

# Satire and Negative Theology: Swift, Voltaire, and the Hermeneutical Dilemma<sup>1</sup>

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Definitions of satire have tended to focus on its quality (the satiric) rather than on any stipulation of a generic form (satire). Dr. Johnson's definition («a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured») is a typical, albeit succinct, representation of the tendency; and it receives little more than amplification some two centuries later from the literary historian and critic M.H. Abrams, when he describes satire as «the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn ... satire derides ... it uses laughter as a weapon ...»<sup>2</sup> These more usual excursions toward capturing what might be described as the satiric intention or spirit have as their complement what we might term minority reports, understandably uneasy with leaving the matter at that, which rightly note that satire is also a kind of literature. The *Princeton Encyclo-*

*pedia of Poetry and Poetics* offers just this distinction, and then effectively throws up its hands in the face of classifying a genre of such enormous range, settling instead for an etymology of the term.<sup>3</sup> The most widespread quasi-generic delineation is a three-fold typology: it contrasts first formal or direct satire (per Horace and Juvenal), involving a speaker either urbane and witty (Horatian) or morally serious and dignified (Juvenalian); with informal or indirect satire, taking the form of a narrative rather than of direct address; and, finally, Menippean satire, which takes the form of extended dialogue and debate.<sup>4</sup> The typology is notable in at least two respects. First, it scarcely relieves the itchiness

<sup>3</sup> A. Preminger, ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, enlarged edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 738–740.

<sup>4</sup> An important, albeit idiosyncratic typology that seeks self-consciously to bridge the divide is offered by Northrop Frye; see his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), esp. pp. 223–239. A still strong interpretive tradition of satire, emergent from the 1960s in the work of a range of figures including not only Frye but Ronald Paulson, Irvin Ehrenpreis, Maynard Mack, and Edward Rosenheim, press the focus on text and historical context and address, with varying conclusions, the issues of authorial sanity. For a useful summary of these positions, and a valorous if (on my reading) only partially successful attempt to update the theory of satire, see Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Introduction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

<sup>1</sup> An initial version of this paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies in April 2000, but the current, revised version was delivered to faculty and students at the University of Lund in October 2004. Heartfelt thanks to the most stimulating and receptive audience in attendance for the seminar, from whom I learned much, and special thanks both for the invitation, and for especially stimulating theological and hermeneutical queries, to Dr. Werner Jeanrond.

<sup>2</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), 153.

the reader of satire may have felt at the qualitative definition, offering in its stead a formal delineation that is if anything at a further remove from readerly grappling than its qualitative counterpart. And, second, a moment's consideration affords the recognition that satire in its generic expression crosses even these relatively straightforward typologies. Is Voltaire's *Candide*, for example, best understood formally as a narrative of *Candide's* misadventures, or a dialogue and debate between Pangloss, *Candide*, and the reader?<sup>5</sup>

Interpretations of satire, perhaps as a result of these definitional conundra, tend to take recourse to one of two general tendencies: either to a historical glossing of the text, in which a series of parallels are drawn between the satiric work at hand and historical data, the latter usually contemporary (Voltaire's Pangloss equals, or approximates, the philosopher Leibniz; Swift's «Grand Academy of Lagado» remind readers of the Royal Society that counted Sir Isaac Newton in its membership); or to a psychologizing of the author, as either insane and utterly misanthropic (Swift, especially the Swift of the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* and «The Modest Proposal») or as willfully mercurial and possibly not serious, or at least not to be taken fully seriously (Voltaire).<sup>6</sup>

I shall argue in what follows that these common recourses in the interpretation of satire reflect the hermeneutical dilemma of its definition, and fail to capture the experience and essence of satiric meaning. Satire's elusiveness

<sup>5</sup> The issue of the implied narrator's attitude remains crucial for these questions in relation specifically to *Candide* and to *Gulliver's Travels*. Whether the answers are in the text or in authorial psychology is of course a matter for discussion, but important inroads to the right answer — in which the range of Swift's purposes are linked closely to the multiple roles he bestows upon Gulliver, by Edward Rosenheim in *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), esp. pp. 158–160. A useful supplement to Rosenheim's call to analysis of the text is the historical context provided by R.S. Crane: see «The Houyhnhymns, the Yahoos, and the History of Ideas,» in J.A. Mazzeo, *Reason and Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).

in terms of attitude (what does this really mean?) and sheer plasticity of form merit serious and sustained attention, however frustrating they may be; and these qualities — which constitute in many if not all respects the appeal of the genre — merit a new approach.

I propose an approach that begins from the recognition that satire presents its own paradox of declaration and withdrawal. Always trenchant in its critique of what it takes to be the faulty status quo, satire is in fact comparatively silent about a possible alternative vision to that reality.<sup>7</sup> Writers such as Swift and Voltaire construct their targets with an attention to detail that renders unmistakable, and usually unmysterious, the problem with the described order. Yet each is equally unmistakably, and mysteriously, inattentive to conveying a vision of the good, or the alternative social order with its implied under-

<sup>6</sup> The point is of course not to dispute that such approaches, and the questions and concerns they address, are irrelevant or without productive insight. It is rather that the recourse to historical antecedent or psychological profile, has not, to the best of my knowledge, contributed to resolving the paradox of a manifestly moral form of literary expression that affords its reader no positive sense of how to act or to be in the world. For an excellent example of the problem applied to the psychology of Swift, see F.R. Leavis in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), in which the word «negative» applies not to Swift's language but to his intellect, and he is compared unfavorably on that score to Blake. Whether right or wrong as a comparison, Leavis's judgment effectively elides the satiric edge by reflecting it back on authorial psyche. One might juxtapose his judgment with Swift's prescient comment in *The Battle of the Books*: «Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own: which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it» (R.A. Greenberg & W.B. Piper, eds. *The Writings of Jonathan Swift* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), p. 375.

<sup>7</sup> Critics typically waffle on the question of the clarity of satire's implied moral universe. So, e.g., Frye, who states that «satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear» and later that in satire «we must reach some kind of impersonal level, and that commits the attacker, *if only by implication*, to a moral standard» (*Anatomy*, pp. 223 and 225; italics mine).

standing and practice, that informs the critique and could, if honored, improve upon the indicted state of affairs. Vaguer than Wayne Booth's implied author,<sup>8</sup> satire juxtaposes a devastatingly clear picture of folly with a vexingly vague alternative vision. Given that the former ought to imply the latter — critique implies norm, and searing critique emphatic norm — the problem for the interpreter of satire, then, must begin with this fundamental paradox of satiric expression.

If this paradox is indeed fundamental to satiric expression,<sup>9</sup> it bears striking and perhaps suggestive affinities to the language of Christian «negative theology». Theologians throughout the Christian tradition have made a cornerstone of their endeavors the recognition of the paradox that language about God is both necessary and doomed to failure: they have sought in their writing to invoke presence by demarcating absence. Analyses of their linguistic practice, with special reference to the early fathers and their medieval successors, suggest that the innovations of theologians from Pseudo-Dionysius to Meister Eckhart to Søren Kierkegaard self-consciously cultivated a language which brought into explicit dialogue, even direct interchange, the language of positive attribution with the language of negation.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth recalling that the word «God» can and does function in discussion with an important dual reference. A proper name and an abstract noun, to believing Christians it is both the object of prayer and the designation of the underlying source and power of the universe. This dual service animated initial debates in early Christendom concerning, e.g., the Trinity. We can make this more concrete and specific for our purposes not through the invocation of dog-

matic debate but by recalling that, for early theologians particularly, the need for symbols with which to talk about God were not answered by the Scriptures with an abundance of sensate imagery that could be described as edifying. Scripture and also liturgy, for example, each present images of God as a rock, or a drunken warrior. The disjunction this bespeaks between belief and expression became a serious philosophical problem as it became fully apparent that such concerns applied not solely to what was unedifying, but even to the most unambiguously faithful and august pronouncements: God's greatness simply and utterly outstripped all human predication. Every available signifier — irrespective of its author's intention — necessarily falls short of its chosen Signified.

Yet words are essential to the manifest imperatives for the believing community: to proclaim the Word, and to worship. And in that context predications of comparatively noble creaturely ideals, such as goodness and justice, prove only nominally more successful than «the drunken warrior.» Early Christian theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine — writing theology in response to the positive if problematic formulations of revelation in the Scriptural texts — each recognized this problem, and each endorsed in their respective formulations the assertion that it is better to say what God is not, than to commit the heresy of presuming to say what God is. The resulting negations of the believing intellect («God is not this») thus have the advantage of being true, and of honoring the fact that god is utterly unlike anything else which we might deploy in simile or metaphor. Dissimilarity better reveals God because it propels the believer beyond the

<sup>8</sup> The *locus classicus* remains of course W. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> For an exception genealogy of the ambiguity of satiric invocation in literary and wider cultural expression, suggesting its derivation from the King James Version of the Bible, see C. Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination 1492–1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> In what follows I am especially indebted generally to the work of Bernard McGinn, esp. in *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991). On issues of ambivalent language, see also A. Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechtild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). The discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius and his wider relevance to theological signification is suggestively discussed by T. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

dangerous fallacy that symbols are adequate, itself a concern because it implicitly compromised the cherished unity of God as beyond all conceptions or notional formulations. In this way a better path might be cleared to the discovery of God as God.

We see here, I want to suggest, a theological paradox that parallels that which I am suggesting with respect to satire. In regard to satire we might consider, in this theological context, two epithets contributed respectively by Voltaire and Swift to the vocabulary of modernity: «Pangloss» and «yahoo». Each enjoys usage that is widespread, comprehensible, and fundamentally negative. «Pangloss» suggests a person who holds to the (naïve) belief that everything turns out for the best, and does so utterly heedless of the facts of life that argue, directly and eloquently, to the contrary. To refer to someone as «Pangloss» is to invoke a sort of blinded cheerfulness. We call someone a «yahoo» when we want to suggest that the person appears human but acts in ways that we judge sub-human and beneath the dignity of purportedly rational, civilized creatures. A yahoo has pretensions to humanity but lacks the complementary aspects and habits of character to support the claim, and is, ultimately, indistinguishable from an animal. Like the Houyhnhymns and Gulliver, we deploy the word — holding our noses — to distinguish ourselves from those noxious beings who lack our own good breeding and cultivation.

These epithets are not incidentally keywords that fuel the respective satiric thrusts of *Candide* and *Gulliver's Travels*. The crucial point — the essence of what I am terming the paradox of satire and its hermeneutical challenge to its interpreters — is that neither satiric work offers a parallel word or phrase — or even a recognizable candidate — as a counterpart. The reader is left without an ostensible alternative. No character in *Candide* is fully Pangloss' alter ego; and, while Swift provides an apparent structural antonym to the yahoos in their Houyhnhymn masters who reign in the world described in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, the words and actions of these rational horses do not finally provide Swift's reader with a fully realized emotional counterpart to the disgust that the yahoos evoke. Indeed the words and images associated with

them, like their Scriptural counterparts for the deity, fall short of the mark established, at least by Lemuel Gulliver — for their comprehensive wisdom and sagacity in establishing and directing an ordered, just society.

It follows from this that the theological paradox of naming God has as its counterpart the satiric paradox of naming the Good; but, whereas the modern tradition of theological scholarship has begun to deploy richly the resources of the tradition in recognition of this, literary scholarship on satire has foundered on the shoals of the psychological and the historical. Those of us who seek to understand satire better, to answer its hermeneutical dilemma, could do worse than to learn from our theological counterparts.

To that end I want to suggest that with particular reference to the senses of their endings, the satiric practices of Swift and Voltaire in *Gulliver's Travels* and in *Candide* bear signs of a parallel sense of the potential idolatry implied by any decisive invocation of the Good. In the remainder of this article I want to offer an interpretation of the efforts at closure in these two works. My approach has as its premise the hypothesis that generic forms display most prominently their essential purpose in the ways they achieve closure, in the events and the tone that shape their endings and our senses of them.<sup>11</sup> In its particular form of ending, I shall argue, satire seeks like negative theology to outline what everyone should surely recognize — but literally cannot say. In other words, how the satire ends embodies in its ambiguities of resolution the power and the limitation of the satiric art as both impulse and form.<sup>12</sup>

Let us turn, then, to the task of delineating a possible «negative ethic» of satire by beginning with the final refrain of *Candide*, uttered by its protagonist in response to Pangloss's final, monotonic declaration that everything has turned out for the best: «I know also ... that we must cultivate our garden.»<sup>13</sup> *Candide's* rejoinder

<sup>11</sup> The controlling book is F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction: with a new Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also his *The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

der becomes refrain when it becomes apparent that Pangloss has misunderstood this statement as making reference to the Garden of Eden, and Voltaire has his hero reassert the moral: «That is very well put ... but we must cultivate our garden.»

The immediate referent is, of course, the anonymous old man — «the Turk» — whom Candide, Pangloss, and Martin encounter as they return to their farm. Willfully ignorant of the affairs of the world, utterly absorbed and content in the comparatively tiny realm of his farm, the old man's fate is, as Candide reflects after they have left him, «preferable to that of the six kings with whom we had the honor of dining.» and whose dinner was, notably, interrupted by news of carnage in Constantinople. Martin's subsequent proposal that they resolve to «work without speculating ... It's the only way of rendering life bearable ...» serves as a coda for the emerging community Voltaire only briefly invokes in his ending, and in which everyone begins to exercise their respective talents. Withdrawal or escape into the countryside and its controlled environment has much to recommend it.<sup>14</sup> The more than implied retreat from journey and interaction in the world reverses decisively the fundamental motion of the book, and affords the

recognition that Candide, whose stalwart refusal to permit injury and abuse to dissuade his faith in his teacher, has finally seen the light. The reader is now given to understand that the reality of injury and loss have, in fact, taken their toll and overwhelmed the Panglossian idealism.

However understandable and even welcome such realism may be to the reader, it in fact does nothing to resolve the fundamental issues Voltaire raises in *Candide*: both its extended political and social critiques, and the well-worn but enduring and still urgent issue of theodicy, persist. The reader has been exposed, with trenchant humor and devastating detail, to the seemingly endless and inexhaustible capacity of human will and apparently random circumstance to destroy lives. Voltaire has richly detailed the baseness of the apparently noble, and the hollowness of the idealist. An unmistakable and central lesson has been to always already distrust appearance. *Candide* has trained us to look more deeply for what is real, knowing that to do so will almost inevitably reveal a rotten core. Simplicity alone is no antidote to so well-documented and — justified a base of suspicion. The logic of the narrative suggests that without its immediate closure, the reader would quickly discover some new, further reason not to conclude that the modest country estate is superior to the other forms of life we have discovered.

So Candide's pronouncement affords no real solution to the problems described in the text. At a minimum, it does next to nothing to mitigate the reader's now well-honed suspicions, the unassailable results of what she has been led to see. We scoff at Pangloss's confusion about the reference to the Garden of Eden because, if this text has taught us nothing else, it has taught us

<sup>12</sup> It may be important at this point to note a significant *caveat* that serves as a common, but in the end secondary, denominator to both satiric writers such as Swift and Voltaire and to theologians such as Augustine and Kierkegaard. This is their unstated, but far from unapparent presumption that the world is, in essence, «fallen», a cosmos in which sin reigns. It is thus anything but surprising that the satirist has so much grist at hand for the mill. It is crucial to distinguish this general disposition to understanding what William Congreve termed «The Ways of the World» from the satiric thrust of a Swift. The satiric impulse, I want to suggest, is not merely an expression of this general disposition, but a protest against a specific manifestation of it and — however implicit — a demand for change.

<sup>13</sup> The French is clear: «Je sais aussi, dit Candide, qu'il faut cultiver notre jardin.» And, subsequently, the final words of the tale: «Cela est bien dit, répondit Candide, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.» From Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme* (Paris: Larousse-Bordas, 1998), pp. 188, 189.

<sup>14</sup> The theme of country as refuge from the evils of the city is common to other eighteenth-century narrative genres, and is especially prominent in the early English novel. It is a crucial leitmotif in the conclusion of both Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749) and, most acutely, *Amelia* (1751). For discussion of this theme in relation to providence and the sense of ending in the novels, see R. Rosen-garten, *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence: Divine Design and the Incursions of Evil* (New York and London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2000).

that it is not possible to return to such innocence. It may be too harsh to say that the guileless are without excuse; but it would be all too accurate to say that they will almost certainly be trampled.

Yet innocence hardly captures the full tone of *Candide's* remark. The world invoked by Voltaire in his conclusion is a genuine alternative, previously unseen. While this option is not open to the reader, for the reasons just detailed, it does represent the necessary alternative that underscores the critique. Faults of logic do not compromise its capacity at least to imply an alternative that, however unrealistic both theoretically and practically, may nonetheless represent Voltaire's best judgment about what humanity can do positively to combat the ills he has so decisively documented. Its limitations, then, serve to underscore the source of the critique and its perduring concern even as it permits the narrative to close.

It is worthy of note that closure here is crucial: Voltaire's ongoing catalogue of malfeasance would be unsustainable over a longer haul. The brief narrative that is *Candide* has, at this point, already more than amply made its point, and in the process it has tested the reader's patience despite its compact form. At the same time, closure requires resolution, and critique implies some positive vision or alternative. Voltaire's major mode is satiric because, we may surmise, he is in the end unsure about his capacity to articulate a fully positive alternative vision to his controlling satiric ethos. That he must do so nonetheless suggests a parallel to the dialectical practice of negative theology: the need, at one and the same time, to use language while suspecting its capacities. Voltaire in closing *Candide* exhibits the paradoxical need to reveal what cannot be revealed: namely, the vision of the Good that informs his satire. It is, both formally and conceptually, necessary and insufficient, and outlined primarily by the negative details of the alternative ways of being in the world (which have themselves been shown to be insufficient). In refusing to amplify the world of the Turk with anything like a richness of detail parallel to what we have seen, Voltaire draws back from claiming too much even as he invokes

it and permits it to provide the closing narrative surcease on *Candide's* trials and tribulations.

A similar dialectic is given even fuller elaboration by Swift in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*. Having followed Gulliver into worlds freakishly small (Lilliput in Book I) and alarmingly large (Brobdingnag in Book II), and then into a labyrinth of episodic oddities (Book III), Swift concludes the *Travels* with Gulliver's experience on the remote island inhabited by the Houyhnhymns and the yahoos. Swift forces the reader to share the full scope of Gulliver's reaction to the yahoos, from his initial, bitter revulsion and disbelief that the Houyhnhymns actually supposed he was one of them (an impression that at least one importunate yahoo female shared, to Gulliver's horror) through the familiar process of reversal and recognition in which Gulliver comes to accept, reluctantly but with a sense of inevitability, that he hovers more dangerously close to being a yahoo than even his own Houyhnhymn masters may realize.

Swift then shifts the reader's orientation, however, by presenting a further dilemma. How are we to understand Gulliver's attraction to his Houyhnhymn hosts? There are two dimensions to this attraction: it distinguishes him from the yahoos, and it is unqualified. In contrast to the yahoos, Gulliver is utterly compliant and obedient to the rulers of this unnamed country, and he readily and even with alacrity seeks to emulate these horses. The effect is to present the reader, who has identified throughout with Gulliver and now certainly empathizes deeply with him, with a dilemma: are humans yahoos, or are they Houyhnhymns? Just as we might wish in *Candide* for a third alternative to the utterly corrupt and the seemingly idyllic social settings presented by Voltaire, so Swift's reader badly wishes for a third anthropological alternative.

Such an option in *Gulliver's Travels* achieves the closest approximation Swift is willing to offer in Gulliver's utterly cogent plea for clemency when informed that the Assembly of the Houyhnhymns has determined, after all due deliberation, that Gulliver must leave their country because he poses a danger as the potential leader of rebel yahoo forces. While longer than *Candide's* refrain, it is equally trenchant and disruptive of the narrative flow:

I answered, in a faint voice, that Death would have been too great an Happiness; that although I could not blame the Assembly's *Exhortation*, or the Urgency of his Friends; yet in my weak and corrupt Judgment, I thought it might consist with Reason to have been less rigorous. That, I could not swim a League, and probably the nearest Land to theirs might be distant above an Hundred: That, many Materials, necessary for making a small Vessel to carry me off, were wholly wanting in this Country, which, however, I would attempt in Obedience and Gratitude to his Honour, although I concluded the thing to be impossible, and therefore looked on myself as already devoted to Destruction. That, the certain prospect of an unnatural Death, was the least of my Evils; For, supposing I should escape with my Life by some strange Adventure, how could I think with Temper, of passing my Days among *Yahoos*, and relapsing into my old corruptions, for want of Examples to lead and keep me within the Paths of Virtue.<sup>154</sup>

Gulliver's reverence for the Houyhnhymns here renders him obedient in spite of his disagreement, and in the process of articulating his response Swift permits the reader to glimpse, ever so briefly, speech in which head and heart unite. We glimpse an alternative — composed equally of vaunted Houyhnhymn rationality and yahoo instinctive reaction — that tempers justice with mercy. Not incidentally the speech makes plain that Gulliver could never pose the threat that the Assembly fears, at least on his own terms (and indeed Gulliver subsequently pledges that if his forecast is in error and he does survive, he will spend the remainder of his days praising the Houyhnhymns to any who will listen — a promise he keeps, with comic but distressing implications, when he returns to England and finds his greatest comfort residing in a barn with his horses).

However notable and even attractive to Swift's readers, Gulliver's speech produces no discernible reaction from the Houyhnhymn master. As a result, while it is unmistakably a speech, and it arrests the reader's attention, its

standing within the narrative is in fact fleeting and brief precisely because Gulliver cannot get out of his own skin to remark its irony, which is in any case not his usual recourse. The remainder of the *Travels* as it moves to closure enacts this paradox, rendering it all the more vexing because Gulliver is no ally to any attempt by the reader to find fault with the Houyhnhymn worldview. Effectively divorced from her only spokesperson in the text, the reader is left, in a nice irony, at sea: there is no way to corroborate that Gulliver's moment was more than illusion, much less that it might inform an alternative vision to the heartless cruelty of the social universe Gulliver himself so appreciates, and indeed continues to appreciate in the aftermath of his departure and successful return to England.

*Gulliver's Travels* presents a parallel ambiguity about the good to that discovered in *Candide*: while the focus is more anthropological than social, the reader seeks and does not find a more extended articulation of Gulliver's insight and with it a further differentiation of yahoo and Houyhnhymn that includes an even-handed assessment of their qualities, good and bad. That alternative remains entirely implied, and its articulate moment obscured by its very voice's subsequent avowals of loyalty and admiration for the creatures whose paranoia fuels their failure to know him for who, and what, he is.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Rawson, in *God, Gulliver, and Genocide*, offers what we might term, borrowing from Harold Bloom, the definitively «strong» reading of Book IV, arguing for a tradition of «the Yahoo stereotype in the European imagination» (11) that becomes the *de facto* object of the human (and, indeed, the divine) propensity to exterminate. Satire as a literary form occupies a liminal space between expression and implementation: thus, Rawson writes of its excoriative declarations, «We mean it, we don't mean it, and don't not mean it.» (vii). The complementary implications — that the Houyhnhymns treat Gulliver with brutal and ruthless indifference, effectively consigning him to death; and, at the same time, that in doing so they are acting very much like humans and, indeed, not irrationally — seems to me to capture precisely the satiric paradox in tone and substance. The rhetorical attitude Rawson describes affords an important parallel to the

<sup>15</sup> R. A. Greenberg, ed., *Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift*, sec. ed., (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), p. 245.

While Swift's satiric problem has to do with the proper understanding of the human in relation to reason and civility, Voltaire's text addresses the possibility of a social order on the micro-level that can adequately address the stresses and unhappiness of society on the macro-level. Yet the distinctive questions and dilemmas respectively posed by the anthropological and the social do not obscure the common ways in which each writer is, in fact, recognizably satiric: each acknowledges, albeit briefly, the necessity to outline or allude to the positive alternative, the vision of the Good, that informs the satiric critique. In Voltaire, this takes expression in a brief invocation that is connected to the closure of a narrative that cannot proceed much farther without compromising the reader's credulity. (The point has been made.) In Swift, this takes expression in a similarly brief invocation that serves not closure, but the placement of the reader on the horns of an excruciating dilemma, for which the narrative provides no succor, concerning the differentiation of the rational and animal tendencies of the human.

While parallel in its expression about the good, it is crucial to note as well the utterly contrasting formal methods by which these texts achieve this expression, or perhaps better enact this anxiety. *Candide's* utterance is epigrammatic, appropriately declarative and responsorial, and enacts itself the closure of a text that would otherwise become overlong. *Gulliver's* utterance is more elaborate, in the subjunctive mode, and provides the momentary counterpoint to a fuller elaboration of the logic of yahoo and

Houyhnhymn as they play out in *Gulliver's* mind. We need to see *Gulliver*, returned to England and resolved never to travel again, spending as much time as he can with horses in stables and outside common social intercourse, to appreciate fully what is being said, and what not said, about the Good. In this we see the formal plasticity of satiric expression, which is the resilient formal complement to its characteristic combination of expressive power and compromised programmatic statement.

Like negative theology, then, we see that satire displays an almost innate resistance to positive invocation, and almost an innate capacity to swerve away when this alternative, positive affirmation approaches the foreground. Both God and the Good defy positive articulation, and both negative theology and satire reflect a common ill ease at the prospect of articulating these norms that manifestly inform their respective projects. Both satire and negative theology reflect an aversion to idolatry, a common recognition that human invocation is at least as likely to predicate the false as the true. What the negative theologians deployed as a hermeneutical principle also informs the work of the satirist. We can see here both the immense power and the inherent limits of the satirist's troubled and tortured art. It is a relation of a kind of writing to the Good that parallels precisely the relation of writing to God among the negative theologians. The first step in addressing the hermeneutical challenge presented by the satiric — in reconciling the tone of the satiric and the genre of satire — is to recognize its paradox of affirmation and negation. Through it, readers may begin to capture the unique juxtaposition of suasive strength and qualification that comprises the deepest hermeneutical challenge presented to the humble reader by those practitioners of truly savage indignation.

mean it.» (vii). The complementary implications earlier discussion of negative theology, which is also means, but doesn't mean, but doesn't *not* mean what it predicates of the deity.

