The Flying or Floating Island: Lemuel Gulliver and Ideas Disembodied

Abstract: Lemuel Gulliver’s desires are figured in his immediate and unstinting embrace of life on Laputa, the Floating or Flying Island, in Book Three of the Travels. Written last of the four, the third book of Gulliver’s Travels brilliantly satirizes modern thought and experimental science, its assumptions and its implications. As Swift sees it, modernity seeks little less than transcendence of the human. This, and more, he represents in his narrator’s thoughtless embrace of Laputa (meaning “whore”). The inhabitants of Laputa and of the subjugated world beneath them are given to abstraction and the theoretical, and as a consequence nothing actually works—except on the separated estate below of Lord Munodi, an exemplary Ancient in this relentless battle of the books. For the Laputans, as for other peoples visited in Book Three, there is strangeness without reality, reason separated from common sense.
If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost, that is where they should be Now put the foundations under them.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

What is permanent and good in Romanticism is curiosity—a curiosity which recognizes that any life, if accurately and profoundly penetrated, is interesting and always strange. Romanticism is a short cut to the strangeness without the reality, and it leads its disciples only back upon themselves.

T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*

In Book Three of his *Travels*, Lemuel Gulliver visits Laputa, the Flying or Floating Island—at least, first he does, for unlike all the other parts, this book contains several outlying voyages. He is privileged to see the Grand Academy of Lagado, where, amid other perverse “projects,” he encounters “a most ingenious architect who had contrived a new method for building houses, by beginning at the roof and working downwards to the foundation, which he justified to me by the like practice of those two prudent insects, the bee and the spider.” With this last reference, Swift’s reader thinks immediately of the early satire *The Battle of the Books*, in which those two insects represent Ancients and Moderns, respectively. The world of Laputa is awash in modernism, itself an outgrowth of Romanticism with—according to T.S. Eliot—its commitment to strangeness without the reality.

The Laputans are indeed strange: Gulliver says, immediately, that he had “never till then seen a race of mortals so singular in their shapes, habits and countenances. Their heads were all reclined either to the right or the left; one of their eyes turned inward, and the other directly up to the zenith.” The servants, many of them, were equipped with “a blown bladder fastened like a flail to the end of a short stick” and filled with “dried pease or little pebbles.” With these “flappers” they struck the mouths and ears of those about them, for “the minds of these people are so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourses of others, without being roused by some external taction upon the organs of speech and hearing.”

About the Laputans’ houses, we are told by Gulliver of their many and serious problems, a passage that opens out to reveal many of the