The Discourse of Modernism

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Our imagination, dominated as it is by our modes of visualizing and by the familiar Euclidean concepts, is competent to grasp only piecemeal and gradually Lobachevski's views. We must suffer ourselves to be led here rather by mathematical concepts than by sensuous images derived from a single narrow portion of space. But we must grant, nevertheless, that the quantitative mathematical concepts by which we through our own initiative and within a certain arbitrary scope represent the facts of geometrical experience, do not reproduce the latter with absolute exactitude. Different ideas can express the same facts with the same exactness in the domain accessible to observation. The facts must hence be carefully distinguished from the intellectual constructs the formation of which they suggested.

—Ernst Mach, “Space and Geometry from the Point of View of Physical Inquiry”

Galileo had been condemned for claiming that what his accusers called a mathematical fiction capable only of satisfying the appearances was in fact the true picture of the way things work in the world. We have seen that for Bacon and for Descartes the order of concepts, whether systematized mathematically or not, can indeed be claimed to provide such a true picture. Whatever the manifold differences between these two thinkers, at its core that is what their use of the word ‘method’ signifies.

For both these philosophers, as for the vast majority of their successors certainly until the end of the nineteenth century (ignoring relatively minor variations as to viewpoints and overlapping as to period), there is just one right method. There is, in other words, just one method in which conceptual order, sense perception, and world order correspond: it may be referred to in shorthand as ‘Euclideanism.’ Apart from its use of an analytico-referential discourse, it involves the claim that a Euclidean plane geometry of parallel and right angle is the order of ‘common sense,’ and that this order of common sense (though we may make obvious, and corrigible, mis-
takes) is the order of objective reality. This order is the right ('legitimate') one and it is the only one.

This does not mean that other orders are inconceivable. On the contrary, as the epigraph from Ernst Mach indicates, it is possible to compose other orders that do 'correspond' to the 'facts' and that can provide us with some other kind of usable knowledge of them. Such orders do not 'reproduce' the facts, however. Rather they give us an intellectual 'construct' suggested by the facts. No longer are these 'facts' themselves thought of, as they still were to some degree by Galileo, Bacon, and Descartes, as a construct of the interaction of human system and the world. They precede any such construct and they are discoverable by common sense ('Euclidean') without any particular mathematical construct we may be able to compose in order to 'account for' such facts, to make them in some way useful. We may say, then, that there is one right order (the dominant one of 'common sense'), but any number of usable constructs. Such a construct is no more than a transcript of nature into the coherence of a particular (and "arbitrary," writes Mach) language. "What the scientist aims at," says Albert Einstein, "is to secure a logically consistent transcript of nature. Logic is for him what the laws of proportion and perspective are to the painter."

By the time Einstein's remark was recorded, of course, the notion that there is only one 'natural' order but several possible transcripts of it was considerably blurred—though not so much for Einstein himself, who remained largely faithful to his early belief that Mach's view was correct in all essentials. Nor by this time would such a natural order be thought of as Euclidean, in any case. The main point here, though, is not so much the claim concerning the particular order of Euclid as the claim that there is just one right order. Furthermore, since this order is taken as reproducing the facts before they are intellectually 'constructed,' its common sense is no longer (and not yet again) assumed to be "theory-laden." The order is 'transparent.'

That order is repeated in all the discourses of knowledge, which, as we have seen, form parallel and 'different' interpretations of a single reality, 'starting' (here) with Kepler's notes to the Somnium.

1. From an essay originally written, together with two others, especially for The Monist and published there in English in 1903. All three are available in Ernst Mach, Space and Geometry in the Light of Physiological, Psychological, and Physical Inquiry, tr. Thomas J. McCormack (1906; rpt. La Salle, Ill., 1960); the quotation is from p. 132.

These parallel interpretations do not meet except in a ‘cross-section’ that might be made through them. In a discussion of a ‘literary’ text, whose order may be viewed at one level as in every way comparable to the order of nature, such a cross-section would be the ‘meaning’ of a particular moment of the text: in one way such a ‘meaning’ would be unlimited, because one could always compose a new parallel and thereby add ‘more’ meaning (as in the various critical interpretations of Crusoe, the ‘reasons’ given for his story); in another it is strictly limited, because the ‘logic’ of any parallel is the same as that of all the others. More generally, the cross-section that might be taken of all the discourses of knowledge would represent the totality of the real at the moment it is taken; the ‘real’ being simply the accumulated meanings of the various “types” of discourse whose sum is the discursive class characterizing our episteme.3

Because these various discourses (the “types”) run parallel to one another, such a cross-section will make possible the “connecting and transferring [of] the observations of one art to the use of others” of which we saw Bacon write. The cross-section gives us the ‘content’ of the real, the variables, so to speak, which are its events and objects; while the order of the real, its process in time and its ‘motion,’ are given by the constants of the logic that alone underlies all the various ‘interpretations.’ These constants appear to correspond, in a general way, to the model of what I am calling the “discourse of experimentalism” or “analytico-referential discourse.”

Thus, for example, John Stuart Mill will be able to admire what he considers the Continental method of history and, while criticizing its “Cartesianism,” to view its methodological order as essentially cor-

3. I need hardly add that such a cross-section is what I have sought to take with regard to Kepler, Cyrano, and Defoe, of which the ‘lists’ of sequences form the résumé. It is what Lévi-Strauss has sought to do, in a very different way, with regard to myth. Such an attempt to discover “meaning” is what I have had in mind in the various references to Wittgenstein’s lion and when, at the beginning of Chapter 3, I spoke of the “betrayal” due to the “Euclideanism of the textual critic.” Clearly such an activity necessarily views the text (any discourse indeed) in terms of forms of knowledge which have become habitual to us yet which we are showing even here to be but the outcome of developments in discourse. This outcome has already been put into question from many points of view: as to its epistemological ‘reliability,’ its social utility, its moral and political desirability. The only alternative to this for us, in so far as our present is concerned (it is a mighty difficult task to escape a heritage, as Bacon constantly acknowledged), is possibly the deconstruction of the very models which the seventeenth century built up for us. Such at least is the claim of Derrida and his followers, though it may be doubted whether such ‘deconstruction’ can be undertaken save in terms of the very models it seeks to undo. If that is so, one may wonder whether it can escape them: is this the position of Gulliver’s Travels? In any case, we may be permitted to use such models to examine the texts which created them—understanding that our use of these models is put into question by, among other things, the series of occultations that proved necessary for their installation.
rect. He criticizes its absolutism, its apriority, and its ‘self-contained’ nature, but is able to suggest a way to adjust the method so that it will become the right one: for what is above all important is the kind of order it conceives and the kind of relation it sets up between historical facts and that order. It is the latter, not the former, which Mill corrects. This adjusted method, then, “consists in attempting, by a study and analysis of the general facts of history, to discover . . . the law of progress; which law, once ascertained, must . . . enable us to predict future events, just as after a few terms in an infinite series in algebra we are able to detect the principle of regularity in this formation, and to predict the rest of the series to any number of terms we please.”

Mill disagrees with the assumption of the Continental philosophers that the “order” of these facts will produce a “law of nature,” but he does affirm that it would produce “an empirical law,” itself dependent on “psychological and ethological laws” and on “the concurrence of deduction a priori with historical evidence.” Still, the aforementioned “empirical law” will become “scientific law” once the more fundamental “psychological and ethological laws” and the agreement (“concurrence”) of method and fact (“evidence”) have been properly taken into account. Though Mill would limit the extent of the predictions made possible by such scientific law, nevertheless the basic concept of methodical praxis remains that of which I have been speaking. The Cartesian cast of the Continental notion of history and law has been readjusted, so to speak, to fit in with a Baconian-style empiricism, but the relation of fact and law remains the same, save that the ‘dialectic of knowing’ has been added. What is the case for the “method of history” is likewise the case for all other discourses.

Like the parallels of Euclid, then, these various types of discourse never meet (though one may bisect them with the line of a ‘cross-section’). They are separated into what were to become quite rigidly compartmentalized ‘disciplines.’ They are objective and perfectly ‘general,’ in the sense that no individual need, or indeed can, take responsibility for them: they are institutions. For on the one side of these discursive types lies their common referent, the real, while on the other is their common ordering: that of analysis, the experimental order. They are, then, both true and right. They depend on no one; they ‘just are.’

By the time Defoe and Swift are writing this episteme is consolidated. But even in a Cyrano a new departure is signaled by the very

opening lines of the novel ("The moon was full . . ."), abrupt and ‘realistic,’ already representative of what Valéry was eventually to criticize in the ‘traditional’ novel ("La marquise sortit . . ."). The beginning of romance, and even of such parodies of romance as Sorel’s Francion, was considerably more ‘Homeric’ in tone and provides the reader with a much more deliberately fictional entrance to his matter.5 Of course, realism within the story itself will be abetted by claims made in prefaces and introductions by “editors” and “friends” of the “real” author/protagonist of the story, and similar devices.

The beginning of the Lune marks an overt claim to be a representation of reality, an empirical ordering of time, place, and substance. It is a challenge to traditional prose fiction; but at the same time such a claim puts in question any discursive rendering of the real, even though such a rendering, as any novel says, is all we have. At one level, Cyrano’s two novels seek to deal with that problematic. Eventually it will have been dealt with, and a Defoe can get on with telling things as they really are. This, too, is the case with Swift. The difficulty posed here is that how things are, at least as far as humanity is concerned, is rather unpleasant. This being so, the most suitable course of action is that which will best permit us to put up with the unpleasantness: both Gulliver and Candide will decide to sit things out in their gardens.

For Swift the discourse of experimentalism may be no more than the best road to knowledge available to us, and we should not rely on it too heavily: that way madness or foolishness lies, an excess of pride or an exaggerated horror of humanity. Thus, in Glubbdubdrib, Lemuel Gulliver, that typical representative of the English middle classes, comes face to face with Aristotle, the essential philosopher of common sense (though he would doubtless not have been so considered by most of Gulliver’s contemporaries). The two of them together meet with Gassendi and Descartes, those two archetypal philosophical adversaries of the seventeenth century, and Aristotle finds himself obliged to remark “that new Systems of Nature were but new Fashions, which would vary in every Age; and even those who pretend to demonstrate them from Mathematical Principles, would flourish but a short Period of Time, and be out of Vogue when that was determined.”6

5. This is true, too, of the pastoral tradition, but not of the Spanish picaresque novels or, come to that, of Don Quijote itself.

Of course, Aristotle’s views may not be too reliable either: he is old and stooped, his face is “meager, his Hair lank and thin, and his Voice hollow” (p. 197). Aristotle’s own system may be as hollow as all others are said to be. Swift appears to underscore the permanent inconclusiveness of method, but in a rather different spirit from the open-endedness which is inscribed in the very discourse itself. To be sure, Gulliver’s voyages could well become as unlimited as those we saw earlier. They could be an echo of Bacon’s explicit progression, of Crusoe’s espousal of the whole process from base to product with its achieved goal of possession and authority, of utility and power. This does not happen: they are brought to a halt, and there is a kind of stock-taking, a suggestion that improvements may be possible even now, though it is not clear how they may be undertaken.

There lies the point, however. We are not being forced to choose between Yahoo and Houyhnhnm; nor are we pushed to select the middle way of Pedro de Mendez, or even of Gulliver himself at certain moments. But nor are we shown that humanity is irredeemable. The degenerate behavior of the Yahoos is abhorrent in all ways (as is that of their European counterparts), but the point surely is that it is a degeneracy, and recognized as such by all: it started out as something better, and that something was not the innocence of the Garden but the civilized experience of the first European couple to have appeared in the land of the Houyhnhnms. The behavior of the Houyhnhnms is usually admirable—there can surely be no question about that, and only a willful misreading could claim that either Gulliver or Swift saw it otherwise. Admirable as it is, however, it is by no means as perfect as some criticism has sought to suggest.

I will seek to show that this behavior follows the discourse of experimentalism, and that its flaws are those of that discourse. The stock-taking of the conclusion suggests that this discourse with all its flaws is the best we have and we must make do with it. These flaws can even be reduced in their effect: the Houyhnhnms will stay in their own country, Gulliver will enjoy his “own Speculations in [his] little Garden at Redriff” (p. 295), and later still will live “retired” in the country “near Newark, in Nottinghamshire” (p. 9). Presumably others could also keep to their own affairs.

Swift suggests that the ‘absence at the centre,’ of which I have spoken earlier, is to some degree reducible. Morally man cannot be perfected, but he can be made relatively sociable; epistemologically some kind of knowledge of the real is available, but it is neither infinite nor, perhaps, unlimited. The goal of completeness, in any domain whatsoever, may be unrealizable, but that does not provide a
reason for looking upon *Gulliver’s Travels*, and especially the conclud­ing “Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms,” as entirely ‘pes­sismistic.’ Man may be fairly revolting on the whole, but he can learn from the Houyhnhnms: as they have ‘learned’ from him, for the order of all such learning is now that of analysis and referentiality. Perhaps this is one reason why the eighteenth and nineteenth cen­turies gradually came to treat Swift as such a pariah. In an age that believed in unlimited progress and the perfectibility of man, he has taken the discourse of that progressive man and shown not so much its flaws, its lack of perfection in its present state of development (which might be supposed corrigible), as its absolute lack of perfec­tibility.

Nevertheless, neither for Gulliver nor for the Houyhnhnms nor, it would seem, for Swift himself, is there ever any question as to the necessity of the discourse they use. Imperfect it may be, but it is all we have. That discourse is always supposed to have a precise refer­ent and a precise signified whose quality may vary according to the society using (and used by) it but which is certainly representative of a more or less readily definable reality—social, ethical, historical, physical, and so on. There is never any question as to the way in which discourse means or as to the way in which it controls what it grasps.

Gulliver always learns a new language by first learning the names of things. Those who can ‘reason’ by speech are quite naturally the rulers: speech, reason, and power are naturally concomitant. As the “master” Houyhnhnm puts it: “if it were possible there could be any Country where *Yahoos* alone were endued with Reason, they cer­tainly must be the governing Animals” (p. 242). In Brobdingnag the King had taken Gulliver for “a piece of Clock-work” until he discov­ered that what Gulliver “delivered” with his “Voice” was “regular and rational” (p. 103). The master Houyhnhnm is “astonished at [his] Capacity for Speech and Reason” (p. 237).

These are commonplace, reminiscences of much that we have already seen. But it is precisely as commonplace that they are im­portant. There is no question at all but that the Houyhnhnms’ no­tion of reason and its relation with speech on the one hand (for they “have not the least Idea of Books or Literature,” p. 235) and with facts on the other is that of analysis and reference, is that of experi­mentalism. This will be considered at greater length when I come to

7. And, e.g., “the Ship was made by Creatures like myself, who in all the Countries I had travelled, as well as in my own, were the only governing, rational Animals” (p. 298).

8. This orality and the fact that they do not use money (p. 251) are two of the very
speak a little later of the Houyhnhnms' idea of what constitutes knowledge. Let us content ourselves for the moment with one very minor example that occurs shortly after Gulliver has landed in the country of the Houyhnhnms and when he is being examined by the first two horses: "They were under great Perplexity about my Shoes and Stockings, which they felt very often, neighing to each other, and using various Gestures, not unlike those of a Philosopher [natural scientist], when he would attempt to solve some new and difficult Phaenomenon" (p. 226).

Although Gulliver does eventually land in a country where a particular order is maintained, the beginning of his fourth voyage can scarcely be thought overly auspicious. Man's capacity for control might reasonably be wondered about. Of two captains, the one, "Captain Pocock of Bristol, . . . an honest Man, and a good Sailor," succeeds only in losing his own life and those of his entire crew "but one Cabbin-Boy," because, says Gulliver, he was "a little too positive in his own Opinions, which was the Cause of his Destruction, as it hath been of several others" (p. 221); the other, Gulliver himself, is overwhelmed by his crew, "debauched" by the buccaneering recruits picked up in the West Indies (p. 222).

Rational systems which oppose civilized man to the state of mere nature and which propose the supremacy of the individual (both over nature and over mankind) are cast into doubt: the first by nature itself (for Pocock perished in a storm), the second by Gulliver's overthrow. In a conflictual system it is apparent that only one participant can come out on top: there will always be those who rule, those who have and who use knowledge and power, and those who are ruled, who are used by knowledge and power. Crusoe avoided this difficulty by means of now generalized ruses and occultations, thus making the system appear not to be conflictual at all. At the beginning of Gulliver's fourth voyage the roles of ruler and ruled are reversed when
the buccaneers seize power, and this conflictual aspect of things is laid bare once again in a kind of degeneracy which prefigures those others of which so much will be made: that of the Yahoos, and that of the Europeans.

The process is not laid bare in order to be replaced by something else, however, or even reworked in any way. On the contrary, Gulliver will find himself in a situation that reconfirms the familiar structure of discourse. In his analysis of the all too well known "excremental" nature of the voyage to the Houyhnhnms (starting with Gulliver's near "stifling" with excrement at the hands of the Yahoos, p. 224), and in particular of the passage where Gulliver describes European medical practices to his Houyhnhnm master (pp. 253–54), Jacques Ehrmann associated (as others have) the "reversal" of the "natural" functions of the body's orifices with a symbolic attempt to overcome the "distance" introduced between interior and exterior by the advent of civilization, with the search for a way to express the "interior" in the familiar terms of an exterior perception: this reversal would mark a kind of despairing attempt to experience once again that proximity with nature, that participation in the life of nature, broken forever by civilization. Man is supposed to have made a break from nature, civilization to have made a beginning by means of a rupture from the brutish and nasty life of the beasts—or, alternatively, to have broken the bonds of sympathy which united him with nature in the idyll of the Garden. Ehrmann remarks: "This origin (the birth of the individual, of 'civilization') consecrates—according to this tradition of thought—the beginning of interiority (of the 'inside'). Death marks its end. 'Art,' 'culture,' thus represents a desperate attempt to utter interiority and so to oppose death taken as an expulsion towards exteriority."9

Gulliver's critique of European medical practices would therefore be a critique of the whole tradition of thought underlying it. For themselves, of course, the Houyhnhnms would not need to worry, for the harmony of their way of life with nature is such that they are never ill. The Houyhnhnms themselves would thus be the inhabitants of a utopia in which the difference of interior and exterior has never been made, in which the rupture has never occurred—which does not prevent them from applying an improved version of the European medical practice to the Yahoos, who have experienced that rupture (at one time).

10. Which is why they are 'degenerate' and not simply brutes in a state of innocence: otherwise there could be no explanation for their difference from the Houy-
I do not believe this to be the case: Gulliver does not find himself in a country that enjoys the state of innocence—even though “Houyhnhnm” may mean “in its Etymology, the Perfection of Nature” (p. 235). He finds himself in a country in which a particular discursive ‘logic’ has found its least unsatisfactory extension. As far as Gulliver is concerned man cannot escape his brutal instincts unless he follows that extension. The European way of life does not give evidence of a ‘false’ use of reason, according to the Houyhnhnm, it gives evidence of a degenerate use: in effect the inhabitants of Europe do not use reason at all. The Yahoos may be physically degenerate, but Europeans are morally so, because “instead of Reason, [they] were only possessed,” says Gulliver’s master “of some Quality fitted to increase [their] natural Vices” (p. 248). Or, as Gulliver says a little later, the Houyhnhnm “looked upon us as a Sort of Animals to whose Share, by what Accident he could not conjecture, some small Pittance of Reason had fallen, whereof we made no other Use than by its Assistance to aggravate our natural Corruptions, and to acquire new ones which Nature had not given us” (p. 259). But this is to deprive Europeans of all reason whatsoever, because, as will be repeated several times, a rational creature cannot act irrationally, and vice is irrational; therefore a vicious person cannot be rational.

Houyhnhnhmland does not give us a picture of a state of innocence: left to itself nature is vicious, corruption is ‘natural.’ Gulliver’s view is entirely that of Hobbes. There is no return to a prelapsarian condition and Gulliver does not make one. What he finds is a right use of reason—so, at least, the Houyhnhnm (and Gulliver) never tires of implying. Since there cannot be a ‘false’ use of reason, for that would be contrary to reason and therefore excluded by definition, the Houyhnhnm is obliged to argue that Europeans have some other quality instead of reason. But this argument does not change the structure and organization of what may be considered reason: it simply opines that Europeans have yet to learn to follow it. It is this that Gulliver will come to find in Houyhnhnhmland, not its denial.

It is true that the voyage starts with the apparent defeat of the institutionalized rational system, at least in the use to which it is put. Pocock’s navigational skill is incapable of saving him and his crew from drowning. Gulliver’s leadership cannot prevent him from being reduced to the solitude of his cabin and then to the “desolate condition” of his being cast away in an unknown country in an

hnhnms. This degeneracy is given as the reason for “the violent Hatred the Houyhnhnms, as well as all other Animals, bore them” (pp. 271–72).
unknown part of the world. Yet Gulliver is not entirely destitute: he has on his “best Suit of Cloaths,” he has “a small Bundle of Linnen,” he has a weapon, some money, and “some other little Necessaries” (p. 222). All this may be a parody of Crusoe, but the effect is the same, however reduced. He remains bound to his past, and as he sets out to “advance forward” (p. 223), it is with a view to buying his way back to civilization.

Ehrmann has sought to equate metaphorically Gulliver’s ejection out of European civilization with excrement, remarking that he is at this moment symbolically dead. But Gulliver is not completely ejected; he does maintain certain physical ties. He may be ‘outside,’ but he is not cut loose from, European rational art and culture. He is not to advance in complete ‘freedom’ (whatever that might be). He goes to find a more finished example of the ideal of that culture. Gulliver himself is already closer to that ideal than are the contemporary doctors and lawyers, politicians and statesmen whom he will describe to the Houyhnhnm, and that is why the latter will treat him as he might a more lowly Houyhnhnm (indeed, the “Sorrel Nag” becomes virtually Gulliver’s servant). Gulliver is treated in this way from the outset, so that this proximity to the ideal is not the result of a learning process—at least, not in the eyes of his master Houyhnhnm.

Indeed, the other Houyhnhnms will resent this grand treatment of Gulliver by his master:

the Representatives had taken Offence at his keeping a Yahoo (meaning myself) in his Family more like a Houyhnhnm than a Brute Animal. . . . He was known frequently to converse with me, as if he could receive some Advantage or Pleasure in my Company: . . . such a Practice was not agreeable to Reason or Nature, nor a thing ever heard of before among them. [P. 279].

Gulliver, like Crusoe, has lost none of his predisposition to the systems of European rationality: it is just that which the Houyhnhnm approves of, which he finds principally attractive in Gulliver, and why no doubt he concludes Gulliver’s stay in his country with “so great a Mark of Distinction” as to raise his hoof so as to permit Gulliver to kiss it without prostrating himself (p. 282).

In fact Gulliver will never question the discursive ideal, any more than will the Houyhnhnms. His very admiration for the horses proceeds from their having achieved that ideal, not from any rejection

of it on their part. Gulliver’s rejection of the Yahoos is based upon a perfectly habitual rationalistic judgment; and so, too, is the disgust the Houyhnhnms feel toward them. The Houyhnhnms have achieved a more entirely satisfactory practice of the moral, social, and political discourses of Enlightenment man—at least in Gulliver’s eyes. There are all kind of indications.

When the traveler first meets with the horses he records the gradual dawning of his recognition of this achievement. The horses greet one another in “a very formal Manner” (p. 225), their behavior is “orderly and rational, . . . acute and judicious” (p. 226), their furnishings are “not unartfully made, and perfectly neat and clean” (p. 229), they eat “with much Decency and Regularity” (p. 231). Certainly all this is Gulliver’s initial impression, as the smug and condescending tone serves to indicate (and, again, we must remember that this is written after Gulliver’s return to Europe). Yet the general interpretation he is able to make of their activities is only confirmed by the passage of time, and if Gulliver ends up by condemning the Yahoos and humanity as a whole it is not because a rational system has failed. It is rather because it has not been permitted to function, because man has allowed degeneracy to set in.

First of all, the Houyhnhnms’ language is very close to that ideal transparent mediator which we have seen to have become the ideal expressive instrument of European rationalism. When Gulliver first hears it, he notes: “I plainly observed, that their Language expressed the Passions very well, and the Words might with little Pains be resolved into an Alphabet more easily than the Chinese” (p. 226). As he comes to know it better he is able to remark that “their Language approaches nearest to the High Dutch or German, of any I know in Europe; but is much more graceful and significant” (p. 234). This combination of aesthetic pleasure in the order of a language with meaningfulness in its expression of true knowledge is precisely what constitutes, for the European seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the perfection of a language, its precellence.

Such perfection is achieved when a language is composed of the fewest words possible necessary to communicate all the concepts lying behind language. For this reason Gulliver further admires the Houyhnhnms: “their Language doth not abound in Variety of Words, because their Wants and Passions are fewer than ours” (p. 242). If he speaks of “our barbarous English” (p. 245) it is chiefly because it lacks this one-to-one correspondence between words and their denotata. Words are multiplied to so great a degree that the excess of signifier creates new signifieds, which no longer correspond
to anything real and give rise, therefore, to extensive falsehoods: in this way European lawyers, for example, are bred up “in the Art of proving by Words multiplied for the Purpose, that White is Black, and Black is White” (p. 248). Even in poetry the Houyhnhnms do not make this error, and Gulliver can note there “the Minuteness, as well as Exactness of their Descriptions” (p. 273), and he is able to record in like manner their “Conversations, where nothing passed but what was useful, expressed in the fewest and most significant Words” (p. 277).

Gulliver apparently doubts whether so perfect a language could in fact have been achieved, and his (or Swift’s) praise of it is tinctured with irony: “The Emperor Charles V. made almost the same Observation when he said, That if he were to speak to his Horse, it should be in High Dutch” (p. 234). Worry over the perfectibility of language for use as an instrument to communicate and gather knowledge was a general critical and philosophical preoccupation before and during the time Swift is writing. He himself in the Tatler, in 1710, “announcing that the corruption of English was in full career, pointed to recent usages ‘altogether of a Gothick Strain,’ and to ‘a natural Tendency towards relapsing into Barbarity, which delighteth in monosyllables . . . when we are already overloaded with monosyllables.”

In Lagado Gulliver had already seen two projects that were intended to overcome the lack of correspondence between signifier and signified and this “barbarity” in general. One of these involved the reduction of all polysyllables to monosyllables and the rejection of all parts of speech but nouns, “because in Reality all things imaginable are but Nouns.” The other was the more drastic scheme “for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever” (p. 185). For us this may be a reminder of Cyrano’s conclusion. If so, the Houyhnhnm’s language is the response. As it is also Swift’s response (and that of Enlightenment Europe as a whole) to the general corruption and degeneracy of vulgar tongues.

Since the Houyhnhnms’ language has attained the sought-after coincidence of word and concept there is no danger of falsehood or disguise, at least in theory. They have achieved John Wilkins’s universal language. They have, in a sense, overcome the dichotomy interior/exterior because their language mediates perfectly. And not only language, one might add. In a similar way their ‘code’ of man-

12. This “even” is not really necessary, of course, for poetry is just as much governed by the laws of analysis and referentiality as any other type of discourse.

ners (another type of the same class of discourse, though using a different medium from language) does not rearrange or reform nature: it strives to make social phenomena a perfect 'representation' of nature. Thus, when Gulliver is to show the Houyhnhnm that he is a Yahoo, he writes: "I would give him immediate Conviction, if he pleased to command me; only desiring his Excuse, if I did not expose those Parts that Nature taught us to conceal. He said my Discourse was all very strange, but especially the last Part; for he could not understand why Nature should teach us to conceal what Nature had given" (pp. 236–37).14

The "strangeness" of the discourse here concerns the apparent lack of coincidence between its own order and the order of nature: the Houyhnhnms cannot comprehend why they should differ. This assumption of automatic correspondence between words and things also applies, needless to say, to language use in general. It is covered by the Houyhnhnms' use of the phrase "the thing which was not" (p. 235). The absence of the very idea of lying that is claimed of the Houyhnhnms' discourse asserts that coincidence of exterior and interior, of language, concept, and referent on which we have been remarking. We might note right away, however, that the use of a paraphrase is hardly proof that the idea is absent: on the contrary, it suggests rather that the idea is being concealed for some reason, and the particular paraphrase selected is more than a little revealing.

Let us note, too, that the concealment of Gulliver's real appearance, acquiesced in by his master, is no less a falsehood for its not being called such. And the reason for the concealment itself is Gulliver's correct awareness of the contemptuous and superior pride native to the Houyhnhnms, even if they do not admit it—though the mistress of the house did in fact make it obvious right away (she "gave me a most contemptuous Look," p. 229). While we are speaking of similarities between the Houyhnhnms and Gulliver, we might add that there is little obvious difference between Gulliver's astonishment at their rationality and theirs at his (p. 238).

Some kind of false-speaking does, then, exist in the Houyhnhnms' discourse: indeed, the very use of the phrase "the thing which was not" may be thought of as a falsehood. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the search for coincidence (rather, its claimed achievement) between sign and referent should be expressed in terms identical to those which the European discourse of rationality likewise

14. This coincidence is also revealed in the Houyhnhnms' 'code' of food, which is why they are never ill. Gulliver notes that his adoption of a similarly "natural" diet had the same effect on himself (p. 232).
seeks to impose: it is entirely a matter of the ordered expression of referential truth. Reason and knowledge exist only to the extent that discourse expresses such truth. The Houyhnhmns manifest a kind of Cartesian optimism, and Gulliver’s master put it in terms that might well have come from Montaigne (e.g., Des menteurs):

And I remember in frequent Discourses with my Master concerning the Nature of Manhood in other Parts of the World; having Occasion to talk of Lying, and False Representation, it was with much Difficulty that he comprehended what I meant; although he had otherwise a most acute Judgement. For he argued thus; That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now if any one said the Thing which was not, these Ends were defeated; because I cannot properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving Information, that he leaves me worse than in Ignorance; for I am led to believe a Thing Black when it is White, and Short when it is Long. And these were all the Notions he had concerning that Faculty of Lying, so perfectly well understood, and so universally practised among human Creatures. [P. 240]

What is “altogether past his Conception” is, for example, the idea that anywhere in the world a Yahoo could be the governing animal (p. 240): the Houyhnhnm is therefore led to believe that this is a falsehood. The “thing which was not” is, quite simply, the expression of anything that the discourse itself excludes (an expression the horses hold to be impossible by definition): the Houyhnhnmns are the rational, governing creatures, and the expression of any other notion will be contrary to the truth. This repeats the legitimization of analytico-referential discourse we saw in Bacon and Cyrano: by the exclusion of nonverifiable assertions, or of negations and contradictions of its assertions.

Montaigne implies something similar in the essay “On Cannibals” when he remarks (as we saw at the end of Chapter 3) that not only are the natives of Brazil without “name of magistrate” or “of politike superioritie,” but that they have no words to express the typical vices of European men: “The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulations, covetousnes, envie, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them.” In Montaigne, however, the argument avowedly concerns the visible limits of conceptual space. (He remarks that his interpreter was unable to express his questions adequately—and presumably also the answers given by the three natives of Brazil; thus an authentic incomprehensibility is in ques-
In Swift, we are dealing with an occultation by the Houyhnhnms of an activity that certainly continues to function, albeit in a concealed manner. Thus, just as various evils are always expressed by the epithet “Yahoo” (which, again, does not mean the idea of ‘evil’ is absent), so too the Houyhnhnm finds it necessary to translate Gulliver’s explanation of the relation between man and horse in Europe into that which his self-esteem requires between Houyhnhnm and Yahoo (pp. 241–42). But the comparison is erroneous, and in making it the Houyhnhnm, too, is guilty of saying “the thing which was not.” He can do nothing else.

For the Houyhnhnms presuppose an identity of discourse and concept (and indeed of thing); they have built into the system an a priori assumption of an absence of falsehood. What is not true cannot, they argue, be said at all: no concept corresponds to a false assertion, and since all words correspond to concepts (as we saw in Gulliver’s remarks about their language), a false assertion is not only impossible to make but is literally inconceivable. During a later period of crisis in the dominance of this discourse, Wittgenstein will be saying nothing else: “We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either.” But for Wittgenstein (not altogether unlike what I suggested of Montaigne), such a proposition is presented within the context: “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Wittgenstein is asserting that we are necessarily bound within the limits of a specifiable “logical space,” and that whatever is outside it can neither be thought nor said: though we can always say how things are in relation to a certain way of grasping the world, we can never say what they are.

Like others we have seen and will be seeing, Wittgenstein is writing as analytico-referential discourse attains its limits. This is obviously not yet (or no longer, if we think of a Montaigne, for example) the case for the Houyhnhnms—or Swift himself, or his contemporaries. The limits of logical space have already been hypostatized into the objective place of the real world. In their case, therefore, the notion of inconceivability leads to certain difficulties, because it provokes the dubious assertion that what cannot be conceived does not exist—in any sense whatsoever. They neglect the “how” and believe they

are concentrating on the “what.” As Wittgenstein remarks once again: “The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.” Like Heisenberg, Wittgenstein insists, rather, that laws are about descriptive models in their relation with the “how” they are describing, not about “what” is described. The Houyhnhnms are hardly at this stage. Even Gulliver’s (apparently somewhat emancipated) master has difficulty understanding the existence of a country beyond his experience, and the “inferior” Houyhnhnm, the “Sorrel Nag,” never does: the island which Gulliver can see remains for him only “a blue Cloud” because “he had no Conception of any Country beside his own” (p. 881).

In much the same way Gulliver’s disquisition on the marvels of European warfare is cut short by his master because “he found it gave him a Disturbance in his Mind, to which he was wholly a Stranger before. He thought his Ears being used to such abominable Words, might by Degrees admit them with less Detestation” (p. 248): for words may make concepts and concepts facts. He is afraid of losing, so to speak, his own discourse, and the answer here is to stop up his ears. Cremonini refused to look through Galileo’s telescope because, while he did not doubt the scientist’s assertion as to what he would see, he felt that there was no way of measuring and allowing for the distortions to sight that the use of such an instrument would necessarily entail. The Houyhnhnm closes the circle in similar terms: there is one right discourse; what is not familiar to it cannot be said and no way can be found in that discourse for saying it. Therefore it is not.

Still, Gulliver’s master does eventually come to admit new concepts, and this acceptance implies a considerable change in his very idea of reason and knowledge and an ‘expansion’ of language to deal with it. The inferior sorrel nag cannot rise to such heights any more than could the vast majority of Galileo’s or Bacon’s contemporaries: as Bacon and Descartes had said, it requires a return to zero and a learning of the lion’s tongue. In fact, as we saw, such a

17. Ibid., §§ 6.371, 6.35. One could argue that the first aphorism of the *Philosophical Investigations*, though ostensibly referring to an Augustinian description of language, is in fact reducing the *Tractatus* itself to the same status: it is not a description of the way in which all language and any logical space must work, but a description of one such (a stricture that applies not simply to the content of the *Tractatus*, but its very existence as a description).

18. Actually the Houyhnhnm seems to remain dubious concerning such existence until he finds an idea he can use: that of castration for the purpose of exterminating the Yahooos. As we will see, this idea is a perfectly logical extension of certain aspects of the class of discourse we are examining.
feat is also beyond any of the other Houyhnhnms, who order Gulliver's master to treat him differently or to get rid of him. Among them he is unique.

The rejection of all that cannot be contained in their received discourse is evident, too, in their idea of reason as carrying "immediate Conviction; as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by Passion and Interest" (p. 267). But the only concepts that can carry any conviction are those which are provided with a means of expression: one might say that they carry "immediate Conviction" because they are ruled over by precisely what Gulliver criticized in his family's and friends' (or his own) behavior upon his return from Brobdingnag: "the great Power of Habit and Prejudice" (p. 149). Any other concepts are not simply not real; they do not exist at all, and to say them is offensive.

Certain other ideas have no word in the Houyhnhnms' language, and, as in the case of falsehood, this lack is more a sign of the same occultations we saw in earlier chapters than it is of the absence of the concepts involved: "Power, Government, War, Law, Punishment, and a Thousand other Things had no Terms, wherein that Language could express them" (p. 244). The use of the phrase "the thing which was not" implies that their discourse is complete: it can utter all there is to utter. In the same way, the Houyhnhnms may have no word for "power," but the reaction of the Yahoos whenever a Houyhnhnm approaches is indicative enough of their wielding of it. In any case, as we saw, the Houyhnhnms always put reason and governing together. As for "government" as such, what else can one call the "Representative Council" which meets "every fourth Year, at the Vernal Equinox" (p. 270), a moment which also forms a pleasant pun? They themselves do not engage in "war," but certain of the Yahoos' activities recounted by the Houyhnhnm come quite close to it. And so on. I suggest that the omission of such terms merely permits the presence of the practices they signify in rather more surreptitious form and that it corresponds in many ways, therefore, to what we saw in Crusoe.

In the meantime the Houyhnhnms can be said to enjoy in their own minds the advantages of a certain 'Cartesianism.' Samuel Monk has observed that the concepts which strike with immediate conviction are a "version of Descartes' rational intuition of clear and distinct ideas." We may add that they bask in that identity of language, concept, and object viewed as perfection by Descartes in the letter to

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Mersenne of November 20, 1629, and dismissed by him immediately as likely to be put into use only in "a terrestrial paradise" of "a fictional world." That is why Gulliver is able to admire "the Justness of their Similes" in poetry and "the Minuteneas, as well as Exactness of their Descriptions." These are, he affirms (and Descartes would certainly agree) "inimitable" (p. 273).

For the Houyhnhnms such accuracy of description confirms the complete adequacy of their discursive structure. Our world may be "a broken and twisted version of the truth" and man "less capable than once he had been of penetrating beyond it to what is eternally valid" in the eyes of Swift himself, but for the Houyhnhnms there quite simply is no other true and rational knowledge but what they themselves can express. That is why the Houyhnhnms cannot consider Europeans rational. That judgment is confirmed by the Europeans' lack of virtue. Gulliver records how his master condemns the existence of European "Institutions of Government and Law" as due only to "our gross Defects in Reason, and by consequence in Virtue; because Reason alone is sufficient to govern a Rational Creature; which was therefore a Character we had no Pretence to challenge" (p. 259).

Virtue is the sign that the Houyhnhnm system of discourse has been adopted. Virtue and reason are indeed synonymous: "They will have it that Nature teaches them to love the whole Species, and it is Reason only that maketh a Distinction of Persons, where there is a superior Degree of Virtue" (p. 268). But reason has another sign. For as virtue is marked by living according to the way of life established by the Houyhnhnms, so reason is marked by a submissiveness to that system: what most astonishes them in Gulliver is his "Teachableness, Civility and Cleanliness" (p. 234), just as what is most deplored in the Yahoos is their "unteachable" (p. 235), intractable (p. 241), and "indocible" (p. 271) nature. Reason is essentially teachable, and docility is a principal evidence of its presence.

The idea of reason as marked by submissiveness to right thinking is what separates the "natural" from the "rational," though that distinction should not be too greatly emphasized, because reason is itself a product of nature: there is a natural superiority built into the Houyhnhnms' discursive structure. The reasonable naturally imposes itself. This is why Gulliver and the first Houyhnhnm he meets

fall automatically into the master/servant relationship that is demanded by the individualist structure and will last until Gulliver leaves the country. Here the Houyhnhnm’s superiority is as “natural” as was Gulliver’s as captain of his ship or as lord and master within his family, as was Crusoe’s over Friday and eventually over the other “tenants”: “For they looked upon it as a Prodigy that a brute Animal should discover such Marks of a rational Creature” (p. 234). In a way Gulliver’s debased copy of this stance upon his return home may be Swift’s retort: a plague on all their houses, but what have we better?

This treatment of reason as power is echoed throughout the entire society over which Houyhnhnms like Gulliver’s master are the lords. Within it not only is there no social mobility of any kind whatsoever, but there is what amounts to a caste system:

He made me observe, that among the Houyhnhnms, the White, the Sorrel, and the Iron-grey, were not so exactly shaped as the Bay, the Dapple-grey, and the Black; nor born with equal Talents of Mind, or a Capacity to improve them; and therefore continued always in the Condition of Servants, without ever aspiring to match out of their own Race, which in that Country would be reckoned monstrous and unnatural. [P. 256]

In this way, while the race of masters practices a kind of zero-growth regime (they allow themselves one colt and one foal per couple), “the Race of inferior Houyhnhnms bred up to be Servants [is] allowed to produce three of each Sex, to be Domesticks in the Noble Families” (p. 268). Now here we certainly have “Power, Government [and] Law” in practice, whether or not they are named as such.

With regard to the Yahoos this practice is taken yet further. Gulliver had told his master of the behavior of men toward horses in Europe. The master views his servant’s revelation with the utmost horror: “But it is impossible to express his noble Resentment at our savage Treatment of the Houyhnhnm race; particularly after I had explained the Manner and Use of Castrating Horses among us, to hinder them from propagating their Kind, and to render them more servile” (p. 242). At this point in Gulliver’s knowledge of the Houyhnhnms we might be inclined to believe that this horror is not a reaction simply to the treatment of the master’s own race but to a distortion by reason of nature—one more sign that the Europeans are not endowed with reason but merely with a means to encourage their vices. For here the teachableness of reason is not in harmony with nature, docility is in fact un-natural. However, this is certainly
not the reason why the Houyhnhnm reacts with horror to Gulliver's revelations. For the activities of European rationality are rapidly improved upon by the Houyhnhnms.

Some time after this Gulliver's master is able to tell him of the debate ("the only Debate that ever happened in their Country," p. 270) concerning the final solution for the Yahoos, in which Gulliver's hint about castration is taken up as the ultimate expedient. The Houyhnhnm recounts how he told the assembly "that the Operation was easy and safe; that it was no Shame to learn Wisdom from Brutes... That this Invention might be practised upon the younger Yahoos here, which, besides rendering them tractable and fitter for Use, would in an Age put an End to the whole Species without destroying Life" (p. 273). We might note that the speciousness of this last argument comes at least close to a falsehood, and certainly stretches meaning somewhat.

Whether this genocidal project is ever to be carried out we are not told, because Gulliver is obliged to leave the country shortly after it has been proposed (luckily for him). The Houyhnhnms are, however, "exhorted" to develop the necessary alternative workers ("the Breed of Asses," p. 273), and that, Gulliver will explain, is tantamount to "a Decree of the general Assembly" (p. 280). We may suppose the plan would be carried out, for, as it is implied, the expedient is a natural extension of the rationalistic process of control, possession, and utility, and the Houyhnhnms insist that "no Person can disobey Reason, without giving up his Claim to be a rational Creature" (p. 280). The Yahoos upset the smooth running of the Houyhnhnms' society; they are considered "the most filthy, noisome, and deformed Animal which Nature ever produced, ... the most restive and indocible, mischievous and malicious" (p. 271). What more 'reasonable' than to get rid of them once and for all?

Still, whether the final solution is actually applied or not is as indifferent to our present discussions as it is to Gulliver's Travels itself. My point is that the Houyhnhnms' discourse simply reproduces what we have seen being developed. It places it under a clearer and more pitiless light. The Houyhnhnms make this discourse uncompromising, and what is opposed to it is not an alternative—we do not have to choose between the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos of Europe—but a debased version of the very same class of discourse. Gulliver and Don Pedro are marks on the scale that goes from the discourse as it is used in Europe to the same discourse as it is applied in Houyhnhnmland.

Gulliver claims that the Houyhnhnms are free of greed, ambition,
and lust, the vices of progressive individualism. But to the extent that they appear not to be present one is tempted to suggest that it is due to lack of obvious opportunity. For the same logic that dictates the use of genocide—convenience, superiority, utility—is also behind the seeming lack of the vices just mentioned: "He was wholly at a loss to know what could be the Use or Necessity of practising those Vices" (p. 244).

The elements of power and utility so pervasive in the Houyhnhnms' social practice are exactly those of European rationality, and of Gulliver as its representative: one need only look at his attitude toward his family, of which the example occasioned by his return from the Houyhnhnms at the end of the fourth voyage is but an exaggerated version of what we have read at the beginning and end of earlier voyages. Such similarities are everywhere to be found.

So the very same assumptions of dichotomy (interior/exterior) and reversal (mouth for anus, ingestion for expulsion) which govern European medicine as scornfully related to the Houyhnhnms by Gulliver (pp. 253–54) also govern the practice of the Houyhnhnms themselves in their treatment of the Yahoo's diseases (the horses being free from illness of any kind): "the Cure prescribed is a Mixture of their own Dung and Urine forcibly put down the Yahoo's Throat" (p. 262). This treatment, with the greater excremental purity of the medicine involved, shows the same improvement over the European method as we have already seen in the discussion leading to the expedient of genocide (for, after all, the Europeans had no mind to exterminate horses).

Gulliver praises the Houyhnhnms' lack of pride, saying that they "have no Name for this Vice in their Language" (p. 296), but it is hard to see how else one can consider their attitude toward the inferior Houyhnhnms, toward the Yahoos, toward Gulliver himself. It accompanies a sentiment of superiority which had so often been Gulliver's own in earlier voyages. Then, too, Gulliver rejects the use of precedents in English law as pernicious nonsense and as justifying "the most iniquitous Opinions" (p. 249), but this does not prevent the Houyhnhnms from arguing that Gulliver's master should get rid of him because, among other reasons, the keeping of a Yahoo was not "a thing ever heard of before among them" (p. 279). One might reasonably ask, in like manner, whether the Houyhnhnms are any less 'positive' in their opinions than was poor Captain Pocock, drowned for just that reason.

All this, of course, is in the name of that expression of truth we saw claimed for their language by Gulliver. All else becomes justifi-
able provided only that the assertion of "truth" is possible: "I had likewise learned from his Example an utter Detestation of all Falsehood or Disguise; and Truth appeared so amiable to me, that I determined upon sacrificing every thing to it" (p. 258). Truth is the standard; its place and measure is the discourse of analysis and referentiality.

It is not, therefore, the efficacy of the Houyhnhnms' discourse that is put in question: there can be no question but that it works—and effectively. Nor is Houyhnhnm society held up for admiration as the perfection of innocence (if the two terms can be put together at all): they, too, like everyone else, have come out of a past, and if the derivation of the word "Houyhnhnm" is "Perfection of Nature," now it merely means "Horse" (p. 235). The efficacy of their discourse is due to three essential factors: that its functioning necessitates a series of what I am calling "occultations"; that it never questions itself by stepping outside its own assumptions; that it supposes the nonexistence of anything which escapes its own order ("the thing which was not").

What Swift's attitude to this discourse ('way of thinking'—and of acting) may be must remain unknown; or so the violence of the critical disputes on that subject would seem to encourage us to believe. My point has been that while the Dean may criticize or praise the discourse he places before us, his readers (depending on the interpretation we wish to give his text), he has no choice at all as to which discourse it is: experimentalism is dominant. Its use may be criticized, but its premises and the way it functions are now inviolate.