SATIRE AND DYSTOPIA: TWO GENRES?

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The term dystopia is often replaced by another one, negative utopia, which relates itself to the realm of utopian literature. The world of utopia is depicted as ideal, a negative utopia or dystopia offers a gloomy, often bitter vision of the future, providing a picture of the present that is cast in the future, often in a caricature-like fashion, painted in dark colours. Despite the obvious differences between the two genres, the technique shows important similarities: the device of *displacement* is used in both genres. There are two methods of displacement: the author can either reflect the present in an imaginary future, in a non-existing time, or it can be confined in space, in a non-existing place, on an island for instance. The method of displacement provides us with a distorting mirror that can either place beauty in the foreground, as in the case of positive utopias, or it can magnify anything that is ugly in the reality of the present and in that case we read a negative utopia. Both positive and negative utopias are definitely critical, as their point of departure is that the present is imperfect, it needs to be thoroughly transformed, or if the tendencies of the present remain unchanged, we can expect such extreme consequences that appear in dystopias.

This, however, should not be seen as an unchallengeable, objective authorial intention that is conceived accurately in the reader. Negative utopias usually reach their target in causing horror and disgust in the healthy public. In the case of positive utopias, however, the reader's identification with the author's intention is less automatic: it is questionable whether we would feel content in Wells's industrialised, mechanical world, or in the cold, army-like order of Bellamy, or in other, overregularised places. It often seems that we cannot share the optimism of the authors of earlier times and we see a smothering dystopia in their wonderfully arranged worlds, having lost our faith in the accessibility of perfection. Man has woken up from the dream of utopia, and prefers an ironic reading even of the most beautiful social designs. This problem may become the central theme of a work of art, as in the case of Sándor Szathmári's *Kazohinia*, where two opposite worlds are depicted, that of the *hin*s and of the *behin*s, and neither world seems to be endurable, we recognise the caricature of our own life in both of them. A superficial reading of the narrative might offer a direct utopia, but at least the last phase of the frame story dawns on the reader that he is being presented with pure irony. To put it simply: in this case and also in many others, whether one reads a utopia or a dystopia depends a great deal upon the reader's choice. A typical example for the ambivalent nature of utopias is the 4th part of *Gulliver's Travels*, which has incited a century of debate if it is to be read as a utopia or as a dystopia.

The critic is in a tough position when looking for a really attractive utopia and it is presumable that the sincere writing of such works has become impossible, the place of positive utopia has been taken by its negative counterpart, and the former genre has become a branch of social-philosophical thinking, or it has returned to that field. At the same time dystopia has become almost self-evident, as if all social analysis

that is deeper than that of a soap opera should run into gloomy consequences. Juvenal's famous sentence (*Satires* I, 30) – that it is difficult not to write a satire – refers to the world of the Roman Empire and has remained valid for centuries, but it seems that in the age of globalisation it is equally difficult not to write a dystopia.

Dystopia and satire

Dystopia appears to be leaving its parent utopia and it is more convenient if we reflect upon this kind of literature as a part of another genre, as a special kind of *satire*. Dystopias (and from now on I refrain from using the expression negative utopia) are such satires that are displaced, cast in the future or confined in space, and do not limit themselves to the scathing criticism of certain people or phenomena, but scrutinise the workings of the society thoroughly, usually putting one element of the problems in the centre, and that element, being magnified, distorts the whole system, or more precisely, shows its distorted nature.

Sutherland reminds us that "the emphasis in modern satire has shifted from individual man to mankind, and the satirist is now concerned to save the human race."[1] This tendency opens broad fields before utopian or dystopian works of art. We may even regard this statement of Sutherland as an alternative definition of dystopian literature: dystopia is satire focusing on the whole humankind.

It is self-evident for Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism* to list dystopia under the mythos of winter: irony and satire, more precisely in the second phase of satire, when "the 'other world' appears in satire, [. . .] as an ironic counterpart to our own, a reversal of accepted social standards."[2] If the tone is darker, more demonic, the work of art belongs to the sixth phase, where satire gives over to irony, and we no longer want (or can) laugh at the tragic hero or situation. Laughing is a victorious war-cry: the thing or person that is being laughed at is defeated; we are no longer in its power. Dystopias, however, present "human life in terms of largely unrelieved bondage. [. . .] In our day the chief form of this phase is the nightmare of social tyranny" (Frye 238).

In accordance with the arguments above, I will now analyse dystopia as a branch of satire, and to begin with, I shall highlight among the characteristics of dystopia the feeling of *inevitability*, the belief that the present world is going in a direction, whose future consequences are shown in dystopias, and we cannot alter these consequences, we do not rule the course of the world, the catastrophe is unavoidable. Dystopias revaluate the notion of progress; we can no longer expect with optimism a better world where everything goes well on its own. On the contrary: we anticipate in anxiety the fulfilment of those tragedies whose germs we experience in our own age. Our anxiety is increased by such works of art, as Orwell's *1984*, that do not place the catastrophe in a distant future, but in the life of their own, or in the next generation.

The 17th and 18th centuries are generally looked upon as the golden age of satire; by the 20th century this genre has become much rarer in its traditional form, satire is more often present in literature as an element or tone in other genres, like in the novel. The satirists of the golden age, as Pope or Swift, shared the conviction of

regarding themselves as the purifiers and guards of civilisation. In Cuddon's view "Anti-Utopianism or dystopianism has also produced a kind of satire: the creation of a futuristic society whose shortcomings and evils are then exposed."[3] We will soon be discussing why the traditional moral purifying role of satires is only partially present in dystopias.

The characteristics of dystopias

Laughing presupposes (or creates) a relation of subordination and superiority between the one that laughs and the one that is being laughed at, should this latter one be either a person or any phenomenon. Marcel Pagnol remarks that "Laughing is a triumphal song: the expression of temporary superiority towards the one being ridiculed."[4] If we reflect upon dystopias as satirical works, the above statements must be valid in connection with this genre as well. Still, it is rather rare that we start laughing while reading dystopias and we do not even feel that it would be the intention of the author.

It is so because in the dystopian form of satire it is very difficult to interpret subordinate and superior relations. The topic of a dystopia is much less confinable than that of traditional satires as in most cases dystopias analyse the workings of the society, human civilisation thoroughly, and not only one or another social phenomenon. The readers cannot fully detach themselves from this broad topic and cannot feel the superiority needed for the triumphal song of laughter. Moreover, we can also understand from these books that the reason for the social tragedies depicted is not only a specific historical, therefore ephemeral current of thought, but behind these tragedies we find the defects of the human nature in general, towards which no sincere reader may feel completely superior and detached. The mediocre and selfish anti-hero of a satire might be laughable, but such a character in a dystopia can only arouse fear or pity.

James Sutherland states that the satirist views the criticised phenomena from an outward point of view, attacking the social structure that produced the topic of the satire.[5] Dystopia, in this context, is the par excellence, extreme satire, which attacks the social structure directly. One can interpret Sutherland's opinion in a way that the topic of the satire is practically a pretext for the examination of the social system, a symptom that shows grave problems and which cannot be cured on its own because it cannot be isolated from the other set of problems. Dystopias do not seek such pretexts, they show the problems of society directly, in their complexities. When Jonathan Swift in *A Tale of a Tub* attacks pedantry and self-complacency, he also attacks, at least implicitly, the society that tolerates or even promotes such behaviour. This global consideration, however, remains in the background in the genre he cultivates (liberating the reader to a hearty laugh), whereas in a dystopia the general problems of society and human civilisation come to the foreground, rendering impossible the feeling of extraneousness and superiority that could make the reader able to laugh.

In the satires of the first half of the 20th century the satirical superiority became relative: the society to be criticised sank very deep. This has led to a pessimism that makes writers see the problems, but not the solutions. It is not a coincidence that it was the same age (and partly the same authors) that made dystopia an important

genre. It is more and more difficult to write a satire that is built upon the superiority of the author, as the society towards which one could feel superior is not worthy of this comparison. Or to put it another way: the social problems that usually serve as a background to the satire have grown so great that they can no longer stay in the background and occupy the centre of the satire thus making it a dystopia. It might have seemed effective earlier to criticise certain characteristics of men, and satirists might have considered themselves the purifiers and curers of humanity who heal one or two minor ailments and the patient leaves healthily. The satirists of the first part of the 20th century, Huxley, Wells, Čapek and Karinthy, did not look at the repulsive characteristics of human beings as historical (and thus transitory) categories, but as perennial human attributes that cannot be helped. It also means that social cataclysms cannot be avoided, only postponed, partly because it is the attempts to solve the problems that end in more and more tragic results. As Pollard puts it: the hopeful satirists offer a remedy to the maladies of the human race, but according to the writers of dystopias "the cure is worse than the disease."[6]

Sutherland remarks wittily that "much of the world's satire is undoubtedly the result of a spontaneous, or self-induced, overflow of powerful indignation, and acts as a catharsis for such emotions."[7] The element of indignation is not absent from dystopia either (unless it is replaced by resignation), but we do not find a catharsis that cleanses our emotions and relieves our anxiety. The author of a dystopia cannot undertake this task: problems can be shown, but solutions cannot be found. The satirists, especially in the golden age of satire, in the 17th and 18th century, trusted in the power of criticism, the authors of dystopia are not optimistic even with respect to their own role.[8]

It is characteristic for satires and other literary works with a satirical tone to choose a socially significant theme for their object, and the rejection of that object is an important contribution to their popularity. "The role of freedom and that of liberation, the last gesture of emancipation are the most important properties of satire. What it destroys, breaks down and demolishes is a socially unjustified, rigid scheme, an inhibition that burdens mankind, an unhealthy mental and emotional tie" argues Szalay.[9] Yet the gesture of liberation is not so obvious in dystopias. Not only because they lack the feeling of superiority, and the position of extraneousness essential to satires is dubious, but also because the act of liberation assumes a condition that the thing from which the recipient is liberated is something limited compared to the whole, but in a dystopia it is the whole that becomes the theme of criticism: the entire social order and the perspectives of human civilisation are questioned. The effect of a dystopia is rather stirring or depressing than liberating. The aim of satire is to clear away the object pilloried, or if that is not obtainable, to reduce its power as much as possible. All that a dystopia carries out is a warning, as it cannot achieve any more; hence it is more comparable to a desperate cry for help than to a victorious war-cry. The moral transformation of the reader is also irrelevant because, as opposed to satire, dystopia is not concerned with the individual's sin, but with such structural vice that lies not in the individual but in the system of society.

Moral tracts are boring, uninteresting and ineffective, or it is felt so by many, so satire uses irony and other, presumably more effective literary devices in order to improve the human race. Dystopia does not find any devices that could be effective

against the dangers threatening human civilization. According to Harris, satire's implicit methods are necessitated by the hypocritical society, and they can work because we are not all scoundrels and we accept some moral values at least in principle. "Once we become a world of knaves, there will be no room for satire. Fortunately, every age including our own (so far) has been content merely to remain on the brink of complete knavery, total disaster, and absolute ruin."[8] Dystopia looks a little further, over this brink, where even the traditional weapons of satire prove to be ineffective.

A dystopia usually offers no alternative to the horror depicted: the direction where the world is going according to the author is undoubtedly wrong, but there is no more naive faith in reaching a safe harbour by changing the direction. Sutherland states in the very beginning of his book that "the satirist is destructive; he destroys what is already there [. . .] and he does not necessarily fill the vacuum that he has created. He is [. . .] 'a demolition expert.'"[9] The author of a dystopia destroys not only what is already there, but also what exists only potentially in the time of the author, when only its possibility is apparent. It would be unfair to expect a satirist to correct the vices besides showing them up, and it would be equally unfair to expect a dystopia to show the way towards a happy future, or to make avoidable the horrid future it depicts. The author of the dystopia recognises the dangers hidden in his age, but to avert these dangers, if it is possible at all, is not in their competence.

Let me finish by quoting the opinion of Arthur Pollard, according to whom the best satire is the one that is the most certain in its values.[12] The best way to perceive evil is to be aware of what good is. Dystopia is probably the satire of less confident times: we are not really certain of what is good and normal, but it is good news concerning the future of civilization that we know at least what is bad or abnormal. And should we forget it, then dystopias will always remind us.

Notes

[1] James Sutherland. *English Satire*. Cambridge UP, 1967, p. 21.

[2] Northrop Frye. *The Anatomy of Criticism*. New York: Atheneum, 1966, p. 233.

[3] J. A. Cuddon, ed. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 832.

[4] Quoted by Károly Szalay. *Szatira és humor*. Budapest: Magvető, 1963, p. 94.

[5] Sutherland, quoted by Szalay (1963), p. 143.

[6] Arthur Pollard. *Satire*. London and New York: Methuen, 1987, p. 34.

[7] Pollard, pp. 4-5.

[8] It is obviously a limited power. According to Harris: "So the practical hope and aim of the satirist is that his barbs will be sufficiently irritating to stop or at least slow down the increase of evil, even though it cannot be reversed." Robert Harris. "The Purpose and Method of Satire" *VirtualSalt* May 14, 2001. Nov. 22, 2002 www.virtualsalt.com/satire.htm. Pope wrote to John Arbuthnot (2nd August, 1734): "I hope to deter, if not to reform" (quoted by Harris).

[9] Károly Szalay. *Komikum, szatira, humor*. Budapest: Kossuth, 1983, p. 143.

[10] Harris, op. cit.

[11] Sutherland, p. 1.

[12] Pollard, p. 3.