arbitrariness" into human acts of classifying and naming. His arguments undermined confidence

[4] John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), bk. 3, ch. 6, §26, 453.

[5] Locke, bk. 3, ch. 6, §22, 450.

[6] Locke, bk. 3, ch. 6, §22, 451.

that "classifications (or predicamental series)" were "the mirror of nature."[7] This assessment of Locke is corroborated by M. M. Slaughter, who contends that Locke's argument "discredits taxonomy" and "excludes the possibility of obtaining certainty or explanation in empirical science."[8]

For traditional-minded authors who replied to Locke, his denial that there were "unmovable Boundaries" between the species, "made by Nature," opened to door to Pyrrhonism and infidelity. I will consider two of the most important replies to Locke, those by the prominent Anglican scholar and Bishop of Worcester, Edward Stillingfleet, and a later critique of the *Essay* by Locke's eminent philosophical contemporary, J. G. Leibniz. Stillingfleet charged that Locke had given anti-Christian writers a dangerous new weapon in arguing that species and genera were "*meer Names*, or *signs of Ideas*."[9] This thesis threatened belief in a stable natural order, sorted into fixed species by the infinite wisdom of God. Locke's thesis was also self-evidently wrong, for we have a direct and intuitive understanding of the real differences between various species. We know that all "men" are of the same species not because they "have the same common Name," but because we recognise that humans are essentially different from "drills" and other similar creatures. Who could fail to identify the essential difference between a man and a horse, even if they happened to share the same

[7] Lia Formigari, *Language and Experience in 17th-Century British Philosophy* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1988), 88. Formigari's opinion departs from the more traditional view that Locke maintained a clear distinction between words and ideas, and that he was concerned with words largely as they became a source of philosophical errors and misunderstanding. See Norman Kretzmann, "Locke's Semantic Theory," in Herman Parret, ed., *History of Linguistic Thought and Contemporary Linguistics* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1976), 331–47; John W. Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 196–223.

[8] M. M. Slaughter, *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 193. Slaughter has stressed that Locke's *Essay* brought to an end the ambitions of seventeenth-century scholars to invent a perfect "philosophical" language that reflected the real order of things in nature. There could be no perfect language when words denoted only an arbitrary and human-made division of the world into species and genera. Recent scholars have pointed out that Swift was sceptical of plans to create a perfect language, and that he was satirising the Royal Society's language projects in part 3 of *Gulliver's Travels*. See Reiss, 328–50; Kelly, *Swift and the English Language*, 73–88.

[9] Edward Stillingfleet, *The Bishop of* Worcester's *Answer to Mr.* Locke's *Letter, concerning some Passages relating to his Essay of* Human Understanding (London: 1697), 109.

name? "My Man *Peter* and I can sit and chop Logick together, about our Country Affairs, and he can Write and Read, and he is a very sharp Fellow at a Bargain; but my *Horse Peter* can do none of these things, and I never could find anything like *Reason* in him."[10] Stillingfleet, who clearly had never met a Houyhnhnm, had not the least doubt that our naming and sorting of the species was "founded on real and distinct Properties," and not on some purely arbitrary convention.[11]

Whereas Stillingfleet was worried that Locke's doctrines gave ammunition to anti-Christian writers, Leibniz was concerned that Locke had deprived philosophers of any ability to make meaningful statements about the world. In *New Essays on the Human Understanding*, which was composed between 1703 and 1705, but not published until 1765, Leibniz gave detailed attention to Locke's argument that the definition of "man" was less fixed than people were apt to imagine. The essential difference between humans and monkeys, contended Leibniz, was certainly *reason*, and not shape or quantity of hair: "A man of the forest, hairy though he is, will still be recognizable; and what disqualifies a baboon is not its fur."[12] Shape or hairiness was, in Leibniz's view, only a "sign" of the more essential intellectual qualities that truly distinguished the species from each other. It was true that we ordinarily relied on these outward signs. For example, "if there were rational animals whose outer form differed slightly from ours, we should be perplexed."[13] But nature was so wisely ordered that these perplexities were rare. In the present state of things, the word "man" truly denominated a distinct species, clearly divided from all others by the essential attribute of reason.

In the minds of these authors, Locke's theories threatened the possibility of a stable classification of nature. He had undermined *taxonomy*, the organising principle or *episteme*, as Foucault argued, of sciences in the "Classical Age."[14] Yet it was clearly Locke, rather than Stillingfleet or Leibniz, whose ideas would have the greatest impact on European thought in the

[10] *The Bishop of* Worcester's *Answer to Mr.* Locke's *Second Letter* (London: 1697), 162.

[11] *Answer to Mr.* Locke's *Second Letter*, 170.

[12] Johann Gottfried Leibniz, *New Essays on the Human Understanding*, trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), bk. 3, ch. 6, 313.

[13] Leibniz, bk. 3, ch. 6, 313.

[14] See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 46–77.

eighteenth century. As Lia Formigari remarks, Locke's *Essay* "opens a new era in the philosophy of language."[15] Later philosophers who developed his nominalistic theories reached the conclusion that language did not merely denote an outward reality, but was the very basis of our understanding of the world. As Condillac declared in his 1746 *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, "The origin and progress of our ideas, depends on the manner in which we make use of signs."[16] Influenced by Condillac, Rousseau remarked similarly in his second *Discourse* (1755) that "men needed speech in order to learn how to think."[17] These statements signal the rise of a very different way of understanding the world and language from that which prevailed in the seventeenth century. In the new "order of things," "classification" existed in the human mind, rather than in nature. And language was no longer seen to "represent" reality, as it was in the seventeenth century, but rather to *constitute* the world as we know it.[18]

How does Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* fit into all of this? Few issues have so preoccupied and divided modern scholars of Swift as the problems of naming and definition in part 4 of *Gulliver's Travels*. It has usually been assumed, however, that Swift's intention was to challenge the definition of humans as

[15] Formigari, 88.

[16] Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. Thomas Nugent (London 1756; facs. rpt. Gainsville Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1971), 358. On Condillac's theories concerning the joint evolution of reason and language, see Hans Aarsleff, "The Tradition of Condillac: The Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder," in *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 146–209. Condillac openly acknowledged his debt to Locke. He argued, however, that Locke had seen the importance of language to the understanding too late in his composition of the *Essay* to examine this issue with the detail it deserved. See Condillac, introduction, 10. This opinion was later echoed by the English grammarian John Horne Tooke. See *The Diversions of Purley* (1786), 2 vols. (2nd ed., London: 1798), 36–7.

[17] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, in *The First and Second Discourses, together with Replies to Critics, and Essay on the Origin of Languages*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Perennial Library, 1986), pt. I, ¶26, 154.

[18] I borrow the term "constitute" from Raymond Williams's excellent discussion of eighteenth-century language theories in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 21–44. Williams distinguished between "instrumental" and "constitutive" theories of language, naming Vico and Herder as philosophers who expounded the latter theory that language played an essential role in understanding the world. He does not discuss the influence of Locke or Condillac on the development of this thesis.

"animal rationale," and to substitute another, better definition. But if Swift's strategies in the fourth voyage were inspired by Locke's discussion of species and genera in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, we should consider the possibility of an even more sceptical purpose. Swift may well have agreed with Locke that there was no "true" definition of human, though he did, mischievously, lure us into over two centuries of ultimately fruitless debate about what this definition should be.

That Swift *was* thinking of Locke's doctrine of "radical arbitrariness" is strongly suggested by the close similarity between the creatures in part 4 and the various beings used by Locke and his philosophical adversaries to illustrate the problems of definition. Horses, humans, drills, changelings, hairy "men of the forest"—all these beings seem closely related to the perplexing triad of beings, Gulliver, Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, presented in the fourth voyage. The Yahoos perfectly embody Locke's instance of "Creatures in the World, that have shapes like ours, but are hairy, and want Language and Reason." On this evidence of appearance, Gulliver's concludes that he *is* a "Yahoo." This conclusion obviously contradicts the traditional belief, as expounded by Stillingfleet or Leibniz, that reason, not appearance, is the "essential" attribute of human beings. But Gulliver's assumption is also absurd from Locke's point of view, though for a different reason. Gulliver takes appearance to be the sign of what Locke calls "internal specifick Constitution," a "real essence" that humans share with Yahoos. What he naively confuses are the arbitrary distinctions that he himself has made—mere acts of *naming*—with the real order of Nature.

But does Swift seriously believe that his reader will discern Gulliver's epistemological confusion? Every indication suggests that Swift counted on our *not* knowing Locke's theories, or at least agreeing with them, and on our automatic assumption, much like Gulliver's, that the boundaries between the species were inscribed in Nature. His goal was to muddle these distinctions, and to leave us in a permanent state of vexation and indecision about the correctness or error of many key words and definitions used throughout part 4. Let us consider another famous passage in part 4, the Houyhnhnm Master's condemnation of the human physique in chapter 4. This

condemnation, we will note, turns on the highly debatable substitution of the word "fore-feet" for "hands":

> As to my fore Feet, he could not properly call them by that Name, for he never observed me to walk upon them; that they were too soft to bear the Ground; that I generally went with them uncovered, neither was the Covering I sometimes wore on them, of the same Shape, or so Strong as that on my Feet behind...That I was not able to feed my self, without lifting one of my fore Feet to my Mouth. (pt. 4, ch. 4, 242)[19]

Some previous readers have recoiled from the obvious unfairness of this attack. In the words of William Bowman Piper, for example, the Master's criticism of Gulliver's "fore Feet" is "a blatant piece of nonsense"[20] It is ridiculous that Gulliver's hands should be criticised for not performing the same functions as feet. But is it really so easy to dismiss the Houyhnhnms' naming as wrong or absurd? We might consider now Swift sets out deliberately to blur the distinction between "fore Feet" and "hands" in early episodes in part 4. The Yahoos seem to walk on all fours, but "often stood on their hind Feet" (pt. 4, ch. 1, 223). They hold their Food between their fore-feet, though they apparently leave the food on the ground (pt. 4, ch. 2, 229). There is even a hint that they, like humans and Houyhnhnms, use their fore-limbs for gestures, though we cannot be sure. Soon after his landing, Gulliver is approached by a Yahoo, who "lifted up his fore Paw, whether out of Curiosity or Mischief, I could not tell" (pt. 4, ch. 1, 224).

All these passages lead up the Master's unfavorable comparison between human and Yahoo "fore Feet." Their evident effect is to *confuse* our ability to deny this identification with certainty. We may well feel discomforted, perplexed, by the identification, but Swift has done his best to muddle the differences we rely on to distinguish feet and hands. Nor is this the only case where the reader is left in a state of perplexity about how words should be defined. Later in part 4, for

[19] All references in the text to *Gulliver's Travels* are to Herbert Davis's edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965).

[20] William Bowman Piper, "Gulliver's Account of Houyhnhnmland as a Philosophical Treatise," in Fredrik N. Smith, *The Genres of "Gulliver's Travels"* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 193.

example, Gulliver finds that "it was with extreme Difficulty that I could bring my Master to understand the Meaning of the Word *Opinion*, or how a Point could be disputable; because *Reason* taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain; and beyond our Knowledge we cannot do either. So that Controversies, Wranglings, Disputes, a Positiveness in false or dubious Propositions, are Evils unknown among the *Houyhnhnms*" (pt. 4, ch. 8, 267). It might well be objected that this statement is contradicted in the very next chapter, when the Houyhnhnms have their "grand Debate" about what to do with the Yahoos. Surely here the speakers on differing sides may be said hold "opinions." Yet the word "opinion" is not used in this chapter. And the polite and orderly debate at the council hardly amounts to what we can confidently call "wrangling," "dispute," or even "controversy" (see pt. 4, ch. 9, 271–3).

In the same chapter, we learn that the Houyhnhnms lack any word for "evil." Instead, they borrow the epithet "Yahoo" to denominate "the Folly of a Servant, an Omission of a Child, a Stone that cuts their Feet, a Continuance of foul or unseasonable Weather, and the like" (pt. 4, ch. 9, 275). It might be argued that the Houyhnhnms seem to be protecting their claim to be "the Perfection of Nature" by using the term "Yahoo" to describe their own imperfections. There is no reason why the Houyhnhnms should lack a word for "evil," since faults do exist in their own world. On the other hand, Swift seems deliberately to have chosen examples that make it difficult to prove that the Houyhnhnms are not as perfect as they would like to appear. The omission of a child or bad weather hardly seem worthy of the name "evil," or even "imperfection."

Here and in many other places in part 4, Swift's strategy is to tease the reader with words that seem inaccurate, while denying us the ability to reject threatening or disturbing words with total confidence. This technique achieves its climax when Gulliver rails arrogantly against human "pride." Many readers have felt that this denunciation is hypocritical.[41] Swift was well aware, however, that the true definition of the word "pride" had become a major issue of controversy only shortly before

[41] See, for example, Samuel Holt Monk, "The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver," *Sewanee Review* 63 (1955): 48–71; Reiss, 349.

the publication of *Gulliver's Travels*. This controversy followed Mandeville's claim in the 1724 edition of *The Fable of the Bees* that all human virtues were based on "pride," for all good Christians are very "proud" of their virtues and enlightenment. The answer made to Mandeville by incensed divines was that a genuine satisfaction in one's own virtues or reason was not "pride," properly defined: "*Pride*, as used by [Mandeville] in this place, is an equivocal Term," answered Richard Fiddes, a respected Anglian theologian, "If we understand by it, a natural Consciousness of Worth in a Man, arising from a Sense of his having acted according to the Order and Perfection of his Nature, there is nothing criminal or irregular abut such a Principle."[22]

Could not Gulliver or his admired Houyhnhnms be rescued by the same defence? Swift's counts on our being unable to answer this question with any certainty. He had firmly in mind Locke's dictum that naming is based on our own, frequently inconsistent criteria, and not on any "fixed," irrefragable standard. In short, the issue raised by the language of part 4 is not that we need to achieve a "more correct" definition of "man" or "perfection" or "pride." Our problem is rather that no absolutely correct definition is possible at all.

Inspired by Locke's theories about the "sorting and naming" of species and genera, later philosophers such as Condillac and Rousseau developed the theory that "men needed speech in order to learn how to think." This conclusion followed logically from Locke's sceptical nominalism. If, as Locke argued, humans were in charge of differentiating between the species though their definitions of words, then those words did more than "represent" some fixed truth of Nature. Rather, they *constituted* our understanding of the world, and even enabled us to think about Nature in rational ways.

Locke's influence led Swift to many related insights into the "constitutive" function of language. The "reality" of Gulliver's fourth voyage will depend on how each reader defines words

[22] Richard Fiddes, *A General Treatise of Morality, form'd upon the Principles of Natural Reason Only* (London: 1724), preface, xxvi. For an account of this debate, see Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 129-38.

like "debate," "evil," "pride," terms that have no absolute meaning, and leave a considerable margin of interpretative latitude. And elsewhere in *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift explores ways in which our perceptions of the world are shaped by words, quite apart from the "facts" of the world beyond language. These experiments with language reflect Swift's own and highly original contributions to the outburst of radical linguistic ideas sparked by Locke's *Essay*.

Throughout parts 1 and 2, Gulliver is faced with the task of describing worlds that the reader has never seen. This task seems relatively uncomplicated, since the only essential differences between these worlds and Europe is size. Yet when Gulliver compares small objects with large objects, he colors our perception of the "facts," usually with the effect of degrading those objects that our society considers most important. Near the beginning of part 1, for example, Gulliver is bound in "fourscore and eleven Chains, like those that hang to a Lady's Watch in *Europe*, and almost as large" (pt. 1, ch. 1, 27–8). This sentence might be compared with the description of "the great Oven" in the palace at Brobdingnag as "not so wide by ten Paces as the Cupola of St. *Paul's*" (pt. 2, ch. 4, 114). The irony of each statement derives in part from the humorous mixture of European and native scales of proportion in Gulliver's language: the phrase "almost as large" seems ridiculous when it refers to a lady's watch-chain, and "not so wide" seems similarly inappropriate when combined with St. Paul's Cathedral. Furthermore, the equation of manacles with ladies watch-chains, or St. Paul's with an oven, conforms with a general pattern of imagery throughout the first two voyages. Elsewhere in part 1, the "ancient Temple" where Gulliver is lodged is called his "House" (pt. 1, ch. 2 , 29). The emperor and his entourage appear to Gulliver like a "Petticoat" (pt. 1, ch. 2, 31). The ceremonial sashes awarded in court are described as "Threads" (pt. 1, ch. 3, 37). When Gulliver's possessions are searched by the Lilliputians, his comb is compared with "the Pallisado's before your Majesty's Court" (pt. 1, ch. 2, 32). This pattern is continued in part 2, though the terms of comparison are reversed. The farmer who finds Gulliver is described as "Tall as an ordinary Spire-steeple" (pt. 2, ch. 1, 86). A coach is compared to a "a Square of *Westminster-Hall*" (pt. 2, ch. 4, 112).

On one side of these comparisons are a watch-chain, oven, petticoat, comb, thread and house—domestic and predominant-

ly "feminine" objects; on the other side are chains, St. Paul's, an ancient temple, pallisados, a steeple, and Westminster-Hall—symbols of power, sanctity and masculinity. Bringing these words into juxtaposition inevitably tends to diminish the prestige of the symbols of power. The ironies of parts 1 and 2 are, indeed, based very largely on the emotive value that we attach to words. Absurdly, Gulliver seems entirely unconscious of these differing emotive values. He intends all these comparisons only to "clarify" the worlds he describes, to give the reader a better picture. But the reader finds, if only half-consciously, that Gulliver's comparisons constantly transform his or her perception of these worlds. Beyond the mere denoting of "things" in Lilliput and Brobdingang, words are controlling our "moral" impressions of dignity or insignificance.

Most striking is the implication that these feelings of prestige or pettiness are based on nothing *intrinsic* to objects themselves. The objects that we consider important are big, and unimportant objects are small. Moreover, if Gulliver is right in suspecting that there are creatures even bigger than the Brobdingnagians and smaller than the Lilliputians, then there is theoretically no end to the shifts of value that we experience throughout the first two voyages.[23] All our values of honor, power, and even sexual difference belong to an infinite chain of relativity. But surely there are some qualities that *are* intrinsic, and cannot be manipulated merely by a "translation" of vocabulary to suit the reader's scale of physical proportion. These qualities might include reason and virtue, for presumably nothing is less reasonable or virtuous simply by being large or small. Yet the "translation" that occurs in the fourth voyage to the Land of the Houyhnhnms undermines human claims to either reason or virtue. And here again, we discover that our language in many ways determines our perspective of the world.

The narrative situation of part 4 is fundamentally different from the narrative situation in the previous voyages. Previously, Gulliver was describing an alien world to his European reader (the one major exception being his description of Europe for the King of Brobdingnag). Part 4, on the other hand, is dominated by Gulliver's description of *our* world for

[23] See pt. 2, ch. 1., 87.

the benefit of the Houyhnhnm Master. Furthermore, Gulliver does not have the advantage he relied on in previous parts of comparing all objects in one world with similar objects in another. As he explains, "I doubted much, whether it would be possible for me to explain my self on several Subjects whereof his Honour could have no Conception, because I saw nothing in his Country to which I could resemble them" (pt. 4, ch. 4, 243). The paucity of "Similitudes" has a profoundly important effect on the narrative, because Gulliver must rebuild our world from the bottom up, defining even the most ordinary words in detail.

Indeed, the whole discourse to the Master emerges from Gulliver's attempts to explain one ordinary statement. When asked where he came from, Gulliver answers, "I came over the Sea, from a far Place, with many others of my Kind, in a great hollow Vessel made of the Bodies of Trees; That, my Companions forced me to land on this Coast, and then left me to shift for myself" (pt. 4, ch. 3, 235). The Master accuses Gulliver of saying "*the thing which was not*," revealing, as Timothy J. Reiss has pointed out, the Houyhnhnms' debilitating habit of dismissing as untrue everything that has not fallen into their experience.[11] Even from the reader's perspective, however, Gulliver has misrepresented his journey in a subtle and complex way, despite his efforts to be strictly factual.

We might compare Gulliver's way of describing his ship ("a great hollow Vessel made of the Bodies of Trees") with the phrase used at the beginning of part 4 for the benefit of the European reader—"a stout Merchant-man of 350 Tuns" (pt. 4, ch. 1, 221). For the reader, this phrase contained a great deal of information beyond the narrowly factual description given later to the Houyhnhnm Master: it denoted the ship's size measured implicitly against other ships in the modern fleet, the function of the ship in European trade, and the extent of Gulliver's new responsibilities as a ship's captain. All this information is left out of Gulliver's statement to the Master, creating a curiously childish picture of "Companions" building a hollow vessel, riding about on the sea and abandoning one of their fellows for no reason. Later, Gulliver tries twice more to make the Master understand his statement. And each time, we note a significant adjustment of his language as the Master

[11] See Reiss, 342.

gradually becomes more knowledgeable of European society and its ways. "A great hollow Vessel made of the Bodies of Trees" becomes "a great hollow Vessel made of Wood" (pt. 4, ch. 3, 238), and finally "Ship" (238). The purpose of this ship is clarified when Gulliver's says that "I left...to get Riches" (pt. 4, ch. 4, 243). "Companions" becomes "Fellows of desperate Fortunes, forced to fly from the Places of their Birth, on Account of their Poverty or their Crimes" (pt. 4, ch. 4, 243-4). Where Gulliver's descriptions become shorter, as with "Ship," the Master has become accustomed to the linguistic "shorthand" which we use to denominate the material, construction, purpose and so forth of familiar objects. Where Gulliver's description become longer, he is attempting to explain all the circumstances of our world—its economic conditions, laws, social hierarchy—needed to complete the Master's understanding of how Gulliver arrived on the island.

In short, to make his Houyhnhnm interlocutor comprehend even the most straightforward statement, Gulliver must set his journey in the context of the entire society of Europe. Through a quite natural progression, the description of his journey transforms into a commentary on "Power, Government, War, Law, Punishment, and a Thousand other Things [which] had no Terms, wherein that Language could express them" (pt. 4, ch. 4, 244). As in parts 1 and 2, therefore, we discover that words do far more than signify basic "facts." Every word possesses "additional" meanings beyond its bare denotative value. In the first and second voyages, those meanings are the feelings of honour and power, or of commonness and domesticity, that speakers attach to different words. In the last voyage, Gulliver finds that no word can be truly understood apart from the whole social perceptive that implicitly governs its interpretation in common speech.

According to Kathleen M. Swain, in an excellent and neglected study, the effect of Gulliver's descriptions in part 4 is the "definition, the apprehension and clarification of all."[25] Forced to define exactly what a "war, a "soldier," or a "lawyer" *really* is, Gulliver uncovers unpleasant facts about our society that we prefer not to think about. Nevertheless, we have considered that many of the key terms in part 4—Yahoo,

[25] Kathleen M. Swain, *A Reading of Gulliver's Travels* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1972), 190.

Houyhnhnm, fore feet, opinion, evil, pride—are not fully defined, and even lack anything more than a "nominal" significance. The reader is left feeling that these words have been used unfairly by Gulliver and the Master, but is unable to establish a clear alternative meaning. In the case of these and many important terms, there is no fixed or "essential" meaning that can be uncovered.

Indeed, it may be questioned whether any of Gulliver's "clarifications" of our world do not, on close inspection, contain an important element of distortion. First, because Gulliver lacks proper "similtitudes," all human activities and traits are approximated to what is only roughly similar, with little attention being given to differences. The Master's confidence that humans are "Yahoos," for example, derives in part from his habit of limiting himself for practical reasons to comparison rather than contrast. Because "he meant only to observe what Parity there was in our Natures," all those traits which differentiate humans from Yahoos, such as "Learning, Government, Arts, Manufactures and the like," are dismissed as irrelevant (pt. 4, ch. 7, 262).

Second, many words and distinctions in the Houyhnhnm world do refer to the "real essence" of things, while all human distinctions are "nominal." The social hierarchy of the Houyhnhnms, for example, is based on a system of visual marks that reliably denote the inward nature of the different ranks. The Master points out to Gulliver that "among the *Houyhnhnms*, the *White*, the *Sorrel*, and the *Iron-grey*, were not so exactly shaped as the *Bay*, *Dapple-grey*, and the *Black*; nor born with equal Talents of Mind" (pt. 4, ch. 6, 256). Partly because Gulliver lacks accurate "Similitudes," relying constantly on the Master's "Assistance when I wanted proper Words" (pt. 4, ch. 4, 243), he imports this system of "real essences" into his description of Europe. He indicates that the European social hierarchy is based on a similar system of visual marks for inward nature: "a weak diseased Body, a meager Countenance, and a sallow Complexion, are," he claims, "the true Marks of *noble Blood*" (pt. 4, ch. 6, 257). Similarly, ministers of state are described as a "Species of *Yahoo*" (pt. 4, ch. 6, 255), rather than a position in the political hierarchy. Because Gulliver is trying to make the European world understandable to a Houyhnhnm, who regards appearance as indicative of inward nature, he portrays human society as a perverted natural order rather than a corrupt political system.

Again, our former question arises: is the reader meant to recognise that Gulliver's descriptions are misrepresenting European society in such subtle ways? That many readers have concluded that Gulliver's description "clarifies" the reality of our world is hardly surprising, since Gulliver himself is so unconscious of the distorting quality of his language. Throughout the *Travels*, Gulliver is remarkable for his linguistic naivety, his reliance on language as a transparent medium for "facts," and his failure to recognise that language is a deeply colored mirror that transforms our perceptions of truth. On the other hand, no careful reader can avoid feeling deeply "vexed," to use Swift's term. There is something wrong about Gulliver's narrative, even if most readers may be unable to identify or formulate the exact nature of the linguistic distortions that they sense on an intuitive level.

The linguistic ideas that we have examined in *Gulliver's Travels* reflect what might well be described as a new *episteme* in Western thought. In Swift's time and in later decades, the organising principles of what Foucault called the "Classical Age"—taxonomy, mathesis, and the "representative" function of the linguistic sign—yielded to scepticism about the reality of species and genera, and the internalisation of the sign as the very fabric of rational thought. In this concluding section, I would like to present *Gulliver's Travels* as an artistic expression of this new intellectual era. Indeed, this work might even be viewed as the era's most typical expression of its underlying philosophical assumptions, occupying the same role that *Las Meninas* of Velazquez or *Don Quixote* filled in the previous era.

Those works, as Foucault argued, dramatised the very act of representation, the separation of the sign from the world, and the end of the Renaissance belief in "resemblance" as the organising principle of language and knowledge. They show how, in the Classical Age, "language has withdrawn from the midst of beings themselves and has entered a period of transparency and neutrality."[26] Analogously, I propose, *Gulliver's Travels* marks the end of the age of "representation" and the reentrance of language into the "midst of things." We are unable

[26] Foucault, 56.

to differentiate throughout this satire between language and the reality that it is supposed to denote. This loss of the clear distinction between sign and reality is dramatised in the work's numerous images of theatre, mimicry and mirrors. A close of examination of these images reveals the same blurring of the difference between the real and the artificial, the original and the copy, that we have found in Swift's use of language.

Soon after his arrival in Lilliput, Gulliver remarks that the capital looks to him "like the painted Scene of a City in a Theatre" (pt. 1, ch. 2, 29). Because of its tininess, Lilliput does not seem real, but like an imitation of a real world. Indeed, this impression seems to have some foundation in the nature of this kingdom. Lilliput is filled with absurd theatrics—with marches, ceremonies, mock battles, and all sorts of artificial grandeur. The reader will recognise many of the displays, such as the palace tight-rope walking and "*leaping* and *creeping*" (pt. 1, ch. 3, 39), as parodies of the European court, with its ministerial rivalry and cringing. Lilliput is significant largely for what its symbolises about the pettiness and vanity of our world. In every respect, it is a world of imitation.

Brobdingnag, on the other hand, seems to "imitate" nothing at all. In this land, we are impressed not with any "symbolic" representation of European manners, but instead with the giants' often repulsive and dangerous physical reality. Here it is Gulliver who becomes an imitation man. When he is first taken to the farmer's house, he must enlarge all his gestures to be understood: he makes a low bow when he is given food, and waves his hat and makes "three Huzza's" to show he is unhurt after he falls over a crust (pt. 2, ch. 1, 90). He must constantly parody human behavior, a practice that the farmer later exploits by making Gulliver into a travelling theatrical show. The farmer's daughter calls him "Grildrig" or "Mannikin" (pt. 2, ch. 2, 95), and treats him like a doll. The King of Brobdingnag, who at first thinks that Gulliver is piece of clockwork, regards Gulliver almost exactly as we previous viewed the Lilliputians—as an imitation or "mimicry" of the real world, important largely for what he symbolises: "he observed, how contemptible a Thing was human Grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive Insects as I" (pt. 2, ch. 3, 107).

In the episodes that we have just considered, Swift perplexes the difference between imitation and reality. Lilliput not only "seems" unreal because it is small: it is *inherently* theatrical,

artificial and symbolic. The pageantry and protocol that makes up the "reality" of this world is, moreover, only a slightly exaggerated version of the European world, which is similarly theatrical and artificial. Lilliput is an imitation of a world that is itself imitative. Similarly, the King of Brobdingnag's suggestion that Europe simply "mimics" real grandeur is reaffirmed by Gulliver's subsequent reference to "a Company of *English* Lords and Ladies in their finery and Birth-day Cloaths, *acting* [my italics] their several Parts in the most Courtly Manner of Strutting, and Bowing and Prating" (pt. 2, ch. 3, 107). The "reality" of English court-life, Gulliver now sees, is theatrical.

The problem of differentiating between the copy and original becomes even more threatening in part 4, for here it contributes to the reader's perplexity about how "man" should be defined. The Houyhnhnm Master assumes that Gulliver is not a member of an unknown species, but a Yahoo "taught to *imitate* a rational Creature" (pt. 4, ch. 3, 235, my italics). And following Gulliver's description of European wars, the Master concludes that we differ from the Yahoos not in our possession of "Reason," but by having "some Quality fitted to increase our natural Vices; as the Reflection from a troubled Stream returns the Image of an ill-shapen Body, not only *larger*, but more *distorted*" (pt. 4, ch. 5, 248). The Houyhnhnm Master suggests that reason is a kind of internal *mirror* that reflects the body and all the brutal passions that we share with the Yahoos. Reason is not a distinct attribute; rather it is only a distorted copy of the lower faculties. This claim marks the culminating challenge not only to our attempts to establish the difference between humans and Yahoos, but also to differentiate between reality and images of reality, originals and copies.

It was this difference that was being challenged by the linguistic theories of Locke and his later admirers. In the new philosophical outlook that Locke inspired, signs did not merely "mirror" an external reality. They constituted that reality. This closing of the gap between sign and signified, language and the world, characterises some of the most interesting philosophy of the eighteenth century. It also inspired new experiments in art and literature, not the least of which of *Gulliver's Travels*. *Gulliver's Travels* could only have been written in the age that followed Locke. Moreover, the linguistic experiments of this work demonstrate why Swift cannot be viewed merely as a

narrow empiricist, who hated "anything of the sort demanding close thinking."[17] *Gulliver's Travels* reveals the mind of an agile and original thinker, responding with sophistication to some of the most interesting and revolutionary theories of his day.