HISTORY AS STORY AND PARODY IN JULIAN BARNES'S *THE NOISE OF TIME*

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Abstract: *This article analyses Julian Barnes's The Noise of Time, a postmodernist parody of the Russian communist world, and shows that historical truth is turned into a story which is remembered with bitter irony and which offers various interpretations. Being nothing but a story, history, associated with the symbol of noise, becomes subject to parody. Emphasizing the role of irony in revealing the dramatic effects of the Russian communist past, this essay remarks that parody functions as severe criticism.*

Keywords: *history, irony, parody, story, time*

1. Introduction

Focusing on the theory of postmodernist irony put forward by Linda Hutcheon (2000) and using the theory of "metafictional parody" developed by Patricia Waugh (1984), this article shows that in Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* (2016), history, which is associated with the metaphor of *the noise of time*, becomes a story and a postmodernist parody of the Russian communist world at the beginning of the 20th century. Exploring the theme of history as a story, the novel is based on a series of bibliographical sources approached in a subjective manner, as Julian Barnes admits in the *Author's Note* at the end of the novel:

The Shostakovich bibliography is considerable, and musicologists will recognize my two main sources: Elizabeth Wilson's exemplary, multifaceted *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (1994; revised edition 2006), and *Testimony: The Memoirs of Shostakovich* as related to Solomon Volkov (1979). [...] I have treated it as I would a private diary: as appearing to give the full truth, yet usually written at the same time of day, in the same prevailing mood, with the same prejudices and forgettings. (Barnes 2016:200)

The novel is a third person narrative and consists of three parts symbolically entitled *On the Landing*, *On the Plane* and *In the Car*. It focuses on Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich's life story, on his vision on art, music and on the concepts of time and history as experienced by him at the beginning of the 20th century Bolshevik Russia. Shostakovich is a composer with liberal views who survives the Bolshevik terror by approaching the communist political system in a diplomatic and ironic manner. He writes high-quality music for art's sake, enjoying success in Russia and abroad and coping with difficult, frightening times which he approaches calmly, patiently and ironically. His musical work prevails over *the noise of time* no matter how hard this time might be. Having a family and loving his wife and two children, Shostakovich tries his best to protect them and survive the communist regime which frightens him and makes him feel ashamed of the compromises he has to come to in order to continue to live.

The Noise of Time is a cyclical novel whose three parts are preceded and followed by a similar chapter written in italics, which enlarges upon the metaphor of a toast to three principles presented as the motto to the novel: "one to hear, one to remember and one to drink" (Barnes 2016:vii). At the end of the novel we are shown that the main character, Dmitri Shostakovich, is

the one who hears *the noise of time*. Thus, we are suggested that he is the one who has experienced the harmful effects of this historical time which is haunting him like a nightmare. He is also the one who remembers *the noise of time*, presenting us his vision on it and feelings towards it. Moreover, he is the one who drinks to this *noise of time*, diplomatically coping with it through his music. Part I of the novel is suggestively entitled *On the Landing* to express the idea that he expects *the noise of time*, which is the fearful and the threatening time of the Bolshevik Russia, to bring about its disastrous and chilling effects. We are shown Shostakovich's mental and physical preparations for his arrest, having his luggage ready every night and waiting for the oppressors on the landing in front of the lift. In Part II, suggestively entitled *On the Plane*, he seems to be above *the noise of time*, fighting the Bolshevik terror at a spiritual level through his music. We are introduced to his journeys by plane to America, where his musical works enjoy great success and where he is asked to deliver speeches written by the anonymous representatives of the Soviet Union to their own benefit. In Part III, suggestively entitled *In the Car*, he seems to fully understand *the noise of time* or the hard, ludicrous time of the communist Russia, feeling more and more shameful and hopeless.

Each part of the novel starts with a reference to the lived time which threatens and endangers everyone's life: "All he knew was that this was the worst time" (Barnes 2016:3, 63, 123). This idea is promoted as a fact that should be taken for granted. This seems to be the only fact one can associate with historical truth, which is nothing but a story open to our interpretation. Telling us this story, the third person narrator takes a distance from the past in order to ironically illustrate the danger represented by the communist approach to life, art, human values and history. This manner of reflecting on the past is enlarged upon by Frederick M. Holmes, who argues that:

it might seem paradoxical to want to represent and in the process experience (or re-experience, in the case of very recent history) events which are disturbing, but such activity can be a way of imposing order upon and making more manageable processes which are chaotic and threatening. In such cases, it is history as lived experience which "hurts" (in Jameson's formulation), and historical representation is motivated by the need to distance the past, not to make it live again in all of its vividness. (Holmes 1997:55)

The third person narrator uses symbols and irony to depict the difficult and sad past time of the Bolshevik Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. The novel recreates the Russian historical past, inviting us to ponder it and give it our own interpretation in a postmodernist manner.

2. The Role of Parody in Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*

An adept at postmodernist irony for reflecting on the Russian historical past dominated by the communist regime at the beginning of the 20th century, the third person narrator of *The Noise of Time* offers us a parodic representation of the Russian communist world, of its ideas, events and lack of conscience and morality. In Julian Barnes's novel, parody reveals the disastrous effects of what the narrator calls *the noise of time*, which stands for the historical time of the early 20th century Russia whose cultural values are threatened and compromised by the Bolsheviks and whose human values have no longer any importance attached to them. By associating historical time with the symbol of noise, history becomes subject to parody. The metaphor of *the noise of time* parodies the Russian Bolsheviks' acts of destroying moral and human values, the noise standing for destruction and for an all-encompassing evil. Valuing the importance of parody for emphasizing the negative aspects of a historical period, the author of the novel shows that irony is used by Dmitri Shostakovich as a strategy for facing the danger he is exposed to and for mitigating the dramatic effects of what he calls *the noise of time*:

But irony – perhaps, sometimes, so he hoped – might enable you to preserve what you valued, even as the noise of time became loud enough to knock out windowpanes. (Barnes 2016:91)

All his life he had relied on irony. He imagined that the trait had been born in the usual place: in the gap between how we imagine, or suppose, or hope life will turn out, and the way it actually does. So irony becomes a defence of the self and the soul; it lets you breathe on a day-to-day basis. [...] And part of you believed that as long as you could rely on irony, you would be able to survive. (Barnes 2016:189)

In Julian Barnes's novel, parody has the role of severe criticism. It is a postmodernist parody, which, according to Linda Hutcheon,

is fundamentally ironic and critical, not nostalgic or antiquarian in its relation to the past. It 'de-doxifies' our assumptions about our representations of that past. Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium. (Hutcheon 2002:94)

The use of irony in Barnes's *The Noise of Time* can be noticed in the symbols enlarged upon and in the structure and style of the novel. We witness what Patricia Waugh calls "metafictional parody", which "reveals how a particular set of contents was expressed in a particular set of conventions recognized as 'literature' by its readers, and it considers what relevance these may still have for readers situated at a different point in history" (Waugh 1984:67). According to Waugh (1984:72), "parody in metafiction may operate at the level of style or of structure".

Parodying the Russian communist world and associating it with "the world upside down" (Barnes 2016:70-71), which lacks moral and human values, the narrator ironically labels the communist society as "the most advanced society on earth" (Barnes 2016:19), and considers the communist political Utopia "the Garden of Eden and the Promised Land" (Barnes 2016:99). Irony plays the role of a narrative tool meant to facilitate our understanding of the negative, hilarious effects of the Bolsheviks' mentality and actions. Thus, Julian Barnes's novel proves the theory put forward by Linda Hutcheon, who shows that "irony participates in parodic discourse as a strategy [...] which allows the decoder to interpret and evaluate" (Hutcheon 2000:31). In line with this idea expressed by Hutcheon, the third person narrator in Julian Barnes's novel parodies Lenin's belief that "art belongs to the people" (Barnes 2016:97), introducing us to the scene when Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich, a professor in a university commission examining the candidates' knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, asks a student whom art belongs to and feels satisfied with hearing no answer. The student's silence symbolizes one's incapacity to take the Bolsheviks' ludicrous ideas for granted. Their desire to misinterpret the artists' aspirations and to change art's mission is ironically revealed as nonsensical. As the narrator suggests, true art survives time, history and any ideology, whereas the true artists leave their creation to eternity:

Art belongs to everybody and nobody. Art belongs to all time and no time. Art belongs to those who create it and those who savour it. Art no more belongs to the People and the Party than it once belonged to the aristocracy and the patron. Art is the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time. Art does not exist for art's sake: it exists for people's sake. [...] He wrote music for everyone and no one. [...] He wrote music for the ears that could hear. And he knew, therefore, that all true definitions of art are circular. (Barnes 2016:97-98)

Mocking the fact that the Bolshevik representatives are not qualified enough to understand the real artistic values, wanting to turn them upside down, the novel draws our attention to hilarious situations when famous composers like Beethoven could be transformed into "the Red Beethoven" (Barnes 2016:99) in order to embrace and promote the communist ideology: "Where was the Red Beethoven? And there took place a nationwide search unparalleled since Herod's quest for the infant Jesus. Well, if Russia was the homeland of elephants, why should it not also be the homeland of the Red Beethoven?" (Barnes 2016:99)

An effect of the world upside down is the fact that the protagonist of the novel, Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich, takes his life for a farce, reinforcing his idea that “tragedies in hindsight look like farces” (Barnes 2016:178), life turning into “an optimistic tragedy” (Barnes 2016:187): “And now that he had lived too long, he was even beginning to see his own life as a farce” (Barnes 2016:178). Reading the story of his life, which he associates with an absurd and ridiculous play, we read nothing but a parody. His past and history are subject to parody in a postmodernist manner. A cultivated person, Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich makes comparisons between the tyrants of Bolshevik Russia, who lack any conscience, and the monsters in William Shakespeare’s literary work, who are endowed with conscience. Therefore, the Russian communist world is ironically depicted as a strange and cruel one:

In the world’s younger days, when magic and religion held sway, it was plausible that monsters might have consciences. Not any more. [...] Perhaps conscience no longer had an evolutionary function, and so had been bred out. Penetrate beneath the modern tyrant’s skin, go down layer after layer, and you will find that the texture does not change, that granite encloses yet more granite; and there is no cave of conscience to be found. (Barnes 2016:179)

Outlining Shostakovich’s approach to the Bolshevik world devoid of any conscience, Barnes’s narrator emphasizes what Hutcheon (2002:90) calls “ironic difference” between the past and the present. According to this critic,

postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representations it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from that past today – by time and by the subsequent history of those representations. There is continuum, but there is also ironic difference, difference induced by that very history. (Hutcheon 2002:90)

Treating the Russian communist past with irony, the third person narrator in Julian Barnes’s novel aims to illustrate its devastating, traumatic effects. Irony bridges the gap between the painful past and the present.

Not only are the Bolsheviks’ ideas parodied, but so are Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich’s own actions. He takes up the invitation to attend the *Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace* in New York in order to represent the Soviet Power in America and to deliver speeches already prepared by a Soviet Party representative. Shostakovich takes on the assignment to read discourses whose ideas he rejects, diplomatically fulfilling his given role of Soviet representative at the Congress and trying to give the impression that he reads a speech he is not familiar with. He has no choice but to take his role seriously, feeling ashamed of himself: “The supposed author of these words sat there motionless and unreacting, while inside he felt awash with shame and self-contempt. [...] He had foolishly imagined that his public indifference to his own speech would indicate a moral neutrality. That was as stupid as it was naïve” (Barnes 2016:108). Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich is also faced with strange and embarrassing situations which require him to read articles written under his own name by somebody else. These articles focus on his visit to America and on what he is expected to think about it. At this point, he better understands that *the noise of time* has produced unfortunate and disastrous effects, surrounding him with falsity and lies:

Not long after his return to Moscow, an article appeared under his name in the magazine *New World*. Interested to find out what he was supposed to think, he read of the congress’s huge success, and of the State Department’s furious decision to cut short the Soviet delegation’s stay. [...] ‘Life is not a walk across a field’: it was also the last line of Pasternak’s poem about Hamlet. And the previous line: ‘I am alone; all round me drowns in falsehood’ (Barnes 2016:119-120).

The third person narrator associates the Bolshevik political regime with the symbols of *Power* and the *Big House*, which are ironically defined within the novel. The readers are invited

to give their own interpretation according to their own vision: "Do not trust what comes out of my mouth, trust only what goes into your ears" (Barnes 2016:183). *The Power* and *the Big House* stand for a horrible monster lurking around to devour anyone who disobeys its orders and who rejects its ideas. The only symbols which are not treated ironically are the symbols of the clock and the candelabra which the narrator is very fond of. The clock stands for correctness and precision, for the lack of compromises, for a continuous present which successfully copes with *the noise of time*. The candelabra stands for illumination, spiritual progress and morality above *the noise of time*.

In Julian Barnes's novel, irony enables the third person narrator to highlight the negative and hilarious aspects of the communist approach to history, art, and cultural values. It emphasizes the horrendous nature of the Russian communist ideology and the dramatic, obvious differences between normality and abnormality, between logic and nonsense, between art and non-art. To use Linda Hutcheon's (2000:32) verb, irony "belittles" the communists' actions and mentality. According to the Canadian critic, "irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody's irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' [...] between complicity and distance" (Hutcheon 2000:32). Contrary to Hutcheon's theory that "parody is, then, an important way for modern artists to come to terms with the past – through ironic recoding or, [...] 'trans-contextualizing'" (Hutcheon 2000:101), in Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*, parody highlights the importance of rejecting the negative and absurd aspects pertaining to the communist past which destroyed human values and art, having rewritten history as a horrible, haunting story. Thus, Barnes's novel proves Brian McHale's (2004:154) theory that "parody, of course, is a form of self-reflection and self-critique, a genre's way of thinking critically about itself".

3. History as Story and Parody in Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*

A postmodernist novel, *The Noise of Time*, shows us that history is nothing but a story kept secret in Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich's mind and ironically revealed by the third person narrator. Being associated with the *noise of time*, history becomes subject to parody. The concept of historical truth is open to our analysis based on our vision. What can be considered trustworthy is the story of one's mind and of one's past and present:

He had thought, standing here, that he would be in charge of his mind. But at night, alone, it seemed that his mind was in charge of him. [...] And no escaping one's mind. [...] It had all begun, very precisely, he told his mind, on the morning of the 28th of January 1936, at Arkhangelsk railway station. [...] At moments his mind refused to believe what was happening. (Barnes 2016:5-7)

Just like a story, history does not reveal a unique truth, but different interpretations of it: Dmitri Shostakovich's personal interpretation kept in his mind and presented by the third person narrator, and the one offered by Pravda, the editorial which represents the Bolshevik Power and its principles and which distorts reality in a grotesque manner, misinterpreting art and music in a hilarious way. This editorial is referred to in an ironic fashion in Barnes's novel:

So he read how his music 'quacks and grunts and growls', how its 'nervous, convulsive and spasmodic' nature derived from jazz; how it replaced singing with 'shrieking' [...] So the anonymous analysis by someone who knew as much about music as a pig knows about oranges was decorated with those familiar, vinegar-soaked labels. (Barnes 2016:26)

Writers were condemned on page one of Pravda, composers on page three. Two pages apart. And yet it was not nothing: it could make the difference between death and life. (Barnes 2016:40)

Living in a historical period when telling the truth might lead to the death penalty – “it was impossible to tell the truth here and live” (Barnes 2016:115) – when speaking one’s mind is dangerous, when one is urged to deliver speeches prepared and written by somebody else, having to read articles written under his own name by someone else, Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich, argues that “facts were no longer facts, merely statements open to divergent interpretation” (Barnes 2016:54). Therefore, he suggests that historical truth based on facts is open to our analysis, being nothing but a story. He views his life as being governed by destiny and creates scenarios of what might happen to him, frequently using the modal verbs *could*, *would*, *might* and the adverb *perhaps*. Moreover, he asks himself many rhetorical questions about the current events he witnesses, about their possible results and about his own future. His mind turns into an Agora, allowing him to freely and safely ask and answer questions and to debate the latest political issues in his home country, Russia:

Would Zakrevsky’s successor begin as Zakrevsky had, with courteous preliminaries, then a hardening, a threat, and an invitation to return with a list of names? [...] He would be asked about his political convictions, his family and his professional connections. (Barnes 2016:53-54)

Perhaps, after his death, which could not be far away, they would form a household together. Mother, daughter-in-law, grand-daughter: three generations of women. (Barnes 2016:56)

As the third person narrator shows, one’s story is rewritten by the Bolsheviks unless one survives and preserves one’s truth in the mind: “And that is why he could not kill himself: because then they would steal his story and rewrite it. He needed, if only in his own hopeless, hysterical way, to have some charge of his life, of his story” (Barnes 2016:104). Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich’s life and artistic career are threatened by the Russian communist regime which promotes fantasies about “the perfectibility of mankind”, “the engineering of the human soul” (Barnes 2016:55) and circulates fake stories that come to be swallowed hook, line and sinker: “the more a story circulated, the truer it became” (Barnes 2016:111). History and art are revalued by the Russian Bolsheviks according to their own ideology, which is parodied in Julian Barnes’s novel. Falsity replaces historical truth, which turns into a story that is subject to parody. We are invited to ponder Shostakovich’s views on history, being suggested that only art survives time. Just like stories, Shostakovich’s music will prevail over time:

What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves – the music of our being – which is transformed by some into real music. Which, over the decades, if it is strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, is transformed into the whisper of history. (Barnes 2016:135)

History, as well as biography, would fade: perhaps one day Fascism and Communism would be merely words in textbooks. And then, if it still had value – if there were still ears to hear – his music would be...just music. [...] Because music, in the end, belonged to music. (Barnes 2016:195)

Not only is history a mere story, but so is Dmitri Shostakovich’s identity. The way he views his own private and public life experiences and the way he is viewed by the Bolsheviks cause different stories to go around. His vision on the Bolshevik times, history and art is different from the Pravda’s perspective on these aspects. His feelings and prejudices regarding his present and future life, his principles, actions and music define his own identity, which, according to Mark Currie (1998:17), “exists only as narrative”.

4. Conclusions

Julian Barnes’s *The Noise of Time* is a postmodernist parody which incorporates an ironic, elegant and critical discourse that associates the Russian communist past and history with

nothing but noise. We are shown that history and truth can be offered various interpretations, being parodied and turned into a mere story remembered with bitter irony. Julian Barnes's narrator explores the critical function of parody to illustrate the negative aspects of the Russian Bolshevik past, approaching the symbols of the *noise of time*, of *Power* and *the Big House* with heavy irony. Showing us that one's story is rewritten by the Bolsheviks unless one survives and preserves one's truth, the third person narrator of the novel, who presents Dmitri Shostakovich's perspective upon time and history, suggests that historical truth is no longer unique but multiple and, thus, it is nothing but a story. By associating the historical time of the early 20th century Russia with the metaphor of *the noise of time*, which stands for a temporary disaster, the concept of history becomes subject to parody.

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