

Jonathan Swift

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Defoe's 'Robinson Crusoe' and Swifts 'The Travels of Gulliver' although obviously written for adults, survive to this day as the quintessential children's stories. If ever the epithet 'classical' has a meaning, it relates to those two books. 'Robinson Crusoe' I first encountered in a simplified and illustrated version for children. It remains for that reason my favourite, although I have not reread it for over thirty years. Gulliver ought to satisfy the childish imagination even more, and in a sense it did. This book I might initially encountered in simplified, not to say comically stripped versions, although I read with pleasure a full Swedish translation of it at the verge of teenage-hood, including the two additional books, which are usually not presented to children (and maybe for good reasons). Swift, perhaps even more than Defoe, has always intrigued me, although I have not read anything else by him, not even his 'Modest Proposal', so it is with a certain curiosity I open the pages of the biography I bought several years ago.

It turns out to be written with some flair. Maybe the fact that Swift being born in the 17th century (1667 to be exact) makes for a modest amount of documentation. This of course has the drawback of laying the field open for unbridled speculation, some of which the author engages in, tongue in cheek, but basically it saves the reader from trying to digest more than he is willing to.

Swifts father died very young, in fact, before the birth of Swift himself. The young guy along with an older sister we brought up by his fathers relatives in Ireland, while his mother returned to her origins in England. Consequently during the formative childhood years, Swift saw very little of her, nevertheless upon her death he was able to feel a certain filial sadness and come to grips with the predicament that strikes you when your surviving parent dies, namely that there is no longer anything between you and eternity.

Swift came of age at the end of the 17th century, when he also transferred to England. Those years were critical ones, coming as they did as a culmination of the troubled times that had lasted for over half a century. James II was eventually disposed and the Dutch William of Orange and his spouse, the daughter Mary of the former, assumed a dual stewardship, sealing the tumultuous Jacobite era. Politically it was dangerous times, when your affiliations could literally mean life or death. Swift had secured the mentorship of an influential family friend - William Temple, and lived at his mansion, his status somehow on the border of being a family relation and a trusted employee. Temple had high connections, including those with the Monarch and certainly this opened doors for Swift, doors which otherwise would have been closed. Relations with the Temples cannot always have been very smooth, there were too many ambiguities in the situation to allow this, and besides, Swift was not an easy person to get along with, sharp, cantankerous, strong-willed. What else do you expect of a famous wit and writer of acid satire? Not surprisingly he displayed a curious blend of servility and disdain, no doubt necessary in order to get on in life. His official life so to speak, spans but a short period, but during that time he managed

to establish himself in London literary circles by spending time in the then fashionable coffee-houses thereby befriend not only literati such as the successful cripple Alexander Pope along with Addison and Steele, but also the personal physician to the Queen Mary. More importantly he befriended Robert Harley, the Earl of Oxford and Henry St. John Bolingbroke, leading ministers of the Tory cabinet in the early 18th century. The two ministers, one of them serving as Prime minister, did not get along too well with each other, but supposedly each of them splendidly with Swift, whose wit and conversation they greatly treasured. Their political fortunes came to an end in 1714, maybe partly due to their mutual discord, and a Whig administration under Walpole took control. Their reputations had suffered irrevocably, both being suspected of Jacobite sympathies. Harley as a result had to endure two years of imprisonment in the Tower, while Bolingbroke was forced into exile to France, from where he eventually returned with a French wife. Their fall from grace also ended the enhanced politically and literary position of Swift and much to his regret his cultivation of the mighty had not resulted in what he had ultimately coveted, namely a nice see, instead he had to be content with a modest improvement of his Irish Vicarage to becoming a Dean in Dublin, where he was to spend most of the remainder of his life. Although Swift was not a party-man, how could you have expected that of him; his affinities were always with the Tory, and in his Gullivers he heaps abuse on the Whigs. He shared of course many sentiments prevailing with the conservatives, including the pivotal role to be played by religion, although of course his own personal piety is up for doubts.

Swift never married, and that provides a potential problem for a biographer, because after all what has more human interest than the sexual life, frustrations and triumphs alike, of the protagonist? Luckily for a modern biographer (and reader?) there are (at least) two women in his life, that can provide enough of a titillation. Esther Johnson, more known as 'Stella' (1681-1728) and Hester Vanhomrigh referred to as Vanessa (1788-1723), with whom he conducted long-term correspondences and flirtations. Not surprisingly the author spends a lot of time trying to elucidate the nature of those relationships, were they ever consummated? Documentation is too scanty to provide definite answers, but rich enough to give tantalizing hints. It is also quite possible that Swift does, however, get the impression that the relationship with Stella, whom he already met during his time at Temple, in whose household she was a young member, was the warmest and deepest one. But whether it was sexual is another matter, in spite of rumours later to flourish to the effect that they had been secretly married back in 1716. With Vanessa he wrote less and talked more, being a very frequent visitor to her London home. which she shared with her mother, not only having coffee with her but also partaking regularly at the family meals. Swift was almost twenty years older and must have, at least by the mother, be seen as a mature suitor, whose intentions hopefully were honest. But his relations to Vanessa definitely cooled once she followed him to Ireland. That was the domain of Stella and her older companion, the sweet relationship with which, Swift was exceedingly reluctant to jeopardize.

One learns as a matter of curious trivia, that Swift was a believer in exercise to keep fit and stay immune to disease. He counted the number of steps he took, close to six thousand in an hour, and he often went riding or taking long walks. As he got older he scared the

wits out of his housekeeper by charging up and down the stairs in his deanery. She feared for his life, lest he managed not to slip and fall. His sound life notwithstanding (or rather his attempts at such) he could not evade eventual dementia, and was pronounced a few years before his death in 1645 (aged 78) to be of unsound mind.

The reputation of Swift, along with that of his almost contemporary Defoe, is well-grounded, and will remain so in the foreseeable future. 'Gulliver's travel' is of course an allegory, and a satirical one at that, and satire would be his strongest suit, although being a child of his times, he often tried his hand at poetry, the reputation of which no doubt was far stronger than that of other literary genres. But what he wrote in this regard would have had no interest now, although perfectly competent and often clever, had it not been that it was of the hand of Swift himself¹

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¹ Still one cannot but recall his little observation on lice that feeds on lice and which in their turn have lice and so ad infinitum.