



Yahoo

Swift and the asses

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GENERALLY speaking, it is unprofitable to try to read meanings into the names of peoples and lands in *Gulliver's Travels*. These names are what they are, to be taken for granted, like those of strange, far-off countries in real-life geography. Yet in the *Travels* an imitative or echoic element does occur, if only in *Houyhnhnm* with its whinny. But if there, perhaps elsewhere as well, and where more likely than in the companion name *Yahoo*? If *Houyhnhnm* is intended to convey the neigh of a horse might we not expect to hear in *Yahoo* the sound of some other, inferior, animal?¹ Perhaps Frank Kermode came nearest to following this clue when twenty odd years ago he drew attention in *Notes and Queries* to the *Yaios*, a people of Guiana described in 1613 by Robert Harcourt in his *Relation of a Voyage* to that country. 'Yaios', said Kermode, 'is, one feels, a sort of Bunter yelp or howl that would have appealed to Swift in his search for a savage nomenclature', and so, he believed, 'one may suppose that Swift was thinking of this tribe when he coined the word *Yahoo*'.² It is, however, not a savage nomenclature that he would have sought but an animal cry on which to base a corresponding name for the brutes he opposed to the admirable horses.

'Your horse, Sir! Your horse is an Ass, Sir', says Petulant to Sir Wilfull Witwoud, flinging it 'by way of Offence' from one end of the equine scale to the other; and what animal cry more closely resembles the sound *Yahoo* than the bray of an ass? The ass's bray, to be sure, is identified today as *hee haw* (French *hi-han*),

¹ Marjorie W. Buckley also considers the two names together, in offering a 'Key to the Language of the Houyhnhnms' in *Fair Liberty was all his cry* (ed. A. Norman Jeffares, 1967, 270); but she hears the voice of Swift in both, indicting respectively 'Ye *who*' behave as Yahoos, and 'You *who inhuman*' behave as Houyhnhnms.

² Frank Kermode, *Notes and Queries*, cxcv, 1950, 317-18.

but it is worth noting that the earliest form recorded in *O.E.D.* (from a pseudonymous work of W. H. Ireland's published in 1815) is 'an *Hiu Haw*, in imitation of the Ass's braying'. This sound, inverted — or heard in rapid repetition — yields a sequence (*haw hiu*) startlingly like *Yahoo*, and needs only the slightest adjustment (to *hiaw hu*) to be virtually identical with it. That this was a recognized representation of the ass's bray in Swift's time is out of the question: if it had been, the correspondence would have been noted, for, as Gay playfully recorded soon after the book was published, *Houyhnhnm* and *Yahoo* immediately became 'modish terms'.¹ But if in 1815 Ireland imitated the bray as *Hiu Haw* it is by no means impossible that Swift should have imitated it as *Yahoo* about a hundred years earlier.

We are led, then, to the hypothesis that the word is, with *Houyhnhnm*, echoic, the product of a jesting fancy, each intended to match the other, the sound of the ass balancing that of the horse. If that was Swift's intention, what was the motive behind it? What can it have been but to develop the idea that, to put it simply, in contrast to the horse man is an ass? As we know, that is not the emphasis of the Fourth Book as it came to be written. The Yahoos are not asses. They howl or roar: they do not bray.² Neither are the Yahoos identified with the ass in nature or appearance. On the contrary they are a distinct species, and compare unfavourably in almost every respect with the ass, which through deplorable increase they have tended to displace. The contrast is neatly summarized by the Houyhnhnm proponent for their extermination. He regrets that in earlier times

the Inhabitants [of Houyhnhnmland], taking a Fancy to use the Service of the *Yahoos*, had very imprudently neglected to cultivate the Breed of *Asses*, which are a comely Animal, easily kept, more tame and orderly, without any offensive Smell, strong enough for Labour, although they yield to the other in Agility of Body, and if their Braying be no agreeable Sound, it is far preferable to the horrible Howlings of the *Yahoos*.

It is evident, then, that if Swift first hit upon the word Yahoo 'in imitation of the Ass's braying' the motive behind its invention did

¹ *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 1963, III, 184.

² When Gulliver practises the sound Yahoo, 'boldly' pronouncing it 'in a loud Voice', the two Houyhnhnms he has met are 'both visibly surprized', not to hear him cry like an ass or a Yahoo, but at his skill in imitating a word in their language.

not persist. Accordingly a further hypothesis suggests itself, that of stages of imaginative development in the 'foreconceit of the work'. In the first, man is conceived as asinine in nature and capacity, in the last as bestial. In both of these stages the horse is a rational animal, as man supposes himself to be, and the Yahoo is essentially human in form; but in neither do horse and man simply change places in the animal hierarchy. For the horse as we know it is, for an animal, 'sensible', and man as we know him is, viewed in the light of his pretensions, the reverse of sensible. Accordingly the 'good sense' of the horse is idealized, and equated with true rationality, whereas man's capacity for rational behaviour is first identified in relation to the horse's as that of the lowest member of the horse tribe — the ass, traditional emblem of folly. Subsequently that symbol becomes inadequate as the idea of the *Voyage* comes to be developed in the scathing spirit in which the King of Brobdingnag condemns the bulk of Gulliver's countrymen as 'the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth'. To convey that emphasis the opposition of horse and ass can no longer serve, for it goes far beyond the simple question of pretention to rationality and the possession of it, and man at his worst must be placed at the bottom not of the equine scale but of the bestial.

What support does the text afford for these conjectures? It is generally agreed that the *Fourth Voyage* is a work of continuous composition, written in accordance with a well considered, coherent scheme — the second of those outlined above. This could have developed out of an earlier scheme and completely supplanted it, so that no trace of it survived in the writing beyond the conveniently arcane appellation Yahoo. In that case it would be idle to pursue the present speculations. There is evidence in the text, however, pointing to the type of change we have been hypothesizing, and the survival of such evidence, albeit shadowy, in such a highly organized construction as the *Fourth Book* shows what a firm hold the initial postulate seems to have had on Swift's mind.

We have already noted that he is at pains to insist that his Yahoos are not asses but of a nature far worse than the ass's.

Yet correspondences do occur, consistent with the theory that this was indeed the conception on which the Yahoos were originally formed. Proverbially the ass is dirty, lazy, foolish, dull and obstinate, and it is such qualities that chiefly mark the habits and disposition of the Yahoos. They appear, says Gulliver,

to be the most unteachable of Animals, their Capacities never reaching higher than to draw or carry Burthens. Yet I am of Opinion, this Defect arises chiefly from a perverse, restive disposition. For they are cunning, malicious, treacherous and revengeful.

His statement of the imperfections of mind of the young English nobleman Yahoos has a similar emphasis: they are 'a Composition of Spleen, Dulness, Ignorance, Caprice, Sensuality and Pride'.¹

So much for what may be considered surviving traces of the original, informing idea of the Book. In a general way the Yahoos' qualities resemble the proverbial notion of the ass. The correspondence is obscured to some extent, not only by the difference of outward form, which leads the reader not to look for it, but by an intermingling of other animal characteristics such as extreme nimbleness and agility and the habit of digging holes in the ground with the nails. These may well be regarded as a necessary embroidery of the informing idea we have been considering, for a downright, unadorned horse-ass opposition can have served only as the seminal condition of the Yahoos' conception, being in itself too obvious, formal, restricting and dull to base a Book on. The function of the additional traits seems merely to suggest general animal affinities in the propensities and capacities of primitive Yahoos. They have not the effect of presenting them in a more offensive or derogatory light.

That belongs to the final conception — that of the written work — in which they stand below all other beasts, ugly, hateful, contemptible and vile. They are 'the only Animals in this Country', says Gulliver, 'subject to any Diseases', and in a land where 'there appears to be a natural Love of Cleanliness in all other Animals'

¹ 'This absurd vice' pride, the height of folly, is reserved for the final comment of the *Travels*. Gulliver 'could plainly observe some Rudiments of it among the wild *Yahoos*', but the Houyhnhnms could not. 'For want of thoroughly understanding Human Nature, as it sheweth itself in other Countries, where that Animal presides', they did not know what to look for. That this vice may be considered specifically asinine appears from the proverbs Thomas Fuller cites (no. 1404 f.), 'Every ass loves to hear himself bray' and 'Every ass thinks himself worthy to stand with the king's horses'.

the Yahoos have 'a strange Disposition to Nastiness and Dirt'. Gulliver's master observed among them practices of 'such Degrees of infamous Brutality, that no other sensitive Creature ever arrived at'. Yet when he heard of European war he realized that 'civilized' Yahoos had arrived at degrees of brutality beyond brutality:

he no more blamed [the wild Yahoos] for their odious Qualities, than he did . . . a sharp Stone for cutting his Hoof. But, when a Creature pretending to Reason, could be capable of such Enormities, he dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality itself.

A pattern of distinction emerges, therefore, from the text, defining stages of development towards which we have been groping. The first of these, taking its rise in the fancy that man in his irrationality can fitliest be called an ass, widens out to embrace general animal affinities. The emphasis at this stage is upon man's place being unmistakably among the animals. The last stage is concerned with man's degradation in comparison with all other animals. In spite of the groundwork of asinine characteristics the main impression now given is that of such profound beastliness that it borders at times on a condition below the bestial. This impression is secured simply by making the Yahoo a species apart — abhorred alike by Houyhnhnms and all the other beasts — with a loathsomeness peculiarly its own. Nothing like a mixture of vicious animal characteristics is attempted. It is in later work (lines rejected from 'On Poetry. A Rhapsody') that Swift uses that method, likening kings to:

Hogs, Asses, Wolves, Baboons & Goats,

which

represent in figure just
Sloth, Folly, Rapine, Mischief, Lust.

How much neater and more inclusive is the Yahoo in its final conception and, at least aesthetically, how much more just a figure.

In the concluding chapter with a masterly twist of logic Swift suddenly confers an unforeseen unity upon all the *Travels* . . . into several Remote Nations of the World by off-handedly referring

to the Brobdingnagians as 'the least corrupted' of 'those remote Nations where *Yahoos* preside'. All men are Yahoos, near and remote alike, from the most to the least corrupted. *Every animal, except the Houyhnhnm, is irrational: Only Houyhnhnms are rational.* It is a simple logical inference from an exceptive proposition. In Marsh's text-book written *in usum Juventutis Academiae Dubliniensis* such propositions and such inferences are enunciated in terms of *the ass* as an exception to rationality. Is this altogether without significance? It was from that book, as R. S. Crane has shown, that the expression *Joannes, Petrus, Thomas, &c.* embedded itself in Swift's memory;¹ and it could be from there, as well as from other logics in use at T.C.D., that — eight years before Locke's *Human Understanding* appeared — he first learned, by way of contrary opposition, to scoff at the idea of *homo* as *animal rationale*. Marsh's chapter '*De Enunciationum Oppositione*' is therefore deserving of attention, or rather the three pages of it that illustrate the opposition of exponibles.² The 'exceptive' propositions used for that purpose are of the type *Omne animal, praeter asinum, est rationale*, with variants formed by negating subject, predicate, or exceptive particle. The first of the derived propositions cited from the parent type is *Every irrational animal is an ass.*

This kind of illustrative material offers fruitful opportunity for ridicule to the undergraduate with a sense of fun, and it may seriously be doubted which came first in the imaginative pedigree of the Fourth Voyage, the *equus* or the *ass*. They may hang close together. The horse appears the earlier in Marsh's pages (and it is of common occurrence, of course, in Burgersdicius and other logics), but it is hardly in itself an occasion of mirth. On the other hand it takes no very wild flight of fancy to imagine a delighted, mischievous-minded Junior Freshman doodling in mind with Marsh's pages and amusing himself by framing the syllogism: *Every irrational animal is an ass; Man is an irrational animal: therefore Man is an ass.* The imagination works in mysterious ways. It may be that Swift, who carried away from Marsh the form of words 'John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth', carried away also the makings of *Homo est asinus — vel Yahoo*. Who can say?

¹ R. S. Crane, 'The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and the History of Ideas', in *Reason and the Imagination*, ed. J. A. Mazzeo, 1962, 251-3.

² Narcissus Marsh, *Institutiones Logicae*, ed. 1681, 97, 99, 100.