

SWIFT'S ATTITUDE TO REASON  
IN  
BOOK IV OF *Gulliver's Travels*

“Swift was a rationalist with no faith in reason.”

An Essay by  
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In an often quoted letter to Pope Swift wrote: “I have got materials toward a treatise proving the falsity of that definition [of Man as] *animal rationale*, and to show it should be only *rationis capax*. Upon this great foundation of misanthropy . . . the whole building of my Travels is erected;”<sup>1</sup> With reference to this claim by Swift a lot of literary criticism has been concerned with the question what Swift is “really” saying about the nature of Man in *Gulliver's Travels*, especially in Book IV: Does he want to hurt our pride in being *the* rational animal by showing us that we resemble the brutal Yahoo far more than the noble Houyhnhnm? He certainly does, as the quotation above demonstrates. Swift calls his attempt to send us off our imagined to our proper place in the chain of beings an act of “misanthropy”. We are not as noble as we think we are mainly because we are not as rational as we think we are. Like the queen in Snow-White we are humiliated by Swift’s answer “But across the ocean in Houyhnhnmland there are beings much more rational than you are.” Well, are they? Or are the Houyhnhnms just another – perhaps more advanced – version of human pride and hubris? Can anything like a completely rational being exist when we ask ourselves whether faith in reason is, in fact, rational? In my opinion Swift hopes one thing and at the time feels quite another way. He is, indeed, a rationalist with no faith in reason. Both aspects of Swift’s attitude towards reason, the hopes he places in it as well as the difficulties and limitations he perceives in the principle of reason, will be discussed in this essay.

When Gulliver first encounters the Houyhnhnms he regards them as “brute beasts”<sup>2</sup> and “animals” (GT, p. 272), but this perspective is soon changed when the Houyhnhnms in turn think of Gulliver as “a brute animal” (GT, p. 280) and wonder about the “marks of a rational creature” they discover in him, namely his ability to speak (GT, p. 280). The stage is set up for Gulliver’s humiliating

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<sup>1</sup>quoted as found in R. S. Crane: ‘The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and the History of Ideas’, in *Reason and Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas 1600-1800* edited by J. A. Mazzeo, (Columbia University Press, Routledge & Kegan Paul: New York, London, 1962) pp. 231-253, (p. 250)

<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Peter Dixon and John Chalker, (Penguin: London, 1967, 1985), p. 271, in the following text this edition will be referred to as GT with page numbers in parenthesis

experience that there are beings far more rational than he is who view him as a Yahoo, the most detestable animal they know, that “seemed in his words and actions to discover some glimmerings of Reason.” (GT, p. 282) This situation finally leads to Gulliver’s conversion to the Houyhnhnm view of the world. “At first”, he confesses, “I did not feel that natural awe which the Yahoos and all other animals bear towards them [the Houyhnhnms], but it grew upon me by degrees” (GT, p. 326). The result is that “the many virtues of those excellent *quadrupeds* . . . had so far opened mine eyes and enlarged my understanding, that I began to view the actions and passions of man in a very different light” (GT, p. 305). In this light Gulliver considers “my family, my friends, my countrymen, or human race in general . . . as they really were, Yahoos in shape and disposition” (GT, p. 327).

Nothing that Gulliver tells about Man can change this judgement, it only confirms it. First of all there is the physical similarity between Man and Yahoo. Gulliver must observe with “horror and astonishment” that “this abominable animal” possesses “a perfect human figure” (GT, p. 276). His clothes which he first uses to conceal this resemblance do not rescue his pride in the long run, since Houyhnhnms have no conception of covering their bodies with garments and regard this habit as unnatural and therefore unreasonable. Gulliver’s host and master “could not understand why Nature should teach us to conceal what Nature had given.” (GT, p. 283) Clearly, clothing is no proof for reason, quite the contrary.

When Gulliver starts to inform his master about politics and society in his native country everything that might count as the invention of a rational creature and therefore demonstrate the reason of Man is dismissed and exposed as the product of passion, desire, lust and malice. The little reason Man might possess is not strong enough to work against these powerful drives. Instead, it is perverted and abused by them to serve their goals. This leads to the even more humiliating judgement that reason does not make Man better than Yahoos but worse, since it only increases the ability to satisfy desires and act out malice. Reason in such a creature is no improvement at all. Proof for this opinion is the fact that Man leads wars and the way in which Man uses reason to make his wars more “efficient” and destructive (see GT, pp. 292-294), the existence and perverted practice of lawyers and judges (see GT, pp. 295-297), the money-based economy of Man which prevents a just and equal distribution of goods instead of promoting it (see GT, pp. 298-300), the existence and practise of doctors (see GT, pp. 300-302), and of course the behaviour of state ministers (see GT, p. 302). Gulliver’s host does not think that any of these achievements is necessary in a community of rational creatures. Houyhnhnms do not lead wars. They have no need for lawyers, judges, state ministers since they believe that “Nature and Reason were sufficient guides for a reasonable animal . . . in showing what we ought to do, and what to avoid.” (GT, p. 295) This does not only apply to law and government but also to the existence of doctors. Gulliver’s master cannot comprehend that “Nature, who worketh all things to perfection, should suffer any pains to breed

in our bodies” (GT, p. 300). In fact, Houyhnhnms do not know physical illnesses except injuries and are convinced that it is the degenerated nature of Man that causes his different experience.

Therefore, Gulliver’s account of human civilization does not cause a reevaluation of the Houyhnhnms’ opinion of his nature but a confirmation of their view of him as a Yahoo. Instead of distinguishing him from Yahoos they use his information to explain the mysteries of Yahoo nature. Gulliver’s host is convinced “that the dissensions of those brutes in his country were owing to the same cause with ours, as I [Gulliver] had described them.” (GT, p. 307) Like the people in Gulliver’s country they display greed, a passion for war and fighting, an unhealthy desire for alcohol and all kinds and especially huge quantities of food, a very similar system of “government” based on mischievous passion, even a similar disposition for depression (“spleen”) (see GT, pp. 307-315). Yahoo and Man also share strong sexual desires but differ from each other in what Gulliver calls “unnatural appetites” which leads him again to the humiliating conclusion that reason does not make Man better than Yahoos but worse: “these politer pleasures”, he observes, “are entirely the productions of art and reason” (GT, p. 312).

Houyhnhnms, in contrast, are completely different from Yahoos and Man. Because they do not know the human amount of passion and desire, they do not develop any form of personal attachment to fellow beings or objects. Their marriages are based on rational motives, sex is confined to procreation and not connected with lust and all goods are distributed equally among the population. Since the Houyhnhnms are governed by reason they have no need for an institutionalized government that rules over them except a “Representative Council” that meets every fourth year and is concerned with the application of reason to current problems. (see GT, pp. 316-318)

Gulliver summarizes Houyhnhnm nature and society in the following way:

As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by Nature with a general disposition to all virtues, and have no conceptions or ideas of what is evil in a rational creature, so their grand maxim is, to cultivate *Reason*, and to be wholly governed by it. Neither is *Reason* among them a point problematical as with us, where man can argue with plausability on both sides of a question, but strikes you with immediate conviction; as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by passion or interest. (GT, p. 315)

Clearly, in this chain of arguments reason is seen as something which could make the world better in case humans would be able to listen to it in its pure, unobscured form. The connection between the noble nature of Houyhnhnms and their rationality is stated when Gulliver’s master observes the “gross defects in *Reason*” in Man’s nature and goes on to say: “and by consequence in *Virtue*” (GT, p. 306). If Man would only forget his passions, desires, attachments, he could

be struck by reason like the Houyhnhnms and life would instantly be better and easier. This seems to be Swift's hope.

But at the same time Swift seems to distrust this hope and vision because he distrusts reason and its ability to "strike" beings in an unquestionable, objective way. The question is not only whether Swift really intended the Houyhnhnms to be a model he wanted Man to imitate. The question also is whether Houyhnhnms really are the "animal rationale" they claim to be. Whether they really live up to their own standards. Are they really able to perceive pure, unobscured reason? Is there, in fact, any rational way by which we can decide whether there is such a thing as pure reason? I think Swift allows us to have our doubts about these questions. Swift does not only humiliates humans by reversing the statements in his textbooks in logic where man is the rational and the horse the irrational creature<sup>3</sup>, he also disturbs Man by demonstrating that there is no *animal rationale* at all and that any animal is "only" an *animal rationis capax*.

In her article 'If Houyhnhnms Were Horses'<sup>4</sup>Sahra Wintle observes a strong resemblance between Houyhnhnms and humans. She notes for example that during the first encounter between Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms "the houyhnhnm's behaviour . . . is . . . that of a man inspecting a horse".<sup>5</sup> The Houyhnhnm looks at Gulliver's hands and feet, walks around the human and finally takes him home, exactly in the manner of Man buying a horse. Of course this resemblance can be interpreted as a manifestation of the above mentioned role reversion between humans and Houyhnhnms: In Houyhnhnmland Gulliver is the irrational animal and therefore treated like this by the rational species, the Houyhnhnms. But we have to keep in mind that in the above suggested reading of the story, which is the reading Gulliver presents to the reader, Houyhnhnms are meant to be superior in relation to humans, not similar. As soon as Houyhnhnms start to resemble Man they attract the same questions and critical thoughts. And as Frances Deutsch Louis shows: Houyhnhnms do not only behave like humans, they also think like them.<sup>6</sup>"Guest and host alike", he explains, "mistake seeing for knowing."<sup>7</sup> They do this in every possible way. Gulliver sees a being that resembles a horse and concludes that he sees an irrational animal. The Houyhnhnms see a being that resembles a Yahoo and conclude the same thing. Later, when Gulliver develops his awe for Houyhnhnms and their – literally – point of view, he identifies horse-shape with reason and virtue and his own appearance with Yahoo-malice and irrationality up to the point of thinking that in case he is able to resemble a Houyhnhnm physically he will automatically do so mentally. In exactly the

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<sup>3</sup>see Crane, 1962, p. 248

<sup>4</sup>Sahra Wintle, 'If Houyhnhnms Were Horses: Thinking With Animals In Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*', *The Critical Review*, Vol. 34 (1994), 3-21

<sup>5</sup>Wintle, 1994, p. 9

<sup>6</sup>Frances Deutsch Louis, *Swift's Anatomy of Misunderstanding: A Study of Swift's Epistemological Imagination in A tale of a Tub and Gulliver's Travels*, (George Prior Publishers: London, 1981)

<sup>7</sup>Louis, 1981, p. 157

same way the Houyhnhnms insist on calling Gulliver a Yahoo because he looks like one although there *is* a fundamental difference between both: Gulliver is an animal capable of reason, which Yahoos are not. Just as Gulliver – initially – cannot understand that a creature that looks like a horse can act in a rational way Houyhnhnms are unable to conceive that a being that looks like a Yahoo may not be a Yahoo.

When Houyhnhnms think like humans it is hard to understand why their reason should be superior to the reason Man shows. They might possess more virtues and less passions but their way of reasoning is not fundamentally different from the creature they banish from their island. And as Louis argues

They send Gulliver packing not because he acts irrationally, but because he does not look like the only creature they know that converses and reasons, namely a horse. They are more concerned that he look like *animal rationale* than that he act like one.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that Houyhnhnms can be just as irrational as humans and just as humans they tend to believe that they are the only “really” rational beings existing. Like humans they also conclude that their way of thinking, their version of reason is objective and absolute. When the Houyhnhnms decide to banish Gulliver it is sufficient to say that this plan is reasonable and “because no person can disobey Reason without giving up his claim to be a rational creature” (GT, p. 328) everybody who raises an objection to the plan is disqualified. This pattern of totalitarian and circular thinking is indeed familiar to humans. Disturbingly familiar is moreover the Houyhnhnm-version of arrogance expressed in their belief that their point of view is absolute. Louis notes for example that “the Houyhnhnm view of Gulliver’s physical inadequacy here is determined by what they believe to be the ruling species’ relationship to nature – a horse’s eye view of how to cope . . . Utility also seems to be in the eye of the beholder”<sup>9</sup>. But Houyhnhnms do not take this into account. Instead they display the “human tendency . . . to cling to . . . [their] own perception of ‘right’ ”<sup>10</sup> Their defence against the threat Gulliver poses to this attitude is equally well known among humans:

when Gulliver’s appearance suddenly calls into question the world-view and self-image of an entire culture, his hosts can name him a sport of nature, and by accepting the name for the thing, remove any challenge his presense offers.<sup>11</sup>

Since Swift created Houyhnhnms as passion-free, attachment-free and desire-free as possible (if we believe in Gulliver’s account) so that they do not obscure reason

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<sup>8</sup>Louis, 1981, p. 163

<sup>9</sup>Louis, 1981, p. 164

<sup>10</sup>Louis, 1981, p. 174

<sup>11</sup>Louis, 1981, p. 176

with emotions and interests, their shortcomings can only lead us to the conclusion that there is no such thing as objective, rational reason. Every form of reason is biased and limited and by presenting this to us, Swift who may want to be a rationalist certainly does not show unrestricted faith in reason.

As always with Swift we cannot find out what he wants his reader to think. We feel asked to strive for the virtue of Houyhnhnms while at the same time we are warned not to imitate their arrogance and hubris which seems to be Gulliver's final failure. He wants to be an *animal rationale*, no matter what it costs: his family-bonds, his self-esteem, his sanity. Gulliver cannot accept that there might be animals capable of reason only. In spite or because of his long experience with relativity during his previous travels he looks out for the final authority. Among many things it seems to be this attitude that Swift satirizes. He certainly does not offer us the authority we can lean on. As David Nokes observes:

the most fundamental and enduring quality of his satires is their challenge to our own reasoning powers. The liberty which he served is a liberty of the mind to pierce through false images, the stereotypes of propaganda, utopian dreams and political clichés.<sup>12</sup>

And like his reader Swift might have wished that it would be possible to be struck by reason with immediate conviction, so that we might know what to do and what to avoid, — and how to read Swift.

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<sup>12</sup>David Nokes, *Raillery and Rage: A Study of Eighteenth Century Satire*, (Harvester Press: Brighton, 1987) p. 187

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