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The Flight of Man, the Fall of Icarus and Phaeton

Abstract: *Reading Gulliver’s Travels* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, two of the greatest, most capacious, most perspicacious narratives (and satires) in English, confronts the reader with the problems the protagonists exacerbate, notably including that of separation. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s semi-autobiographical “hero,” reveals a pattern of unchanging response to the world, its stench, and its difficulties: he flees, at the end leaving behind his biological mother, his mother church, and his mother country for a world “forged” in his imagination. In similar fashion, Lemuel Gulliver, a “projector” of sorts and an insatiable explorer and empiricist, even leaves his wife “big with child,” returning home at the end, after four voyages, only to separate himself from his family, preferring the company of horses, whom he had come so much to admire in his journey to Houyhnhnmland. Flying, Stephen and Gulliver both fall, a fact figured in their stories by respective references to Icarus and Phaeton.
When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

He was an honest man, and a good sailor, but a little too positive in his own opinions, which was the cause of his destruction, as it hath been of several others. For if he had followed my advice, he might at this time have been safe at home with his family as well as myself.

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*

Joyce’s semi-autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) ends with the diary entries of the protagonist Stephen Dedalus, from whom his author thus effectually separates himself (as he did in changing the title from *Stephen Hero*). Stephen proudly proclaims, in an ironic embrace of what he calls “life,” that he goes forth—to France, we learn from *Ulysses* (1922)—to “encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” Rarely if ever has a fictional character been so presumptuous or so arrogant.

Unless it be Lemuel Gulliver (le mule), who has stubbornly adhered for many years to his waywardness to the detriment of his family and who, finally back home for the last time in his “little garden at Redriff,” lashes out at human pride without the slightest hint of his own complicity and with resolutely no capacity for self-consciousness, making all too clear his desire to separate himself utterly and completely from the humanity that he disparages:

My reconcilement to the yahoo-kind in general might not be so difficult if they would be content with those vices and follies only which nature hath 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, or the like; 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 Houyhnhnms, who abound in all excellencies that can adorn a rational creature, have no name for this