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Remarks On The Life and Writings Of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin

Orrery, John Boyle of

London, 1752

Remarks upon the Houyhnhnms, and the Yahoos.

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pray. GOD Almighty's providence protect and guide you, my HAM, whatever fate of life, or fortune attends

Your affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y,



LETTER XV.

IT is with great reluctance, I shall make some remarks on GULLIVER'S voyage to the *Houyhnhnms*. In this last part of his imaginary travels, SWIFT has indulged a misanthropy that is intolerable. The representation which he has given us of human nature, must terrify, and even debase the mind of the reader who views it. His sallies of wit and humour lose all their force, nothing remaining but a melancholy, and disagreeable impression: and, as I have said to you, on other parts of his works, we are disgusted, not entertained; we are shocked, not instructed by the fable. I should therefore chuse to take no notice of his YAHOOs, did I not think it necessary to assert the vindication of human nature, and thereby, in some measure, to pay my duty to the great author of our species, who has created us in a very fearful, and a very wonderful manner.

We are composed of a mind, and of a body, intimately united, and mutually affecting each other. Their operations indeed are entirely different. Whether the immortal spirit, that enlivens this fine machine, is originally of a superior nature in various bodies (which, I own, seems most consistent and agreeable to the scale and order of beings) or, whether the difference depends on a symmetry, or peculiar structure of the organs combined with it, is beyond my reach to determine. It is evidently certain, that the body is curiously formed with proper organs to delight, and such as are adapted to all the necessary uses of life. The spirit animates the whole; it guides the natural appetites, and confines them within just limits. But, the natural force of this spirit is often immersed in matter; and the mind becomes subservient to passions, which it ought to govern and direct. Your friend HORACE, although of the Epicurean doctrine, acknowledges this truth, where he says,

Atque affigit humo divinæ particulam auræ.

It is no less evident, that this immortal spirit has an independent power of acting, and, when cultivated in a proper manner, seemingly quits the corporeal frame within which it is imprisoned, and soars into higher, and more spacious regions; where, with an energy, which I had almost said was divine, it ranges among those heavenly bodies, that, in this lower world, are scarce visible to our eyes; and we can at once explain the distance, magnitude, and velocity of the planets,
and

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and can foretel, even to a degree of minuteness, the particular time when a comet will return, and when the sun will be eclipsed in the next century. These powers certainly evince the dignity of human nature, and the surprising effects of the immaterial spirit within us, which, in so confined a state, can thus disengage itself from the fetters of matter. It is from this pre-eminence of the soul over the body, that we are enabled to view the exact order, and curious variety of different beings; to consider, and cultivate the natural productions of the earth; and to admire, and imitate the wise benevolence which reigns throughout the whole system of the universe. It is from hence, that we form moral laws for our conduct. From hence, we delight in copying that great original, who, in his essence, is utterly incomprehensible, but, in his influence, is powerfully apparent to every degree of his creation. From hence too, we perceive a real beauty in virtue, and a distinction between good and evil. Virtue acts with the utmost generosity, and with no view to her own advantage: while vice, like a glutton, feeds herself enormously, and then is willing to disgorge the nauseous offals of her feast. But I shall wander too far, especially as I flatter myself, that your mind is so good, and so unprejudiced, that you will more easily feel, than I can illustrate, the truth of these assertions.

SWIFT deduces his observations from wrong principles; for, in his land of *Houyhnhnms*, he considers the soul and body in their most degenerate, and un-

cultivated state: the former as a slave to the appetites of the latter. He seems insensible of the surprising mechanism, and beauty of every part of the human composition. He forgets the fine description which OVID gives of mankind.

*Os homini sublime dedit, cœlumque tueri
Jussit, et erectos ad sidera tollere vultus.*

In painting YAHOOs he becomes one himself. Nor is the picture, which he draws of the *Houyhnhnms*, inviting or amusing. It wants both light and shade to adorn it. It is cold and inspid. We there view the pure instincts of brutes, unassisted by any knowledge of letters, acting within their own narrow sphere, merely for their immediate preservation. They are incapable of doing wrong, therefore they act right. It is surely a very low character given to creatures, in whom the author would insinuate some degree of reason, that they act inoffensively, when they have neither the motive nor the power to act otherwise. Their virtuous qualities are only negative. SWIFT himself, amidst all his irony, must have confessed, that to moderate our passions, to extend our munificence to others, to enlarge our understanding, and to raise our idea of the Almighty by contemplating his works, is not only the business, but often the practice, and the study of the human mind. It is too certain, that no one individual has ever possessed every qualification and excellence: however such an assemblage of different virtues, may still be collected from different persons,

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sons, as are sufficient to place the dignity of human nature in an amiable, and exalted station. We must lament indeed the many instances of those who degenerate, or go astray from the end and intention of their being. The true source of this depravity is often owing to the want of education, to the false indulgence of parents, or to some other bad causes, which are constantly prevalent in every nation. Many of these errors are finely ridiculed in the foregoing parts of this romance: but the voyage to the *Houyhnhnms* is a real insult upon mankind.

I am heartily tired of this last part of GULLIVER'S travels, and am glad, that, having exhausted all my observations on this disagreeable subject, I may finish my letter; especially as the conclusion of it naturally turns my thoughts from YAHOOs, to one of the dearest pledges I have upon earth, yourself: to whom I am a most

Affectionate Father,

O R R E R Y.

L E T.