

A PALIMPSESTUOUS READING OF SILVIU PURCARETE'S 2012 PRODUCTION *CĂLĂTORIILE LUI GULLIVER*

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Abstract: *The paper discusses Silviu Purcarete's 2012 theatrical production Călătoriile lui Gulliver/Gulliver's Travels, staged at the "Radu Stanca" Theatre in Sibiu, Romania, as an appropriation of Swift's famous satire, which uses fragments from it and from three other of his satirical texts, brought together in a multi-layered palimpsestic intertext. This intertext makes use of the title story as a frame narrative for a series of "scenic exercises" that deconstruct and critically as well as artistically reinterpret the writer's misanthropic vision of the human condition, pointing to its philosophical relevance in a contemporary context and to the director's philosophical affinity with the Anglo-Irish satirist.*

Keywords: *appropriation, Gulliver's Travels, palimpsest, Silviu Purcărete, Jonathan Swift*

1. Introduction

The field of adaptation studies is, as Kamilla Elliott (2020: 8; 9) correctly notes in her latest book, *Theorizing Adaptation*, one that “benefits from a variety of theories, epistemologies, and subject matter” because it “inhabits and crosses many fields”, and as a consequence it borrows concepts that it reinterprets and redefines in an attempt to cover the wide variety of processes and types of aesthetic works that are labelled adaptations, whether in a strict or a wide sense of the word. The issue of fidelity, though never a major concern for reviewers and critics even in the early days of adaptation criticism in late 18th century (Elliott 2020: 17-20), has been addressed theoretically in a more consistent way since the early 2000s, mostly owing to influences from the structuralist and especially poststructuralist theories from the 1960s onwards (Stam 2000: 58). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's highly influential theory of intertextuality, introduced in her 1966 essay “Word, Dialogue and the Novel” (1986: 34-61), Roland Barthes (1981: 39) describes texts as “tissue[s] of past citations”. To poststructuralists, all texts, and the adapted text is no exception, are collages, tissues of extant material, more like textual palimpsests, with an elusive final meaning, which makes fidelity in the process of adaptation a “chimera” (Stam 2000: 57; 54).

If, from the perspective of the audience, the term adaptation is inevitably linked with that of fidelity, the term ‘appropriation’ is free of such associations, as Julie Sanders explains in her *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006). The thing that makes appropriation different from adaptation, in the narrow sense of the word, is that “the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process,” occurring “in a far less straightforward

context than is evident in making a film version of a [literary text].” (Sanders 2006: 26) What we see in adaptations and especially in appropriations is “a more sustained engagement between texts and their creators” (idem: 8), in which the interrelation between texts is intentional and possibly even political. The older text is revisited, reinterpreted and refashioned by the appropriator to put forth his or her agenda. In the process, the older text is deconstructed and then re-articulated, and, as this process is taking place, the older text’s own tissue of incorporated texts becomes part of the play of signification within the adaptation/appropriation, in a multi-layered textual structure, which is why the palimpsest becomes a perfect trope for the resulting aesthetic work. In the words of Linda Hutcheon (2006: 8), “adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.”

The French narratologist Gérard Genette’s also used the palimpsest metaphor in his 1982 book *Palimpsestes: Literature in the second degree*, where he explains it as follows:

On the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal, but allows to show through. It has been aptly said that pastiche and parody ‘designate literature as a palimpsest.’ This must be understood to apply more generally to every hypertext.” (Genette 1997: 399)

The hypertext, as defined by Genette, is the newer text, drawing on the older one, the hypotext, to which it is connected through a relationship of co-presence and interpretation. As he (ibid.) explains, “[t]he hypertext invites us to engage in a relational reading, the flavor of which, however perverse, may well be condensed in an adjective recently coined by Philippe LeJeune: a *palimpsestuous* reading. ... [O]ne who really loves texts must wish from time to time to love (at least) two together.” On a similar note, Linda Hutcheon (2006: 21) concludes that “[palimpsestic] adaptations ... are directly and openly connected to recognizable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity, but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity.”

The palimpsest is an appropriate visual metaphor in adaptation studies, because the very definition of the palimpsest indicates the visibility of the overlapping text. In the case of an adaptation/appropriation, the co-presence of selected fragments from the earlier text(s) helps create new meanings through the relations created between old and new “writing” and the complex discursive dialogue that is established. Appropriators like Silviu Purcărete reinterpret, recycle older material because it is relevant, meaningful, and important for their own political or artistic agenda, inviting the audience to perform a *palimpsestuous* reading.

This palimpsestic quality of Purcărete’s production is revealed to the audience in the form of “scenic exercises,” as the poster advertises, relying on fragments from *Gulliver’s Travels* and three other Swiftian texts, which address similar or complementary issues related to the human condition, the main interest of the Anglo-Irish author. The audience is invited to identify the citations incorporated in the text of the play and to also find the rationale for the way in which they are collated, rearranged, given new interpretations through scenes that rely on physical and visual theatre strategies to tell stories. Even without correctly correlating text and dramatic action, the audience can experience these “scenic

exercises” and the evocative power of the strong, often grotesque and nightmarish, but intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging visuals of the performance.

In the following pages, Silviu Purcărete’s production *Călătoriile lui Gulliver/Gulliver’s Travels* (2012) will be the subject of a *palimpsestuous* reading that will be carried out focusing on the complex processes at work in the process of appropriation, resulting in a dramatic text and a theatrical performance with a pronounced palimpsestic quality and, equally important, on the ways in which the resulting work reinterprets for us the four texts it cites, making them relevant for a contemporary audience.

2. Silviu Purcărete’s *Călătoriile lui Gulliver/Gulliver’s Travels* (2012)

This production of the “Radu Stanca” National Theatre of Sibiu, first performed at the Sibiu International Theatre Festival in 2012, and winner of the “Herald Angel” Award at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival that same year, had a relatively short performance life. In all fairness, although the critically acclaimed Romanian director himself, known at home and abroad for his distinctive artistic style and unconventional approach to the literary texts he adapts for the stage, did not advertise his *Gulliver’s Travels* as a straightforward adaptation, it certainly is a challenging production for those not familiar enough with Swift’s satirical work, his misanthropic vision, and Purcărete’s theatrical style. As I will explain in the following pages, it is the very palimpsestic quality of his dramatic “text” that makes it both cryptic for larger audiences and a real treat for those prepared to perform a *palimpsestuous* reading that will reveal all the textual layers in the play and their interconnectedness. The appropriation is organized into a Prologue, an Epilogue, and twelve scenes, based on eight fragments from *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) – particularly Book IV (5) and Book III (3), with echoes of Books I and II, suggested through visual means only (the two shadow play scenes of the piece) – and the other four scenes are based on passages from *A Modest Proposal* (1729), “A Beautiful Nymph Going to Bed” (1731), and “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.” (1731), all made to create an organic dramatic work by the creative team: Silviu Purcărete (director), Crista Bilciu (translator and adapter of the fragments), Dragoș Buhagiar (scenographer), and the actors.

The play opens with an Epilogue that transports us directly into the world of Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift’s darkest and most sceptical meditation on human nature. What is interesting here is that Purcărete reveals from the onset that, like Swift, he too believes the human being to be both a Houyhnhnm and a Yahoo: his stage is filled with women dressed in tight spandex suits, moving about like horses in an upright position, neighing and circling the Swiftian character – a man looking like the Dean of St. Patrick himself – performing a kind of mating ritual that echoes Gulliver’s description in Book IV of how he was attacked by a female Yahoo in heat. Their Yahoo nature is further reflected in their violent, brutal nature: the Epilogue concludes with these creatures attacking the man, stealing his wig and the leather-bound book he was holding, one of them managing to rip off pages from it. They are all dispersed by some exterminators/hospital orderlies (the same costumes being used for scenes set in a hospital/asylum later on), who drag the collapsed man off stage. His place is taken by a boy (not older than 10) riding a wooden horse tricycle, a reference to Swift’s Houyhnhnms. As the Boy starts reading from the ripped pages, we recognise the passage in which Gulliver describes his departure from the land of the Houyhnhnms, which is the trigger for his mental collapse upon his return to England.

The entire production, in fact, is built around the idea of mental collapse accompanied by physical decay caused by illness, old age, or a life of depravity, moral decay, and the beastliness of humankind, all key themes in *Gulliver's Travels*, the text Purcărete chooses to foreground as his main source. The hospital/asylum in which the first scenes are set is not a place of healing and recovery, but a setting in which the abandoned individual becomes a prisoner of his own phantasmagorical, surreal, strange, confused and confusing exploration of human experience, as suggested to the Romanian director by what we know about Swift's final years, when, suffering from an incapacitating medical condition – the Ménière Syndrome – the author was deemed “of unsound mind and memory and not capable of taking care of his own person and fortune” (Smith 2012: 202), tormented by pain and possibly by his own distorted memories and perceptions of reality. This interpretation is supported by three elements of the appropriation: the overall dark, pessimistic, disturbing mood of the entire production, where the few comic interludes only provide the audience with an opportunity to prepare for yet another thought-provoking scene; the nightmarish quality of most scenes, where the grotesque and the darkly farcical seem the dominant modes; and finally the Swiftian character introduced in the Prologue as the Dean, and then as Gulliver – a patient in the care of his wife and the hospital staff. Later, against the background of lines 80-90 of “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.” where Swift talks about his own mental illness as if from the perspective of others, the character becomes the Dean again until, in the Epilogue, the line between the fictional character and his author is completely erased and the two become one.

Purcărete, like Claude Rawson (2014), sees beyond Swift's playful initial self-effacing strategy of indicating Lemuel Gulliver as the true author of his travel narrative, and he creates his Swiftian character as a purposely ambiguous one, as Swift himself had done when, in the book frontispieces of the 1735 edition of his *Works*, Gulliver's and Swift's portraits are so similar as to suggest that they might be one and the same person, almost as if the author had finally agreed to confess to the “authorial irony” (Rawson 2014: 138) in *Gulliver's Travels* where, in the constant changes of the narrative voice, one can get a glimpse of the author himself.

As Purcărete also likes to play with his audience, the Gulliver/Swift persona acquires another dimension through the character of the Boy, on stage for most of the 90 minutes of the performance, as a silent, innocent witness to the spectacle of human sinfulness, moral, mental, and physical decay presented before us all. Though we first identify him with the Houyhnhnms, as suggested by his horse-shaped tricycle, his pristine white shirt, and reserved manner while watching the human spectacle unfolding before him, he is also a symbol of our (Gulliver's/Swift's) innocence and idealism, soon to be crushed and replaced by disappointment and scepticism in man's superiority to the animal species. It is in the Boy's voice that we hear the Houyhnhnms' pronouncement on Gulliver and the human race, ending in what sounds like a sentence: “We ask you to leave. Go back to your Yahoos where you belong! You are what you are...” And then, as the Boy climbs on the old man's lap, cuddling there, becoming one and the same person, the audience understands that the Swiftian character becomes the Dean himself, his childish innocence, purity, naivety now deeply buried in a mind trapped in a helpless, old body, defeated and incapable of seeing man as anything but a creature whose existence is dominated and limited by its base instinctual nature, being prone to self-corruption and brutish behaviour, as demonstrated in all the situations presented to us in this production.

The Yahooesque, the brutish quality of the human being is a common theme in various scenes in this production. Take, for instance, the puppet show, a rewriting of a passage on the beastly lustfulness of Yahoo females in Book IV, chapter VII, and also a nod to an earlier scene inspired by “Beautiful Nymph Going to Bed”, both featuring prostitutes at their worst. They are represented as half puppet-half human women, whose physical deformity is appropriately matched by their moral corruption. Although the scene is farcical, incorporating elements of slapstick comedy, animal sounds, catfight gestures, false deaths (the client stabs the prostitute who has just serviced him, but she comes back to life and shoots him, dies again only to miraculously come back to life with a hysterical laughter), and a final Moulin Rouge end-of-performance number suggesting that it’s all been a show, this is only a dramatic strategy mimicking the entertaining quality of certain passages in *Gulliver’s Travels*, equally ironic in Swift’s work.

The scene based on lines from “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” uses the cabaret format in a much darker mode, and the human body is again used as a vehicle for satire. The poem is, in brief, Swift’s riff on the theme of moral and physical decay as portrayed by an old, decrepit and absurdly coquettish and delusional prostitute, whose disgusting body is gradually revealed as she removes her pestilent clothes and prosthetics, including artificial hair, a “crystal eye”, eyebrows made of a mouse’s hide, or her false teeth (l. 10-13; 19-20). At first sight, Gulliver’s horror at describing the apish, disgusting nakedness of the Yahoos is echoed in the description of this old prostitute, whose life of servitude to the appetites of men has certainly maimed her body and spirit.

Purcărete’s prostitute is replaced by a bearded male cross-dresser, a victim of abuse and, most likely, rape. He is further abused by two female cross-dressers looking like cabaret characters, who perform some lines from Swift’s poem, with gestures that visually translate the prostitute’s activities, the climax of the scene being when the text suggests that even members of the clergy use her services, at which point one of the female characters performs a symbolic anal penetration with her cane on the poor prostitute. The human spectacle before us is shocking, visceral, and emotionally disturbing, especially as the visual overpowers the textual and the implied in Swifts’ text becomes inescapably concrete. In a world where God seems absent (the only time He is represented in the play being as a detached, cynical puppet-master playing with anthropomorphic figurines whose body movements are mirrored by those of terrified human beings on stage), the image of Christ becomes a perverted representation of the victim and of what is innocent, pure, and beautiful in man. Corinna, the bearded cross-dresser, freezes in a Christ-on-the-cross posture, his naked torso and limbs having been covered in a lacquer that gives them a lustre reminiscent of that of the Christ statues above altars. Nothing remains sacred or pure in a world so unhinged and with no moral compass as that represented by Swift and Purcărete, whose art derives from the same kind of misanthropic vision.

The gender reversal in the scene (male victim, female abusers) presents human sinfulness and viciousness as universal features, the line between oppressor and the oppressed being fluid and relative on context. Purcărete appears to share Swift’s understanding of the human condition in social, political, and economic contexts, in which the mighty subdue, exploit and, albeit in hardly noticeable structures of oppression, enslave the poor, the needy, or the weak. Ann Cline Kelley (1976: 846), taking her cues from Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*, writes that Swift sees a relationship between “external enslavement and internal debasement”,

the latter being enforced through starvation and an inhumane treatment. And the question is, “Who is the brute then – the enslaver or the enslaved?” (idem: 847)

Purcărete dramatises this volatility of power relations and the causes and consequences of the dehumanisation of the human being in two scenes, the former a transposition of the most shocking passage in *A Modest Proposal*, the latter a personal contribution to Swift’s satire in the form of a long scene set in a contemporary context – a reminder that the true essence of Man has not changed in the course of history. In the former scene, the Irish poor of Swift’s satire are represented by women carrying even two or three babies at once in baskets or wheelbarrows, or simply in their arms and bellies; one woman even gives birth before our eyes and has her baby immediately taken away by people looking like hospital orderlies. It’s a financial transaction, and each woman, having received her money, walks away relieved, not before performing a brief dance routine, both joyous and absurd. A man dressed as a chef comes in and chooses a baby from the piles on what looks like a row of mortician’s tables, has the baby weighed and then plunges a hammer in its skull, removing a piece of the baby’s flesh. He will sear that on a grill, while in the background we hear a passage from *A Modest Proposal* (the paragraph about the various dishes that can be made from baby flesh) being read by the Boy, who has been on the stage the whole time. To translate Swift’s reification of imperialist subjugation and exploitation of the Irish as cannibalism, the Romanian director has the chef actually taste and then offer the Boy a plate of freshly cooked baby flesh, which the Boy eats without flinching. Are we to interpret this as a direct accusation for all of us who, like the Boy, remain silent witnesses in the face of even the most atrocious crimes, as Swift’s contemporaries did? Out of naivety, passivity, cowardice, shock, fear, all of these together? Possibly so. And this complicity is dehumanising, as suggested by the end of the scene, where two giant rats, disgusting disease-spreading animals, appear on stage, perform a brief mating act, and then take the plate with the grilled baby flesh from the Boy’s hands and fall dead to the ground as soon as they eat it. “Man differs more than Man, than Man from Beast” (Rochester qtd. in Smith 2012: 198-199), Swift’s sub-text in both *Gulliver’s Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, becomes here only a pale reflection of the basest of human behaviour towards fellow human beings, as rats are more sensitive to human flesh than Man is.

The second scene capitalising on this idea of the beastliness of man focuses on the dehumanisation of modern man in a capitalist system, which exploits man’s gluttony, violent impulses and survival instinct. The modern Yahoos (the exploited) are part of a regimented society, being trapped in a thoughtless routine suggested here by the actors’ marching across the stage, in sync, with expressionless faces and no sense of direction. Their marching is interrupted by the Boy, who is curious to see what would happen if he placed an obstacle (an anthropomorphic figurine, metonymical of a change in leadership within this tightly controlled society) in front of the man leading the procession. Unable to advance, they bump into one another as if they were goods on a production line and the machine malfunctioned. The same man-as-part-of-a-machine imagery appears later, when the modern Yahoos sing a choral piece to Shaun Davey’s repetitive melodic line and they move like pistons in a running engine. It’s all part of a performance to please their new master – the Boy – an attempt that fails and plunges them into chaos. They disappear behind a sofa, from where they emerge crawling and growling, gradually learning to walk on their two feet like apes. They start fighting one another and the victims have their organs removed in the most

brutish way. Their bloodthirst quenched, the now naked Yahoos retrieve their suitcases and start marching again, but not before one of them performs another gratuitous destructive act, crushing several of the paper ships with which the Boy has been playing. The victim cannot resist the temptation to become an aggressor, even if only for the sake of finding out what happens.

3. Conclusion

A *palimpsestuous* reading, like the one performed in the pages above, is never complete. Much remains to be said about such a complex production relying on visual and physical theatre more than on text, which imposes a description of action, *mise-en-scène* and performance for each scene analysed. Also interesting for further analysis would be how Books I and II of *Gulliver's Travels* are included in the production in two instances of shadow play only, one representing the relativity and volatility of power relations, enacted by human silhouettes metamorphosing into threatening giants or shrewd midgets, the other evoking characters from the entire book, presenting them like shadows from another world – an image possibly suggested by Gulliver's encounter with the ghosts of famous people from antiquity in Book III. Or the scene where physical distortion, a key literary device in *Gulliver's Travels*, is paired up with Swift's views on the perverse nature of exploitation (presented as a felicitous solution to poverty in *A Modest Proposal*) and the result is one of the most confusing yet viscerally powerful theatrical experiences of the production, which seems built around the idea of exploitation of patients by doctors, as suggested by the medical imagery in the *mise-en-scène*.

Like Swift, his predecessor of almost three hundred years, Silviu Purcărete is a sceptic thinker who cannot avoid exploring the darker recesses of the human soul and the most repugnant manifestations of human behaviour. The Romanian artist made no secret of his affinity with the Anglo-Irish writer and his intentional appropriation of his predecessor's work. To quote the director, “[m]y performance borrows only the title of Swift's novel and is, in fact, an independent production inspired by the book... [it] is more like a post-mortem dream: pessimistic and sad.” (qtd. in Orr 2012). In truth, one feels that much of the entertaining quality of Swift's satires is lost in translation. With few comic interludes and a haunting musical score, this production feels less Swiftian and more like a theatrical philosophical essay in which the source texts are visible, but their meaning is altered through a process of revisionist interpretation, also deriving from the criteria for selection and the rearrangement of fragments selected for this theatrical collage. Swift's most disturbing conclusions on human nature and life are only passages in highly imaginative fantastic stories in *Gulliver's Travels*, carefully wrapped in entertaining, rhetorical masterpieces where the reader's pleasure derives both from the writer's penmanship and his rich, vivid imagination. Purcărete's production, with only 90 minutes to experience a visually and conceptually rich palimpsestic theatrical “text,” feels like a crash course in Swiftian misanthropy more than anything else. It is also an emblematic production for Purcărete as appropriator, as his aim is never to be loyal to his sources, but rather to forge his own creation through “powerful theatrical images that condense drama into a syncretic and imaginative experience that has the ambition to exalt the senses and challenge the mind.” (Komporaly 2017: 88) It is great theatre, true art and it

does what any appropriation should aim to do: it forces us to reread, to reconsider and to revalue Swift's satires by forcing us to see them through the lenses of theatre.

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