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AMERICA IS A DEMOCRACY, WHEREAS AUSTRALIA STAYED A BUREAUCRACY

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ABSTRACT. ***America Is a Democracy, whereas Australia Stayed a Bureaucracy*.** Peter Carey is one of those authors who, through almost their entire body of fictional works, deal with politics, search for the political, examine how it permeates all layers of one's life, irrespective whether one is better or lower positioned in society. The more so this happens in *Parrot and Olivier in America* (2009), a novel in which his two main characters swing between the Old and the New Worlds, between political systems in the making. The twenty-first century reader is thus forced to question what has been made and what they are currently living in.

Keywords*: Peter Carey, Parrot and Olivier in America, Europe, France, French Revolution, America, Australia, political systems, democracy, bureaucracy, penal colony, Alexis de Tocqueville, narrative voices.*

REZUMAT. ***America a devenit o democraţie, iar Australia a rămas o birocraţie.*** Peter Carey este unul din acei autori care, aproape în întreg corpusul său de lucrări ficţionale abordează politica, caută politicul, analizează cum acesta pătrunde toate straturile vieţii individului, indiferent dacă acesta este plasat mai bine sau mai jos în societate. Cu atât mai mult acest lucru se întâmplă în *Parrot şi Olivier în America* (2009), roman în care cele două personaje principale se perindă între Lumea Veche şi Lumile Noi, între sisteme politice în construcţie. Cititorul contemporan este astfel forţat să se întrebe ce s-a construit şi în ce lume trăieşte.

Cuvinte cheie: *Peter Carey, Parrot and Olivier in America, Europa, Franţa, Revoluţia franceză America, Australia, sisteme politice, democraţie, birocraţie, colonie penitenciară, Alexis de Tocqueville, voci narative.*

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Even since *Illywhacker* (1985) – Carey's second novel, the United States has been perceived by characters in his fiction as the new colonial power; that is, crawling inexorably towards Australia in order to prevail over its economy, political development and culture.

1. Writing Technique – Narrative Voices (I)

Parrot and Olivier in America (2009) is written in a narrative technique that has become a classic recipe with Carey: the multiple voiced text. In an interview conducted by Andreas Gaile in 2004, Peter Carey indicates his influence for the plural narrative voice novel to be Faulkner's novella, *As I Lay Dying*:

> *As I Lay Dying*, with its conflicting points of view, had a huge effect on me. And, in a funny sort of way, cubism presents its truth like this. To me it's simply a representation of reality. And it's always like that – we're both experiencing this conversation now, but what I think I'm saying to you and what you're hearing are two different things. So it seems reasonable to represent that. Of course, it's arrived at intuitively and compulsively, rather than systematically. (Carey in Gaile ed. 2005, 7).

Carey first approached this literary strategy in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), where, although written in the 3rd person, there are continuous shifts in viewpoints – from chapter to chapter, the author introduces alternative renderings of the unfolding story which correspond to the meaning different characters gather from one or another experience.

In *Theft. A Love Story* (2008), there are only two voices – those of the two brothers, who are also the main characters of the novel – and the thread is spun in the 1st person narrative.

Parrot and Olivier in America (2009) – the novel I intend to focus on this paper - is again a two-voiced narrative. Its protagonists? They shall introduce themselves:

> I, Olivier-Jean-Baptiste de Clarel de Barfleur de Garmont, a noble of Myopia, am free to speed like Mercury while pointing out the blurry vegetable garden on the left, the smudgy watercolor of orchard on the right. Here is the ordure of the village road across which I can go sailing, skidding, blind as a bat, through the open gates of the Chateau de Barfleur. (Carey, 3-4)

Olivier, born – according to the novel – in 1805 in the noble family of de Barfleur de Garmont, is Carey's fictional replica to Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville. The overlap between Olivier de Garmont and the historical character, Alexis de Tocqueville, from whom he was inspired, is

impressive. In addition to the 'identification list' items, the following are included: they are both coming from old Norman aristocratic families with ancestors who participated in the battle of Hastings of 1066, both had a grandfather guillotined during Robespierre's reign of terror and both of their parents barely escaped the same guillotine (hence the guillotine obsessive shadow over the novel):

> "(…) so it was, at six years of age, I had my first lesson in the Terror which had been the flavor of my mother's milk. My parents had been thrown into Porte Libre prison where every day one of their fellow nobles was called "to the office" and was never seen again. In these months my father's hair turned white, my beautiful mother was broken in that year of 1793, when the *sansculottes* came up the road from Paris." (Carey, 17).

Following the plot, one can point out towards other facts, events, etc. that are more than similar, they are faithful 'carbon copies' of elements found in the resources the author researched for the writing of his novel. Thus, there will be several questions that can be addressed, which I prefer to tackle here, because they will broaden the context, allowing me then to better explain the interest for American imagery.

2. Historical Fiction. Political Fiction

The most consequential question with this type of writing is: how much is history and how much is fiction? In order to spare some of our attempts at detective work, Peter Carey posted a bibliography on his official website, in the section *Parrot and Olivier in America*, under the heading "author's bookshelf". It says: "This list is certainly not exhaustive, but it gives a good idea of what the author read while he was writing *Parrot and Olivier in America*." (Peter Carey official website). And there are some 40 titles… However, it seems that with all this research, there are inaccuracies, quickly spotted by sharp-eyed readers:

> Despite Carey's repute as a bravura performer in the depth and accuracy of his research, his research and his inventiveness frequently blend to blur history. He jumps in and out of time like Dr Who in his police box. He credits the invention of carbon paper to his one-armed count, although it had been developed in England thirty years earlier and played no part in Tocqueville's notebooks. He cannot resist the temptation to drop in popular sayings, hoping the reader will not notice the anachronism. (Luck, *Peter Carey's Bootleg Tocqueville*, web)

Many reviews draw the readers' attention, while naming other Carey novels (such as *Oscar and Lucinda*, *True History of the Kelly Gang, Jack Maggs*) that the author is into (a lot of) historical fiction writing/rewriting.

Yet, what would make a novelist glide towards history? Antonia S. Byatt in her *On Histories and Stories* gives a series of justifications: the fact that "we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded it and produced it" (11); "the aesthetic need to write coloured and metaphorical language, to keep past literatures alive and singing" (11); "the political desire to write the histories of the marginalised, the forgotten, the unrecorded" (11); nostalgia[2] (25-26); "because the idea of writing about the Self is felt to be worked out, or precarious, or because (…) we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self" (31); "the novelists' new sense of the need for, and essential interest of, storytelling, after a long period of stream-of-consciousness, followed by the fragmented, non-linear forms of the *nouveau roman* and the experimental novel" (38); and the "interest precisely in the secret and the unknowable" (56).

More ironic, even cynical voices, claim that the focus on the past, regardless of how original the turn may be, is testimony to authors' lack of originality, or to a lack of subjects in the present.

Geoffrey Luck, for instance, would say in his article on *Parrot and…* that:

> Peter Carey comes to the Tocqueville drama with a reputation of using other authors' works as crutches for his novels. They are not historical novels in the traditional sense, but stories with an historical setting; Carey's flair is in his usually scrupulous and detailed research of the habits, the industries, and the social culture of the period, applied to embellish a theme he seems unable to invent for himself. (Luck, *Peter Carey's Bootleg Tocqueville*, web)

My position, with respect to the above-given examples of the rationale – is that one can indeed find, in *Parrot and Olivier in America*: 1) the past as a key for understanding, or a metaphor for representing, the present, or that the rewritten past provides an alternative meaning to the present; 2) the historical setting gives grounds for staging a show of craftsmanship in the use of language; but, overlaying all that, the most vigorous streak is the political one. In a debate with authors Claire Messud and Edmund White, when asked by Messud whether he considers himself a political writer, Carey answered "Is it possible to not be?" (Carey, *Live from NYPL*, web).

[2] "Frederic Jameson has written perceptively about 'what the French call *la mode retro*, the 'nostalgia film', pastiche of popular culture within popular culture itself. Makers of films about the fifties in the seventies and eighties, he observes, are nostalgic, not for the fifties values, but for the experience they had when seeing the films as innocent audiences" (Byatt, 25-26).

It is from this perspective that I shall look at what America stands for in the novel, as opposed to (colonial) Europe, on one hand, and to Australia on the other, as well as at the friendship between Olivier and Parrot, the other main character and 2nd voice of Carey's text.

3. Writing Technique – Narrative Voices (II)

That said, let's allow Parrot to introduce himself:

> "YOU MIGHT THINK, who is this, and I might say, this is God and what are you to do? Or I might say, a bird! Or I could tell you, madame, monsieur, sir, madam, how this name was given to me--I was christened Parrot because my hair was colored carrot, because my skin was burned to feathers, and when I tumbled down into the whaler, the coxswain yelled, Here's a parrot, captain. So it seems you have your answer, but you don't.
> I had been named Parrot as a child, when my skin was still pale and tender as a maiden's breast, and I was still Parrot in 1793, when Olivier de Bah-bah Garmont was not even a twinkle in his father's eye.
> (…)
> In 1793 the French were chopping off each other's heads and I was already twelve years of age and my *endodermis naturalus* had become scrubbed and hardened by the wind and mists of Dartmoor, from whose vastness my da and I never strayed too far. I had tramped behind my darling da down muddy lanes and I was still called Parrot when he, Jack Larrit, carried me on his shoulder through Northgate at Totnes. My daddy loved his Parrot. He would sit me on the bar of the Kingsbridge Inn, to let the punters hear what wonders came from my amazing mouth: *Man is born free and is everywhere in chains*." (Carey, 53-54).

Parrot, by his real name, John Larrit, a motherless child, is raised by his father, a printer. The craft opens the way to knowledge, both for father and the son who very early becomes familiar with Rousseau, Adam Smith, Hume or Paine.

Jack Larrit and his son get to Dittisham, "Dit'sum, as they called it", in 1793, where the father can find work at an isolated print shop owned by Mr. and Mrs. Piggott. There, they meet other members of "that better educated class--I mean printers." (Carey, 56).

And Parrot is required (among other tasks) to run hush-hush errands, namely to take the meals and get the chamber pot from a talented and hidden engraver. In order to reach Mr. Watkins, Parrot finds his way up the chimney. Although the secret object of Watkins' work is not initially known by Parrot, the boy is fascinated by the printer's talent and a tutor-apprentice relationship, strained but somehow generous in knowledge acquisition for the boy, grows between the two. Parrot is told that he's not "an artist's bootlace", which makes him want to forget completely about Leonardo and Cicero, and become a "printer's devil".

As the narrative develops, we find out that it was money-forging that was kept under wraps in Watkins' attic workshop.

> I had no idea that thousands of these assignats were forged in France and Britain and the Netherlands. Their purpose was to devalue the currency and thereby, by dint of ink and paper, destroy the beloved Revolution. All I knew was that forgery was a capital offense. Witnessing the two printers examine Mr. Watkins' work I understood I had betrayed the poor queer creature, trapped inside his cage.
> Of course I should have confessed to Mr. Watkins, but I wished him to like me and I was so ashamed that, on that Sunday night, I would not take my burin lessons. I said I was needed by my father. (Carey, 83).

A banknote leaked out by Parrot from the shrouded part of the house leads to the arrival of law enforcement representatives who, indiscriminately, want to arrest everyone in the printer shop.

Parrot manages to run away and, in the Scottish moors, he meets up with a familiar character – familiar because he had already encountered him at Mr. Piggott's print house: the one-armed Marquis de Tilbot.

Fleeing prison, the Marquis bribes the captain of a ship (ironically) packed with prisoners, heading to Australia, so that the two of them can get on. Frightened, insecure, and in lack of affection, Parrot develops allegiance to the Marquis who, nonetheless, disembarks in Rio, leaving the child by himself on the ship to Australia.

4. Writing Technique – the Connection

I shall bypass the retelling of significant parts of the novel in order not to spoil the readers' memories or appetite for reading and point only to the Marquis as the link between Olivier's and Parrot's life stories.

The Marquis was, during his entire life, the devoted admirer of Comtesse de Garmont:

> I watched Monsieur's brows descend. For a soldier he had a very touchy equilibrium. On the right tray of his scales you had his infatuation with the Comtesse de Garmont. On the left, there was his mad impatience. I have seen him break a man's neck, in an instant, and now would you like a cup of tea, Monsieur? But with Lord Migraine's maman he was like a boy in love, not that he threw pebbles at her window or climbed a ladder like the Sorel fellow, only that he was a fool before her translucent skin, her long swan's neck, the ancient fire still glowing beneath the quartz. I never saw the like before or since, the way they blushed and whispered, traveling in closed coaches (…) (Carey, 125-126).

And the same Marquis lured Parrot back from Australia to Europe, promising the latter an artistic career in France. Monsieu did not keep his word and Parrot was only the Marquis' factotum, but elevated servant:

> Monsieur had held me in this trap so many years I had come to accept it as my rightful place. I had food and shelter of a type my da could never have imagined. I handled prints and folios the most cultivated men in Europe wished to own, and there were not a few occasions when I gazed at myself in admiration. A fly on the wall, I thought, might mistake me for Monsieur's junior officer, or his disinherited brother, or his bastard son sired when he was twenty, but then hey-ho, enough of that my lad, and off along the frigging Paris road in the wind and rain, and *Chevalier*--it amused him to call me Chevalier-- *Chevalier, do take us to the bishop*. Then hell's gate for the bishop. I hope he dies. (Carey, 126)

5. Parrot and Olivier Travel to America

The political situation in France in 1830 (the July monarchy – the abdication of Charles X who "was most pigheaded", and the coming into power of Louis Philippe I), and all the events surrounding it, make it clear for Olivier and his friend, Blacqueville, that monarchy does not keep up with the times anymore. Although hired as lawyers at the Court, the two friends start secretly attending the more radical talks given by the French Protestant - historian, and politician in the making – François Guizot.

That prompts Comtesse de Garmont to consider the circumstances too dangerous for her son to stay in France. Pretexting the need for a study of American prisons, which are conceived for the recovery of the individual and not for their complete perdition/execution, a study that might be replicated by the French penal system; the Comtesse obtains this assignment to be conducted by her son, the "French commissioner in America".

With the help of the Marquis de Tilbot, she manages to 'ship' a reluctant, drugged (because his opposition had to be defeated) Olivier to America. Equipped with a servant: Parrot. And because the valet had his own personal drama –a love relationship with a younger, beautiful and talented painter, Mathilde; the Marquis managed to embark the angry 'paramour' and her mother on the same ship to America.

Crossing the ocean brings along two other intersections and passages… Olivier and Parrot turn from master and servant to friends towards the end of the novel, and democracy wins over… democratically or not.

Still on the ship, Olivier is warned by a fellow traveler, a successful American – farmer converted into banker (because in America everything is possible and accessible to anyone) – that if he wants to be trouble free and not draw hostile attention from the other passengers, he should share his cabin, better located and equipped, with his secretary: in the New World there are not servants.

> "'For instance, the plutocrat and the lowly worker shake hands in the street. Ha-ha,' he cried. 'You like that, no? Good morning, good to meet you.'" (Carey, 176).

6. Parrot and Olivier on Democracy in America

The two accounts alternate, reflections on America and Americans, including the negative ones, pertain, both to Olivier and to Parrot, although the latter will end by adopting and living the American dream.

It is through Olivier that we find out how Americans lack in culture:

> That is, dear Peek lacked so many of the cultural pretensions with which the bourgeois, wishing to ape his betters, always cloaks himself. Of literature and philosophy he proudly declared himself a dunce. When I mentioned Proudhon, and even Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun, he did not know who they were. And this, I supposed, was what one should expect of this new democracy which made itself without the benefit of a noble class. (Carey, 186).

With respect to the country's administrative organization, there is no need for a central structure of power to manage the wealth: there is plenty for everybody in America and there are no poor, because as Parrot learns: "No man who will work can be poor." (Carey, 193)

Parrot finds Americans to be very optimistic and with superbly inflated egos:

> The banking chamber of the Bank of Zion was supported by the most boastful columns, but if the name had made me think it would be the home of Jewish bankers I was a fool. On coming beneath its rotunda, we beheld a great symbol laid in mosaic on the floor, this being a triangle and a laurel and three stars which later proved to be the sign of American Protestants who believed their voyage had been more than equal to the Israelites'. (Carey, 232)

Young women in America are not chaperoned as in Europe, they can freely engage in conversations and walks with men, but the richness of their thoughts and interests dies with marriage. "Delicacy prevents me from listing the dinners, the peculiar menus, the names of the ladies who lived only to marry and, when married, thought only of their husbands." (Carey, 244) The two picaros follow each their individual personality development on the American territory. And love pervades both stories.

Olivier falls for and is loved by an American woman. He proposes to her, they are about to get married, until she finds out that he cannot take her to France since his mother would never accept a non-noble woman to marry her son. Consequently, rejected by Amelia, Olivier decides to go back to Europe, but before embarking, he pays a visit to his now friend.

Parrot buys a house on the bank of the Hudson River, similar to the one shown in the picture bait by the Marquis. However, with America, as opposed to Europe, one can follow and fulfill the most daring dreams. He sets up a business in bird engravings with his former art tutor, Mr. Watkins, and with Mr. Watkins' wife, and insures the sales of their art production in Europe via the Marquis de Tilbot. Parrot's wife pursues her passion in painting and in her husband with whom she will have a child.

7. Writing Technique – Narrative Voices (III)

The end of the book brings the triumph of the democratic voice, which becomes THE VOICE, and the scribe turns into the overpowering single author:

> I dedicate this account of our lives and travels to Olivier-Jean-Baptiste de Clarel de Garmont (...). To him I say, in the fullness of my heart, sir, your fears are phantoms.
> Look, it is daylight. There are no sansculottes, nor will there ever be again. There is no tyranny in America, nor ever could be. Your horrid visions concerning fur traders are groundless. The great ignoramus will not be elected. The illiterate will never rule. Your bleak certainty that there can be no art in a democracy is unsupported by the truth.
> You are wrong, dear sir, and the proof that you are wrong is here, in my jumbled life, for I was your servant and became your friend. I was your employee and am now truly your progenitor, by which I mean that you were honestly MADE IN NEW YORK by a footman and a rogue. I mean that all these words, these blemishes and tears, this darkness, this unreliable history--although written pretty much as well as could be done in London--was cobbled together by me, jumped-up John Larrit, at Harlem Heights, and given to our compositor on May 10, 1837. (Carey, 575-576)

However, Carey's political cunning in writing style contradicts to a certain extent Parrot's words: the author's power (read author as the 'I' writing the novel) is in Parrot's puppeteer's hands because he stands for the many which is, in fact, synonymous to the tyranny of democracy.

But the scheme belongs to a political conscience born in Australia, living for the past twenty years in the US, blaming the US for a new form of imperialism while acknowledging that the very existence of Australia is only a consequence of the Americans' fight for freedom and independence. Australia came into being as a penal colony when the British could not any longer send their prisoners to America. Thus Australia became a bureaucracy: when America developed itself into a democracy.

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