EAST OF THE WESTERN CANON: CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN LITERATURE UNDER BRITISH EYES

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Abstract: Constructed by Western discourse as part of the same absence/ non-significance area with which 'the centre' seems to associate 'the margin', Romanian literature (including writers and writings regarded as 'canonical' by the local school of criticism) has yet to find a way to decentre or dispute the dominant hegemony of the established Western canon. A case in point is exposed by Julian Barnes, in 'One of a Kind' (1982/1987). The accuracy of the detail in this short story reveals a narrator keenly acquainted with the realities of Romania and its culture during the communist era. Apparently objective and realist, the text artfully conceals the metafictional subversion of established truths and values, and sheds some light on a political context hindering the development of culture, which was virtually unknown to the English readership in the 1980s. This paper aims at discussing the strategies employed in this game of appearances, whose scaffolding shows the oppositions between subjectivity and objectivity, but also between Englishness and Romanianness.

Keywords: reception/reflection, communism and fiction, Western canon, otherness, subjectivity

Julian Barnes's 'postmodern condition'

When he is not compared with Ian McEwan or with Martin Amis (or both), a comparison which Merritt Moseley, one of the most cited exegetes of Barnes's work, regards as "instructive" (1997: 55) and which seems to simplify the task of the critic when approaching his works, Julian Barnes is usually introduced as "the chameleon of British letters" (Stout 1992: 29), or as "a suspiciously Europeanised writer, who has this rather dubious French influence" (Barnes in Guignery and Roberts 2009: 64). Difficult to label because of the eclecticism of his themes and modes of writing – a feature which he indeed shares with the other two novelists mentioned above – Julian Barnes is, more often than not, considered to be a postmodernist writer, a view also adopted in the present paper, despite Barnes's own explicit penchant for realist modes of writing (seen here as contributing to the postmodernist debate on *real-ising* fiction rather than opposing its aesthetics altogether).

In *The Modern British Novel*, Malcolm Bradbury speaks of Julian Barnes as of someone who "plays with the limits of fiction, the borders of reportage, the laying and mixing of styles" (1993: 437), whilst another reputed critic of twentieth century British fiction, Peter Childs, describes him as "a postmodernist writer because his writing rarely conforms to the model of the realist novel or concerns itself with a scrutiny of consciousness in the manner of modernist writing" (2005: 86). Along the same lines, starting from A.S. Byatt's description of postmodern literature as "an awareness of the difficulty of realism combined with a strong attachment to its values, a formal need to comment on their fictiveness combined with a strong sense that models, literature and the tradition are ambiguous and emblematic goods combined with a profound nostalgia for, rather than rejection of the great works of the past" (1979: 34, qtd. in Guignery 2006: 1), Vanessa Guignery, French professor of Contemporary English Literature and author of several books on Julian Barnes, asserts that the British author's fiction reveals elements of postmodernism (obvious in his resorting to and, at the

same time, subverting realist strategies), self-reflexive techniques and [ironic] celebration of the literary past.

Nevertheless, Barnes's understanding of prose is that it should be "largely fictional" (Moseley 1997: 110) – that is to say, not entirely fictional – and completely indifferent to literary theory and classifications. Novels, he says in an interview about his alleged 'postmodern condition', should "come out of life, not out of theories about either life or literature" (Freiburg in Guignery and Roberts 2009: 31). Moreover, analysing Barnes's novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, almost universally acknowledged as a piece of postmodern writing 'by the book' (though one may wonder what such a *book* should consist of or why someone should try to impose rules and regulations on postmodernism), Brian Shaffer, editor of *A Companion to the British and Irish Fiction 1945-2000*, posits that Julian Barnes confessed in a private conversation that he did not consider his novels postmodernist (2005: 490). He seems however quite willing to accept a different inclusion, in the category of 'desperado novelists', proposed by Romanian critic Lidia Vianu and defined as comprising "a generation of writers who will do anything in their power, form and content (technical and emotional experiment at all costs) to shock, confuse, render the reader helpless" (2009: 22). Denying the actual constructed shock, yet admitting to the game of destabilising reader expectations and to the goal of rendering reality in "all its confusing complexity" (Vianu 2009: 22), Julian Barnes practically sums up his inescapable 'postmodern condition', whose temporal frame he acknowledges, but whose -ism he does not.

Further emphasising the contradictory nature of Barnes's literary credo is his slight involvement with politics in fiction. "Anyone sensitive enough to be touched by the zeitgeist is also involved in politics", Orwell once noted (2009: 129), and Barnes has indeed proven his political awareness through his non-fiction writings as is, for instance, the case of the collection of essays *Letters from London* (1995). However, Julian Barnes's fiction is mostly non-political, which is quite surprising for a writer who had his debut in the 1980s, when, as Moseley puts it, "a political stance [of a writer] was usually a demand for a commitment to the broad left" and when there was a strong belief that "writers and artists and intellectuals should feel, and express in their art, a solidarity with the working class" (1997: 146). During a decade in which British novelists were competing in denouncing Thatcherism and American imperialism in their works, Julian Barnes's contribution to political fiction consists of a single short story, 'One of a Kind', (first published in 1982 in *New Stories* vol. 7 and reprinted in 1987, in Malcolm's Bradbury's *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*), under focus in the present paper.

Metafictional is political

In the context of Julian Barnes's fiction of the 1980s, it may be argued that 'One of a Kind' is indeed… one of a kind – through its political content, on the one hand, and through its being set in communist Romania, on the other. Although the Romanian head of state, Nicolae Ceausescu, had just visited the United Kingdom in 1978, which must have generated certain awareness about Romania, one may reasonably assume that the British readership was not at all acquainted with the realities of the Eastern European communist republic in its later years. According to Julian Barnes, he had visited Romania back in the 1960s, during a trip through the entire communist bloc, and once again, in 1979 (in Vianu 2009: 26). It may be

what determined him to contribute to the widening of "the geography of contemporary fiction", as Malcolm Bradbury names it, adding that "in the era of Europe, European subject-matter became ever more important, in the fiction of Ian McEwan and Anita Brookner, Julian Barnes and Penelope Liveley" (1993: 413).

The "European subject-matter" is, beyond any doubt, political – even if it only pointed to an openness towards the others and, implicitly, to the destabilisation of English centrality. This is one of the reasons why Merritt Moseley's observation, that the short story "assumes some knowledge of the political situation in Romania, but […] is hardly a political fiction" (1997: 145), requires corrections. The short story actually depicts much more than "some knowledge", being a piece of political fiction looming large beneath the overt metafiction. 'One of a Kind' is, in fact, a detailed account of the writer's condition in the totalitarian era, one that is presumably more objective than similar accounts produced by the exiled, Westernised intelligentsia who had fled totalitarian spaces.

The assumption which governs the present section is that Julian Barnes's short story is double-layered and jocularly misleading in the sense that metafiction conceals politics and, conversely, politics conceals metafiction, aspects which shall be dealt with in turn, by looking into the text from the two perspectives in question.

'One of a kind' is set in the 1980s, with an English narrator (which may stand for an alter ego of the author) conversing with a Romanian expatriate, Marian Tiriac, about the little awareness the world has of Romanian culture. The conversation takes place in two separate stages: stage one precedes the actual visit to Romania, being informed by stereotypical perceptions of the cultural other and by distorted memories of one's own cultural identity; stage two follows the trip to Bucharest (for a literary conference) and the excursion to the Danube Delta (offered to the participants), with first hand experiences supporting the argumentation.

The thesis advanced from the very beginning is that "in various fields, Romania has managed to produce one – but only one – significant artist. […] So: one great sculptor – Brancusi. One playwright – Ionesco. One composer – Enescu. One cartoonist – Steinberg. Even one great popular myth – Dracula." (Barnes in Bradbury 1987: 400) No novelists, though.

It then changes as a result of seeing that the actual reality differs from the imagined one. This discovery gives Marian Tiriac the chance to take the floor as the narrator of a framed story about a novelist, Nicolai Petrescu, who became successful by tricking censorship into believing that he was writing an "intensely patriotic" (1987: 405) epic novel, while he was employing exaggerated irony about the political system of his times.

Irony, as a matter of fact, is the main device used in this short story. It is directed at the narrator's Englishness, both by the narrator himself – "due English meekness and hesitancy and pleading of ignorance" (400) – and by his Romanian interlocutor: "he said with irony, but also with a sort of funny pride, as if I didn't have the right to an opinion […] on the subject of his homeland" (400). It is oriented, through Petrescu's voice, towards the important figures at the Writers' Union – "They'll see through him this time, surely. But irony is not a mode with which the committee were too familiar" (404). It eventually shapes the conclusion that Petrescu was Romania's greatest ironist (406). Even the name chosen for the successful novelist carries ironic overtones, especially for a Romanian reader – coincidentally, it is made

up of Ceausescu's first name and his wife's maiden name, also bringing to mind the famous (locally) modernist novelist, Camil Petrescu. Ironical too is the other Romanian name occurring in the text, Tiriac (not Marian, but Ion – the tennis player and multimillionaire) being somewhat of a spokesperson for Romania.

An ironic short story about an ironist, which draws attention to irony with each and every idea it introduces, 'One of a Kind' may very well be defined as 'meta-irony'. Reinforcing irony, but without specifically pinpointing the device, Julian Barnes passes his own judgements about writing. A good case in point is his opinion that writers should leave their familiar territories behind and use their imagination to rebuild them.

Discussing some critics' idea that Barnes's political novella about the communist bloc, *The Porcupine* (1992), lacks an intimate and direct understanding of communist mentality which can be accessed only by an insider, Vanessa Guignery (2006: 89-90) observes a similitude with the short story published ten years before 'One of a Kind', more precisely, with Tiriac's irritation at the Englishman's comments about the dissidents in Romania. The word *dissident* – employed in political discourse to denote a person who dissents from an established policy – very much in use in the United Kingdom at the time when the short story was written, in the context of the rise of cultural theories – suggests, according to cultural materialist critic Alan Sinfield, a subversion constructed within the discourse of power: "dissidence operates necessarily in reference to dominant structures; it has to invoke those structures to oppose them and therefore can always, ipso facto, be discovered re-inscribing that which it proposes to critique" (1992: 47).

Judging by this definition, in the short story, the Englishman's observation is justified with reference to Romania, but the text seems to imply that Romanians are not exactly familiar with the term: "It's always an awkward word to use with Eastern European exiles, as I should have realised. Some of them take the high political line of: 'It is the Government who are the dissidents'; others the personal, practical one of: 'I'm not a dissident, I'm a writer.'" (Barnes in Bradbury 1987: 400). Ironic here is that some make the confusion of taking the dominant structure – the Government – for what actually opposes it. The second response may suggest either a subtle comment on the subversive role of literature, an aspect which the exiles fail to understand, or the idea that literature transgresses mundane politics.

Another reflection on the role of the novelist is forwarded under the pretext of the literary conference held in Bucharest. The narrator, this time identified as a "young writer", emphasises the pointlessness of "the speeches about the duty of the writer towards mankind, and about the power of the written word to shape men's souls" (401), vaguely implying that he is derisive of such elating approaches to literature. This derision is even more visible when criticism is… criticised for its formulaic representations of the literary: "the few scraps of work I offered to publish were held to be insufficiently uplifting to the human spirit. Uplifting…ha! As if writing were a brassiere and the human spirit were a pair of bosoms" (405). The comment about the absence of the contemporary Western novelists in the communist bookstores not only tells of a certain local inertia and tendency to glamorise the literary past, but is also symptomatic of the fear of the dominant structures to allow their 'subjects' to take a glimpse at the Western, capitalist world – which, once again, renders it both metafictional and political: "My companion and I looked briefly into the Western

languages section of the shop – if you're foreign it's best to be dead as well if you plan to sell in Bucharest." (401-2)

The most interesting combination of *fiction about fiction* and *political awareness* may be found in the framed narrative about the fictitious novelist Nicolai Petrescu and his epic novel 'The Wedding Cake', named – in a sarcastic form of ekphrasis – after the hideous huge buildings of Soviet inspiration, "Stalin's presents to his slave nations" (405). Only two pages are sufficient to critically assess the aestheticism of Romanian literature during the years of the "obsessive decade" (the 1950s), after a brief, but accurate introduction to the political circumstances in the aftermath of the Second World War. The real-life model which Julian Barnes might have had in mind is less important and an attempt at its identification would mean unproductive detective work. However, Marian Tiriac, who assumes the role of narrator in the embedded story, extracts the requisites for the literature of this 'brave new world' with surgical precision: "epically historical, epically sentimental, epically improving, epically realistic" (404) and "intensely patriotic, sentimental and documentary" (405).

In truth, the literature of the time was supposed to follow the dogmatic patterns and to support the body politic in its 'civilising' efforts. To this effect, writers were often forced to draw on a carefully fabricated heroic history, but also to pay great attention to the approved way of thinking. Petrescu conforms to these impositions and to some more in writing his *magnum opus*: the fictitious author pushes the limits of verisimilitude up to ridiculous extents (which are not described in the short story, being only suggested by the repetition of the adverb *epically*), with the declared aim of "shaming and embarrassing those who had revered it" (405). The advice he asks for from the writers entitled to examine and evaluate the manuscripts, "the clodheads and buffoons of the Writers' Union", brings forth new metafictional stances which refer to universal difficulties of writing a novel: "the problem of realistically conveying the point of view", but also to specific troubles generated by the political context: "the question of handling sexual experience without offending the intrinsic good taste of the book buying steel-worker of Ploieşti" (404). Needless to say, this "intrinsic good taste" is yet another sample of irony on the part of the character-narrator and, probably, one also assumed by the author himself.

Ultimately, the greatest irony is that "the ironist" Nicolai Petrescu seems to have been subdued to the rigours of the regime in order to become a respected author, one with many other titles published, despite his initial resolution to never write another novel, in order to make "the joke clearer as the years go by" (405). The ending lines of the short story clearly point to a Romanian brand of subjectivity – as Marian Tiriac is ready to believe that his friend, Nicolai Petrescu, went on with his literary joke – and to the more objective, though understated, view of the foreigner that the Romanian author gave up his sarcasm and complied with the rules of the new world and its epically heroic national literature. His unexpressed opinion on the matter and the condescending "agreeing smile" (406) are related to that "due English meekness" (400), but they may also bring forth the self-centred, canonical Western discourse of otherness, which construes the margin as either negative or non-significant, and in whose shadows the East seems doomed to stay.

'East, West': towards a European canon

Despite its imposing and authoritarian name, whose original meaning is *rule* or *standard*, the literary canon is an arbitrary and mutable construct – one that is more resistant to change and intrusion than many other cultural and social practices which converge, especially at a political, declarative level, towards unification and multiculturalism. Of course, resistance has nothing to do with the ethnicity of those who might stand a chance to enter the select circle of the canonical writers, as the grounds for exclusion – at least in the opinion of a critic who has dealt extensively with the matter, namely Harold Bloom – are rather related to the dismissal of social and political motives and the favouring of the aesthetic. The term "School of Resentment" which Bloom coined in *The Western Canon – The Books and School of the Ages*, denoting the critical theory concerned with the enlargement of the canon so as to comprise literary products of the voices of otherness (1994: 4), may well apply to schools and literatures that are not even 'long-listed' in the category which has yet to prove itself worthy of 'canonization': the chaotic age (1994: 549-567). Without necessarily regarding Bloom's lists as definitive, one cannot but notice the fact that Romanian literature is utterly ignored by the American scholar. It certainly looks like Romanian literature (including writers and writings regarded as 'canonical' by the local school of criticism) has yet to find a way to decentre or dispute the dominant hegemony of the official Western canon. The assumption that the said hegemony has been established, as Bloom claims, on the criterion of aesthetic value, apart from being idealistically naïve, may seem offensive for the national literatures which are lost in the implied absence of any literary value of their representatives. On the other hand, neither is the placement beyond the borders of 'the Western canon', in the non-relevant area of the subaltern, a more desirable variant. Either way, Romanian literature is construed as marginal within the discourse of canonicity.

The geopolitical marginality of the communist bloc during the years of Soviet influence and totalitarianism may be one of the reasons why the Western discourse has constantly ignored (until recently) the Eastern European voices contributing to the European canon[1]. Notable exceptions are, not infrequently, authors who chose exile and, with it, the identification as representatives of their adoptive spaces, e.g. Milan Kundera, Herta Müller, Arthur Koestler, Julia Kristeva, or the 'one of a kind' playwright mentioned in Barnes's short story, Eugene Ionesco.

In fact, all the names mentioned at the beginning of the short story, on which the narrator grounds his "theory about Romania", belong either to exiles or to artists who spent their lives between Romania and the West. When imparting this observation with a Romanian, the narrator is served with a few more names, profoundly ironical in some cases,

[1] One may think that Europe has had enough accusations of Eurocentrism; it is hard to imagine a more Eurocentric stance than the formation of a separate canon. Nonetheless, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe issues in 2008 a recommendation, *Promoting the teaching of European literature*, stressing the need for a "transversal approach to Europe's heritage" and for strengthening "approaches that emphasise the European dimension". Along the same lines, Budapest hosts a conference of the literary societies and literary museums in Europe entitled The European Literary Canons (May 4th-6th 2010). Moreover, the old continent strikes back, fighting the Americanisation trends with books like *Identifying with Europe. Reflections on a Historical and Cultural Canon for Europe* (ed. by I. van Hamersveld and A. Sonnen, Amsterdam: Boekmanstudies, 2009), which advocate commonality of European heritage, intercultural dialogue across European nations and a unified canon as an instrument for increased European awareness.

like the name of Ceausescu as 'the one' in party leadership. However, Marian Tiriac, the Romanian character, mentions the name of the most important Romanian poet, Mihai Eminescu, whom the local criticism regards as one of the peaks of European Romanticism in the nineteenth century and as the national poet of Romania. The Westerners' perception, as rendered in this short story, is 'slightly' different: obviously, the author has heard of Eminescu (or his name would not have been mentioned), but his narrator had only "vaguely encountered" (401) the name.

As for novelists, as already mentioned, not even the Romanian subjectivity is enough to make a case in favour of Romanian literature: "There are none. We have no novelists" (401). Romanian criticism includes a series of novelists in the category of canonical writers – George Călinescu, Camil Petrescu, Marin Preda, Liviu Rebreanu, Mihail Sadoveanu, and Ioan Slavici (Bădărău 2010), but they are practically unknown outside the Romanian borders, an aspect also signalled by Barnes's short story. The names of Rebreanu and Sadoveanu bring no recollection to the mind of the Englishman at the heart of 'One of a Kind': "I hadn't recognized either of the names" (Barnes in Bradbury 1987: 402). Coincidentally, these novelists are among the few Romanian authors whose works have been translated, which may be the reason why they appear in the English text, but, as the Romanian character notices, "they're only thesis material nowadays" (402). The fact that 'Romania's greatest' are of little interest to Europe is an objective observation made by a foreigner, one which has taken Romanian critics almost thirty years to embrace without grudge: in 2009, during a debate at the Romanian Cultural Institute on the translation and publication of canonical writers, Nicolae Manolescu advocated for the translation of contemporary writers, whilst Liviu Papadima pointed out that the invisibility of the Romanian writers in Europe was not a consequence of their lack of aesthetic value, but simply one of their cultural specificity and regional themes which were not compliant with the requests of the international book market (Bălan 2009: 4). As for the (now practically absent) cultural strategy they will draw up in view of better marketing Romanianness in future… it remains to be seen.

Final remarks

East of the Western canon lie unchartered literary territories which are hinted at in Julian Barnes's 'One of a Kind'. The Romanian case scrutinised leads the reader along a forking path, disturbingly expressing prejudice and challenging it at the same time.

Advancing a politics of its own, whereby the subordinate canonical core of the other is reluctantly allowed on its fringes, the short story 'sells' by focusing on the last years of communism and its silencing of representative voices, using this as the perfect excuse for Romanianness not being associated in English eyes with the many great figures in the European cultural past.

At once loyal to reality in fiction and subversive of the reality of fiction, 'One of a Kind' also has a marked meta dimension which is observable in the witty commentary on the status of writing in general and on the fate of literature in a specific geopolitical context in particular.

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