

## Reading After Trump, Episode 3 Blakey Vermeule

Alex Woloch: Hi, I'm Alex Woloch.

Kenny Ligda: I'm Kenny Ligda.

Alex Woloch: This is Reading After Trump. Our aim in this podcast is to initiate conversations with literary scholars, critics, and historians about what literature can tell us about this critical moment. The views expressed here are our own and don't necessarily reflect the view policy or positions of Stanford University.

Alex Woloch: I'm going to jump in to say that we're here, I'm here, this is Alex Woloch. I'm here again with Kenny Ligda in our second meeting for our podcast reading after Trump, Conversations in Literature and Politics. We're here with my friend and colleague, Blakey Vermeule. I'll just say by way of introduction that Blakey is one of the people who, for Kenny and me, our idea of this podcast was very much formed in part with conversations with her. I look to Blakey, I'm not going to give a formal introduction to Blakey, but rather to just say I look to her as someone whose work, whose teaching, whose research has been in lots of different ways circling around the question of what literature's relationship can be and should be to ethics, to philosophy, to reflection, to our social understanding, and also what scholars' relationship to all those things can be. There's a kind of insistent effort in her work to think about the potential blind spots and limits of our work as scholars and ways to transcend that, ways to make thinking relevant to what's going on in other areas. Classic questions about what it means to be an intellectual, is that something that has validity, is part of the validity of being intellectual being skeptical about that. This comes out in lots of ways in teaching, in scholarship, and writing and reading. I think it's fair to say Blakey that a touchstone for you is *Gulliver's Travels* and Jonathan Swift. For our purposes that seemed like a good place to at least start and to have a conversation between the three of us focused on *Gulliver's Travels*. We were struck, this was just a complete coincidence, but our last conversation was with Morgan Frank about a pretty scathingly satirical novel by Nathanael West whose hero was ... What was his? Lemuel ...

Kenny Ligda: Lemuel Pitkin.

Alex Woloch: Lemuel Pitkin.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: There's an odd immediate connection between these two texts.

Kenny Ligda: We're not promising a third in the Lemuel sequence. This may be-

Alex Woloch: Third in the Lemuel.

Kenny Ligda: This may be it.

Alex Woloch: No, but maybe we should go to something that has a horse in it. I don't know.

Kenny Ligda: Okay.

Alex Woloch: The stronger connection is just that these are two books that are very funny, deeply cynical, powerfully satirical, politically engaged, extremely pessimistic, and bordering on misanthropy. I guess Jonathan Swift's book would be absolutely the canonical center of any kind of thinking mythanthropy as a philosophical or literary position or a human sensibility. That all seems like one incredibly important and interesting vein for the literature that we turn to at this political moment. I am going to ask Kenny if you have any other introductory comments that you want to make about our podcast or about Blakey's visit.

Kenny Ligda: I don't think I can improve on that. I think that basically we've always wanted to do books that speak to the political moment and Swift is one that has spoken to many political moments. Even though he's very specific in an environment that I'm not very familiar with, which is Whigs and Tories and the 18th century. Blakey I want you to start wherever you want to start, but one thing is that this is the first time that we've talked about a really classic text. There's a question of how can something that was written 200 years ago speak to us now?

Blakey Vermeule: Right. Swift I think is basically the great diagnoser of the human modern condition. I think that that diagnosis is multifaceted. It goes in a million different directions, which we can talk about, but one of the major pieces of it has to do with basically the modern human being as a political person. Swift was writing at the time basically of the invention of the modern political party. In the late 17th and early 18th century, political parties as we've come to understand them now were coming into being and he was very, very, very shrewd about what that was likely to mean and what it looked like. In his view political parties were essentially, they looked a lot like what we would call the mafia. They were gangs of people running around trying to get some influence over each other. I think he saw all of the ridiculousness of that set of practices and just put it out there for us to continue to come back to and say yeah he really got something about the contemporary scene of politics. One of his diagnosis is that the modern man basically, or the modern human being I should say, one of the features of being modern is that you basically hate your politicians. Your

politicians come on the stage and you go boo. Not only do you hate your politicians, but you also hate everybody else. So it's a pretty negative vision. I've been thinking a lot about Twitter as a platform that is just suffused with hatred. Part of the suffusion of hatred has to do with this thing that Swift diagnosed is that somebody comes along and makes a statement and pretty much everybody else starts this chorus of boos. That's what Swift, that's one of his main preoccupations.

Kenny Ligda: Is just hatred.

Blakey Vermeule: It goes a little deeper than that. It's not that humans are by nature haters of each other, it's that it's basically that humans in their capacity as rational animals that part of what it is to be rational is basically to imagine that you have an intellectual control over circumstances that actually aren't really in your control. Part of the fantasy of that intellectual control is that you get to say no to other people. Often paradoxically intellectuals are among the most hating of each other and their own tribe, and we can get into the question of what it means to be a member of a tribe that you hate. Intellectuals, they're especially prone to this because basically somebody comes along and says something and the right or the correct intellectual response is essentially negation.

Alex Woloch: Let me just jump in then with a question about hatred.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: I guess I'm wondering how we distinguish between ... It's culture as hatred partially, right, that culture is a vehicle for hatred actually. If that's part of what Swift is diagnosing and putting on display, how do we start to distinguish or do we want to parse that, the hatred that he's condemning against the vituperation that he brings to that project right? His representation of hatred against his own hatreds.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Which seems relevant to this political moment where the reaction to Trump is ... There's a weird mirroring of the qualities in Trump that we viscerally respond to, hatred, is largely hatred, but that's also the modality through which we respond. I guess it's, what's the expression? Don't fight a pig in the mud because ...

Blakey Vermeule: Trump is a man who has clearly spent much of his adult life sitting in front of the TV and screaming at it.

Alex Woloch: Which we're now doing.

Blakey Vermeule: Which of course turns out to be contagious.

Alex Woloch: Right. How do you see that contagiousness working in Swift's writing?

Blakey Vermeule: Maybe I'll back up a little bit. Very famously when he was describing *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift wrote letters to his friend Alexander Pope. He has this one letter where he says, "I have materials towards a treatise" and he meant *Gulliver's Travels*, "proving the falsity of that definition" from Aristotle, which is, "animal rationale." He's saying that what I'm going to show you is that human beings really aren't rational animals and to show that it should be only *rationalis capax* or capable of rationality. This distinction between being reasonable and being capable of reason is really crucial to Swift. He says, "Upon this great foundation of misanthropy," "... the whole building of my Travels is erected. "It's an interesting proposition to erect a building upon a foundation of misanthropy. The foundation is that human beings have reason, are capable of reason, but they tend on the whole not to exercise it. This is a pretty profound proposition, but to give it a little bit of a cast, or I mean to take an entry point, it's a different proposition to say that human beings say in their local groups or tribes or sources of affiliation, whatever those are, are not particularly rational. It's a different thing to say that human beings are all mixed together in this modern world in which everybody's alienated and then under control of a deracinated and largely invisible system are irrational. It's that second mode of the deracinated, alienated human who realizes that there's a kind of system that is in charge and is trying in some sense to ground her or himself in this condition of alienation that I think he's really after, that's what he's really after. His diagnosis of that condition is pretty profound. We can get into what it is, but I think that that's really what he's after is that sense of having the capacity for reason but really not having any grounding, any sort of social or emotional or community grounding in which to exercise it so you sit there and you scream at the television.

Kenny Ligda: I'm curious. When I think of the 18th century as I understand it, in England, I think of basically that England and Europe were emerging from centuries of religious war and a lot of what we're proud of in Western civilization is emerging. We have the idea of civil society and polite conversation in coffee shops and scientific rationality and non authoritarian forms of government. It seems to me that Swift was in a prime location where you have all those foundations, but it seems like he didn't see it that way.

Blakey Vermeule: That's a great point Kenny. He's writing about the question of what it means to be civilized and lots and lots of intellectuals and writers on the right and the left have really taken this idea of civilization to task. I was thinking recently of Noam Chomsky, who I think is a writer on this sort of extreme left, who has really critiqued civilization in the way that Swift

has, as a form of socialization that basically makes people obedient to a system that acts in their names in ways that they would never consent to and makes them passive and makes them kind of stupid. Chomsky famously has a whole critique of the American education system, and especially of the, dare I say it, the elite education system, in which he says that most of the people, and I'm quoting something he wrote, that most of the people who make it through the education system and get into elite universities are able to do so because they've always been willing to obey a lot of stupid orders for years and years. It's those people who then go on to shape a system in which obedience is pretty much the prime value or obedience and domestication. Swift's diagnosis of what it means to be civilized is essentially that we're going to be obedient and we're going to submit to a bunch of ridiculous norms and rules and so forth. To bring it back to Trump, I think that part of what people, and I should say I'm not one of them, but I see that part of what people feel is appealing about Trump is that he just is able to cut through those norms and that system of obedience and just be free, apparently free to do and say what he thinks. It turns out that that freedom is actually pretty horrifying.

Alex Woloch: I'm just thinking about it, that mind blowing line up of Swift, Chomsky, and Trump is all at war with a certain notion of civilization, right?

Blakey Vermeule: Yep.

Alex Woloch: In all cases like a certain notion of the system and the conscription of people into the system, with Chomsky and Swift, a kind of conscription of rationality I guess into the system. That's just great for cutting so quickly into the heart of some of what's going on in *Gulliver's Travels* and in Jonathan Swift's writing. It obviously raises a question of how far do you want to go with that analysis, that comparison of Chomsky and Swift. If the diagnosis is the same, the remedy I guess is not the same. Maybe Swift isn't interested in remedy so much. How would you start to describe that?

Blakey Vermeule: Chomsky ...

Alex Woloch: Maybe Chomsky's not interested in remedy so much either. You could argue-

Blakey Vermeule: I actually think that that's probably right and I think that Chomsky probably like Swift is he's a brilliant, brilliant writer and a brilliant thinker and part of the charge of his writing is to diagnose the problems over and over again. That doesn't mean that he's wrong about the kind of ... It doesn't mean that Swift is wrong about the kind of obedience that civilization demands.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: ... and that some people really find problematic. One of the things about Swift that is so wonderful, as you pointed out Kenny, is that whenever you come to this book it's like putting your hands on the third rail. It's immediately electrifying. Teaching this book, I've been teaching it for years, but I was teaching it around the time of the Iraq War, the beginning of the Iraq War, and it struck me that the diagnosis of obedience on the part of the civilized peoples to a regime that was propagating the most unbelievable just malfeasance in the name of civilization was pretty profound. This is a very modern paradox and one that I don't think we have come to resolve.

Kenny Ligda: What strikes me going back to it now, I wonder if this is the same for you, is I think an ongoing theme for us has been shock.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Kenny Ligda: Shock in the election. Here's my first shock with the election. I remember when Trump was given hard questions by Megyn Kelly that he said oh you're on your ...

Blakey Vermeule: You're bleeding, yeah.

Kenny Ligda: He says she was on her period.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Kenny Ligda: I thought that's it for the Trump campaign, he's out with that, but he wasn't. That was one of-

Alex Woloch: Many.

Kenny Ligda: ... one of many things where it was just this realization that there is a lot of support out there for someone that will attack or belittle lots of people. Going back to, for Swift, it strikes me that Swift is not Rabelaisian. It's not like all shit and hatred all the time, it's actually a kind of politely written book in a lot of ways, but there is this thing, especially in Book IV when you get into the land of the Houyhnhnms, of seeing the Yahoos, of seeing human beings and just this terrible shock, this terrible disgust at the people that he's the same as. I feel like this as an American, a white American, and as a man a real shock that this is the demographic and this is what people are like in this country.

Blakey Vermeule: I guess I think that what Trump has shown is not what people are like. He's not revealed their deepest commitments. I think what he has revealed

is that our political system is actually quite chaotic and fragile and I think that that is shocking. The political parties can actually be taken over by somebody who is just an amazing communicator but has absolutely no political experience, has never had a constituent in his life, and just basically has a cheap hat and a megaphone. I think that part of the shock is that actually we haven't really solved the deeper problems of how to create a stable system that actually replicates itself over time. It turns out to be a kind of piece of tissue paper.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. You had this passage here from Book I that I think is sort of on political parties, is that right?

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah. It is. Book I of *Gulliver's Travels* is about Gulliver's visit to this little island of Lilliput. Lilliput is England, except that the people are all six inches tall and they're very, very, very political. They're totally just obsessed with the doings at court. Gulliver arrives, he's shipwrecked, and he arrives in the land of Lilliput. The very first thing that happens, he's passed out on the beach and he comes to and he sees this little group of courtiers dancing around on their horses and so forth and he thinks, I submit. Even though in point of fact he could easily just stomp on them and take ... but he doesn't. His first thought is I submit, I surrender, and then the joke of Book I is in a way all of the different ways that Gulliver finds to submit himself to the regime. The regime of course is one in which you advance by being just a tiny bit better than, or a tiny bit taller than the person next to you. The reason the king is the king is that he is actually half an inch taller than everybody else. The joke is that in this regime, height actually matters except that Gulliver is so determined to domesticate himself that he ignores the fact that he has all this physical power. He just gives up his physical power in the service to a psychic submission. In fact there's a little passage where he says ... He learns some language, he starts talking to the king and he says, please, the very first words I learned were to express my desire that he would please give me my liberty and every day I repeated that wish on my knees. Book I is about the modern condition of psychic submission to a system that everybody can see is ridiculous, but that nobody's willing to overturn or throw themselves out of. The passage I gave you is about this game at court where you have to basically leap over some threads and then creep under some other threads and this is how you're going to advance. I don't know about you, but it's not completely foreign to the world of life in institutions.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. Should we read the passage?

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: "There is likewise another diversion which is only shown before the emperor and the empress, and first minister, upon particular occasions. The emperor lays on the table three fine silken threads of six inches long; one is blue, the other red, and the third green. These threads are proposed as prizes for those persons whom the emperor has a mind to distinguish by a peculiar mark of his favor. The ceremony is performed in his majesty's great chamber of state, where the candidates are to undergo a trial of dexterity very different from the former, and such as I have not observed the least resemblance of in any other country of the new or old world. The emperor holds a stick in his hands, both ends parallel to the horizon, while the candidates advancing, one by one, sometimes leap over the stick, sometimes creep under it, backward and forward, several times, according as the stick is advanced or depressed. Sometimes the emperor holds one end of the stick, and the first minister the other; sometimes the minister has it entirely to himself. Whoever performs his part with most agility, and holds out the longest in leaping and creeping, is rewarded with the blue-colored silk; the red is given to the next, and the green to the third, which they all wear girt twice round about their middle; and you see few great persons about this court who are not adorned with one of these girdles."

Blakey Vermeule: Right. This kind of satire is now a staple of anti-corporate satire. this could be a *Dilbert* sketch or *The Office*. There's a whole genre in this vein.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Blakey Vermeule: For Swift, he grew up in Ireland and he saw the court in London as the only source of his advancement in the church, but he made a terrible mistake, which is that he offended the queen. He offended the queen by writing pamphlet called *A Tale of a Tub*, which even though it was ultimately a defense of the Anglican church, was not quite understood in that spirit by the queen's ministers. He was ultimately banished to Ireland where he had to spend his days growing ever more bitter, but also cynical about what it takes to advance in the world, that you basically have to take your liberty of conscience and subsume it to this kind of procedure.

Kenny Ligda: As I understand it, the bit where Gulliver pisses out the fire in the queen's-

Blakey Vermeule: Chamber.

Kenny Ligda: Chamber.

Blakey Vermeule: Yes. Yes.

Kenny Ligda: That's *The Tale of the Tub*. That's his understanding.

Blakey Vermeule: “I rendered her a signal service and this signal service” was not quite taken--it was not taken in the spirit in which it was meant.

Kenny Ligda: I like it because I suppose it was how Swift felt, but he describes being, he's like wow I had this great idea all of a sudden and I was pleased by my ingenuity coming up with this.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. That phrase, “leaping and creeping,” I guess part of the point is there's something so powerful about the conflation of those two terms and the way that the admonition to all of us that when we think we're leaping might be when we're creeping. I guess one thought that comes to my mind as we're reading this passage and sort of an implicit in this conversation is it's so powerful and so diagnostically germane to any point in time. Maybe Swift isn't the best optic that we need at this moment for Trump because, and this is a little bit like Chomsky, it's like the critique could be leveled at any point and it's aimed at such a general level of modernity. Then conversely that there's a question of how much we should blow up Trump's singularity. This is part of that back and forth about does the election just sort of reveal the chaos or the imperfection of the system or does it reveal that there's a Yahoo bestiality in our fellow citizens. I don't know Blakey, if you have-

Blakey Vermeule: I think that Dostoyevsky says somewhere I think it's in *Notes from Underground*, that there's a fixed quantity of perversion in human life. My take on that is that we live in a largely solutionist, one of our guiding ideologies, especially dare I say it in Silicon Valley, is the ideology of solutionism. If we just tweak the right knob or get the right fix that actually things will be good from here on out. Of course solutionism is a kind of subset of liberal technocratic ideology, which was the guiding ideal of the Obama administration, has been the guiding ideal of both political parties to some degree over the past 40 years. If Dostoyevsky is right, then solutionism is just like you solve along one axis and it turns out that while you're solving along one axis, there's a kind of Hindenburg on the horizon that's actually about to blow up over Central Park. Maybe the real message here is that solutionism doesn't take into account the full spectrum of human perversity or the capacity of humans to mess themselves up as opposed to getting more and more placid.

Alex Woloch: Right. In our first conversation we were talking about this Orwell comment on H.G. Wells, that he's too sane to understand the modern world.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: As I was following you, you were making this distinction between understanding man as a rational animal against understanding man as an animal capable of rationality, right?

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: With part of that difference being we can never just assume placidly that we are rational because that's going to be a very misleading ... Is that-

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah. I think that this issue of being capable of rationality is really huge in our politics at the moment. Our politics, like Swift's politics, are chaotic and one of the effects of that chaos is that no statement can be used to basically change the mind of another person who doesn't already agree with that statement. I think that that's a deeply problematic place to be in if you believe in rationality. It's like I'm showing you the facts and your interlocutor simply thinks that your facts are pre-spun in some sense. The sense that all information comes tagged to a source that you're going to discount if it doesn't come wearing the shirt of your team is a really weird phenomenon. I think that that's why *Gulliver's Travels* actually is so powerful because this is precisely what he's interested in.

Kenny Ligda: That scares me the most. I'm actually directly quoting Orwell right now, but also speaking for myself. What scares me the most about this past election is just the sense of not knowing where to begin to have conversations. How do we have this argument about whether Hillary Clinton was operating a pedophilia ring out of a pizza parlor or something.

Alex Woloch: It's also, it just reminds me, there's a line from Orwell where he's talking exactly about this, like the way that books and writers are associated with a certain party and he says something like the book is dismissed not just before it's read, but before it's even written.

Blakey Vermeule: Yep. Okay. To come back to a Swiftian example, Swift was born in and lived through a period of intense civil war in Europe and in Britain, it was a war between the Catholics and the Protestants. In 1687 when James II, who was the king of England, who was a Catholic, his wife had been delivered of several stillborn infants and some of his children had died at birth, but all of a sudden in 1687 she gets pregnant. The Protestant regime freaks out because here he's going to have a baby and so therefore he's going to have a successor and so forth. She's delivered of a little baby boy and immediately people simply discount that this could be true. Oh no she didn't really have a baby boy, it was a changeling who was smuggled into her bed chambers in a warming pan. It seems to me that when politics gets chaotic, when there's an underlying chaos, human beings simply, they're unable to evaluate information on the merits. All information becomes politicized. Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. That's incredibly resonant with some of the key points of the last year and the power and the traction of these comments that it's so easy to just dismiss as false. I'm thinking about the birther, about Trump's ... In a way that's closer than the conversation we're having now.

Blakey Vermeule: Right. Right.

Kenny Ligda: I guess there's a scary and a encouraging way to take it, which is that it's scary that even at the beginning of the Enlightenment as I take it or the heart of the Enlightenment when Swift was living, that this was a huge problem as well. I guess the encouraging way to look at it would be that despite that, despite that being a problem at that time, that we did get the Enlightenment. If we credit it we did get liberal democracy, we did get the scientific revolution and so on. Perhaps we can say that there's such a thing as human progress and that people can emerge from conflicting opinions, can find a way to mediate between truth claims. I guess I'm asking if you believe in human progress.

Alex Woloch: Or if Swift believes...

Kenny Ligda: Or if Swift. Yeah either.

Blakey Vermeule: I think that Orwell put it best when he said that Swift was driven to a condition of Tory, meaning conservative anarchism, by his sense of reaction to the modern world. I'm not a reactionary in the sense that Swift was or really in any sense, but I do think that we have a sort of tendency to congratulate ourselves on progress when in point of fact oftentimes we are simply not seeing what that progress entails. Yeah. Benjamin famously said that all documents of the Enlightenment are also documents of barbarism. There's always a kind of dialectic in any system, even if there's progress.

Alex Woloch: Yeah it is interesting to think about. I'm just thinking about Orwell has this essay "Can Socialists Be Happy?" Which is talking about the difficulty that literature gets into when it's trying to describe the perfect society and how good literature is at diagnosis and critique. The cultural and literary tradition that's skeptical toward progress, it's an incredibly vivid and vital tradition. Whereas you think about a cultural, if you try to come up with a cultural and literary tradition that is, I don't know, making the case for the progressive development of humanity or history that's not going to tip into religiosity or sentimentalism or ideology, those don't come to mind as easily as the opposing camp, the camp of skepticism and irony and puncturing, the puncturing of the isms, the puncturing of ideologies, right?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: It's just curious because we're at a moment ... One of the things that's happened this week more than last week but is certainly in the air is the question of whether with the healthcare bill, whether we would actually erase an entitlement. I think we can probably argue, the truism is that that just doesn't happen in American politics and it's part of why conservatives or the right or the Republican party is so hostile to further growth of the safety net, because the theory is that whenever it grows you'll never be able to pull it back. This is the question that we're ... After the election one of the things we're looking at is we're all sort of looking at could this happen, could you erase a benefit.

Kenny Ligda: The point about literature describing utopia and also you mentioned Silicon Valley earlier. I think that's been a theme of our conversations over the years, Silicon Valley. I think there's a particular experience of the 2016 election and of Trump being in Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley is very utopianist or solutionist. It's always like oh yes we're going to disrupt this and we're going to fix that, but we have a large and conspicuous homeless population, there's all kinds of really shitty things that happen here. I think there's something very acute about the vision of the world here that everything is going to improve except everything that matters. The political system is going to go to hell, but we'll have drones deliver packages.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Kenny Ligda: You won't be able to afford a house anymore, but you will be able to stream all of the newest movies that come out. I can't point to the part in Swift that that speaks to, but I feel like Swift would've recognized something about this.

Blakey Vermeule: There's no question that he would've loved the rhetoric coming out of Silicon Valley. Yeah. You're going to be able to get from point A to point B without any friction, but the consequences are going to be a total disruption of our governing laws about labor protections and so forth. You got yours, I got mine, so let's ... Silicon Valley sometimes is almost a parody of individualism and liberal technocracy.

Kenny Ligda: I guess it's Laputa, right?

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: This would be Book III.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Kenny Ligda: The projectors. Is that right?

Blakey Vermeule: Right. No, exactly. We've talked a little bit about Book I as a diagnosis of modern politics. I think that the thing that people really remember about Swift though is Book IV, which goes deeper and goes into the feature of modernity that the modern person basically ends up in a condition of deep self division, deep self hatred, and really a member of a tribe who really just hates the tribe. That's pretty deep.

Kenny Ligda: We have a passage here. Do you want to ...?

Blakey Vermeule: Sure. I'll read it.

Alex Woloch: Can I ask a, this is off, we don't need to go with this, but just a preliminary question on the four books. In a literary way it's very effective, it's very effective to have Book IV because it goes deeper.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: How much do we hold onto that structure of the four different sections and how much do we see it as one thing? It isn't a formal question, it's just such a fascinating one.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah, no, I think that the first three books are very coherent and I think Book IV, which was written a little bit later, is on the surface it's the same structure. Gulliver gets shipwrecked and ends up in a foreign country and so forth, but it's of a totally different order. If you could say that the first three books are about, they're about science, they're about modernity, they're about politics and so forth, the fourth book is just something else. I'm not quite sure how to describe it, but it seems to me about really the deep sense of somebody who lives around other people and sees all of their flaws in a way that ends up driving him crazy.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. It just seems fascinating that deepening and that, just the movement and the force of movement. I'm just thinking if there's other examples that come to mind for any of us of books that have-

Blakey Vermeule: Of the sort of late books that just take what is implicit in the previous.... Dickens would be an interesting-

Alex Woloch: You mean in his arc overall.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: Right. That's true. That's true. That's part of the late style. In so far as it is one book it also has this quality that it's sort of like ... You're describing it in a way that in some level the fourth book is cast against the rest of the

book or is almost, it's almost swallowing them up in a way that is another amplification of that diagnostic impulse almost.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: It also puts the reader on a journey actually. We do feel we're going somewhere further.

Kenny Ligda: It reminds me a little bit in *Catch-22* about halfway through there's a bit where everything's been pretty funny and then there's a bit where Kid Sampson is sawed in half by a propeller. It's just a sense of the bottom falling out.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Kenny Ligda: I hate to do biographical criticism, I don't really, but did something happen politically or in Swift's life, because it seems to me that tonally the first three books are all kind of funny. There's a kind of lightness to them, it's like I'm traveling through and these people are silly. It's all like these kind of silly or interesting people, Book IV is us and it just seems such a tonal shift.

Blakey Vermeule: The way I understand that is that Swift was an Irish Protestant living in a very, very poor Catholic country that was basically being colonized by the very people to whom he apparently owed his allegiance and so forth. I think that over the course of his life he began to realize that England was just unbelievably brutal to the Irish. There was just no way of getting around that fact. He just became more and more and more sympathetic to the Irish plight and to the Irish cause and so forth, yet he was a member of a class that was a thin minority class at the top of the political heap who controlled many of the resources. I think he began to find that intolerable. Before Amy Chua wrote that book on being a tiger mother that made her so famous, she actually wrote a book that I really love. It's called *World on Fire* and it's about the condition of basically what she calls market dominant ethnic minorities. This is a worldwide phenomenon of a group or class of people, and I include English Protestants or Irish Protestants in Ireland, who control a disproportionate share of the country's resources, but who are not of the same class or religion of most of the people. Those market dominant ethnic minorities she argues over time tend to become targets of political unrest and political attacks and so forth. I think that for Swift the painful part of Book IV is that he recognizes that he's a member of a system that is controlling and colonizing a large group of people who are deeply disenfranchised and yet he's not of them. It's that sense of the kind of awareness of his plight. I see it as a political awareness.

Kenny Ligda: We should read this passage.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: [crosstalk 00:44:48]

Kenny Ligda: This seems perfect.

Blakey Vermeule: Do you want to read it?

Alex Woloch: I could try. This is coming right at the end of the book right? This is an ultimate paragraph. Do we need anymore context for our listeners?

Blakey Vermeule: He's basically back in England and he's thinking about his travels and he's very, very disgusted by his wife and his children. He has to stop up his nose with lavender and so forth before he can even be around them, but he goes out to the stable and hangs out with his horses. This is his reflection.

Alex Woloch: "My reconciliation to the Yahoo-kind in general might not be so difficult, if they would be content with those vices and follies only which nature has entitled them to. I am not in the least provoked at the sight of a lawyer, a pickpocket, a colonel, a fool, a lord, a gamester, a politician, a whoremonger, a physician, an evidence, a suborner, an attorney, a traitor," an English professor, "or the like;"

Kenny Ligda: Wait.

Alex Woloch: You could add to the list. That sort of seems to be the nature of this. That was for you Blakey."... this is all according to the due course of things: but when I behold a lump of deformity and diseases, both in body and mind, smitten with pride, it immediately breaks all the measures of my patience; neither shall I be ever able to comprehend how such an animal, and such a vice, could tally together. The wise and virtuous ..."

Blakey Vermeule: Houyhnhnms.

Alex Woloch: Houyhnhnms. "The wise and virtuous Houyhnhnms, who abound in all excellences that can adorn a rational creature, have no name for this vice in their language, which has no terms to express any thing that is evil, except those whereby they describe the detestable qualities of their Yahoos, among which they were not able to distinguish this of pride, for want of thoroughly understanding human nature as it shows itself in other countries where that animal presides."

Blakey Vermeule: All right. This is one of Swift's cherished themes, which is actually human beings would be just fine if they weren't civilized, that actually civilization makes us worse. It gives us the power to think well of our capacities in a way that is ultimately deeply destructive.

Alex Woloch: Pride and civilization are deeply linked here.

Blakey Vermeule: Here he's actually just talking about the sense of I'm better than everybody else or I'm better than the animals or I'm actually-

Alex Woloch: That I have anything in me that would...

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah. Anything in me that makes me think that I'm a better creature, a better order of creature than other creatures. Basically I think he's talking about speciesism here, this idea that humans think that they're just-

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: That they've levitated out of the natural order.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: He's also talking about ordinary human pride. I was rereading at your prompting Kenny, Orwell on Swift this morning. Orwell really goes for this. He says part of the problem with the Houyhnhnms, these horses, is that they just don't change. They're animals that are perfectly adapted to their little niche in life, their goal is to replicate their social world over time. The Houyhnhnms could simply just perpetuate themselves as is. For Orwell this is kind of a disaster, that actually you need to have some kind of sense of what Swift would call pride or animal spirits or something that makes you not simply want to just go on in your niche. The problem for Swift is that he was fairly politically and socially dispossessed when he wrote this. I really see him as writing from the perspective of somebody whom progress or the kind of great cathedrals of the Enlightenment rising up around him, has passed by. He's sitting there watching this all happen and he's in a state that is not prideful or is not full of this sense of progress and enlightenment.

Alex Woloch: This is probably a really stupid question, but just to throw it out there. Isn't there a couple problems with this or isn't Swift setting up a model where we understand that there's all these Yahoos and we're a Yahoo, but we also have the ghost Houyhnhnm within us.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: Doesn't the Houyhnhnm for us just become exactly that source of pride? That we recognize that we have some Houyhnhnm capacity or the capacity at least to imagine the Houyhnhnms.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: That seems to be the very problems he's talking about. That's one question. The second one is, I take it that there's a lot of critics have read the Houyhnhnms in Orwell's way, it's not at all so elevated.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: Is it your sense that Swift has that understanding or is there an idealization? Is he really idealizing them? Is there a little bit of, it's a little bit like all happy families are alike, each unhappy family is different.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: That the salient point of the Houyhnhnms is that they're completely fantastical, that all we really have are the Yahoos now.

Blakey Vermeule: There's evidence on both sides of the question about the Houyhnhnms. On the one hand they argue for genocide against the Yahoos, they keep slaves, they're racist, there's some Houyhnhnms who are simply not favored by virtue of the color of their coat.

Alex Woloch: They don't know how to read.

Blakey Vermeule: They don't know how to read, they don't have fiction. They're clearly, in Swift's view, not some kind of aspirational model. The thing that they don't have, and I think this is crucial to Orwell's point, is some sense of counterfactual reasoning. In order to basically progress, you need to imagine that things could be different than what they are. To come back to Silicon Valley, the three of us live in a place and time where counterfactual reasoning is sort of like the gold standard of human life. It's like I'm imagining a little twist on some app. This is really going to be the thing that is great. There's a lot of resources being poured into counterfactual reasoning, or making up new stuff. The Houyhnhnms don't have that, which means that they basically don't go anywhere.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, but the Houyhnhnms also are that. This is the great example of ...

Blakey Vermeule: That's a good point. He's imagining a utopia by using the very thing that the Houyhnhnms don't have. Whenever I'm struck by moments of misanthropy, which I should in a Lilliputian way, hasten to say is not often. Take that as a form of leaping and creeping. I think what are my Houyhnhnms? What's the counterfactual situation that I would be tempted to sit around worshiping in my barn? It's not entirely clear. It's not entirely clear what Swift really thinks about the Houyhnhnms either. Clearly they're not an especially admirable group of characters.

Kenny Ligda: Going back to the letter to Pope and the idea of being rational capable, it strikes me that one could wrangle a positive message out of this that basically humans can progress if they just set aside pride and that they could become rational.

Blakey Vermeule: Yep.

Kenny Ligda: I guess what's complicated with the Houyhnhnms is you wonder if he would really want to be.

Blakey Vermeule: If he would want to be rational.

Kenny Ligda: If he would want to be rational, yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah. Yeah. What rationality delivers is a system in which basically everybody agrees with each other, and so therefore they agree to the most horrible political consequences.

Alex Woloch: Blakey another stupid question.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Why are they horses? In other words this whole analogical system, the whole counterfactual experiment could take place with a totally different kind of creature.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: It feels to me like the horse, it haunts the whole thing in a non rational way, a beautiful way, but it's not accounted for. We can't fully absorb that into the system. It has this sort of weird irrational kind of ...

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah. Every time I think about Book IV I think about that incredible passage at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment* where ...

Alex Woloch: Yeah. The dream of the ...

Blakey Vermeule: Raskolnikov's dream of the beaten horse and that's a dream that as you say simply, it's unassimilable because it's so horrifying.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: I think for Swift and also for Dostoyevsky the horse is a very, very intelligent animal that is completely under the thumb of people who are often quite cruel.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. It's interesting to think about Boxer in *Animal Farm*. I guess because Orwell's, I think he's writing that near to when he's writing his own essay on Swift.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. I think it was within a-

Alex Woloch: That horse ain't no Houyhnhnm.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: You get an incredibly, a remarkable depiction of the refraction of that Dostoyevsky and maltreatment with Boxer sent to the glue factory as the epicenter of the representation of Stalinism.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Kenny Ligda: To me the bit from *Crime and Punishment*, the story is that when Nietzsche went insane that he was protecting or that he was hugging a horse that was being whipped. I know that he was reading Dostoyevsky towards the end. I think it's kind of lost on us now because horses were an omnipresent part of city life.

Blakey Vermeule: Yep.

Kenny Ligda: Of human life until the early 20th Century, for Orwell and his childhood.

Alex Woloch: Kenny, I want to ask a question to you. I'm actually just thinking about the questions we've been talking about about pessimism. It's hard to be optimistic and intelligent, let's say that. I do think that you have an optimistic spirit obviously, and it's powerful. If you think about the Orwell work, just the effort to find comedy in Orwell, it takes a certain sensibility where there's a certain navigation between these poles. I'm just wondering why do you love Swift despite his ... or do you? Does this ultimately something that you would disagree with?

Kenny Ligda: I do love Swift. I've noticed when I've talked to other people that I seem to skew positive on my interpretations of text and movies and whether endings were good or bad.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Kenny Ligda: I don't know. It's something I remember from childhood. Maybe that's not an unproductive way to go with *Gulliver's Travels*. In Orwell's essay he says that he read this the day before his eighth birthday and I think that most of us probably had some kind of experience with Swift, maybe even just having it described as kids.

Alex Woloch: I would like to read that passage if I could find it.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: Okay.

Alex Woloch: It is one of my favorite points in Orwell's essay. Okay. Blakey I'm just curious for your thoughts as someone who's thought so much about this text, about this particular kind of description of reading it. "From what I have written it may have seemed that I am against Swift, and that my object is to refute him and even to belittle him. In a political and moral sense I am against him, so far as I understand him. Yet curiously enough he is one of the writers I admire with least reserve, and *Gulliver's Travels*, in particular, is a book which it seems impossible for me to grow tired of. I read it first when I was eight, one day short of eight, to be exact, for I stole and furtively read the copy which was to be given me next day on my eighth birthday, and I have certainly not read it less than half a dozen times since. Its fascination seems inexhaustible. If I had to make a list of six books which were to be preserved when all others were destroyed, I would certainly put *Gulliver's Travels* among them."

Blakey Vermeule: That's an amazing passage, the primal scene of theft.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. Exactly.

Blakey Vermeule: The sense that you're a child and you take something and then you come back to that, that thing that you've stolen.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. It does seem more a fantasy than a memory in some way.

Blakey Vermeule: Yeah. It's clearly become encrusted with layers of fantasy and desire and nostalgia and so forth. Swift and Orwell have this in common, that they've written books that are profound, very uncomfortable political satires but also are often packaged as children's literature. For Swift the condition of childhood is one in which you're just totally powerless. People are going to thwart you. He says in his self reflections that all of his disappointments can be traced to moments in childhood where he was thwarted. I read this passage as an Orwellian version of the same thing, but in this case Swift is the kind of ... I think Orwell says in that essay, and correct me if I'm wrong, wrong that Swift's pessimism which borders on insanity makes him a ghost haunting life.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: He's like the shadow.

Kenny Ligda: He can't partake in the pleasure that he sees other people enjoying.

Blakey Vermeule: Right. There's a sense of deep and bitter renunciation of human connection, which many heirs of Swift, I include Beckett, Kafka, and Coetzee, they've also rejected this sense of human connection and human pleasure and favor of this ghostly finger of blame.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Yeah. It does, to get back to the present, when we started this I was thinking many things in here speak to Trump, but following your prompt Blakey I think there are also many things that speak to being an intellectual and being at a university. There's always the suspicion I think or the worry that maybe we're just not part of what other people seem to find an adequate way of dealing with reality. Alex you made me realize there's something I want to say about optimism and Swift which is that really just in literature, the thing about *Gulliver's Travels* is like yes it's pessimistic, but just the world is very wonderful. It's a really wonderful fantasy. I think this is a thing for literature that strikes me as always somewhat optimistic, is there's some part of it that makes you always want to be there. It may be that terrible things happen in Thomas Hardy's Wessex, but it's the sort of other world. In Swift, there are these moments, like in Lilliput with a little girl threading an invisible thread through an invisible needle. He is possessed of like an incredible capacity for beauty and exploration right? That's what makes the whole book work isn't it?

Blakey Vermeule: I think that's absolutely right. Then the big question is how do you live among your fellow creatures.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Blakey Vermeule: To me that's the heart of this text.

Kenny Ligda: It doesn't seem like that's really resolved at the end.

Blakey Vermeule: But he's a lover of humankind.

Kenny Ligda: He did go insane after writing this.

Blakey Vermeule: He did go insane. I think there was probably a deeper, certainly an underlying physical pathology in Swift's case, but I also think that at its extremes, irony is a source of insanity.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. Which is also doublethink. Orwell, doublethink is a talisman for what's bad. You're not supposed to do that, but at the same time Orwell's incredibly invested in irony, which is a kind of doublethink where you're able to hold to two thoughts at the same time.

Blakey Vermeule: Right.

Alex Woloch: I think there's that same ... Sorry Blakey.

Blakey Vermeule: No, no, no, no, no. The artist who is closest to Swift in this respect is Dave Chappelle who also famously gave up show business, at least for awhile, because he couldn't bear the pain of this self revolving irony. His medium is different. Swift's medium is the question of human egotism, Chappelle's is race, but they're working in similar modes. Chappelle has this skit involving a person named Clayton Bigsby who's an African-American man who's blind and has been raised to think he's white and becomes a white supremacist. This sketch was one of the last that Chappelle did before he ended up dropping out of show business and retreating to his farm in Ohio. It's the same sense of being somebody who is immersed in a condition of self division and self hatred and it's sort of out at the extremes, the ironic extremes, where frankly artists can go but most people would find it intolerable to live there, which is why when artists go there we watch them.

Alex Woloch: That's great. Blakey I just want to say thanks for this extreme ... This is a great and really thought provoking conversation. We don't have a way to wrap it up, but really fascinating stuff. It's difficult to take the superficial framework that Kenny and I are posing on, like how is *Gulliver's Travels* different now than it was a month ago?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: I think there's a lot here to think about and also a lot of text to read and consider anew.

Blakey Vermeule: I'm so glad you guys are doing this. I think it's a wonderful series. I hope it flourishes. Thank you.

Kenny Ligda: Thank you.