

A VIEW OF LIFE, FICTION AND CULTURE WITHIN *THE BALKAN TRILOGY*. A LITERARY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT OF OLIVIA MANNING

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Abstract: An author worth considering, Olivia Manning, is the creator of an exquisite and stunning writing style. This work begins with an overall view of Manning's masterpiece, *The Balkan Trilogy*, which targets her experience as a British journalist's wife refugee, her husband, and her friends' adventures in a hostile environment at the beginning of World War II in Romania and Greece. Focused on aspects of life, fiction, and culture, this piece of work will relate her vision of the war, reflected on the keen overview of the social situation of the Balkan space in those years, her couple's hardships to adapt to a new society and its different rules make her a keen observer of a polemic world which finds on the border of the Occident and Orient. This paper highlights the author's vision of narrating her drama as a fictional transposed autobiography in a foreign background and displays the importance of culture in the authorial vision as a refugee. The article will conclude with a hint on the autobiographical traits in the context of a culturalized writer.

Keywords: community; intercultural context; communication; autobiography; literature

1. INTRODUCTION

In the broad literary picture of the twentieth century, Olivia Manning, one of the most controversial, skilled, and fascinating British writers, created an original and unique narrative style which is perfectly embodied throughout her works, especially in her masterpiece, *The Balkan Trilogy* (1960).

Literary criticism often settles Manning's literary creations as being biographical and autobiographical; however, beyond the evident description of the self, a refined reader may foresee subtle nuances of fiction deliberately introduced by the author in the three volumes that compose *The Balkan Trilogy*: *The Great Fortune* (1960), *The Spoilt City* (1962), and *Friends and Heroes* (1965).

More profound research into author's life story, which represents an origin and a transposition of a portrait on the later writings, may provide a deeper sense to history, autobiography, and literary fiction.

2. THE BALKAN TRILOGY

The Balkan Trilogy might not amaze the reader throughout its dynamism: its narrative thread is relatively logical and straightforward, more typical of a drama movie. Taking place at the eve of the Second

World War, due to the tense political situation in Great Britain, a young couple; Harriet and Gut Pringle, are forced to travel to Romania, a country that sets its frontiers and mentality between Occident and Orient. In this hostile background, where society is displayed as immoral and decadent, they need to survive physically and mentally, yet, their marriage is initiated hastily and apparently as a sexual appeal (Deirdre, 2012:62). As part of the British Legation in Bucharest, Harriet and Guy Pringle have a reasonably fast social integration; their young friends form a lively group with Professor Inchcape as the leader. Unfortunately, all of them experienced the bitter taste of the war during a year, especially the vehement political changes (Iron Guard, Armand Călinescu's assassination, King Carol I abdication, the Nazi Occupation), caused the escape to Greece a year after. This place seems much more tolerant and is finally the take off-ramp to their final jump to the Orient.

David Deirdre sharply noticed Olivia Manning's perception of war in his work, *Olivia Manning: A Woman at War* (2012), and this perception comes also as family tradition: her father worked as a navy official. She recalls hard times of war when she unwillingly took part in conflictive actions or backgrounds (Deirdre, 2012:6).

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Apart from this, Olivia Manning has never surpassed her inferiority complex and her feelings of deprivation and limitation. She seemed to have suffered due to her parents' continuous fights, and, as a child, her social class inferiority and provincial manners obstructed the expectations to live in a better world. This personal drama did not cease even when Manning achieved considerable success, and a consequence was that, in time, the writer inherited a certain forlorn way of being. The war also targets the psychological infliction caused by her humble social class origin, an endless source of inferiority complex she will manifest all her lifetime (Deirdre, 2012:19-20).

A pained witness to her parents' quarrels, Olivia never overcame her feelings of deprivation and liminality. As a child, she felt shut out from a better world elsewhere by her social inferiority, her pitiful wardrobe, and her provincial manners, and even when she had achieved considerable professional success, spoke in a remarkably polished accent, and was surrounded by a bevy of bright and accomplished friends, she sometimes appeared almost forlorn, according to Victoria Orr-Ewing, the daughter of Olivia's closest friend. (Deirdre, 2012:19-20).

Leading this reason, *The Balkan Trilogy* deals with the war and the ultimate survival as the actual subject. Not its causes, or its purpose, not primarily its horrors and cruelties, but its all-embracing scope, the way it has swallowed up like a flood innumerable lives (Graham, 1980:203). War is the very synonym for destiny; hence, it appears as an obsession that can mark and create a sort of living of her own. As a journalist in London (in real life) and a keen observer of reality, as a young literature teacher's wife in Bucharest (in *The Balkan Trilogy*), Olivia Manning draws the essential difference between the novelist and the fictional character. The former is that she was already a working writer, whereas the latter (despite her pre-war employment in an art gallery) seems unemployed and possesses an invalid social identity.

3. A VIEW OF CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION WITHIN *THE BALKAN TRILOGY*

The writer evokes the Balkanic space in a Dickensian antithetic description: Bucharest at the beginning of WWII is a place where the Romanian people manifest an unsatisfied appeal for food, which is abundant.

The heart of the display was a rosy bouquet of roasts, chops, steaks and fillets frilled round with a froth of cauliflowers. Heaped extravagantly about the centre were aubergines as big as melons, baskets of artichokes, small coral carrots, mushrooms, mountain raspberries, apricots, peaches, apples and grapes. On one side there were French cheeses; on the other tins of caviar, grey river fish in powdered ice, and lobsters and crayfish groping in dark waters. The poultry and game lay unsorted on the ground. (Manning 2021, 29).

The smell of garlic persists everywhere, whereas the beggars roam through the streets.

All the beggars set upon the Pringles. One hid a loaf behind his back to join in the age old cry of: "*mi-e foame, mi-e foame*". They were hemmed in by a stench of sweat, garlic and putrid wounds. (Manning, 2021, 22-23).

Two classes inhabit Olivia Manning's novel: the old, arrogant, snobbish, middle class and the peasants, appearing poor and needy. Nevertheless, there could be another appearance in this social landscape: the remains of an old aristocracy (Princess Teodorescu, Princess Mimi, Princess Lulie, Cici Palu), a class ready to trade their nobility in favour of different favours (money as the most important) (Godeanu, 2005:205-207).

Hadjimosco's face, that had been agleam with mischeaf, straightened at the sight of Yakimov and assumed an enchanted smile. 'Ah, there you are, *mon cher*.' He pressed Yakimov's arm. 'Allow me to present you to my charming friends, Princess Mimi and Princess Lulie. Surnames do not matter. (Manning 2021, 54).

Besides, Harriet Pringle, Olivia Manning's alter ego, struggles to comprehend the unclear direction her relationship with Guy Pringle (Reggie Smith, his real name) takes. She longs for love in the form of a demonstrated act, while he offers almost all his attention to Sophie, his half-Jew, half-Romanian ex-student in a previous stay in Bucharest, to their mutual friends, Dobson, Clarence, Yakimov and many other characters, along with the novel. His permanent and deliberate involvement in his job as a teacher causes her unbearable frustration and an acute sense of lacking nearness. Harriet sees herself obliged to look company desperately, in some cases a cat, in others chatting to Clarence, one of the members of the British Legation in the capital. She attempts to have an artificial compensatory relationship with him, failing before starting.

Harriet grew pink, realising she had felt a pitying sympathy for Clarence as she had watched him picking himself up and taking himself so quietly, so unoffendingly, out of the flat. (Manning, 2021:201).

The same intention and result will occur in Athens, this time with an official in the army, Charles Warden: “Charles was as good as forgotten; [...]” (Manning, 2021:850). Her wrecked intentions to find sentimental and even suggested refuge in others come from Guy's personality. Guy Pringle is the type of worldwide altruistic man who thrives on helping others, a simple, intelligent, and diplomatic character and precisely these features make him loved for the rest of the world and both loving and hated for his wife. Although later, after twenty years, when she wrote the trilogy, Manning recognized she was using history and autobiography, inspiring herself from the realistic experience and knowledge. The truth is quite different. She proves to be a marvellous creator of her life story, using dramatized terms, fabulations about her family, lovers, professional conflicts and figuring herself as a dramatic character, thus creating a personal style and freedom of writing:

Biographical exploration sometimes gets complicated, but always in fascinating ways, by Olivia's tendency to relate her life in literary, often highly dramatized terms: in interviews with friends and journalists, she often figured herself as a literary character who might have stepped out of an Olivia Manning novel. Fashioning fictions more exotic than the tedious contingencies that she felt had shaped her early life, she created a self-freed from the unexciting stuff [...]. Olivia was also given to a good deal of self-fabulation, about her family, her lovers, and her perceived professional injuries. (Deirdre, 2012:9-10).

In all the twisted living as a foreigner and as a runaway from the colourful world of Bucharest or Athens, Harriet finds it fundamental to stay in contact with the culture in all its forms: war and propaganda movies at the cinema, cocktails with her husband's group, at the university, meeting with artists, different social classes.

Harriet Pringle, no longer fearing that she and her husband would have to flee at any moment, began to look for a flat, buy clothes and take an interest in the invitations that were arriving now that the university term had started. (Manning, 2021:95).

One of the most emblematic episodes in the novel is the Pringles' visit to the Druckers, a

wealthy, cultivated, influential Jewish family. In this ambient, Harriet meets Emanuel Drucker, a banker, and his son, Sasha, who, apart from the intelligent, charismatic, and intellectually superior Guy Pringle, the second cultural landmark for the reader, symbol which demonstrates the author's visible preference towards him. The author centres her narrative lenses at their maximum power and sensitivity: thus, Sasha's portrait seems angelic, with white skin, long pianist fingers, very thin, tall, sensible, and respectful (Manning, 2021:102-103). The physical description supports, in fact, the author's deliberate intention of evincing the moral and emotional purity of the ideal transposed into people. Even so, Olivia Manning utilizes the details to construct an antithesis between the raw and polemic world of day by day and the little moments of delight that life scarcely offers, on the one hand, on the other, she puts in front of reader's eyes the contrasting features that target the Jews and the rest of the world. Sasha Drucker is more explicitly different from his father, showing opposite occupations and ideals.

Furthermore along the entire narrative thread, the writer adorns the main picture with rich and minutious literary and descriptive devices to draw a vast fresco of an Epoque in which the reader receives the power to see, taste, and feel the truth of time, actions, and personal passions. In a novel that seems autobiographical, fiction can make the difference: the realistic elements that compose the narrative panorama, additional elements such as hope, doubt, self-deception, cowardice, disloyalty, and the vision of the inner complete the unique film that opens in the reader's mind and soul:

Hay pocas dominantes en las que todos ellos coincidan; quizá las dos que mejor mueven los hilos de la historia se engranan en Harriet, siendo compartidas por todos: la incertidumbre y el desamor, dos fuerzas terribles que son capaces de devastar el mundo cuando se entrecruzan. Cuando estas dos fuerzas se mezclan en medio de una guerra, la única opción para sobrevivir. La guerra convierte el desamor en deslealtad y cobardía, los dos sentimientos más destructivos para el ser humano (Sanz Barajas, 2020:352).

Writing about a complex world, creating numerous characters, each displaying complex behavioural characteristics, involves leaning on an expert mind and divine creative gift. At the beginning of the first chapters, Olivia Manning confessed she used the first person, specifically for previously mentioned reasons. Furthermore, while acquiring more experience, she adopted the third

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person, creating a distant posture regarding the novel and the personal involvement (Sanz Barajas, 2020:352).

And when asked in by a skeptical interviewer for *The Times* where she had managed to ferret out so much extraordinary material, she replied crisply that she had experienced it ‘mostly at first hand . . . In effect the characters in the books are real . . . all the background comes from my own or my husband’s knowledge and experience. (Deirdre, 2012:4).

The type of culture Olivia Manning comes in contact with within her wandering experiences through Europe proves to be decadent, aimless, and confused, the same as the Belic background (imaginary or real) in which she was always involved. In Bucharest or Athens, people organize public events, such as concerts, theatre plays, or lectures. The characters use these acts to release the pressure of war, initiate social relationships, and be in contact, obviously, due to the isolation and fear the war causes in everyone. A mere example of this kind is a scene where Professor Inchcape requires The Pringles invite Professor Pinkrose, a polemic, stern, and shallow character. He misbalances the yet fragile line of the novel (he becomes obsessed with sustaining a famous conference about Coleridge), a concert given by The Iron Guard in the name of the German invader army, where the three attend due to terrible place confusion (they realize it when, instead of Mozart, it was Wagner):

Guy, eager and short-sighted, had bought the tickets without consulting the boards outside the theatre. This was a German propaganda concert. [...] Pinkrose stared at him in acute irritation. He whispered: ‘It’s no good. I’m going’. [...] Guy tried to apologise again but Pinkrose held up his hand. (Manning, 2021:570).

In the eyes of the writer, a great lover of cultural events, Harriet Pringle exposes her permanent need to be part of a group. When Guy organizes a play of Shakespeare, *Troilus and Criseyde*, she receives a role that she refuses because of the jealousy for Sophie, Guy’s former fiancée. However, Harriet enjoys the play from a distance to her manner. Thus, she builds a certain distance between personal aspirations and the authentic fact of reality. The permanent waving between unmotivated conflicts and the desire to have social relationships within the surrounding reality is practically a definitory feature of the

main character in *The Balkan Trilogy*. This tendency breaks the routine of reading and keeps the narrative rhythm alert. Undoubtedly, Olivia Manning reveals her genius by initiating a new stunning style in literature, the one in which she plays both parts, biographer and fabulist, an elegant, incisive, devilish, and psychologically penetrating manner of exposing the historical and literary facts (Foster, 1980:894).

4. CONCLUSIONS

If one should come to analyse her life synchronically and diachronically, it becomes evident that Manning’s passion for culture and literature was a lifetime habit; in her early childhood, her mother enjoyed listening and seeing her reading from her compositions. She was a fervent visitor of Portsmouth public library, and later, her favourite peers were Stevie Smith, William Gehardie, and Francis King, all famous writers (Andrés Oliver, 2018). Moreover, she maintained this habit throughout her life, especially travelling around Europe and Africa.

Nevertheless, in this novel, culture does not necessarily mean only intellectual culture. From the very beginning, Harriet meets the lowest and purest Romanian culture, the folk depicted under the shape of a raw exoticism. Olivia Manning meets it during her sole wonderings through Bucharest or occasionally when she visits Predeal. In this context, the image of the bothering beggars and the harsh peasants mark her awareness and sense of sensibility. This contradictory archaic and modern world, the train and the views are reversed one by one, whereas the connection between inclusion and exclusion becomes a *sine qua non* motif for the entire trilogy:

The ‘civilized’ space and the wild space of the new territory, the train and the landscape, respectively, are thus juxtaposed, while their relation of mutual isolation and exclusion is symbolic for the whole approach that is to be used in the rest of the book. The method Manning chose to render the novelty of this ‘edge of Europe’ less threatening is that of connecting it to known elements of the familiar world the Pringles belonged to — the West, but also to their accepted version of exoticism — a romanticized Orient with its age-long accepted characteristics: “its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability”. (Godeanu 2005, 202).

This unfortunate pendulation in time and space makes the author and her ego experience a

profound ruefulness of being an involuntary part of the war, no matter where she lives or does. In addition, she imagines an original way of surviving the war's horrors, a completely different approach than her male writers. While they portray the female excitement that energizes sexuality and see the war as paralysis and pollution, women writers focus on the excitement and the freedom of the war (Gilbert, 1983:438). It is precisely Olivia Manning's case: she deploys a talent in using the detail as the purest version of reality. Sometimes, her descriptions are tolerant, like in Florica's case, the famous singer in Bucharest, the Romanian minister Ionescu's mistress (Manning, 2021:35). Other times, she has a morbid predilection of characterizing the disfiguring ugliness in individuals and living spaces (Yakimov, Romanian gypsies/beggars), a tendency she acquired since she was a child in Laburnum Grove and recalled her mother, a fastidious figure, and her father, Commander Manning, a lively character.

Eventually, as the present study has analysed, Olivia Manning's power of example mingled with the genius of creation, and a sophisticated or somewhat controversial character must be providential in Olivia Manning's life and writings. The literary universe marked her existence thoroughly and irreversibly at such a point that she took the practice of writing as a personal religion. Although huge success was never a recognized fact for her permanent dedication (she did not gain any important award), her extraordinary captivating literary style received positive criticism along the 20th century and settled as a brand in universal literature. The Balkan Trilogy reveals a sublime touch of a culturalized woman writer and explores, at the same time, the vast territories of the human soul and mind in front of the most perilous face of the universe: destiny.

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