

Some Quotations from Jonathan Swift

“Digression on Madness”, from *A Tale of A Tub* (1710), rep. in *Gulliver’s Travels and Selected Writings*, (London: Nonesuch 1944, pp.333-36.)

In the Proportion that Credulity is a more peaceful Possession of the Mind, than Curiosity, so far preferable is that Wisdom, which converses about the Surface, to that pretended Philosophy which enters into the Depth of Things, and then comes gravely back with Informations and Discoveries, that in the inside they are good for nothing. The two Senses, to which all Objects first address themselves, are the Sight and the Touch; These never examine farther than the Colour, the Shape, the Size, and whatever other Qualities dwell, or are drawn by Art upon the Outward of Bodies; and then comes Reason officiously, with Tools for cutting, and opening, and mangling, and piercing, offering to demonstrate, that they are not of the same consistence quite thro’. Now, I take all this to be the last Degree of perverting Nature; one of whose Eternal, Laws it is, to put her best Furniture forward. And therefore, in order to save the Charges of all such expensive Anatomy for the Time to come; I do here think fit to inform the Reader, that in such Conclusions as these, Reason is certainly in the Right; and that in most Corporeal Beings, which have fallen under my Cognizance, the Outside hath been infinitely preferable to the Inn: Whereof I have been farther convinced by some late Experiments. Last Week I saw a Woman flay’d, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse. Yesterday I ordered the Carcass of a Beau to be stript in my Presence; when we were all amazed to find so many unsuspected Faults under one Suit of Cloaths. Then I laid open his Brain, his Heart, his Spleen; But I plainly perceived at every Operation, that the farther we proceeded, we found the Defects encrease in Number and Bulk: from all which, I justly formed this Conclusion to my self, that whatever Philosopher or Projector can find out an Art to sodder [solder] and patch up the Flaws and Imperfections of Nature will deserve much better of Mankind, and teach us more useful Science, than that so much in present Esteem, of widening and exposing them (like him who held Anatomy the ultimate end of Physick). And he, whose Fortunes and Dispositions have placed him in a convenient Station to enjoy the Fruits of this noble Art; He that can with Epicurus contend his Ideas with the Films and Images that fly off upon his Senses from the Superficies of Things; Such a Man truly wise, creams off Nature, leaving Sower and drugs for philosophy and Reason to lap up. *This is the sublime and refined Point of Felicity, called, the possession of being well-deceived; The Serene and Peaceful State of being a Fool among Knaves.* (My italics.)

Jonathan Swift, Letter to Alexander Pope (29 Sept. 1725)

‘I have ever hated all Nations professions and Communities and all my love is towards individualls for instance I hate the tribe of Lawyers, but I love Councillor such a one, Judge such a one for so with Physicians (I will not Speak of my own Trade) Soldiers, English, Escotch, French; and the rest but principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth. This is the system upon which I have governed my self for many years (but do not tell) and so I shall go on till I have done with them I have got materials Towards a Treatise proving the falsity of that Definition *animale rationale*; and to show it should be only *rationis capax*. Upon this great foundation of Misanthropy (though in Timon’s manner) The whole building of [*Gulliver’s*] *Travells* is erected: And I never will have peace of mind till all honest men are of my Opinion: by Consequence you are to embrace it immediately and procure that all who deserve my Esteem may do so too. The matter is so clear that it will admit of little dispute: nay I will hold a hundred pounds that you and I agree the Point.’ (*Correspondence*, III, 103; in Seamus Deane, ed., *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 1991, Vol. I, p.351.)

Further: ‘The chief end I propose to myself in all my labours is to vex the world rather than divert it’ (Letter of 1725; quoted in John Hayward, ed., “Gulliver’s Travels”, [Bloomsbury] Nonesuch Press; NY: Random Press 1934 p.[2].)

Cf., *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726): “I cannot but conclude”, says the King, “[that] the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the face of the earth.”

Consent of the governed: ‘For in *Reason*, all *Government* without the Consent of the Governed, is the *very Definition of Slavery*; But in *Fact*, *Eleven Men well armed*, will certainly subdue one single man in his Shirt. But I have done. For those who have used *Power* to cramp Liberty have gone so far as to Resent even the *Liberty of Complaining*, altho’ a Man upon the Rack was never known to be refused the Liberty of *Roaring* as loud as he thought fit.’ (“Drapier’s Letters” [No. 4]; *Works*, ed. Davis, Vol. 10, pp.62-3; see also Joseph McMinn, *Swift’s Irish Pamphlets*, 1991, p.80). [Note that the sentence is echoed in James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*.]

Letter to Bolingbroke (March 21, 1729), on living in Ireland: ‘I reckon no man is thoroughly miserable unless he be condemned to live in Ireland. ... do not let me die in a rage here like a poisoned rat in a hole.’ Further, ‘I ever feared the tattle of this nasty town [Dublin], and told you so; there are accidents I life that are necessary and must be submitted to; and tattle, by the help of discretion, will wear off.’; told Pope that he would be buried at Holyhead since he ‘will not lie in a country of slaves’ (*Letters*, ed. Williams, Vol. 4, p.406.)

Anglo-Ireland: Swift complained that ‘all persons born in *Ireland* are called and treated as *Irishmen*, although their fathers and grandfather were born in England; and their predecessors have been conquerors of *Ireland*, it is humbly conceived they ought to be on as good a foot as any subjects of *Britain*, according to the practice of all other nations, and particularly the *Greeks* and *Romans*’ (Letter to Lord Peterborough, 28 April 1726).

Letter to Charles Wogan (1732) on the Catholic Irish gentry: ‘I cannot but highly esteem those gentlemen of Ireland, who with all the disadvantages of being exiles and strangers, have been able to distinguish themselves by their valour and conduct in so many parts of Europe, I think above all other nations, which ought to make the English ashamed of the reproaches they cast on the ignorance, the dullness, and the want of courage, in the Irish natives [...]’ (Rep. in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 1991; quoted thence in P. J. Kavanagh, *Voices in Ireland*, 1994, p.8.)

Roman Catholicism: ‘For Popery, under the Circumstances it lies in this Kingdom; it be although offensive, and inconvenient enough, from the Consequences it hath to increase the Rapine, Sloth and Ignorance, as well as Poverty of the Natives; it is not properly dangerous in that Sense, as some would have us take it; ... The Papists are wholly disarmed. They have neither Courage, Leaders, Money, or Inclinations to rebel.’ (*Queries relating to the sacramental test*, 1732; *Works*, ed. Davis, Vol. 12, pp.258-9)

The Irish Language: ‘It would be a noble achievement to abolish the Irish language in this kingdom, so far at least as to oblige all the natives to speak only English on every occasion of business [...]. This would, in a great measure civilize the most barbarous of them, reconcile them to our customs, and reduce great numbers to the national religion, whatever kind may then happen to be established’ (*Works*, Vol. 12, p.89).

Swift’s Epitaph

‘Hic depositum est Corpus / IONATHAN SWIFT S.T.D. / Hujus Ecclesiae Cathedralis/Decani/Ubi saeva Indignatio /Ulterius / Cor lacerare nequit. / Abi Viator / Et imitare, si poteris, / Strenuum pro virili / Libertatis Vindicatorem / Obiit 190 Die Mensis Octobris / A.D. Anno Aetatis 78. [W. B. Yeats’s version: ‘Swift has sailed into his rest; / Savage indignation there / Cannot lacerate his breast. / Imitate him if you dare, / World-besotted traveller; he / Served human liberty.’]