

HONEY, HE SHRUNK THE KIDS: SWIFT AND IRISH WRITING

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ABSTRACT. *Honey, He Shrunk the Kids: Swift and Irish Writing.* A study about Jonathan Swift as a founder of Anglo-Irish literature and of children's literature, this paper delves into the "story of the repressed" and is an insight into the painful motivations that make the child-adult relationship an examination of human nature's darker side of nature. This sub-genre considers the exploit of the defamiliarising effect in the tradition and types common in fairy tales of Gaelic Ireland and shows the Irish writer as a dissident and an upholder of tradition. The probability that his writing is the disclosure of any story's potentiality is assumed by questing the welded joint of the relativity of all judgments, the extreme self-confidence of those who live at either extreme, the critique of unreasoning, tyranny and absence of rational justification of power systems.

Keywords: *Jonathan Swift, Irish writing, children's literature, fantastic narratives, Gaelic tale, power elite, critique of unreasoning.*

REZUMAT. *Dragă, a micșorat copiii: Swift și literatura irlandeză.* Un studiu despre Jonathan Swift, ca fondator al literaturii anglo-irlandeze și a celei pentru copii, această lucrare sondează "povestea celor reprimați" și discerne adevărata natură a motivațiilor dureroase care fac din relația copil-adult o examinare a părții întunecate a naturii umane. Aceasta variantă sub-generică vizează folosirea efectului defamiliarizării în tipologia și tradiția caracteristică basmelor Irlandei gaelice, și îl indică pe scriitorul irlandez ca deținător al tradiției și ca dizident. Probabilitatea ca scriitura sa să fie un mod de dezvăluire a potențialului

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oricărei povestiri este asumată de interogarea legăturii strânse dintre relativitatea oricărei forme de judecată, încrederea exagerată în sine a acelora care trăiesc în orice mod extrem de viață, critica lipsei de judecată, a tiraniei și a absenței oricărei justificări a unor astfel de sisteme de putere.

Cuvinte cheie: *Jonathan Swift, literatura irlandeză, literatura pentru copii, narațiuni fantastice, povestea gaelică, elita puterii, critica lipsei de judecată.*

At a moment of celebration of the study of Irish writing at Cluj-Napoca, it seems fitting to consider Jonathan Swift not only as a founder of Anglo-Irish literature but also of children's literature too. His case raises an interesting question. Why are so many authors of children's classics either childless (as was Swift) or hostile to children, even their own offspring (as was Enid Blyton)?

Perhaps it is because they have never fully "worked through" their own childhood that they are more assertive/competitive than parental in approach. The monomania, egotism and rage are not completely transacted, but lodged forever in the personality, a notable feature of the adult-becoming-a-child in the act of writing.

Like all children, Swift saw more of humanity than he was supposed to see. His writing, like William Blake's or Roald Dahl's, has the unpleasantness that often accompanies deep insight. He was accused of 'having blasphemed a nature a little lower than that of angels and assumed by far higher than they'. No wonder that his work proved interesting to children, who have never been especially impressed by those who seek knowingly to beguile them.

Swift had no children of his own (that we know of) and, apart from advice administered to a teenaged charge, he never claimed to direct his texts at the young. But you can see why they have taken to him. His "Modest Proposal" that Irish children under the age of six be sold as roasting meat for English tables is outrageous enough to be interesting:

Now, an American of my acquaintance, a man of excellent judgement, assured me that in London a perfectly healthy young child, well fed, is, at the age of one year, a delicious and nourishing food, either boiled, roasted, steamed or baked; and I have no doubt that it would be equally well used in a fricassee or stew. (Swift 2010, 125)

This is really a form of Fairy Tale presented as the morning news. It was discussed as such by over-literal English adults over their breakfast tables. In one sense it merely reverses the familiar trajectory of children's

literature (which is usually written for adults and then taken up by kids). The “Modest Proposal”, which suggests that since the English have devoured the parents, they now have every entitlement to eat the children, seems written as a monster tale of cannibalism to frighten children, only to endure the dismal fate of being taken seriously by some adults.

There is a real sense of hurt not far below all of Swift’s lines. As a boy at Kilkenny School he felt himself a loner, out on the edge of things, like fish out of water. For him the signature experience of his childhood was endure such a state:

I never wake without finding life a more insignificant thing it was the day before... but my greatest misery is recollecting the scene of twenty years past, and then all on a sudden dropping into the present. I remember when I was a little boy, I felt a great fish at the end of my line which I drew up almost on the ground, but it dropt in, and the disappointment vexeth me to this very day, and I believe it was the type of all my future disappointments.²

Swift is usually seen by readers of that passage as identifying his loss of the big fish with his failure to land a major ecclesiastical post in England. But no mere career frustration could explain the force of that passage. His real identification is with the struggling fish itself, briefly out of water, before it falls back into the depths of the ocean. In those deeps of the unconscious, Swift may have been happiest – as in nursery rhymes and in the non-moral world of Fairy Tales, he could keep mainly to facts and avoid too many interpretations.

Detractors of *Gulliver’s Travels* have said that once you have thought of the big people and little people, the rest comes easily and obviously enough. But no child has ever thought that. For children know that Swift, once he has established the laws of his genre, plays it in deadly earnest. The matter-of-fact way in which he narrates the strangest details and comes after each adventure to a rather banal conclusion recalls the dryly factual world of the nursery rhyme:

Solomon Grundy
Born on a Monday;
Christened on Tuesday;
Married on Wednesday;
Took sick on Thursday;
Died on Friday;
Waked on Saturday;
Buried on Sunday.
That was the end of Solomon Grundy.

² From a “Letter to Lord Bolingbroke” of April 5, 1729 (Swift 1814, 280).

The fact that the narrator to whom these enormities happen should be a literal-minded unimaginative sea-captain merely adds to the fun of the game.

It was the hurt child in Swift who wrote of Gulliver. Like all who insure themselves against insult by claiming to expect little of humanity, he naturally expected a lot and was forever disappointed. His life, like his boyhood fishing expedition, was a preparation for something that never happened. Children have responded to this sense of powerlessness in one so capable of deep idealism; and to the sense of realism with which he documented his fantastic narrative. They are accustomed to just the sort of changes of state, between bigness and littleness, which he describes, knowing that they are but little people in the eyes of parents and teachers, but that they can become like giants when they assemble toys or summon pets.

The story goes further. With the Lilliputians, it allows children to imagine beings much smaller than they and to see how such beings cope with their own smallness (as children constantly do). But it also, through Gulliver's experience in Lilliput and then through the Brobdingnagians' experience of Gulliver, rehearses that moment when the child-reader will become a big person, one of the giants. The Lilliputians seem little more than toy people, their world fragile and easily broken; but among the giants, Gulliver as a grown man is reduced to the state of a child, pitched about and put on display, even threatened by a cat whom once he might have treated as a pet. This is the shadow-side to the injunction of Jesus that only those adults who become as little children will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Lilliput is a little like Main Street in Disneyland: its smallness (horses four inches tall, a lark the size of a tiny insect, the tallest trees not much higher than a human) serves to make Gulliver's world seem more real, even as he slowly loses his sense of the normal. As in all Fairy Tale expeditions to the otherworld, the effect is to defamiliarise our own "real" world. Soon the size of trees or birds is neither here nor there, as Gulliver becomes just an awkward physical problem, to others but ultimately also to himself. His very size relative to the Lilliputians makes him seem infantile, in desperate need of care and supervision. Even the disposal of his faeces becomes a huge problem. The Lilliputians are terrified that, if they execute him, they may not be able to dispose of his putrefying body. He is – like the future Selfish Giants of so many kids' stories – too big to fail, or to survive with any grace.

The little people see themselves generally as deft, precise and subtle, whereas Gulliver's largeness makes him feel awkward, rude and uncouth. This is not the whole story, of course, as the emperor is also vain and unaware of the vulnerability of his tiny island kingdom – just as Gulliver the monster retains, for all his awkwardness of movement, a sense of his own proportionate judgement.

In Lilliput Gulliver poses the problem of eating, excreting and wasting too much: a manic consumer. In Brobdingnag he faces the problem of being consumed: as entertainment, as a meal for an animal, or as a mere freak.

Most Fairy Tales depict bigness or littleness as a problem. Often, they are about small persons confronted by a larger, threatening world. Gulliver's Travels is unusual in portraying someone of normal adult size who has nevertheless to cope with both tiny people and with giants. If among the tiny he rapidly ceases to be a marvel and constitutes an appalling problem, among the giants he is rapidly reduced to a mere entertainment – kept in a box, exhibited on special occasions, adopted as a pet by the Queen of Brobdingnag, who thus refuses to take him very seriously. Swift may have felt himself similarly toyed with by the authorities in London: “they call me anything but Jonathan, and I said, I believe they would leave me a Jonathan as they found me” (Swift 1812, 139).

The giants of Brobdingnag are anything but appealing. Seen in close-up, their women are positively anti-aphrodisiac: “The Nipple was about half the Bigness of my head, and the Hue both of that and of the dug so verified with Spots, Pimples and Freckles that nothing could appear more nauseous” (Swift 2005, 82). Set down for sport upon the bosoms of young maidens, Gulliver is disgusted by their rank odour, and by their coarse eating habits, which cause even ladies of title to munch huge fowl between their teeth. This sort of depiction anticipates not the mysterious aura of the “blow-up” image of the film-star of the movie screen, worshipped in darkness by little onlookers: rather it evokes the sense that those who are cursed to see things more deeply than other humans will be eternally disillusioned by what they see. To view each pore of a flawed human body up close is to be denied any capacity to metaphorise it; instead, one is reduced to a painful literal-mindedness. It is as if a blind person were suddenly endowed with sight, but only that sight possible to one who suffers myopia in a fallen world, and has to hold everything far too close for comfort in order to see anything at all.

That, of course, is how the adult world may sometimes appear to literal-minded children. It is remoteness which conduces to a romanticisation, which proximity may destroy.

Part of the fascination of *Gulliver's Travels*, like that of *Robinson Crusoe*, is that it shows how a grown man, cast ashore in a strange place, has to learn the world all over again, as if he were a small child. If many Fairy Tales depict a child facing adult challenges (as Harry Potter is described confronting terrorism), Swift's story describes how an adult may have to face the challenges of childhood all over again – especially if he persistently acts like a recalcitrant child and dismisses the sensible advice of a parent. The fish-out-of-water state which overtakes Gulliver or Crusoe in their baffling new settings is akin to that

confronted by every child thrown into a baffling world. Each child fears the unknown, the dark, the danger of attack by inexplicable forces, including hunger and tempest; but each must slowly feel its way into a controllable, knowable world. In so doing, the child must vanquish its own shadow side, its tendency to give up and surrender; and, instead, it must assert a delight in building things, in constructing the set called the world.

Gulliver's Travels, though never intended as such, helped to invent entire sub-genres of later children's tales, from *Alice in Wonderland* to books like *The Borrowers* or films such as *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. In Swift's tale, the adult male again becomes a child in the very reading of the narrative, just as Gore Vidal has observed that the adult reader once again becomes a child in the act of reading *Alice in Wonderland* – and in both cases, of course, the narrative is powered by bewildering changes in size. This may hint at the problems of the early adolescent, who never feels the right age or size – big relative to infants, yet still small as compared to adults. If there is something tragic about child chimney-sweeps expected to act like men in the songs of William Blake, there may be something comical about a grown man named Lemuel Gulliver trapped in a childlike body.

What *Gulliver's Travels* shows is that every child is a kind of anthropologist, amused yet also outraged by the arbitrary, capricious nature of the codes of a seemingly mature world. Social scientists are capable of marveling at the primitive logic of equatorial tribes whose members divide a society according to the totems on their poles, yet are themselves quite capable of analysing developed urban communities in terms of divisions between white-collar and blue-collar workers. In the same way, Gulliver is amazed that wars have been fought by the Lilliputians on the issue of whether a boiled egg should be broken open at the big or little end. The deceiving, self-interested nature of all official histories written by winners is manifest in the report that all books by Big-Endians have been forbidden in Lilliput.

Two centuries after Swift, James Joyce (possibly thinking of that passage) remarked that how a man eats an egg will tell you more of his philosophy than how he goes to war. And, sure enough, a reader of *Autobiographies* by W.B. Yeats will find in its early pages the following memorable account of his maternal grandfather, William Pollexfen:

His way was to hold the egg-cup firmly on its plate with his left hand, then with a sharp knife in his right hand to behead the egg with one blow. Where the top of the egg went was not his business. It might hit a grandchild or the ceiling. He never looked. (Murphy 1978, 87)

The Yeats children, in the poet's account, were intimidated by Pollexfen, whom they sometimes confused with God; but in all likelihood what terrified them was this display of childishness in so powerful an adult.

At the centre of *Gulliver's Travels* is a sustained critique of the unreasoning, capricious tyranny of power elites, who feel no deep need to give a rational justification of their systems, whose wisdom they take to be self-evident. It is the same logic of the powerful in *Alice in Wonderland* – sentence first, trial afterward – when I say a thing, it means exactly what I want it to mean. The rulers find that their rules, being good enough for themselves, must be good enough for the world. By constantly shifting perspectives, however, Swift is enabled to show how arbitrarily each system works; and the rapid changes of scale and size have the effect of showing how relative are any judgements, how random is the fate of humans, but, above all, how strange our home world can be made to seem after such weird adventures.

The Lilliputians appeal to a common childhood fantasy of exercising power over bigger people, a power achieved by the simple act of banding together through sheer force of numbers. The experience of Brobdingnag, on the other hand, leaves Gulliver feeling himself on display wherever he goes, like kids who feel that they are being watched all the time. If the Flying Island of Laputa, with its nutty professors extracting sunbeams from cucumbers and designing a suit of clothes made by quadrants, demonstrates the idiocy of much educational theory, the Struldbrugs, who live for hundreds of years, illustrate the dangers of a second childhood, a dystopic Tír na nÓg in which childlike adults become a burden even to themselves. It is indeed as if Swift saw – in the words of W.B. Yeats – ‘the ruin to come’. Gulliver himself is, at various stages of his journeys, a shocking example of pre-senile infantilism: someone who seems to need care, protection, even basic toilet training.

The third book has often been omitted from children's editions – a process which began in Philadelphia in the 1780s – yet it also is full of hilarious exposes of authority.

Taken as a whole, the four volumes of *Gulliver's Travels* are not encouraging to educators who might wish to think of successive books as inducting children into a print culture of increasing complexity. Well before Darwin, children were believed to reenact the evolution of the human race in their growth; but what *Gulliver's Travels* actually depicts is an adult sea-captain who devolves in intelligence and capacity from book to book, becoming more rather than less dependent on others, and in the end hugely resentful of the very people who rescue him. Not only that, but the books themselves take an increasingly darker view of human nature. At the start, Gulliver is cast away by chance; then abandoned by colleagues; next he is put

upon by pirates; and finally marooned by mutineers. His own sense of self, far from being strengthened by all these challenges, is disintegrated by them, to such a degree that he becomes by the fourth book a worshipper of talking horses. The Houyhnhnms make more sense to him by then than do humans, partly because they deny the Yahoos in their midst, foul-smelling creatures who pelt Gulliver with excrement. It's easy to see how children who like to play in dirt might be fascinated by Yahoos, just as they could be mesmerised by the thought of mere animals able to seize control of an entire society. The revolutionary potentials of that story would contribute to a modern Fairy Tale by George Orwell called *Animal Farm*.

It would be too simple to say that the adult reader of *Gulliver's Travels* identifies with the bigger people in each episode and the child reader with the little ones: for the vanity of the little people and the insensitivity of the large is insisted upon at every turn in the narrative. What most readers are struck by is the relativity of all judgements – and the extreme self-confidence of those who live at either extreme of the human spectrum. Even more remarkable, however, is the fact that, unlike children in Fairy Tales who commute to and from a fantasy land, Gulliver appears not to grow or to learn anything new. Rather he is more and more estranged from all human sympathies.

Yet a Fairy Tale of some sort *Gulliver's Travels* undoubtedly is. It was probably based on “Imtheachta Tuaithe Luchra” (“The Events of the People of Luchra”), which Swift heard at Quilca, county Cavan, while staying as the guest of his friend Thomas Sheridan. In that tale, the king of the leprechauns behaves much like the vain emperor of Lilliput during a visit by Ulstermen, who admire the fine, unblemished skin of the little folk. Distance in this case lends enchantment. In the “Imtheachta Tuaithe Luchra” the leprechauns objected to the ugly skins and smelly breaths of the rank, robust Ulstermen; in Lilliput, Gulliver revealed great holes in the pores of his skin to those small people who stood in distraught amazement up close to him.

However, in the “Imtheachta”, when the leprechaun-poet Eisirt goes to Ulster, he experiences a life like Gulliver in Brobdingnag, almost drowning in a container of ale, as Gulliver almost drowned in a bowl of cream. Many of the customs of the Lilliputians seem analogous to practices common in rural Ireland: the burying of the dead head downwards in vertical position (as at Knocknarea); the notion of an unjust curse rebounding upon its author; the removal of children from parents under fosterage systems. Gulliver has to crouch on entering Lilliput's cabins, as Swift did during his visits in the Irish countryside.

The Houyhnhnms of the fourth book initially strike Gulliver as magical shape-changers, a type common in Fairy Tales of Gaelic Ireland; but they turn out to be super-rationalists, creatures of the daylight world. In them the

rational faculty is so specialised and over-developed as to become a new form of barbarism. That volume exposes the pretensions of the super-rational horses to absolute authority as a power elite: like the colonial system, it has merely taught snobs how to neigh. The book as a whole assumes the failure of secular theory to produce human happiness, becoming (in effect) a plea for a return to a world of magic and tradition. As always, Swift has gone to extremes to project a *via media*. In his heart he is, as Orwell so astutely observed, a Tory Anarchist. Being an upholder of tradition, he acquired (like many Gaelic poet-rebels) the cachet of an insurgent and a dissident.

There is a durable legend that Swift was reminded of the old Gaelic tale when he remarked on the difference in size between the huge labourers on his friend Sheridan's farm and on the rather delicate, diminutive workers on the estate of the nearby Brooke family. Swift's visits to Cavan were marked by a real sense of involvement with local characters, as Sheridan jocosely recorded:

So far forgetting his old station,
He seems to like their conversation.
Conforming to the tatter'd rabble,
He learns their Irish tongue to gabble. (Swift 1834, 303)

Given that both giants and little people are seen as reliques from a lost world which once held sway on earth, perhaps Swift saw in the story of big and little people a way of accessing more ancient mind-sets.

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