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***THE CULTURALIST BRAND IN THE RECENT BRITISH LITERARY TRADITION : NATIONAL SELF-PORTRAYAL IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ORLANDO AND JOHN FOWLES'S THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN***

**Keywords:** *collective self-portrayal; national and insular culturalism; the culturalist literary brand; the high-modernist self-trusting fiction; anagogy; experiment in imaginative narratives; the post-modernist self-subverting universe; the mirror of art.*

**Abstract:** *Starting from the observation that the collective self-portrayal of this insular nation has culturalism as a constant mode of communication in whatever age and literary trend, and regardless of the fashions/ strategies embraced, the paper follows the implications of the legitimating and ironical intentions paradoxically placed side by side as a rule, in both modernist and postmodernist British literary texts. The text proposed for the conference will follow the constants and the diverging ways in which the national paradigmatic English culturalism manages to remain present to itself in literary terms, both when the high modernist, self-trusting fiction is deployed in the modernist key, in Woolf's mythomorphic, anagogical novel, and when, on the contrary, Fowles's postmodernism deploys its playful ruse in the fictitious key, in a self-subverting fictional universe. Noticing that, on the other hand, the two texts end up installing the artistic self as supreme, in the paper we try to discover more things about the relationship between, respectively, a didactic and an aesthetic constant in literature, measuring our discoveries against the artistic standard set by Oscar Wilde's maxim, in the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, about the rage of Caliban at seeing/not seeing his face in the mirror.*

Defining the terms of the paper enumerated in the abstract first, **culturalism** is the language game which keeps tradition in movement, either didactically or otherwise in literary texts. It is a term coined *ad hoc*, a mannerist *conceptismo*, deriving from the authoritarian culture makers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot, who must be regarded as members of a series of paradigmatic British men of letters, canonical creators and legitimators of culture; they were followed or supported by all the names which the academia either reverently commemorates, or uses as targets of pertinent criticism, every year when still teaching them. They form a series starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Thomas Carlyle and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with T. S. Eliot himself, both of them and several others backed up by F.R. Leavis. We cannot refer to either Eliot's essay *Notes for a Definition of Culture* or to his canonical *The Waste Land* to make the case clearer, because in Romania these works are known and given the fact that in the paper, as the title shows, we have decided to (epistemologically) cut the **fiction** slice of this tradition of men, and women, of letters (as F. R. Leavis, side by side with Virginia Woolf, include(s) George Eliot in the *Great Tradition* and *Common Reader*). Not only can we note that these writers are part of a strong series of what we can figuratively call "tradition mongers", canonical, national and insular, but we can invoke them to make a case of the fact that in twentieth century literature culturalism can be showed to persist in texts whose wager is experimental. In English letters, experiments themselves, radically modern, use the national canon as a constant ingredient and as the cultural idiom, or, consequently, as a nexus of English/British aesthetic writing.

Secondly, as the clarification of the terms goes, **the figure of the mirror** is turned, in radical aesthetic modernity, neither up to nature, as in Shakespeare, nor up to Caliban, as in Wilde's declarative and didactic recasting of Caliban in the preface to his novel. In all the experiments which were instituted as canonical literary texts by (post-) modernism and the readers' communities, and also in the academia, the following can be affirmed: since the mirror cannot be turned up to itself, it is worked upon, to extend and knead into being its textures as objects of our aesthetic attention. The operations upon, and with, the mirror constitute the substance of the radically modern aesthetic experiment. But it is claimed here that the pieces of the game are still culturalist, resting upon the sharing of the tradition, as the language of cultivation and refinement. Without being skeptical, we would claim that in an intertextual modern universe, the pieces of the game persist, as in Mihai Eminescu's poem *Gloss*, making different language games from the same musical scales, with different mouths uttering the words of pertinent, artistic variations.

For interrogating the ways in which the culturalist tradition persists behind, in, and through the experimental texts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these two basically anti-realistic novels are placed side by side as tokens of the symbolic, metaphorical narrative kind, on the one hand (as in *Orlando*) and, on the other hand, as more recent anti-narratives (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*). We want to see how the stereotypically Calibanesque rage is sublimated differently in literary modernism and literary post-modernism. As foreign readers, we can measure the different sublimations against what we perceive quite clearly as being the English culturalist tradition. We see this tradition as a constant, deeper narrative, an intentional narrative underlying the particular texts in the phenomenological sense of the word "intentional". This is an intentional narrative containing and conveying a national and local identity in action, and performatively. There is no use in simplifying this narrative, to recognize in it the persistence of some didactic ethos, for the game with tradition is subtler than the conscious (and conspicuous), deliberative, and ideological, one, of, for example, the Victorian eminent missionaries or professors of culture<sup>1</sup>.

Instead, we will look into the ways the professorial materials increase the accuracy of the mirror, by depositing ever more refined silver layers on its texture. The following text places together the figures of refinement and aesthetic professionalism which remain in the culturalist vein of the English tradition, in order to make more magical and ever more substantial the surfaces of a thickened artistic mirror. And in order to create a brand.

It is precisely this merger of high and low literary strands of meaning that encourages a foreign reader to declare that in even recent English literature one has to do with **a decisively culturalist literary brand**. A brand has to have continuity, currency, accuracy, plus the binding power to create orderliness, and to give radiance, or at least transparency, to cultural meanings. The brand is fashioned by cultural anthropology and cultural ideology as a public and fully performative projection of taste, just as taste is the dialogue of styles. Communicatively and institutionally (sociologically speaking) a brand is a form of effective circulation for a people's recognizable cultural identity, shaped as a collective self. Given the

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<sup>1</sup> Here, regarding things from Romania, again, it is worth noting that the discourse about the culturalists came our way in the early 1990s via the books of the neo-Marxist and anti-canonical British intellectuals who exposed to a then fashionable *critique* Eliot's *Notes towards a Definition of Culture*, decrying the existence in Britain of the „Great Tradition” school; therefore we owe our own contact with this, or the, tradition of English letters to the academic accents taken from the books and discourses of the then mainstream people who were positioned *against* this tradition. For obvious reasons, pertaining to the turn of the century ethos, contesting the values of those who had managed to reign supreme for too long. And one can only be grateful, maybe not grateful enough, to those people whom even we could call today „the postcolonial intellectuals” working in Romania, side by side with us for some princeps years, or inviting us to visit their academic centres, inviting us to partake of the accents of their academia. And the present paper is *a letter to their world*, too, as Emily Dickinson would put it.

currency and publicity of these texts by Woolf and Fowles, made into success stories and successful films repeatedly, we would claim that the culturalist style is part of the English *de facto*, unorthodox, or popular, as well as of the *de jure* literary canon(s). Starting from a stylistic and typological consideration of **the mirror of art** in these two novels, the paper will assess the power of the thematic factors in the terrain spanning from the individual work and its values to the public valuation processes. This text will probe into the relationship between the individual literary medium, the mirror, and the phenomena of the public forum of communication where Caliban and the media hype reign supreme.

Stylistically speaking we encounter a comparably big amount of cultural sophistication and artificial constructedness in both *Orlando* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. But there exists a discrepancy between Woolf's high modernist masterpiece, whose meanings radiate from a centre (or converge into a centre), and Fowles's post-modernist work which constructs meanings as a consequence of its being an antiform, operating centrifugally. Virginia Woolf's book is a parable of the artistic personality which repeats its own theme with variations only to expand the core meanings and make them radiate. Like all high modernist texts, *Orlando* breathes its own aesthetic rules of the game in the encyclopaedic but highly selective, even select, space - described by Northrop Frye as **the anagogical space of the utmost ambitious literariness**. Aesthetic anagogy distinguishes itself by an infinitely connoting/connotative autonomy. An anagogical literary work, Frye explains (in his second essay of the *Anatomy of Criticism*, containing a theory of symbols) (Frye 119-122), is a monad, in the substantial sense: it is self-sufficient, establishing its own reading rules and nuclear meaning. In *Orlando* the meaning is centred upon the figure of the artist as sublime and complete. The artist is the androgyne growing in perfection through a cycle of metamorphoses which sharpen the artistic consciousness, enriches and radicalizes the person's creative self. Virginia Woolf theorizes upon the changes of the artist's delicious apartness and compelling personality by weaving a series of domestic and romance narratives upon the wider loom of history in very wide, comprehensive, encyclopaedic and historicist terms. Woolf illustrates the processes and phenomena leading to the reconciliation of the social and artistic self as an artistic phenomenology of the Spirit. She is superimposing the domestic on the historical and social narrative in a very elegant historicist romance. This is the label and recipe for artistic grandeur that we recommend for classifying her aesthetic Bildungsroman set in the various grand cultural ages in English history. Typologically, in *Orlando*, Woolf is writing an aesthetic romance, harking back to the romantic and Goethean fictionalized histories (in Romanian, *istorii romanțate*), and embodying in a straightforward manner Wilde's theory about the romance of art, so masterfully analysed by the Romanian author and Anglicist Florina Tufescu, both in her mature school-leaving dissertation, defended at the University of Bucharest in the year 1999, and in her outstanding study *Oscar Wilde's Plagiarism: The Triumph of Art over Ego*, issued in 2008 by the prestigious Irish Academic Press, which spans over...several seas and oceans, since its headquarters...range (while they do not rage !) from Dublin to Portland, Oregon.

The result of the modernist and post-modernist mannerisms, which pertain, chronologically, to what we would jocosely term "the long 20<sup>th</sup> century", by which we would parody the long span of long modernity's *long durée*, is that the mirror has been suffused - and thickened - with the aestheticist values invested into it: a mirror that charms and delights, leaving very far behind all the enraged Calibans (even those of the average mainstream clichés put in circulation by either the too fashionable critics, or the too uninformed wider public).

On the other hand, stylistically, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* uses both the low mimetic(or domestic) histories of the Victorian age, and the high mimetic meta-narratives of Darwinian natural science and of historiography to deconstruct them, by ironic strategies. If we pass on, now, from these meta-narratives carried by what literary pragmatics and semiotics has called the meta-textual signs of the epigraphs to the individual chapters, we can note that, in his story, the *sjuzet*, Fowles is creating a

pastiche of Hardy's pathetic novels, obliquely mirroring what his predecessors had established as the tradition of the English novel. This is the second layer in the depth of layers or thicknesses inscribed on the mirror of art, Fowles's own mirror of art, after the previous meta-textual, metanarrative one. The result is a destabilizing collage of narratives played against each other, if we take them at face value, or literally, as separate narrative melodies. But since *unheard melodies* are sweeter, we might think further, measuring things against the more mysterious standards of art, to say the following. As a historian of art, Fowles foregrounds, i.e., puts between brackets, the characters and themes of the Victorian age, but as a postmodernist artist he makes them dubious and questionable by a kind of twisted pastiche, playing romance against science ironically, in several ways. By contrast to Woolf in her narrative of faith, which intensifies, viz. existentially actualizes, the myth, reenacting it with variations bespeaking of an anagogical literary eternity, Fowles behaves as an ironist whose vision is always self-divided. The characters in Fowles's hypertext to Hardy's hypotext, especially the text in *The Return of the Native*, are explored and exploded to continue them beyond the original limits. In the postmodernist mirror, the mirroring beyond the limits is a magical mirroring, on the wall. The characters' mystery, unsolved and insoluble till the end of the story, doubles their predictably realistic misery; the endings are double; the chapters' epigraphs both motivate and contradict, in their counterpointed movement, the local stories – and the local embodiment of theories in the narrative key; the novels' own words and worlds are doubled. Since Sarah Woodruff is a fully modern, emancipated woman, whose modernity overpowers both the Victorian prudery and the self-important theorizing of the consensus, being situated between the ages. (And one must bear in mind here both the consensus of the *fabula*, and the consensus of the *sjuzet*, i.e., both the Calibanesque naivete of the established Victorian community, and the Calibanesque callousness of the readerly consensus, which may well be a human universal, alas!, not an artistically concrete universal only). The lesson of the novel is anti-historicist, and it breaks the Victorian age glass (and the Victorian stage *mirror*), when it lets the sand of the hours seep into the later age all the time. Fowles's book dramatically plays the mystical love narrative not just against the domestic love narrative but also against the wider fabric of the historical or clinical *grand recits* of the ages. As a better fated Eustacia Vye and as a sure Becky Sharp *rediviva* (re-diva-viva!), Sarah Woodruff constructs herself unvirtuously, without scruples, directly as an object of public disdain; especially she is turning to account the inimical public text to suit her loving intentions and to defend her own self's apartness. As much in revolt against the limitations of the people around her as the innocent child Jane Eyre had been, Sarah Woodruff demonstratively, obstinately, and, indeed, suicidally, keeps running counter to conventions by deception, in the course of the novel. Her success lies in managing to lure the Victorian man. But what is more, she turns the less fit Charles Smithson's Victorian survival into the matter for meditation of, and about, the historical fossils. She makes him be the scapegoat fossil of the Victorian and male prejudices, turning him precisely into one of the clayey wonders of dead life that he had so lazily been enamoured of at the beginning of the novel. At the end of the novel, however, a new culturalist paradigm looms into view: the aestheticist one which would reconstruct the self of the victims in the Calibanesque Victorian or simply social game. The scapegoat is suddenly empowered by and as one of the Pre-Raphaelite artists. The understanding of the book over against the judgmental, negative labelling which would bitterly criticize and dismiss all the protagonists, like in Hardy's novels, or like in the implausible reformatory punishments of so much Victorian fiction in general depends upon the recognition of the scenarios deployed in the texture itself and the depth of the narrative mirror. The mirror does more than reflect passively, it enacts its own rituals. *This is its way of writing and inscribing the artistic self at the centre of the tradition*. An empowering, death and rebirth ritual has to be followed in the texture of Woolf's mirror of domestic and artistic delights which her picaresque of sorts is. On the scene of Fowles's postmodernist narrative is enacted a sacrificial and pathetic ritual, then a rite of passage to the maturer and historically more recent artistic state, in this pastiche of both narrative and cognitive realism. But to perform his

literary rites, Fowles needs to act violently, in so far as he breaks the mirror of Caliban's rage, where Woolf makes it hover in the widest distance from the turbulent powers<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, one feels that both of these English writers build up demonstrations. Woolf builds descriptively a discontinuous narrative, made up of patches, as theorized by Ilie Gyurcsik in his *Essay of paradoxical hermeneutics* (Gyurcsik, I., 2000) using the figure of the Harlequin's mottled cape to describe what for Frye were centripetal anagogical collages. Both critics, Ilie Gyurcsik and Northrop Frye, speak to us, however, of what holds together fictions informed by a very local, not general principle of coherence. Repetition on the theme of the artistic temperament are projected in Virginia Woolf against the public and historicist canvass to *make a case for the artistic continuity and sublimation of selves into creativity* – in spite of the ages' recognizable differences. Fowles, however, *makes a case against continuity* since he is interested in the interstices of the ages, the modes of life, the classes and occupations. His instrument of meaning is the collage dramatising the gap between the individual and the social, the private and the public sphere is what interests. But this does not mean that the two English/British<sup>3</sup> writers' narratives do not use the same source, the tradition, as the matrix or domain of their inspiration. And things are not as simple as to enable us to speak, traditionally, of the place they draw their inspiration from, viz. of "the fountain" of their inspiration. We have to change the metaphor to suit their agenda (or their plot) which is artistic. The plots of their books are ways of stating their own theme(s), as will be seen further, when we will compare the two writers' feminism and discourses on art, i.e., when we will contrast their mirrors.

It is quite true that thematically both novels are centred upon a feminist and an artistic case study, a case study that merges these two and other themes. The romance and romance of art themes ensure the popularity of the books with all the strands of popularity characteristic for a receptive public; but they also add to these the scenic value of the local and historical colouring provided by the novels. Artistically, nevertheless, the variation upon the theme of the Calibesque rage in front of the realistic mirror of fiction is what gives canonical depth to the texts. Encouraging the readers to understand things by forcing them to inhabit the interstice between the lines of realism and the conventions, the novels enable the readership to tap in to tradition, and to read between the ages and surfaces, unlike a literalist Caliban eaten by anger anyway – and raging in blindness. Because tradition, the culturalist tradition of art can make a gift of meaning from behind the stage of narrative artificiality, sensationalism or sensualism for its/their own sake. But what brandishes the sword of literary meaning in action (as Tennyson put it, describing the

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<sup>2</sup> For it is just to say that a modernist plot, which is built, as in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, around the re-enactment of the androgyne myth, does not break (or murder!) anything to create, whereas a ...serious pastiche, devoid of humour but brimming with sombre ironies, while not being a *bona fide*, humorous parody, as Fowles's *The French Lieutenant* is, thrives on the violence of its ironies, warring with the tradition – exactly as things are presented in Harold Bloom's post-structuralist narrative about the literary ephebes.

<sup>3</sup> This is the place to clarify the choice and vacillation between the adjectives "English" and "British", which we, foreign literature teachers, have to address almost daily in our teaching – that needs to remain free from the various brands of pathos excusable within cultures, but impermissible outside them, in imagological environments which must have their own deontology. The choice involves the opposition between the philological and the political texts. We read and comment upon *English language texts* in their relation with *the tradition of English letters* (and you can refer to this tradition in terms of Tery Eagleton's excerpt on *The Rise of English*, in Surdulescu and Ștefănescu, 1999, 129-133) but we politicize them, when we write in full cultural studies awareness of their belonging to the various kinds of *British regionalism* and we, therefore, move in our discourses in and out of the established contexts. (In the University of Bucharest, we have taught British regional identity from this perspective, studying the Celtic fringes in the MA modules dedicated to the British Cultural Studies Scottish and Irish identity). These two identity adjectives are not opposed, but just contrasted, when used with a slash, as a means of thinking them together.

wonderful appearance of Sir Lancelot's sword in *The Lady of Shalott*, or the sword of Ulysses' aspiration, in the homonymous dramatic monologue), what turns into a powerful brand the rich meanings of such English/British culture within culture emblems as these two books are is the convergence of the twain: namely the articulation of the grander with the lesser narratives in the English fictional monads. If, at the level of sophisticated symbolism of aestheticism, the mirror is seen to represent the inert surface of the realistic fiction resisting and infuriating the conventional Caliban, then the two novels in question here work by expanding the mirror, or by going "beyond the looking glass". Virginia Woolf's mirror is expanded so as to catch a different face than that of Caliban, for its mythical realism reflection. It minimizes Caliban and expands the figure behind him, the self withdrawing into its own writing which empowers the mirror with another than the enraging function. Woolf's mirror is magical because it augments the truths of art – and its grandeur. By contrast, Fowles would place art's surfaces so as to cut with them an image beyond the looking glass of conventions. This attribute of feminine feed-back with beauty, the mirror, is wielded as a sword by this martial, inhabitant of Mars that Fowles is. On the other hand, even the widest public can rejoice (at, when) witnessing the sure moves of a powerful personality in the texture of the two texts. If the last avatar of Woolf's Orlando, the artist, is androgynously feminine, the postmodernist text itself inhabits *the woman country*, as it was called in Robert Browning's poem *By the Fireside*.

*It seems that the two novels advance feminism and art together as constants of the more advanced modern and cultural ages, which have transcended patriarchal and literalist prejudice.* The two books make a case of the woman essence which proves capable to cure an inartistic Caliban readership of his (r)age. Semiotically and pragmatically thinking, this is... "announced covertly" by Virginia Woolf's innocently entitled *Orlando*, while Fowles' title thematises and asserts the feminine, in a manner that plays with the aspiration of being infinitely connotative. Both novels would give their readers access to the woman essence of love and art. A woman essence that can cure the scholar gypsy artist of Woolf's narrative of the rage inevitable to his... male and other handicaps, allowing the artist to escape the monstrous by the wondrous. For it is by a wondrous transformation that Orlando the artist born a man can grow at last to the stature and maturity of Orlando the woman artist, the master mistress of our passion. This wondrous transformation can only be made possible and couched in the very modern, most recent terms of art; they are the terms of what was then the...latest contemporary literary and cultural age and page. Similarly, in Fowles's story, the woman-essence, the feminine artistic essence is encountered and declared at the...profuse ends of the book capable to cure Charles Smithson of his rudimentary and Victorian selfhood and rage. And we can notice, mirrored in depth in the mirror of art, how the artistic self can be rewritten creatively. It can be rewritten, either, as in Woolf's poly-novel, by enhancing, or as in Fowles's antinovel, by undercutting other literary constructions of the self. Or is it so? We can reiterate things by looking at the canonical or maybe anticanonical series of ...two writers proposed in our case study<sup>4</sup>. Woolf's feminine mirror contains the artist in its wonderful depth, in tenuous, dreamy and sentimental social panoramas sublimated by the finale gesture of a cross-gender, artistic harakiri. Fowles empowers the femininity of artistic fertility by both recycling and slaying the eminent texts of the literary tradition containing him as an English writer, too. He recycles Virginia Woolf's own most radical feminist gesture, but not by a loving action, since he is writing an anti-romance or love story with an unhappy ending.

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<sup>4</sup> In the originally presented version of the paper, a sketch really, the case and series proposed here comprised one more member and a demonstration of how T. S. Eliot did the same thing as our other two writers. But that demonstration cannot remain part of this paper, for space and other obvious reasons, while it was a necessary ...consummation of the course delivered to the second year students in the last semester of the British literary survey, in 2008.

Why any radical, radically modern, reader may dislike these two novels *qua* novels may be precisely and respectively because of their pathetic sentimentalism. Which can be understood, in culturalist terms as the pathethics of literary sentimentalism<sup>5</sup>. Fowles's mirror is never tenuous but always polemical, ambitiously dramatic, tragic, sacrificial – and of course, pathetic. Fowles has digested not entire myths but just fragments of sacrificial moments, pathetic shards that cut and make us bleed, if we hanker for believable fiction. Like in any of the mirror-novels written by Hardy and like the primum movens of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Becky's femininity is sharp, as sharp as Sarah's.

But beside the artistic signatures they place or fail to place upon myth, as myth criticism will put it, both novels need the entire social and cultural panorama as their vis-à-vis for creating their own meanings. They both invoke tradition and depend upon it to make the mirror grow into artistic being, at the expense of Caliban.

The Caliban of the tradition, the communal and conventional, always predictable and outrageous raging presence, is tamed and improved upon, on a par with other characters and characteristics of the tradition. This is the merit of literary anagogy, as Frye has instituted or described it, or the merit of the paradoxical hermeneutics wielded, so often like a sword, by the radically modern artists.

For the modern English writer who aims at being a classic or to polemically correct the classics (as Wilde the artist did first, and as Florina Tufescu helped us understand more clearly first, too), Caliban remains both the stimulus and the background presence for the aesthetically intensified fictional reflection. And if you fail to see his gesturing behind the stage, as a foregrounded extra, the miracle of the transposition, by either transcendence or fully accepted transience, simply does not obtain. Tradition is a kind of ladder upon which the literary talent climbs to make eloquent literature from Culture (capital letter) as an empowering tool of meaningful communication behind the mimetic stage, or from the stage Wings.

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<sup>5</sup> Sentimentalism is taken to mean here what Frye reiterated, *apud* Schiller (Frye, in the first, historical essay of *The Anatomy of Criticism* Frye, 35), as being the sentimentalism of the later ages when rewriting the older, prototypical literary texts and their wisdom. This is what has probably prompted radical moderns, in whose number have latterly been included the postmoderns also, to incur the risk of practicing only sustained literary experiments while writing literature in/on the mirror. These experiments refuse sentimentalism, embrace polemics and....land literature on the highest plains which may also remain completely inaccessible for wider reading publics.