

THE INTERTEXTUAL READING OF THOMAS MORE'S *UTOPIA* AND JONATHAN SWIFT'S *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*: FROM UTOPIA TO DYSTOPIA

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ABSTRACT

More and more criticism is interested in the utopian travel mode of writing because of the popularity it is gaining. This art is rediscovered in new modern forms such as: science fiction dystopias, anti utopian space odysseys and apocalyptic dystopias, these neological genres of utopia are flourishing in arts. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1535) is considered as the founding text of the utopian travel literature and it is often read as a pretext deeply inspiring dystopian texts written after. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is regarded as the first significant dystopian travel narrative directly inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*. This inspiration and influence was openly recognized by Jonathon Swift himself and widely investigated by critics. This article analyses this relationship between Thomas More's *Utopia* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver*. The many studies done on this issue have generally examined this relationship through thematic comparative studies conducted in terms of similarities and differences between the two texts. However, the study below has attempted to go beyond mere thematic comparison and traces the genetic link between the two narratives. In other terms, the extent to which *Gulliver* owes to *Utopia* has been examined in relation to the generic link between the utopian and the dystopian modes of writing. This has been done through an intertextual reading of the two texts, where similarities and differences are reconsidered from the assumption that *Utopia* and *Gulliver* belong genetically to the same literary genre. Tracing the intertextual link between the two utopian travel texts from this perspective reveals that *Gulliver* relies on the dynamics of the utopian literary genre as established by More in *Utopia*, and make it undergo reformulations, readaptations and reshaping contributing by that in the cloning of dystopia as a new literary genre genetically deriving from utopia.

Keywords: *Gulliver's Travels*, *Utopia*, Utopia, Dystopia, Intertextuality.

INTRODUCTION

A utopia is often defined as an ideal or perfect world or state. In literature the term is used to describe visionary texts of political or social perfection. These are generally detailed descriptions of a nation or a world functioning according to social, political, economic and religious codes which the narrator sees as being better than the ones existing in reality. There is a clear desire for a better world, hence a clear dissatisfaction with an actual one. This is the core of Thomas More's travel narrative *Utopia* in which the word utopia and the concept it implies were defined for the first time. This text marked the beginning of a long tradition of a utopian travel literature and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is an example.

When considering Swift's *Gulliver* within the utopian tradition, critics find it quite natural that *Gulliver* is a text that is to be read against More's *Utopia*. This is so for some pertinent reasons, the first major one is that More is considered as one of the founders of the utopian

tradition. Second, Swift was a fervent admirer of More. Third, in the chronology of the history of travel utopian writing in English literature, *Gulliver* is the first important text written after More's *Utopia*. More importantly, in his narrative Swift gave a pessimistic satirical tone to More's *Utopia* creating by that the dystopian mode of writing. Dystopia is the opposite counterpart of utopia, it is the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which systems are based (Booker, 1994: 23). This assumption allows us to consider dystopia as a sub-genre of utopia, therefore understanding dystopia comes from grasping the essence of utopia. And from an intertextual point of view it would be almost impossible to read a dystopian text not having taken its material from utopia.

In this respect, the aim of this article is to examine the intertextual genetic relationship between *Gulliver* and *Utopia* as far as the utopian and dystopian literary genres are concerned. The 'genetic' relationship between these texts is investigated through an intertextual reading. As it is widely known, Intertextuality is a concept that implies that no text, much as it might like to appear so, is original and unique in itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unconscious, references to and quotations from other texts (Krestiva, 1986: 41). The relation between More's *Utopia* and Jonathon Swift's *Gulliver* can be examined in the light of the different forms the intertextual links between them may take. To this end this research seeks answer the problematic that the intertextual reading of *Utopia* and *Gulliver* unfolds the generic relationship between the utopian and dystopian modes of writing. This is done through raising the following research questions:

- 1 To what are the utopian aspects in Swift's *Gulliver*?
- 2 what are the dynamics of Swift's dystopian reformulation of the utopian mode of writing?

Accordingly, this article is divided into two major parts; the first deals with the dynamics of the sociopolitical dynamics in More's *Utopia*. The second section, examines how Swift's *Gulliver* reshaped the Morian utopian discourse creating a utopian sub genre which is dystopia.

I-Thomas More's *Utopia*, The Birth of a Literary Genre

Exploring *Utopia* is necessary because it plays the role of the pretext in the intertextual reading of the utopian discourse in English travel literature. In other terms, the utopian material More's text offers is the quintessence of the theoretical tool in this study. Therefore, below will be a description of the dynamics in *Utopia* that allowed it to be considered as the guiding book and the raw material that served a long history of utopian writing.

I-1-A General Presentation

Born in 1478, Thomas More lived in a time when Columbus with his discovery of the New World opened both imaginary and real horizons and dreams of exploring new lands hunted spirits of explorers and writers. It was also a period of drastic changes all over Europe, the Roman Catholic Church began to lose its grip on power, leading the Protestant Reformation and followed by Henry VIII establishing the Anglican Church. Moreover, due to rapid expansion, the continent's empires began to splinter, framing an age of constant war. Because of such political turmoil, the period was characterized by questioning existing political and social convictions and philosophies, and more importantly, the feeling of instability motivated the tendency of proposing and experimenting new political and social organizations as it is clearly reflected in More's *Utopia*.

Thomas More was close to politics, he was appointed as MP of London in 1515. He had the opportunity to contribute in treaty negotiations with the Netherlands. This experience led him into a long travel over Europe and critics think that *Utopia* was inspired by this trip. As Speaker of the House of Commons, More contributed in important controversial decisions. He strongly supported King Henry VIII. In *Responsio ad Lutherum* he defended the church and attacked Luther's ideologies. More was rewarded for his support and loyalty to King Henry VIII by granting him the position of Lord Chancellor of England. When Henry VIII decided to be at the head of the New Anglican church, More resigned. There is a strong probability that *Utopia* reflects More's personal indirect oppositions to the political policies of his time.

Thomas More's *Utopia* is divided into two books, written separately but published together in 1516. The first book paves the way for the trip to Utopia. In the first book the narrator, Thomas More meets his friend Peter Giles in Bruges. Giles introduces More to Raphael Hythloday, a very important character since it is from his tongue that we know about Utopia. He is an explorer who travelled all over the world. More, Giles, and Hythloday go to More's house, and Hythloday starts describing his travels. The information that Raphael is a traveler puts us in the atmosphere of a travel narrative right from the beginning.

I-2 Book I, The Socratic Dialogue

In the opening of Book I, More introduces himself as both a character and narrator. He tells the readers that he has been deployed to Flanders on a diplomatic mission for the king of England. Then, he introduces us to his friend Peter Giles, who lives in Antwerp (More, 2003: 39). This part of the narrative is based on facts since as previously mentioned Thomas More was sent on a diplomatic mission by Henry VIII in 1515, and Peter Giles, really existed as a famous Flemish writer and a close friend of More. Moreover, shortly after, when the fictional character Raphael appears, we learn that he served in the company of the famous Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, another detail taken from reality. More importantly, one may imagine that More's travel narrative puts us from its opening in his imagined Utopia, but the author begins Book I with an exchange of letters between More and his friend Giles. The presence of such metafictional device provides seriousness and credibility to Raphael's account of Utopia.

This opening part containing facts has actually a significant role in creating the impression that it is a fact based account. More wanted his island to be as believable as possible. This is a tendency typical to fictional travels, where the writers use facts, detailed descriptions, and maps, techniques used in non-fictional travel books, to give credibility and realism to their accounts. The first book is centered on a long discussion between the three characters. More's native country is the main topic of this discussion and Raphael starts commenting negatively on some of its laws and policies. He talks about a series of events to refer to the problems faced in Europe and how the limited perspectives of the ruling class drove them away from effective and fair solutions to these problems. Raphael criticizes the incapacity of England's current political system to keep the all the categories of society satisfied, as the rich thrived at the expense of the common man (More, 2003: 40-44).

The reader of *Utopia* would find many points of discussion even before meeting the land of Utopia, the core of the travel book. In fact, when we carefully examine the first book we can assume that it is given a precise function by the writer. It refers to factual events and characters to create the impression of verisimilitude and grant seriousness to the sociopolitical discourse the book proposes. The first book also establishes ambivalence in the

tone of the whole book, as it develops a Socratic dialogue in which opinions about the social and political policies in England and other European countries diverge. An almost dialectical situation probably necessary to create duality, hence it is hardly possible to situate the position of More in this highly controversial debate.

However important is the first book, it is in the second one that we can see the construction of Thomas More's utopian discourse and its different social, political, religious and cultural aspects. Indeed, the content of the second book of *Utopia* inspired centuries of multidisciplinary criticism, and upon it was fashioned a whole tradition of utopian travel literature writing.

I-3 Book Two, Cap to Utopia

After devoting the first book commenting on the flaws and weaknesses he observed in contemporary European society, Raphael's descriptions of Utopia form the bulk of the second book. It begins with Raphael Hythloday's detailed description of the setting. While the first book contains references to really existing places and countries, the geographical location in which the land of Utopia is situated is purely imaginary. However, despite the fact that both More and the reader know that Utopia is imaginary, the writer gives it such a detailed geographical description that we feel like looking for Utopia in a real map. This only reinforces the assumption that More wanted to make his account as believable as possible

Raphael starts his description of Utopia's different aspects of life by highlighting its greatness: "But you should have been with me in Utopia and personally seen their manners and customs as I did, for I lived there for more than five years and would never have wished to leave except to make known that new world." (More, 2003: 55). Here More starts his plan to find solutions for the imperfections in European society, as well as critique of the hypocritical social customs and laws. Raphael's long commentary on the country of Utopia, its history, geography, social customs, legal and political systems, economic structures, religious beliefs and philosophy shows that all function harmoniously in Utopia. Many of the aspects of Utopia that the narrator glorifies reflect the power of awareness of the role of an individual in assuring the happiness of all the members of society. The essence of the Utopian society is the community of property. This quality is best described thus: "Every house has both a door to the street and a back door to the garden. Their doors have all two leaves, which, as they are easily opened, so they shut of their own accord; and, there being no property among them, every man may freely enter into any house whatsoever...though no man has anything, yet they are all rich."(More, 2003: 64)

The sixteenth century enclosure system is clearly contrasted and satirized. In fact every single aspect of the Utopian society is presented as the opposite image of its European counterpart. In this sense Utopia is maybe imaginary, but not as remote from reality as we might think since its essence is inspired from contemporary realities. And all the other features of Utopia are described in contrast and opposition to existing policies and ideologies(More, 2003: 64-66).

II Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, from Utopia to Dystopia

The presence of the elements of travelling, new societies and peoples, and traveler narrator makes of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver* a significant instance of the utopian discourse. Many critics have argued that *Utopia* served as a model to Swift. This implies that the dynamics of *Utopia* and the ideas and themes it develops, provide an important context to read *Gulliver*. Brian Vickers in his famous study *The Satirical Structure of Swift's Gulliver's Travels* and

Thomas More's Utopia proposes a detailed reading of the relationship between the two texts highlighting their satiric dimension and implies that beside significant differences the two narratives share important common points (Vickers, 1968: 233-57). According to Vickers, *Utopia*, with its attack on social ills and flaws served as a model for *Gulliver's Travels* (Vickers, 1968: 245).

II-1 A General Presentation

Published in 1726, Swift's *Gulliver* appeared in a period of transition in Britain. It was a time when Britain grew into an empire. Parliament and political parties became prominent. Trade and commerce flourished. It was also the era where science and pragmatism knew real advances. Yet, with that tremendous wave of transitions, there were fervent political conflicts. This atmosphere of confusion is reflected in *Gulliver*, where the writer shows that travel, on which global exploration, colonial enterprise, and scientific advancement depend, will not necessarily lead 'utopias'. It will instead unfold the confusion of individual mentality and thinking. Therefore, *Gulliver* presents a counter-argument against the usual optimism of utopian literature.

II-2 Aspects of Morian Utopianism in *Gulliver*

Critics often agree that there are three 'utopias' in *Gulliver*, they are Lilliput, Brobdingnag and Houyhnmiland. In fact, they are utopias because they are shaped on the values of More's *Utopia* and because the three of them take as a theme the flaws of society and human behavior. As we could see More draws a picture of a society governed by clearly designed ideologies and rules and according to Raphael this is the secret behind the perfection of the Utopian society. Many aspects of Lilliput remind us Utopian life. The first striking Morian touch in Lilliput is how the law system functions, it "is more disposed to reward than to punish" (Swift, 1992: 118), this immediately reminds us of Raphael denunciation of the harsh punishment laws in sixteenth century England in his dialogue with the cardinal Morton in the first book of *Utopia*. This also reminds us when More describes the principle of punishment in Utopia, where good behavior leads to public reward.

In Lilliput, education and family function in a way that strongly resembles the way they do in Utopia. Education has a major role in preparing successful citizen, thus children are brought up in "the principles of honour, justice, courage, modesty, clemency, religion, and Love of their country" (Swift, 1992:120). Besides, the educational system conceived by Swift seems having been inspired by the utopian model in that girls have rights for education as boys (Swift,1992:121). A last Utopian aspect in Lilliput is the state support of poor people; this welfare is also a characteristic of Utopia economic policy. Brobdingnag is probably closer to More's *Utopia* because of its Giant king's criticism of European law policies, the same attitude adopted by Raphael in his comment on England's legal code. Gulliver tells us that in Brobdingnag, laws do not exceed in words the number of letters in their alphabet (Swift, 1992: 133). The Utopians understanding of the role to play by the laws in society seem to have been a model followed by Swift in imagining this institution in his Brobdingnag, Raphael says:

"they have very few laws because very few are needed for persons so educated...they themselves think it most unfair that any group of men should be bound by laws which are either too numerous to be read through or too obscure to be understood by anyone" (More, 2003: 195)

One of the characters present in the Socratic dialogue at the house Of Cardinal Morton is a lawyer with whom Raphael sharply criticizes laws and legal codes. Later when we are in Utopia, the narrator relates that the position of lawyer has no place in the Utopian legal code.

People need no one to plead their cases because the practice of a lawyer is based on tricking and misleading. In Brobdingnag the Giant King does approve this idea when he tells Gulliver that: “ He confined the knowledge of governing within very narrow bounds; to common sense and reason, to justice and lenity, to the speedy determination of civic and criminal causes” (Swift, 1992:178). Houyhnhnmland however is a society of horses with a level of intelligence higher to that of men. This horse society believes in the same way as Utopia in the value of reason. Reason is seen as the source of all truth. The Houyhnhnmland share with the utopians their rational attitude to all the aspects of life.

II-3 The Function of More's and Swift's Utopias

Utopia's perfectly functioning institutions are used to reveal Europe's flaws all along the narrative. Raphael remarks: “At this point I should like anyone to be so bold as to compare this fairness with the so called justice prevalent in other nations, among which, upon my soul, I cannot discover the slightest trace of justice and fairness” (More, 2003:239). In the words of Raphael we can distinguish a comparative and contrasting tone. Thus, imagining an ideal society is employed to denounce and to criticize, in other terms there are no apparent intentions on the part of the writer to propose Utopian mode of life as an alternative or as a plan. The same can be said regarding the aim of Swift behind his imaginary travels. Gulliver wishes if the Houyhnhnms were in a capacity or disposition to send a sufficient number of their inhabitants civilizing Europe: “by teaching us the first principles of honour, justice, truth, temperance, public spirit, fortitude, chastity, friendship, benevolence, and fidelity. The name of all which virtues are still retained among us in most languages” (Swift, 1992: 239).

Both More and Swift praise the encountered societies to criticize Europe. The concept of Utopia is used as a standard by which the flaws of societies and the vices of men are criticized. At the same time both writers build an ideal yet nothing in both texts indicates that this ideal can be attained in reality. None of them looks forwards to an age of reform and we feel that they worry about bringing light to human wickedness and do not offer a programme of action. This is why we can assume that our two writers belong to the realistic utopian tradition. In other terms they show awareness that the ideal societies can exist in fiction only. Accordingly they serve as a means or a tool, chosen by their writers among other ones, to criticize and satirize their own time and society.

In reading a utopian text one must accept that the intention to criticize realities does not necessarily come with the will to bring change or create reform yet this does not exclude the possibility that More and Swift showed dissatisfaction with their own societies. *Utopia* and *Gulliver* do not offer plans of action because their creators paradoxically do not believe in the possibility to attain their own utopias. This reminds us Russell Jacoby's argument that there are two categories of utopia, an iconoclastic one expressing the dream of a better life (Jacoby, 2007: 37) but as Ruth Levitas implies “ resists its precise definition, which articulates a longing that cannot be attained” (Levitas, 2013: xvi), the second category however consists in blueprints that “ map out the future inches and minutes” (Jacoby, 2013: 34). The French philosopher Miguel Abensour in *L'Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*, makes difference between heuristic utopias that are exploratory in nature and systematic utopias with action plans (Abensour, 2009: 41). All the critics reject the literal function of utopia. In fact the majority of utopist thinkers and writers do not really approve the idea that a utopia may serve as a blueprint.

Both *Gulliver* and *Utopia* do not provide enough hints to classify the utopias they embody in the category of the blueprints. It is very difficult to prove any intention of creating and

proposing attainable alternatives. In addition even if both writers want their readers to believe in the credibility of the voyages, they use misleading, almost puzzling elements in their utopias that make us doubt in their belief in the feasibility of their own ideal societies. More uses factual elements to give a realistic dimension to a voyage to which he gives a 'fancy' title, as the term utopia means 'nowhere'. So the title itself indicates the impossibility of existence of Utopia. Swift seems to have borrowed from his predecessor this 'fantastic' aspect and expressed it through the use of a non human society whose members are highly intelligent horses (Houyhnhnms) or the use of miniature men in Lilliput. Actually, it is very ironic that his most utopian society which is the Houyhnhnms is composed of horses. It is Swift's way to indicate that human perfection is improbable in human societies.

It is hardly possible to believe in the workability of More's and Swift's utopias as long as skeptical utopian critics are still reluctant to put more faith in the utopian discourse. Maybe with more flexibility future readers will be able to find enough arguments to support the reading of *Utopia* and *Gulliver* as blueprints. Moreover, even if I do not dare venturing in such reading I believe that assuming that neither More nor Swift openly propose an action programme, does not exclude the possibility that they did not have that intention. Given the hostile environment during which they wrote their texts, they had probably hidden any overt insinuation that their utopias were meant to serve as blueprints and did let it up to the reader to decide about this matter. Moreover, the ahistorical aspect of utopias which is often used to justify the improbability of their realization leaves this discussion open to be enriched or completely uttered. This is so because anyone would find that both More's *Utopia* and Swift's *Gulliver* are timeless and frozen and this gives our two texts a kind of flexibility. In other terms what seems ahistorical today may have significance and pertinence in a future context, thus it not the last word More and Swift have to say on the subject.

II-4 Swift's Satirical Utopia, towards Dystopia

Intertextuality offers us the possibility to explore relationships between texts beyond the habitual oversimplified processes of drawing similarities and differences. Many critics 'enumerate' the similarities and differences between *Utopia* and *Gulliver*; some agree that they are similar because they both contain utopian features, and others however believe that they are opposite because *Gulliver* represents an instance of dystopia. In fact here lies the rub, for in that simplistic distinction what errors may come. Accepting this utopia/dystopia distinction, means accepting that utopia and dystopia are two distinct modes of writing and thus denying their genetic link. The term difference is maybe inappropriate because it implies total separation between utopia and dystopia and it cancels any genetic or generic link between them. Whereas from an intertextual point of view, dystopia is a different version of the pretext which is utopia. This does not mean that highlighting the common points and differences between the two texts is irrelevant, (previously I have been tracing the utopian similarities between them), however it is interesting to show that the dystopian aspect of *Gulliver* that differs it from *Utopia*, is in fact rewriting, remodeling and reshaping of More's *Utopia*.

There is no doubt that Swift's journeys contain utopian features, yet finishing reading it leaves us with a bitter taste. Contrary to More's *Utopia*, *Gulliver* is over dominated by a pessimistic tone and a sarcastic attitude, while it is not the feeling we have when we read *Utopia*. In *Gulliver* the utopian mode is satirized through the use of the utopian form and at the same time by attacking features common to utopian fiction. Raphael detailed the significant role of education in the Utopians' life thanks to which Utopia succeeded in forming honest and productive citizen. This feature of utopian education is satirized by Swift.

In Laputa, where we see much of Swift's satire, Gulliver tells us about the use of a developed a linguistic frame which creates sections of sentences through the random movement of words within it (Swift, 1992: 173-174). This invention allows all people including "the most ignorant" to "write Books in Philosophy, Poetry, Politicks, Law, Mathematics and Theology, without the least Assistance from Genius or Study" (Swift, 173). Swift reduces the 'genius' of disciplines highly mystified in Europe to a simple learning attainable by the most ignorant. He maybe questions the widely held utopian idea that learning can ameliorate human conditions. He rejects the idealism attributed to education in utopian texts, as Houston implies: "the enthusiasm for the reform of education which characterized the Utopian thinking of social reformers such as Bacon, Andreae, and Comenius are all fodder for Swift's satire on the idealism which their writings embodied."(Houston, 2007: 428)

We could trace the utopian aspects in *Gulliver* especially in the voyage to Houyhnhnms. It is the society in the narrative that is closest to Morian utopia. Yet there is an important difference between Gulliver's and Hythlodæus's experience of these idealised societies, a difference that makes the anti-utopian tone of Swift. At the end of *Utopia*, Raphael tells us that his five years spent in Utopia were happy and fruitful and he feels able to return there (More, 2003: 222). Gulliver's presence, however is not really appreciated among the Houyhnhnms, and is then obliged to live with his fellow Yahoos (a human society) or go back whence to his country. At the end, he returns home to England with a strong feeling of uneasiness unable to adapt himself to life in his original country (Swift, 1992: 252). He decided to isolate himself from human society because of his feelings despise towards men. However, the narrator feels happier in the company of his two horses, with whom he converses for four hours a day and who can understand him "tolerably well" (Swift, 1992: 257). At the end of *Gulliver*, we understand that he encountered a society which functions perfectly, yet he cannot belong to it. Moreover, Swift makes us deduce that the travel of Gulliver is negative more than it is positive because he cannot belong to the ideal society he remembers, at the same time after having experienced such social standards; he is unable to bear his own environment.

It seems that if Utopia and the Houyhnhnms are successful societies it is because they could fight and overcome pride. Even if the two texts condemn pride in the same way and show skepticism as far as the possibility of the realization of an ideal society in reality, they differ in the tone. More represents the idea of perfection as being inherent in human society. However, Swift makes the idea of the ideal state proper to animals and never to men, the fully utopian society he admires in his travels is that of horses, eliminating by that all possible human progress, this is symbolized by the rejection of Gulliver's presence by the Houyhnhnms. This strong rejection symbolizes Swift's pessimistic attitude towards humanity. Whilst More creates an ideal human society in a remote world, Swift dislocates this possibility through his use of animals.

CONCLUSION

It would be mistaken to understand Swift's satire as purely utopian in character or intent. While *Utopia* is like an open book with an open end which is itself open to possibilities and horizons, *Gulliver* seems to close the door. So, the similarities between *Utopia* and *Gulliver* testify Swift's use of *Utopia* as a raw material or a skeleton for his work, and then through satirical processes such as mockery, parody and irony, he reshapes the discourse of utopia, rewrites it, distorts it and creates its counter image to produce what has become a sub-genre of utopia which is dystopia. In *Gulliver* we sometimes read direct references to *Utopia*, other

times we come across allusions to it. The intertextual link between *Utopia* and *Gulliver* takes the form of reshaping and remodeling and most importantly cloning a sub genre that twentieth century technophobic writers such as Huxley and Wells developed.

Gulliver's Travels is a text that clearly dismantles the Morian utopia. It was indeed the birth of satirical dystopia which as explained before, is a derivation neologism which took its essence from utopia itself, that is why Vieira finds that it shares *Utopia's* strategies and its narrative conventions. However, the tone each develops is completely the opposite of the other. While *Utopia* is built on hope and desire, satirical utopia reflects total skepticism. It was a sort of mock- utopia where the aim was to denounce the inconsistency of the utopian dream.

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