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Self-Recognition in Houyhnhnmland

Lemuel Gulliver is by no means a hero. Dropped from the sky, mired in excrement, paraded, abused, abducted, and sexually assaulted, Gulliver is continually at the mercy of his travels. But that which makes Gulliver a poor hero also makes him the perfect guide. Unassuming, open minded, and altogether depthless, his body takes on an almost transparent quality, a hollow entity through which the reader can vicariously project themselves and by which Swift can satirize the native England Gulliver represents. This is the character that we, as readers, inhabit throughout the first three books of *Gulliver's Travels*. His lack of growth—protected by the *deus ex machina* that governs the plot of the story—allows his character to remain naive and almost invisible, leaving space for Swift to attack the external societies Gulliver witnesses throughout his travels. The stability of character is one element, among many, that unifies Books I, II, and III of Swift's work. Despite extreme cultural and physical differences, each of the humanoid societies are undermined by similar archetypes of sin, courtly drama, and prejudice. Even the Brobdingnagian king, who rejects gunpowder in the name of morality, procures the services of a militia to guard against the "same Disease, to which the whole Race of Mankind is Subject; the Nobility often contending for Power, the People for Liberty, and the King for absolute Dominion" (401). But lacking kingdom and army, wealth and poverty, the *Houyhnhnm* society of Book IV plays a significantly more subtle role in the book.

Many critics have attempted to strike down Houyhnhnmland's utopian societal premise, interrogating their lack of emotion, their depthless history, or the superficial "rationality" of their discourse. But, in the surreal unfamiliarity of Houyhnhnmland, the *external* critiques of the first three books no longer hold. I posit that the Houyhnhnm's reflective and depthless nature acts more as a literary mechanism than an opportunity for utopian critique. It is out of their abstract, non-human selves that pure difference, pure alienation, pure foreignness can be divinized within our narrator, a critical difference that allows Gulliver to begin his journey of self-recognition. Swift, through a reversal of narrative authority and a symphonic repetition of themes, delivers Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* as a distinct section within the greater arc of the work, focusing on the previously transparent subject of Gulliver himself.

From a macroscopic perspective, the structure of Book IV is markedly different from the Books that precede it. Rather than treating Gulliver as an impartial observer through whom we explore the society at question—silently allowing Swift's satire to percolate through the cracks in each literary reality—Book IV focuses all its attention on the interrogation of Gulliver. Notable for its intimacy, this dialectic is more personal than Gulliver's previous accounts with rulers. Where the king of Brobdingnag is offered a "historical Account... of the Affairs during the last Century" of England (467), the Houyhnhnms examine Gulliver as an individual entity, in and of himself: "my Birth was of honest Parents, in an Island called England..." (467). The placement of the Socratic dialogue between Gulliver and the master is also key to note, as before the reader is even privy to the inner workings of the Houyhnhnm society in Chapter 8 and onwards, the entirety of Gulliver's society and existence has already been reviewed, and rejected. The Gulliver-centric model of the fourth narrative is confirmed by the description the reader finally receives of the Houyhnhnm political system, whereby we learn that the only issue raised

in the debates revolve around the presence of Gulliver, and “the only Debate that ever happened in their Country” is centered around the anthropomorphic presence of Yahoos—Gulliver’s other foil in this chapter (485). Where Swift had previously projected “foreignness” upon the territories that Gulliver explores, he shifts his focus in this narrative. In Book IV, we enter a new allegorical mode, where the narrative roles have been reversed. A world in which the reader is now guided by the Houyhnhmns, through the foreign entity of Gulliver himself.

Before jumping into a deeper examination of the mode of this dialectic, it is important to stress the transparency of the Houyhnhnm society. Many critics have taken the “soft view” in analyzing the fourth book, postulating that Swift levies a critique against the Houyhnhnm society, deliberately presenting them as depthless, emotionless creatures in order to criticize utopian ideals. Although these critics might be correct in their qualitative attributions, I fundamentally disagree with the notion that the Houyhnhnms are meant to be examined as a material entity in the first place, as another in a series of Gulliver’s “external” societies. In my view, the lack of depth and struggle among Houyhnhnms merely serve as a literary mechanism, similar in effect to Gulliver’s transparency as a narrator within the first three books. They are impartial observers, who, by very nature of their simplicity and innate goodness, demand the most elementary explanations of human sin and human experience. This can be seen through the operation of the Houyhnhnm linguistic model. Lacking the words to represent convoluted concepts—Indignation, Power, Government, War—the discourse with the Houyhnhnm master, by nature, doesn’t allow implicit assumptions to pass by unobserved (468). Although he has come to explain the workings of his society several times over, each description is now endowed with the quality of being utterly novel and absurd. Lying, previously accepted as a fact, now becomes “*the Thing which is not*” (469). Where the magicians on the isle of Glubbudbrib

provide Gulliver with the mirror-like representations of human history, the Houyhnhnm society is a mirror to Gulliver: a depthless, flat surface, through which Gulliver can see his true form.

Turning our focus to the body of the dialectic, Swift reviews and “doubles” many of the themes of the previous books, multiplying their alienating effects throughout the conversation (much like a symphony might repeat its themes in the conclusion, delivering dissonance to a new harmonic consonance). Clothing is a topic discussed at great idiosyncratic lengths within the bounds of each society, whether it be the hundreds of Lilliputian tailors needed to make Gulliver a garment, the coarseness of the clothing in Brobdingnag (despite being made by the finest artisans), or the eccentric astronomical garments of the Laputans. However, the concept of clothing is rejected by the Houyhnhnm “for he could not understand why Nature should teach us to conceal what Nature had given” (463), and could not understand why his “whole Body wanted a Fence against Heat and Cold” (466). Removing the pretense of clothing, the Houyhnhnm rejects the basic premise that distinguished Gulliver from the Yahoos upon their first encounter, and indeed, it is on the same ground that the master later resolves that their clothes are beneficial, purely out of clothing’s ability to cover the “Odiousness of their own Shapes, which all could see in the rest, but not in themselves” (478). The hassle taken throughout the previous books to distinguish himself from nature via garment is driven home by Swift in the scene between Gulliver and the female Yahoo on the riverbank, to a ruinous effect. When Gulliver “stripped [himself] stark naked” and the female saw these proceedings, he was sexually assaulted (482). Recognition of a sexual counterpart comes as a direct effect of Gulliver’s lack of clothing. The event serves as a kind of perverted unification of the male and female body in its most elementary form, recalling the story of Adam and Eve, who hid their own nakedness from God after eating from the tree of Knowledge. A similar revisiting of Gulliver’s pride occurs via the

repudiation of his own profession. Upon being asked about the nature and duties of a surgeon, Gulliver replies that their main practice was to decide whether to force “Solids and Liquids in at the Anus” or in through the mouth (474). This stands in sharp contrast to how he first describes his profession to the Houyhnhnm master: “I was bred a Surgeon, whose Trade is to cure Wounds and Hurts in the Body” (467). Through this example we see the main effect of this Socratic dialogue begin to take shape. Rather than coming into recognition of the faults of another society or his own, Gulliver is coming into recognition of, and a rejection of, himself.

Moving away from the reflexive surface of the Houyhnhnm dialectic and culture, let us focus our attention upon the other literary “mirror” employed by Swift in Book IV: the native *Yahoo*. This comparison is invited from the moment Gulliver steps foot in *Houyhnhnmland*, where he is assaulted by the Yahoo inhabitants. After retreating against a tree and brandishing his sword, Yahoos jump into the tree above him “from whence they began to discharge their Excrements.” and Gulliver is “stifled with the Filth, which fell about [him] on every Side” (455). The extremity of this defilement resonates symbolically with Gulliver’s constant and perverse occupation with human excrement throughout his travels in the previous three books, another instance of Swift’s narrative doubling. At the start of his stay on Lilliput, a whole paragraph is devoted to Gulliver’s guilt at defecating within his temple home. He follows this description by imploring the reader to suspend judgment against him, claiming that he found it “necessary to justify my Character in Point of Cleanliness to the World” (331). The same pattern is followed at the beginning of his stay within Brobdingnag, where he takes great pains in describing his difficulties discharging “the Necessities of Nature,” hidden from his nurse-captor, while claiming that this description was necessary to “help a Philosopher to enlarge his Thoughts and Imagination” (373). Gulliver’s insistence upon describing excrement continues in every

conceivable manner throughout the rest of the work. Whether it be his failed attempt to leap over cow dung (391), or the professor endeavoring to turn Excrement into food—whose “Face and Beard were of a pale Yellow; his Hands and Clothes dawbed over with Filth” (426)—Gulliver’s engagement with fecal matter is always wrapped in a supposed “important” or “rational” pretense. For Gulliver, relieving his bowels in a cleanly civilized manner is the critical distinction that marks his civility. Even when he is chained up, stuffed in marrow, or sexually abused, his greatest shame arrives out of his engagement with feces. So, supplied with three books worth of Gulliver’s humiliation and disgust with regards to human excrement, when the Yahoos attack Gulliver with their feces at the beginning of the fourth book, Swift delivers Gulliver into a nightmare. This event, placed deliberately at the start of the narrative, plays on Gulliver’s exhortations of his cleanliness at the beginning of his first two travels to Lilliput and Brobdingnag and creates a structural parallel between the discharge of Gulliver at the onset of his prior travels and the discharge of the Yahoos that greet him into Houyhnhnmland—an ironic reversal that not only rejects Gulliver’s thesis on personal cleanliness, but also lays the foundation for Swift’s extended comparison between Gulliver and the Yahoo species. The inversion is once more doubled in effect when we learn later that the deposition of a Yahoo leader is followed immediately by the groups collective discharging of their “Excrements upon him from Head to Foot” (479). The soiling of Gulliver by the Yahoos seems to signify a similar change of power, in which he is deposed from a position of narrative impartiality. A change of power that renders Gulliver the new focus of Swift’s satirical, “fecal” attack.

Several animals and humanoid creatures are used as a foil to Gulliver throughout his travels, but it is the horror of Gulliver’s self-recognition among the Yahoo species that drives Swift’s satire into the heart of the reader. The seeds of this recognition are sowed earlier in

Gulliver's Travels, when he is abducted by a monkey in Brobdingnag. Gulliver writes after the event: "I have good Reason to believe that he took me for a young one of his own Species" (390). The comparison invoked in this passage is, at the time, mitigated for the reader, obscuring the darkness that is insinuated by the Monkey's recognition of self in him. Indeed, Gulliver's diminutive size places this act as a kind of *misrecognition* rather than a correct correspondence between our narrator's form and the monkey's. In the company of the court, the humiliation of the event is just another in a series of spectacles for Gulliver, such that this event is also externalized to be a fault of the society's large size, rather than pertaining to some essential quality of himself or humanity. The intimacy of the encounter, demonstrated by the Monkey's attempt at cramming "victuals" from its breasts into his mouth (390), draws it into a direct comparison with Gulliver's interaction with the young female on the riverbank in Book IV, doubling the event both in quality and effect: "For now I could no longer deny, that I was a real Yahoo, in every Limb and Feature, since the Females had a natural Propensity to me as one of their own Species" (482). For, it is only after the event is replayed at the end of Book IV, after the first three Books separate Gulliver's connection to his "civilization" and destroy his pride in his history, and after Gulliver has been reduced to the most essentialized conception of his ontology through the Houyhnhnms, that true recognition can occur. Seeing the reflection of his form in a lake afterwards, Swift delivers the final blow: "I turned away my Face in Horror and detestation of my self; and could better endure the Sight of a common Yahoo, than of my own Person" (490). The act of recognition becomes complete, and Gulliver comes into view, to himself and to his readers. Standing there, looking upon the face of God that was meant to be made in his image, Gulliver moves from subject, to complete "other."

It is a shame, however, that Gulliver does not internalize this lesson. Banished from the Houyhnhnm country, he fashions for himself “a Sort of Indian Canoo, but much larger, covering it with the Skins of Yahoos well stitched together” (492). Floating on the skin of his own species, Gulliver attempts to exterminate the other living within, symbolically killing the self that had just been recognized. Unable to accept his own form, he embarks back into the world, alienated rather than enlightened. The wind that carries him away blows in a sail “composed of the Skins of the same Animal; but I made use of the youngest I could get, the older being too tough and thick” (492). We see here a dramatic reversal of character, for the previously open-minded narrator has been killed. Our unbiased guide—a traveler who moved with utmost courtesy and care in the world, who took care not to hurt the inhabitants of the other countries—has now gone on to murder a species that he has just recognized as his own.

For Swift, it is not enough that Gulliver reject all of society, all of history, and all of learning. The satire must also abort its guide. Through the subversion of the everyman of Gulliver in Book IV, the embodied representation of the reader in the story is also rejected. This hidden narrative brings the reader into the purview of Swift’s satire, whoever they may be, revealing our tendency to claim ourselves as exceptions to the rule. Convinced of our own individuality and significance, we cannot realize the things we represent, and are unable—or altogether unwilling—to recognize the animals we inhabit.

Swift, Jonathan, et al. “Gulliver's Travels.” *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, W.W. Norton & Co., 2010, pp. 311–502.