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Metaliterary Parody in *The Unfortunate Traveller* and *Ulysses*

ANTONIO BALLESTEROS GONZÁLEZ
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

“It is a truth universally acknowledged” (punning on the ironical beginning of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*) that every book—every literary work—speaks about books. Intuitively, such formulation is prior to the coinage and development of the notion of intertextuality, as this concept was delimited by Julia Kristeva. It is certain, nevertheless, that some works gather in a more exhaustive form the great quantity of influences coming from previous literary manifestations. The example of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is renowned in this respect, turning itself into a wonder of intertextuality, into a crucible of resources, and, in so doing, reaching beyond what is purely narrative, transcending the fragile and obsolete barriers of genre.¹

Taking as its main model Homer’s *Odyssey*—whose characters, motifs and events help Joyce to establish magnificently the structural parameters between which the thematic anecdote which frames the narrative is located—*Ulysses* develops in an ironic transposition some episodes taken from the Greek epic, this curiously being the first known literary exponent ever in history (together with the *Iliad* and Hesiod’s *Theogonia*), and being then placed at the origin of any textual reference and recurrence.

The outcome is a new degrading, though epic, vision (no matter how paradoxical it may seem) of the intrinsic complexity of the human being. What is susceptible to ridicule at the beginning ends up by reaching greatness of ample dimensions, while what appears to be significant and important turns itself in the end into an empty trifle. The result is a faithful reflection of the human condition. As Harry Levin stated, Joyce’s irony was double-edged, and it comes back to the source of its tenderness. The immediate effect of this method is to lower his characters to the level of mock-heroic absurdity. Another more contradictory effect would be that of amplifying them, to convert their unimportant habits into profound rites, giving universal significance to smaller details. Quoting Thomas Hardy, Levin affirms that the function of the poet or the novelist is to show the lowness of the most beautiful things and the beauty of the lowest.²

In this respect—and obviously taking into account the many differences—Joyce’s method in *Ulysses* is thus not too far from Valle Inclán’s “esperpentos” (*Luces de Bohemia* being the best example), where characters and situations are contemplated “from above,” with a distorted and burlesque purpose. The effect achieved uses demystification to produce in the addressee, in a circular scheme, the sensation that the human being is contradictory, underlining at the same time the epic greatness of insignificance.

However, the *Odyssey*—together with other texts to which Joyce’s narrative refers—simply constitutes a point of departure for the writer’s parodic transposition. *Ulysses* is not on the whole an epic work, quite on the contrary. As Levin says, Joyce, always elusive as far as action was

concerned, avoids the heroic.³ The Irish author in fact expurgates, re-elaborates the text in order to emphasize by means of irony the abused—and at the same time noble—condition of the human being. If the heroic can be observed in *Ulysses*, the impression one gets is that of what is denominated “mock-heroic” in English, an approach whose ultimate model is located in the satire, which has born fruits throughout the literary history of England, with the original influence of Rabelais, Cervantes and the Spanish picaresque novel: the clearest examples in this respect—apart from *The Unfortunate Traveller*, as will be later shown—would be certain works of Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and *Ulysses*’ forerunner, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*.

The mock-heroic dimension of the Joycean text, in the amazing erudition of the artist, reaches beyond the limits of the mythological in order to reach the metaliterary parody, in which it is literature itself that constitutes the primary pretext to fable. The eleventh thematic part in *Ulysses*—the one corresponding to the Homeric episode of the “Oxen of the Sun”—reveals, beneath the mere anecdote of Mrs. Nina Purefoy’s childbirth, a parodic taxonomy of prose discourse imitating those of the great classics of England’s literary trajectory, in an attempt to relate the development of the embryo with English prose. There are imitations in chronological order of the style of Mandeville, Malory, Bunyan, Defoe, Swift, Sterne, Addison, Goldsmith, Junius, Gibbon, Walpole, Lamb, DeQuincey, Landor, Macaulay, scientific treatises of the first part of the nineteenth century, Dickens, Thackeray and Carlyle, finishing up with a demonstration of American slang.⁴ The burlesque effect is even more surprising when we observe that it is applied to an apparently banal context and to equally anti-heroic characters, including Leopold Bloom (Odysseus) and Stephen Dedalus (Telemachus), two of the doubles of Joyce himself, who, together with other characters, are waiting for the outcome of the childbirth. This specific episode is the one which will best illustrate our subsequent comparison with *The Unfortunate Traveller*.

Metaliterary parody is not, undoubtedly, the exclusive dominion of the Irish writer. As we pinpointed before, every book speaks about books. However, what deserves emphasis is the originality, the new method that Joyce introduces in order to develop his parody, in contrast with the nineteenth-century narrative tradition in English literature, whose background is ultimately different: the reader of *Ulysses* is conscious that Joyce is constantly playing with other texts to which the narrative leads. The playful recreation of such models is nearly always manifested on the rhetorical level by the hyperbole: the vision that Joyce shows is above all exaggerated and amplified. The plot does not matter—at least if we conceive this term from a traditional perspective: it is the pretext that a more or less normal situation creates the one which—emphasized by hyperbolic parody—turns itself into a majestic linguistic development by means of Joyce’s use of irony. According to G. W. Stonier, *Ulysses* shocks the reader because of

the amazing use of parody. Joyce uses a mixture of parody and pastiche in order to achieve effects of his own, and not only the Oxford Book of English prose, but newspapers, novelettes, scientific reports, advertisements are echoed ironically to suit the scene. The famous chapter on parodies (“The Oxen of the Sun”) . . . is an extraordinary fantasia, beginning with *Beowulf* and ending with polyglot slang, in which the language at times obliterates the characters and their setting.⁵

The realist canon of a great part of twentieth-century literary works in England (with the exception of the complex phenomenon of the genre of fantasy, running parallel with the other parameter and sometimes intersecting with it) led narratives to stages in which hyperbolic parody was avoided in favour of realism. However, even before this manipulation of narrative materials took place, one could cite examples of novelists using methods and techniques which, despite the chronological lapse, are close approximations of the purpose which Joyce sublimates and turns into climatic. We have already alluded to the narrative current in which *Ulysses* is inserted, the obvious exponents in England being Fielding and Sterne, both writing in the second half of the eighteenth century. But we can go still further back in the history of English prose, paying attention to the first vernacular instances in the Elizabethan period. The example we are going to take into account in this brief study is Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, published in 1594.⁶

This is, without any doubt, a very difficult book to classify, given that it represents the incipient incursion in prose narrative of a pamphleteer who was determined to live by the pen in the global context of the Renaissance. This work, the prodigy of what Latin rhetoricians called *amplificatio*, verifies the imprint of several influences like the Spanish picaresque novel—the debt with respect to *Lazarillo de Tormes* has been discussed to the point of satiation—or Elizabethan drama, at the same time that the digressive method intuited in *The Unfortunate Traveller* can be much better seen in more complex and satisfactory works as *Don Quijote*. There is nothing really radical or surprising about our choice of this “lesser” narrative as a work comparable with *Ulysses* as far as the use of metaliterary parody is concerned: there are many characteristics which relate both narratives, no matter how many differences there can be between each other.

To begin with, one of those shared features would be the travel motif as the structure: *The Unfortunate Traveller*—the title is explicit, though not wholly convincing—contains the sequence of the different journeys that Jack Wilton—the narrator and main character of the fragmentary episodes conforming the plot—carries out throughout a part of Renaissance Europe, mostly Italy, so much loved and hated by Elizabethan individuals. At the same time, these “outer” travels are counterpointed by the inner journey that *Ulysses* shows by means of its main characters, the surface structure being based on the pilgrimage throughout Dublin which is ironically related to the comings and goings of Odysseus along the Mediterranean landscapes. However, the titles of neither work really justify reader expectations, for Jack Wilton's or Leopold Bloom's travels are simple pretexts to dive into wider issues.

Another point of union is propitiated by the fondness for the grotesque, in some occasions almost approaching the truculent, a feature that has undoubtedly to do with metaliterary parody. As far as Nashe is concerned, this bloodthirstiness is connected with Elizabethan tragedy, to which this writer devoted some of his literary efforts alone and in collaboration.

A further nexus—unconscious with regards to Nashe, wholly immersed in the habits and prejudices of his times—is constituted by the views on the Jewish race (Leopold Bloom comes from a Semitic origin, the same as some of the characters in *The Unfortunate Traveller*) as a paradigm of otherness, as those who live permanently exiled (“wandering”) and despised by many of their fellow human beings. Nashe's work acquires a deeply anti-Semitic tone, a secular problem that Joyce tackles with a great feeling of human solidarity: *Ulysses* is never the tragedy of a ridiculous man, no matter how many defects Bloom may have.

To summarize, let us emphasize the shared elements: the techniques and methods that Thomas Nashe foresees and Joyce—using his vast literary culture—sublimates and turns into narrative quintessence. The most remarkable feature in *The Unfortunate Traveller* concerning its incursions in the field of metaliterary parody is underlined by several causes: the digressive structure of the text, the function of Jack Wilton as a “literary critic” and *alter ego* of the author—subordinated to the former epigraph, understanding the literary struggle as one of the factors related to the Elizabethan social circles with which he interacted—and the fragmentary composition, in the form of a “pastiche” or “collage,” of the different elements which make up the narrative action.

The Unfortunate Traveller does not show a discursive unity in its unquiet shift of thematic perspective. It is only by means of the fading figure of the narrator, Jack Wilton, that the reader can trust a certain point of reference. The plot of the novel—which breaks with some conventions of the picaresque genre—is iteratively interrupted. The generic—or subgeneric—indeterminacy of the narrative (which contains elements of historical novel, travel book, anti-romance, satire, jest book, etc.) is emphasized by the great amount of digressions appearing in its narrative universe. The possibly deliberate anachronism helps to entangle the historical events of the narrative.

But everything in *The Unfortunate Traveller* is a pretext to speak about literature by means of a literary discourse, undertaking such a task from a parodic perspective. Wilton’s first digression contains some criticism on artificial language, so fashionable at the Elizabethan Court because of the influence of *euphuism*, a style that Joyce also parodies in *Ulysses*. The consequent interruptions provide the text with the fragmentary characteristics of *pastiche*, not far removed—despite their being so incipient—from some techniques used by the Irish writer in his works: there appear in *The Unfortunate Traveller* more or less bitter criticism and opinions against a wide range of contemporary genres of the Elizabethan period, and Nashe always shows—the same as Joyce—a chameleon-like adaptation of his language to that of the literary register he is parodying.

Thus, his satire⁷ centers on the use of courtly love conventions and the reiterative Petrarchan fashion, given that the Earl of Surrey—one of the fictional characters in Nashe’s narrative—together with Thomas Wyatt was one of the introducers of the sonnet in England; there is also an attack on the epigones of the use of Ciceronian rhetoric (Gabriel Harvey among them), so much *in vogue* in sixteenth-century universities; we can also find a parodic re-writing of the Italian *novella*, so much liked by Elizabethan readers, as its influence on Shakespeare proves; there is a burlesque of the pastoral genre, anticipating bitter criticism on the corruption of popish Rome; the thematic complication taking place whilst the protagonist goes to and fro throughout Italy, and xenophobic and anti-Semitic feelings, are related to the Senecian sensationalism of the Elizabethan tragedy, mostly the revenge play, whose truculent endings are parodied by Nashe in a mixture of horror and blood-thirsty humour; the digression of nationalist overtones concerning the disadvantages of travelling through different European countries (France, Spain, Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands are mercilessly criticized) adapts the style of Robert Ascham in *The Schoolmaster*, one of the most influential ideological works in the British Renaissance.

To all these examples of metaliterary parody should be added a moral environment with Protestant features which is connected with oral⁸ and written religious literature of the period, at the same time that there is iterative emphasis on the necessity to reach a clear and understandable

rhetorical ideal. That is to say, Nashe's contemporary stylistic "enemy" is the euphuism shown in the courtly favourite written by John Lyly, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578).

On the other hand, the transgression of some Puritan norms as comprehending metaliterary parody appears as well in the use of scatological elements and sexual puns, another factor intertextually related to Joyce's *Ulysses*. A very witty example of this is the sonnet that Surrey supposedly devotes to his beloved Geraldine in *The Unfortunate Traveller* (TUT 261).

Another interesting feature in our comparison would be the use of languages other than English, an essential point when it comes to understanding the parodic transposition that both Nashe and Joyce utilize in the works we are commenting on here. The function of Latin in this respect is extremely significant, for it is the language of universal classical knowledge and the Church—one of the targets of Nashe's and Joycean attacks. However, when it is inadequately used, Latin is also the language of pedantry and superficial culture.⁹ Moreover, building on Nashe's model and many others, Joyce uses languages like classical Greek, French, Italian, German, etc. together with different registers and slangs of the English language in order to underline his metaliterary parody.

Another important factor when it comes to providing a framework to comprise the use of metaliterary parody is the narrator-reader relationship, that both Nashe and Joyce—once again with the intermediate exponents of Swift, Fielding and Sterne—exploit with all its consequences. Jack Wilton addresses the reader once and again, aiming to sustain a dialogue, however true it is that such an attempt is frequently veiled by the excessive use of the *captatio benevolentiae*. In "The Oxen of the Sun" episode, Joyce takes possession of such an old technique, precisely parodying Elizabethan writings and those pertaining to the eclosion of the novel genre in the context of capitalistic expansion of the second half of the Age of Reason.

As a corollary to our fragmentary arguments, we shall conclude by pointing out that, for the use of parodic metaliterary elements, Joyce starts from the Enlightenment narrative tradition, which is also indebted in England to former examples, with *Don Quijote* as the most evident recurring element. Such current was more or less interrupted in the field of the novel by the onset of realism and naturalism, whose parodic forms do not include the impressionistic technique of the *collage*, the *pastiche*, or the flowing digression, and the modern novel has to wait for a writer like Joyce—in the second decade of the twentieth century—to renovate the old conventions suggested, increasing their literary power by means of new formulas.

Therefore, inside the evolutive chain of English literature—if such a concept can be admitted—the methods of parodic metaliterary writing find a former echo in incipient works in the field of prose literature. One of these forerunners is *The Unfortunate Traveller*, which, by means of Renaissance *amplificatio*—collected from the classical and medieval rhetorical tradition—foresees a wide range of narrative possibilities that would be later rejected or regenerated. From this perspective, Joyce, as the writer of *Ulysses*, is located nearer Nashe, Swift, Fielding or Sterne rather than his immediate Victorian predecessors.

Appendix

Examples of several meta-literary parodic conventions in *The Unfortunate Traveller* and *Ulysses*. Pages in brackets correspond to the editions mentioned in end notes.

- *Parodic use of literary discourse*: (a) Alliterative style of Middle English: "Before born babe bliss had. Within womb won he worship" (U 382); (b) Parody of euphuism: "Her high exalted sunbeams have set the phoenix nest of my breast on fire, and I myself have brought Arabian spiceries of sweet passions and praises to furnish out the funeral flame of my folly" (TUT 238); (c) Parody of scientific jargon: "This would be tantamount to a cooperation (one of nature's favourite devices) between the *nissus formativus* of the nemasperm on the one hand and on the other a happily chosen position, *succubitus felix*, of the passive element" (U 415); (d) Parody of hyperbolic Ciceronian rhetoric: "A thousand *quemadmodums* and *quapropters* he came over him with. Every sentence he concluded with *esse posse videatur*" (TUT 241)
- *Use of Latin with burlesque purpose, connected with literary allusions*: (e) "Bring a stranger within my tower it will go hard but thou wilt have the second-best bed. *Orate, fratres, pro memetipso*. And all the people shall say, Amen" (U 390); there is in the first sentence a parodic reference to Shakespeare's will; (f) "Yet nevertheless, since it is Italy, my native country, you are so desirous to see, I am the more willing to make my will yours. Aye, *pete Italian*, go and seek Italy with Aeneas, but be more true than Aeneas" (TUT 239).
- *Hyperbolic truculence*: (g) "A canting jay and a rheumy curdog is all their progeny. Pshaw, I tell thee! He is a mule, a dead gasteropod, without vim or stamina, not worth a cracked kreutzer. Copulation without population! No, say I! Herod's slaughter of the innocents were the truer name. Give her beefsteaks, red, raw, bleeding! She is a hoary pandemonium of ills, enlarged glands, mumps, quinsy, bunions, hayfever, bedsores, ringworm, floating kidney, Derbyshire neck, warts, bilious attacks, gallstones, cold feet, varicose veins" (U 420); (h) "To die bleeding is all one as if a man should die pissing. Good drink makes good blood, so that piss is nothing but blood under age" (TUT 292); see also the "Esdras of Granado" episode.

Notes

1. We quote from James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).
2. We paraphrase from Harry Levin, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (New York: New Directions Books, 1941) 78.
3. Levin 76.
4. See Adrienne Monnier in *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*. 2 vols. Ed. R. Deming. London: Routledge, 1970.
5. Deming 247-48.
6. Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller, An Anthology of Elizabethan Prose Fiction*, ed. Paul Salzman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987); hereafter cited as *TUT*.
7. Nashe's satires are impregnated by the so called "jest books," being the most famous that written and compiled by Skoggin (1565). Jest books consisted in a collection of varied stories containing burlesque overtones.
8. Sermons and similar forms; the text preserves many medieval elements in this respect.
9. A Spanish literary example is Father Jerónimo de Islas' Quixotic *Fray Gerundio de Campazas*, written in the eighteenth century.