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VERSATILE GENRES: TRAVEL WRITING AS ‘COMEDY’

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Abstract: *Proposing a cursory critical slalom through various acceptations of “travel writing” and “comedy”, and also referring to such authors as William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Oscar Wilde, D. H. Lawrence, Dante, or Cervantes as exemplifications, our paper is suggestively a reading proposition meant to shed new light on conceptual intersections between the title keywords.*

With a structuralist-formalist mindset, the paper touches upon various critical perspectives mainly including the connection between a comical content and its possibilities of dramatic enactment, drama representations of “travel” and their comic purport, historical considerations, the relevance of the parodic, genre intersections revealed via the fluctuating poetics of the novel, aesthetic means of translating the social, cathartic echoes, and the relevance of the carnivalesque.

Far from being exhaustive, our analysis still opens multiple research paths attempting a reevaluation of two banal, quite forgotten genres relying on the rather clear distinction, in the world of letters, between “epic” and “dramatic”.

Literary theorists belonging to a variety of conceptual and methodological backgrounds are almost unanimous in (explicitly or implicitly) admitting the fluidity of genre boundaries, the permanently questionable stability of such notions as “lyric”, “epic”, “dramatic”, or “tragedy”, “comedy”, “novel”, “short story” etc.

For the literary critic, and, in many respects, for the universal reader, dealing with the question of “genre” is, however, fruitful as it allows “a better reading and a better understanding of texts” (Stalloni 7), a facilitated passage from “a form to a meaning” (7), a way of defining “the unidentifiable semiotic specificity” (Shaeffer qtd. in Stalloni 7) of the literary.

Moreover, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, David Duff detects a return to a more lenient attitude towards “genre” seen as “the enabling device, the vehicle for the acquisition of competence” (Duff 2) in the wake of new revaluations of popular culture.

Pointing out the changeable nature of the genre, Marielle Macé still pleads, in her Introduction to *Le genre littéraire*, for “a tolerant ontology of the notion” (of “genre”) (Macé 33). She viably depicts the genre in its dynamism, in its relation with space and time, and indirectly summarizes an entire body of criticism on the complexity and

versatility of this literary category: in their being “support for aesthetic experiences, receptacles of the history of texts, settings and filters for the main functions of literature, they (genres) emphasize ... both our relationship to the past and our relationship to the possible...” (46).

In real practice, the particular histories of all genres appear to have confirmed their protean character, to use, by extension, the concept that R. M. Albérès applied to the novel in his *Histoire du Roman Moderne*. Beyond the legitimate need for order and classification, for the sake of an efficient analysis, one should still pay attention to reductionist attitudes towards the genre: let us remember, for instance, “the nominalistic aesthetics” (Combe 53) leading, in the line of Benedetto Croce, to the image of the work as “irreducible singularity” (55), or Genette’s “archi-genres” particularizing and limiting the genre as empirical, temporary, thematic (Genette 143). Such views can prove useful thanks to an enlargement of horizons, and a more fluidized view on pieces of literature.

In the structuralist-formalist tradition, our paper is meant as a suggestion of (also, as a reflection on) a possible key to reading travel writing: what is the relevance of “comedy” – viewed as a mode, as intrinsic comicality, but especially as a dramatic genre – in a discourse of (especially physical) movement centred more on the documentary than on the entertaining?

Roland Barthes’s characterization of the “travel impression” as a genre “to which our society extends the greatest indulgence” (Barthes qtd. in Burton) is evocative of the status fluctuations of a questionable form of writing already situated on an unstable territory: the general “genre” theory. Fiction or document, this type of writing is problematic through the basic encounter between “a text that generically proffers itself [...] as a representation of unaltered ‘reality’” (Baine Campbell 263) and “the fundamental fictionality of all representation” (263). In this sense, Tzvetan Todorov’s comments on fantastic literature can be extrapolated in order to efficiently define the problematics of travel books in the light of a stimulating reading attitude, that of “hesitation as to the nature of a strange event” (Todorov 193) – which translates, in our case, as similar hesitation as to genre conventions and the *real/fictional* dichotomy.

Musing on the genre boundaries in travel books, Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen identify intrusions “into the territory occupied by other forms of non-fiction, including history, political analysis, art criticism, journalism, sociology, and scientific observation.” (Hamera, Bendixen 3). High susceptibility of *mélange* with other genres or disciplines (novel, reportage, philosophical or historical writings, art compendiums etc) makes travel writing more likely to intersect the realm of comedy – however lax the notion of “comedy” may be. Anyway, we are dealing here with travel writings as mainly fictional forms of representation.

In order to investigate the relationship between two apparently disparate concepts, one should return to the fundamental “content”/“form” duality of Saussurean extraction. The two elements are useful only through their instrumentality. In relation to the genre question, a clear-cut distinction between the two facets is difficult to operate as

they generate forms of influence and inter-dependence. A deeper insight into the genre issue will lead us to notions similar to what Fredric Jameson signals, in the line of Hjelmslev, as the “content of form” (Jameson 98).

“The word « comedy » is customarily applied only to dramas; it should be noted, however, that the comic form, so defined, also occurs in prose fiction and narrative poetry.” (Abrams 27) By its very definition “the comic” cannot be excluded from any form of literary manifestation. It could practically be included into the travel narrative, too, as a vision, as an authorial mode, even as a mood, a “humour” of the writer/the reader, to use Ben Jonson’s term in an intertextual perspective.

But “the comic” content can go even further than that. It can bestow dramatic characteristics (such as dialogue or descriptions operating as stage directions) on certain scenes in the travel account, and, consequently, the narrative acquires a high degree of scenic representability. This can make it possible for “travel writing” and “comedy” to coexist.

Even in a non-dialogical scene, the suggestion for a form-content of “comedy” can equally be detected thanks to the differential mode, which is foundational for travel accounts. In Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, the clash between two different worlds is susceptible of generating a form of genuine comedy. A scene of Friday’s experiencing new eating habits can be read as the consistent nucleus for a better developed staged representation: “He made a sign to me that the salt was not good to eat, and putting a little into his own mouth he seemed to nauseate it, and, would spit and splutter at it, washing his mouth with fresh water after it.” (Defoe 160) Furthermore, Robinson’s image, frequently interpreted, in a grave register, as “the bourgeois” or “the colonizer”, could be regarded as embryonically comical given, for instance, the hero’s obstinacy in reproducing his home world, or his authority pretensions.

Dramatic representations of “travel” can be enlightening as to the close connection between the two key-concepts of our paper. One should remember that, before being a candidate for a “genre” position, “travel” can also be a theme or a motif. Thus, in a reversed perspective, “travel”, in its thematic dimension, can be the source of “comedy” thanks to its symbolic aspect. What could be more laughable than Jack’s origin in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: the character was found in a hand-bag “in the cloak-room at Victoria Station” (Wilde 43). Moreover, he was named after “a first-class ticket for Worthing” (42), “travel” becoming, in his case, an identity provider. “Travel” acts as a plot releaser, as the generator of a series of comical interplays between essence and appearance.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare’s play in which “travel” and “comedy” are basically motifs rather than foundational genre-patterns, the dramatic constraints do not seem to impede the “flowing”, temporal character of “travel”: “The Tempest, while ostentatiously observing the Aristotelian unities of time and place, extends its actual story over a dozen years as it condenses its «backstory» to exposition.” (O’Connell 216) It turns out that the dramatic can adapt its specific means to render ‘travel’ scenically. There is, as we

remember, the initial dynamic episode of the sea storm followed, in the next, more serene scenes, by the use of flashback techniques.

It is a structural device, the “travel” motif, that facilitates access to a “comedy” content like the characters’ laughter-provoking meeting with Caliban, “the strange fish” (Shakespeare 40), and the drinking episode in Act II, Scene II. It is “travel” that ensures the awareness of otherness by the juxtaposition of characters which are less comical if left in their ordinary milieu.

A diachronic view on our title-concepts can be equally enriching as to our analysis. Before turning into an abstract form of literary representation, travel was originally a purely physical experience. In literary history, the necessity of moving (with) the text is often posed as a prerequisite for efficient reception. In this sense, Mark Griffith points out the role played by direct communication in an antiquity context reminding us that “in the case of the solo narrative poetry of Homer and Hesiod [...] a professional reciter (rhapsode), travelling from city to city [...], was expected to deliver the lines quite dramatically and to stir his audience through his effective impersonation of individual characters...” (Griffith18). The nomadism of the performance is ancient, and “the differences between ‘epic’ and ‘drama’ could be less sharp than they came to be in later generations of western culture and criticism.” (19) One can thus notice an early dramatization of the epic, that is, in fact, a dramatization of a narrative travel, of a literarily rendered slalom among a series of happenings. Moreover, the reciter comes to enact a concrete, physical travel in order to reproduce an abstract, literary “travel” (that is a constructed text). He is thus a double performer: of a real-life act and of an artistic one.

“About the mid-sixteenth century” (Abrams 30), in a more eloquent way, the *commedia dell’arte* performed by “wandering Italian troupes” (30) again seems to illustrate this physical blending of travel with drama (comedy). The stable of “comedy” (an audience in a hall at a given time) is thus conditioned by the unstable of “travel”: in pragmatic terms, the two elements display an organic, almost economic dependence.

The physical vicinity between “travel” and “comedy” is translated (or, at least, translatable, as we do not have concrete evidence for this derived interrelatedness), at a more spectacular level, into the authors’ in-text positionings, into their concerns with the form of their literary productions. Probably one of the oldest intersections of the two conceptual fields is provided by Dante’s celebrated *Divine Comedy* in which the use of the word “comedy” is in keeping with the formal rigours of the Middle Ages, referring to “narrative poems that end happily” (Baldick 40). Ending in Paradise, containing samples of realism, and considering triviality for its discursive evolution, the Dantean work can, indeed, be said to display conceptual similarities to more recent developments of “comedy” as a genre in its own. The formal vehicle for rendering the “comedy” is, however, “travel”, the perfect (allegorical) signifier for a medieval form of becoming.

Situated at a superior level of intertextual distantiation, the parodic applies easily to the adventure narrative. A possible form of travel literature, the medieval romance intersects the comic register thanks to what Simon Gaunt, for instance, identifies as “an

essentially comic vision of romance” (Gaunt 45) that testifies to the early presence of a form of in-text detachment. Strictly from the “content” point of view, the authorial attitude is fundamentally ironical being born from “the opposition between chevalerie and clergie” (47). Though going *against* the travel (adventure) discourse, the comic distantiation paradoxically goes *with* it as it happens in any form of parody: one needs the model to provide the anti-model.

The parody of travel can manifest itself through a specific content of acts and attitudes. At actantial level, to employ Greimas’s terms, *Don Quixote*, for instance, is evocative of the comedy of character: the protagonist leaves in order to resemble the fiction heroes of his expectations; his ideals are high in relation to the scarcity of means. The hero thus comes to enact a kind of hybrid genre, an adventure comedy.

Comparably, Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* fails to fulfill the reader’s expectations: the author gives us very little of the life of his character and nothing of his opinions. In this way a projected (time) travel ends up in comedy: the reader and the writer develop a relationship similar to that between two characters in a staged comedy – they are the duper and the duped in the classical farce.

Parody is liable to bring us back to contemporaneity by its extension from “content” to “form”, and thanks to its resistance, in literary history, till modernist and postmodernist concerns.

Furthermore, one should notice that the parodic content and the comic in general, find their way to “drama” in variegated ways. From a formal point of view, Melveena McKendrick describes *Don Quixote* as “a theatrical novel” (McKendrick 133) pointing out “the pictorial imagination”(133), the dominance of the dialogue, the general dramatic development of the narrative. Chaucer in turn seems to provide even more consistent patterns of framed comedies. According to Derek Pearsall, in *The Canterbury Tales*, one can identify tales that belong to the genre of comedy. “Romance and fabliau complement one another, and Chaucer encourages us to look at them thus by setting The Knight’s Tale and The Miller’s Tale side by side. Each type of story makes a selection of human experience in accord with its own narrative conventions or rules.” (Pearsall 129) The critic singles out the familiar, the contemporary, and the social relevance as the characteristics of Chaucer’s comedy, by opposing it to stories centred on the historical past like *The Knight’s Tale*.

The decoupage into comedy scenes can be operated even in more solid narratives not necessarily tributary to the tale-within-the-tale pattern. Of course, the distinction between “comedy” and “comical” needs to be taken into account but, in our case, it becomes immaterial. Travel writing could, indeed, fall in with “humorous writing”, but, in many cases, a consistent dramatic independence of the humorous episodes can be noticed. The comicality of the situations is complemented by their theatrical character. The usual inside-the-plot perspective of the comedy – possibly diverted, in the travel narrative, by the traveller-narrator’s (usually first person) centrality – is compensated for

by the scene-like character of certain fragments. This can be fully illustrated by a fragment from D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*:

The second part of the Via Maqueda is the swell part: silks and plumes, and an infinite number of shirts and ties and cuff-links and mufflers and men's fancies. One realises here that man-drapery and man-underwear are quite as important as woman's, if not more.

I, of course, in a rage. The q-b stares at every rag and stitch, and crosses and re-crosses this infernal dark stream of a Via Maqueda, which, as I have said, is choked solid with strollers and carriages. Be it remembered that I have on my back the brown knapsack, and the q-b carries the kitchenino. [...]

.....
Suddenly I am aware of the q-b darting past me like a storm. Suddenly I see her pouncing on three giggling young hussies just in front – the inevitable black velveteen tam, the inevitable white curly muffler, the inevitable lower-class flappers. "Did you want something? Have you something to say? Is there something that amuses you? Oh-h! Why? Why? You ask why? Haven't I heard you! Oh – you spik Ingleesh! You spik Ingleesh! Yes-why! That's why! Yes, that's why." (Lawrence 22-23)

The theatricality is saved by descriptions (evocative of scenery and costumes), by movement, by the detailed account of attitudes and reactions, by the dialogue itself. Special mention shall be made of the reproduction of the girls' incorrect language, an element accenting the mimetic character of the text and its dramatic effect. Moreover, the author's irony facilitates the connection with the comedy register.

The unmediated passage to the last paragraph of Chapter I, the one with the "American woman", is suggestive of the dramatic (or film) division into sequences.

But this shop too is shutting. I ask a man for the Hotel Pantechnico. And treating me in that gentle, strangely tender southern manner, he takes me and shows me. He makes me feel such a poor, frail, helpless leaf. A foreigner, you know. A bit of an imbecile, poor dear. Hold his hand and show him the way.

To sit in the room of this young American woman, with its blue hangings, and talk and drink tea till midnight! All these naïve Americans—they are a good deal older and shrewder than we, once it nears the point. And they all seem to feel as if the world were coming to an end. And they are so truly generous of their hospitality in this cold world. (24)

Additionally, the blending of the concepts of "travel" and "comedy can be viewed as a concrete illustration of the modern world discourses: the existence (and demonstrated possibility) of filmic/dramatic adaptations of novels.

All forms of humour could be included into the travel discourse: it can aim at character, manners, language, feelings. Travel writing could, indeed, be seen as a series of chained comedies brought together by the formal artifice of a "pilgrimage".

In Pia Brânzeu's book on *The British Novel from Defoe to Scott*, the realistic novel is plausibly depicted as including "travel books, picaresque and quixotic novels, novels of adventures and of manners" (Brânzeu 8). In its capacity as a novel, the travel narrative counterbalances the first-person dominance by what Bakhtin calls *polyphony*, by the multiplicity of voices that it includes into its texture. Moreover, the novel boundaries are elastic, the genre accommodating a wide range of virtual (and actual) intersections.¹

The novel, in turn, seems to intersect the comic register from its very beginnings as confirmed, in English literature, by Henry Fielding in his *Preface to Joseph Andrews*: he calls his novels "comic-epic poems in prose" (Fielding qtd. in Clonțea 81), and points out the necessity of a "light and ridiculous"(81) subject matter. Moreover, it is the picaresque novel that seems to stand for the historical node of the two lines of genre development. The picaroon is permanently engaged in a form of travel and is permanently faced with the unfamiliarity (and often with the comical features of) a variety of situations.

Reading Fielding's "comic" as a form of present-day "realism", Malcolm Bradbury explains that the term is due to a "familiar context, that of drama", and that the author uses it "to suggest the tone, and also the type of structure, that work of the kind he was writing might contain – even as the word 'epic' suggested its spatial and its social scale." (Bradbury 31) Remarking social relevance as the premise for 'comedy' and operating a form-content mixture ("That social shape was artistic shape; it was form for the reader." (34)), Bradbury seems to bring the picaresque novel closer to "comedy" as a form of dramatic representation. The critic emphasizes the performing character of Fielding's "comedy" seeing it not only as an isolated artistic element, but as "a special kind of *action* in a special kind of universe" (34 emphasis mine).

In a survey of the theoretical approaches to laughter, Robert R. Provine evokes Arthur Schopenhauer's so-called "Incongruity Theory": "laughter arises from *the perceived mismatch* between the physical perception and abstract representation of some thing, person or action, a concept that dates back to Aristotle. *Our success at incongruity detection is celebrated with laughter.*" (Provine 15 emphases mine) In this perspective, travel writing could be interpreted as a permanent generator of "incongruities", being, in this respect, closer to the novel, but often surpassing it by a supposedly augmented use of the variety principle: different characters, different places, different perspectives. In comedies the "mismatch" is usually posed in ethical terms while, in travel writings, the awareness of difference is more neutrally posed and much more spatially and temporally determined. Yet the effect upon the reader is comparable thanks to the amount of tension induced by both types of texts.

¹ Let us remember, with Mikhail Bakhtin, that "...the novel gets on poorly with other genres. There can be no talk of a harmony deriving from mutual limitation and complementariness. The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them." (Bakhtin 71)

The travel narrative and comedy are fundamentally rooted in a form of imbalance, but, unlike other literary forms, they do more to recuperate the lost equilibrium: comedy by laughter, travel writing by its physical dynamism (and by laughter, too). In his plays Molière provides a portrait of his 17th century world. In *Persian Letters* Montesquieu depicts and satirizes the Enlightenment society of his time. Both genres are descriptive and didactic: they are primarily about society, and for society.

Travel can be traced back to a fundamental social orientation: one moves to meet other people. Travel writing and comedy share an integrative dimension: the two are socially-centred and (tend to) return the individual to a state of equilibrium. According to Jean Emelina, the comic is, by comparison with the serious, an “attitude of systematic opposition, of protest and denial, but also of distantiation and of commitment refusal...” (Emelina 171) In this sense, Swift’s travel narrative can be read as a form of exilic comedy. The anti-utopianism of such countries as Brobdingnag or Laputa, their much discussed mirror-like connection to England, is in keeping with the didactical inclination of a significant body of travel literature in world literature. Though constructed as an anti-“travel” piece of literature, in the line supported later by modernism and postmodernism, *Gulliver’s Travels* still alludes to the social function of the traveller-writer: “a traveller’s chief aim should be to make men wiser and better, and to improve their minds by the bad as well as good example of what they deliver concerning foreign places” (Swift 340).

Northrop Frye emphasizes, we remember, the integrative dimension of comedy, its orientation towards social inclusion: “the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated” (Frye 165). In a romance play like *The Tempest*, even a (basically comical) character like Caliban is finally “incorporated into society” (Berry 126), either as a solitary master of his island, or as a member of the onland community. Thus, as revealed in the play, one shows the incongruous, one re-establishes the normal order, and, additionally, it turns out that one needs to travel to achieve these objectives.

One can also notice, with Frye, that in comedies the emergence of a new (redeemed) society is often marked by a festive event in keeping with the happy-ending tradition of the genre.

In chapter 2 of his essay on laughter Henri Bergson points out the necessity to interpret comedy in relation to its ludic dimension, to “the child’s games” (Bergson 49). Playing and celebrating are, indubitably, forms of doing away with conventions, and they are both identifiable in travel accounts and comedies in the light of the often invoked Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

D. H. Lawrence’s travel books, for instance, reveal a complex literary discourse seen as a polyphony of arts and as propensity for annulling social boundaries: one can identify, in the playful spirit, descriptions of the carnival in the streets of Cagliari (*Sea and Sardinia*), of Indian dances (*Mornings in Mexico*), or of theatre representations (*Twilight in Italy*).

The carnivalesque in comedies is in turn easy to demonstrate. Edward Berry is an example in point. Analysing a significant body of comedies, and refraining from declaring derisive laughter a trait of Shakespearean comedies, the critic concludes that “the word carnivalesque is not a bad one to describe a more inclusive and distinctively Shakespearean kind of laughter – a kind that temporarily breaks down social and psychological boundaries.” (Berry 137).

One should also remember that travel writing and comedy are redolent of a fundamental hedonist principle. Comedy is, by its very definition, meant to “amuse its audience” (Baldick 40), to entertain. In their turn, apart from their humorous writing potentialities equally able to produce laughter, travel books can be derived from the entertainment practice of tourism aiming at finding pleasure in *fabula* (to use a formalist term for “events”), that is in actual travelling, but also – operating a “leap” from “content” to “form” – in narrating (which is, in fact, a symbolic form of travelling). Irrespective of the specific expressive means or of the nuances of “distraction” connotations, travel writing and comedy offer spectacles of the world for the world, providing not necessarily chances of laughing at others, but especially of laughing with others.

Conclusion

Seen both diachronically and synchronically travel writing and comedy can develop surprising intersections in their capacity as themes, motifs or genre-patterns.

Being aware of the multiplicity of the types of travel discourse as well as of the variety of comedies, we are still of the opinion that the last two ideas mentioned here as common denominators – the specific social relevance and the “laughter” potentialities – remain the key-elements capable of depicting the title-concepts as more related than other genres have proved to be.

Thanks to a fundamental socially-orientated mimesis, the two appear to be essentially united in “content” though formal intersections, as stated above, are also easy to pinpoint in terms of dialogue, description, language, sequentiality. Still, a “form-content” concept is more easily applicable to such interrelations, and it reveals itself through a constant play of mutual revaluations, through such issues as humorous (travel) writing rendered scenically, “travel”-framed comical discourse, comedy-framed travel discourse, or “genre” multiplicity for social concerns.

Moreover, one should keep in mind that the common path followed by the two genres may be more easily demonstrable, as intimated in the paper, thanks to the intermediary concept of “novel” whose aesthetic flexibility and cumulative nature are likely to offer solid grounds to our assumption of similarity.

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A note: The quotes from the French and Romanian texts are my translations.

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