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■ CROSSING THE BORDER BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION IN MARTIN MCDONAGH'S *THE PILLOWMAN*

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Martin Makдона je savremeni britanski autor irskog porekla koji u svojim dramama istražuje odnos između autora, dela i čitalaca. Rad se bavi Makdoninom dramom *The Pillowman* u kojoj on pokušava da dokuči interakciju stvarnosti i fikcije u toku stvaranja umetničkog dela, kao i uticaj koji umetničko delo ima na čitaoca.

Ključne reči: stvarnost, fikcija, britanska savremena drama, stvaralački proces, fikcija transponovana u stvarnost, prelaženje granice.

Authorial awareness, having as a direct consequence self-reflexive and experimental works, has been contributing to the strengthening of the relationship between reality and fiction since the beginning of twentieth-century literature. The interest in outer reality has been gradually overtaken by the focus on inner reality, on the relativity of the apprehension of reality and on subjectivity, which eventually raised the question of how reliable reality is. In her work exploring "culture and the real", Catherine Belsey, by referring to Stephen Greenblatt, states that "reality is understood to be synonymous with cultural conception of reality, and this in turn is historically relative." (Belsey 2005: 4) By exploring the possibilities offered by psychological research, writers have discovered how outer facts and contexts determine their way of thinking, leading to identity alterity. Poststructuralist writings opened the gate toward uncontrollable works and authoritative language and texts, while smoothly smothering the voices of the authors claiming the authority over their works.

The writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper systems, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them by only letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the

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language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*. (Derrida 1976: 158)

Writers themselves have eventually had to accept that any idea that was worded ceases to belong to its producer, and John Fowles extended this theory to a material deconstruction of his own body over which he could not claim ownership:

All parts of my body are objects external to me: my hands, my tongue, my digestive mechanism. The words I speak are counterpoles. There is no mental activity I cannot stand back from and be towards as to a counterpole. So I am a tissue of counterpoles. My body and my words are like the garden and the rooms and the furniture of my house. Certainly they seem to me more mine than your garden or the room you read in at this moment; but a moment's analysis tells me that they are not mine in any total or scientific sense. They are mine in the artificiality of the law, and in the illogicality (or biologicality) of emotion. My garden is this collection of grass, earth, plants, trees that I possess in law and can enjoy while I live; it is not mine. Nothing, not even what I call my self, is mine; individuality and counter-polarity separate me from all. (Fowles 1970: 85)

After having sipped at his predecessors' experience in relation with the cultural dissipation of the author's identity, Martin McDonagh, a contemporary British playwright with Irish roots, escaped the Irish space that hosted his previous plays to make his play *The Pillowman* unroll in an unidentified totalitarian country. Any attempt to force the action and/or the characters into a real context would fail, as the play intermingles glimpses of reality related to different geo-political and cultural spaces. The non-identifiable space implies a two-plane interpretation: on the one hand, the author aims at a generalization of the message conveyed; on the other hand, he may tackle the idea of globalization that threatens the individual with the loss of his /her cultural identity.

Challenging and playful, *The Pillowman* echoes more cultural spaces, eventually displaying a combination between a totalitarian regime suggesting eastern European countries through the characters' names, for example Tupolski which is a Polish name, and a multicultural area. Katurian and Michal are two brothers taken by the police as suspects for murder, Tupolski and Ariel are two detectives who try to make the criminal confess and who also mention the restrictions the totalitarian state imposes on them. The two detectives are too self-confident, ironic and authoritative, which refrains the reader from imagining a higher authority. The fact that they execute Katurian without a trial and without even finishing counting down reinforces the idea of dictatorship. The four characters form a nucleus that mirrors, in a simplified form, a society in which social cleaning has very clear rules meant to reestablish the required equilibrium: in this case the murderer has to die.

Tupolski and Ariel also enact the team of detectives echoing American films: the good cop and the bad one. They generally react by alternatively increasing and relaxing the pressure with amusing, ironic or absurd observations and opinions, and they manage to lead Katurian through his stories, by creating confusion or by challenging

him. Tupolski is the smarter cop, or the brain, that leads the operation and insists on being recognized as such, while Ariel is the aggressive cop, ready to torture the suspect:

ARIEL. Look why don't we just start torturing him and cut out all this shit?

KATURIAN. What...?

TUPOLSKI. Who's Number One in this case, Ariel, me or you? (*Pause*) Thank you. Don't listen to him. Anyway, so why do you suspect we have brought you here? (McDonagh 2003: 6)

Seen as mind and body, the two detectives remind of other pairs of characters in drama, such as Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. In a similar way, Katurian and Michal complete each other: the former being related to the mind and the latter, the brain-damaged one, being related to facts and to the body. The idea of complementarity on which McDonagh's pairs of characters are constructed is also reflected in their conversations. The relationship between the cultural context in which McDonagh evolved, seen as reality, and *The Pillowman*, requires the identification of similarities. Reminding of the Irish cultural space, McDonagh's play invites to associations with Flann O'Brien. The fragments below show a conversation between a policeman and a suspect in McDonagh's play and in Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman*:

TUPOLSKI. I have to fill this form out now. It's a form in case anything bad happens to you in custody. (*Pause*) We've got a mistake here with your name, I think. Your name is Katurian, yes?

KATURIAN. Yes.

TUPOLSKI. See, we've got your first name as Katurian.

KATURIAN. My first name is Katurian.

TUPOLSKI. (*Pause*) Your first name is Katurian?

KATURIAN. Yes.

TUPOLSKI. And your second name is Katurian?

KATURIAN. Yes.

TUPOLSKI. Your name is Katurian Katurian?

KATURIAN. My parents were funny people.

TUPOLSKI. Hm. Middle initial?

KATURIAN. K. (*Tupolski looks at him. Katurian nods, shrugs.*)

TUPOLSKI. Your name is Katurian Katurian Katurian.

KATURIAN. Like I said, my parents were funny people.

TUPOLSKI. Mm. For "funny" I guess read "stupid fucking idiots." (McDonagh 2003: 8)

A similar dialogue centered on a character without identity, which reminds of an Irish theme concerning the lack of belongingness, appears in *The Third Policeman*.

'It would be no harm if you filled up these forms,' he [the policeman] said. 'Tell me, he continued, 'would it be true that you are an itinerant dentist and that you came on tricycle?'

'It would not,' I replied. [...]
 'What is your pronoun?' he inquired.
 'I have no pronoun,' I answered, hoping I knew his meaning.
 'What is your cog?'
 'My cog?'
 'Your surnoun?'
 'I have not got that either.' [...]
 'I was once acquainted with a tall man,' he said to me at last, 'that had no name either and you are certain to be his son and the heir to his nullity and all his nothings.' (O'Brien 2002: 55-57)

At first sight, a striking difference between the two excerpts may be noticed: the main character in McDonagh's play has a name, but it suggests entrapment and dependence upon domineering parents obsessed with the idea of tradition. The repetition of Katurian as the first, middle and last name shows the parents' exaggerated insistence upon the idea of continuity that depersonalizes the individual and turns him into a representative of a family. On the other hand, O'Brien's protagonist has no name or he cannot remember it, which implies the character's inability or refusal to find his identity. Eventually both characters are representatives of a category of people hindered, in different ways, from expressing and from being themselves. Besides, another similarity between both cases arises from Tupolski's and Sergeant Pluck's attitude towards the interlocutors, an attitude that is reflective of the higher position they have within the social historical context. Katurian and the unnamed character in *The Third Policeman* are obedient and amazed at their situation, while Tupolski and Sergeant Pluck are self-confident and critical of the interlocutors' parents, being thus critical at the characters' uncertain or not assumed identity.

Tupolski, as Number One and also familiar with story-writing and related techniques and vocabulary, can be associated with Nicholas, a very authoritative, aggressive and contextually powerful character in Harold Pinter's *One for the Road*. Both characters try to impose themselves as intellectuals and force the interlocutors, who are writers, to recognize their value:

TUPOLSKI. [...] Why would there be a linkage, your stories, you being taken here? It isn't a crime, you write a story.
 KATURIAN. That's what I thought.
 TUPOLSKI. Given certain restrictions ...
 KATURIAN. Of course.
 TUPOLSKI. The security of the state, the security of the general whatever-you-call-it. Wouldn't even call them restrictions.
 KATURIAN. I wouldn't call them restrictions.
 TUPOLSKI. I would call them guidelines.
 KATURIAN. Guidelines, yes.
 TUPOLSKI. Given certain guidelines, the security of the whatever, it isn't a crime, you write a story. (McDonagh 2003: 7)

Nicolas. [...] I've heard so much about you. I'm terribly pleased to meet you. Well, I'm not sure that pleased is the right word. One has to be so scrupulous about language. Intrigued. I'm intrigued. Firstly because I've heard so much about you. Secondly because if you don't respect me you're unique. Everyone else knows the voice of God speaks through me. You're not a religious man, I take it? [...] I hear you have a lovely house. Lots of books. Someone told me some of my boys kicked it around a bit. Pissed on the rugs, that sort of thing. [...] You understand. You're not a fool. (Pinter 2004: 1659)

The pairs of characters in both works are in a similar relationship: Tupolski arrested a writer because of the message in his short stories and Nicolas, having a leading position in an oppressive army, arrested Victor who was also a writer. Although aware that art "isn't a crime," Tupolski admits that the artist should comply with certain "restrictions" related to "the security of the state, the security of the general what-you-call it." Nicolas concedes that art has the power to transmit or suggest opinions when he invokes Victor's widespread reputation. However, he takes Victor's works as an offense ("... if you don't respect me you're unique.") and the artistic challenge as a non religious one, in earthly terms actually, as the historic conjuncture makes him powerful enough to decide what to do with people's lives ("Everyone else knows the voice of God speaks through me.").

Tupolski and Nicolas are manipulative. By reminding the reader of the subversive power of words and the floating meanings that, as writers pretend, escape the creator's authority, they try to be "scrupulous about language" in an ironic way. Yet, McDonagh and Pinter prefer different styles – McDonagh's detective is more elusive and suggestive while Nicolas is direct and aggressive – to transmit the same message.

Another reference to possible interrelations that anchor McDonagh's play in twentieth-century cultural identity is the experimental stimulation of Katurian's imagination in his childhood, an experiment that reiterates the one in Fowles' *The Magus*. Nicholas Urfe's imagination is stimulated by the music he could hear in Conchis' house, and he is told that the music is in his mind only. Seemingly, Katurian's parents told him that the terrifying noises he could hear at night were the result of his overactive imagination and urged him to write. Katurian's parents play with his mind by making those noises drag terrifying images out of his unconsciously born fears.

Although McDonagh has not experienced life in a totalitarian state, he might have constructed his play based on a reality that he got acquainted with via other readings or sources, his imagination being thus indirectly stimulated. The humour and the detectives' playfulness, which makes Jonathan Kalb state that the "comically non-realistic totalitarian setting" of the play is "evidence of a weak imagination" (Kalb 1), shift the attention of the reader from the setting and the situation to language, to interactions between characters, to games and to the tricks that the characters play to one another. The reality that the play actually reflects is that of a multicultural background aiming to generalise the relationship author-work-reader.

Besides the relationship between outer reality and the play, conveyed at the level of the making of the work, McDonagh's *The Pillowman* raises questions related to the steps a writer should take to become a good writer; to the writer's limited apprehension

of his own text as probably determined by intentional phallacy or by the authority of the text during the making of the work; to the “death of the author”, when the story is published or transmitted; to the reader who has the authority over the text.

The Pillowman tackles the relation between reality and fiction with reference to both the making and the apprehension of the work of art, therefore it may be seen as a mirror held up to the condition of the artist who filters elements of the surrounding reality, subjectively perceived, and alters them during the process of creation. However, some of Katurian's stories suggest that a work of art is not essentially far from the reality the creator perceives. Katurian's stories about physically tortured children are an obsessive retelling of his experience. The fact that most children die may suggest, in Freudian terms, Katurian's desire either to have died as a child or to have found his brother dead.

According to Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, man's life is a quest for “the initial state from which the living entity has departed” (Freud 1990: 52), that of death. Besides, writers behave like children at play: they create a fictional world in their day-dreams in which they fulfill their wishes. (Freud 1972: 36) Katurian's stories are deeply rooted in his childhood experience revealing his suffering as well as his wish to regain the initial and peaceful state, which makes *The Pillowman* be Katurian's alter ego. *The Pillowman* used to convince children to commit suicide in order to spare the suffering their life generally brings to them. Michal, who transposes fiction into reality by killing children, also identifies with *The Pillowman*:

MICHAL. [...] And he's the hero! And I'm not criticizing. He's a very good character. He's a very very good character. He reminds me a lot of me.

KATURIAN. How does he remind you of you?

MICHAL. You know, getting little children to die. All that.

KATURIAN. The *Pillowman* never killed anybody, Michal. And all the children that died were going to lead horrible lives anyway. [...]

MICHAL. Erm, hmm. Did *you* lead a horrible life since you was a child? Yes. Erm, did *I* lead a horrible life since I was a child? Yes. That's two out of two for a start. (McDonagh 2003: 36)

The key to the relation between reality and fiction lies in the autobiographical story “*The Writer and the Writer's Brother*” which Katurian wrote but did not read to his brother, as he used to do with the other stories. The lurid text covering the entire Scene Two of Act One has a central position in the play as it encapsulates Katurian's confession of how he became a writer, it reveals the writer's wish to have rather found his brother dead and implies the conviction that greater suffering results in better works of art.

The story covers three steps in the writer's evolution from the shy beginning at a very early age – he was offered anything he wanted in order to stimulate his creativity: toys, paints, books, paper, pens – to the moment when he started hearing terrifying noises in the room next door, which made him create darker and darker stories which were also better stories that eventually brought his first prize and the apparent revelation of the source of the noises: “... his parents sitting in there, smiling, alone; his father doing some drill noises; his mother doing some muffled screams of a gagged

child; they had a little pot of pig's blood between them." (McDonagh 2003: 24) The last part of the experiment was even more shocking as the writer finds out that there was his brother whom his parents actually tortured to death and that his brother was a better writer.

The end of the story "The Writer and the Writer's Brother" is different from what happened in reality when he found his brother and killed his parents by holding a pillow on their faces. He afterwards led a life in search for redemption as he felt guilty for the chance he had, that of not being in his brother's situation, and did his best to offer Michal decent life and education, but continued to write and used to read his stories to his brother. Katurian turns out to be a very sensitive and caring person, apparently unable to torture and kill children in his real life, yet obviously affected by his life experience: he cries when he hears the screams of his supposedly tortured brother during the interrogatory.

Act Two continues the first one by revealing the impact a work of art can have on the audience and that the writer's authority over the text is limited. What Tupolski tried to demonstrate in Act One is confirmed by Michal in Act Two: Katurian's mostly unpublished stories led to two murders, therefore he and his brother became the suspects. Tupolski's game in Act One shows that Katurian could not grasp the depths of his stories as he never tried to be a reader, but his brother was. In defense to *The Pillowman*, Jonathan Kalb writes: "As to whether McDonagh himself understands all his play's depths, that is immaterial. Any strong text – from Shakespeare to Chekov to Kafka – knows more than its author, holds meanings its author didn't deliberately insert like measured ingredients, and it's not always necessary for decades or centuries to pass for that to become evident." (Kalb 1)

Subjective apprehension of the work of art determines two relationships that the two readers, Katurian and Michal, can establish between reality and fiction. While during the interrogatory Katurian is groping for a meaning of his stories by associating them with the possible offense brought to the totalitarian state, and his stories indeed troubled the social order in the community, Michal assumes the position of the reader who wants to verify how far-fetched the stories are. He thus crosses the border of the usual apprehension of literature.

The play also treats a society/audience–writer relationship that seems to turn the writer into an instrument. Katurian's stories given back to the bloodthirsty audience unexpectedly repel it and the author is perceived as a sick-minded person and guilty of the audience's horizon of expectation.

MICHAL. [...] I wouldn't have done anything if you hadn't told me, so don't act the innocent. Every story you tell me, something horrible happens to somebody. I was just testing how far-fetched they were. 'Cos I always thought some of 'em were a bit far-fetched. (McDonagh 2003: 35)

Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* can be read as a warning against crossing the border between reality and fiction. The author diminishes the responsibility of a writer urged to write and whose personality was shaped by the social-cultural context in which he evolved, while promoting textual authority that releases creativity in the audience

and the ability to act in accordance with what they understand. As the first part of the paper demonstrates, due to the fictitious and multicultural setting that McDonagh has created, readers can simply imagine where the roots of the text are, as the meaning of the text is (also) a responsibility of the reader.

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SUMMARY

CROSSING THE BORDER BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION IN MARTIN MCDONAGH'S *THE PILLOWMAN*

Martin McDonagh is a contemporary British writer with Irish parents and his play *The Pillowman* unrolls in an unidentifiable totalitarian setting, tackling problems related to author-work-reader relationship. The paper focuses on reality-fiction interaction at the level of the process of creation and on the impact of the work of art on the readers. McDonagh's play is a warning against the influence the audience may have on the writer and against the impulses a work of art raises in a reader, presenting the entire process as a cyclic movement having reality as a starting point and return to reality.

KEYWORDS: reality, fiction, British contemporary drama, the process of creation, fiction transposed into reality, border-crossing.

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