

## 5.5. When Lilliput Becomes All Too Real: Utopian and Dystopian Elements in László Rab's *Among the Hungarians: Gulliver's Umpteenth Voyage*

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### **Abstract**

The main theoretical basis of my paper is the critical assumption, supported by relevant literary examples, that utopias and dystopias have a tendency to make use of the means and methods of satire, with their commentary aimed at certain social and political oddities and shortcomings of the countries or communities they intend to depict and, ultimately, ridicule. Referring to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as a classic manifestation of this trend, in this essay, I analyse a Hungarian rewriting of the 1726 original, namely, László Rab's *Among the Hungarians: Gulliver's Umpteenth Voyage* (2005) as a book applying the speculative potential of the source to the context and climate of early twenty-first-century Hungary. I attempt to highlight and examine the segments of this short novel, which, besides providing political and social allusions permeated by witty irony, presents characters, groups of people, as well as entire ideologies in a way that implies an exaggerated, yet highly expressive version of Hungary. A utopia for some and a dystopia for others, *Among the Hungarians* makes for an all-too-real kind of Lilliput.

**Key words:** utopia, distopia, Hungarian literature, Gulliveriad

It is no secret that literary writings with utopian or dystopian content tend to take the form of social and political satire. In her essay, "The Concept of Utopia", Fátima Vieira notes that, when satire is concerned, "conspicuous criticism of the

real society's flaws is part of the nature of the genre" (Vieira, 2010: 8). Utilizing their own methods, voices, and style, representatives of utopian and dystopian fiction essentially aim to do the same: their goal is to shed light on certain shortcomings and faults in the texture of a given nation's or community's social, cultural, and even economic landscape. Characters travelling — or rather sent by their authors — to faraway, unknown, and mesmerizing yet often potentially dangerous places, representing an imaginary or would-be state based on actual countries, are destined to face and endure both physical and mental hardships caused by issues, disagreements, conflicts, rivalries, and contradictions within the political climate of the societies they visit.

Erika Gottlieb remarks of the dystopian subgenre that, "the tragic elements of the protagonist's fate notwithstanding, the overall strategies of the dystopian novel are those of political satire" (Gottlieb, 2001: 13). Thus, even though on the surface level the narrative of a dystopia draws attention to the adventures and mishaps experienced by the central character(s), some deeper meanings and connotations alluding to some, more often than not, negative social commentary should not be ignored either. Such an approach to this branch of speculative fiction might, in fact, be extended to utopian literature as well.

Besides Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), there is a widely known English-language prose work that may be a classic manifestation of how political, social, and literary satire works in texts related to utopian thinking. This work is efficiently identified and described by Gregory Claeys, who refers to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) as "the most important early satire of utopianism" (Claeys, 2017: 291). The journeys of the English surgeon and captain to multiple fictitious lands, or fictionalized versions of real-life locations provided plenty of source material for re-writings and adaptations of the Irish author's classic — collectively referred to as "Gulliveriads". These works, especially those based on and taking inspiration from Books I and IV, justify Nicole Pohl's view that *Gulliver's Travels* is permeated by some "unforgiving but witty political satire" (Pohl, 2010: 67). This is because they might include features that, besides making fun of characteristics frequently attributed to various countries and groups of people, make utopian and/or dystopian readings possible. In my paper, I analyse the ways in which a Hungarian Gulliveriad, László Rab's *A magyarok között: Gulliver sokadik utazása* (*Among the Hungarians: Gulliver's Umpteenth Voyage*) (2005) fills its ironic, exaggerated, yet highly expressive plot with something considerably more ominous and sinister than witty Swiftian humour. Such elements constantly lurk beneath (or even support) the social and political system — as well as its inhabitants' possible outlooks regarding both the present and the future — in this piece of all-too-realistic fiction.

Rab's short novel, *Among the Hungarians*, is part of the Hungarian tradition of re-writing, adapting, and imitating eighteenth-century English-language literary sources — of which Robinsonades might be the other main set of examples. It is not the first of its kind, since there are considerably earlier — and internationally better-known — representatives of the same trend: for instance, Frigyes Karinthy's *Voyage to Faremido* (1916) and *Voyage to Capillaria* (1921) are mentioned by both Claey's (2017: 336) and Gottlieb (2001: 289, n. 15), whereas Sándor Szathmári's *Kazohinia* (1935) is briefly referred to by Gottlieb (2001: 289, n. 15). However, while these works depict twentieth-century fantasies, Rab's story was written in and leads the reader to an early twenty-first-century context. Furthermore, unlike its predecessors, it uses the somewhat exaggerated version of an actual, real-life country as the setting for its social and political satire. Consequently, the Lilliput portrayed in *Among the Hungarians* manages to become all too real, as the book guides (all of) its traveller(s) to a central European country called Hungary.

On the surface, *Among the Hungarians* seems to follow the Swiftian recipe: a clueless and naive but good-hearted, optimistic, and ambitious Englishman, Jonathan Gulliver, visits Hungary in order to install his new invention, a computer programme meant to count votes during the upcoming parliamentary elections. While staying in our country, this lone traveller has to see and, even worse, experience all kinds of oddities and shenanigans — which more often than not promptly culminate in the most conspicuous manifestations of the Hungarian character. Like the protagonist of the source, this modern Gulliver is also “stranded” in a land unknown to him. Not only is he an outsider, but he is inherently alien — and further alienated: as he is physically hurt and taken advantage of. Meanwhile his attempts at acclimatization and adaptation prove to be futile. Another parallel between Rab's book and the original work might be drawn if the political milieu encountered by the central character is considered: both countries have two opposing parties, constantly at odds with each other for ridiculous reasons. Whereas Swift's story provides the Tramecksan and Slamecksan (i.e. high heels and low heels) to make fun of the then emerging parties of the British Parliament (i.e. the Tories and Whigs) (Swift, 2005: 42 and 293), in Rab's book, there is an ongoing conflict between the two political sides identified as “Hümmögők” and “Kaffogók” (40). Presumably based on two real-life parties, i.e. the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz), these two groups are named after the characteristic sounds they regularly produce as they speak. That is why Gabriella Hartvig (2009: 176) refers to them in English as the “humming” and “yapping” parties. Their satirical

role already implies the visiting Englishman's situation as a clumsy, hopeless giant tied down by the improbable nature of the system whose network he has been tangled up in.

Besides the striking similarities connecting *Among the Hungarians* to *Gulliver's Travels*, there are certain differences between the two that might intensify the speculative effect of the former. On the one hand, the reason — or rather purpose — behind Jonathan's travels is a mission leading him specifically to Hungary. Thus, while he feels lost and out of place in this foreign land just as much as his "ancestor" did in Lilliput, the location of his arrival is the intended destination all along. His task is to introduce a vote-counting programme called "Superparliament 2010" to the world of Hungarian politics (84). Although the calculating mechanisms behind this sci-fi software are never explained or elaborated on in detail, the presence of this factor highlights one of the most distinct characteristics of a modernized *Gulliveriad*. On the other hand, since the main setting of the plot is an actual country, references to social issues are considerably more overt, making the satirical tone of the book noticeably less subtle and more direct than that of *Gulliver's Travels* (Kvéder, 2022). However, besides the humour, irony, and wit included in the details criticizing, among other elements, Hungarian politicians, our health-care system, as well as the general — and rather stereotypical — mood of the members of this nation, Jonathan's enterprise and (mis)adventures might offer the possibility of a utopian and/or dystopian interpretation, too.

If Rab's book is looked at as a piece of speculative fiction, it might be worth asking whether the early twenty-first-century Hungary presented here is closer to a utopia or to a dystopia. The most expressive parts through which this question might be approached and examined in an efficient way are the characters encountered by, accompanying, and, most importantly, "educating" and "enlightening" the curious Englishman. All of the major Hungarian figures here are bold caricatures taken from reality: their outlooks on the world and their surroundings, as well as their attitudes towards their potential future are entirely determined by their rather one-dimensional moral codes, whose practical manifestations and outcomes visibly startle yet, at the same time, intrigue Jonathan. The decisions and life choices made by these people might be put on a scale, at either end of which the perspective of the most radical individuals can be found: at one end, the view of a person looking at Hungary as a utopia for his kind; at the other, the view of a group of people collectively considering it an oppressive dystopia.

At one extreme of the scale — Hungarian citizens' well-defined, crystallized opinions about the social and political system of their homeland — would be Károly (Charles), the sibling of Jonathan's love interest, Mary Gecse. Often

referred to as “Maribrader” (literally “Mary’s brother”), this village swindler intentionally misinforms and exploits foreigners — including Jonathan himself — without hesitation, takes pride in bribing official personnel, and blatantly blackmails the authorities as well. His creed is shared with the protagonist near the end of their brief encounter, when Charles plainly declares: “[Money] always slips from my hand to someone else’s pocket — quietly, so it does not rattle. Heard only by you and me. And if we keep slipping like this, cog wheels stay oiled all the time” (103).<sup>1</sup> Based on the activities — technically, crimes — practised and committed by him, it can be seen that Charles’s personal happiness and wellbeing are achieved through a depraved, tainted kind of social knowledge, which inevitably leads him to creating, maintaining, and living in a corrupted kind of welfare state: a utopia for utilitarian people like him.

At the other end of the scale — “measuring” the Hungarians visited by Jonathan from the point of view of utopias and dystopias — stands an entire “empire”. This self-proclaimed inner country is called Sámánia Nagyhenegség (“the Great Boasting/Bragging Dukedom of Shamania”). The Hungarian name is a pun played on the words *hercegség* “dukedom” and *henceg* “to boast/brag about something”. The secret, underground society, stumbled upon by Jonathan after signing up for a course about the history of Hungary for foreigners, is entirely made up of self-appointed, makeshift rebels. The vast majority happen to be elderly men, who all detest the current political system of the country. They religiously believe that the state of present-day, “normal” (i.e. post-Trianon) Hungary is the common enemy of its own people, since it ignores and even conceals the greatness of its ancestors, namely the Sumerians and the Huns (109). Their uncritical acceptance of such historical relations, as well as their desperate dreams and illusions regarding a glorious (inter)national past might be read as this cult’s unique way to cope with their society as they see it: a dystopia for the dissatisfied.

What connects the two above-mentioned, extreme responses to the social and political climate of early twenty-first-century Hungary is the power structure behind them. Despite one cheerfully exploiting it and the other deliriously trying to fight against it, the system in which both Charles and the members of Shamania have to (co-)exist remains the same state — which, thus, gains a double function as both a utopia and a dystopia. However, the factor that makes this particular literary depiction of Hungary exceptional, even among representatives of the Hungarian reception of Swiftian utopianism and dystopianism, is summarized by Hartvig: she notes that *Among the Hungarians* “expresses the author’s disillusionments with the post-transition period in Hungary, while it also ironizes the arbitrariness of the Swiftian impact” (Hartvig, 2009: 176). Therefore, not only is Rab’s take on the original story a remarkably witty reflection on the Irish clergyman’s most popular prose work, but it also focuses on an era that has

scarcely — if ever — been discussed in the form of a Gulliveriad before. Instead of the better-known Soviet totalitarianism, which arguably provides more subject matter for a piece of utopian and/or dystopian fiction, in *Among the Hungarians*, the most conspicuous shortcomings of contemporary democracy are discussed as the main sources of oppression and exploitation. In accordance with this general authorial attitude, at the end of the plot, the Superparliament 2010 software is never installed: attempts at introducing it to Hungarian politics are prevented by the pitfalls and intricacies of Hungarian politics itself — the kind of system that is a utopia for some and a dystopia for others.

Besides its content, even the front cover of *Among the Hungarians* appears to emphasize the double nature of the book: in the middle, the sketchy, distorted, shouting/yawning face with its tongue out (and the Hungarian tricolour on it); under it, the unstable, broken wheels. The row of almost identical figures standing in the background might evoke ambivalent feelings in the reader. This crude image — or rather collage of images — might be looked at as a truly disturbing portrayal of a gloomy dystopian world, but it might also be interpreted as a quick, tongue-in-cheek, yet thorough look at early twenty-first-century Hungary through the lenses of a disillusioned but good-humoured satirist, whose style combines elements of utopian, anti-utopian, and dystopian literature.

In conclusion, with the upcoming parliamentary elections in Hungary taking place on 3rd April 2022, possible literary manifestations of various prospects and predictions regarding the future of Hungary might gain some impetus, attention, and popularity. The relevance of Hungarian Gulliveriads, including László Rab's *Among the Hungarians* might be (re-)discovered as a result of general interest being drawn to speculations in literary forms, while the newfound enthusiasm for, and potential of, this subgenre might be utilized to create a new wave in the tradition of Jonathan Swift's witty, satirical utopianism and dystopianism, adapted to the bittersweet reality of present-day Hungary.

## Notes

1. "[A pénz] [a]z én kezemből mindig valaki másnak a zsebébe csúszik. Halkan, úgy, hogy ne csörögjön. Hogy csak mi ketten halljuk. És ha így csúsztatgatunk, olajozottan működnek a fogaskerekek" (my translation).

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