Scientific progress and its impact on linguistic thought: the problematics of figurative speech in Jonathan Swift's Gulliiver's Travels (1726)

Mireille Ozoux

Scientific progress and its impact on linguistic thought and literature: the problematics of figurative speech in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

Mireille Ozoux, Aix-Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France.

Introduction

The word « progress », in its literal meaning, refers first and foremost to a movement either through time–a series of actions or events, or space–the act of journeying or moving onward. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift exploits the polysemy of the word, with a narrative that combines its spatial and temporal meanings : « rest » (the antonym of « movement ») is indeed anathema to Gulliver, a protagonist always on the move who, no sooner has he arrived home from a journey, shortly embarks again on another. His progresses through the various lands he visits give the narrative a structure that enables Swift to explore and question the notion of progress in its temporal meaning.

Swift was particularly concerned with *scientific* progress. In XVIIth-century Europe the emergence of a new science (often described as a scientific revolution meant to sweep away the old Aristotelian philosophy) opened up an era of strong faith in the power of man's intellect : by means of his all-powerful reason, the scientist (then called "natural philosopher") would inexorably advance in his knowledge of the natural world. But new scientific epistemologies brought along new attitudes toward language. As Professor Preston notes, in the introduction of her book *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England*, « How to *do* science was not just an empirical question, but also a rhetorical one: it was a question of how to *say* it. »[1]

Words matter indeed; Swift always was acutely aware of the power of language, and in this presentation today, I would like to show to what extent he tackles and questions the notion of "progress" in its *linguistic* aspects.

- I shall start by describing how the text mirrors some aspects of the linguistic thought and debates which were ignited by the new science ;

- I shall then try to throw light on the *significance* of such linguistic improvement, that is to say, on what Swift saw as the moral assumptions involved in the "modern" attitude towards language–an attitude deriving from the scientific spirit ;

- I will finally endeavor to show how the narrative voices Swift's *esthetic* concern, and points to the impact of science on literary language and forms.

I- Scientific and linguistic progress: Swift's satiric point in *A Voyage to Laputa.*

Like so many men of letters before and after him (poets, playwrights, or novelists) Swift mirrors the scientific knowledge of his time in his fiction ; but while some authors were enthusiastic about the new science, Swift is to be found among the discordant voices who chose the satirical mode to expose scientific behaviour–and the third part of *Gulliver's Travels* is dominated by an attack on the doctrine of progress as championed by the Moderns, who saw it as a linear, cumulative process, following a never-ending dynamic of improvement, one grounded in science.

A/ Satirical targets.

In *A Voyage to Laputa,* Swift debunks the two scientific epistemologies that developed in the first half of the XVIIth century, with Francis Bacon (and his followers) in England, and with Renée Descartes in France. And his satire gives pride of place to their *linguistic* impact.

Cartesian rationalism and Baconian empiricism embody two (widely) different attitudes towards the power and the use of reason, and each epistemology informs an attitude towards language that the text very seriously questions.

(1) On the flying island of Laputa, the inhabitants are lost in speculation, one of their eyes constantly looking *upwards* towards the sky, their favorite field of study being astronomy, and their other eye being turned *inward*–which symbolizes their constant recourse to introspection–introspection being, according

---

[1] Claire E. Preston, *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 10.

to Descartes (who distrusted the senses) the only way for man's reason to gain access to true knowledge. In other words, Swift's depiction of the Laputans is meant as a caricature of Cartesian rationalists.
(2) In the kingdom of Balnibarbi below, which the flying island rules over, Gulliver visits the Grand Academy of Lagado (the capital city), which houses a host of Baconian empiricists busy observing the real world so as to derive true knowledge, by induction. This time, through the depiction of ludicrous, nonsensical experiments, Swift parodies and comically ridicules the attitudes of empirical scientists.

And Gulliver, acting as an ethnolinguist in each of his four travels, doesn't fail to give his reader a detailed account of the idiom of each community.
Describing the Laputan tongue, he says :

> The knowledge I had in mathematics, gave me great assistance in acquiring their phraseology, which depended much upon that science, and music; and in the latter I was not unskilled. Their ideas are perpetually conversant in lines and figures. If they would, for example, praise the beauty of a woman, or any other animal, they describe it by rhombs, circles, parallelograms, ellipses, and other geometrical terms, or by words of art drawn from music, needless here to repeat. [2]

In the School of Languages housed in the Grand Academy of Lagado, the philosophers bent on improving the language are working on several projects, one of which is to abolish words altogether : words standing for things, people should carry with them all the objects they will show to each other as the objects of their discourse. Quite a few articles by Swiftian scholars give illuminating accounts identifying the probable targets of Swift's satire but, to put it in a nutshell :
(a) the idiom of the scientists on the flying island satirizes a number of XVIIth-century projects to devise an artificial, philosophical language, some kind of universal code to express, unambiguously, universal truths of the natural world.
(b) As for the absurd projects of the Lagadan linguists, they point to the materialistic conception of language ; the notion that words stand for things stems from Baconian empiricism, which then inspired (among others) Thomas Hobbes and members of the Royal Society. Shortly after it received its Royal Charter in 1662, the Royal Society urged some of its members to elaborate a linguistic platform. On December 7, 1664, a committee was appointed to improve the English tongue. Thomas SPRAT's *History of the Royal Society,* published in 1667, includes a very famous passage where he mentions the decision made by members of the committee :

> (…) to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking ; positive expressions ; clear senses ; a native easiness : bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars. [3]

B/ « The language of mathematics. »

In order to understand what motivates Swift's satire, it is important to see that the two epistemologies he ridicules have, in fact, a lot in common : both rely on mathematics (because of its universality) and manifest a phantasm of transparency, of a rational language that would be purely denotative, leaving no room for ambiguity. The primary aim of a Cartesian rationalist, or an empiricist, is to use a language that no longer suffers from the « abuse of words » (cf. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690. Book III, Chapter 9, the imperfection of words), a language that has expelled the « idols of the market place » (common language: Bacon, *The New Organon*, 1620. Book I, Aphorism XLIII)–and which would be, therefore, *universal* (thanks to the strict use of definitions, as in

---

[2] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. by David Womersley, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift (Cambridge, Royaume-Uni de Grande-Bretagne et d'Irlande du Nord.: Cambridge University Press, 2012). III, 2, 233.
[3] Thomas Sprat, '"History of the Royal Society" (Selections)'
<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/sprat.html> [accessed 20 February 2019].

mathematics). One of the most eminent figures among the early champions of the scientific revolution put it plainly : according to Galileo [1564-1642],

> [The universe] cannot be read until we have learnt the language and become familiar with the characters in which it is written. It [the universe] is written in mathematical language, and the letters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without which means it is humanly impossible to comprehend a single word. [4]

But in Swift's eyes, scientific progress, based as it is on mathematics and empirical science, has a dangerous linguistic corollary: it informs a conception of language that ignores the very nature of human speech–the fact that words are arbitrary. Like Thomas Hobbes (whose *Leviathan* he studied carefully), like John Locke, Swift shared the view that meaning is assigned to words *by convention*–if we use the modern, Saussurian concept of the linguistic sign, the signifier (sounds) and the signified (the thing or notion referred to) are associated by human convention ; there is no such thing as a pure language where words unambiguously denote the thing or notion referred to: in brief, Swift did not adhere to the ancient Cratylist, or (later) Adamic, conception of language. As a result, *because* words are arbitrary, are subject to convention, they have a history (since conventions evolve through time, along with the evolution of societies). Swift blames the modern champions of progress for ignoring the historicity of language; the rational, transparent idiom they seek to impose entails a rupture with the past. Commenting on Galileo's words in his book *A Short History of Linguistics*, Robert Robins, reminds us that :

> Mathematics is a genuinely language-free mode of symbolization, though it has not got the semantic range or expressive power of a natural language (to speak of the "language of mathematics" or "mathematical language" is to use a metaphor, and the analogy should not be pressed too far). [5]

« Pressing the metaphor too far » seems to be *precisely* what swift blames the new scientists for; in fact, they are blind to the figure of speech and give it a literal meaning; and in his turn, Swift uses one of his favorite stylistic devices to expose their attitude, their literal-mindedness, by literalizing the metaphor. The inanities scientific progress leads to (whether technical, social or linguistic) are further exposed in Book III by means of contrastive vignettes emphasizing the importance of transmission.

C/ Tradition and transmission.

Universal codes like mathematics or music are not human speech ; **nor** can words directly refer to things in human speech; and that's what the common people, the « vulgar «, very well know–or intuitively feel. Ending his description of the mad project of Lagadan linguists to replace words by things, Gulliver adds :

> And this invention would certainly have taken place, to the great ease as well as health of the subject, if the women, in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate, had not threatened to raise a rebellion unless they might be allowed the liberty to speak with their tongues, after the manner of their forefathers; such constant irreconcilable enemies to science are the common people.[6]

In my opinion, in this short piece of Swiftian irony, there is one key word that helps understand the author's satiric point–the word « tongue », which combines both the physicality and historicity of language :
(a) in its literal meaning, the tongue is the muscle in your mouth – that amazing sound box in which the position of the tongue will give each sound you make its timbre, its quality (or colour);

---

[4] Opere Il Saggiatore p. 171. 'Quotations by Galileo' <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Quotations/Galileo.html> [accessed 20 February 2019].
[5] Robert Henry Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics*, Longmans' Linguistics Library (London: Longman, 1967), p. 113.
[6] Swift. III, 5, 271.

(b) by extension the word describes your "mother tongue", ie. the language you inherit from you parents and your « forefathers »; it is your linguistic heritage – one you can't escape, precisely because it is so deeply ingrained / rooted in your body.

Before Gulliver sails back to England, his progress through the several islands in Book III takes him to Luggnagg, where he encounters an extraordinary community: the immortal Struldbruggs. The episode has received various interpretations over the centuries, but it is particularly relevant to the linguistic issue and the question of transmission. The nightmarish plight of the Struldbruggs is not only due to the inescapable physical decay (though they are eternal, they don't enjoy eternal youth), but also to the impossible linguistic transmission; Gulliver reports that :

> The Language of this Country being always upon the Flux, the Struldbruggs of one Age do
> not understand those of another; neither are they able, after two Hundred Years, to hold any
> Conversation (farther than by a few general Words) with their Neighbours the Mortals; and
> thus they lie under the Disadvantage of living like Foreigners in their own Country. [7]

They are denied access to the past (they can hold no conversation with the past). The mortifying spectacle they offer Gulliver and the reader is a picture of progressive decay which seems to serve as a warning against a rupture with the linguistic heritage : (in other words) regress is what lies in store for those who forget their (linguistic) past. This is an episode that announces the physical degeneration of the bestial, sub-human, infra-linguistic Yahoos in Part IV, *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms.*

So the third part of *GT* is often described as a piece of linguistic satire whose targets were the linguistic debates of the time, as they emerged with the XVIIth-century scientific movement. The numerous topical details belonging to Swift's age and world are accessible to us (modern readers) by means of the invaluable scholarly editions such as *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*. However, I believe that even if readers don't go through the notes, the text has an enduring power because the narrative suggests the underlying significance of the ludicrous satiric vignettes.

II- Swift's linguistic insights: the scientific spirit and linguistic determinism.
As early as 1694 Swift wrote *The Battle of the Books*, an allegorical piece staging the literary quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, and the first sentence reads: « Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own. » The reason why I am quoting this famous, often-quoted definition Swift gives of satire, is that the word « glass » perfectly describes how the narrative of *GT* works. In *GT*, two meanings of the word come into play: as seen in part I, the linguistic satire sends back a reflection on contemporary linguistic debates, and more generally on the modern, hubristic pride in progress, but the narrative also functions as a window opening on new (and disturbing) perspectives– « glass » also referring to a material you can look through, and beyond.

A/ The naturally rational idiom of the Horses.
I would like to show how the impact of scientific progress on language, as it is ridiculed in book III, is also at the heart of the fourth voyage–as Gulliver's progress finally takes him to the land of the Houyhnhnms (the talking horses). The universal, perfect, unambiguous language–the object of a wild, human quest–is here made *real*, and is embodied in the idiom of the Houyhnhnms–a name which, as Gulliver reports, means "the perfection of Nature". The horses are described as perfect rational creatures, following the dictates of reason and nature and having therefore a direct access to truth
Their idiom is as pure as the Adamic language of the origins and expresses naturally what is rational.
- Besides, their use and conception of language is merely utilitarian ; the social function of language is reduced to the communication of information. Telling the reader how he enjoyed attending their conversations, Gulliver gives a full description of their idiom :

---

[7] Swift. III, 10, 319.

> I was infinitely delighted with the station of an humble auditor in such conversations, where nothing passed but what was useful, expressed in the fewest and most significant words;[8]

- The qualities that are prized by the horses are BREVITY and SIGNIFICANCY, which are reminiscent of the shortness and exactness advocated by the linguistic reformers of the RS.
- And of course, they can only express what *exists*, what *is* : their perfect, absolute rationality prevents them from LYING–they don't even have a word to denote falsehood—what they call "the thing which is not."

B/ "The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world".

However, although the horses' idiom is devised as an ideal, Utopian language, the attentive reader will realize that the narrative *deconstructs* this image and suggests instead a disturbing, much darker picture. Their vocabulary is rather poor :

a. the rational Houyhnhmns are without passions, which is reflected in an idiom much lacking in words referring to sentiments or emotions ;

b. the rational horses are virtuous, and their idiom includes no word denoting evil ;

c. the perfect horses are never ill, and their idiom includes no word referring to illness or diseases.

As a result, their supposedly perfect linguistic system is a binary one: their rational nature is reflected in a perfectly rational language, expressing what is useful; and whenever they want to refer to something negative they name it by building compound words with the epithet « Yahoo » :

> I know not whether it may be worth observing, that the Houyhnhnms have no word in their language to express any thing that is evil, except what they borrow from the deformities or ill qualities of the Yahoos. Thus they denote the folly of a servant, an omission of a child, a stone that cuts their feet, a continuance of foul or unseasonable weather, and the like, by adding to each the epithet of Yahoo. [9]

In other words, their thoughts are shut up within a binary linguistic system which prevents them from understanding and accepting what is different, what is *other*, what can't be thought of as « Houyhnhmn » or « Yahoo ». Otherness *does* exist though, but their idiom shuts it out of the horses' understanding. Gulliver is of course no horse ; he shares some of the physical features of the Yahoos, but he is otherwise an exceptional Yahoo, as he is clean, civil, and teachable. As a result, Gulliver does not fit the binary linguistic system of the horses: they fail to name Gulliver and feel compelled to banish him from their land ; they illustrate the famous words of the philosopher (and mathematician!) Ludwig Wittgenstein : « The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world » (Original German: *Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1922*).

C/ The rhetoric of the « purely utile ».

Swift understood that language is not simply the « clothing » of our thoughts–a very ancient metaphor implying that language is a mere vehicle for our thoughts–but that our ideas have their origin *in* language. And he seems to have perceived the danger lying in the utilitarian conception of language sponsored by scientific institutions. (Again) in *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England*, Professor Preston specifies the meanings of the term « literary », and one of its uses refers to « *the consciously deployed generic and rhetorical tools of literary expression (as opposed to the purely utile – if such a non-rhetorical category even exists)* ».[10] I am particularly interested in the parenthesis she makes, since I believe this is Swift's point : such a « non-rhetorical » category does *not* exist, but he warns his readers against the advocators (like the horses) of a purely utile language: it allegedly rejects ornament, rhetoric, but is a form of rhetoric itself, wearing the mask of objectivity because it is presented as natural ; as if the argument of the natural allowed for ideological immunity. To Swift, this is no progress at all but an imposture : the pure, naked style *is* a form of rhetoric, although it is devoid of ornament, and allows for all kinds of manipulations. And George Orwell is the 20th-

---

[8] Swift. IV, 10, 418-9.
[9] Swift. IV, 9, 414-5
[10] Preston, p. 5.

century novelist who understood Swift's point perfectly and saw how such a reductive use of language (such as his Newspeak in *1984*) can be exploited and serve political authoritarianism. To sum up Swift's ethical concern : his awareness that our thoughts are linguistically determined made him particularly wary of a purely utile idiom that entails uniformity of thought and its sad corollary, impoverishment of thought.

So the narrative of the *Travels* dramatizes what Swift saw as the scientific impact on language ; and the scientific spirit that informs the rational idioms of the Laputans, the Lagadans and (more subtly) of the naturally rational Houyhnhmns, is forcefully questioned by the author. To him, such linguistic progress may very well have dreadful ethical implications (as we have just seen) but esthetic consequences as well. The new vision of the world that was born with the new science was to be expressed, in the early XVIIIᵗʰ century, in a new (novel) form of fiction Swift strongly disapproved of.

III- The brave new literary world of the 1720s.

A/ Gulliver's plain prose style: the point of Swift's pastiche.

« Brevity », « exactness », or « exactitude » are words that come again and again under Gulliver's quill, as he regularly punctuates the narrative of his travels with protestations of his veracity. He has learned, perfected and readily, even ecstatically assimilated the idiom of these perfect beings, the Houyhnhnms, and comes back from his voyage sharing the horses' aversion to lying and falsehood. But the author Swift meant the horses' idiom, and its reflection in Gulliver's supposedly unequivocal style, as a pastiche of the "plain prose style" advocated by scientists. Like them, Gulliver seeks to avoid the "cheat of words" by rejecting any form of rhetorical ornament, as he repeatedly reminds his readers:

> …I have been chiefly studious of truth, without affecting any ornaments of learning or of style (II, 1, 134).

> Thus, gentle reader, I have given thee a faithful history of my travels for sixteen years and above seven months: wherein I have not been so studious of ornament as of truth.(IV, 12, 436)

Gulliver's style reflects his epistemological stance, empiricism ; his choice to (I quote) « relate plain Matter of fact in the simplest Manner and Style » (IV, 12, 436), his distrust of ornament, his refusal to use figures of speech, are meant to reflect the position of renowned empiricists like John Locke (or later : David Hume), who dismissed imaginative narratives as possible sources of knowledge–they insisted instead that knowledge of man should be drawn from direct experience or reliable factual reports. And indeed, Gulliver never fails to mention that creative imagination has no place in the communities whose idiom is, or strives to be, rational :

- when visiting the kingdom of Brobdingnagg, inhabited by the admirable Giants, Gulliver notes nevertheless that :

> The learning of this people is very defective, consisting only in morality, history, poetry, and mathematics, wherein they must be allowed to excel. (…) And as to ideas, entities, abstractions, and transcendentals, I could never drive the least conception into their heads.[11]

- The (Cartesian) Laputans on the Flying Island are described in the following terms :

> Imagination, fancy, and invention, they are wholly strangers to, nor have any words in their language, by which those ideas can be expressed; the whole compass of their thoughts and mind being shut up within the two forementioned sciences.[12]

- The horses, for instance, have an aversion for « the thing which is not », which refers to falsehood, and extends to invention, fiction, the product of imagination–something that doesn't exist in the real world of facts. The culture of the Houyhnhmns is only based on the oral tradition (as Gulliver mentions

---

[11] Swift. II, 7, 195.
[12] Swift. III, 2, 235.

in IV, 3: « …for the inhabitants have not the least idea of books or literature »), which therefore includes the originally ORAL art of poetry. However, we learn that:

> In poetry, they must be allowed to excel all other mortals; wherein the justness of their similes, and the minuteness as well as exactness of their descriptions, are indeed inimitable. [13]

In other words, their esthetics (mimetic of the real) claims veracity, their poems being an exact description of *what is*, but the horses never allow imagination to state *what is not*.

B/ *Gulliver's Travels* and the rise of the novel.

According to John Bender[14], the eighteenth-century novel partook in the early modern quest for an empirical science of human nature. Gulliver's obsessive concern with factual truth is meant in fact a parody of a new, « novel » form emerging in the early 18th century, that of realistic fiction – as illustrated by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a kind of fiction manifesting the new rigor of empirical science, along with its new moral and philosophical assumptions. When Clara Reeve (1729-1807) published the first history of the novel in 1785, she called it *The Progress of Romance* to indicate that romance, an entertaining but childish genre—one whose epistemological allegiances were anti-empirical—had indeed improved, *progressed*"and become a new genre.[15] But Jonathan Swift had a strong aversion for this new literary form then in the making, and mimics realistic fiction the better to debunk it. By learning and assimilating the horses' idiom, Gulliver fails to realize that it is no human language, it belongs to a different species. The aim of Swift's parody is to engender in readers a heightened consciousness of language and remind them that human speech, on the contrary, *is* equivocal, *is* connotative. Linguistic signs are (to a large extent) arbitrary, and it is history, tradition, that has accumulated the several layers of meaning, leading to the polysemy of words, their literal *and* figurative meanings. What the scientific spirit seeks to exclude can't be suppressed; what science tries to leave aside (what we may call « the remainder », after the French linguist and philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle [16]) is powerfully invested by Swift, who subtly but powerfully fights literalness with literariness.

C/ Gulliver, Swift, and the linguistic « remainder ».

In his article entitled « Science and English Prose Style in the Third Quarter of the Seventeenth Century », R.F. Jones talks of « *the way in which the scientific spirit was destroying the sheer joy in language* » (94), and he exclaims : « *How completely has vanished the feeling for beauty in language, as well as a spirit of enthusiasm and imaginative activity!* » (96).[17] His words may seem adequate enough to describe Gulliver's plain prose style but certainly not Swift's work, which constantly dramatizes the tension (contradiction) between the competing claims of science and literature.

At the level of the narrative, of course, realism is deconstructed by the lack of factual credibility : Gulliver visits imaginary and *fantastic* lands and peoples (Lilliputians, giants, inhabitants of a flying island, talking horses, etc). On the linguistic level :

(a) There is indeed a tension between Gulliver's quest for stylistic uniformity and the extraordinary linguistic diversity in the narrative. In each and every of his "progresses" Gulliver comes across real and imaginary languages–his unequivocal, transparent idiom describes the inescapable Babelization of the world, i.e. the living proof of the arbitrariness of signs. Swift's play on the arbitrary is reaches a paroxysm as he invents the imaginary idioms of his imaginary peoples ; the « mathematical plainness »

---

[13] Swift. IV, 9, 412.

[14] John Bender, 'Enlightenment Fiction and the Scientific Hypothesis', *Representations*, 1998, 6–28 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902945>.

[15] Voir : John Mullen, 'Swift, Defoe, and Narrative Forms.', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1650-1740*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge (GB): Steven N. Zwicker, 1998), pp. 250–75.

[16] Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[17] Richard Foster Jones, *The Seventeenth Century: Studies in the History of English Thought and Literature from Bacon to Pope* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1951).

of Gulliver is subverted by the numerous ciphers in the imaginary languages–Gulliver may be a very good linguist and translator, opacity, or mystery, remains.

(b) The very figure of Gulliver is full of contradictions : for example, he may be imbued with the modern scientific spirit of his age and bent on what is "useful", he manifests a passion for the physicality and history of the several tongues he discovers and learns. Gulliver's empiricism relies on the physical sense of sight, but also on that of hearing; Gulliver has a prodigious ear and he describes (with a never-failing exactitude) the intonation, rhythm and sounds of the languages–even their pitch and volume (intensity). He is likewise interested in the etymology of the words, thus showing an interest for diachrony.

(c) And of course, it is the polysemy and ambiguity inherent to human speech that allow for literary creation and nourishes the activity of interpretation. Swift is master in the art of constantly playing with the literal and figurative ; but this aspect of his creative activity as a man of letters can't be dissociated from his lifelong career as a man of the church, as a « Church of England Man » (in his own words). Hermeneutics, or the interpretation of the Scriptures, led him to try and decipher the biblical text and accept some of its opacity, of its undecipherable mysteries. Language is the only medium, via the Scriptures, which gives man access to the divine, as long as you have enough faith to accept some of the encoded mysteries (cf. Swift's « Sermon of the Doctrine of the Trinity »). Gulliver's literal-mindedness (which is associated from the very start, though implicitly, with his puritan background), his empirical quest for « truth-in-things » (or:) « truth-in-the-real » is forcefully deconstructed by the author's belief in (what J.J. Lecercle calls) « truth-in-language ».

Conclusion

As a conclusion to this presentation devoted to scientific progress and its impact on language and literature, I would like to add a few words about the pioneer of empirical science, Francis Bacon, whose works Swift read and studied carefully–and whom he admired. Professor Preston reminds us that Bacon set a high value on decorum, ie the (very old) view that there should be propriety, or fitness, in the way a specific genre is matched to the style of narration. As far as scientific writings are concerned, Professor Preston explains that :

> Bacon's theoretical writings advocate a middle way between the plain and the figurative, each mode approved in its proper roles; and he himself wrote in both styles. [18]

Bacon's attitude, his insistence on propriety, finds an echo in Swift's own definition of style, which is (I quote): « Proper words in proper places, make the true definition of a style. » (*Letter to a young clergyman*, 1720).

In my opinion, the narrative of *GT* voices Swift's concern about the dangerous fading away of frontiers : when the scientific discourse and spirit leaves its proper place and insidiously invades non-scientific fields, such as morals and literature. And I will borrow my very last words from the French (conservative) thinker Jean-Michel Delacomptée who recently published a beautiful essay in praise of the French tongue and literature–which he sees as threatened by the growing number of assaults coming from the scientific and technical idiom :

> Avec l'univocité strictement fonctionnelle, c'en sera fini de la langue équivoque, noyau des valeurs intellectuelles et morales élaborées par les générations passées et qui maintiennent encore (…) une ligne de démarcation entre une société vivable et un monde post-humain.[19]

Writing in the early XVIIIth century, a century only after the emergence of the new science, Swift couldn't imagine a post-human world, but the narrative of *GT*, and especially the fable of the talking horses, may suggest Swift's intuition that scientific progress might possibly lead to a non-human world. And with his parody of a « novel » genre-to-be, Swift appears (I'm borrowing Claude Rawson's words:)

---

[18] Preston, p. 17.
[19] Jean-Michel Delacomptée, *Notre langue française* (Paris: Fayard, 2018), pp. 159–60.

as « a proleptic master of (…) several modes of modern writing » [20] and in the end, I believe, a writer endowed with tremendous powers of cultural analysis.

---

[20] Claude Julien Rawson, *Swift's Angers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 94.