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Why Michael Ondaatje?

**Postmodern Trajectories in the Information Society:
Twentieth-century Canadian Literature in Bulgaria**

Abstract

This paper looks at one single fact from the recent cultural history of Bulgaria, the publication of a series of fictional works, The Twentieth-Century Golden Collection, in 2005, which incorporates the achievements of the past cultural periods with the literary consciousness of the last 15 years. One among the 40 books to present the greatest literary achievements of the twentieth century is Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The article discusses Ondaatje's reception in Bulgaria from the point of view of postmodern developments in culture.

Résumé

La communication traite d'un seul fait de l'histoire culturelle bulgare récente, la publication de « Collection d'or de 20^e siècle », une série de romans publié en 2005. Celles-ci regroupent les acquis des périodes culturelles passées ainsi que la conscience littéraire des 15 dernières années. Parmi les 40 livres qui présentent les majeurs acquis littéraires du vingtième siècle est l'œuvre de Michael Ondaatje intitulée *The English Patient*. L'article traite sa réception en Bulgarie d'un point de vue du développement postmoderne de la culture.

The reception of any literature in a foreign culture is rarely a one-dimensional matter. The factors that predetermine and govern this reception, though sometimes a matter of chance, are intricately connected to the characteristics of the receiving culture. In this sense, if we wanted to explain the factors that have governed the way Canadian literature has found its place in Bulgarian culture, it would be necessary to take into account the specific development of the national and literary consciousness in Bulgaria. This, however, would enlarge the scope of the present paper out of proportion and that is why I have concentrated on one phenomenon from the recent cultural history of Bulgaria, the publication of a series of fictional works, The Twentieth-Century Golden Collection, in 2005, which incorporates the achievements of past cultural periods within present-day literary consciousness. One among the 40 greatest literary books of the twentieth century chosen by the publishers of this collection is Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. This paper discusses Ondaatje's reception in Bulgaria from the point of view of postmodern developments in culture.

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In his recent book *Critique of Information*, Scott Lash claims that contemporary times can be better understood as the information age rather than as postmodernism, the risk society, late capitalism, consumer society etc. “Information society is, first, preferable to postmodernism,” he claims, “in that the former says what the society principle is rather than saying merely what it comes after. Second, postmodernism deals largely with disorder, fragmentation, irrationality, whilst the notion of information accounts for both the (new) order and disorder that we experience” (Lash 1). He goes on to delineate the great difference that he sees between narrative and discourse, on the one hand, and information as it is presented by the media, on the other.

Unlike, say, narrative or discourse or painting, the information in the papers comes in very short messages. It is compressed. Literally compressed. Narrative as in the novel works from a beginning, middle and end. The subjective intentions of the protagonist are the motor of the plot, the events follow from one another as causes and effects. Discourse – as in philosophic or social scientific texts – is comprised of conceptual frameworks, of serious speech acts, of propositional logic, of speech acts backed up by legitimating arguments. Information is none of these. (Lash 3)

In fact Lash suggests that “the primary qualities of information are flow, disembeddedness, spatial compression, temporal compression, real-time relations” (Lash 2). He ends this interpretation of our contemporary society with the conclusion that “informational knowledge is increasingly displacing narrative and discursive knowledge” (Lash 3).

What then happens to literature in this new information society, where identities are not only fragmented and discursive but hybridized in new entities that are not just dual, combining the opposites in some kind of dialectics but representing “a process from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex, a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of traits, nor even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent”, as Malinowski wrote in his Preface to Fernando Ortiz’s book *Cuban Counterpoint* (Ortiz 1947)? One possible answer is that we have to talk about the decline of literature, its disappearance with the establishment of the “new mode of information” or, as Galin Tihanov suggests, to face a total transformation of the field of literature due to the influence of genetics, the media and the disappearance of the fundamental characteristics of the nation-state in the era of globalization (Tihanov 2003).

I would rather prefer to see literature as participating in an ongoing process of cultural exchange and hybridization, a process which bespeaks the “glocal” as one of the new “products” of the information age, or of what Manuel Castells calls “the network society”, which is characterized by “the globalization of strategically decisive economic activities ... by a culture of real virtuality constructed by a pervasive, interconnected and diversified media system” (Castells 1). My hypothesis is that in this network society “based on the systemic disjunction between the local and the global” (Castells 11), literature does not so much lose its characteristics of a narrative discourse but is hybridized, or to use another of the terms that are quite popular today, creolized, in this process of cultural flow. As Hannerz points out, “Not only does the idea of flow stand in opposition to static thought. It implies, moreover, that we may think of mighty rivers and tiny rivulets, separate currents as well as confluences, ‘whirlpools’ ... even leaks and viscosity in the flow of meaning” (Hannerz 1992).

A way to illustrate my point is to try and analyze in more detail the publication of a series of fictional works called *The Twentieth-Century Golden Collection* in Bulgaria. At the beginning of 2005 the two most widely-circulated newspapers in Bulgaria at that time, *Trud (Labor)* and *24 Chasa (24 Hours)*, started issuing the books included in this series. Each week, on Tuesday, the two newspapers were sold together with one of the books.

The titles were advertised as the best pieces of fiction created in the twentieth century. Among the 40 published titles thirteen come from American literature – Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, Charles Bukowski’s *Post Office*, Frederick Forsyth’s *The Day of the Jackal*, Pearl Buck’s *East Wind, West Wind*, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, James Ellroy’s *The Black Dahlia*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. Among the rest of titles, seven are Bulgarian; eight British: Joseph Conrad’s *The Shadow Line*, D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Indians*, Graham Greene’s *The Burnt-out Case*, Ian McEwan’s *Amsterdam*, George Orwell’s *1984*; four French: Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* and Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*; two German: Thomas Mann’s *Joseph in Egypt* and Hermann Hesse’s *Siddharta*; two Russian: Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* and Mikail Bulgakov’s *Black Snow: A Theatrical Novel*; and Italian: Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*; one Japanese: Yukio Mishima’s *Kinkakuji*; one Portuguese: Jose Saramago’s *Baltasar and Blimunda (Memorial do Convento)*; and one Canadian: Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*.

The most striking fact of the series is that all the books included in these collections have already been translated – some even not from the original language, as is the case of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which was translated for the first time from French. Moreover, all of the titles have already been published in Bulgaria. In this sense the editors’ choice has been quite restricted – they have to depend on choices already made in previous periods and for different reasons. Thus, this gives a kind of telescopic image of the reception of a foreign literature in Bulgaria and its influence on contemporary Bulgarian culture.

Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992) was first translated and published in Bulgaria in 1996 by Luchezar Minchev Publishing House. In 2000 it was published by another publishing house, Delfi, and in 2005 it was published for a third time, by *Trud* Publishing House, as part of The Twentieth-Century Golden Collection Series. The second and the third publications use the original translation from 1996 by Valentina Donkova, while the graphic design is entirely different in the three cases.

It is interesting to compare the number of publications of *The English Patient* in Bulgaria and the other seven countries besides Bulgaria which are part of the CEACS Translating Canada Project, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. The CEACS Translation Research Project database shows that there are at least twenty editions of Ondaatje’s novel in these countries over the past seventeen years, with the first translation being the Bulgarian one. In most of the countries there are two or three editions of the novel. While the first “boom” in translations of the novel in 1996 (for Bulgaria) and 1997 (for the other seven countries) can be explained by the astonishing success of Anthony Minghella’s



Oscar-winning film adaptation of the novel created in 1996, the later publications can rather be explained by the socio-cultural specifics of each of the countries.

One way to do that is to consider the other works of Ondaatje's translated in these countries. A significant fact is that in Bulgaria the only other book of Ondaatje to have appeared is *Divisadero*, published in 2007. It is his last but one of the six novels he has created so far: *Coming Through Slaughter* 1976; *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1987; *The English Patient*, 1992; *Anil's Ghost*, 2000; *Divisadero*, 2007; *The Cat's Table*, 2011. These novels together with his play/poetry collection *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, 1973, and his memoir *Running in the Family*, 1982, and a collection of poems, *A House Divided*, have all been translated in the eight countries part of the project. In Croatia, for example, with the exception of *In the Skin of a Lion* all the other books have been translated, including the earliest translation of Ondaatje in the region, the collection of poems *A House Divided* in 1972. The most popular among the translated novels of Ondaatje's is no doubt *The English Patient*, both with regard to the number of countries and the number of publications, but the next most popular novel from his translated works, *Anil's Ghost*, has never been published in Bulgaria, unlike all the other countries from the region.

The fact that Ondaatje's claim to greatness in Bulgaria rested on only one novel before he was chosen to stand among the greatest writers of the twentieth century is even more striking when one considers the wrong attribution of the 2000 edition of *The English Patient* to British literature in the National database of published books in Bulgaria (<http://www.booksinprint.bg>). This might, however, be a clue to his fame in Bulgaria, since the misattribution seems to have sprung from the fact that the novel received one of the most prestigious British book awards, the Booker Prize. It is no secret that publishers quite often choose their titles for translation from the literary magazines and catalogues and are in search of books that have been recognized by the critics and the public alike.

It should also be noted that although Ondaatje is not the most popular of the translated contemporary Canadian authors in the region, with only 45 entries in the database, he is very close behind such writers as Margaret Atwood, who has 75 entries listed there. Alice Munro and Yann Martel follow with 20, Timothy Findley with 10, not to mention David Morrell with over 130.

This last fact shows another very important aspect of the contemporary literary scene, the merging of two discourses so far kept apart – the mass media, popular-culture discourse and the high literature discourse. To analyze this phenomenon I will employ some of the concepts of postmodern theory and show that despite Lash's insistence, at least in the literary field, such postmodern concepts as *simulacrum* and *pastiche* can co-exist with the *critique of information* he has offered. That seems one of the expressions of the hybridization of literature and its globalization.

For many scholars nowadays globalization has entailed the leveling of cultural differences in favor of insignificant sameness (see Lois Parkinson Zamora, "Comparative Literature in the Age of 'Globalization'"), the shrinking of space and time and the uprooting of huge masses of people. That means that new patterns of dominance can be recognized in contemporary culture which are connected to the basic characteristics of consumer culture, whose central features are, to borrow Frederick Jameson's description, a new relationship with the past based on pastiche and nostalgia, a new and eclectic randomness in the cultural artifact, as well as the already mentioned reorganization of space, both physical and symbolic.



This is what happens in Ondaatje's novel, which follows two seemingly unconnected plots that, in the manner of the postmodern pastiche, converge in time and space in the ruined Italian villa where four characters find themselves at the end of the Second World War: a burned beyond recognition patient, who everybody refers to as the English patient; the Canadian nurse Hana, who has stayed behind to look after him; an old friend of her father, Caravaggio, who is a thief and a spy; and a Sikh sapper, Kim, who is disarming the minefield around the villa.

Gradually, it becomes clear that the title character is not English at all: he is Count Ladislaus de Almásy, a semi-fictional figure based on the real-life person László Almásy, a desert explorer and a spy. The fictional Almásy, before being brought to the Italian villa, had an affair with Katharine Clifton, the wife of Geoffrey Clifton, another member of the team mapping the North African desert just before the war broke out. After an intense love relationship with her he crashed into the desert in an attempt to find her dead body two years after he had left her in a cave, severely wounded in the air crash caused by her jealous husband, who died in it. He could not save Katherine because he was captured by the British, then put into prison on the suspicion of being a German spy, escaped and helped a German spy through the desert. His story is told in bits and pieces, just like a mosaic which has been strewn all over the place by a violent shake, and the characters try to put it back together interwoven within the pages of Herodotus' histories, a book "the English Patient" uses as a journal. This new relationship with the past based on pastiche and nostalgia seems to be symbolically embodied by the "non-identity" of the English patient.

The other plot that unravels parallel to the attempt to solve the puzzle of who the English patient is brings Hana and Kip together in another love story, very different from the passionate and tragic love of Katherine and Almásy, but nonetheless intense and deeply moving. When Kip, who is as if totally mesmerized by the possibility of one day emulating his mentor, Lord Suffolk, changes entirely after he hears about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he puts an end not only to his relationship to the English but to his relationship to Hana as well. As with the English patient, the foreign identity he has tried to put on as a new skin burns away, to leave him scalded and naked in a hostile and prejudiced world.

This simultaneity of stories of high emotional intensity and clear political stance not only makes the book a good example of the pastiche quality of contemporary literature but mirrors the pastiche quality of the whole series. This pastiche quality is reflected in the fact that the books included in the Twentieth-Century Golden Collection come from every genre and trend – from high modernism to postmodernism, from existentialism to ethnic writing, from the detective story and the spy thriller to science fiction, from the Lost Generation to the Beat Generation, books which were translated because of different ideological reasons during the turbulent twentieth century. Of course such a collection is supposed to be diverse, to really represent the "best" of the twentieth-century literature, but its most striking feature is the attempt to combine genres and works that have either been always associated with "low" popular culture or have been banned for one reason or another with Nobel Prize winners and books by high modernist artists. And this is very clearly expressed in the choice of the one book from Canadian literature included in the series, which undoubtedly skillfully combines the popular genres of adventure and romance with the serious work of an accomplished artist and the clear moral stance it takes.



Moreover, this is the choice of the chief engines of the information society, two of the most widely circulated newspapers in Bulgaria, as the title page of each of the volumes insists, and it is in this sense that these volumes become part of mass culture as well. But the whole collection is hardcover only, beautifully bound, meant to last for several generations. This attempt to achieve permanence in the world of the fluid, ephemeral images of information society speaks of the hybrid quality which contemporary literature has acquired.

This hybridity can be linked to Baudrillard's idea of simulacrum. Simulacra are in fact copies of an original that no longer exists, which turns these copies into an original creating a hyper reality in which the contemporary consumer society lives.

What we have in the case of the works included in the Twentieth-Century Golden Collection is exactly the creation of simulacra, since there is no time for new translations of all the books chosen to be included that could be prepared in a week's time. And since consumption should be sustained, a copy of the original is used, which acquires the status of a canon – it becomes part of the “treasures” of the twentieth century to be preserved for posterity. Predetermined by consumption, by the urge to be at the crest of the wave, the choice of the books also seems to exhibit the “pastiche personality of the affectually attenuated, decentered ego inhabiting the electronic, global world” of post-modernity (Smith 1980), which seems to have found its most convincing symbol in the “pastiche personality” of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

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