

Jacek Mikoś

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Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio F, Nauki Filozoficzne i Humanistyczne 17, 27-38

1962

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Z Katedry Języka Polskiego Wydziału Humanistycznego UMCS
Kierownik: doc. dr Leon Kaczmarek

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Swift's World Comedy

Swifta komedia świata

Свифта „мировая комедия”

Dürrenmatt's lecture on problems of the theatre¹ and his conversation with the members of the editorial staff of the monthly „Dialog”² have cast new light on the place of comedy in European literature.³ Dürrenmatt had attempted to see the old problems through the eyes of a modern reader and thinker,⁴ to transfer today's systems of reference twenty-four centuries back to show that in some aspects the Greeks of IV century B. C. and people who live in this unquiet epoch of the A-bomb and the sputniks face similar turmoil and, as a matter of fact, are in the same boat.

In the vein of the world comedy which leads from Aristophanes to our day, Dürrenmatt mentions François Rabelais and Jonathan Swift. As Dürrenmatt's lecture does not aspire to the condition of a scholarly dissertation I do not want to verify all his statements; the aim of this paper is to show that Swift's vision of the world and some devices of his technique make him present this world and people as comedy.

What are Dürrenmatt's chief assumptions about the world comedy?

It is characteristic of the theatre that it developed chiefly by means of comedy and through comedy. Tragedy, as the most rigorous genre, presupposes the existence of an already formed world. Comedy, on the

¹ The lecture was delivered in 1954 and 1955. Its Polish translation appeared in „Dialog” 1961, No. 9, p. 111.

² F. Dürrenmatt: *Z rozmowy w Dialogu*, „Dialog”, 1963, No. 4, p. 75.

³ cf. G. Sinko: *Komedia świata*, „Dialog”, 1963, No. 5, p. 90.

⁴ cf. Jan Kott's similar approach in *Szkice o Szekspirze*, Warszawa 1961.

other hand, assumes the existence of a formless world, a world still in making, undergoing numerous changes, a world which is, just as ours, "packing its things" before departure.

Comedy has been living and changing up to this day but the changes are not so fundamental as one would think. Even today two kinds of comedy can be roughly distinguished both known since antiquity and these types have their counterparts in the Old Attic comedies. The Old Attic comedy, connected with Aristophanes, was the comedy of the world, the New Attic — of characters. Both have continued into the modern times. The world comedy appears not only at the theatre but also on the pages of Rabelais and Swift.

The most characteristic elements of comedy are a joke and an idea. The joke is usually uncouth or even vulgar and it may cause a lot of objections but its aim is that of creating distance. The subjects of a joke are matters purely sexual and therefore they are deprived of any shape; the joke, therefore is pracomedy, it transmits sex into the comic and this is the only possibility of decent speaking about these things. Watching the joke one may see that the comic lies in shaping the formless, in forming the chaos.

Another means to achieve distance in comedy is an idea. Tragedy is deprived of an idea and writers of tragedy did not need any new concepts. The themes of Aristophanes' plays, on the contrary, are not invented actions which take place in the past but in the present. The ideas rush into the world like missiles and transform the present into the comic and, at the same time, into something visible.

Tragedy presupposes the presence of guilt, misfortune, responsibility. In the general bustle of our era no one is guilty or responsible. We are only descendants and it is rather our bad luck than guilt. Only comedy is the right form to express our times. Our world has brought forth the grotesque as well as the A-bomb. The grotesque is a sensual paradox, a shape of something shapeless. And our thinking cannot be deprived of the notion of paradox just as our art and world exist only owing to the A-bomb, to the fear of it.

One might conclude that comedy is the expression of despair but such a suggestion would not be necessary. Anyone who perceives nonsense and the inconsistency of this world might fall into a fit of despair, but this despair would not be the result of the existence of the world. It would be an answer which is given to the world; another answer would be the lack of despair and the decision to endure in this world, where we often dwell as Gulliver among giants.

So much for Dürrenmatt. Now, in the light of these remarks we shall try to examine more closely the epoch and art of Jonathan Swift.

II

Undoubtedly much of the satiric writing of the eighteenth century, as of any epoch, developed directly out of the personal spleen and spite of the satirist. But if no other period in English literary history has produced greater satirists than the eighteenth century did, it is, perhaps, because no other period was so characteristically full of pretence and sham of men on the one hand and under the stress of changes and turmoil, on the other.

In the first half of the eighteenth century England was the arena of great changes. The Great Revolution of 1688 put into power commercial aristocracy, great merchants and bankers. Soon after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), which brought England new estates in North America, the Whigs came into power and under the leadership of Sir Robert Walpole held it for thirty years. With these changes, never yet had England grown rich so quickly; the country was prosperous and in the main contented even in time of war, owing partly to good harvests and cheap food and partly to industry, agriculture and commerce all of which continued to expand. Trade was a national preoccupation and the constant concern of Parliament and the government. "Eighteenth-century politicians realized with great clarity that wealth meant power. Chatham [...] planned his campaigns with the merchants of London and planned them to capture French trade. For trade was wealth and wealth was power." ⁵

The changes also went in another direction. Science and knowledge suddenly became the fashion of the day. There came into existence a scientific association to which the king gave the title of "The Royal Society" (1662). The developments in science had opened immense vistas in knowledge, deepened man's understanding of the world and made him question the whole nature of that biblical universe in which his ancestors had believed with unquestioning faith.

But the growing wealth and development of science were only one part of the real face of the century. Walpole governed with the help of evident and insolent bribery, widespread corruption was followed by deception and treason. "The age of Walpole was rough, coarse, brutal, a world for the muscular and aggressive and the cunning. The thin veneer of elegance and classic form obscured but never hid either the

⁵ J. H. Plumb: *England in the Eighteenth Century*, London 1957, p. 13.

crime or dissipation of the drab middle class virtue and thrift." ⁶ In the midst of death (there was a very high infant mortality) the people sought palliatives and found them in drink, gambling and violence. "Both sexes gambled freely [...]. Immense sums of money changed hands over cards and dice. Drunkenness was the acknowledged national vice of Englishmen of all classes." ⁷

The growing wealth and developing science brought forth a boundless self-confidence, an attitude which has always served to cover man's fears and weakness. "I do not think — wrote in 1727 de Saussure, who was not the only visitor to stress the point — there is a people more prejudiced in its favour than the British people, and they allow this to appear in their talk and manners. They look on foreigners in general with contempt, and think nothing is as well done elsewhere as in their own country." ⁸

III

The same historical period brought forth Jonathan Swift and there came the cohesion of two stimuli: of the innate features of the satirist and the historical environment which released these features. With a critical spirit such as his Swift was born in the right age because this age deserved satire and because, in principle at least, it approved of criticism.

The success of satire, perhaps more than of any other literary work, depends upon the author's ability to involve his readers — to make them share his condemnation. In order to achieve this, the satirist must allow himself neither to relax into an uncritical amusement nor to lose his temper. Swift's general tendency of mind was to vent his deep, bitter and disillusioned anger against the proud fraud of human effort. To achieve this Swift developed a variety of techniques such as invective, diminution, mask, irony, allegory which range among the means of satirical technique. But at the same time we may find in the framework of these devices the elements which serve to create distance and detachment and which lead to his world comedy: a joke and an idea.

Invective is that criticism in which the author vilifies an object strongly and openly. The substance of it is outright denunciation. "Its tendency [...] is towards the expression of emotional extreme: it tends

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ G. M. Trevelyan: *English Social History*, London 1946, p. 314.

⁸ Plumb: *op. cit.*, p. 33.

to magnify and exaggerate the viciousness of an object and it finds its vocabulary in the lexicon and hyperbole and billingsgate."⁹

In *A Tale of a Tub* Swift describes the Peters Bulls "They would roar and spit, and belch, and piss, and f...t, and snivel out fire, and keep a perpetual coil, till you flung them a bit of gold."¹⁰

It is an example of invective in which the author vilifies an object strongly and openly. But it is, as well, an example of joke: the author is playing with words and it makes this enumeration rather funny than spiteful, removes our interest from the viciousness of an object turning it to humour, distance and detachment.

In *The Drapier's Letters*, "Wood's Execution" the people cried out to have Wood delivered into their hands.

Cook:	I'll baste him.
2nd Cook:	I'll give him his Belly-full.
3d Cook:	I'll give him a Lick in the Chops.
Drunken man	I'll beat him as long I can stand.
Grocer:	I'll pepper him.
Whore:	Pox rot him.
Farmer:	I'll thrash him.
4th Taylor:	I'll make his A... make Buttons.
Gamester:	I'll make his Bones rattle. etc.' ¹¹

Here, our interest is quickly focused on the witty apposition of professions and curses, and the curses lose their venom in the mouths of the speakers.

Another device of Swift's technique is diminution. It may be described as "the use of any 'ugly or homely' images which are intended to diminish the dignity of an object."¹² The sharpest and most shocking form of diminution is achieved by the usage of the element of disgust. It is effected by dwelling upon certain physical and physiological characteristics of a person which tends to present him as extremely contemptible and nauseating and includes a sexual incapacity and impotence of any sort.

In *Gulliver's Travels*:

"I went into another chamber, but was ready to hasten back, being almost overcome with a horrible stink. [...] The projector of this cell was almost the ancient student of the academy, his face and beard were

⁹ J. Bullit: *J. Swift and the Anatomy of Satire*, Cambridge 1953, p. 16.

¹⁰ *A Tale of a Tub* in *The Works of Jonathan Swift*, Edinburgh, n. d., edited by W. P. Nimmo, p. 69.

¹¹ *The Drapier's Letters to the People of Ireland*, Oxford 1935, pp. 175—176.

¹² Bullit: *op. cit.*, p. 45.

of a pale yellow, his hands and clothes daubed with filth. [...] His employment from his first coming into the academy, was an operation to reduce human excrement to its original food, by separating the several parts, removing the tincture which it receives from the gall, making the ordure exhale, and scumming off the saliva." ¹³

The affinity of this diminution with a joke is clear. The description itself is uncouth and disgusting but soon we realise that the occupation is improbable, created to make people laugh and we smile after the first shock.

Another example of diminution which combines disgust with sexual matters:

"The maids of honour would often strip me naked from top to toe, and lay me at full length in their bosoms, wherewith I was much disgusted because to say the truth, a very offensive smell came from their skins [...]. They would strip themselves to the skin and put their smocks in my presence, while I was placed on their toilet directly before their naked bodies, which I am sure to me was very far from being a tempting sight, or from giving me any other emotions than those of horror and disgust: their skins appeared so coarse and uneven, so variously coloured, when I saw them near, with a mole here and there as broad as a trencher and hairs hanging from it thicker than packthreads; [...] Neither did they at all scruple, while I was by, discharge what they had drunk [...]" ¹⁴

In this diminution, the elements of joke and the comic are subordinated to the prevailing effect of abomination. There is a danger, that invective and diminution can be so direct and vituperative that, in the process of reducing an object to what is disgusting and loathsome, the author may lose control and guidance of the literary purpose. To avoid this danger and to increase the distance between the real and the ideal Swift developed the techniques of irony, which served to present a broad range of ideas, with unrivalled brilliance.

The ironist takes a disguise, says one thing while meaning something else and by disdaining to exert himself directly against an opponent he preserves a shield of safety and a status of superiority to what he attacks. Drapier, Bickerstaff, Gulliver are only a small fraction of Swift's assumed identities. The major kind of 'persona' is the mask of 'the detached observer'; the author assumes the role of a speaker who offers his advice from the point of view of a well informed and intelligent layman whose opinion reflects that of the generality of mankind.

¹³ *Gulliver's Travels* in *The Works of Jonathan Swift* edited by W. P. Nimmo, p. 174.

¹⁴ *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 151.

In *The Drapier's Letters* the hero is introduced:

"I was bred at a Free School where I acquired some little knowledge in the Latin tongue. I served my Apprenticeship in London and there set up for myself with good success [...] till I returned into this Kingdom and began to employ my thoughts in cultivating the Woolen Manufacture through all its Branches."¹⁵

In *Gulliver's Travels*

"My father had a little estate in Nottinghamshire; I was the third of five sons. He sent me to Emanuel College in Cambridge, at fourteen years old, where I resided close, and applied close to my studies."¹⁶

In *A Modest Proposal* the author of the proposal repeats the opinions of other people:

"[...] I have been informed by a principal gentleman in the county [...]"¹⁷, "I am assured by our merchants [...]"¹⁸, "[...] by a very knowing American of my acquaintance [...]"¹⁹ and "I profess, in my sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavouring this necessary work having no other motive than the public good of my country."²⁰

Having put on a disguise the author may begin to produce his ideas. Their range is broad: *The Battle of Books* or *A Full and True Account of the Battle fought Last Friday between the Ancient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library* — the Homeric conflict which takes place "on the plains of St. James's Library". *A Tale of a Tub*, a satire on the corruptions in religion and learning hid in the story of a father who leaves as a legacy to his three sons, Peter (The Roman Church), Martin (The Anglican), Jack (the dissenters) a coat apiece, with direction that on no account are the coats to be altered. Or *A Modest Proposal*; what gives to this essay its unique horror is the proposal itself: "infant's flesh will be in season throughout the year"²¹ so it may be an economic "saleable commodity."²² This 'idea' is based on the careful statistical analysis of the population and exact computation income derivable from the young and succulent children.

¹⁵ *Drapier's Letters*, p. 102.

¹⁶ *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 114.

¹⁷ *A Modest Proposal* in *The Poetical Works of Jonathan Swift* edited by Thomas Roscoe.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²¹ *Modest Proposal*, p. 17.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

And the richest source of ideas: *Gulliver's Travels, Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*. The imaginary voyages are Swift's chosen vehicle which gives him freedom to express his own views and ideas and allows him to offer the reader a comprehensive criticism of his own country, people, manners, morals and institutions, to transform the chaos of the day into the comic.

As Swift was chiefly concerned with the vicious limitations of mankind his primary task was to achieve the definition of man's nature. Lilliputians and giants serve to him to view man, Yahoos to pass his final judgement.

From the first perception of the first Lilliputian, the reader is invited to consider man and his littleness:

"I perceived it to be a human creature not six inches high"²³, their king "[...] is taller, by almost the breadth of my nail; than any of his court"²⁴, and "I put them all in my right hand, put five of them into my right pocket."²⁵

So from the very beginning we know that the Lilliputians are human beings and the reader sees through the nature of Lilliputians the nature of man and then through the events at the court the situation in England.

The situation in Brobdingnag is more complex. It is not only that Gulliver has shifted from a giant among the pigmies to a pigmy among the giants.²⁶ "Within the compass of Book II, there is a double perspective: the giants show man's defects enlarged at the same time that Gulliver reveals human littleness."²⁷ What is treated as naughtiness in human boys seems cruelty when a giant boy holds Gulliver high in the air by the legs²⁸ and the mischievous schoolboy aims a hazel nut at his head.²⁹ Through all holding up of human defects to view by means of enlargement, human insignificance is still before us in Gulliver's littleness, even intensified because it is combined with the memory of Lilliput.

The beings who inhabit the allegorical worlds that Gulliver visits are progressively less human from voyage to voyage. Gulliver and the reader alike are led through an increasing isolation of human traits in the first three books to the complete abstraction in the fourth. The

²³ *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁶ cf. a play by J. Broszkiewicz: *Dwie przygody Lemuela Gullivera*, „Dialog”, 1961, No. 8.

²⁷ E. Leyburn: *Satiric Allegory: Mirror of Man*, New Haven 1956, p. 83.

²⁸ *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Yahoos are the culmination of the symbolic pattern Swift has created for the corruptions of man. They embody in a crude animal form most of the vices (and supposed glories) of the civilized man. This animal allegory is used for portraying human irrationality and its horror and Gulliver sees that much of human glory is a more complex version of Yahoo brutality'. It is also an attempt to show to the corrupted people of the time, those human traits which the Yahoos lack.

But the voyages have also another aim: to escape from the reality, to create distance. The "Voyage to Lilliput" is an allegory of the political situation, the quarrel between Big- Endians and Small- Endians is that between Roman Catholics and Protestants, High- Heels are the Tories and Low- Heels are the Whigs; Blefuscu is France and Flimnap, the Treasurer, is Sir Robert Walpole, and green, red and blue ribands, to win which he showed so much agility are the Orders of the Thistle, the Bath and the Garter.

Thus the problems of the epoch are lessened, shown from a perspective, as mischiefs of children, converted downwards into humour and the comic.

IV

Invective, diminution, irony, allegory- these elements of satirical technique allow Swift to vent his deep anger against the human frailties. But in the pattern of these artistic devices there are interwoven jokes and ideas which are not expressions of Swift's propensity to shock the audience with his disgusting imagery and queer notions. They serve to create distance and detachment and then another dimension in which humour and the comic prevail over spite and scorn. If we are able to discern the role of jokes and ideas, the inferno picture of the times loses its blackness and horror. We leave behind a transient actuality and events of the eighteenth century and watch the world- wide problems which grow into abstract generalizations. Swift's world comedy is one more attempt to show the human condition -by means of a mean joke or a bold idea, in a grimace of grotesque.

I think that our epoch threatened with the terror of war and a vision of self- annihilation and dehumanization³⁰, calling in question beliefs and morality, may better understand and estimate Swift's art. This time without any ironic undertone we are facing the facts which he

³⁰ Cf. A. Huxley: *Brave New World*, E. Waugh: *The Loved One*.

showed as incipient nearly three centuries ago.³¹ But, owing to that, we may learn that our epoch is not unique: the times of changes and revaluations have always brought uneasiness, fear and determination. And there was always a writer who could express the strange, fearful and wonderful experiences of his times.

STRESZCZENIE

W niniejszym artykule dokonano analizy techniki satyrycznej Jonathana Swifta opierając się na poglądach Friedricha Dürrenmatta, dotyczących komedii. Ukazano, w jaki sposób i dzięki czemu konkretne środki artystyczne, użyte przez Swifta, dają w końcowym efekcie obraz komedii świata.

Dürrenmatt twierdzi, że komedia zakłada istnienie świata nie ukształtowanego, podlegającego przemianom, świata, który odchodzi. Zadaniem komedii jest stworzenie dystansu, oderwanie się od wydarzeń aktualnych. Osiąga to przy pomocy takich środków, jak tłusty „kawał” (którego przedmiotem są sprawy czysto płciowe i dlatego właśnie są one pozbawione wszelkiej postaci) oraz pomysł, akcja wymyślona, przekształcająca teraźniejszość w komizm i formującą chaos.

Skoro tragedia zakłada istnienie winy i odpowiedzialności, nam przystoi tylko komedia, bowiem nikt z nas nie jest winny i nikt za nic nie odpowiada. Nie znaczy to jednak, że komedia jest wyrazem zrezygnowania; jest ona raczej wyrazem postawy pozbawionej rozpacz i nastawionej na wytrwanie — twierdzi Dürrenmatt.

W następnej części artykułu przedstawiony jest obraz Anglii na przełomie XVII i XVIII w. Wzrost bogactwa narodowego, rozwój nauki, nowe spojrzenie na wszechświat sprawiają, że w Anglii wzrastają nastroje samozadowolenia i przekonanie o wyższości narodu. Na ten właśnie okres przypada twórczość Jonathana Swifta, który swój gorzki i głęboki gniew kieruje przeciwko dumie i iluzji potęgi ludzkiego umysłu. Gniew ten jest jednak zawsze kontrolowany ścisłymi zasadami techniki satyrycznej.

³¹ "I told him of invention [...] to make a certain powder, into a heap of which the smallest spark of fire falling would kindle the whole in a moment; although it were as big as a mountain, and make it all fly up in the air together with a noise and agitation greater than thunder. That a proper quantity of this powder rammed into a hollow tube would drive a ball of iron or lead with such violence and speed, as nothing was able to sustain its force."

Gulliver's Travels, p. 157.

Opierając się na materiale *A Tale of a Tub*, *The Drapier's Letters*, *The Battle of the Books*, *A Modest Proposal*, *Gulliver's Travels* zasadniczą część artykułu poświęcono szczegółowej analizie takich środków wyrazu, jak: inwektywa, pomniejszenie, maska, ironia i alegoria. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na rolę „kawałów” i pomysłów, które sprawiają, że zaciera się powierzchowne wrażenie nienawiści i pogardy, a na pierwszy plan wysuwają się komizm i humor. Kondycja ludzka ukazana jest w grymasie groteski, a aktualne problemy tracą swą ostrość i urastają do rangi abstrakcyjnych uogólnień. Pomaga nam to zrozumieć, że nasza epoka nie jest wyjątkowa; wszystkie okresy zmian i dewaluacji starych pojęć powodowały niepewność, strach i determinację, a zadaniem pisarza było i jest ukazywanie tych dziwnych i wspaniałych doświadczeń swoich czasów.

РЕЗЮМЕ

В статье анализируется сатирическая техника Джонатана Свифта на основе взглядов Фридриха Дюрренмата на сущность комедии. Автором делается попытка показать, каким образом и при помощи каких художественных средств Свифт создает в итоге образ „мировой комедии”.

По Дюрренмату исходным пунктом комедии является существование мира еще не сформировавшегося, подвергающегося изменениям. Цель комедии — создать отдаленность, отрыв от актуальных событий. В комедии достигается это при помощи таких средств, как „похабщина” (предмет которой — сексуальные явления). Замысел, вымышленные события, придают современности комизм и создают впечатление хаоса.

Если трагедия основывается на вине и ответственности, нам к лицу только комедия, ибо никто из нас ни в чем не виновен и никто ни за что не отвечает. Это однако не значит, что комедия выражает отречение; комедия выражает состояние, которое характеризуется стойкостью, которому чуждо отчаяние. Так утверждает Дюрренмат.

Далее, автор говорит об Англии на рубеже XVII и XVIII веков. Рост народного богатства, развитие науки, новый взгляд на вселенную становятся причиной того, что в Англии растет самодовольство и убеждение в превосходстве английского народа. Это был именно период творчества Джонатана Свифта, который задался целью обратить свой горький и глубокий гнев против высокомерия и мнимого могущества человеческого разума. Этот гнев всегда, тем не менее,

регулирується точними принципами сатиричної техніки. Опиняючись на *A Tale of a Tub*, *The Drapiers Letters*, *The Battle of the Books*, *A Modest Proposal* і *Gulliver's Travels* автор присвячує головну частину статті подібному аналізу таких художественних зобразувальних засобів як: інвектива, знищення, маска, іронія і аллегорія. Особливу увагу звертається на роль шутки і прибаутки, завдяки яким зникає враження — втім тільки зовнішнє — ненависті і презирства. На передній план висуваються комізм і юмор. Людське існування представлено в причудливій гримасі, актуальні проблеми втрачають свою гостроту і стають абстрактним узагальненням. Це допомагає зрозуміти, що сучасна нам епоха не є якоюсь-то особливою; кожен період змін і переоцінки старих понять викликав неуверенність, страх і отчаєння, а завданням письменника був і залишається показ цих дивних і вражаючих експериментів свого часу.