

News, Notes and Queries

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SWIFT'S HALF-WAY HOUSE

ONE OF the more recent developments in penology, psychiatry, and sociology has been the establishment of so-called half-way houses for ex-prisoners, narcotics addicts, alcoholics, and the mentally ill. These establishments provide a transitional environment between that of the prison, mental hospital, or sanatorium, and the everyday world to which the former inmate is returning. After confinement in institutions, apart from normal human contacts or activity, perhaps for many years, these people need the controlled environment of the half-way house to re-establish within themselves a feeling of security and self-confidence. Gradually they move, physically and then psychologically, from this protected and controlled environment to that of the world outside, wither they must eventually return to live and work. Through their stay in the half-way house, their adjustment to this world has been accelerated.

Near the end of *Gulliver's Travels*, Book IV, Gulliver spends some time in what we today would call a half-way house—the home of Captain Pedro de Mendez. In Houyhnhnm land, Gulliver has been a quasi-prisoner, quasi-servant—albeit a willing one. His frequent references to 'my master' reveal his subservience before one whom he recognizes as ethically and morally his superior. Only superior parts merit homage, he tells us. The contrast between the life of reason seen in the noble Houyhnhnms and the bestial yet manlike Yahoos unsettles him, sets up within him an irreconcilable conflict as he perceives within himself the dominance of appetite in contrast to the pure reason that he perceives in the Houyhnhnms. Forced to live in such an environment, Gulliver finds and maintains a degree of peace only by what he regards as justifiable subservience. His swoon on hearing of his fate—to have to return home—is both a measure of his attraction to a life of reason and an indication of his condition as a Yahoo himself: a Houyhnhnm would not have been moved. Almost his last words on his departure from Houyhnhnm land in Chap. X concern his own inferiority—'a creature so inferior as I.'

His original plan, to find and live upon an uninhabited island, is diverted when he

is discovered by a shipload of honest Portuguese and taken aboard by order of the captain, who deems him mad. In actuality, trembling 'all the while between fear and hatred,' Gulliver can scarcely be called emotionally well adjusted. Captain Pedro de Mendez bears to Gulliver much the same relationship as the Houyhnhnms had: that of a benevolent superior, but with a significant difference, in that Gulliver regards de Mendez as a Yahoo. Gulliver sees mankind as the Houyhnhnms saw him, and, like them, he is surprised 'to find such civilities from a Yahoo'. Still, 'at last I descended to treat him like an animal which had some little portion of reason.'

Clearly the task of readjustment to life and society in England will be formidable. And it is here that de Mendez' house enters in. The Captain, a humane man, possessed of a 'very good *human* understanding' (is it not significant from Swift's view that he is unmarried?) realizes some of the problems Gulliver will face. His savage dress covered with the Captain's cloak (at the latter's insistence) to keep the rabble away, Gulliver is taken to the de Mendez house and led to a room on the top floor, at the back, physically as far removed from the life outside as possible. A man of prudence, the Captain keeps secret the fantastic story of Gulliver's experiences. Clearly the savage dress will not do: since Gulliver will not wear clothes that have been worn by others (a form of phobia), the Captain prevails upon him to accept new clothing, which Gulliver then proceeds to air for twenty-four hours. Clearly this is related to the cleanliness compulsion known to modern psychiatry by which, as in repeated washings of the hands, one seeks to eradicate a past guilt or feeling of contamination. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene is another case in point.

The Captain perseveres in his attempt to make Gulliver rejoin the human race. It is through his persuasions, Gulliver tells us, that he ventures to look out the back window (one can easily imagine him previously closing the blinds or drapes) and then lets himself be led into another room, facing the street. Gulliver peers out the window but, frightened, withdraws. 'In a week's time' the Captain has Gulliver at the front door and at last goes walking with him. The Captain's role in all this is clearly noted: had it not been for him, Gulliver would have remained indefinitely withdrawn from the company of men. Through the ministrations of the good Captain, however, Gulliver is brought to an acceptance of and adjustment to reality. Islands where no man comes are non-existent (Robinson Crusoe and Alexander Selkirk perhaps prove the point), and Gulliver can be a recluse within his own house if he wishes.

So it is that Gulliver at last returns to his family, 'finding I could not do better'. Although the distressing terror has gone, the 'hatred, disgust, and contempt' for human company have not. Perhaps a moderate adjustment is all that can be reasonably expected in view of the severe shock to Gulliver's psyche caused by his sojourn in Houyhnhnm land with its disclosure to him of man's bestiality and the emotional shock consequent upon that disclosure. Gulliver has suffered a trauma that renders complete recovery impossible; but Captain Pedro de Mendez, the eighteenth-century counterpart of our modern psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker, has alleviated something of the burden that Gulliver carried on his return to civilization and made possible an adjustment to life in society. In the de Mendez episode, Swift has interestingly anticipated a development of modern psychiatry.

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