

## Parody, Satire and Sympathy in *Don Quixote* and *Gulliver's Travels*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The notion that parody and satire are, among other things, related to sympathy may sound strange. After all, parody is intended to expose certain texts as superficial and cliché-ridden, to unbind the assumed “natural” connection between style and content in semiotic objects, and satire is supposed to arouse a mocking attitude in readers (or listeners or spectators) towards certain social habits, norms and values.<sup>2</sup> Mockery, like any other kind of laughter, is based on psychological detachment whereas sympathy involves the activating of compassion.<sup>3</sup> Still, looking at our reading experience, sympathy does seem to play an important role in many parodies and satires. How can we describe this role? One possibility would be to argue that it is just a matter of proportion and changing hierarchy—when sympathy is aroused towards a person or a text or a social institution, parody and satire subside—and vice versa. Another way to account for the co-existence of the two opposing attitudes would suggest a somewhat mechanistic solution: sympathy could dominate in some parts (e.g. chapters) of the work, whereas parody and satire in others. These two suggestions may indeed explain some cases.

Still, I would like to propose a more fundamental explanation for the way these two seemingly contradictory forces may function, and even complement and reinforce each other. To consider the way sympathy and mockery co-function within a fictional literary work, I suggest distinguishing between two dimensions. (1) The texts or literary conventions or social norms at which the parody and satire

aim their criticism; and (2) a character within the fictive world who is strongly influenced by texts, literary conventions or illusionary, fictive worlds. Towards the naiveté, illusions and gullible attitudes of such a character, sympathy may be evoked.

### *Don Quixote* – the Paradigmatic Case of Parody and Sympathy<sup>4</sup>

This dual attitude—mocking certain texts or literary conventions and sympathizing with a naive character—may be argued to mark some of the greatest parodies. In fact, one of the literary masterpieces of all time—Cervantes' *Don Quixote*—is based precisely on this dual principle: the conventions of the chivalric romance are exposed, but our hearts ache for Don Quixote. In *Don Quixote*, the novel, the connection between a critical attitude towards the conventions of a literary genre and sympathy towards the deluded human being is very intimate. The more the person is entangled in the imaginary web of the genre and loses touch with reality, the more he arouses sympathy for his plight. At the same time, the stronger our sympathy swells for hallucinating Don Quixote the sharper our critical attitude towards the literary conventions becomes. Our mental syllogism seems to work thus: if excessive reading of chivalric romance brings someone like Don Quixote to the point of losing his mind, there must be something inherently wrong with this literature itself.

Cervantes' attitude is conveyed at the very beginning of the novel:

The reader must know, then, that this gentleman, in the times when he had nothing to do—as was the case for most of the year—gave himself up to the reading of books of knight errantry; which he loved and enjoyed so much that he almost entirely forgot his hunting, and even the care of his estate. So odd and foolish, indeed, did he grow on this subject that he sold many acres of corn-land to buy these books of chivalry to read, and in this way brought home every one he could get. And of them all he considered none so good as the words of the famous Feliciano de Silva. For his brilliant style and those complicated sentences seemed to him very pearls, especially when he came upon those love-passages and challenges frequently written in the manner



of: 'The reason for the unreason with which you treat my reason, so weakens my reason that with reason I complain of your beauty'; and also when he read: 'The high heavens that with their stars divinely fortify you in your divinity and make you deserving of the desert that your greatness deserves.'<sup>5</sup>

Cervantes builds up our sympathy for Don Quixote: he is by no means a wrongdoer. On the contrary, he is full of good intentions; he wants to promote noble causes. His only problem seems to be that he, foolishly, takes his reading habits, his "hobby," too seriously. Now being an over-diligent reader may describe the problem of some of us—especially among such an honorable audience of literary scholars. We, however, unlike Don Quixote, invest our time and money in serious, respectable books (written in many cases by our colleagues, of course). Don Quixote invests his time and energy in rubbish. Cervantes makes this clear by the short, brilliant parody provided in the quotes that give us an idea of Don Quixote's literary taste. The tortuous, pompous style of the chivalric romance is presented as a mixture of pretentiousness, forced word play and cliché: "the reason for the unreason with which you treat my reason, so weakens my reason that with reason I complain of your beauty [...]. The high heavens that with their stars divinely fortify you in your divinity and make you deserving of the desert that your greatness deserves." How can a sane mind be enchanted by such conglomerations, we may well ask ourselves. And, indeed, the next step for Don Quixote is to "translate" these nonsensical writings into reality and to embark on a search of adventures, "following in every way the practice of the knights errant he had read of" (33). Cervantes is here suggesting that when a person's imagination is so fatally captured by such mechanical, pretentious conventions of thought and behavior, he may be treading on a slippery road, leading him on to folly and to bizarre corners of human experience.

Throughout the work the ratio between invoking our sympathy for Don Quixote and arousing our critical attitude towards the conventions of the chivalric romance may shift. Sometimes the dosage of sympathy is increased, at other times critical parody gains the upper

hand. But the division of labor is always the same: the delusional person attracts our sympathy, and the mechanical literary conventions are critically exposed.

It is interesting to note that what I describe here as a synchronic co-existence of satire and sympathy in Cervantes' novel was already suggested in English criticism—but on the diachronic level. The novel was first described as a satirical work and Don Quixote was treated as part of the satire, until, in the eighteenth century, he was increasingly treated as a sympathetic character. For Addison (in *Spectator* No. 249) the novel is a "burlesque" and Don Quixote is merely the object of satire. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the prevailing attitude had begun to change and Hazlitt, for instance, argues that Cervantes creates in Don Quixote "an enthusiast of the most amiable kind; of a nature equally open, gentle, and generous; a lover of truth and justice."<sup>6</sup> Until, in mid twentieth century, Don Quixote becomes for Erich Auerbach a symbol of a noble illusionist: "de tout noble illusionnisme chez les hommes, de la grandeur et de la vanité de la vie humaine."<sup>7</sup>

Going back to the synchronic co-existence of the two attitudes—of sympathy for Don Quixote and of criticism towards the literary conventions—one should note that they are not necessarily maintained in a pure state. Sometimes, we are critical of Don Quixote, and our attitude towards the chivalric romance is not only a critical one. Our occasional objections to Don Quixote's behavior are based not only on rational grounds (he is unrealistic, he is detached from reality) but also on moral ones. This is especially true where he brings harm not only on himself but also on people around him—such as Sancho Panza or some of the needy persons he intends to rescue. His first attempt to save the oppressed—where he intervenes with the countryman flogging the boy Andrew (Andres), Book I, chapter 4—ends in bringing a more painful flogging on the victim. Don Quixote is convinced, of course, that he emerges from this adventure as a great savior, not realizing that he has in fact only exacerbated the situation. When Don Quixote meets Andrew again on the road (Book I, chapter



31), he encourages the boy to tell the company his brave deeds. To his surprise, Andrew tells the misfortunes that befell him because of Don Quixote's intervention, and before he departs, he angrily says: "For God's sake, sir Knight Errant, don't come to my help if you meet me again, even though you see me being cut to pieces. But leave me to my troubles, for they can't be so bad that the results of your worship's help won't be worse" (276).

Thus, there are times where we are far from feeling sympathy for Don Quixote. But even in such cases, we may still find mitigating circumstances in the fact that he acts in good faith and with the best of intentions.

When it comes to the other side of the equation—the conventions of the chivalric romance—the rhetorical situation is not a simple one. True, the chivalric romance is exposed, both in stylistic details and in the overall story line as pompous, ridiculous and even dangerous. But at the same time we have to admit that part of the attraction we find as readers of Cervantes' work lies precisely in the series of chivalric-like fantastic adventures. When we become deeply engaged in reading the novel, at least part of our enjoyment is drawn from psychological layers similar to these in the make-up of any reader of chivalric romance, including of course its most famous reader—Don Quixote.<sup>8</sup>

### Satire and Sympathy in *Gulliver's Travels*

Let us now go on to discuss the dual structure of mockery and sympathy in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Whereas Swift's work is first and foremost a satire, criticizing certain social norms and human modes of behavior, he also sends his critical arrows towards a specific literary and philosophical tradition, that of utopias. I will focus primarily on the fourth book, the land of the Houyhnhnms and discuss its relation to More's classical *Utopia*.<sup>9</sup> It seems to me that Swift is here mocking the genre of utopia, especially some of its underlying optimistic ideological assumptions concerning human nature. At the same time, our

sympathy towards Gulliver is aroused when he becomes entranced with the horses' "utopia."

The relevance of utopian literature in reading the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* is evident both in the overall structure and in some specific details. To begin with, the *Travels* share a narrative structure with some exemplary utopias, especially More's *Utopia*. In both works we meet a traveler—Raphael in More, Gulliver in Swift—leaving Europe, arriving in an unknown country in a remote part of the earth. In this "no place" (the etymology of "utopia") the traveler discovers a developed, structured society. The most conspicuous characteristic of that society is that it lacks most of the follies, shortcomings and degradations of existing human societies. The traveler inquires into the nature of that society, and conducts discussions with the inhabitants and, as a result, becomes an admirer of the habits and principles governing utopian society. At the same time and by the same token, he develops a harshly critical attitude towards regular human society.

In addition to the analogies between the overall narrative line, one can also find some specific parallel details in *Gulliver's Travels'* fourth book and More's *Utopia*. One of the most conspicuous elements characterizing the debased human race is greed and avarice, especially the thirst for gold. In that respect, both More and Swift follow Christian doctrine. Thus it is not surprising to discover that an important characteristic of utopian inhabitants is their negative attitude towards money, silver and gold. They attempt to adhere to a "truer" and a more "natural" set of values: "Without iron human life is simply impossible, just as it is without fire or water—but we could easily do without silver and gold, if it weren't for the idiotic concept of scarcity-value."<sup>10</sup>

In a deliberately provocative ploy, More describes the use the citizens of Utopia make of gold, intended to counter any (human) tendency to cherish these precious metals:

But silver and gold are the normal materials, in private houses as well as communal dining-halls, for the humblest items of domestic equipment, such as chamber pots. They also use chains and fetters of solid gold to immobilize



slaves, and anyone who commits a really shameful crime is forced to go about with gold rings on his ears and fingers, a gold necklace round his neck, and a crown of gold on his head. (86-87)

These Utopian procedures seem to have succeeded beyond measure in Swift's land of the horses. Swift takes the model he is parodying a step further.<sup>11</sup> The Houyhnhnms do not use money, nor do they cherish gold or silver. In the land of the Houyhnhnms the Yahoos—Swift's debased, animal-like version of the human race—are those that fancy precious stones. Gulliver's master the horse tells him:

That in some fields of his country there are certain shining stones of several colours, whereof the Yahoos are violently fond, and when part of these stones are fixed in the earth, as it sometimes happeneth, they will dig with their claws for whole days to get them out, carry them away, and hide them by heaps in their kennels; but still looking round with great caution, for fear their comrades should find out their treasure. (210)

Swift seems to follow, in an exaggerated, grotesque manner, the model set up by More in *Utopia*. The horses are "immune" to human weaknesses, and avarice belongs solely to creatures left out of rational (and natural) society.

Then perhaps Swift is also writing a serious, unequivocal utopia, and the horses' society represents a desirable ideal? I think a careful reading of the fourth book shows that Swift, unlike Gulliver, does not embrace indiscriminately the model presented by the horses.<sup>12</sup> In fact, on more than one occasion and in many respects he makes sure to distance himself from this supposedly ideal society. To begin with, he favors a playful effect regarding their language. When Gulliver first encounters the horses he dwells on the sounds they produce: "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" (184). The reader cannot help but be amused by the actual sounds of neighing produced here.

The peculiar nature of the horses' language, however, is not the only target of Swift's comic purpose. It seems to me that Swift suggests the horses 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 four leads to the conclusion that the horses are simply not intelligent. This is most evident in the way they try to understand and categorize the newcomer—Gulliver—is he or is he not a Yahoo? In classifying Gulliver as a Yahoo (after finding out that he is wearing clothes) 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 betray their most ardent supporter when they decide to send him away.

To accentuate the inherent cruelty of these "elevated" creatures, Swift tells us that during the horses' general assembly, in which they discuss the solution to the Yahoo "problem," a proposal is made to castrate the Yahoos. This idea is not originally theirs. 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" (220).<sup>13</sup> Usually the horses are very hostile towards any idea expressed by Gulliver. But when it comes to this appalling notion of castration, they suddenly listen and become receptive.

Another indication of Swift's reservations about the "ideal" nature of the horses can be found in the etymology given for their name: "The word *Houyhnhnms*, in their tongue, signifies a *horse*, and in its etymology, the perfection of nature" (190). This arrogant etymology sounds all too familiar; it is nothing but a horsy version of the human claim to be the "crown of creation." Swift suggests an analogy between the horses' version of *hubris* and the original human version. This *hubris* adds on to other repulsive characteristics of their society. They lack any sense of compassion, their society is all too organized and their mating and breeding customs are racist:



In their marriages they are exactly careful to choose such colours as will not make any disagreeable mixture in the breed. Strength is chiefly valued in the male, and comeliness in the female, not upon the account of love, but to preserve the race from degenerating. (216)

When one takes these traits into account, one realizes that in Swift's world the horses do not represent ideal creatures, and their society is by no means a desirable utopia. Understanding that the horses do not represent a desirable ideal does not imply that Swift rejects *in toto* everything they stand for. When the horses expose certain human shortcomings—avarice, corruption, cruelty, stupidity, futile disputes—Swift joins them; when they “overdo” their rejection of humanity, especially when they become prideful and inhumane, Swift distances himself from them. Whereas Swift's rhetorical attitude is complex, sometimes even confusing,<sup>14</sup> Gulliver's own attitude is quite unequivocal: for him, the horses are the epitome of the ideal society. He is so fascinated with what they represent that he begins to imitate their way of living in a pathetic attempt to literally become one of them. While reading Book IV, we should always remember Monk's insistence that Gulliver “is NOT Jonathan Swift. The meaning of the book is wholly distorted if we identify the Gulliver of the last voyage with his creator, and lay Gulliver's misanthropy at Swift's door.”<sup>15</sup>

After returning to England Gulliver finds himself totally alienated from his fellow human beings. By identifying himself with the Houyhnhnms, by adopting their worldview according to which any human being equals a despicable Yahoo, he is caught in a tragic quandary where he despises himself and those mostly close to him, but cannot actually align himself with what he cherishes. At the end of the book, when Gulliver is repulsed by the very physical presence of his wife and children and finds solace in conversing with “two young stone-horses” (234), no reader can remain indifferent. He is ridiculous, to be sure, and Swift loves to elaborate on the ludicrous and grotesque aspects of his behavior.<sup>16</sup> But when we think of his deep and bitter alienation from those closest to him he arouses our sympathy. And by the same token we criticize the madness of falling in love with fantas-

tic utopias. Utopia is treated by parody; the human being made captive by the vision gets, at least partially, our sympathy.

### Concluding Remarks

Both Cervantes and Swift invented a protagonist enchanted by an imaginary, fictive, literary world and this enchantment leads the character to depart from normality. Don Quixote became a demented individual who actually saw giants in windmills. Gulliver evolved into a misanthrope, repelled by his own wife and children, enjoying conversing with horses. In Cervantes, the "spell" falls on Don Quixote through excessive, uncritical reading of chivalric romances; Don Quixote blurs the line between literary allusion and mental delusion. We may all imagine giants in windmills, as we may imagine elephants in clouds. But when we actually see such giants in windmills and begin to act as if these were real giants, we cross the line separating aesthetic illusion from pathological delusion. Don Quixote attempts to make reality comply with patterns of fiction (or alternatively, to force a fictive, fantastic world onto reality).

The relationship between fiction and reality is different in *Gulliver's Travels*. Excessive reading does not excite Gulliver's imagination. In fact, Lemuel Gulliver is portrayed as an average Englishman and there is no indication that he had even read More's *Utopia* or any other work pertaining to the tradition of literary utopias (e.g. Bacon's *New Atlantis*). His imagination is stimulated not by books but by a possible realization of a perfected society. If Cervantes had created an imaginary world in which giants and magicians truly existed and Don Quixote was fascinated by the conduct of such characters in such a world, we would get something like the situation presented by Swift.

There are thus some differences between the two works and the way they situate their protagonists vis-à-vis an imaginary ideal world. In both cases we develop a critical attitude towards the construction of elevated, fictive ideals—the chivalric code detached from real hu-



man existence in Cervantes, the social rationalism devoid of true human sentiments in Swift. Our sympathy is reserved for those human beings—like Don Quixote and Gulliver—who are drawn in by such ideals.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The first version of this article was read in the 7th International *Connotations* Symposium on "Sympathetic Parody"—and I benefitted from the participants' discussion and comments. I also owe special thanks to Matthias Bauer, the editor of *Connotations*, and to the readers of my article, Josef Haslag and Inge Leimberg, for their many valuable suggestions that helped to put my arguments in a broader critical perspective.

<sup>2</sup>On the structure and functions of parody, see the classical work of the Russian formalist Jurji Tynjanov, "Destruction, Parodie," *Change 2* (1969): 67-76. For recent surveys and theories of parody, see Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985) and Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000). For the forms and functions of satire, see the classical article of Northrop Frye, "The Nature of Satire," *The University of Toronto Quarterly* 14 (1944): 75-89. See also Alvin B. Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1965) and the opening chapter of Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1964). For the possible inter-relations between parody and satire—the two neighboring but still distinct genres—see Ziva Ben-Porat, "Method in Madness: Notes on the Structure of Parody Based on MAD TV Satires," *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 245-72.

<sup>3</sup>It was Henri Bergson, in his *Le Rire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1920), who suggested that an emotional detachment is a prerequisite for laughter and mockery.

<sup>4</sup>For the importance of paradigmatic cases in understanding and describing literary genres, see chapter 3 of my *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950) 31-32.

<sup>6</sup>These quotes are taken from Stuart Tave's illuminating presentation of the development in the perception of the novel and of its protagonist in *The Amiable Humorist* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960) 153, 163 (for Hazlitt's views on *Don Quixote*, see also 234-35).

<sup>7</sup>Erich Auerbach, *Introduction aux études de philologie romane* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1949) 171.

<sup>8</sup>Simon Dentith (see note 2 above) points out the "paradoxical effect of preserving the very text that it [parody] seeks to destroy [...]. Thus the classic parody of *Don Quixote* [...] preserves the very chivalric romances that it attacks—with the unexpected result that for much of its history the novel has been read as a celebration of misplaced idealism rather than a satire of it" (36).

<sup>9</sup>John Traugott points out the close similarities between More's *Utopia* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, to emphasize Swift's serious intentions. His analysis can be found in "A Voyage to Nowhere with Thomas More and Jonathan Swift: *Utopia* and *The Voyage to the Houyhnhmns*," *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ernest Tuveson (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964) 143-69, and in his "The Yahoo in the Doll's House: *Gulliver's Travels* the Children's Classic," *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 127-50. For the affinities between More's and Swift's works, see also Brian Vickers, "The Satiric Structure of *Gulliver's Travels* and More's *Utopia*," in a collection of essays edited by the author: *The World of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1968) 233-57.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. and intro. Paul Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 86.

<sup>11</sup>Swift's deep appreciation of More's work is reflected in the fact that More is the only modern writer mentioned in Book Three of *Gulliver's Travels*, as one of six noble sages "to which all the ages of the world cannot add a seventh." See Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston: Riverside Editions, 1960) 159.

<sup>12</sup>Such a reading could also take into account certain parallels between the horses' society and that of the Lilliputians, especially some of their cruel, insensitive aspects. For a reading emphasizing the playful, ironic and satirical attitude of Swift towards the horses' "utopia," see Kathleen Williams, *Jonathan Swift and the Age of Compromise* (Lawrence, KS: The U of Kansas P, 1958) 179-209; see also my "Satura Contra Utopiam: Satirical Distortions of Utopian Ideas," *Revue de littérature comparée* 268 (1993): 463-71.

<sup>13</sup>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 I, chapter 7). It seems to me that through this analogy Swift suggests that the noble horses act in some cases like the Orwellian small creatures.

<sup>14</sup>The fourth book has received many, sometimes conflicting interpretations of Swift's "true" attitude towards the horses. As I argue in this section, Swift ultimately rejects the horses' society as a model for emulation, but sometimes one is enticed to believe that their society is indeed attractive and harmonious. In an interesting argument Allan Bloom, for example, presents the horses' society as a desirable "ancient" model, coupled with the Brobdingnags' attractively simple society in Book II (and opposed to the corrupt "modern" societies of the Lillipu-



tians in Book I and the crazy scientific societies of Book III). See his "An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*," Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert A. Greenberg (New York: Norton, 1970) 297-311.

<sup>15</sup>Samuel Holt Monk, "The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver," Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Greenberg 318. Monk's article, which first appeared in *The Sewanee Review* in 1955, highlights the ironic distance between author and narrator-character in *Gulliver's Travels*. A similar emphasis has already been suggested in the early forties by John F. Ross, *Swift and Defoe* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1941) 79-92. See also Kathleen Williams, *Jonathan Swift and the Age of Compromise* (Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1958).

<sup>16</sup>In his tendency to linger on the grotesque aspects of human behavior and to unleash bitter, sardonic satire, Swift is undoubtedly in the tradition of Juvenal (it is no accident that the Struldbrugs scene in Book III echoes Juvenal's *Satire 10*). But in the midst of the satirical invective and vehement diatribe, one can detect some tender cords, stemming from Swift's affirmation of "the dignity and worth of human kind" (Monk 330). And, to use Williams' astute analysis, Swift is able to recognize man's "goodness of love, pity, gratitude, kindness, which makes life bearable in man's fallen world" (Williams 192).