

## SATURA CONTRA UTOPIAM : SATIRICAL DISTORTIONS OF UTOPIAN IDEAS

Utopia and satire would seem, superficially at least, to be closely related genres. They both reject present forms of human society, and they sometimes make use of similar devices (e. g., the voyage, the stranger's eye). They would seem to differ only in emphasis. Whereas the satirist focuses on criticism, the utopian writer offers an ideal alternative. The implicit social censure embedded in utopian texts, and, in a complementary way, the human ideals assumed by satirical ones, further underscore the similarities of the two genres. According to this argument, utopian writing entices its readers into accepting an ideal alternative on the basis of implicit, and often explicit, rejection of contemporary society through satire<sup>1</sup>. The satirist and his readers must share certain human values and general utopian ideals regarding society, so that the satirical message may be conveyed and the distorted world depicted by satire be recognized as such.

It is of course no coincidence that More's *Utopia* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, perhaps the most famous and powerful examples of the two

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1. This interpretation may sometimes overemphasize the « negative »-satirical dimension of the classical utopias at the expense of their positive utopian aspect (an interesting example of this attitude can be found in an unpublished M. A. thesis, *More's Utopia — A Satiric Dystopia ?* by Burton Ravins, The Hebrew University, 1973). I think, however, one should agree with Paul Turner, who in the introduction to his English translation of *Utopia* (Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 12) says that « I am simple minded enough to believe, with certain qualifications, that the book [More's *Utopia*] means what it says, and that it *does* attempt to solve the problems of human society ». For the intimate links between satire and utopia, see, for instance, Robert A. Kantra, *All Things Vain : Religious Satirists and Their Art* (University Park, 1984), especially pp. 75-92, and Robert C. Elliot, *The Shape of Utopia* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 18-25.

genres, share so many thematic and structural traits. The fact that Sir Thomas More is mentioned in book 3 of *Gulliver's Travels* as one of the six noble sages « to which all the ages of the world cannot add a seventh »<sup>2</sup> (of these More is the only modern thinker and statesman, the other five are figures from ancient history) is an illustration of the intimate spiritual and ideological similarities between the two works. A further example can be found in the structure of the voyage, in the course of which the traveller (Raphael in More, Gulliver in Swift) visits remote utopian societies and returns to the normal world. In both cases, after experiencing Utopia, his life among his fellow human beings is filled with a deep and anguished sense of alienation<sup>3</sup>.

However, the apparently intimate relationship between the two genres is open to doubt. There may, of course, be interesting similarities between the works of More and Swift, or, for that matter, between utopia and satire in general. I would like to suggest a different interpretation of these similarities. The structural analogies do not express a shared « world-view » and artistic sensibility, but reflect instead a mechanism of parody and playful distortion. A careful reading of satirical writings will lead to the conclusion that satirists, rather than embracing utopian ideas, tend to suspect, distort, and parody them. Further, this disrespectful attitude of satirists towards utopian thinking seems to prevail in different periods and literary traditions. Thus, I draw my examples from some *paradigmatic* eighteenth century cases (Swift and Voltaire), from a modern, twentieth century satirist (Orwell), and also a powerful classical satirist (Juvenal). Whereas these satirists differ greatly in many respects, I would like to argue that they share certain basic sensibilities when it comes to the treatment of utopian ideas.

Let us examine, for instance, Gulliver's first encounter with representatives of an ideal, Utopian society, the horses<sup>4</sup>. As with the other creatures Gulliver meets, here too Swift dwells on the peculiar language they use : « Then the bay tried me with a second word, much harder to be pronounced ; but reducing it to the English orthography, may be spelt thus, Houyhnhnm. I did not succeed in this so well as the former, but after two or three farther trials, I had better fortune ; and they both appeared amazed at my capacity »<sup>5</sup>. The reader cannot help but be amused by the actual sounds of neighing produced by Gulliver in this

2. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, edited by Louis A. Landa (Boston, 1960), p. 159.

3. Accounts of the close similarities between More's *Utopia* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* can be found in two articles by John Traugott : « A Voyage to Nowhere with Thomas More and Jonathan Swift : *Utopia* and *The Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* », in Ernest Tuveson (ed.), *Swift : A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey, 1964), pp. 143-169 ; and « The Yahoo in the Doll's House : *Gulliver's Travels* the Children's Classic », in Claude Rawson (ed.), *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 127-150 ; and in Brian Vickers, « The Satiric Structure of *Gulliver's Travels* and More's *Utopia* », in the collection he edited, *The World of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 233-257.

4. Swift's irony takes us far beyond the supposition that the horses are not an ideal we should, in actuality, strive to attain. See also Ehrenpreis's and Mack's articles in Ernest Tuveson, *ibid.*

5. Swift, *ibid.*, p. 184.

particular scene. Needless to say, this comic effect is deliberate. Swift could have simply told us that the Houyhnhnms neighed, without providing an orthographic presentation of their discourse. However, we would then have missed some of the playful aspects of the situation. Had he ignored these (and other) opportunities for humor at the expense of the horses, we might have been more inclined to consider their « utopia » as a serious alternative to corrupt human society. As it stands, Swift seems to be interested in ridiculing these horses as much as he wishes to criticize human society. The peculiar nature of the horses' « language » is not, of course, the only target of his comic talent. These effects go hand in hand with many other harsh (though implicit) critical comments on these « ideal » creatures.

To begin with, the Houyhnhnms are stupid. This statement may sound strange to those of us who are used to perceive the horses as representatives of Rationalism, as *ratio* incarnate. But an impartial reading of book IV leads to the conclusion that the horses are simply unintelligent. They are unable to comprehend simple facts, for example that Gulliver is wearing clothes. The epistemological confusion and complex ideological problem that Gulliver poses — is he, or is he not, a Yahoo — is based on their misunderstanding of the nature and function of his clothes.

When they finally come to realize the true purpose of Gulliver's clothes (a discovery made by chance), their stupidity together with their cruelty become apparent. After all the pathetic efforts Gulliver has made to resemble his beloved horses, and after his self-effacement and total adoption of their ideology, point of view, diet, and language, they convene to discuss how to get rid of him. After finding out that he wears clothes, these allegedly rational creatures categorize him as a Yahoo. Just when Gulliver has reached a state of total identification with the creatures he most admires, the horses, they decide to include him in the category he most despises, the Yahoos. In classifying Gulliver as a Yahoo, they reveal a mixture of cognitive and moral blindness : from a cognitive point of view, their categorizing system is highly deficient if it cannot distinguish Gulliver from the Yahoos, while from a moral viewpoint, they cruelly betray their most ardent supporter when they decide to send him (the original plan was to send him swimming !) back to human society. This decision, like all the others made by the horses' general assembly, is described by the word *hnhloayn*, « which signifies an *exhortation*, as near as I can render it : for they have no conception how a rational creature can be compelled, but only advised or exhorted, because no person can disobey reason, without giving up his claim to be a rational creature »<sup>6</sup>. Note how the horses' language verges on Orwellian newspeak : the term «*exhortation*» is applied to what is in fact a mandatory decree.

In order to accentuate the inherent cruelty of these « innocent » creatures, Swift tells us that during the horses' general assembly, in which

6. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

they discuss the solution to the Yahoo problem, a proposal is made to castrate the Yahoos. This idea was not originally their own. In fact, it was Gulliver who put this « modest proposal » into their heads : « I mentioned a custom we had of castrating Houyhnhnms when they were young, in order to render them tame ; that the operation was easy and safe »<sup>7</sup>. Whereas the horses are usually hostile towards any idea expressed by Gulliver, when it comes to this vicious notion — they suddenly listen and become receptive.

Thus, there can be some serious doubt as to whether Swift wants us to see the horses as ideal creatures or to view their society as an utopia. A suggestion of his critical attitude can be found in the way Gulliver explains the etymology of his hosts' name : « The word *Houyhnhnm*, in their tongue, signifies a *horse*, and in its etymology, *the perfection of nature* »<sup>8</sup>. This haughty etymology sounds all too familiar ; it is nothing but a « horsy » version of the human claim to being the « crown of Creation ». An implicit analogy exists between the horses and their self-image as « the perfection of nature » and human beings who regard themselves as nature's elevated creatures. Gulliver, after having being exposed to the « light » of the horses' utopia, vehemently rejects — together with Swift — human expressions of *hubris*. But, by calling our attention to certain analogies between the prideful human self-image and the horses' own version of *hubris*, Swift also satirizes the horses. This time, Gulliver does not share Swift's criticism. In fact, Swift indirectly satirizes Gulliver, in addition to the horses, as he cannot perceive the analogy between arrogant human and horsy self-perception.

Thus, in Swift's world the horses do not represent ideal creatures and their society is by no means a desirable utopia. By focusing on the ridiculous and unpleasant aspects of their behavior, I do not mean to deny the existence or diminish the significance of certain attractive features that these creatures possess. Rather, I wish to suggest a balanced approach in which Swift's satirical temperament receives due attention. Perhaps Swift wished to portray a utopian society in which there are no painful gaps between nature and man, thinking and action, theory and praxis ; the horses represent these ideals in many respects, and their society is Paradise on earth.<sup>9</sup> Swift, however, is basically a satirist, not a utopist. This means that he is keenly aware of the ridiculous and harmful traits in man. In a way, a true satirist is always a pessimist (or perhaps a realist) at heart. Thus, no matter how Swift planned to portray the horses, the important fact is that, as a satirist, he could not simply portray an ideal

7. *Ibid.*, p. 220. There is an interesting analogy between the horses who adopt the suggestion of castration and the Lilliputians who metaphorically suggest castrating Gulliver (literally : blinding him) as an « elegant » way to get rid of him (Book 1, chapter 7).

8. Swift, *ibid.*, p. 190.

9. William S. Anderson, in « Paradise Gained by Horace, Lost by Gulliver », in Claude Rawson (ed.) *op. cit.*, pp. 151-166, points out the interesting biblical allusions to Eden in the description of the Houyhnhnms' utopian society. At the same time, he is keenly aware of the mechanism of parody these allusions undergo.

alternative society, full of impeccable creatures. These creatures may possess certain lovable characteristics — perhaps as a result of Swift's momentary utopian « impulse » — but Swift cannot resist the temptation to frequently deflate this utopian image that he himself has created. Driven by his satirical temperament, he adds many funny and ridiculous aspects to his portrayal of the horses, as well as some serious moral faults in the form of « horsy » *hubris*. In the final analysis, it is the playful, critical, and satirical manipulations that express Swift's innermost artistic inclinations.

The exposure of utopian ideas as a mere camouflage for stupidity, prideful vanity, and vicious intentions is evident in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. As with Gulliver's horses, there is a sharp contrast between the way certain animals portray themselves, and the way the author wants us to judge them. Like the Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels*, the pigs in *Animal Farm* portray themselves as « nature's perfection ». There are, of course, many aspects in which these two works differ. Whereas Swift subtly exposes his « utopia » as pretentious, Orwell is much more direct in his showing of the cruelty and vanity on which the « utopian » society is founded. Another major difference is that Swift presents us with a complete, static, and, in a way, classical utopian society,<sup>10</sup> whereas Orwell focuses on the process by which utopian ideals and aspirations are shattered and degenerate into something totally different.

Notwithstanding these significant differences, I would like to stress that for both Swift and Orwell, utopian ideas and ideals become a source of playful parody and satire. Furthermore, these two satirists seem to share certain comic relief techniques, depending on the fact that human aspirations are being expressed by horses or pigs. Swift explores the comic effects that ensue from the articulation of high utopian ideals through neighing, while Orwell creates hilarious situations based on the incongruity between elevated ideas and their expression through animals, in particular pigs. While describing how Snowball climbed up on a ladder in order to inscribe the seven commandments on the wall, Orwell adds that he did it with some difficulty « for it is not easy for a pig to balance himself on a ladder »<sup>11</sup>.

The ridiculous aspects of the « human » animals often verge on the grotesque and frightening, for example, when the pigs train themselves to walk on two legs, and to carry a whip : « It was a pig walking on his hind legs. Yes, it was Squealer. A little awkwardly, as though not quite used to supporting his considerable bulk in that position, but with perfect

10. The paradigmatic utopian society is usually described as static and isolated, with no conflicts, and complete in itself, as are the Houyhnhnms. For a discussion of the characteristics of paradigmatic cases of Utopia, see Lea Hadomi, *Between Hope and Doubt : The Story of Utopia* (Tel Aviv, 1989), pp. 31-43. [In Hebrew]. For a serious analysis of the static, unalternating essence of human nature assumed by utopian thought, see Isaiah Berlin, « The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West », in his *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London, 1990), pp. 20-48.

11. George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Harmondsworth, 1952), p. 23.

balance, he was strolling across the yard. And a moment later, out from the door of the farmhouse came a long file of pigs, all walking on their hind legs. Some did it better than others, one or two were even a trifle unsteady and looked as though they would have liked the support of a stick, but every one of them made his way right round the yard successfully... and out came Napoleon himself, majestically upright, casting haughty glances from side to side, and with his dogs gambolling round him. He carried a whip in his trotter »<sup>12</sup>. In fact, throughout many parts of this parody, Orwell oscillates between the comic and the dreadful, and while in the first part of his work the former dominates, towards the end the latter becomes prominent.

When the horses in *Gulliver's Travels* declare themselves to be the « perfection of nature », they automatically become the butt of satire. Similarly, when the pigs in *Animal Farm* crown themselves rulers over their fellow-animals, by virtue of their alleged wisdom and perfected faculties, they become a target for Orwell's satirical arrows. It should also be noted that simplistic thinking and conceptualization are characteristic targets of satire in both *Gulliver's Travels* and *Animal Farm*. We have seen how the horses are indirectly criticized by Swift when their rigid system of classification leads them to see Gulliver as a Yahoo. The animals in *Animal Farm* are also characterized by their tendency to simplify and to divide the world into opposite, dichotomic, categories, remaining blind to the variety of intermediate shades, and to moral differentiations within the various categories. Thus, in the seven commandments words like « whatever », « no », and « all » are used. They are the product of crude and rigid thinking, dividing the world into animals (the epitome of good) and human beings (the embodiment of evil). To Orwell, it is precisely this rigid thinking that is responsible for the distortions and bitter ironies of animal (or human) utopian revolution.

One major reason for the satirists' negative attitude to utopian ideals lies in a deep suspicion that elevated talk merely veils evil intentions ; that utopian aspirations ignore the basic *condition humaine* with its inherent shortsightedness and imperfections. Utopian attempts to ignore human beings' natures and to assign to them a quasi-angelic status in a heavenly society, are portrayed by the satirist as but another *symptom* of human shortsightedness. In addition to the playful ironies that ensue from this paradoxical situation — the attempt to transcend human imperfections is a manifestation of these imperfections — there are some serious moral issues at stake. These utopian ideals may give birth to previously unknown barbarities and atrocities. Utopian ideals, on their way to heaven, can increase the amount of stupidity and cruelty on earth.

Thus, a major cause of the satirists' suspicion and hostility towards utopian notions can be attributed to moral or ethical objections. Utopian ideals portraying people as perfectible creatures, capable of achieving

12. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

complete moral integrity and social harmony, are exposed by the satirist as part of human vanity and pride and as inherently chimerical and harmful delusions.

In addition to the moral issue, yet another factor can be identified in the satirists' aversion to utopian ideas. I will turn to Voltaire's description of Eldorado in *Candide* to illustrate my point.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that as in More's classical *Utopia*, here too gold serves as a central symbol ; it emphasises the contrast between utopia and everyday, western, society. While the inhabitants of Utopia treat it as just another basic mineral, "civilized" and therefore corrupted people (and, of course, the grotesque Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels*) adore and cherish it.

However, Voltaire is writing a satire, not a utopia. To begin with, he enjoys exploring some of the playful and ridiculous aspects of utopian life. An example of this can be seen in the Eldoradoans use of sheep as a means of transport : « Candide et Cacambo montent en carrosse ; les six moutons volaient, et en moins de quatre heures on arriva au palais du roi »<sup>14</sup>.

In addition to these playful aspects, Voltaire reveals his true satirical attitude towards utopia when his two hero-travelers, Candide and Cacambo, decide to leave Eldorado. It is interesting to see how Voltaire explains their reasons for abandoning a place which is, by their own admission, a heaven on earth :

Ils passèrent un mois dans cet hospice. Candide ne cessait de dire à Cacambo : « Il est vrai, mon ami, encore une fois, que le château où je suis né ne vaut pas le pays où nous sommes ; mais enfin Mademoiselle Cunégonde n'y est pas, et vous avez sans doute quelque maîtresse en Europe. Si nous restons ici, nous n'y serons que comme les autres ; au lieu que si nous retournons dans notre monde seulement avec douze moutons chargés de cailloux d'Eldorado, nous serons plus riches que tous les rois ensemble, nous n'aurons plus d'inquisiteurs à craindre, et nous pourrions aisément reprendre Mademoiselle Cunégonde ».

Ce discours plut à Cacambo : on aime tant à courir, à se faire valoir chez les siens, à faire parade de ce qu'on a vu dans ses voyages, que les deux heureux résolurent de ne plus l'être, et de demander leur congé à Sa Majesté<sup>15</sup>.

So why are they leaving Eldorado, after Candide admits that it is indeed a far better place than the country house he was born in ? The passage does not provide a single answer to this question. Rather, we encounter a conglomeration of possible answers : they are leaving because Mlle Cunégonde is not there ; because Cacambo probably has a mistress too ; because if they stay they will lose their individuality ; because they can become the richest men in the world ; because they will be able to free

13. Curiously enough, this typical utopia is not analyzed or even mentioned in most of the critical discussions of the relation between utopia and satire. Even Krishan Kumar's comprehensive and admirable scholarly account of anti-utopias, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford, 1987), refers to Voltaire's ironical comments on Rousseau's utopian thinking, but neglects his experiment in *Candide*.

14. Here and elsewhere, I quote from Voltaire, *Romans et contes* (Gallimard : Paris, 1972), p. 185.  
15. *Ibid.* pp. 186-87.

Mlle Cunégonde ; because they will enjoy telling their adventures. The longer the list becomes, the more we begin to suspect that perhaps these many reasons, each of which is sufficient in and of itself, only conceals a more fundamental reason — Voltaire's reason.

I would suggest that the true reason lies in the fact that our two travelers, as well as Voltaire, are simply bored to death in Eldorado. They are eager to set back to their adventures, and Voltaire, of course, is eager to comply. He wants to put them into new situations that will enable him to explore additional human follies and vices. In Eldorado there simply are none. He wants to describe more extraordinary, deviant, and perverse kinds of human behavior, and in Eldorado there are none. He wants to go on depicting the bizarre panorama of inhumanities that humans are capable of. Eldorado, with its utopian way of life, is characterized by high moral standards and is static in nature. It provides a poor target for a satirist's pen.

In comparison with the intriguing and colorful possibilities present in the depiction of a sinful society, the satirist finds utopia a dull and unattractive prospect for artistic development. One can also find this impulse to sabotage paragons and utopian ideals among Roman satirists, especially Juvenal. In his famous misogynic Satire 6, enumerating an unbelievably long list of women's vices and caprices, his interlocutor challenges him : « Do you say no worthy wife is to be found among all these crowds ? » To which he answers : « Well, let her be handsome, charming, rich and fertile ; let her have ancient ancestors ranged about her halls ; let her be more chaste than all the dishevelled Sabine maidens who stopped the war — a prodigy as rare upon the earth as a black swan ! » Here, Juvenal gives us a portrayal of a utopian woman, even living up to his own standards.<sup>16</sup> So will he embrace and commend her ?

Had Juvenal been a utopist, he would no doubt have cherished this portrait of a perfect woman. But Juvenal is, first and foremost, a satirist, basically a pessimist as far as his vision of human nature is concerned. And, perhaps even more important, he is attracted — from an artistic standpoint — to the multifaceted nature of vice, and the diversity of deviant behavior.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Juvenal will neither embrace nor cherish his portrait of the marvellous lady, but rather dismisses her as a boring nuisance : « yet who could endure a wife that possessed all perfections ? I would rather have a Venusian wench for my wife than you, O Cordelia, mother of the Gracchi, if, with all your virtues, you bring me a haughty brow, and reckon up Triumphs as part of your marriage

16. Note that chastity, both literal and metaphorical, is the hallmark of utopian societies. See, for example, Francis Bacon's description of the people of Benshalem as the « virgin of the world » in *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, ed. Arthur Johnston (Oxford, 1974), p. 235.  
17. For Juvenal's satirical temperament and artistic inclinations, see my « The Vanity of the Reader's Wishes : Rereading Juvenal's Satire 10 », *American Journal of Philology* 111 (1990), pp. 370-82.

portion »<sup>18</sup>. This *rara avis* is simply an obstacle to his passion and artistic inclination for depicting colorful and grotesque pictures of deviant women.

Every satirist could thus rephrase Tolstoy's opening lines in *Anna Karenina* : « All utopias are happy in the same way, but all existing societies are unhappy in many different ways ». It is in the diversity of unhappiness, and in the variety of vices and follies that produce this unhappiness, that the satirist is best able to articulate his innermost artistic talent and aesthetic inclination.

In conclusion : utopia and satire express two extremely different types of moral stance and artistic sensibility despite the apparent similarities between them. The former is an optimistic vision of what humanity could achieve as opposed to the latter, which is a pessimistic view of humanity's inherent shortcomings and self-delusions. Utopian writing communicates a fascination with describing the harmonious nature of life in utopia, while satire deals with the seductive force of diverse and colorful portrayals of sinful societies<sup>19</sup>.

One possible implication of the above description is that the satirical treatment of utopian ideas should be distinguished not only from utopian writings but also from what is known as anti-utopia, or dystopia.<sup>20</sup> Whereas the former ridicules utopian ideas in a playful, parodic, or even sarcastic, manner, the latter usually portrays a frightful mirror-like image of utopia (e. g., Orwell's *1984*). Again, we are dealing with a fundamentally different artistic sensibility. *Utopias* and *dystopias* (or anti-utopias) differ in their moral assessment of mankind, and *sat-opias* (satirical treatments of utopias) share with dystopias a pessimistic view of human nature. As far as artistic sensibilities and aesthetic inclinations are concerned, utopias and dystopias are very much alike in their portrayal of a static and isolated society ; they differ, however, from the ironic, playful, and parodic inventions of the *sat-opias*.

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18. *Juvenal and Persius*, with an English trans. by G. G. Ramsey, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), p. 97.

19. For an interesting discussion of certain intriguing « mixtures » of utopiam and satirical drives, see Michael A. Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival : Ressentment and the Abject Hero* (New Jersey, 1992).  
20. Most critical treatments of the subject do not make this distinction and lump together satirical treatments of utopias with anti-utopias. See, for example, Lea Hadomi, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 44-91, and Krishan Kumar, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 99-131. Northrop Frey's distinction between two kinds of satirical utopias, in « Varieties of Literary Utopias », in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, edited by Frank E. Manuel (London, 1973), also neglects the exuberance and the playful aspects that dominate satirical and parodic treatments of utopian ideas.