

Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell 2005)

On Swift

[..]

There is an interesting ambiguity in Swift's presentation of the bestial, shit-smearing Yahoos. Are they meant to be an image of humanity in general, or of 'primitive' peoples in particular? There is evidence, for example, to suggest that the Anglo-Irish Swift saw the colonized people of Ireland as Yahoos. The Yahoos reflect among other things an Anglo-Irish fear and hatred of those they oppress. 'Yahoo', then, may mean all people or just some people, just as it may signify a human condition but also a way of perceiving that condition. And this leads to some interesting political ambiguities. If 'primitive' peoples like the Irish or South Sea islanders really are Yahoos, then this would seem to justify a smack of firm colonial government. But if Yahoos are humanity at large, then the colonial governors are (metaphorically speaking) bestial and shit-smearing too, which undercuts their right to rule. Colonialism then becomes a matter of a bunch of hypocritical savages lording it over a bunch of non-hypocritical ones. On this theory, the masters are as worthless as the natives – an opinion which, as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, undermines colonialism (what right have they then to rule?) but also confirms some of its prejudices (the natives really are worthless).

This ambiguity reflects something of Swift's own double-edged relations to colonialism. As a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, he was, so to speak, colonized and colonialist at the same time. He was in the ironic position of belonging to a sidelined governing class – a body of Anglo-Irishmen who ruled over the common people of Ireland, but who felt shabbily treated by the British on whose behalf they governed. Swift played a key role in the British colonial state: at one stage he was the Tories' chief propagandist, and helped to draft the monarch's speeches to parliament. But there were also certain questions on which he spoke up eloquently for the Irish people against their British overlords. He was caught between the coffee houses of Westminster and the starving weavers on his Dublin doorstep, rather as Gulliver is caught between Houyhnhnms and Yahoos. If he did not consider himself an Irishman/Yahoo, the British/Houyhnhnms sometimes did.

Swift the Yahoo can be heard loud and clear at the end of *Gulliver's Travels*, ventriloquized in Gulliver's magnificent tirade against imperialism:

The colonial adventurers go on shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless people, are entertained with kindness, they give the country a new name, they take formal possession of it for the king, they set up a rotten plank or a stone for a memorial, they murder two or three dozen of the natives, bring away a couple more by force for a sample, return home, and get their pardon. Here commences a new dominion acquired with a title by divine right. Ships are sent with the first opportunity; the natives driven out or destroyed, their princes tortured to discover their gold; a free licence given to all acts of inhumanity and lust; the earth reeking with the blood of its inhabitants: and this execrable crew of butchers employed in so pious an expedition, is a modern colony sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous people.

If such a passage were to crop up in Defoe, indeed in many an English author, one might anticipate an immediate disclaimer: the British don't do that kind of thing. We are speaking of the Belgians, Spanish, French or Portuguese. Swift does indeed instantly append such a disclaimer, but it is wholly ironic: 'But this description, I confess, doth by no means affect the *British* nation, who may be an example to the whole world for their wisdom, care, and justice in planting colonies; their liberal endowments for the advancement of religion and learning...'. It is because Swift is Irish, conscious of the muddle, prejudice, nepotism, brutality and crass inefficiency of the British administration at Dublin Castle, that he is saved from the customary double-think.

Gulliver ends up unhinged by his hatred for his own species, a dreadful warning to his embittered creator of what he himself might turn into. Those who have lost touch with common humanity in their hubris, stepping outside their situations altogether, end up in lunacy. This, however, is not at all good news for the common people. For in Swift's view this lunacy includes those radical reformers who seek to view their situation as though from the outside in order to change it for the better. These, too, are crazed experimenters, intoxicated like the scientists of Laputa by their own hare-brained intellectual antics. The condition of the common people can be at best patched up somewhat; to imagine that it could be fundamentally transformed is a folly akin to using a quadrant and pair of compasses to measure someone up for clothes, as the Laputian tailor does with Gulliver.