

British Travellers Stick Together – Olivia Manning’s Gulliver in the Balkans

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This paper involves discovering how Olivia Manning’s Balkan Trilogy has mapped the image of Romania and mostly draws upon the sections of the trilogy in which pre-war Bucharest was memorialized as a blend of Orient and Occident, where the native population coexists with an amalgam of various other nations. Upon the examination of Harriet Pringle, the central figure of the sequence, it becomes clear that there is a connection to Swift’s Gulliver in that both characters embark on a process of “literary colonisation”. This focus establishes Manning’s place among the British travel writers by reviewing the main ideas that stem from the substantial body of work concerned with her trilogy. The article makes frequent reference back to Olivia Manning’s biography, since her narrative is admittedly based on the writer’s personal odyssey in Bucharest. Through identifying the crossover character of Manning’s prose, this research highlights its relevance for the fictional construct.

Keywords: centre; margin; alterity; literary colonization; Gulliver syndrome.

Introduction

Olivia Manning’s most notorious works, *The Balkan Trilogy*¹ and *The Levant Trilogy*², known collectively as *Fortunes of War*, are, paradoxically, at the same time much discussed and quasi-unread. Although the collection was made famous by the 1987 BBC television adaptation *Fortunes of War*, a series that followed the original works relatively faithfully, Manning’s novels themselves (the trilogies included) have never enjoyed from the readership the enthusiastic reception their author felt they deserved³. The six novels making up *Fortunes of War* are overtly based on the writer’s personal odyssey in Bucharest, Athens, Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, and Jerusalem. Manning’s Balkan and Middle East journey started just before the outbreak of WWII and continued into its early years, but the actual trilogies were written between mid-1950s and mid-1970s. This time lag (during which the writer must have decanted her experiences and impressions and reached some conclusions relative to them) can hardly explain why the scarcity of imagination⁴ that characterizes

¹ *The Balkan Trilogy*, made up of *The Great Fortune* (1960), *The Spoilt City* (1962) and *Friends and Heroes* (1965), was published in one volume in 1981.

² *The Levant Trilogy*, consisting of *The Danger Tree* (1977), *The Battle Lost and Won* (1978) and *The Sum of Things* (1980), was published in one volume in 1982

³ “Manning craved much more critical attention and money than she got for her writing, but with her ‘permanently discontented’ manner and ‘great angry eyes’, she was clearly a very hard person to please or praise. The saddest parts of this biography are where friends struggle to convey her personal qualities: tales of kindness and sympathy tend to get outnumbered very quickly by tales of ‘Ollie Beak’s recurrent gloom’. It’s a terrible fate to be pretty much always unhappy, and to feel as jealous of everyone as Olivia Manning did, but perhaps she needed that stimulus, however miserable it made her. The books remain as a vindication” (Harman, 2013).

⁴ “As she openly confided to friends and fellow-writers, she felt happiest and most confident when writing

a prose whose author is often judgmental and self-righteous⁵ is only at times counterbalanced by the literary merits of the abundant descriptions⁶ of the places and characters in *Fortunes of War*.

Discussion

The literature generally sees *The Balkan Trilogy* as more accomplished than *The Levant Trilogy*, but this alone does not explain the multitude of the Romanian studies and commentaries (Boia 1997; Gavrilu 1998; Machedon & Scoffham 1999; Andras 2003, 2010; Ivancu 2010; Damian 2013; Bardulete 2014; Pelehatai 2016) concerned mainly with *The Great Fortune* and *The Spoilt City*, the first two parts of *The Balkan Trilogy*. The substantial body of work concerning an author who “fell into the category of novelists whose name is somehow familiar but whose novels are not familiar at all” (Hensher, 2004) has to do with the fact that Bucharest is at the same time the setting for the above-mentioned novels and its most powerful character, the target of Manning’s analysis and judgment. As Goldsworthy puts it, “Manning’s Bucharest, exuberant and lavish, is similarly a melancholy presence in spite, or perhaps because of, its enormous luxury” (1998: 193). Going beyond the picturesque descriptions of a Bucharest in which Orient and Occident blend, most of the British, American and Romanian academics⁷ have approached *The Balkan Trilogy* from a broader perspective which, instead of simply seeing it as a roman-fleuve concerned with travels and wartime, has raised issues such as margin vs. centre, alterity and otherness, and “narrative/imaginative colonization”⁸. Understandably and more or less overtly, they identify in Manning’s view on the Balkan countries and their inhabitants the embodiment of Ruritania, although, geographically speaking, Ruritania’s original location is closer to central Europe.

However, as Goldsworthy (1998) notes, real geography and history are of secondary importance during “[t]he imaginative colonisation of the Balkans by British writers” (2), a process of reshaping that can range

from the comparatively insignificant attempts of the “imagine” to create and present a recognisable face to the “imager” for economic benefit – as in the transformation of Castle Bran in Romania into “Dracula’s Castle” in spite of its tenuous historical link with the historic Count Dracula – to the more important impact of preconceived ideas on the processes of decision-making which determine the extent of foreign loans and investment, the level of military and humanitarian aid, and the speed at which individual Balkan countries are allowed to join “Europe”, NATO or any other international organisation or club. (2)

When Olivia Manning arrived in Bucharest in 1939, she had already had a taste of London’s literary world to which she felt she rightfully belonged, and the time spent abroad (until 1946) was going to provide her with the material she would exploit for the purpose of securing her

of things she had known first-hand. Ruefully declaring that she possessed neither a capacious imagination nor a feel for fantasy, she insisted she wrote completely ‘out of experience’ (...)” (David, 2012: 5).

⁵ “While she was alive, she didn’t inspire much affection; her enemies thought her ‘carping and vindictive’, ‘narrow-minded and spiteful’, and even her chums called her ‘Olivia Moaning’ behind her back” (Harman, 2013).

⁶ “The Bucharest sequences are the best, but subsequent volumes sink into a mess of vague characterisation, obtrusive and unappealing research (the battle scenes in the second trilogy are, as many people have said, very implausible), and difficulties with emphasis. Moments which should stand out, like the unbelieving parents spooning gruel into a hole in a dead boy’s cheek at the beginning of *The Danger Tree*, or the Cairo brothel scenes, just become a morass of one damn thing after another” (Hensher, 2004: 71).

⁷ Gavrilu, 1998; Goldsworthy, 1998; Steinberg, 2005; Hammond, 2010; Ivancu 2010; Drace-Francis, 2013, etc.

⁸ In her book *Inventing Ruritania: the Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998), Vesna Goldsworthy identifies the stories and movies about Ruritania as forms of imaginative/narrative colonization of the peoples of the Balkans that are highly effective in shaping international perceptions of the Balkans (Goldsworthy, 1998: x, 2).

place as an acknowledged writer. The resulting narrative “was not history reimagined but rather history experienced and remembered” (Moorehead, 2013), only the image she creates by writing what she remembered shows, once again, “[l]ack of familiarity with the Balkan world and a corresponding sense of its exoticism and extraordinary complexity (reiterated by almost every British writer who has ever written anything about the region)” (Goldsworthy, 1998: 208) which have “enabled British authors to use the Balkans as a suitable location for a variety of popular genres. The cultural identities of the countries themselves are largely disregarded, and they remain in thrall to the imperialist advance of the expanding industry of the imagination, eager to chart its maps of intellectual property rights (Goldsworthy, 1998: 208).

That much can be said about the way Manning’s pre-war and wartime experiences in the Balkans are reflected in her alter ego, Harriet Pringle, an intentional self-insertion of the writer whose behaviour, disposition, family and social life are often indistinguishable from that of its creator. Thus, in *The Great Fortune* and *The Spoilt City*, the reader follows Harriet and Guy Pringle to Bucharest, where everything that happens to them and the group of English expats there is seen through Harriet’s eyes on the background of the events that shake the Romanian society. The two novels considered in the present study can be recognized then as pieces of fictionalized personal experiences, the outcome of Manning’s travel to Romania. Gavrilu’s observation, that “[t]he fictionalized versions of Eastern Europe created by contemporary British writers combine the features of travel literature with utopia or dystopia, thus revealing the authors in a dual role: that of creators of fiction and of cultural historians for the two nations; they remain engaged in a paradoxical play of reality and fiction” (1998: 123), can be applied to Manning’s treatment of her Romanian experience. In *The Balkan Trilogy*, the duality identified by Gavrilu appears to have fuelled the discrepancies in Manning’s rationale and cast a shadow of doubt on the reliability of the roles she assumes.

The same Gavrilu aptly named such attitudes the “Gulliver syndrome”, a concept that lumps, under the umbrella of the complicated insular superiority complex attributed to the British ethnic self-image, a subtle array of relationships generated by the encounter with an alien cultural environment (1998: 11). Indeed, Swift’s character perceives cultural differences from a quadruple perspective⁹: 1. a feeling of superiority that makes the rest of the world look ridiculous and mean; 2. the perception of alterity as abnormal and thus grotesque and oversized; 3. the interpretation of differences as lack of reason and common sense; 4. an awareness of the self that makes the world look like a conglomerate of base animal instincts (Olos, 2003: 155). Such standpoints tend to bounce back and, as Gavrilu notes, Gulliver, “as a hypothesis of otherness disturbed by the value system of his cultural code evolves from the compatible to the incompatible, from the inclusion to the exclusion in order to end up as an alien in his own culture” (Gavrilu in Mudure, 2005: 270).

One can recognize this pattern in Harriet Pringle’s odyssey, from the moment she takes her headlong plunge into the Romanian world as the wife of a man she barely knows¹⁰ to her return to London at the end of the war. Even before arriving in Bucharest, Harriet feels displaced and excluded from her husband’s bachelor life habits that tend to continue in marriage, as well as from the social duties she understands to assume, and that makes her look at things around her through malicious eyes. Her world back home, the British capital and its literary circles, has also been changed by WWII, and Bucharest has thus become the point of no return for her. Harriet’s realization resembles the one Manning expresses in October 1939 in a letter to a friend in which she is “bemoaning the ‘stupidity’ of their generation and ruing the loss of her ‘old life’: when she left London it had ‘ceased almost at once to be the London I knew and seems to have become

⁹ These standpoints were outlined by Paul Turner in his Introduction to the 1994 OUP edition of *Gulliver’s Travels*.

¹⁰ Like Manning herself, who married Reginald Donald “Reggie” Smith very soon after Walter Allen introduced them, Harriet married Guy Pringle after only a three weeks’ relation.

a blacked-out wilderness . . . it is dreadful to feel that my old life is no longer there to be returned to” (David, 2012: 77).

Understandably, the Romanian women, whose language and behaviour codes Harriet does not understand, are depicted with harsh strokes from the first pages of the trilogy: “Stout, little Rumanian women, not noticeable before, pushed their way through the wagon-lit chattering in French” (Manning, 1981: 18). The impression of this first encounter on the train taking her and Guy to Romania carries on, and the women the English couple see strolling on the *Chaussée* are described as “implacable as steam-rollers. Short and strong, they remained bland-faced while wielding buttocks and breasts as heavy as bladders of lard” (Manning, 1981: 48). In contrast with the “the pigeon-shaped women on the pavement”, a gypsy flower-girl looks “long, lean and flashy, like a flamingo or a crane” (Manning, 1981: 122).

Sophie Oreşanu’s portrait stands out from among the few portraits of the Romanian women detached from this collective image. Harriet’s antipathy for her husband’s protégée is completely explicable, as the Romanian girl is everything she is not, and Sophie’s attitude toward Guy’s spouse does not help much:

As Sophie looked at Harriet, her expression suggested she was at a loss to understand not only how he had acquired a wife, but how he had acquired such a wife. She eventually gave a nod and looked away. She was a pretty enough girl, dark like most Rumanians, too full in the cheeks. Her chief beauty was her figure. Looking at Sophie’s well developed bosom, Harriet felt at a disadvantage. Perhaps Sophie’s shape would not last, but it was enviable while it lasted. (Manning, 1981: 76)

But if the jealousy the insecure Harriet felt of her husband’s student is justifiable, her reaction to the Romanian music cannot simply be explained by culture shock. As a manifestation of an exacerbated perception of alterity, for Harriet’s British ears, “the Rumanian *bora*” is a “persistent, nerve-racking music” (Manning, 1981: 41). Furthermore, the episode of Florica’s performance¹¹ at Pavel’s open air restaurant acquires epic proportions and is probably the most telling account of Harriet’s feelings about Romania:

Florica, in her long black and white skirts, was posed like a bird, a magpie, in the orchestra cage. When the applause died out, she jerked forward in a bow, then, opening her mouth, gave a high, violent gypsy howl. (...) Harriet felt the sound pass like a shock down her spine. The first howl was followed by a second, sustained at a pitch that must within a few years (so Inchcape later assured the table) destroy her vocal chords. (...) Florica, working herself into a fury in the cage, seemed to be made of copper wire. She had the usual gypsy thinness and was as dark as an Indian. When she threw back her head, the sinews moved in her throat: the muscles moved as her lean arms swept the air. The light flashed over her hair, that was strained back, glossy, from her round, glossy brow. Singing there among the plump women of the audience, she was like a starved wild kitten spitting at cream-fed cats. The music sank and her voice dropped to a snarl. It rose and, twisting her body as in rage, clenching her fists and striking back her skirts, she finished on an elemental screech that was sustained above the tremendous outburst of applause. (Manning, 1981: 71-72).

The response of the natives in the audience who “[w]hen it was over, (...) blinked as though they had survived a tornado (Manning, 1981: 72) is natural for Manning: through Harriet’s eyes, she “sees the citizens of Bucharest as a sort of peasants, some of them authentic peasants and others more evolved peasants, dressed up in city clothes explained by the fact that they were peasants themselves (Boia, 2001: 185). Romanian peasants, Harriet had read in “books written by travellers

¹¹ It has been argued (Damian, 2013) that Florica is an alias for Maria Tănase.

in Rumania (...) were (...) mad about music. Music was their only outlet. They made themselves drunk on it" (Manning, 1981: 256). The association of Sophie and Florica in their love for *boră* is yet another belittling addition to the portrait of the former as the most detestable representative of the Romanian women: "Fitzsimon was still at the pianoforte attempting to produce *boră* music while Sophie, beside him, sang shrill and sharp in imitation of Florica" (Manning, 1981: 599).

Harriet's profound unhappiness and discontent appears to be fuelled by everything she saw or felt in a land which, in Boia's words, "presents itself as a country only partially integrated in European civilization, a country of the margins, characterized by a still pronounced store of primitivism, a strange amalgam of modern urban life and rustic survivals" (2001: 185). Like Swift's Gulliver, the central character of the trilogies sets out on a journey from the center of the British Empire to the margins of Europe, where the western luxury goods¹² and commodities available do not comfort her anguish in front of a landscape she perceives as menacing only because it is unknown: "'Oh!' said Harriet. She (...) gazed out at the dark reaches of the Muntenia plain, on which the city stood like a bride-cake on a plate. 'A barbarous country', she said (Manning, 1981: 55).

Even the Romanian continental climate manages to give the Englishwoman cause for complaint, though this is somehow ironical for somebody coming from a country that is not exactly famous for its pleasant weather. For Harriet, summers are too hot and aggress her physically ("Harriet could smell her hair toasted by the sun. The heat was a burden on her head" (Manning, 1981: 615).), while winters evoke Bram Stoker's "wolf country":

Driving now down the long, deserted Calea Victoriei, it seemed to her she could smell in the wind those not so distant regions of mountain and fir-forest where wolves and bears, driven by hunger, haunted the villages in the winter snow-light. And the wind was harsher than any wind she had ever known. She shivered, feeling isolated in a country that was to her not only foreign but alien. (Manning, 1981: 256)

The synonymic pair *foreign* and *alien* is so effective in blurring real geography that Manning does not need to invent imaginary realms for Harriet's travels or to mention Ruritania and Count Dracula explicitly. The capital of an actual Balkan country perceived "in an ambivalent oscillation between 'Europeanness' and 'Oriental difference'" (Goldsworthy, 1998: 2) will do as the natural setting for its amalgamated inhabitants, of which the beggars of Bucharest are reminding of Swift's Yahoos:

These were professional beggars, blinded or maimed by beggar parents in infancy. Guy, during his apprentice year, had grown accustomed, if not inured, to the sight of white eyeballs and running sores, to have stumps and withered arms and the breasts of nursing mothers thrust into his face. (...) All the beggars set upon the Pringles together. One hid half a loaf behind his back to join in the age old cry of: '*Mi-e foame, foame, foame.*' They were hemmed in by a stench of sweat, garlic and putrid wounds. (...) A man on the ground, attempting to bar their way, stretched out a naked leg bone-thin, on which the skin was mottled purple and rosetted with yellow scabs. (Manning, 1981: 46)

The image of the population of Bucharest, for all its national diversity, makes it impossible for Harriet to identify any Houyhnhnms, not even in the group of British expats, although "[i]n the first trilogy, the British virtually all assume the legitimacy of British sovereignty" (Steinberg, 2005: 104). At least some of Harriet's contempt towards everyone non-British can be explained by the fact that Manning has "grown up in the belief that Britain was supreme in the world and

¹² "Within the brilliant windows were French gloves and trinkets, English cashmere garments and Italian leatherwork, tagged with exotic words like 'pulloverul', 'chic', 'golful' and 'five-o'clockul'" (Manning, 1981: 239).

the British the most fortunate of people” (Steinberg, 2005: 105). Consequently, when in an episode in *The Levant Trilogy* she is equated with a native of a marginal country she feels insulted and defends the status she takes for granted¹³.

For rendering local colour and exoticism, Manning, unlike Swift, did not resort to inventing a weird-sounding language for the inhabitants of Romania; she simply picked several Romanian words and phrases and placed them in the English text. If Gulliver learns the languages of the countries he travels to besides those he already spoke (Dutch, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and Lingua Franca), Harriet has no such intention even if, as one of the characters in *The Great Fortune* notes, the language resembles Italian a lot. The fact that she speaks and comprehends practically no Romanian and French enhances her alienation among the people she holds in contempt, but who, unlike her, are polyglots¹⁴:

Harriet said: ‘The trouble is, I do not speak Rumanian.’
 ‘But the landlord will speak French. I am sure you speak very well French?’
 ‘I hardly speak it at all.’
 ‘That is extraordinary, sure-ly?’ Sophie’s voice soared in amazement. ‘A girl of good family who cannot speak very well French!’
 ‘Not in England.’ Harriet stood up. (Manning, 1981: 231)

An effective technique designed to render the linguistic isolation experienced by Harriet is Manning’s use of Romanian and French words and phrases in the English text. Thus, the culturally significant *Chaussée* has 26 occurrences, *crivăţ* – 4, the appellatives *Doamnă/a* – > 100, *Domn/-ule* – 33 and *Dragă* – 2, *horă* – 6, *friptură* – 24, *trăsură* – 24, *ţuică* – 21, *leu/lei* – 34, *lux* – 1, *nebun* – 1, *linişte* – 2, *grădină* – 2, etc. Several Romanian phrases and words, such as *Hey, bey, bey, domnule, Frumosă, Foarte frumosă* (122), *Santajul etajul* (298), *Snagov. Frumosa.* (351), *Bună dimineată, domnule* (457), *bacalaureat, printul, regeul* (618), *Capitanul, Capitanu* (701), *Nu voi abdica niciodată* (823), *Politeul* (897), *O să-le taie gâtul* (970), *Present* (984), *No, no, corniţa* (1019), *după războiul* (1181), *Hey, Hey, Hey, Ionesculi* (1192), though useful in the transfer of the local colour to the British readership, contain mistakes related to either spelling or morphology. As it seems, the British writer/historian can afford to reinvent not only the geography and history of the colonies, but also the language of their inhabitants.

The Romanian food and restaurant-related words inserted in Manning’s narrative (*friptură, ţuică, fleică de Braşov, rezervat, lux nebun, Pofţiţi la masă, Restaurantul and Cafea, Let’s go to Cina’s, Polişinel, a restaurant dating back to boyar days*, etc.) are accompanied by strikingly detailed descriptions of gargantuan meals and the gut reactions they triggered in the foreigners that attend them:

He saw a row of roasted turkeys with breasts ready sliced, two gammons baked with brown sugar and pineapple, crayfish, salmon coated with mayonnaise, several sorts of paté, three sorts of caviare, many aspic dishes, candied fruits, elaborate puddings, bunches of hot-house grapes, pineapples and autumn raspberries, all set on silver plates and decorated with white cattleyas. Trembling like a man in dire hunger, Yakimov darted forward. (Manning, 1981: 111)

Goldsworthy mentions the explanation Manning gives in an interview for this enthusiasm for food that may account for the mixed feelings of gluttony and self-indulgence her characters

¹³ In Egypt Harriet was “shocked to find that to the Americans she was an alien (...). Her line, “I’m not an alien – I’m British”, is wonderful in its assertive obtuseness. (...) What she means, of course, is that she is not only British but lightskinned. As a white British woman, she belongs everywhere, an assumption that sounds very much like an argument for imperialism. She is not a “native”, with all the negative connotations of that word (Steinberg, 2005: 104-105).

¹⁴ Sophie and Bella Niculescu, for example, speak, besides Romanian and English, French, German, Spanish and Italian.

display in the meal, restaurant and shopping scenes: “I think it is because I was so terribly hungry. Once when I was working in London, I fainted in the street through lack of food. And when we reached Rumania, the food was so rich, so fantastic” (1998: 193).

This suggests a rather unfair undertone of Manning’s belief that the British are entitled to enjoy the culinary richness and any other Romanian asset in exchange for their civilizing presence and the questionable protection against the Germans and Russians they ensured, much like the Spanish conquistadors were to the gold of the New World. In Steinberg’s view, “most of the British in Bucharest display an attitude toward the Rumanians that can most nicely be described as condescending. This attitude is reinforced by the Rumanians, who, as long as they believe the British will protect them, behave ingratiatingly. (...) On a deeper, if not more practical level, the British have never taken a real interest in Rumania (2005: 102).

Conclusions

Because it is “flawed by self-indulgence and a lack of self-judgment” (Hensher, 2004), as well as by its length and conventional narrative, the Balkan trilogy has never had the power other British works had to create “brand-names” (like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, for example), yet this kind of literature “continues to scar thinking about the Balkans as surely as British irrigation programmes have salinated the fertile lands of the Punjab” (Goldsworthy, 1998: 208).

In the good old Swiftian tradition, Manning actually appears to look at the world through a monstrous magnifying glass. Like Swift’s hero, she cannot truly return home, because home no longer is the safe familiar place it used to be. Much like Manning herself, Harriet Pringle has a complicated relationship with her husband and with Bucharest, the capital of a country whose people she either dislikes or envies profoundly. Lonely, insecure and disappointed with her new life, Harriet exhibits the behaviours and reactions of a female Gulliver. During the process of the “literary colonisation” of the Balkans she goes through, she takes the journey not as a quest for authenticity, but as an assertion of her own self against the scary otherness.

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