



Felix Nicolau

Imagination between Fiction and Lie

ABSTRACT

French philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger questions the propensity of human mind to binary structures. This attraction has proved to be tragic as it generated all sorts of conflicts. The source of evil is our narrow-mindedness and refusal to apprehend the multi-dimensional nature of reality. His book, *The Contradictory Rationality* (1990) is a plea for a more tolerant “trialectics”. His second book quoted in my article is *The Imaginaries of Politics* and my research focuses on the double-faced nature of fiction. Could we speak about an amoral fiction in the arts, and an immoral one in politics? Is political fiction a lie? Should an ethical literature de-fictionalize itself as much as possible? Should literature unmask the political carnival?

KEYWORDS

Jean-Jacques Wunenburger; Dialectics; Imagination; Fake; Fiction; Politics; Rationality.

FELIX NICOLAU

“Hyperion” University of Bucharest, Romania
felix_nicus@yahoo.com

Oscar Wilde wrote about the *decaying of lie*, the dwindling of the fantasizing capacity. The Irish-British writer targeted in his essay the quality of artistic aestheticism. I cannot figure out how enchanted would the pontiff of the absolute aestheticism be if he could see that fantastic apparatus of lying relocated in the political realm.

In *The Imaginaries of Politics*, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger comes up with “another hermeneutics of politics, milder, more complex” (translation mine) (9). The intention is to re-legitimize the *non-rational*, with a view to make room for a sanitizing imaginary. The philosopher is perfectly conscious of the rigidity of the utopian projects of the past, fact that resulted in the criminal rationalistic excesses of the 20th century. This is the reason why he wonders whether “the imaginary weren’t the best supporter of rationality and, simultaneously, a defending wall against perverted ways of thinking” (*ibid.*, 11). The sanitizing function of the imaginary is backed up by the aggressive ingredient in the structure of whatever social organization. The great liars of world literature – the baron Münchhausen, Pinocchio, Păcală etc – developed their creative qualities as a reaction against the aggressiveness of the system towards the free individual. To lie means to practise subtlety with the purpose of persuasion. But this can stay amoral only in arts, because art is pure fiction. Behind the

frontiers of arts, lie can be useful, but it becomes completely immoral.

The prejudicial legitimacy

To what extent does lie cover the perimeter of the imaginary? A function of the imaginary is, in Jean Jacques Wunenburger's opinion, to support the royal ointment. This can be visualized during the enthronement ceremony and in the divine protection: "The people have needed since immemorial times the incarnated image of grandeur, majesty, omnipotence that connects power with something superhuman" (*ibid.*, 16). Politics is a chameleon – its ambitions camouflage in altruistic scenery; it ceased long ago to be preoccupied with generosity and improvement. Nowadays its interests are strictly captivated by the advantages of a faction. In order to instil life into the altruistic illusion one needs legitimacy and faith. A makeshift faith! If "the political liturgy overlaps oftentimes the religious ritual" (*ibid.*, 20), this is possible only because the cunning politicians understood that reason by itself cannot seduce for long as its spectacular range of manifestation is limited. To be followed, one has to be charismatic. But charisma is a strictly individual attribute.

The lie, so to speak, is divided between artistic fiction and political fiction. The artist, starting with modernism but tracing back the romantics, seeks shelter in the ivory tower. "Poets went out of their way to create a gulf between themselves and their public" (Stanciu, 18). The postmodernists, in their turn, are interested in public as long as they can put up a show with their views and obsessions. Literature progressively manifests the tendency to raise reality from the spell put on it, while politics does whatever possible to manipulate through fiction.

Wunenburger's idea is that the individual attitude and charisma come in first place

when we speak about politics as a system. Simultaneously, he tries to legitimate politics by identifying a sublime dimension of power. This would ensure the sacredness of the one in charge with justice: "there is an imaginary even more archaic than the political power's one, that of the power to make justice" (Wunenburger, *The Imaginaries of Politics*, 24). The sublimity of power is paradoxical, because it legalizes punishment: a violence which is to fight the violence directed against the state system. Its implications are so intricate that some people could invoke the sanctity of the legislator. The law-maker is a genuine individual, above political games, an inspired figure free of human frailties. "The sacred connotation of law" (*ibid.*, 32) is a guaranty for its observance. But this sacredness requires a set of adjacent rituals, able to ceaselessly remind the superhuman – that is objectivity. The judiciary fiction is maybe the only one distant from lie – in an ideal society – and the closest to the condition of religious imaginary.

Superstition and manipulation

The looming question: which is the strict difference between fiction and lie? More exactly: do we witness a moral and an immoral imaginary? The French philosopher warns: the loss or decline of the religious imaginary either triggers chronic crises in the sphere of politics, or, and this is the most dazzling hypothesis, engenders resurgences of the same imaginaries of substitution? (*ibid.*, 34). Owing to the fact that between the religious imaginary – such an awkward formulation – and the political imaginary has always existed an uninterrupted connection, it is implied that the decaying of one should influence the situation of the other. If the religious imaginary has progressively diluted in superstition as it





was expectable in a society interested only in image, and not in text any longer —, the political imaginary is confined to strategies of manipulation by the advancement of makeshift myths. Charisma continues to be as important in the post-industrial society as it has been throughout history. Only that people don't look up anymore to the human qualities helpful to society, but to those qualities fit for assuring success in a profit-oriented, mercantile society. In this fashion, fiction becomes a set of lies which comes in handy when the slaves are supposed to elect their masters through vote — if we resort to the Nietzschean paradigm. Characteristic to the degradation of fiction down to the level of lie is the disappearance of the middle class, the class of intellectual workers. In broad lines, we are left with two classes: the one who, once upon a time, constituted the gentry, later replaced by the haute bourgeoisie, and which, at the time being, is formed by the salient members of business and political milieu, and a second class comprising corporatists and proletarians. Specific to middle class was the investment of their pastime in intellectual-artistic activities. The two classes left are interested exclusively in entertainment. The intellectual-artistic activities are approached today only as a background for social events: fashion parades, philanthropic soirées, cultural-sportive festivals, where the stress is put on consumerism, etc.

Starting from this polarization of social classes, we can debate upon Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's question put in *The Contradictory Reason*, whether the Western thinking got stuck into "an Aristotelian and Cartesian orthodoxy", one which crams "all determinations under the sign of the Same or Another", because "thinking nestles around the non-contradiction principle, the classificatory approach and around a nucleus of substances" (Wunenburger, *The*

Contradictory Reason, 9). If these are true, it means the difference is consciously underestimated with the view to attaining a utilitarian comfort lucrative in the worldly order. I remember the case of a remarkable student in Foreign Languages. He had graduated from Polytechnics, worked as a programmer, had a real capacity of assimilating foreign languages and he even read a lot. After one year he had a nervous breakdown. The cause was the plurality of the humanistic approaches, so much confusing if compared to the efficient, binary system which had been his referential cardinal point when he worked as a programmer. He confessed to me that he was completely baffled and he longed for straight and limited thinking directions. Nostalgia after a logic of conjunction, which wouldn't "highlight the multiform animation of differences" (*ibid.*, 10) is more spread than we should imagine. The attraction to simplification and the focus on strategies conceived to yield fast, palpable results is a symptom of non-philosophical thinking. Wunenburger believes that modernity hyperbolised the left brain hemisphere, the one specialized in analytical understanding (*ibid.*, 11). Slowly but irreversibly, the *numen* vanishes from the pragmatist thinking as it is considered a "rationality of the shadow" (*ibid.*, 13) which damages the perspectives of social success. The author of *The Contradictory Reason* supports the festering of "some ways of thinking contradictory and paradoxical" (*ibid.*, 14), that is of the heuristic ways. In order to promote such thinking we need to invest in the courage of contradiction and of understanding reality as *unitas multiplex*. The acceptance of a hermeneutic state of conflict means going further than Aristotelianism and Cartesianism, but further than Kantism and Hegelian dialectic as well. All these demands are propounded in an epoch in which social sciences proliferate and education is



distorted by the imperatives of efficiency and exactitude. The system postpones thus the essential in order to faster obtain economic advantages, but becomes toxic in this way for human nature and for the environment we inhabit.

The n-dimensional geometry

Wunenburger questions the nature of contemporary excesses: “The excess of alterity, on the one side, the excess of identity, on the other side, don’t they often have their origin in the incapacity of binary schemes to apprehend the many-headed structure of forms?” (*ibid.*, 24). It would be a naivety, though, to believe that the binary representation of reality is a characteristic of modernism. We very well know that Heraclitus saw the universe as a result of attraction between opposites, that Plato, in the last stage of constructing his system, was fascinated by geometrical bodies, the triangle being their core, and that Plotinus derived the world, by way of emanation, from the One. Even the Socratic maieutics, from what Plato transmitted us, was a dispute or a debate with the purpose of filtering out the truth. The move from 1 to 2 is the first step in splitting the monad, but it is not such a dramatic step in Wunenburger’s opinion: “The homogeneous treatment of dyads assures the status of epithetic correlates of the Unity” (*ibid.*, 32). This happens because the structures of reality never confine to binary, as we are lured to organize them, out ofgnoseological comfort. Symmetry would be a maniacal reflex of identitary thinking. These mirages generated by “speculum” emerge from a “paradigm of reflection” (*ibid.*, 38) that doesn’t take into account the geometrical irregularity of creation. Or, if we want, the divine geometry is infinitely more complex than the one we know and doesn’t rely on the straight line. Only the

curve allows for that special judgement of what is behind good and evil.

The true creative tension which generates a “space of mediations” (*ibid.*, 38) is provoked by the existence of a *tertium quid* able to relativize “the alternation from simple unity to fragmented duality” (*ibid.*, 56). This third dimension discharges the tensions of bipolarity, but it simultaneously charges a relation. The philosopher doesn’t reject in any way the n-dimensional space of modern physics. He only promotes the triad as the perfect structure from the point of view of the energy, that is of creativity. The *tetraktys* compensates for “the insufficiency of the dyad” (*ibid.*, 60). He overtakes its antagonisms by introducing into equation the excluded tertium, the scapegoat. The horizontal duality *victim – assailant* would thus be surpassed by transferring the hubris to a transcendent tertium (*ibid.*, 72).

Civilization overtakes culture

In his book from 1930, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, the British literary critic F.R. Leavis warned about the dangers of industrialization. The uncultivated majority started deriding the values of the refined minority. The word “high-brow”, which appeared in that period, was indicative of this aggressive mockery. Much in the same vein, Guillaume Apollinaire bemoaned in his poem *Zone* the end of an aesthetic world: “c’était et je voudrais ne pas m’en souvenir c’était au déclin de la beauté” (Apollinaire, 12).

The tense dyad is now represented by the conflict between culture and civilization. The latter progressively invades the former and subsequently assumes its status as well. Even the multiples of 2 seem to be menacing in the opinion of the American writer Jerome Rothenberg: “I found that the letters

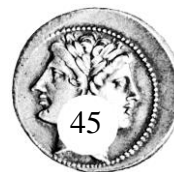


in the Hebrew god-name aleph-lamed-vav-hey (eloha) add up numerically (=42) to the Hebrew word bet-hey-lamed-hey (behalah), ‘terror, panic, alarm’” (Rothenberg, 17). This is Jahve of the Old Testament and he becomes more and more the God worshipped by the masses: a civilized, but not a cultural God. Terror, even if holy, begets superstition. Superstition proves very useful for what Bogdan Ghiu, in his book *Dada-sein*, called the *necropolitics*. Superstitious people are easier to manipulate and, more than this, they need the strong presence of a master. We have the famous couple in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo and Lucky. The ironical shade of the name Lucky is obvious when we realize it is used for a slave who is happy to carry in his mouth the whip with which he is flogged, to sleep while standing loaded with the bags of his master Pozzo. He does all these things in order to impress his tormenter so that he will not fire him. Slavery can be assumed as a job. The contemporary slave becomes prostrate if he is not used as a tool by his owner. In terms of identity, the individual depends upon the relations of power with other individuals. Identity could be perceived as a twofold condition: on the one hand the master, on the other hand the slave. Of course, as it happens in Harold Pinter’s theatre, these apparently opposed conditions can be whimsically inverted. Every victim nurtures the desire to dominate and every executioner longs for the pleasure to be dominated. Sadism and masochism swap roles in order to ensure the contemporary imperative of pleasure. Beckett imagined the two beggars that wait for Godot: “Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace they wait” (Pinter, 22). The more modernism melted into postmodernism, the *menace* was obliterated by pleasure. An indefinite and looming threat triggers unexpected reactions. Terror

is gradually replaced by hysterical fun. The defenceless victim resists the impending danger by ignoring it.

The aleatory technicalities

Alexandru Ivasiuc, who spent several years in the communist jails, describes the logic of annihilating identities while preserving people’s attachment to the unique party in his novel *The Crayfish*. The first step in advancing political “reforms” is to twist the meaning of such words as *honour*, *responsibility*, and *justice*: “By eliminating from our vocabulary the option of individuality, responsibility, justice, we shall replace it with the all-inclusive notion of technique. Clearly thought, obscurely felt. The operation will have an *en-gi-ne-er-like* precision. But it will bring forth a new ingredient, as well, in accord with the most modern techniques. The notion of aleatory, which will make it mysterious. We shall reoffer the world, in order to more efficiently govern it, something of the old mystery it lost with the advent of the rationalist individualism.”¹ (translation mine) (Ivasiuc, 8). Don Fernando has the intuition of political power as natural and unpredictable revelation. Terror becomes sacred and the awestricken people worship the guillotine. Justice and rightfulness are replaced in the limelight by aberration, chance and subjectivity: “The state power shall be completely arbitrary and mysterious. Nobody shall feel sheltered because the *real* criterion shall remain or seem hidden”² (*idem*). This is a poetic justice in the end, as it punishes in conformity with the political reason of appalling people. This is the *contradictory reason* in Jean-Jacques Wunenburger’s terminology. Its effects are artistic as long as they correspond to Jed Rasula’s theorizing on tropes: “Privileging tropes, the poet turns screen into filter, sifting rule into detour” (Rasula, 137).



The judiciary chaos cannot go totally berserk. To secure their positions, the manipulators strew the contradictory reason with what Julia Kristeva coined as *ideologemes*: “The micrological unit known as the *ideologeme*, the smallest ideological component in a system” (in Lane, 189). These microunits would coordinate “the connectivity of texts to form an intertextual network of meaning” (*idem*). The meaningful clusters of sense functioning like some astrocytes fictionalize politics and embellish all sorts of atrocities.

The self-deceived deceiver

The same Jerome Rothenberg warned that “mythology always carries with it an element of automythology” (Rothenberg, 44). Owing to such a reflecting phenomenon, the manipulators manipulate themselves until they completely annihilate their lucidity. All dictators end up believing in their godly nature and in their benign role in history. The auto-mythologizing illusion has the efficiency of a convex mirror. Analyzing Francesco Parmigianino’s *Self-portrait in a convex mirror*, Stephen Paul Miller concludes: “A convex mirror is a perfect surveillance mechanism. [...] No one can stand at an angle too oblique from a convex mirror’s perimeter to avoid being observed by another occupant of the same room. // The convex room therefore conveys a notion of supreme “surveillance” (in Bloom, 32). The researcher even spots the kinship between poetry and politics as he constantly reports his considerations to the Watergate scandal and the controversial figure of President Richard Nixon. This kinship is not an innocent merry-go-round. Politics, through its inherent pragmatism and cynicism, falls short of understanding the economic uselessness of literature. Stephen Paul Miller approaches the equation from the opposite

end: “all literature is primarily political because it is only through the language of culture, in its broadest sense that the contradictions of economic and political power and inequity can be dynamically yet unconsciously reconciled. Put simply, culture is a cover-up” (*ibid.*, 33).

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Notes

¹ “Scoțând deci din vocabularul nostru opțiunea de *individ, răspundere, justiție*, o vom înlocui cu noțiunea atotcuprinzătoare de *tehnică*. Clar gândită, obscur resimțită. Operația va avea o precizie *in-gi-ne-rească*. Însă va aduce și un element nou, în acord cu *tehnicile* cele mai moderne. Noțiunea de aleatoriu, care o va face misterioasă.

Noi vom reda lumii, pentru a o putea eficient guverna, ceva din vechiul mister pe care l-a pierdut odata cu in-di-vi-du-a-lis-mul raționalist.”

² “Puterea statului va fi pe deplin arbitrară și misterioasă. Nimeni nu se va simți la adăpost, pentru că adevăratul criteriu va rămâne sau va părea ascuns”.