

**THE TECHNIQUES OF COMMITTED FICTION:
IN DEFENCE OF JULIAN BARNES'S *THE PORCUPINE***

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Although some critics had repeatedly trumpeted the death of English satire in the first three quarters of the twentieth century, the frequency with which the satiric note is sounded in recent fiction is extremely significant. In a period marked by the decline of the British Empire, a greater public awareness about civil rights, the strengthening of the feminist movement, and the fall of the Berlin wall, politics still draws the attention of contemporary British satirists. Julian Barnes's novel *The Porcupine* (1992) is an excellent example, with its acute satire on the current downfall of Eastern European regimes. On its publication, however, this book received extensive hostile attention from critics and reviewers on several grounds, including its "uncommitted quality", its flat characters and its sombre tone. This paper seeks to dispute the negative critical response to *The Porcupine* by considering this novel within the tradition of British political satire and to draw attention to the author's proper use of conventional satiric strategies, such as caricature, fantasy, irony and detachment, rhetorical devices on which he relies to show the shortcomings and corruption of a Communist country in its transition to a capitalist-democratic state.

Politics has always attracted the attention of British writers. Looking back on the history of English literature one can find an endless catalogue of political satires, ranging from an allegory of court life in John Skelton's *The Bowge of Courte?* (c. 1498) to the ironic criticism on the misery of the Irish poor under English government in Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* (1729), from the epistles against the corruption of Robert Walpole's government in Alexander Pope's *Moral Essays* (1731-35) to Mary Shelley's apocalyptic view of a patriarchal republican England in her novel *The Last Man* (1826). In the twentieth century, however, some critics have spoken of the decline of English satire. In 1952, for instance, Evelyn Waugh

stated that our century is not an appropriate period for satire because this mode only “flourishes in a homogeneous society with a common conception of the moral law” (69), something that our fast moving and rapidly changing society lacks. A few years later other critics declared that the great literary figures of the twentieth century were not “preeminently satirists” (Elliott 1970: 223) and that satiric novels by authors such as Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Anthony Burgess, only “appeal to a limited audience” (Spacks 1971: 337).

This negative view of contemporary satire is now open to challenge. Far from being an exhausted form, we are witnessing a new and powerful revival of the satiric spirit in recent British fiction. There is a large number of celebrated novelists, such as Martin Amis, Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, Alasdair Gray, David Lodge, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie and Emma Tennant, who have followed the principles of the Mennipean tradition. Naturally, politics, either domestic or international, play a very important role here: the evils of colonialism are comically portrayed in Tom Sharpe’s *Riotous Assembly* (1971) and William Boyd’s *A Good Man in Africa* (1981); the reductive political implications of western patriarchy are satirised in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983); dystopian views of nuclear apocalypses are represented in Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1980) and Maggie Gee’s *The Burning Book* (1983); and the nature of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe can be found in Malcolm Bradbury’s *Rates of Exchange* (1983), Bruce Chatwin’s *Utz* (1988), Tibor Fischer’s *Under the Frog* (1992) or Ian McEwan’s *Black Dogs* (1992).

It is within this context of novelistic satire, in general, and political satire on the current downfall of Eastern European regimes, in particular, that we must approach Julian Barnes’s novel *The Porcupine* (1992). As the story unveils, readers participate in the public trial of Stoyo Petkanov, the deposed Communist president of a Soviet satellite state submerged in a profoundly enduring political and economic crisis. Although the name of the country is never mentioned, Julian Barnes actually refers to recent political developments in Bulgaria, a nation which is moving from Communism to a more democratic market system. In an illuminating article entitled “How Much Is That in Porcupines” Julian Barnes recalls his visit to Bulgaria in 1990 —two years before the publication of his novel—, at a time when the country was facing a political and economic crisis and discussing how to put their ex-president Todor Zhivkov to trial.¹ In fact, *The Porcupine* was a great success in Bulgaria, where it was first published with the title *Bodljivo Svinche*, six weeks before its London release in English. The Bulgarian translation sold ten thousand copies in hardback and was even recommended on the television news (Levy 1992: A10). However, it did not fare so well among English-speaking critics and book reviewers. After the enthusiastic welcome received by the more

¹ For further details about the recent political events in Bulgaria see R. J. Crampton’s *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (352-97).

experimental *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989), several critics had some harsh words for Julian Barnes on the publication of *The Porcupine*: some did not like the way in which the political issues were presented, others found fault with its size, tone or characters. The aim of this paper is to counter this hostile criticism by considering Barnes's novel within the tradition of British political satire, and to disclose the author's proper use of conventional satiric strategies, such as caricature, fantasy, irony and detachment, an arsenal on which he relies to expose the predicaments of a post-Communist Eastern European country.

What should be established from the outset is that *The Porcupine* is a satiric novel which dramatises the conflict between the reactionary beliefs of an intransigent old-style Communist dictator, Stoyo Petkanov, and the precarious truth of an ambitious democratic prosecutor, Peter Solinsky. Most of the book shows their confrontation in the Supreme Court, where, after a palace coup, the deposed Petkanov is accused of corruption and abuse of authority by Solinsky. However, because of insufficient evidence, the prosecution finds it extremely difficult to bring charges of genocide, torture and embezzlement against the former dictator. Eventually, Petkanov is only convicted of minor offences, although Solinsky, in the last minute, charges him with killing political opponents, producing a fake document that he had forged. Thus, in this conflict between the new order against the old, both sides have their share of blame for corruption: Solinsky uses dishonest means to accuse someone of relying on such methods. In the end, all those bright and encouraging prospects envisioned for a country which has just overthrown its Communist dictator turn out to be rather bleak.

The fact that Barnes's plot does not present an explicit conflict between vice and virtue, that is to say, between a repulsive Communist dictatorship of the past and an acceptable contemporary democratic world, has led critics to speculate about the "uncommitted quality" of *The Porcupine*. To Merritt Moseley, for instance, this lack of commitment is obvious, because the new and the old system "are more balanced than one might expect, or hope; it would be possible to read the novel as suggesting nearly moral equivalence between Bolshevism and liberalism" (1997: 150). One cannot agree with this critical view. It is true that both systems are censured in the novel, but that should not be a discredit to *The Porcupine* as a committed political satire. In this story Julian Barnes offers a portrait of political changes in Eastern Europe to criticise corruption, deception, craftiness and ambition, both in the old Communist system and in the emerging democratic order of the post-Communist transition period. It is not a question of bad and good ideologies, or Soviet Communism versus Western capitalism, but of a struggle between the unacceptable corruption that often entraps politicians and the implicit honesty that should reign over the political sphere. Therefore, in this novel we can clearly perceive the traditional satiric conflict between vice and virtue. But, as is common in satire, the committed writer emphasises the vices, whereas the values that the

satirist upholds, such as common sense, honesty and virtue, remain implicit in the text (Kernan 1959: 11).

It is evident that Julian Barnes highlights the defects of the old Communist regime. Through the trial of Petkanov, we learn of the most important crimes of this dictator: "Theft. Embezzlement of state funds. Corruption. Speculation. Currency offences. Profiteering. Complicity in the murder of Simeon Popov ... Complicity in torture. Complicity in attempted genocide. Innumerable conspiracies to pervert the course of justice" (Barnes 1993: 15-16). However, it is not only the personal vices of a greedy and hypocritical party leader which are satirised here, but the realities of the totalitarian state that he represents. Petkanov's political regime was an absolute and oppressive single-party government that permitted no individual freedom and attempted to control all aspects of people's life through coercion and repression. It used to be a country where officers in leather coats controlled demonstrations (2), apartments were bugged by the security police (7), public gatherings of more than eight people had to be officially registered (52), and loyal citizens were executed for being traitors and then became martyrs whenever the political situation called for (101-103). An indirect reproach of the main flaws of this political system is superbly shown when Solinsky's daughter, at the age of ten, addresses her father with four "naïve" questions about their country:

Why were there so many soldiers when there wasn't a war? Why were there so many apricot trees in the countryside but never apricots in the shops? Why is there fog over the city in the summer? Why do all those people live on that waste ground beyond the eastern boulevards? (26)

The little girl is really underscoring four basic maladies that Julian Barnes denounces as characteristic of this type of regime in Eastern Europe: police repression, deficient centrally planned economy, disregard for the environment, and social inequalities. Some of these features, together with the references to torture, genocide and manipulation of history, remind us of the world envisioned by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

At the same time, Julian Barnes is issuing a warning about the dangers of making the same mistakes of the past in the new post-Communist era, once Mr Jones has been overthrown, as we can read in Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). In fact, some of these political vices of the past already hover over the new political order. Despite the great excitement associated with the collapse of Communism, the new society has inherited not only the economic problems of the previous system (food and petrol shortages, electricity cuts, etc.), but also some of its arbitrary methods, notably the manipulation of language: the electricity cuts are disguised as "interruptions" by the State Electricity Board (23), people already speak of the Changes instead of Revolution (42), and the new shortcomings of the country that Petkanov mentions, such as inflation, black market and prostitution, are called

“painful readjustments” by Solinsky (70). They seem to be prisoners of their own past. Solinsky clearly illustrates this reality when he accuses Petkanov with a forged document, following the old Machiavellian belief that “the end justifies the means”, and also when he begins to think about the possibility of moving to a larger house, as befits a General Prosecutor (128), although at the beginning of the story he refused to accept favours while charging the ex-President with abuse of privilege (7).

At the end of the novel, there is no clear resolution. Although Petkanov is sentenced to thirty years of internal exile (134), we cannot say that justice has been done and, therefore, there is no happy ending. On the one hand, the truth about Petkanov’s crimes has not actually been proved; on the other, Solinsky has not been victorious in this political judicial match, since he is abandoned by his wife because of his dishonest behaviour during the trial, his daughter refuses to speak to him and, to make matters worse, his father passes away (135). The novel effectively ends with Solinsky in an orthodox church and an old woman defiantly holding a picture of Lenin. However, some critics would have preferred a more positive ending; among them Merritt Moseley, who complains that “Barnes sees no progress in the movement from Communism to a freer society” (1997: 156). Once more, tradition dictates that the normal plot of satire does not include any sort of transformation or progress which would result in a situation different from the one described at the beginning or an ending in which good simply triumphs over evil: “Whatever movement there is, is not plot in the true sense of change but mere intensification of the unpleasant situation with which satire opens” (Kernan 1959: 31). Thus, it is only natural that the last scene of *The Porcupine* should not offer any promising solution.

The shortness and simplicity of the novel have also become an object of ridicule among some critics. Nick Hornby, in his article “Much Matter, Few Words”, alludes to the kind of criticism that has come Julian Barnes’s way: that it is too short a novel for such an important theme, that “... only a truly arrogant writer would attempt to capture the whole sorry mess of the collapse of Communism in 138 pages” (1992: 11). Moseley also states that *The Porcupine* is “the simplest of all Julian Barnes’s novels” (1997: 150), adding a few pages later that “There is, indeed, something thin about this novel, which is also one of his shortest” (1997: 157). If the length of a literary work is one of the touchstones for determining quality, what should we say about Swift’s *Modest Proposal* or Orwell’s *Animal Farm*? They could also be too short to deal with such messy and complicated issues as the political situation in eighteenth-century Ireland and the betrayal of political revolutions. It is a well-known fact that effective satire depends upon audience understanding and acceptance to a great degree; hence, satirists must put their cases clearly and simply in order to win their readers over more easily. Although for critics this impression of economy might blemish the literary reputation of a text, *The Porcupine*, like so many other satiric pieces of the past, observes the rhetorical strategy of concision, precision and compactness.

Simplicity often extends to satiric characters as well. The satirist tends to proceed by drastic simplification and exaggeration, creating types rather than round characters (Kernan 1959: 23). That is why it is difficult to understand the criticism of those who say that *The Porcupine* is thin on characters: "Aside from Stoyo Petkanov, no character, not even Solinsky, is well developed" (Moseley 1997: 157). Of course, Julian Barnes does not introduce complex personalities with rich inner lives who change and grow throughout the story; on the contrary, he presents both his characters and their backgrounds with deliberate precision and simplicity. If we think of a novel like *Mrs Dalloway*, we would probably agree that Virginia Woolf's interest in the personality of the central figure is stronger than her interest in the plot. It is because Virginia Woolf wants to explore Clarissa Dalloway's mind that the action is delayed by her interior monologues. Julian Barnes, however, never thought of the characters in *The Porcupine* as portraits of unique individuals worth studying for their own sake. For him, the characters in this novel are figures who contribute to a larger design. He, then, follows the classical "law of persons" which states that every character should represent some typical human quality, or typical combination of qualities, so that the pattern of interaction between the characters would be typical of human society. In that way it was felt that the writer's imitation of life would be universally true, and that the criticism he expressed would be universally applicable.

Like most satirists, Julian Barnes works through caricature: having decided what qualities he wishes to illustrate, he brings them vividly to life in his characters. They are caricatures which are designed to ridicule some aspects of the society and, at the same time, to represent the most typical and essential characteristics of various social and political figures: Stoyo Petkanov appears as the typical self-confident, wily, aggressive, misogynist, racist, corrupt, old dictator, who is used to being treated with great respect; Peter Solinsky is depicted as the young ambitious politician who defends the new order and wants to destroy the vestiges of the totalitarian past at any cost; Georgi Ganin is the apostate who used to be a faithful party member in uniform and now, after the Changes, has become an anti-Communist democrat who wears a suit, has pink cheeks, and is rather fleshy (Barnes 1993: 50); Anna Petkanova, the only child of the ex-president, is seen first as the beacon of youth, the example to women throughout the nation, but she soon grows fat, is keen on cigarettes and banquets, and dies at the early age of 35 (55-56); Stephan's grandmother represents the nostalgic believer in the old system, whereas the group of students who watch the trial on television stands for the new anti-Communist mood, those who want a radical change and would rather see the old dictator executed. Indeed, these characters are not rich, varied or original, but their sharpness and grotesqueness allow them to fulfil their satiric function.

Nevertheless, the simplicity that characterises *The Porcupine* should not be confused with superficiality, as Francis King claimed when he referred to Barnes's novel as "a disconcerting superficial work" (qtd. by Porlock 1992: 2). To attract the

reader towards his point of view, Julian Barnes adopts different textual strategies which often make satire more effective and memorable. One of these rhetorical devices is what Northrop Frye called "a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque" (1973: 224). In *The Porcupine*, Barnes does not really create a fantastic world, as Swift did in *Gulliver's Travels*, but he offers a distorted vision of life so that the crimes and follies that are to be eradicated from the political scene appear as instances of deformity and the grotesque. This is often achieved by deliberate exaggerations. One example of it may be the way women spit when their demonstration reaches the headquarters of the Socialist Party, a practice which had become "a national necessity for a while so that the fire brigade would be called to hose down the cobbles at the end of each day" (Barnes 1993: 4). Exaggerated are also the 32 volumes of *Collected Speeches, Writings and Documents* that Petkanov has published (66), the long list of decorations and medals that he has acquired (116-120), and the testimonies of the five witnesses summoned by the Defence, whose high praise of Petkanov's personality is later on parodied by the Devinsky Society opposite the People's Court (95-97). Another grotesque way of reducing the human dignity of the target characters is to compare them to animals. Take the case of Petkanov, who on the first day of the trial had left his hat and coat "somewhere along the burrow" (30); he is, of course, the porcupine of the title, an animal that during the trial protects himself very well with sharp comments whenever he is attacked by his enemy Solinsky, who at the end gets hurt, despite the "porcupine gloves" he wears when he goes to court (29); Petkanov is also "the old fox" (75), "the swinish ex-President" (103), and the wolf of Solinsky's phrase: "Set a fox to catch a wolf" (35).

All this shows how Barnes's satire works through subtlety and suggestion. Satiric fiction has traditionally avoided direct attacks and plain statements in favour of indirection. Although some critics miss in *The Porcupine* the "self-conscious obliqueness" of his previous novels (Stone 1992: 3), Barnes does not really abandon the indirect method of art, since he makes extensive use of irony, a device of obliquity popular among satirists, a powerful weapon which often makes great demands on the reader's judgement. Different types of irony are present in *The Porcupine* to show a deep criticism of the political errors of Eastern European regimes. Verbal irony appears in the demonstration organised by the Devinsky Commando against the old regime that had taken place a couple of years before; they chant ironic slogans like "LONG LIVE THE PARTY. LONG LIVE THE GOVERNMENT ... THANK YOU FOR THE PRICE RISES. THANK YOU FOR THE FOOD SHORTAGES. GIVE US IDEOLOGY NOT BREAD" (46); they might also be the authors of the anonymous postcard Solinsky receives at the end of the trial whose text reads "GIVE US CONVICTIONS NOT JUSTICE" (127); even the political system before the arrival of Communism is subject to an ironic comment: "In the old days of the monarchy a cabinet minister had occasionally been impeached, and a couple of prime ministers *dismissed* from office by the roughly

democratic method of assassination ...” (58, my italics). Added to that, there are various examples of irony of fate, which works against various characters:

Solinsky, who from the beginning wants Petkanov to be punished, is the one who ends up with even worse punishment: “He [Petkanov] had lost everything, but he was less defeated than this ageing young man [Solinsky]” (135); even his wife abandons him, despite the fact that they live in a complex of apartments called “Friendship” (7);

Georgi Ganin, the officer who tries to disperse a demonstration against the old regime, is turned into a symbol of decency, negotiation, a sign that the army supports the people, due to shortage of bullets (47-49);

Anna Petkanova, the ex-President’s daughter, first seen as a shining example for the nation and Communist countries in general, puts on a lot of weight because she becomes addicted to American hamburgers, a basic symbol of capitalism (56-57);

The ordinary people of that country (represented by Vera, Dimiter, Stefan and Atanas), who had hoped to see a fair trial and learn the real truth about Petkanov’s government, cannot have any of them at the end.

Together with simplicity, fantasy and indirection, there is another rhetorical strategy that is often present in novelistic satire: detachment. This means that satirists are usually disengaged from both their argument and their characters. The narrators of satiric fiction are just speaking voices who do not explicitly condemn what they try to expose nor feel sympathy for their characters; it is the reader who has to grasp the clues which point to the truth of what is presented. The story of *The Porcupine* is told in the third person, but the author does not intrude his own personality into the story. He cleverly presents facts and dialogues so that we can easily judge. It is a traditional omniscient narrator who knows how the women of the demonstration dress at home and what they have for dinner (2), the way rich foreigners feel at the Sheraton hotel (5), why Peter Solinsky prefers to stay in his small apartment (7-8) and how Petkanov prepares the tactics for his meeting with the Prosecutor General (9). However, this god-like narrator remains entirely aloof from the action and does not preach in the story. In part this is achieved because the traditional third-person narration often changes into a character’s stream of thought with the help of a free indirect style (also called indirect interior monologue). In the following passages, for example, the narrator enters Petkanov’s mind and gives us his point of view, still in the third person, but with the language this character would have used if he were to share his opinions with us:

Would they shoot him? Well, there were no bears in the ground. No, they probably wouldn't: they didn't have the guts. Or rather, they knew better than to make a martyr of him. Much better to discredit him. Which is what he wouldn't let them do. They would stage the trial their way, how it suited them, lying and cheating and fixing evidence, but maybe he'd have a few tricks for them too. He wasn't going to play the part allotted him. He had a different script in mind. (17)

That imbecile boy prosecutor didn't know what he was up to against. If hard labour in Varkova hadn't broken him, when even some of the toughest comrades wet their pants at the thought of a visit from the iron Guard, he wasn't going to be beaten down by this pitiful cabbage-brained lawyer who was fifth choice for the job. He, Stoyo Petkanov, had sent the boy's father packing without much trouble, kicked him out of the Politburo on a ten-to-one vote and then kept him well watched in his bee-keeping exile. So what chance did this ball-less son of his stand, pottering into a court with a silly grin and a bagful of faked evidence? (113-14)

On the one hand, the indirect interior monologue allows the author to invoke critical reactions from some of the characters towards other characters, sparing the narrator the role of an active critic. In the two passages quoted above we can see how Petkanov chides Solinsky for his conduct during the trial. On the other hand, this narrative method offers Julian Barnes the possibility of using the technique of self-revelation—he lets the characters reveal themselves. Petkanov's self-revelation becomes an important part of Barnes's purpose in criticising this character. His vicious nature is thus revealed in a more dramatic and convincing way. It is as if we were hearing the truth from his own lips, like the confession of Chaucer's Pardoner or the soliloquies in those Elizabethan plays in which the villain comes to the front of the stage and unmasked himself in front of the audience.

Finally, the tone of *The Porcupine* has also prompted some negative criticism. Again Merritt Moseley does not like the attitude Julian Barnes adopts towards his material and would have preferred a more comic approach: "Aside from the Devinsky Commando, nobody has a sense of humour" (1997: 157). If we look at the British satiric tradition, we can see that political satire is not necessarily funny. Indeed, there is a considerable range of tone from restrained mockery to violent denunciation, from gentle irony to harsh sarcasm. It is true that the majority of satires do create a risible response, but there are also many Juvenalian pieces which expose flaws, excess or corruption in a more bitter, cruel, merciless way (Pollard 1970: 66-72). We should consider, for example, Dr Johnson's "London", some passages of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the nightmarish world of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as well as many other twentieth-century dystopias. The

prevailing tone of *The Porcupine* is not as tragic as the latter examples. While some references to shortages and repression can be gloomy and even frightening, there are also some comic moments, produced by the exaggerations, grotesque scenes and ironies mentioned above. Undoubtedly, Barnes's humour is not free of some sinister elements, but this kind of mixed tone is fairly typical in satire, a literary mode that often forces us to laugh and to feel moral outrage at the same time.

In conclusion, *The Porcupine* is a sombre look at the political situation in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is a compelling satire against the shortcomings and corruption prevailing in both the old totalitarian Communist regime and the new period of transition to democracy and market economy. I fully agree with John Bayley when he says that in this novel Barnes adopts "the techniques of 'committed fiction', as it used to be practiced by André Malraux, George Orwell, and Arthur Koestler" (1992: 30). It is perfectly reasonable to say that *The Porcupine* is rooted in the tradition of twentieth-century political satire, since both its critical intention and rhetorical elements corroborate that opinion. It was already mentioned how Julian Barnes makes fine use of traditional satiric strategies, such as the simplification of the plot and characters, the depiction of the grotesque, as well as an ironic and detached approach. To some critics all these satiric conventions presumably pose a potential threat to the literary quality of the novel, but I believe that they only help Julian Barnes to offer an outstanding satiric portrait of the downfall of Eastern European regimes.²

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