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An Interview with Lucian Bâgiu, Author of *Bestiary: Oriental Salad with Peacock/Imaginary Academics*

CORINA SELEJAN

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

ABC: How did this novel come into being? It doesn't exactly fit in with your previous creative and critical writing...

LB: Trying to remember exactly what happened in the summer of 2006 makes me realize how long ten years can be... At the time I was twenty-six, I had recently (and successfully) defended my PhD thesis in Romanian literature at the prestigious Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, I was trying to write a sequel (*Beyond the Horizon*) to a children's fantasy book (*Sânziana in the Land of Fairy-Tales*) and I was getting generally bored in a rather small town and a very, very small university from Transylvania, with no prospects in sight. So at some point I decided to have fun. I abandoned the fantasy sequel (something I still blame myself for every time *Sânziana* goes to bed, but she is part of the fairy tale world so I know she is having much more fun by herself anyhow) and started to write about something I was supposedly better at: a slalom between narratologic and academic traps. True, at the time I had no idea how to ski.

ABC: Where did you get your inspiration for this novel: was it reality, other novels, both?

LB: It must have been in 2001 that my uncle casually handed me a novel he had bought. It was the first Romanian translation of *Changing Places*, signed by Virgil Stanciu, and I loved it. The following year, while I was a Philology student in the fourth (and final) year in Alba Iulia, a professor arrived from Cluj-Napoca to teach Contemporary English Literature. The

name of the professor was Virgil Stanciu and thus I was lucky enough to experience first-hand the unsteady distinction between facts and fiction, life and art. *Lucky Jim* was required reading. Those may have been the first bookish roots of my novel. I may as well mention that as a teenager I went to visit the same uncle in Braşov and took the opportunity to watch a theater performance, something I could not do in my small Transylvanian town. I was mesmerized by the novel experience, an audience of a few tens seated on the stage itself and watching the actors within arm's reach, so real, so unreal at the same time. Mircea Andreescu will always be, to me, George, for the name of the play was *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*...

When I was very young, twenty-three years old, I became a member of the academic staff (as a tutor and later assistant lecturer) of the same small university where I had been a student until a few months earlier. Little by little the discrepancy between idealistic fiction and prosaic reality turned into a frustrating gap. I could have simply complied with unwritten rules, tacitly accepted and adopted by everybody in the system. Instead, I decided to write a story. As for how imaginary the story is, the poignant question asked over and over again, mention should be made that the two quotations at the beginning, from Derrida ("Il n'y a pas de hors-texte") and Cantemir, were mostly futile warnings. A colleague of mine, just before the book launch at the University Library, asked me with a tormented mien if she was in the book. Having reassured her she was not, she was brave enough to become part of the audience. Although the room was full, somehow a good number of my colleagues missed it...

ABC: What are your favorite campus novels? Apart from David Lodge's, obviously, since you have dedicated your novel to Lodge...

LB: Every now and then one comes to realize the magnitude of one's own ignorance. Your question is such an epiphany moment to me. I hastened to google "campus novels list" (something I have never done before) and I was both happy enough to find out how very prolific and alive the genre is and sad enough to contemplate the limits of my readings on the subject. I can only name *Lucky Jim*, *Changing Places* and *Small World* (not so

much *Nice Work*, of course), the first two of the Wilt Series (the rest is pulp literature), *The Human Stain*, Javier Marias' *Todas las almas* (*All Souls*), Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, Bernard Malamud's *A New Life*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. I must ask, can you put down *Jude the Obscure* and *Absalom, Absalom!* as campus novels? In the end, I just became aware that I wrote my book without being aware of – or at least without paying much attention to – the long and solid tradition of a much respected clan whose member I inadvertently find myself to be. Which may be either an unforgivable sin, or on the contrary, an ingenuous chance. That is for the reader to decide. Anyhow, I searched for some twenty titles in the Lund University Library and found four available, in English, at the Center for Languages and Literature. Thus I will finally become familiar with some of my kin. You know how these family reunions turn out to be...

ABC: How did you go about writing your campus novel? Did you have a ready-made plan in mind from the very beginning or did the plot emerge while you were having fun with it?

LB: Truth be told, I had absolutely no plan from beginning to end, something that is quite obvious in the fragmented and heteroclit structure (spoiler alert: there is no actual linear story and no explicit revealing epilogue, so that should take care of a good slice of potentially unwise readers). I wrote the first chapter at the same time as the sequel to the children's story and for quite a while I hesitated as to which one should go on (for some reason one of them had to be abandoned so that the other one could come into being...). I sacrificed the fairy-tale for I had the feeling I was stuck when the originality issue came up (the same old story with sequels). However I was not very resolute about the novel either and the completion of the writing was pending until something unexpected happened. I had published the first chapter in a rather little-known provincial cultural magazine far away from my small Transylvanian town (October 2006) and I was stupefied to read, in a Bucharest cultural magazine, a review, signed by (the then unknown to me) Felix Nicolau, of Javier Marias' *Todas las almas* (February 2007), in which he was making

mention of my first chapter, supposedly lost in total anonymity. That gave me an impulse (perhaps self-confidence as well to some degree) and made me continue. Yet another unexpected event took place: around April I was about to lose vision in my left eye (the retina partially came off, for an unknown reason, something I was not even aware of for a while) and I spent ten days in hospital after surgery. It was a little bit of a trauma and one of the things I decided afterwards was to finish the novel. I did it in haste, the final chapters are not what they might otherwise have been. So yes, I did have fun with most of the process of creation, no pain there, on the contrary, relief.

ABC: Food is important in *Bestiary*, isn't it? How did you come up with the idea of structuring your novel's chapters around food and narratology?

LB: Food in *Bestiary* is intentionally something like food in *La Grande Bouffe*, except for the ending. From the very beginning the (sub)title made reference to salad for I wanted to suggest it was about something essential, necessary, familiar, prosaic, which you may or may not appreciate but cannot live without. The way the dish is cooked, sometimes in random order, the ingredients that may look appealing but may turn out to be "corrupted" or missing, the final product itself, incomplete yet effective stand for the academic life I intended to depict – and for life in general. The food chapters are the sequences of life, with its ups and downs. As for narratology, the story goes like this: after I became a tutor in my very small Transylvanian university, with the task of supervising the students' practical essays in linguistics (yeah, linguistics), the first in a series of no less than four tenured professors of linguistics (who was, at the same time, a PhD student in his final year and also a recently retired academic...; this is not a joke; the fourth was also a PhD student who finally got his PhD in Latin History, thus avoiding a forced retiring) handed me a tome edited by Oswald Ducrot and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* in a 1996 Romanian translation. The philology students might not have been terribly enthusiastic about the reference (I cannot blame them), but I did enjoy one

particular chapter, the one dealing with narratology. I later applied the scholarly paradigm and references when drawing up a research report as part of my PhD research (i.e. the required oral presentations), publicly defended in October 2004 and dealing with an exotic Romanian novel published in 1979 by Valeriu Anania (*The Strangers from Kipukua*; no resemblance to Lodge's *Paradise News...*). Ever since I have been sort of "infused" with the techniques which came in handy when one least expected it. Mention should be made, yet again, of my English Literature professors from my BA years, particularly Virgil Stanciu, who came from Cluj-Napoca and explained to us in a very charming way the novelty Conrad introduced with his eye-witness in *Heart of Darkness*, Fowles with the seemingly intrusive and obtrusive narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and so on and so forth. Those were magical times for a young spirit in an otherwise backwards environment.

As for *Bestiary*, this was not the title of the novel until the pre-print stage. The editor called me and said the title *Oriental Salad with Peacock/Imaginary Academics* was too long, I could keep it as a subtitle but we should agree on a shorter title the reader could connect to, react to and remember easily. She inclined towards *Silent Movie*; I disagreed and sort of spontaneously proposed *Bestiary*. Editors have moments like that, yet in the end it might have been a fortunate call. However, every time I order my own novel from the publishing house bookshop, they send me a package of Cortazar's *Bestiary*. Somehow both books managed to go out of print so no confusion is possible anymore.

ABC: Do you mind your novel's being labeled as postmodernist? Do you find that label reductive?

LB: Not at all. From the moment an author finishes writing a piece of literature, that product is no longer (exclusively) his. Every reader (whether a Sunday reader or a specialized one, that is, "a critic") has a right (or even an obligation) to label the artistic product as something or other, otherwise literature and the arts would not exist, would they? But enough about aesthetics, literary theory and so on. Or not? Being postmodernist cannot be any more reductive than being modernist or

expressionist or whatever. Different ways of reinterpreting life, none superior to the other, it is merely a matter of taste, fashion or (un)conscious personal choice. As for postmodernism, most say it has long lived its life, neo-modernism having meanwhile made its voice heard. That is why a novel written in a post-modernist manner some decades after the fever pitch may look out of place, obsolete, redundant. That is why labeling an artistic accomplishment as postmodernist may “reduce” its potential effect. As for my novel, it’s an intellectual game (therefore witty to some degree as well, I hope) and one of my intentions may have been to propose a recipe for how a novel may (not) be written. Yet it is of relatively little relevance what the author’s intentions were anyhow. Once a child is born, sooner or later s/he will start walking on his/her own two feet and wander through life at a personal pace, which most definitely will not be yours. You may worry for a while, or now and then, but there is nothing you could or should do. Just be happy about the walk. And move on.

ABC: Many of the novel’s paratexts are (explicitly) instructive in literary theory, as is indeed (implicitly) the entire text. Did you write with a specific kind of reader in mind?

LB: Yes. Undoubtedly. It is not a tome for the average reader, but for people with a minimum of philological background. To understand it (and possibly enjoy, or disagree) one has to be familiar with the basics of literary theory, with some aspects of British and also Romanian literature, culture and civilization. One of my other intentions was to raise the interest of a potential foreign reader (anglophile par excellence) in Transylvania’s / Romania’s rich, complex and fascinating chronotope. In the end it is a novel which addresses a rather specialized target audience. You may get a shock if you are not prepared beforehand and if you just want to read a funny story with gossip about a small insignificant university with cartoon academics. It is a little bit more than that (I hope). On the other hand, it could stand for a (rather abrupt) introduction to literary theory for a neophyte who may later use it as case study material for a PhD thesis... A good support for text analyses, hermeneutics. Not

the best-seller type. This came as a big disappointment to some of my philological colleagues.

ABC: Notwithstanding the upbeat tone of *Bestiary* as a whole, the picture of the Romanian university seemed to me relatively bleak, especially for young rising scholars. Is it meant to be a ‘realistic representation’? What are your views on extra-literary Romanian academic reality? Has your perception changed now that you’ve been teaching abroad for quite some time?

LB: It is not meant to be a “realistic representation”; actually it is very tame. Had I tried to write an honest depiction I would have ended up with a much less funny story; and with the formal ending of my academic employment. If you want to get a bleak (that is realistic) picture of Romanian university you simply have to look around at the recent public disclosures.

The former Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta acquired a PhD *summa cum laude* in Law in 2003, from the University of Bucharest (you cannot go higher than that in Romania, some might say), under the supervision of the PM at the time, a full professor at the university as well, of course. It took nine years, until 2012, for the PhD awardee to become Prime Minister in his turn and thus for everybody to realize that more than a third of the thesis was a collection of copy-pastes from a few well-known books, mostly from books written by a professor who signed the preface to Victor Ponta’s own “creation” (hence the suspicion that the real author of the compilation is not Victor Ponta at all). I will ignore politics (he did not resign, of course) and focus on the academic issue. The Ethics Commission of the University of Bucharest decided it was a case of plagiarism, but could not withdraw the PhD title. Why? Because according to Romanian legislation, all political dignitaries have a special statute, their doctoral title can only be withdrawn by a special ethics commission appointed by the Minister of Education. Therefore, the Prime Minister appointed an ad interim Minister of Education, who, in turn, appointed new members to that special ethics board which hastily

concluded that there was no plagiarism at all. Do you think that is the end of the story? No way.

History repeated itself with Deputy Prime Minister Gabriel Oprea and Minister for Internal Affairs Petre Tobă: the former even got to be a full professor and supervise twenty-one PhD theses himself, whereas the latter is famous for a Works Cited list that included the author “Apud.”¹

None of this could have happened without the complicity/corruption of the academics. And we have only seen the tip of the iceberg. To get a glimpse of what happens “below the surface,” where the mass of the iceberg floats, an even more recent disclosure speaks volumes. The Romanian Parliament passed a law so that convicted criminals can benefit from a one-month reduction of their sentence if they write and publish a scientific book while doing time. As a result, in 2014 and 2015 no less than 400 “scientific” books were written and published by the strong scholars’ guild of the Romanian prisons (sarcasm intended). The thing is that, according to regulations, in order for them to be able to start “writing” scientific books in reclusion they needed a recommendation from a full professor or an associate professor. The result was astonishing for the scientific community. People who barely knew how to sign their names acquired recommendations from all universities for all thinkable subject matters and wrote several books each in record time (a 270–page-long “scientific” book was written in six hours and a half, according to the prison schedule; and the examples go on). The prisoners got out earlier, some boasting they did not actually write a single line themselves, of course, but simply received the ready-made essays from the academics (they could not brag about the sum paid for the service, which would have been misdemeanor added to felony...). The reaction of the Minister of Education was that the academics gave the recommendations as private individuals, not as members of universities, therefore no harm was done, and no punishment can be reinforced. The university presidents quickly got the message and repeated it with great relief.

Now that is “realistic representation”; bleak enough?

Yes, my perception changed a lot. After spending three years in Trondheim, I came back with an open heart, serene, with good expertise I could apply back home. My idealistic impulse steadily vanished and I had

no choice but to leave again, though that was not my original intention. The sad reality is that nobody wishes for anything to change. Preserving the *status quo* means preserving certitudes, regardless of their (im)moral nature.

ABC: What do you miss most about Transylvania? Judging from *Bestiary*, you are very much attached to your Transylvanian roots, very much aware of Transylvanian culture and history...

LB: I miss home and that should be enough for anybody who has a place called home. I am attached to it firstly and mostly because that is the place where I was born, grew up, acquired my education, had my first academic experiences, in short, all my life happened in Transylvania until I was almost 29. I may be subjective (I am for sure), but it is a splendid realm, and there is a long-lasting tradition among the Brits at least to be fascinated by “the land beyond the forests” (the literal translation of Transylvania’s Latin name). I might name, randomly, Charles, Prince of Wales, Bram Stoker or Laurence Austine Waddell (all of whom traced their origins back to Transylvania, fictitiously or otherwise...). It is a land that has everything: mountains with virgin forests and brown bears, lynxes, wolves, endless rivers, green hills with old villages, farms with cows and horses, rich, diverse, old, alive and functional inter-cultural traditions, a complicated history, astonishing architecture, tasty natural cuisine and yet all the modern “amenities” the “civilized” citizen needs, at sometimes higher standards than offered elsewhere (one may land in at least six airports to begin with, ski in several resorts and even drive on two highways...). I am aware of Transylvanian culture and history for I hold an MA in that very field, something that made me realize, in another way, exactly how lucky I was, to some extent, to have been born and raised there. All of you are very much welcome, some of you will not want to go back home afterwards, some already have not. Charles has bought an endless number of houses in several villages and seems very much at peace every time he comes around – and that is suspiciously often.

ABC: Could you imagine yourself writing another academic novel, perhaps based on your teaching experience abroad?

LB: Imagine it I could. The question was raised in Trondheim, by the second head of department I worked with, and at a Bella litterarum academic circle where I read a fragment from *Bestiary*, in my own English translation, and also in Prague, at a literary evening hosted by the Romanian Cultural Institute, where two Czechs, Jarmila Horakova (Novotna) and Krystof Mika read their own translations from (and reviews of) *Bestiary*. If the Norwegians were curious about the way a foreigner might depict them, the Czechs were a little bit uncomfortable. It would not be difficult to write another campus novel, setting its action in an unnamed Scandinavian or Bohemian university: there are plenty of succulent sources of inspiration and a foreigner's perspective is more detached and, perhaps, objective, the extra-aesthetic implications and repercussions of less significance. One of the effects might be a translation of the novel in the respective language. However, my dilemma is the same as with the sequel to the children's story. What novelty can *Beyond the Horizon* bring once Sânziana was already in the *Land of Fairy-Tales*? Playing at deconstructing a novel in postmodern fashion is an (un?)accomplished experiment. The irony and sarcasm are more or less the same for reasonably similar circumstances. The local color acts as a mere design and cannot be sustainable all by itself. Thus I have not written another novel eight years after leaving my Transylvanian campus. And yet, isn't literature about writing over and over again about the same subjects, and still being spellbound? Looking at the list of 50 greatest campus novels written in the last 65 years, I wonder...

ABC: Is there a question you always wanted to be asked – as a writer?

LB: I will think about this and let you know as soon as Sânziana falls asleep. It is time for a bedtime story.

Note:

¹ "Apud" is Latin for "quoted in."