



Swift, Gulliver and Resistance

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Swift, Gulliver and Resistance

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Nay, but me no buts¹

Everyone knows the opening chapter of part one of *Gulliver's Travels*, which tells of the origins of Gulliver, his formative years at Cambridge and Leyden, his first jobs, his marriage, and finally his tragic wreck and dramatic landing on Lilliput.² Many illustrators have brilliantly represented Gulliver pegged down on the ground,³ almost totally unable to move, and surrounded by a host of minute but human-like figures. That the Lilliputians get the better of Gulliver while he is asleep can be accepted. Once he is awake, however, it is difficult to believe that such creatures, twelve times inferior to him in size, can maintain him a prisoner, when a mere gesture could sweep them off and free him for good. Why is resistance to the Lilliputians impossible for Gulliver? Is he aware himself that his attitude is a source of puzzlement for the reader? To speak bluntly, is Gulliver a coward... or a subtle strategist? The analysis that follows will try to answer these questions, link Gulliver's reactions with some specific ones of Swift in his youth, and redefine non-resistance into a less aggressive, less humiliating concept.

A close reading of part one, chapter one, reveals an interesting recurrence of the conjunction 'but' in what appears as almost always astute, meaningful places. The present study will use this conjunction as a red thread to decode Gulliver's tale and connect it with Swift's more or less cryptic meanings.⁴

Let us start with Gulliver's report of the *Antelope's* wreck in 1699 and the manner in which he is delivered to Lilliput. Owing to a terrible storm, sailing is made very exacting and requires all the attention of the seamen, tired out by a long, arduous voyage and lack of food. Despite the summer haze, one of the sailors manages to "spy a rock." It is patent that Gulliver sides with the sailors when he adds: "but the Wind was so strong, that we were driven directly upon it,

¹ Mrs Centlivre, *Busie Bod.*, II, 1, 28 (1708).

² The reference edition here is: Paul Turner, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³ See for example plates 1 to 4 herein. Sena offers a fine analysis of a 1726 engraving by Hogarth, in which Gulliver metaphorizes the humiliation meted out by the Whigs and the Hanoverian sovereign upon the English people. This "political reading" of part one, however, does not correspond to an actual scene in the book. See John F. Sena, "Gulliver's Travels and the Genre of the Illustrated Book" in *The Genres of Gulliver's Travels*, ed. by Frederik N. Smith (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), pp. 101–138. It is important to underline here that Gulliver is not, in Professor Allan Ingram's terms, "a psychologically realised character," as one might be tempted to believe on the strength of some questionings in the following pages. See Allan Ingram, "Gulliver's Travels and the Contexts of Insanity", in *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. by Pierre Morère (Paris: Ellipses, 2001), pp. 14–24.

⁴ "But" is to be understood in the third value given by the *O.E.D.* There are thirty occurrences of this conjunction in the chapter considered. By comparison, there are thirty-five in part two, chapter one, also an introductory chapter, also reporting a gruelling experience, and the arithmetic reversal of the situation in Lilliput.

and immediately split” (p. 6). It is through no professional fault of the sailors that the tragedy takes place; Gulliver exonerates the men. It is the wind again that causes Gulliver and his five companions’ rescue boat to capsize some time later. Gulliver swims on and on, now and then letting his legs drop to feel for the ground. He fears that he is about to drown, when suddenly Fate becomes more clement: “But when I was almost gone, and able to struggle no longer, I found myself within my Depth” (p. 7). He is so exhausted, he lies down on the grass and goes to sleep for nine hours, a symbolic figure.

When he regains consciousness, he realizes that he is still in deep trouble. Before falling asleep, he had looked for people and their houses and had found none (“but could not discover any Sign of Houses or Inhabitants,” p. 7). Now, he wants to rise, but he cannot (“but was unable to stir,” p. 7); he wants to identify the confused noise he hears, but he cannot (“but in the Posture I lay, could see nothing except the sky,” p. 7); he wants to communicate, again he cannot (“but I then knew not what they meant,” p. 8). Gulliver’s aloneness, his incapacity to move, to look around him, to understand the words spoken to him (note the return of negative terms as well) are all relayed to the reader through the same device — that of the conjunction — here highlighting the gap between expectation and reality.

At this point, Gulliver — at last — manifests a desire to get hold of some Lilliputians. As if he senses the reader’s scepticism (“as the reader may believe,” p. 8), he accumulates adjectives and nouns (“great uneasiness,” “violent pull,” “excessive pain”), verbs (“struggling,” “break,” “wrench out”) and adverb (“at length”) to stress the difficulty he is pitted against in order to do so (p. 8). The result of his considerable efforts, however, is minimal: he turns his head about two inches. The Lilliputians’ immediate reaction is prefaced by the same conjunction: “But the creatures ran off a second time, before I could seize them” (p. 8). Not only does Gulliver fail to achieve his goal but he triggers a retaliation in the form of a “shower of arrows” on his left hand, body and face (p. 8). A second attempt to get loose causes another discharge of arrows accompanied by some spear-pricking in the sides. Fortunately, Gulliver is protected by his clothes: “But, by good luck I had on me a Buff Jerkin, which they could not pierce” (p. 8). Gulliver and the Lilliputians are in deadlock.

Both the reader and Gulliver feel now that a crucial point has been reached and that it becomes necessary to take stock of the situation: on the one hand, a giant for the Lilliputians, whose physical strength has up to then been checked — but this can only be for a time and thanks to ruse; on the other hand, numerous, albeit minute, creatures, whom Gulliver still thinks he can overcome with a little diplomacy (“the most prudent method,” p. 8). Here again, the lexis lavishly supports Gulliver’s faith in his power:

[...] my left Hand being already loose, I could easily free myself:
And as for the Inhabitants, I had Reason to believe I might be a
Match for the greatest Armies they could bring against me, if they
were all of the same Size with him that I saw. (p. 8)

This is sheer boasting and in retrospect, Gulliver comments on his pride and illusions in a most laconic fashion: “But Fortune disposed otherwise of me”

(p. 8). So far, therefore, Gulliver is still at the mercy of the Lilliputians, and it is suggested that more is to come in the same vein. Will the reader accept this kind of outbidding?

The shooting of arrows ceases and is replaced by the noise of even more numerous Lilliputians erecting a stage (“But by the noise increasing [...],” p. 8). From this contraption, a person of quality, the Hurgo, orders that Gulliver be partially unfastened so as to be able to see him speaking. Gulliver does not understand what the Hurgo says; he recognizes, however, the rhetoric of threats, promises, pity and kindness (p. 9). Gulliver answers “in a few Words, but in the most submissive Manner” (p. 9). The paucity of Swift’s language is balanced with its expressiveness. Again, the reader notes, Gulliver chooses submission. Why so? Simply because he is starving. The following scene shows — the reward for future compliance, and incidentally a variation on the theme of relativity — a hundred Lilliputians feeding Gulliver baskets full of meat, the flesh of several animals which he cannot make out (“but could not distinguish them by Taste,” p. 9), not because it is inferior in quality to European food but because in such diminutive quantities it is impossible to discriminate mutton from lark. When it comes to drink, Gulliver evinces more expertise: the Lilliputian wine is better than Burgundy, what a pity his hosts don’t have more (“but much more delicious” and also “but they had none to give me,” p. 10). The pangs of hunger and thirst once over, Gulliver cannot in all decency prove ungrateful by rebelling against the inhabitants:

I confess I was often tempted, while they were passing backwards and forwards on my Body, to seize Forty or Fifty of the first that came in my Reach, and dash them against the Ground. But the Remembrance of what I had felt, which probably might not be the worst they could do; and the Promise of Honour I made them, for so I interpreted my submissive Behaviour, soon drove out those Imaginations. Besides, I now considered my self as bound by the Laws of Hospitality to a People who had treated me with so much Expence and Magnificence. (p. 10)

The temptation to resist persists and is rather aggressively expressed, but the memory of the former pain, the fear of possible worse suffering, the tacit pledge not to rebel in order to obtain food and now respect for the universal laws of hospitality preclude any action. Gulliver even goes further: he confesses quasi admiration for the Lilliputians (“wonder at the Intrepidity of these diminutive Mortals,” p. 10).

It is then that a new character emerges on the scene, on behalf of his Imperial Majesty, a sort of Ambassador, imbued with his superior status (“but with a kind of determinate Resolution,” p. 11). As should be expected, since Gulliver has decided, if not to ingratiate himself with the Lilliputians, at least to wait and see, he answers, and as should be expected too, considering the protagonists do not speak each other’s languages, in vain (“but to no Purpose,” p. 11). This time, the “Person of high Rank” (p. 10) indicates that Gulliver is going to be removed to the Capital, and Gulliver claims for his freedom, also in vain (p. 11). Gulliver’s distress spurs a new bout of revolt, which he quickly represses himself:

I once more thought of attempting to break my Bonds; but again, when I felt the Smart of their Arrows upon my Face and Hands, which were all in Blisters, and many of the Darts still sticking in them; and observing likewise that the Number of my Enemies encreased; I gave Tokens to let them know that they might do with me what they pleased. (p. 11)

As before, the memory of past pain, of which his body offers evidence (blisters and darts), and now a feeling of close-at-hand danger (it is the first time he calls the Lilliputians “enemies”), deter Gulliver from considering resistance. So far from resisting, he abandons himself, he lets physical necessities get the upper hand of his dignity, witness the scene that takes place immediately after in the course of which he makes water in public and yields to the need for sleep. The reader may feel somewhat disappointed with Gulliver’s faint-heartedness. Although the Lilliputian ambassador has promised food and very good treatment — Gulliver’s face and hands are covered with ointment to relieve any smart (“but before this [...]” p. 11) — it remains that Gulliver is a prisoner and that he has still to show his valour. Consciously or not, he must sense the reader’s uneasiness and he launches then into a surprising eulogy of the Lilliputians’ intelligence and courage, prudence and generosity:

For supposing these People had endeavoured to kill me with their Spears and Arrows while I was asleep; I should certainly have awaked with the first Sense of Smart, which might so far have roused my Rage and Strength, as to enable me to break the Strings wherewith I was tyed, after which, as they were not able to make Resistance, so they could expect no Mercy. (p. 12)

The reader cannot but be startled by such words, which turn the situation upside down: here, Gulliver simply and unequivocally transfers his incapacity to resist unto the Lilliputians, thus clearing himself of any shame. Resistance is no longer *his* predicament, it becomes the *Lilliputians’* want. Gulliver’s dilly-dallying about delivering himself is over, and this is so true that he thereupon opens a new paragraph and delivers an extensive and laudatory description of... the Lilliputians’ mathematical and technical know-how.

Indeed, the remaining occurrences of the conjunction ‘but’ in the chapter underline the little men’s concern to find ways to deal with Gulliver’s cumbersome presence, such as raising him onto a mobile woodframe (“but the principal difficulty was to raise and place me in this Vehicle,” p. 12), which is performed while he is asleep, which in turn explains why here again he does not resist; or such as protecting the person of the Emperor (“but his great officers would by no means suffer his Majesty to endanger his Person by mounting on my Body,” p. 13); or such as refraining the citizens from thronging in thousands to climb up his limbs (“But a Proclamation was soon issued to forbid it, upon pain of Death,” p. 14). Considering that the Lilliputians are each time able to cope with the situation, one can say that the Man-Mountain is definitely a nuisance for them, but not an overwhelming one.

In this respect, the last image of the chapter is a telling paradox. Although Gulliver’s size, when at last he stands up and walks, fills the Lilliputians with

surprise, he is nonetheless reduced to the status of a dog in his kennel, to that of an inoffensive pet:

The chains that held my left Leg were about two Yards long, and gave me not only the Liberty of walking backwards and forwards in a Semicircle; but being fixed within four Inches of the Gate, allowed me to creep in, and lie at my full Length in the Temple. (p. 14)

Those chains, which the Lilliputians have fixed in lieu of the former strings and cords, he describes as being “like those that hang to a Lady’s Watch in *Europe*, and almost as large” (p. 14): he does not even suggest he could have broken them up, he no longer seeks to vindicate his passivity, he merely basks in the people’s “noise and astonishment,” hence the full irony of the last “but” (p. 14).

Should the reader draw harsh conclusions from this traceable evolution from a decent surgeon to a somewhat despicable, soft, animalised creature? In the light of what Gulliver reports in the opening paragraphs of the book, the answer should be no. Three times, Gulliver shows how he deals with adversity, even in his early youth. He tells first how he has been sent to Emmanuel College at Cambridge and, being a conscientious student, should have obtained a degree there. Shortness of money, however, prevents him from going on with his studies and compels him to alter his plans: “But the charge of maintaining me (although I had a very scanty Allowance) being too great for a narrow Fortune; I was bound Apprentice to Mr James Bates, an eminent Surgeon in London” (p. 5). This certainly tolls the knell of his previous expectations but shows a capacity for rebounding. After a few voyages, he settles in London as a surgeon himself and benefits from his master’s reputation, which allows him to get married. Once again, adversity strikes: “But my good Master Bates dying in two Years after, and I having few friends, my Business began to fail” (p. 6).

He goes back to sea for six years, then wishing to lead a more sedate life, opts for London again, changing district in the hope of getting business among sailors: “but it would not turn to account” (p. 6). Lack of subsidies, lack of supportive acquaintances, lack of opportunities — Gulliver has met with and overcome obstacles already when he sails out on May 4, 1699 and on these occasions he has proved that he knows how to adapt when fortune fails him. This should warn the reader not to pass judgment on Gulliver too quickly.

In his recently published study on resiliency entitled *Les vilains petits canards*, Boris Cyrulnik⁵ expatiates on what he calls “les rêves-balançoires” (swing-dreams) of individuals who, crushed by objects and people in their dreams, eventually manage after much struggling to inflate themselves to a dizzying size. And Boris Cyrulnik adds: “Celui qui a donné corps à cette sensation de balançoire et en a fait un récit mythique, c’est Gulliver” (p. 232). A *résumé* of Swift’s life follows, tending to explain the author’s “personnalité clivée” (cleft personality), contrasting a painful private life on the one hand, with a socially gratifying, resilient public life on the other. One would have wished Boris Cyrulnik to be more precise in his parallelism between author and narrator, between Swift and Gulliver. Cyrulnik’s most interesting contribution for this

⁵ Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001.

essay, however, is his assertion that “en fait, [*Les Voyages de Gulliver*] sert de métaphore psychologique et sociale à un sentiment de bascule où il est aussi angoissant de dominer que d’être dominé” (p. 234). It is possible to explain Gulliver’s behaviour in part one, chapter one by this double anxiety.

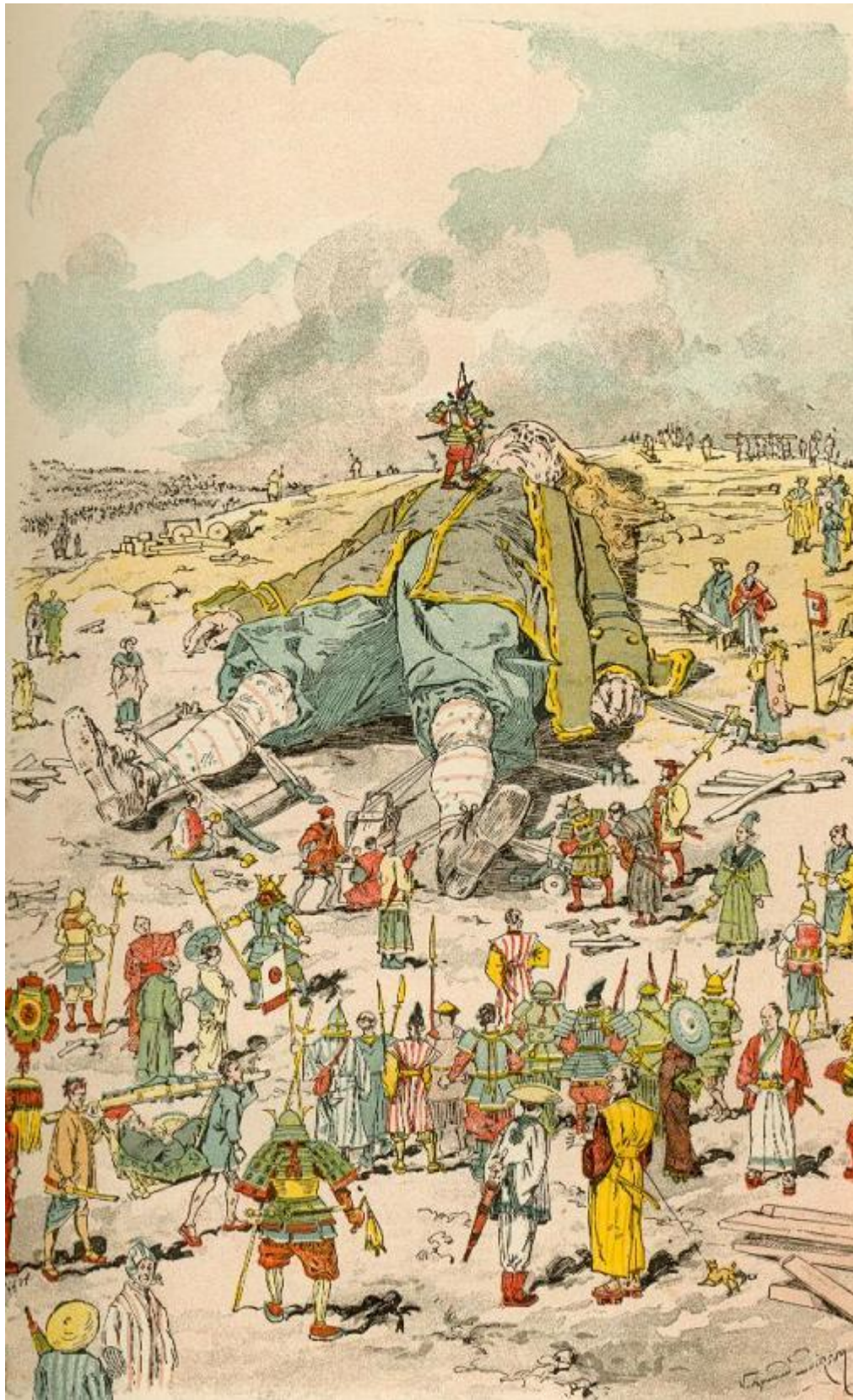
Moreover, the resiliency Gulliver evinces in the opening paragraphs of the chapter under study, which might well be an undercover allusion to Swift’s own hardships,⁶ suggests that his attitude in the first days of his Lilliputian stay may be a sort of interim stance between trauma and recovery. Cyrulnik’s “sentiment de bascule” (seesaw-like feeling) is easily recognized in the patent discrepancy between Lilliput and Brobdingnag, between the diminutive and the gigantic. But it is also present within part one, chapter one in the ups and downs of Gulliver’s successive attempts at resistance and apparent capitulations, monitored by the conjunction “but.”

That Gulliver is no coward, either physically or mentally, is abundantly and convincingly proved in the rest of the book. It is but to recall how he rescues the Lilliputian fleet in part one, how he defeats enormous animals in Brobdingnag, how he dialogues with the great dead in Glubbdubdrib or how he faces the Yahoos’ ignominious looks and behaviour in part four, not counting his handsome weathering out of several seafaring hazards. Gulliver’s apparent meekness, however, is used by Swift for different purposes. The eponymous hero is shown as a verisimilar character⁷ in a travelogue, up against the unknown (Lilliput) after a great tragedy (shipwreck), experiencing surprise and fear, complying with the laws of hospitality to the unwitting detriment of his own image; also as an archetype of Man, subjected to common human idiosyncrasies (fatigue, sleep, hunger and thirst, “the demands of nature,” pain, etc.); still again, as a *persona* for Swift, reflecting the identity of a young man trying to find his bearings in a society where “genius, charm, and integrity all together”⁸ are not enough to obtain recommendation or preferment. In all three instances, Gulliver’s non-resistance, or rather resiliency, is proof of deep trauma, but, if Boris Cyrulnik is right, also of a capacity to reconstruct one’s self.

⁶ Swift too had acutely felt lack of money, friends, and opportunities at the start of his life. See I. Ehrenpreis, *Swift the Man, his Works and the Age* (London: Methuen, 1964 [1962]), vol. 1, *passim* and in particular, p. 264, where the biographer states: “I think that he was fundamentally so unsure of himself, though aware of his gifts, at this era, that he held passively to the appearance of calm and strength.”

⁷ Comparing Crusoe and Gulliver, John F. Ross writes: “The matter-of-fact manner with which the two scales of Lilliput — and of Brobdingnag as well — are mentioned together is thoroughly characteristic of Gulliver’s lack of subjective emotionalizing or attitudinizing.” In *Swift and Defoe, A Study in Relationship* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1941), vol. 11, p. 100, Ross stresses the approach as a means of “presenting [...] remarkable, marvellous, and unbelievable details, but not pinning the reader’s attention to the fact that they are so.”

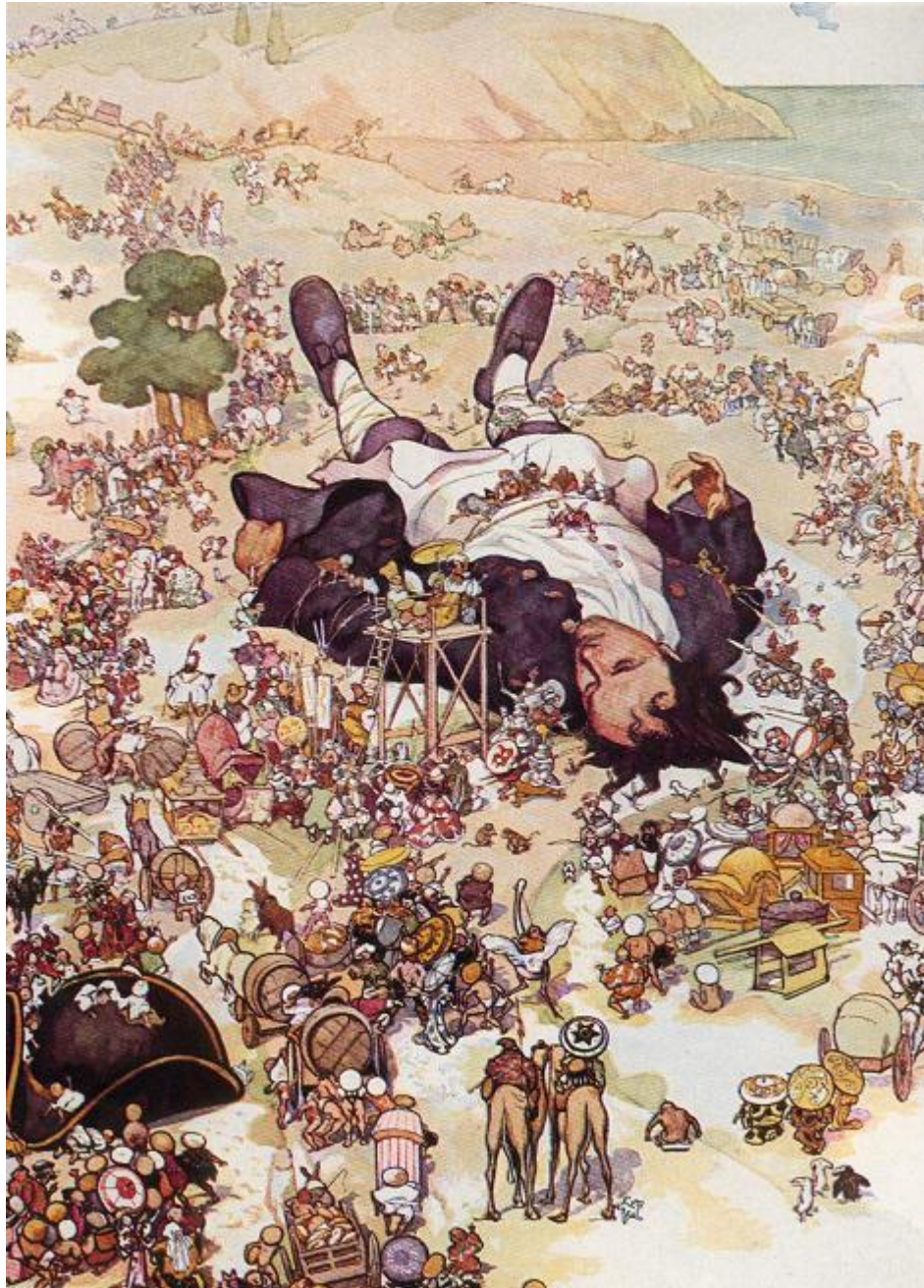
⁸ Ehrenpreis, *Swift*, vol. 1, p. 264.



By V. Armand Poirson (Paris: A. Quantin, 1884)



By J. J. Grandville (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1978 facsimile)



By André Devambez (1867-1944) for the review *Illustration*



Anon (Paris: Hachette, Bibliothèque rose illustrée, 1926)