The Representation of the Subject/Object/Abject in *Gulliver’s Travels*

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Representation in *Gulliver’s Travels*

Ever since its publication in 1726, *Gulliver’s Travels* has been regarded by many readers as a children’s book or a fantasy novel.¹ Some critics apply historical and contextual approaches to this literary classic. Others make use of the author-centered approach. In addition, a number of different approaches have also been adopted.² Although these approaches often tender interesting interpretations of this eighteenth-century literary masterpiece, I want to explore new ways of interpreting this book. Thus, what I intend to do in my thesis is to raise some basic questions concerning this text and try to offer answers to them. The questions include: What type of traveler is Gulliver? How does he understand others when using languages? As a stranger in different alien lands, what is the relationship between Gulliver and others? I am also concerned about the following questions: Why does Gulliver need to represent? How does he represent? What has he represented? Thus, I

¹ According to the textual history of Gulliver’s travels, there are mainly two editions, published in 1726 and 1735, respectively. Here, I choose Paul Turner’s version of the 1735 edition, not only because it is based on Herbert Davis’s authoritative edition and closer to Jonathan Swift’s intention, but also because it contains Turner’s detailed explanatory notes.

² In *Gulliver’s Travels: Complete Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Christopher Fox and Ross C. Murfin put together a number of contemporary approaches concerning this travel narrative. This book contains an unusually engaging set of commentaries on *Gulliver’s Travels* and its contexts. In this book, five critical perspectives have been enumerated, namely, those of Feminist Criticism, New Historicism, Reader-Response Criticism, Deconstruction, and Psychoanalytical Criticism. For example, in “History, Narrativity, and Swift’s Project to ‘Mend the World,’” Carole Fabricant takes a New Historicist’s position to deal with Swift as an Irish historian.
will examine *Gulliver’s Travels* from three perspectives: (1) Gulliver as a traveling subject and the idea of home, (2) the important role played by language in Gulliver’s encounters with the strangers, and (3) the representation of strangers and Gulliver’s final transformation.

*Gulliver’s Travels* stands out among Swift’s major and critically acclaimed works. There are many reasons why I choose this text for my thesis. One of them is attributable to Edward W. Said’s inspiring explication in “Swift as Intellectual.” In that illuminating essay, Said views Swift as “among the most worldly of writers—perhaps the most worldly” (88). Said judges:

> We would not be wrong in saying that a significant aspect of Swift’s coherence as a writer is the intellectual and spiritual feat that sustained such a style as his, performing so drastic a transmutation of reality with such forceful negativity for such regrettably narrow ends. (75)

To Said, Swift’s style is so intriguing as to poke fun of and play magic on the reality, the reality not only represented by the outer world, but also by Gulliver’s psychological construction. He offers an example:

> The human body, for example, is exhibited (as in the Tale or Gulliver) only to be flayed or abused with so intense microscopic attention as to technique that has the uniquely corroscating accuracy we call “Swiftian” (75).

In addition to highlighting the “Swiftian” style that characterizes the famous satirist’s use of language, Said’s idea of “exile” in his famous essay “Reflections on Exile” also offers an alternative way to describe Gulliver’s last voyage to the Houyhnhnm-land, especially the protagonist’s dramatic transformation in seeing
human species and himself. Therefore, pitting Gulliver against these strangers may deliver a “plurality of vision” that problematizes Gulliver’s interpretations of things.

More importantly, I choose this book because Gulliver is not only peregrinating the lands but also representing the world. In my opinion, Gulliver is an earnest traveler seeking his subjectivity, a case similar to what Julia Kristeva addresses in *Strangers to Ourselves*: “No obstacle stops him, and all suffering, all insults, all rejections are indifferent to him as he seeks that invisible and promised territory” (5). Throughout *Gulliver’s Travels*, the traveler’s loathing and fear are everywhere to be seen and often serve to attract, to haunt, and to obsess the reader. In “Approaching Abjection,” Kristeva argues that “[b]ut that word, ‘fear’—a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess—no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer” (6). Fear may eventually transform itself into an irreversible experience. Such experience often occurs when Gulliver encounters the locals in exotic lands; moreover, it becomes indelible after the traveling subject returns to his homeland. For example, Gulliver’s voyages are freighted with body descriptions, like skin, hair, and excrement. Moreover, a sense of fear also brings about psychological symptoms, like disgust, repugnance, and nausea. Therefore, it seems to me that, Kristeva’s discussion of abjection will help add different perspectives to the various analyses of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Throughout *Gulliver’s Travels*, Gulliver identifies himself with the strangers he encounters in exotic lands. Readers may also find it interesting to identify with the traveling subject. This particular identification and its possible implications echo what

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3 In this respect, Said offers a method of reading known as the “contrapuntal reading.” To Said, marginal and marginalized as they are, exiles do have their vintage points, for “most people are principally aware of one culture, one seeing, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*” (Said 1990, 366).
Anna Smith states in her “Introduction” to *Julia Kristeva: Readings of Exile and Estrangement*:

I argue that the experience of reading estrangement is one of both fascination and critique, love and distaste: abjection, as Kristeva terms it, but in any case, another form of *identification* which draws the reader as voyager into and through the text. I invite the reader, then, on a voyage with me across Kristeva’s textual landscape only to discover once more that exile does not always mean separation and loss. (9)

Therefore, what I intend to do in my thesis is to offer a critical interpretation of Gulliver’s subject by adopting some of Kristeva’s ideas. Before undertaking such a challenging task, some background knowledge of the historical context might be necessary. Many writers in the eighteenth century traveled to distant lands so that they might encounter different peoples and cultures. What they perceived and experienced in exotic places was recorded in their travel accounts. As both travelers and writers, they took pleasure in absorbing the superfluity and exuberance of exotic worlds. The eighteenth century was seethed with the spirit of so-called the Grand Tour. The Grand Tour took the travelers to a world far beyond their domestic country. In some extreme cases, it might challenge and even destabilize their previous view of the world. Their prejudices, preconceptions, and anticipations would be reassessed and reexamined. The Grand Tour writers not only faithfully recorded the places they had traveled, but

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4 Throughout this thesis, terms such as “travel account,” “travel writing,” and “travelogue” are used interchangeably in general. In a stricter sense, *Gulliver’s Travels* is a travelogue that Gulliver wrote after having undergone his voyages. In contrast to a travelogue, a travel account usually takes the form of journals, letters, and diaries in which the traveler writes what he has experienced while the journey is still in progress. And a travel writing might contain both of them. Therefore, *Gulliver’s Travels* can be regarded as a travel writing because it includes the implications from Gulliver’s final transformation in his homeland and Gulliver’s final explanation about why he wants to have his writing published.
also attempted to impress their readers with their narrative style. It is significant because the narrative is depicted by the first-person narrator; this kind of narrative has two meanings. First, the narrative serves as a rite of passage for the travelers. Moreover, it shifts the focus from the places traveled to the traveling subject who had perceived the exotic places in his own way.

The term “Grand Tour” appeared around the seventeenth century and flourished in the following age. In *The Voyage of Italy* published in 1670, Richard Lassels used this term for the first time. Many writers, such as Laurence Sterne, Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding, and James Boswell, were among those who undertook the Grand Tour and experienced different cultures in exotic places. As a kind of travel, the Grand Tour was related to the travelers’ domestic education and their individual development. It is a cultural tour to the continental Europe taken by the young wealthy men of the English upper class. They usually had a sense of curiosity for the peoples they encountered. For instance, in his *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, Sterne described a specific “spur” to travel “that we owe the impatience of this desire for traveling; the passion is no way bad…. and, by seeing the difference of many various humors and manners, -to look into ourselves, and form our own” (446). The style of the Grand Tour finally exhausts itself. In “The Idler,” Samuel Johnson launches a powerful criticism of the Grand Tour style:

The greater part of travelers tell nothing, because their method of traveling supplies them with nothing to be told [. . .] he may gratify his eye with a variety of landscapes; and regale his palate with a succession of vintages; but let him be contented to please himself without endeavour to disturb others. Why should he record excursions by which nothing could be learned, or wish to make a show of knowledge which, without some power of intuition unknown to other mortals, he never could attain.

(298-99)
However, I have some reservations about Johnson’s criticism and want to conduct some in-depth discussion in my thesis. In my opinion, what is at issue in *Gulliver’s Travels* is not the fact concerning Gulliver’s experiences in exotic lands, but the way Gulliver faces himself when surrounded by the strangers. For example, the representation of the urinating scene in the first voyage occupies the center of my discussion of the traveling subject. Because the problem of the subject is closely related to the idea of origin, I would like to combine the subject with the idea of home. In the Houyhnhnm-land, Gulliver’s subject is in parallel with those of the Yahoos and their masters. In this case, the presence of others has already threatened Gulliver’s subject. Thus, the way for Gulliver to look into himself is not “to please himself without endeavor to disturb others,” but to confuse himself by establishing a modality or an entity that others have already assumed. This modality or entity is effected by a sense of strangeness which is conjured up by Gulliver’s encounters with others. Furthermore, the representation of others is reinforced when the subject starts to resist the internalization of what they represent. Accordingly, what distinguishes *Gulliver’s Travels* from the Grand Tour writing may be the presence of the disturbing others and their abiding impact on the traveler’s psyche.

In addition to the disturbing others which differentiates *Gulliver’s Travels* from the Grand Tour writing, Gulliver also sets himself apart from those Grand Tourists. Both Gulliver and Grand Tourists did undergo a rite of passage in their voyages. However, what makes Gulliver’s rite of passage, including his physical and psychological conditions, more worth plumbing is the haunting idea that the relation between the traveling subject and the disturbing others, coupled with the description

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5 Two points should be clarified here: (1) *Gulliver’s Travels* is a fictional text, while the texts of the Grand Tour are factual; and (2) the authors of those Grand Tours were also confronted with strangers, like Gulliver.
of their body, will epitomize the undesirable part of the travel. For example, the exposure of Gulliver’s body in the Houyhnhnm-land has prefigured his banishment. The encompassing idea of homeland also indicates some cultural specificities for the traveling subject. These cultural specificities are substantiated by the fact that Gulliver often compares the scenes he has observed in foreign places with those in his homeland. It is more important for readers to understand that only in a non-prescribed itinerary can Gulliver have a chance to escape from his home, because certainty and comfort may become an obstacle for Gulliver to see the world. The idea of homeland has already assumed a place of destination that Gulliver can always return. This assumption marks a fine line between a real homeland and an imaginary one for the traveling subject. What Gulliver fears to confront in the last voyage may have already appeared when he encounters the Lilliputians in his very first voyage. The function of the strangers is to distance Gulliver from both real and imaginary homelands and to problematize Gulliver’s subject. Hence, in order to stress the importance of the strangers in *Gulliver’s Travels*, I will try to demonstrate that once Gulliver sets off for an unexpected itinerary where the unnamable strangers may appear, he is compelled to recognize the unknown part of his own subject.

The demarcation between the real homeland and the imaginary one is thereby blurred by broaching the idea of Gulliver’s subject. Due to this confusion, Gulliver is

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6 There are copious examples to prove that Gulliver habitually compares and contrasts what he perceives in exotic lands with those in his homeland, such as the cityscape of the Lilliputians, the skin of Brobdingnagians, the linguistic system of Laputa, and the nature of the Yahoos in the Houyhnhnm-land.

7 Literally speaking, the idea of real and imaginary homelands may at least include two specific notions: the place where it is located on the map and the land which does not exist on the map. The former notion fashions Gulliver’s subject and his way of representing the world, while the absence of homeland may allow him to reexamine what is being represented and what is not.
likely to be forced to recognize what he is not. To recognize what he is not means to undergo a series of rejection, negation, repression, and expulsion because of the presence of the strangers. In addition to the ambiguity that elicits an array of indeterminacy, the function of language offers another perspective to address Gulliver’s subject. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, the dialogues between Gulliver and the strangers touch upon the issues of words, sentences, and speeches. The production of words and speeches generates a trajectory of signifying practices which Kristeva describes in her essay “The System and the speaking Subject” as follows:

> Semiotics [...] can establish the heterogeneous logic of signifying practices, and locate them, finally and by way of their subject, in the historically determined relations of production. Semiotics can lead to a *historical typology of signifying practices* by the mere fact of recognizing the specific status within them of the speaking subject. (32)

Kristeva stresses not only the dynamics of language, but also the limitations of language. The “heterogeneous logic of signifying practices” is challenged in the third voyage. The linguistic system in Laputa renders a space for Gulliver to examine its function and manipulate; the process of this signifying practice then turns around to scrutinize the role of the speaking subject. Moreover, in the island of the Houyhnhnm-land, the expression “*the Thing which was not*” once again turns us to the question I asked earlier: How does Gulliver understand others when using languages? Because of these complexities, *Gulliver’s Travels* is much more than a piece of the eighteenth century Grand Tour writing. By emphasizing this particular characteristic of *Gulliver’s Travels*, this thesis attempts to discuss the ideas of

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8 In the last voyage, the presence of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos presents a piece of puissant evidence that Gulliver is classified as a species with a speck of reason. Moreover, what culminates Gulliver’s journey is not only the recognition of what he is not, but it also provides a piercing viewpoint that Kristeva’s idea of the abject might open up a new way of reading this classic.
The main body of this thesis consists of three chapters, each focusing on a specific theme: (1) positioning home away from home, (2) encoding and decoding what they speak, and (3) refashioning the subject through engaging with others. Following the present introductory chapter, the second chapter discusses the representation of the traveling subject. The reason why I choose this chapter title is to emphasize the relation between home and travel. The traveling subject in the first chapter is embodied by Gulliver who sees the cityscape and encounters many extraordinary spectacles, such as the fire scene in Lilliput. Gulliver’s urinating is an unusual way to put out the fire in the royal palace, which solves the crisis at hand and yet further endangers the protagonist. The representation of Gulliver’s outrageous act against the law of Lilliput suggests the problematic nature of Gulliver’s subjectivity. Kristeva’s idea of “the Semiotic and the Symbolic” is also applied to address the problem of Gulliver’s behavior. Through a psychoanalytic treatment of Gulliver’s subjectivity, a more heterogeneous interpretation of the text is possible. Moreover, I will also apply Freud’s idea of “fort-da” game to describe the particular “drive” that necessitates Gulliver’s voyages.

The third chapter addresses the representation of the object and the linguistic system in exotic lands. Gulliver’s decoding and encoding what the strangers express is a way to represent them. In this chapter, I will offer two conspicuous examples to discuss Gulliver as a speaking subject and what he has represented in Laputa and the Houyhnhm-land, respectively. In Laputa, the scientists in “the school of language” set many rules to dictate their linguistic system. The absurdity of their understanding of language is first revealed by the act of naming. Furthermore, a possible problem between signifier and signified is connected with the speaking subject. In order to deal
with this issue, Kristeva’s idea of “the thetic break” is adopted. In the Houyhnhnm-land, I want to discuss the idea of “the Thing which was not” and its undesirable part. Therefore, what Gulliver has decoded and encoded in exotic lands is not a way to assure his privileged position as a European Gulliver, but to assume the idea of the subject-in-process.

In the fourth chapter, I want to discuss the representation of the abject in the Houyhnhnm-land. The importance of the abject lies in that it focuses on the process of refashioning Gulliver’s problematic “subject,” rather than as a fixed and stable entity. In addition, the abject calls into question the distinction between Gulliver and the strangers. The presence of the Yahoos not only threatens Gulliver’s subjectivity, but also prefigures a further transformation after returning to his country. The physical description, especially the similarity between the Yahoos’ body and Gulliver’s, is very crucial to investigate Gulliver’s subjectivity. A sense of strangeness also occurs when Gulliver encounters the Yahoo-like creatures in his homeland. From this perspective, Kristeva’s idea of “strangers to ourselves” may help interpret Gulliver’s transformation. Hence, these three chapters deal with the main issues I would like to extrapolate. And each of them discusses Gulliver’s subjectivity and, taken together, they might form a travel analysis, instead of a travel guide, so to speak.\(^9\) *Gulliver’s Travels* is not a travel guide because it does not provide any guidance for readers if they want to undergo the same voyage as Gulliver does. Unlike a travel guide, *Gulliver’s Travels* weaves the thread of travel analysis and offers a different perspective to interpret this text because the traveling/speaking subject may encounter

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\(^9\) Here I would like to distinguish a travel analysis from a travel guide. The former does not inform a traveler where to go or how to go, but to examine and challenge the subject formation of the traveler. On the contrary, the latter assumes certain places to visit and may also recommend a detailed list of transportations so that a traveler may lose the possible mobility which features one of the most important aspects of traveling.
disturbing others whose presence may threaten or reassure his subjectivity.

These chapters attempt to expose some of the important issues of Gulliver’s “travels.” Home is where Gulliver sets off for his faraway journeys, but it is the idea of homeland that complicates Gulliver’s voyages. Is it possible to suggest that the idea of homeland may convey a sense of displacement? What are the possible implications of the ambiguous line between a real homeland and an imaginary one? Under whose rule does the line operate? Moreover, in the four voyages, Gulliver encounters exotic cultures, peoples, objects, and civilizations that their linguistic system is also represented by everyday speech. The way they express their ideas and converse with each other serves to contrast the behavior of the speaking subject in travel. Hence, Gulliver is obliged to learn, understand, and interpret what he has heard, read, and studied in exotic places. But the problem is: Can Gulliver really maneuver languages as a free subject? Or, what is the role of words and dialogues they create? The way Gulliver decodes and encodes their language brings out a fundamental problem: How to recognize himself in a world of strangers? In Gulliver’s Travels, the strangers may gradually destroy Gulliver’s previous identity as a European subject. Nevertheless, the presence of the Yahoos in the last voyage produces a psychological estrangement so that the traveling subject is able to know what he is not and to realize the fact that he is a stranger to himself.¹⁰ Therefore, from a broader sense of discussing Gulliver’s

¹⁰ I think the arrangement of Gulliver’s Travels is elaborately considered by Swift, and it is a travel narrative which includes Gulliver’s voyage-out and his returning. There are two important points to note: (1) the idea of home offers a possibility to examine Gulliver’s subject; and (2), the moment of encountering others spawns a series of confrontations. For example, the islands of Lilliput and Brobdingnag are a pair of contrast not only in the size of the inhabitants’ bodies, but also in their mindsets. What Gulliver experiences in these two travels is more of physical challenges than of cultural shocks. The third voyage to the flying island particularly examines the frailty of the linguistic system, and this voyage is sometimes portrayed as a literary fantasy or imagination. It is in the last voyage that Gulliver’s traveling subject is thoroughly under scrutiny. My proposition that “Gulliver is stranger to himself” is based on the fact that Gulliver’s representation of the exotic world
subject, through the discussion of languages, to the impossibility of the sense of the self, I will try to demonstrate Gulliver’s resistance and transformation in his voyages.

Therefore, the present thesis deals with three important issues concerning *Gulliver’s Travels*. First, each travel account requires the vociferous Gulliver to tell what he has perceived and smelled, tasted and touched, sensed and experienced. Gulliver’s subjectivity is partly constituted by what he has perceived and the way he acts. Furthermore, Gulliver is a cosmopolitan polyglot whose competence in acquiring languages reinforces the position of the speaking subject and his signifying practices. Finally, the voyage to the Houyhnhnm-land presages that Gulliver’s final return challenges, gainsays, and taunts everything that he once held so firm in his mind. This study strives to showcase Gulliver’s descriptions of the places and peoples he encounters, of the results following these encounters, of the languages they speak, and of the high-strung tension between a pair of polarity: Gulliver as a European subject and Gulliver as a haunted abject. The strangers evoke Gulliver’s sense of displacement and their presence suggests that the idea of Gulliver’s multiple subjects questions a one-dimensional perspective of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Accordingly, this psychological tension, originated from crossing the borders and encountering the strangers, is where my discussion begins.

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is problematic itself. Because of the presence of disturbing others, Gulliver is given a chance to examine himself from a critical position.