Notes on Jonathan Swift's utopian and dystopian worlds

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Abstract: The present paper's aim is to substantiate the features of novelty that Swift generated in English and (indirectly) in world literature, with regard to the use of utopian and dystopian elements within the broader scope of satire. Jonathan Swift's satirical prose, which was meant to ridicule human vices and flaws, as well as a number of highly topical issues, considered with irony or sarcasm, chose variegated targets – all external objects and facts, not abstract entities , as the satirist must exaggerate and distort reality, and so the satirical literary product can be said to be referential, while allegory supports the complexity of the message. The author's analytic, critical tendency does not essentially clash with the order-seeking intellect. He generates "parallel universes", inhabited by grotesque beings and illogical realities, yet this cannot be done without the characteristic traits of a world delineated with powerful objectivity. Swift's "dramatic satire" led to the creation of his anti-utopias / dystopias, which are essentially fruitful, and thus capable of generating an undeniable curative function.
Key-words: utopia, dystopia, satire, narrative, irony, allegory

Introduction. The main contention of the present paper does not concern (general) questions of literary history so much as the analytic identification of the modern source of dystopian writing in the world (not only in the English-speaking world). The functional load of Swift's satire was not intellectually limited, in the classical manner of older allegorical criticism, but fully provable in the hermeneutic terms of the modern analysis of the literary discourse.

The 18th century, an era characterized by both rationalistic and sentimental leanings, was preeminently the century of common-sense, relying on wisdom derived from practical activities. This is the age when the *novel* becomes the genre of represented action, with personae evolving in unstable, complex relationships, which grow more complex, proliferate, develop, involving the readers in the action; the characters are typically subject to transformation, just like action, with tensions being released, and conflicts eventually resolved. In this respect, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is not a novel, as it was not meant to be read for the sake of some character or other (involving unstable relationships typically opposing stable relationships), but for the message(s) it conveys us readers about the world around us. *Gulliver's Travels* is hard to fit into any general schema / pattern, as it is a highly paradoxical, involved, fantastic creation: it is multy-layered, and, at first sight, even contradictory. The character introduced to us is a flesh-and-blood hero, a human being with his own distinct features, with a definite biography made up of human and social details, concrete life facts, etc. Yet, the type of prose Jonathan Swift made use of was satirical; **satire** being a narrative whose aim is to ridicule and expose human vices and flaws, e.g. folly or evil, topical issues are held up to ridicule and scorn, typically by means of irony or sarcasm. The range of its targets is comparatively broad, and its fundamental aim is to reform human ways, be they an individual or a group behaviour, a widespread vice, a human institution or a system of rules, norms – all of which are external objects or facts, not abstract entities (which sets satire in contradistinction to the mere apologue, which is an allegory or moral fable). As the satirist must exaggerate, distort reality, and occasionally reduce his demonstrations to the absurd, his satirical literary product can be said to be referential. Yet, the complexity of the message has to be supported by such literary schemes as the allegory (in which the apparent meaning of the characters and events presented is used to symbolize a deeper moral or spiritual meaning), and the anamorphosis (a concept appeared in optics and taken over as a literary device, definable as a distorted image, which only becomes recognizable when viewed in a specified manner or through a special device, e.g. at a raking angle, or reflected from a curved mirror).

Gulliver's Travels concentrates on, and pushes to their final consequences, Swift's moral ideas and artistic means, discussing not only the philosophical, political, religious, literary issues already debated in his previous works, but also the great question of human condition. In point of structure, the well-planned balance of the novel appears in that books 1 and 2 of *Gulliver's Travels*

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allegorically expose meanness vs. broad-mindedness, books 3 and 4: narrow-mindedness of scientists vs. commonsense and wisdom; hence, comparison is a permanent feature of the novel. The most significant and topical butts of Swift's satire are substantiated by both the main character's actions, and the *realia* of the lands and nations he visits; thus, in Book 1, the protagonist's refusal to enslave the population of Blefuscu amounts to a clear stand in favour of human freedom, while in Book 2, he suggests that the king should use gunpowder for destructive purposes (a proposal that flagrantly contradicts his previous actions); the gist of Book 1 (and also of the Flying Island episode in Book 3) is a satire of 18th century Britain as a colonial, imperialistic power; Book 2 purports that the whole of civilized Europe (as indirectly presented in the novel), like the progress of civilization itself, are opposed to the (Enlightenment) ideal of the patriarchal monarch caring for his subjects; in Book 3, the writer's attacks are levelled at the debating societies and the Royal Society (i.e. the English counterpart of the Continental, especially French, Academies), where (abstract) speculation for its own sake tended to replace the practical results of scientific research: in Swift's opinion, science parasitically drew on society at large instead of yielding immediate benefits. Even though grimly cynical and overall disheartening, Book 4 can be considered the best achieved: through scathing, direct, physical irony centred on human condition (with humans equated to animals, and horses – to typical humans), commonsense and humanity are opposed to utter irrationality.

Gulliver's Travels may be a satire, but it can also be read as a memoir-novel, an adventure book, or a novel of travels. Swift was the first English writer to use the "motif/myth of the foreigner", marking his concern for the exploration of otherness (like Oliver Goldsmith, in his subsequently published *Chinese Letters*, conceivably derived from Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1748), a comparative analysis of various forms of government, whose influence on political thought in Europe and America was profound).

The author assumes a would-be unbiassed standpoint in satirically tackling political allegory, where the humour deriving from the inverted proportions (with the action in Book 1 seen as if through a pair of inverted field-glasses) is Swift's principal weapon in stigmatizing the England of his time. Owing to their diminutive scale, the pomp at the court of the Emperor of Lilliput, the civil feuds, the war with the neighbours across the sea (i.e. the English Channel), are made to look ridiculous. The obvious allegorical and political dimensions of the book are best illustrated by the presentation of the war with Blefuscu (actually, England's perpetual war with France), of the High Heels and Low Heels (in fact, the Tories and the Whigs), and of the Big-Enders and the Small-Enders (in actual fact, the English Roman-Catholics and the Protestants). Hence, with Swift, travelling / voyage is placed within a clearly conventional literary framework; its functional load belongs to the broader domain of literary allegory (whose specific role is both satirical and initiatory); at first sight, the narrative present in *Gulliver's Travels* is atypical. In fact, the literary convention of the stranger who gives an account of far-off, strange, exotic places essentially belongs to the Enlightenment. The allegory expresses the experience of a false voyage / journey, starting from such European models of that age as Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, where a foreign traveller to Persia keeps wondering at things, manners, ways and people which, in fact, are all too familiar to him, or Voltaire's *Candide*. With Swift, this false / allegorical journey, as well as the (false) traveller, the (false) wondering objects and places, are all literary devices; the details of the episodes recounted, which were well known by Swift's contemporaries, bear the mask of allegory, a literary device which was essentially necessary for his political and social satire.

If Utopian writing essentially implies fiction of ideas (plus elements of essay, philosophical issues), fundamentally expressing, and discussing, human condition, one should however note that, before the Renaissance, European writers mainly took over forms and ideas from the inheritance of the ancients (mainly from Plato); they did not create such forms – which Swift successfully and memorably did. Furthermore, Swift's work and personality have elicited many passionate opinions, debates and arguments. The subsequent ages were shocked at the vehemence of his criticism (quite natural, indeed, in such a vitalistic, energetic century as the 18th – a century in which every *naturale* was deemed as being *non turpe*): the Romantics were very critical of it, for instance. Swift's

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debunking brutality and violent exposure of evils, shortcomings, prejudices and taboos were censured by the Victorians. However much criticised or blamed, Swift was the indisputable forerunner of several trends and modes in English (and world) literature, e.g. the 'black sarcasm', the drama of the absurd, the 'satirical anatomy' (sometimes, man is with Swift a mere two-legged animal), the possibility for psycho-analytic interpretations, a certain type of hallucinatory literary world made up of excessively concrete details as part of an allegory (which can go, as a model, as far ahead as the 'Nouveau Roman'), Kafkian anticipations of various types, and, last but not least, Swift's dimension as a remarkable precursor of the 20th century anti-utopia as a literary genre dealing with very general ideas limiting and conditioning human existence.

It would be fair to admit that even though Swift's personality was rather misleading and vaguely known (or rather, hidden), its main ingredients were polemical passion and invective, as well as a neurotic strain clearly perceptible in the final years of his life. Moreover, as a man of his time, Swift was a moralist. So, in the very period of that intellectual, scrutatorily philosophical and cultural trend known as the Enlightenment (cf. also Augustanism), it was natural for him to devote attention to man's delineation as a religious, political and social being; his aim was not so much to re-think / re-define man in terms of the new ideals put forth by his own age (as Swift was characterized rather by negative than constructive, positive thinking), as to expose and duly reveal man, pulling down the "walling" / "fencing" which stood around already accepted definitions. He was intensely preoccupied with the public concerns and issues of his day – as his satirical work is an apt reconstruction of the physiognomy of the time (e.g. the lampoon entitled *The Conduct of the Allies*); see also Book I of *Gulliver's Travels*, with the famous presentation of the ridiculous feud opposing the Big-Enders / Big-Endians and the Small-Enders / Small-Endians (standing for the Tories and the Whigs, respectively). In *The Tale of a Tub*, he parabolically and sarcastically presents the ins and outs of the Anglican vs. Catholic vs. Presbyterian religious disputes.

Swift always used a mask (his was, after all, the century of the irony): in *The Draper's Letters* (1724), he puts on the mask of an Irish manufacturer, a commonsensical man revolted by the currency and tax restrictions imposed by England, the metropolis, on his own nation; the mask is supported by facts and arguments – reminding one of the intense pragmatic and scientific preoccupations of the French *Encyclopédistes*. But his most famous mask, a very modern achievement in its violently anti-traditional spirit, is that used in writing his bitter, crude lampoon *A Modest Proposal (for Preventing the Children of Poor Irish Households from Becoming a Burden to the Commonwealth*). This time, it is the mask of the inventor, the absurd and diabolical inventor whose black-sarcastic ideas claim to make a "contribution to the public welfare". Swift's satire is here ferociously brutal, grim, gruesome, and it is enhanced by the matter-of-fact tone of the pamphlet, allegedly based on statistics and economic data (we can notice here the association of the literary mode with the "documentary", a thing that will come into vogue again in the 20th century, e.g. in science fiction, or even with Melville's *Moby Dick*). The cannibalistic implication is intensified as the 'advantages' of the scheme are mathematically demonstrated; the preposterousness of the hypocritical crudity is emphasised in the final part of the lampoon: the author / proponent sincerely confesses that he will have no share or interest in the newly acquired wealth. The nightmarish atmosphere is carefully, minutely secured by the rendering of finely drawn details, related in a completely unemotional tone. This seems to be a perfect fusion between moral investigation and its imaginary (and imaginative) rendering. *A Modest Proposal* is at once parody, satire, and animal myth; this is one of the rare situations in which one could hardly distinguish between art and propaganda.

The literary mask and allegory are with Swift the devices of literary and personal precaution, of objectiveness, but no less a way to achieve that characteristic, typical Swiftian two-sidedness, the very essence of Swift's irony. Sometimes, Swift uses the parable, as in *A Tale of a Tub*. Swift perfunctorily alludes to the title (the sailors, he says, are in the habit of throwing a tub filled with oil overboard in order to abate the strength of the stormy waves). Yet, the ambiguity of the title stays intact – it is ironical, after all: the "tub" can well be Swift's own digression, or rather the religious disputes themselves, which absorb people's minds, diverting them from the real objects of interest.

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A parable-allegory, *The Tale of a Tub* has still other allegories interlocked in its fabric (e.g. that of clothes – "Man is a micro-dress"); it proposes the distinction between accidental and essential (cf. also the episode, in Book I of *Gulliver's Travels*, of the wise horses: they can hardly tell apart what actually belongs to Gullivers from what is "superadded", i.e. his clothes). Further on, *The Tale of a Tub* devotes attention to the Nature vs. civilization antithesis, a favourite idea of the 18th century, in fact. While defending the ideal of (Anglican) moderation and commonsense, the author is fiercely passionate about the thesis he is defending; so, he ends up becoming immoderate (cf. the *parti pris* characteristic of any Utopian / Anti-Utopian literary work). A similar case of parody-and-allegory association is *The Battle of Books* (inspired by the long dispute between Ancient and Modern authors – see the similar case in France). Swift's parody extensively uses the burlesque vein (cf. Nicolas Boileau's *Pew*, or *Le Lutrin*), employing Homer's style and characters placed in comical circumstances. The arrogance of the modern writers is the main butt of his sarcasm (they are self-sufficient simply because they are still alive); one can compare this attitude with the situation in Book II of *Gulliver's Travels*, where the main character is revolted and amazed that the things / realities in his homeland could not be taken as a general rule, and considered perfect by others. *The Battle of Books* also contains the fable of the Bee and the Spider (in which the latter does not heed the arguments, the objections and the answers he gets from his interlocutor). As a matter of fact, Swift's preference for the Ancient is obvious in *Gulliver's Travels*: let us note the Island of the Wizards, where the hero could admire the spectres of the great men of the ancient times – Alexander the Great, Caesar, Brutus –, where the Roman Senate, compared to a modern (i.e. 18th century) Parliament, seems a gathering of heroes and demi-gods, while the latter looks like a gang of thieves and killers. The ancient philosophers and poets (in whose company was also Swift's fellow-utopian Thomas More) voice their indignation at the "mob" of modern writers who try to imitate them or comment on their work; what Swift actually reproached the modern age with, was its lack of originality, as Swift himself made very scarce use of borrowings from older authors.

The form of the novel *Gulliver's Travels* is the fantastic allegory. At first sight, it is the travel along a way with symbolic stages and stopovers, at the end of which the protagonist is to discover the sense of existence; the model had a long-standing career in European literature: Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, etc.). The motif of the journey (exploited by every Utopian writer) is structural; yet it is not narrative-structural, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where it simply provided a framework for the narrative. In Swift's case, it has a signifying value. The only thing which is in common with *The Canterbury Tales* is the lack of a self-generating plot (the plot is allegedly generated by the journey itself – cf. also the picaresque literature of the 18th century, in England and abroad). The fantastic adventure is in a way the prolongation of the exotic adventure in previous travel stories (remember the literature of the geographical discoveries in the past ages, e.g. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, etc.). The "fresh eye' of the character is readily provided by this "naïve" young man (one more persona in the variegated 18th century gallery of "Innocents" taking long, adventurous trips, imaginary or real, keenly searching for new lands and civilizations, e.g. Voltaire's *Candide*, *Micromégas*, etc.). Swift's character is no longer a mask (if compared with the central persona in *The Draper's Letters*). Although the function of the character if to express Swift's own opinion, directly or by means of literary feigning, the traveller's personality is different from that of the author, who on many occasions drift apart from his "creature", subjecting Gulliver to an ironical or distant treatment. Gulliver is transformed, in the pragmatic, experimental (i.e. middle-class) spirit of the age, by his own experiences (cf. Jock Locke's empirical ideas in *Essay on Human Understanding*). Roughly speaking, the travel accounts abounding during the Enlightenment had such models as the Renaissance utopias: Tommaso Campanella's *Civita Solis* (*La città del sole*), Thomas More's *Utopia*, etc. Those works were abstract, cerebral, thesis-directed pieces of literature, at a distance from the reader and rather "immobile" in essence. Actually, their authors offered them as "food for thought" to the readers, and also as pretexts for intellectual, philosophical meditation. Unlike them, *Gulliver's Travels* "really" traces the hero's experiences in far-off countries, which, though

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circumscribed in an allegorical schema, provide us with the concreteness and the intensity of real-life (first-hand) experiences – and they become vividly interesting for the common reader.

The 18th century was characterized by its critical inclination and its relativistic spirit. In the quite numerous literary pieces presenting real and fictitious travels, primitives or oriental travellers, as well as Europeans see things, travel through or sojourn in various civilized countries (which must necessarily be, at least declaratively, very different from the West European pattern), are amazed, compare, confront new realities, etc. Some go as far as using self-irony (e.g. Montesquieu's ironical question "How could anyone be Bulgarian?", in his *Persian Letters*). The astonishment of the "ignorant", "unwarned" primitive, the false ingenuity of the exotic native are used as literary means of social criticism. This is the widely used convention of the "fresh / pure eye" of the foreigner visiting strange countries. The myth of the foreigner is given a new dimension (more recent approaches have been considering it from the angle of the concepts of "otherness" or "extraneity"), in the works of such great writer as Montesquieu (*Persian Letters*), Voltaire (*Candide*, *Micromégas*), Goldsmith (*The Citizen of the World*), etc. They try to underline the relativistic character of social, political, ideological criteria, tributary to many different factors – one of which was climate itself (see Montesquieu's "demonstration" of the fact that warmer climates lead to idleness and lack of serious concerns: he compares the natives' make-up with a sheep tongue sunk into water, whose taste buds become flabby).

In Houyhnhnmland, human criteria and values have no application whatever; everything Gulliver could see there was complete equocentrism; the devaluation of human condition is done from a standpoint completely foreign, outer to human kind. (This is actually another relativistic, anti-utopian idea: what if the reasoning beings on a different planet / in a different civilization did not look like us humans? – cf. Pierre Boulle's *The Apes' Planet*, G. H. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, etc.). Swift's conscience seems to identify itself, first, with that of Gulliver's master, then with Gulliver's own, ashamed of his human condition (an extreme mysanthropy, severely criticised in Swift's time, as well as in later periods). Gulliver painfully identifies himself with the Yahoos (which later attracted, among other critics', Thackeray's tough criticism). The Yahoos are a mocking answer Swift gave to the myth of the "natural man"; in this last book, even his language acquires filthy, obscene, almost insanely violent touches. This is actually what anti-utopia / dystopia does: distorting and perverting pro-humanitarian, optimistic ideas. (The idea of "the natural man" should refer us to the myth of the "good savage", widely held as a cultural tenet in the 18th and part of the 19th centuries – a leit-motif of the philosophy and anthropology of the time; all the travel relations, dealing with either real of imaginary lands, pointed to the innocence and the inner purity of the primitives / the native of far-off countries, mainly islands, who was presented as a paragon of humanity, and as such thematically opposed to the Western type of civilization; in England, the Earl of Shaftesbury, British statesman, spoke about the "natural law" – an idea later on taken over, in a slightly different form, by Voltaire). The permanent oscillation between "human" and "animal" in the text of the book induces a well-managed, suggestive ambiguity. (E.g. the very term *brute* is more often than not used for the Yahoos, but also in relation with the horses' appearance of mere four-legged animals, and at times even for Gulliver himself).

As to Swift's Utopian construction, one should notice that the books in *Gulliver's Travels* do not represent one single book, one single utopia, but rather a series of brief, concentrated Utopias conventionally having one protagonist; these Utopias can also be Dystopias / "negative Utopias". Social criticism appears incidentally through the description of a state the realities, the sum of which is held up as an example to Swift's contemporaries, but no less by the description of states, nations, or government systems characterised by vices and shortcomings in which Swift alludes to the English Establishment. The account of the voyage to, and the stay in, Houyhnhnmland is, obviously, an intensely positive utopia (through its ideological and literary suggestions, coming from Thomas More, as well as the spirit of the mathematically rationalistic utopias of the Enlightenment). Gulliver's last voyage takes him to what seems to be the perfect illustration of a patriarchal republic, the possible paragon of an ideal commonwealth; it is in fact the primitive society, based on natural economy, and lacking social conflicts. (Cf. the solution, in many ways

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related to the "patriarchal republic", of the "enlightened monarchy", as appearing in Book II). This "positive" utopia provided the occasion for an emendation and correction of the accusation of misanthropy and morbid pessimism applied to Swift. In fact, his utopias try to come to the defence of the individual, too often subjugated and marginalized in the name of the community or the existing political and social systems – i.e. the human kind itself (*v.* his letter to Alexander Pope in 1725, in which he recognises that "he loves that animal called man"; and he goes on saying that he had gathered enough material for a treatise which could support the falseness of man's definition as a "reasoning animal"). Man, Swift maintains, is an *animal "capable of reason"*.

As a matter of fact, the idea of Dystopia / Anti-Utopia in Book IV is only defensible if we look at the reality described through Gulliver's eyes alone – he comes to indiscriminately hate everything human; or through the eyes of his horse master alone (where the equine philosopher clearly stands for opaqueness to "otherness" – i.e. to the values and criteria of a different world, as well as for hollow, inanimate reason). Between the two poles of the analysis of the Dystopia lies the refined ironist, Swift himself, who must by no means be reduced to either of the above stances. Even though Swift himself was a tragic spirit, a "harlequin who, unmasked, reveals a grave face" (in Thackeray's words), his art / strategy of distance-taking, ultimately dictated by his very condition of an honest literary creator, conduces to the mirror-satire of the world, in which the beholder (i.e. the reader) can make up anyone's, except for his own, appearance; this is after all the assumed, committed objectiveness of the great Utopia creator. His tight formal logic is practically never overcome by Swift's – generally admitted – ferocious sarcasm. The order-seeking intellect does not essentially clash with his analytic tendency, subversively critical. The creation of "parallel / possible universes", even if inhabited by grotesque beings and illogical realities, cannot be done without the characteristic traits of a world delineated with powerful objectivity, presupposing the idea that the creation is detached from the author. The device of distortion and overturning of planes – comical in its essence –, abundantly served by various absurd situations (which is why Swift's was called "dramatic satire") leads to Swift's anti-utopias / dystopias being fruitful. Added to the absurd generating fear, to the details of a terrifying, nightmarish universe, the (satirical) elements of the Swiftian Anti-utopia were capable of generating an undeniable curative function; judging by them, future itself can appear really optimistic. An indisputable forerunner and top-ranking literary figure in the domain of satiric Utopia, and also of a certain type of absurdity, Swift is the source to which such ulterior creators were indebted as Voltaire (*Micromégas*, *Candide* – mainly the voyage to El-Dorado), Samuel Butler's (*Erewhon, Erewhon Revisited*), H. G. Wells (*The Time Machine*, etc.), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*), George Orwell (*1984*), Tudor Arghezi (*Tablete din Ţara de Kuty*), etc.

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