

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature

**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English

**Band:** 4 (1988)

**Artikel:** Misreading contexts : Sir Walter Scott on Gulliver's Travels

**Autor:** Forster, Jean-Paul

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99869>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 30.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Misreading Contexts: Sir Walter Scott on *Gulliver's Travels*

Jean-Paul Forster

To pose the problem of reading contexts is to pose that of the relationship between a work and its readers, that of a work's reception, that of the plurality of readings and of the reliability of any interpretation: less directly perhaps, but no less imperatively, it is also to pose the problem of the way acts of communication construct their references<sup>1</sup> and the way knowledge becomes transmissible. The modest purpose of the following inquiry is to suggest, by means of an example, what the history of a work's interpretations can contribute to the ongoing debate in the matter. Three general observations will help to define the direction of my argument.

1. History is experienced as a movement forward, but it is read backwards and becomes intelligible only in retrospect. It is impossible to conceive what the public heard at the first performance of Beethoven's sixth symphony. Each new interpretation we hear has been filtered through the temperaments of generations of conductors and influenced by listening to generations of new works which claim to have been inspired by, or to be akin to, Beethoven's symphonies. In literature, later readings similarly contain unconscious echoes of earlier ones or other readings. Pursuing the impossible dream of a true original reading through the accumulation of past readings makes us more conscious of the distance that separates us from a writer and his first readers.

2. Literary works are ever fresh and new, but nothing gives a greater impression of an archeology of knowledge than a collection of interpretations from "The Critical Heritage" series, and sometimes even

<sup>1</sup> This was perhaps the aspect of the problem most often touched upon at the symposium; see the papers by John Carey, Max Nanny and Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich.

from the "Twentieth Century Views" series, though such collections have gathered the best comments and analyses of a work. There is a lesson here: criticism is time-bound in a way creative writing is not. The interpretation of a literary work has a history, but not the work itself. This is where the notion of historical reading contexts comes in.

3. The exponential proliferation of books on literature or individual works, the premium set on originality at all costs in a critical arena where every project is contaminated by a concern for self-promotion, and the speeding up of the rhythms of change in fashions and techniques in other fields, all this has led the world to entertain the belief that diversity and divisions are in themselves inevitable or even desirable. This belief now casts its shadow on literary criticism as it does on many other cultural activities. Criticism has become obsessed with divergent nuances of interpretation and theories,<sup>2</sup> with the result that, sometimes, the more central issues are obscured. Other periods believed in unity and consensus and were predominantly concerned with a core of meaning in works, on which there could be general agreement. But today's leading critics have drawn from their implicit obeisance to the cult of change what seems a logical conclusion in the circumstances. Some assert either — to take but two examples — that reading, and consequently interpretation, is a purely private affair and that, as a result, any reading goes,<sup>3</sup> or that there are "interpretative communities" in which, before communication can take place and some sort of consensus be reached, there must exist a sharing of values and opinions.<sup>4</sup>

A history of a work's interpretations on the one hand corrects such extreme views on vital points and on the other qualifies the belief that all access to the past's understanding of itself is barred. There is no denying that, over decades and centuries, words change meanings or at least resonance. There is no denying either that the referents of words change too, and that literary conventions of genres and diction come and die like fashions. But the interpretations of most works suggest that there is usually wider agreement on a substantial core of meaning than some theorists today are ready to grant. Or, when this core of agreement does not materialize, there are then other points of convergence between the

<sup>2</sup> This love of diversity for itself is also noted by Ihab Hassan.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Holland, *The I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

views of different readers. They will usually agree on the reasons why they differ.

Sometimes, however, in all that remains valid and convincing in older criticism, distortions, or ambiguities, or blind spots appear. Not even the most sensitive critics, when they tackle the text as honestly as they can, are proof against them. For a time, these distortions, ambiguities and blind spots may pass unnoticed. Only retrospectively do they look inexplicable. They form the class of misreadings I am concerned with here. The study of these misreadings has something useful to tell us about the work they misrepresent, the critic who misrepresents the work, the business of criticism, the way great, and not so great, works survive, and the act of reading itself.

The case studied here is one of blatant misreading. It appears unaccountable today, but it was probably inevitable in its time. Sir Walter Scott's study of Swift is an interesting example of early Romantic criticism. As a critical study it is perceptive, except — and this comes as a surprise — with reference to *Gulliver's Travels*. Scott twice turns his attention to the subject in his twelve-volume edition of Swift's work, first in a life of the satirist entitled "Memoirs of Jonathan Swift, D. D.", with which he prefaces the collected works, and again in the introduction to volume xi, which contains the *Travels*.<sup>5</sup>

The pages on *Gulliver's Travels* in Scott's "Memoirs of Jonathan Swift, D. D." begin with an elucidation of topical allusions. Scott may be said to describe what amused early readers of the satire. He explains that Swift's contemporaries were delighted with the portrayal of Sir Robert Walpole as Premier Flimnap, and that of the Tories and Whigs as the factions of High-Heels and Low-Heels in Lilliput. He points out that a certain Raimond Lully once actually drew up plans for a machine "for composing books on all subjects, without the least assistance of genius or knowledge," such as Swift imagines in his attack on the abuses of philosophical science in "A Voyage to Laputa" (vol. i, p. 333). All this is competently researched. But when Scott comes to Book iv, "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," his method veers to something completely different. He finds the invidious double comparison of man to Yahoos and clever horses unacceptable. For him, there is in it what French criticism calls

<sup>5</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Swift, D. D., Dean of St. Patrick's Dublin* (12 vols. Edinburgh: James Ballantyne [1814] 1824). The page references given in the text are to this edition.

"surplus meaning",<sup>6</sup> which must be eliminated, and he eliminates it in the usual way of the nineteenth century. The excess of pessimism is blamed on the life of the writer and becomes the source of the biographical legend. With Swift the legend already existed, and all Scott had to do was to transfer the "surplus meaning" to it. Only minor adjustments were necessary. That Swift's enforced retirement to Ireland had embittered him and that his health was rapidly declining was already commonly accepted. Scott adds that the very fact of writing *Gulliver's Travels* led him to brood on the human condition, making things worse (vol. i, p. 336; vol. xi, pp. 4, 12). Not content to have rid the text of its embarrassing "surplus meaning" by transferring it to the legend, Scott also wants to find aesthetic justifications in the text for what he has done. But to give aesthetic justifications for what you dislike and reject on moral grounds is a delicate affair.

From the moment Scott shifts his ground to argue that Book iv of the *Travels* is unacceptable, he introduces new criteria of evaluation in a discussion so far limited to identifying the targets of Swift's satire. These criteria are those of "verisimilitude" — another phrase he uses is "degree of probability" — (vol. i, pp. 337, 338), and of consistency in the matter of fictional acceptability. He does not deny the presence of "an extravagant fairy tale" (p. 341) in the satirical narrative of the *Travels*, but he finds it palatable only when "the extravagance of the fable" is, as he puts it, "qualified" (p. 339). Verisimilitude becomes a touchstone by which to judge the products of Swift's imagination. Repeatedly, Scott comes back to the idea that verisimilitude is necessary for an expression of truth and that the depiction of marvels must conform to the law of probability: "there are degrees of probability proper even to the wildest fiction" (p. 337).

The criteria of verisimilitude and consistency lead Scott to praise above everything else the fiction of an authentic travel book in which the satire is dressed, with its style modelled on that of actual travellers: what, in a previous article, I described as the framing fiction of the *Travels*.<sup>7</sup> "Even Robinson Crusoe (though detailing events so much more

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to an unpublished lecture by Jean Kaempfer, "L'Homme comme l'oeuvre: à propos de quelques représentations caricaturales biographiques d'Emile Zola".

<sup>7</sup> "Swift: The Satirical Use of Framing Fictions," in *The Structure of Texts* (SPELL 3), ed. Udo Fries (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987) 183-97.

probable) hardly excels Gulliver in gravity and verisimilitude of narrative" (p. 338).<sup>8</sup> Scott discerns in Gulliver's character the typical traits of a real traveller from the eighteenth century, as well as a profoundly English turn of mind. There is nothing surprising in the argument so far.

That Scott should reject the clever horses and ignoble hominids, the Yahoos, as unworthy of the rest of the satire is also consistent with his taste and his criterion of "degree of probability." In this respect, it must be noted that, although he objects to the Yahoos on moral grounds, it is the Houyhnhnms that bear the brunt of his attack. The only thing suspicious in this part of his analysis is the sudden animus of the comments:

But the mind rejects, as utterly impossible, the supposition of a nation of horses placed in houses which they could not build, fed with corn which they could neither sow, reap, nor save, possessing cows which they could not milk, depositing that milk in vessels which they could not make, and, in short, performing an hundred purposes of rational and social life, for which their external structure altogether unfits them.<sup>9</sup>

What Scott is in fact saying here is that Swift takes little notice of an anatomy's adaptation to certain functions and to a specific environment, and that he ignores the close connection existing between an anatomy and the psychological development of the animal.<sup>10</sup> He judges the credibility of the Houyhnhnms by almost Darwinian standards.

Where Scott's argument becomes frankly odd is when he contends that the same strictures do not apply in the cases of Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Laputans and Struldbriggs. His defence of the first two proceeds along two lines. On the one hand he suggests that what he calls "the ordinary machinery of romance" (vol. i, p. 337) has made giants and pygmies so familiar that the reader can conceive them without difficulty.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand he puts forward that, scientifically, Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians are credible, because disproportion in size between groups of the same species exists in nature. He mentions the case of reptiles, which, he says, big or small, look alike (p. 337). The "postulates" of the existence of the giants and pygmies "can be granted" because, Scott

<sup>8</sup> See also vol. xi, p. 5

<sup>9</sup> See also vol. xi, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> See also vol. xi, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Vol. xi, p. 8 makes much the same point about Laputa, Balnibarbi and the Struldbriggs in the third voyage.

adds, in every other respect, "proportions are preserved" (vol. xi, p. 9) and the creatures behave and live like human beings.

Scott's defence of Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Laputans and Struldbriggs against the very drift of his own strictures is puzzling. First, it makes it clear that verisimilitude and narrative probability are notions foreign to Swift's imagination and satirical vision. As aesthetic criteria they simply do not apply to the *Travels*. Then his whole argument does not hold water. That the Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Laputans and Struldbriggs are more probable than the Houyhnhnms was hardly more true in Swift's time than in Scott's or ours. Moreover, it does not seem to occur to Scott that clever animals also belong to "the ordinary machinery of romance" and that scientific standards could just as well be applied to an analysis of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck in this case. In fact, no reader raises an eyebrow when, in folktales and fables, bears are reported to live in "houses which they could not build" or storks to drink out of jars "which they could not make." In the same context, it is interesting to note that Scott is ready to praise the precision with which Swift portrays giants and pygmies but has nothing to say about the nicety with which the horses' behaviour or the monkey-like Yahoos are described, though the satirist's description is worthy of the great fabulists on this point too. Of course, the rub is that fables and folktales do not end up discussing the imperfections of the human body, whereas Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master does, in what has remained one of the most controversial passages of the great satire:

[The horse] then began to find fault with other parts of my Body; the Flatness of my Face, the Prominence of my Nose, mine Eyes placed directly in Front, so that I could not look on either Side without turning my Head: That I was not able to feed my self, without lifting one of my fore Feet to my Mouth . . .

(*Gulliver's Travels*, Book iv, Chapter 4).

Surely, the horse's criticism of the human body is no more to be taken literally than the fiction is to be read as probable. Scott comes very near to admitting as much himself, when he concedes that part of the great charm of *Gulliver's Travels* lies in "the marvels which the volume contains" (vol. i, p. 339).

Such is, in substance, the nature of Scott's misreading. An explanation for the double shift in his argument, first from moral to biographical comments, then from moral to aesthetic criticism, is not hard to find. The aesthetic criteria of verisimilitude and consistent narrative probability,

which apply so ill to Swift's satire, are extrapolated, not from the *Travels* themselves or similar works, but from works expressive of another aesthetic sensitivity, different from Swift's.

What do we know about it? We know that, by 1800, the new sensitivity was firmly established. In this sense, some of Scott's own remarks echo and develop earlier opinions about the *Travels*. Those of Dr Beattie (1783), twenty years previously, bear similarities.<sup>12</sup> Scott's historical novels were equally an expression of it. So what could be more natural than that the brilliant realism of the parody should have appealed to him in Gulliver's purported travel book. He commends it for its use of personal incidents, which is so convincing that "it would almost induce us to believe we are perusing a real story" (vol. xi, p. 5). The aesthetics deriving from this different sensitivity influenced all the literary genres of the period, and not just the novel, which, under its influence, was slowly moving to the position of predominant genre. Poetry too was affected. We find readers of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" objecting to the supernatural in the ballad for the same reasons and in the same words as Scott objected to Swift's fantasy. The debate also centered on the issue whether what happened in the poem was "probable" or "improbable." In a note on the poem added to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth argued in favour of "the necessity of behavioural probability in character and of causality in poetic action."<sup>13</sup> In his defence, Coleridge himself felt bound to insist that, granting the existence of the supernatural, he had only described "such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real."<sup>14</sup> However different they were, Coleridge's supernatural and Swift's fantasy left readers dissatisfied. This seems to indicate that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, verisimilitude had become a requisite in literature. But it was no longer the classical verisimilitude, current in Swift's days and synonymous of "bienséance" or decorum. The fact that Scott systematically equates verisimilitude with "degrees of probability"

<sup>12</sup> For James Beattie's comments, see *Essays on Poetry and Music* (1776) 378-387, and *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (1783) 514-518. Scott refers to Beattie in the preface to vol xi, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> John Spencer Hill, *A Coleridge Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 133-134. He is referring to *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Brett and Jones (London: Methuen, 1968) 276-277.

<sup>14</sup> *Biographia Literaria* (London: Dent, 1975) 168.

could not be more explicit. For him the concept involves scientific probability and psychological realism. Now this throws light on a little explored aspect of Romantic sensitivity – its marked scientific bias and its firmly rooted belief that literature ought to avoid contradicting observation, tested and attested facts, and the general laws drawn from them. This scientific notion of verisimilitude shaped writers' and readers' "horizon of expectations" alike.<sup>15</sup> Works that did not conform had to be aligned. The new sensitivity was hostile to Swift's free display of fantasy. From that time date both the view that *Gulliver's Travels* is a sort of second, more freakish *Robinson Crusoe*, a forebear of the novel, soon to become a book for children, and the debate about the consistency of Swift's characterization of Gulliver.

The study of Scott's misreading of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and of some of its causes, like that of most misreadings of this type, calls for the following comments in connection with the topic of reading contexts. Methodologically first, and to dispel any ambiguity, it is necessary to insist that the use made here of the two terms reading and misreading implies no value judgement, no opposition between what is correct and wrong. The words reading and misreading have no other purpose but to distinguish between what is durable in readers' understanding of a work and what is not, because of its historical conditions. What is durable, this core of meaning mentioned earlier, which remains fairly constant throughout the history of a work's interpretations, could tentatively be said to consist in the mental picture that readers have of a work. This mental picture is both sensory and intellectual. Teaching foreign and native speakers shows the mental pictures of verbal experiences, and of their representations of non-verbal experiences, to vary relatively little between individuals. What changes considerably on the other hand is what could be called the *resonance* that these mental pictures find in an individual consciousness. In this respect, one may well wonder whether literary interpretations are not sometimes unduly concerned with rationalizing this resonance, instead of analyzing the mental pictures of texts. Now, to rationalize the resonance that a text has for this or that individual reader, or group of intimates, is to ask this text his or her or their questions. Asking a text private questions is neither reading nor

<sup>15</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978)-49.

misreading in the sense given to these words here. One can be said to "read" a text when one lets the text ask the questions. Historical misreadings like Scott's are of a different kind. They occur when a text is apprehended through irrelevant conventions so that it asks non-questions: readers mistake the questions their conventions lead them to ask for the questions the text asks.

Historically, then: behind Scott's misreading can be recognized the type of attitudes and beliefs that, in any age, dictate the tacit literary conventions of genres, the conventions that make certain works possible, or at least more acceptable to an audience than others. Misreadings are intimately connected with fashions. They are induced by changes in the "predominant discourses" of a society and, more deeply, by mutations in its sensitivity.<sup>16</sup> They throw light on the nature of the literary, aesthetic and philosophical "horizon of expectations" of the readers of a period. Scott's objections to Swift's fantasy help to understand why such genres as the fable or the allegory found little favour in his generation. In a similar way, even such a necessary and well-documented study as J. L. Lowes's *Road to Xanadu*, which in our century has led to a complete reappraisal of Coleridge's poetry, is not innocent of the same anachronistic bias. Written between 1919 and 1926, one of its declared aims was to describe the way Coleridge's imagination functioned, but it gives of the creative process an account which applies much better to the principles that presided over the imagist composition of T. S. Eliot's interior monologues, *The Waste Land*, or Ezra Pound's *Cantos* than to that of Romantic poems in general. The study of the kind of misreadings considered here also suggests that they are not only inevitable, but perhaps also necessary: they are in a way requisite for a work's survival. Misreadings are part of a larger process by which a work renews its contemporaneity once its topical interest has started to fade. On this point, Scott's misreading is exemplary. After explaining what Swift's first readers liked in *Gulliver's Travels*, he tries to answer the question why the work he is publishing is still worth reading, and the shift in his argument has no other purpose than to meet a possible reticence on the part of his contemporaries. Finally, we have seen that, though they are regrettable,

<sup>16</sup> On this particular aspect of the phenomenon, see my article "Quel contexte de lecture pour "The Collar" de George Herbert?" *Etudes de Lettres* (Université de Lausanne, 1987) 23-41.

misreadings like Scott's do little damage. Either they become obvious as time passes, or they result in the type of elimination of "surplus meaning" described at the beginning of this essay, which, in fact, eliminates nothing. In the case under consideration, Swift's embarrassing pessimism is simply transferred to the biography, or better legend, but, as Romantic poetics simultaneously insists that a writer's life and work are inseparable, Swift's dark vision of man remains, for readers, as embarrassing as ever. Add to this the fact that the political, social, scientific and moral import of his satire is never in doubt, and it is clear that there is little cause for alarm. The misreading is peripheral.

For the literary historian, misreadings are as interesting as Jakobson's "changing dominants." Of course, they are also different. "Changing dominants" result from readers giving, according to their interests of the moment, more prominence to one aspect of a work than another within the economy of a text.<sup>17</sup> Misreadings do not lead to new interpretations, but to misinterpretations, even if they are slight ones. But both make us more aware of the dependence of any reading on a reading context of beliefs, assumptions and conventions.

Misreadings are not only of historical interest, they are also of critical interest. Unquestionably, misreadings occasionally raise irrelevant issues. This was the case with Scott's notion of improbability, though he was not the only guilty party.<sup>18</sup> Yet the misreadings, and the readings, of a period can also illuminate certain aspects of the work they misinterpret. Quite apart from the fact that Scott's discussion of *Gulliver's Travels* contains perceptive remarks which remain of interest to any reader of Swift, his misreading draws our attention unerringly to those aspects of the satire least reducible to neat description and most open to misinterpretation: in the present case, the nature of the writer's imagination and of the fantasy in *Gulliver's Travels*, but also in *A Tale of a Tub* and the other satirical fictions. From Scott's errors we learn that Swift's fantasy ignores the categories "probable"/"improbable," realistic truth/extravagant lie, psychologically founded/gratuitous and irresponsible. It is unfettered by a conception of poetic truth subservient to the imperatives of philosophical science and psychology. Its "charm" lies in its "extravagance" and

<sup>17</sup> "The Dominant," *Readings in Russian Poetics*, ed. L. Matejka and K. Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971) 82-87.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion of Florence Moog, "Gulliver was a Bad Biologist," *Scientific American* 179 (1948) 470-474.

irrepressible freedom of range. The fantasy in *Gulliver's Travels* has all the traits of that born of a period when mythological beliefs, superstitious legends, alchemy and magic had died for good and had not yet been claimed either as fields of investigation for new sciences nor as the expression of psychological processes. The uncanny, the out-of-the-ordinary, the fantastic and the incredible floated in a void and were available indifferently to the imitators of the ancients or to the practical joker. They were the more fanciful for being unclaimed by any system of belief. In this sense, we can conclude that no misreading due to changing contexts of literary conventions and "horizons of discourse" are truly wrong. They are perhaps sometimes even more fruitful than impeccable readings.

One more remark: misreadings reveal the anxieties of the critics. It is high time critics began to analyze their own anxieties, besides those of creative writers. Scott's example ought to make us ponder. It is when he tries to be theoretical, to rationalize the conventions of his time, that he errs. It is his theory, not his reading, that misleads him and betrays the nature of his anxiety as a critic.