LOST AND FOUND RELICS, FORGERIES AND MYSTIFICATIONS IN 20TH CENTURY HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

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Abstract Starting from the assumption that a large number of fictional writings published in the twentieth century foreground such literary motifs as the lost / found manuscript (sometimes replaced by another similar relic), the present article attempts to highlight the significant subversive potential of postmodern literature, its scepticism regarding the positive sciences' claim to anchor the discourse in stable representational grounds. My primary textual focus will be on three historiographic metafictions of the '80s: Silviu Angelescu's *Calpuzanii* [The Forgers], Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and Milorad Pavić's lexicon-novel *Dictionary of the Khazars,* having in common an undisputable propensity for mystification and fakery.
Keywords Historiographic metafiction, trace, irony, fallacy, mystification.

At least from Plato onward, if we consider the frequently mentioned 10th Book of the *Republic,*[1] fiction has been under the suspicion of inconsistency, deceptiveness and, ultimately, of fallacy. Being less sceptical than Plato, Aristotle decisively establishes, in his turn, the distinction between the mission of the historian and that of the poet: if the first one deals with events that have taken place in reality, the second has the responsibility "to speak not of things that have happened, but of the sort of things that might happen and possibilities that come from what is likely or necessary.[2]"

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[1] See Plato, *Republic,* transl. by G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co, 1992), 398-435.
[2] Aristotle, *Poetics,* transl. by Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2006), 32.

In most of the older debates devoted to defining the historic, as well as the fictional fields, the conception that history would be able to accurately capture the past perpetuates itself, while fiction is rather mistrusted, being perceived as closely related to illusion and to fallacy; it would rely on manipulation strategies, on more or less sophisticated techniques in order to temporary suspend the reader's disbelief and ultimately enthral him / her, as Scheherazade does in *The Arabian Nights*. This is the reason why, if one compares the sentences of historic nature (whose truth value is not to be questioned) and the fictional ones (whose truth, according to some opinions, comes down to a matter of style), the gap between them grew increasingly disheartening. The quasi-unanimous accepted opinion was that the first category of statements would distinguish themselves through objectivity, neutrality, impersonality and transparency, as opposed to the latter, accused that they "sin" through subjectivity, illusionism, ambiguity, opacity etc. However, in the last decades, more conciliatory and nuanced points of view have been expressed, often relying on the principle of the accepted third.

When talking about these attempts to reconsider the relationship between the status of the historiographic and fictional narratives, one brings forth the arguments of some theorists like Hayden White, Linda Hutcheon, Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Zemon Davies, Stephen Bann or Ann Rigney, who – providing different arguments – deny the existence of a hierarchy between the historian's discourse and that of the novelist. The similarities between them ultimately prove to be of a greater significance than the differences, since both are "imperfect histories," the authentic representation of the referent – longed for by old-school historians – being discarded as mere utopia: "In my argument," states Ann Rigney, "the possibility of a historical account's being successful – that is convincing for the nonce as a sufficiently accurate and sufficiently coherent account of the past – is linked logically to the possibility of its failing, of its being judged more or less a misrepresentation. Seen from this point of view, historical representation in its various forms always opens up a potential gap between the image of events on offer and our prior beliefs regarding events and our expectations regarding history; between the particular image on offer and the perfect or «virtual» history combining evidence, coherence and relevance that can be imagined in general outline but that may be much more difficult to concretize in practice.[3]" In other words, the distinction between the alleged scientific studies and the creative works of art is of no great importance, since both are related, to some extent, to the field of the particular, positioning themselves outside the history envisaged as an ideal or "virtual" entity. However,

[3] Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories.The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4.

even if we are aware that all knowledge of the past is "provisional, historicized and discursive, this does not mean we do not make meaning of the past.[4]"

Beyond these matters, one raises the issue of the nature and status of our information about the past. As we were able to learn, one is certain about the fact that historiography and fiction share the ability to reshape or remodel our experience with respect to time and to face similar obstacles when it comes to claiming the direct access to the referent. This might be one of the reasons for which historiographic metafiction "shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured (…) and, in problematizing everything the historical novel once took for granted it destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction.[5]" As we can observe, the undisputable quality of this concept proposed by Linda Hutcheon is that it maintains itself midway between extreme points of view, surpassing the binary logic frameworks and succeeding in keeping a balance between the absolute relativism and representational realism. Here follows another advantage of the category in question when it comes to the role of filters in rewriting the past: that of giving the due importance to the peripheral, the marginal details, apparently insignificant, yet paradoxically capable to unfasten monolithic entireties and great narratives, to rehabilitate the particular against the backdrop of the universal and the local to the detriment of the global, ultimately suggesting that truth and fallacy might not be the right terms to define fiction.

That is not necessarily a consequence of fiction theories stated earlier in time by language philosophers like Austin and Searle. It is known that the latter tried to minimize the opposition true/ false by using the arguments of the analytic philosophy claiming that in fictional statements the author merely pretends that he is asserting something, while the recipient agrees to take part in this situation and pretends, in his turn, that the already told stories did happen in reality.[6] However, in historiographic metafiction it is essential to presume that rewriting the past implies, almost every time, a redeeming or a restoring act in a context where the accepted presumption is that one cannot talk about a single "Truth", but about "truths" (always in plural form). Moreover, when it comes to fallacies or mystifications, we actually deal with the truths of others.

According to Linda Hutcheon, all these aspects prove that historiographic metafiction basically seeks a productive problematization of the relationship between language and reality, even if this relationship ultimately proves to be a "problematic" one: on the one hand, the persistently emphasized consciousness of its existence as discourse, on the other hand "its assertion of the social and

[4] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 149.
[5] Ibid., 120.
[6] John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *New Literary History* (vol. VI, no.2, Winter, 1975), 319-332.

institutional nature of all enunciative position and (…) its grounding in the representational.[7]" However this anchoring in the representational does not have much to do either with naïve referentialism, nor with radical formalism, but it posits that the frames of our different discourses about the "real" past (de)forms it in the same manner as that various filters would do if they were inserted between subject and object. The focus shifts from the gap between language and reality to the evidence that the language itself is being used and interpreted in a network of political discursive conditions.

As far as the field of literary practice is concerned, in many contemporary historiographic metafictions we acknowledge the same tendency of entangling historic knowledge and invention, of relativizing perspectives and undermining conventions of any kind. *Welcome to Hard Times* (E.L. Doctorow), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (Angela Carter), *The Public Burning* (Robert Coover), *Chekhov's Journey* (Jan Watson), *Chatterton* (Peter Ackroyd), *Flaubert's Parrot* (Julian Barnes), *Calpuzanii* [The Forgers] by Silviu Angelescu or Milorad Pavić' s *Dictionary of the Khazars* are works which would deserve an in-depth scrutiny. In what follows we will briefly examine the last three.

Among Central and East-European writers, Milorad Pavić has masterfully illustrated the topic of the lost writing. Starting from this illustrious fictional motif, Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* develops a sophisticated, multilayered metafiction which abounds in mystifications and pitfalls that might confuse the innocent reader. In other words, we have to do with a book intended for an informed and imaginative public and above all willing to play the part cunningly set up by the author. It is certainly not accidental that the latter has dedicated his work precisely to the absent reader, who "will never open this book," thus teasing both, actual and virtual recipients: "The author assures the reader that he will not have to die if he reads this book, as did the user of the 1691 edition, when *The Khazar Dictionary* still had its first scribe. Some explanation regarding that edition is in order here, but for the sake of brevity the lexicographer proposes to strike a deal with his readers. He will sit down to write these notes before supper, and the reader will take them to read after supper. Thereby, hunger will force the author to be brief, and gratification will allow the reader to peruse the indroduction at leisure.[8]"

The above quoted paragraph figures in the introduction of this lexicon-novel, entitled *Preliminary Notes to the Second, Reconstructed and Revised, Edition* and reveals not only the writer's parodical intentions, but also his genuine concern for the reader's responses and whims.

[7] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*…, 141.

[8] Milorad Pavić, *Dictionary of the Khazars*, trans. Christina Pribićević- Zorić (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988), 1.

It is obvious that the pretended seriousness of the learned "lexicographer" is meant to subvert any ruling discourse and, ultimately, to question any producer of power. In other words, his extravagant erudition has an assumed, particular function: to plead for unlimited freedom, bearing, at the same time, "a blatant quality of fakery.[9]" Besides, one can interpret this strategy as an embodiment of Borges's *Library of Babel,* the undisputable precursor to synthetic virtual realities; or – following the author's recommendations – one might read it as "an allegory of a small people surviving in-between great powers and great religions.[10]"

In any way, this sample of "devil's lexicography[11]" appears – at its surface – as a playful mock-history of the Khazars, located somewhere among Turkey, Russia and the Slavic countries. In the late nineteenth century A.D., the great Khagan, ruler of the obscure Caucasian people, summons the three leading scholars to determine which religion will be adopted. The story is told in three versions, according to the "sources": the Christian in the Red Book, the Islamic in the Green one and the Hebrew in the Yellow, referring to the fact that there is no single point of view to any fundamental issue. As Michael Helsem has noticed the *Dictionary of the Khazars* "takes as its ostensible subject a people of whom the bare appelation scarcely remains and an era (the 9c.) so obscure that one revisionist historian has suggested that it never even happened.[12]" Briefly, Milorad Pavić writes "as if all three of the possibilities had separately occurred, and fills each third of the book with fanciful but scholarly improvisations flavoured by each culture in turn.[13]" A skilful manner, after all, of de-territorializing the old significances of such categories as time, space and meaning.

Another interesting attempt of re-writing history in South-East European fiction is Silviu Angelescu's 1987 novel *Calpuzanii*[14] [The Forgers]. It narrates a sort of burlesque saga placed in Wallachia, at the end of the eighteenth century. The point of departure is the discovery of a strange text, written in a dead language (obviously an ironical treatment of the Romantic convention of the lost and found manuscript), that is used as pretext for a captivating, picturesque and Aesopian story, occurring in the time of Nicolae Mavrogheni, an eccentric and a mentally disturbed Phanariot ruler.

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[9] Angela Carter, *Expletives Deleted. Selected writings. With an Introduction by Michael Moorcock* (London: Vintage Books, 2006), 12.

[10] Thanassis Lallas, "As a Writer I Was Born Two Hundred Years Ago…– An Interview with Milorad Pavić," in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (vol. XVIII, no. 2, June 1998).

[11] Victor E. Taylor, Ch. E. Winquist (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 137.

[12] Michael Helsem, *Borges: Influence and References. Milorad Pavić,* http://www.themodernword.com/borges/borges_infl_pavic.html

[13] Ibid.

[14] Silviu Angelescu, *Calpuzanii* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1987).

Depicting this bizarre *voivode* in a colourful and humorous manner, Angelescu ironically undermines the literary convention of bad rulers' portraits, as it appears illustrated in the writings of some Wallachian and Moldavian medieval chroniclers. Not only that this attitude produces comical effects, but it also reveals the author's iconoclastic intentions. In other words, it becomes clear that not the reconstruction of the past is here at stake, but rather the desire to highlight the similarities between past and present. In other words, the writer attempts at tracing a radiography of the communist present, dissimulating it in the past. Just like in the case of Eugen Barbu's 1969 novel *Princepele* [The Prince], in *Calpuzanii* [The Forgers], the rich linguistic imagination, the unique "flavour" of the archaic language invented by the author, as well as the air of carnivalesque performance of many scenes and of the novel as a whole, turn it in an unparalleled comic-burlesque historiographic metafiction. There is no use to add that this stylistic disguise made possible the book's publication in the last decade of Ceauşescu' s rule. Otherwise, the numerous hints at the miserable everyday life in communist Romania could hardly go unnoticed.

Many of the Romanian writers of the 1980s acted in a similar way: they realized radiographies of their time, dissimulating them in past ages (among them Ştefan Agopian, Maria Luiza Cristescu, Eugen Uricariu or Dana Dumitriu). Their historical novels read the past "retrogressively", from the point of view of their present political understanding. This is why the reception of such fictional writings has eventually succeeded in shaping, at a considerable extent, the collective construction of Romanian past. In other words, reading historical fiction meant also learning how to face hostile times. For, as far as we can remember, one of the crucial functions of reading in totalitarian societies was that of granting to the readers a minimal inner freedom. As paradoxically as it might seem, in East-Central Europe this "marginal" occupation represented a manner of preserving identity, a soft version of the cultural resistance and, ultimately, a way of surviving. In the particular case of historiographic metafictions, special attention was paid to preserving the genuine, undistorted meaning of what Pierre Nora once called "lieux de mémoire.[15]"

Julian Barnes, in his turn, brings forth an enlightening and humorous example of historiographic metafiction, with his 1984 novel *Flaubert's Parrot.*[16] Not only does the book – whose serious stake is systematically undermined by humorous hints – lie on the edge between past and present, invention and documentary research, but it also mixes a confusing variety of styles and discursive moods, from the historical and biographical to the memorialistic and metaliterary. Moreover, it reveals its playful goal even by the nature of the "relic" for which the inquiry is being

[15] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, transl. by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 4.
[16] Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984).

underway (the parrot Loulou, Flaubert's "muse" in a given circumstance). Furthermore, the mere detail that Loulou is a bird recalls Plato's dialogue entitled *Theaetetus* where Socrates resorts to the aviary analogy (the bird-cage pattern), when talking about memory and the possibility of fallacy.

Barnes's novel begins with the image of six North-Africans from Rouen playing *boule* under the statue of the famous writer. This would already lead us to presume that its main purpose is to jar the common places, the stereotypes and the pre-set ideas. In a word, this is a playful undermining of persistent ready-made *clichés* that could change the image of an important writer into a sort of frozen effigy. There is no need for too much subtlety to realize that Julian Barnes offers more than a sample of postmodern kaleidoscopic discourse; he questions even the claim for an accurate historic knowledge, as well as the possibility of tracing definite boundaries between real and fictitious events.

The narrator, doctor Geoffrey Braithwaite, engages in an eccentric and apparently futile investigation: he is trying to identify the authentic stuffed parrot that served as Gustave Flaubert's source of inspiration in 1877, when wrote *Une coeur simple.* Félicité, the main character of the story in question, is a poor, illiterate servant who lends her affection to a violent fiancé, to the children of her mistress, to her nephew, to an elderly woman with arm cancer and, finally, to her parrot, Loulou. When the time comes for the parrot to die too, Félicité stuffs it and begins to worship it, as if its remains were holy relics.

The role of the first-person narrator in Julian Barnes' novel is roughly that of a detective. He obstinately tries to establish whether the stuffed parrot kept on Flaubert's writing table at the time he had written *Une coeur simple* was the same one exhibited nowadays in the Museum of Rouen or the one in Hôtel-Dieu.

In this case, we obviously identify something more than a mere encounter with posterity in Flaubert's name. The detective story of finding the authentic Loulou might look like a parakeet at the first sight, but it actually dissimulates a serious warning: the (re)reading of the past should relinquish the demand of finding the unique truth. The episode of great significance in this respect is when in Flaubert's museum in Rouen Braithwaite comes across a stuffed parrot, labelled as the one that Flaubert borrowed from the natural history museum to have on his desk while writing the story of Félicité: "I gazed at the bird, and to my surprise felt ardently in touch with this writer (…) in this exceptional green parrot…was something which made me feel I had almost known the writer. I was both moved and cheered.[17]"

Cornelia Stott has rightly observed that Geoffrey Braithwaite "experiences a kind of epiphany and is emotionally moved in a way that seems to be a parody of

[17] Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, 16.

religious ecstasy.[18]" Then, traveling to Croisset to visit Flaubert's summer house he is shown a second parrot, also beyond doubt the one that the writer actually had on his desk. In a nutshell, the authenticity of "the evidence that is available is always on doubt[19]" and the only thing accessible to the researcher of the past is collecting relics of dubious authenticity for the sake of his/her subjective truth. The final sequence is enough edifying in this respect: the confusing reduplication of parrots makes the recognition of the real Loulou impossible. The conclusion (or rather one of the possible conclusions) is that past events – filtered through the *hobby-horses* of the present – can only be partially recovered, while fallacies themselves gain a certain prestige, since they are closely related to fiction and to artists' craft.

In conclusion, the exploration of postmodern historiographic metafictions offers the researcher the opportunity to bring literary studies into an interdisciplinary dialogue which is crucial for understanding the complex topic of memory, history and mystification (since this conceptual network has important implications not only in the field of aesthetics and literary theory, but also in history and social sciences).

[18] Cornelia Stott, *The Sound of Truth. Constructed and Reconstructed Lives in English Novels since Julian Barnes' «Flaubert's Parrot»* (Marburg: Tectum, 2010), 76.
[19] Ibid.