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“Eto ia – Carrère”: Analysing the Influence of Limonov’s Autobiographical Mode in Carrère’s Literary Work

Abstract

In this paper, the author presents a brief overview of Eduard Limonov’s (1943) and Emmanuel Carrère’s (1957) artistic productions, especially dealing with their approaches to the relationship between fiction and reality. Reading Limonov’s autobiographical works, Carrère re-creates his pseudo-biographical depictions, “portraying” and interpreting Edichka’s “forma povedeniia”, or manner of life. The introduction of an intrusive narrator works as a strategy to “wear the narcissistic mask”. Analysing Limonov’s autobiographical mode, it is possible to observe how Carrère elaborates a complementary narrative level to “narrate his own self”, following Edichka’s experience.

In my paper I focus on the analysis of the narrative strategies adopted by Emmanuel Carrère in his literary work *Limonov* (2011). The French author constructed a hybrid genre, which mixes elements from the ‘non-fiction novel’ theorized by Truman Capote, and autobiographical devices which allow him to ‘re-create’ the reality. As Limonov did in his autobiographical works, Carrère creates an autobiographical character, which represents an arbitrary standpoint from which the story is narrated, emphasizing the role of his artistic self.

Reading Limonov’s autobiographical works, Carrère re-creates his pseudo-biographical depictions, ‘portraying’ and in-

terpreting Edichka’s “forma povedeniia” (Vinokur 1927: 48), or manner of life. The introduction of an intrusive narrator works as a strategy to “wear the narcissistic mask”, in order to enable the process of artistic self-assertion. Analysing Limonov’s autobiographical mode, it is possible to observe how Carrère elaborates a complementary narrative level to narrate his own self, following Edichka’s experience and manner of life.

“Je suspends sur ce point mon jugement” (Carrère 2011: 35): defining his work as a ‘portrait’, and rejecting the definition of biography, the French author can create a mystified depiction of his hero, framed by the narra-

tor's commentaries on the recent Russian political and cultural history. It serves as a third narrative level, which emphasizes the impression of verisimilitude. In the same way, in his autobiographical works, Eduard Limonov constructed a 'narrative setting' for his hero by means of a redundant use of topographic details and references to renowned people.

In *Limonov*, the presence of metatextual reflections on the role of imagination and his power to 're-create reality' opens to further considerations about the auto-biographical mode. It is interesting to observe how the ambiguous relationship between reality and fiction, in the given literary genre, has been interpreted by the two authors in their artistic production (for a further analysis of this literary phenomenon, see also Puleri 2013).

The 'portrait'

И чем больше искусство
стремится к жизни, тем
оно условнее.

(Lotman 1994: 437)

Relating to the Russian writer Eduard Limonov (1943), pseudonym of Eduard Savenko, we observe the difficulties in defining his biography without a clear

understanding of the aesthetic project which lies beneath his artistic production. As Richard Borden asserts, "Eduard Limonov itself is a self-fiction" (Borden 1999: 239). In his autobiographical works, Limonov depicts and 're-creates' a literary *alter ego*, in order to focus on the scandalous and shocking events of his life experience. In such works as *Eto ia – Edichka* (1979), *Dnevnik Neudachnika* (1982) and *Podrostok Savenko* (1983), the author recollected his memories about his dynamic life. It underlies a project for new 'readings' of *both*, the real and the fictional, Eduard Limonov. His remarkable biography has been the main topic of his literary production. His focus is on the desire of 'self-assertion': he reached success with his first novels about his experience in New York as émigré, then narrating his adolescence in Kharkov, and eventually, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he came back to Russia in order to start a political career. Abjection, *épatage* and violence are his main literary tools:

Limonov's prose fiction is an example of the return of 'the real', not only because it gives voice to the abject social margins and

introduces new subjects [...] Limonov is also a writer who represents authentic feelings which include compassion [...] that range widely along the emotional and moral spectrum, and at his best he does so economically (Matich 2011: 218-9).

The creation of a literary 'anti-hero' is at the very core of his overall aesthetic project. Limonov's literary *alter ego* has his own ethics, which can exist just out of socially accepted standards. His 'pseudo-biographical' experiences are built on harsh contrast with the social norms, emphasizing Edichka's narcissistic attitude. Otherwise, the truthfulness of his confessions is made ambiguous and uncertain by his subversion of the autobiographical model². He re-elaborates autobiographical parameters, playing with the "autobiographical pact" (see Lejeune 1975).

This is a self-fictional world which operates not

according to the laws of logic or verisimilitude, but solely in accord with ever-changing requirements of the fictionalizing self's self projection (Borden 1999: 243).

The description of his literary production as fiction or autobiography remains an unsolved question. His works grow out of his aesthetic project based on an artistic self-centered view, which exclusively aims to assert the personality of his own. Limonov depicts the society around his literary *alter ego*, this was recreating the reality and himself. The matter deals with the very nature of the concept of art, and his potential in order to imitate and reproduce reality. Iurii Lotman's reflections on the value of the artistic medium, especially on the technique of 'portrait', offer an insight into the particular nuances of the creative process:

Портрет – как бы двойное зеркало: в нем искусство отражается в жизни и жизнь отражается в искусстве. При этом обмениваются местами не только отражения, но и реальности. С одной позиции, реальность по отношению к искусству – объективная

¹ "Человека 'героического' я активно предпочитаю 'пишепереваривающему'" (Limonov 1987: 12).

² "Limonov destabilizes our expectation of truthfulness by qualifying the sincerity and completeness of his confession within the text" (Ryan-Hayes 1993: 4).

данность; с другой – эту функцию выполняет искусство, а реальность – отражение в отражении (Lotman 2002: 370).

According to his view, the portrait represents an emblematic moment of intersection between life and art. It shows the product of the interference between the artistic object and its reflection. It involves two subjects: the one who 'portrayed' and that one who is 'portrayed'. Moreover, it conveys two messages: what the 'depicted' subject wants to communicate with his 'artistic representation', and what the artist aims to transmit through his work. Following the given description, Limonov's anti-hero could be defined as the modelling of the above-quoted messages: it is the result of a 'self-portrait', created in order to convey Limonov's artificial and altered "forma povedeniia", or manner of life. The artistic dimension concerning the literature of the self acquires another hybrid mode, which deals with different autobiographical, or pseudo-autobiographical, narrative strategies.

The 'Alter-Limonov'

The French writer Emmanuel Carrère (1957) also built his ar-

tistic path in the gap between art and life. In his last works, such as *L'Adversaire* (2000), *Un roman russe* (2007) and *D'autres vies que la mienne* (2009), the author elaborated his narrative strategies focusing on the relationship between his artistic self and the subjects of the 'non-fictional' stories, which he aims to tell. As he stated in a recent interview:

C'est l'autre aspect de cette forme un peu bizarre que je développe depuis une dizaine d'années. C'est très variable de livre en livre. Dans *Un roman russe*, j'étais le narrateur et le protagoniste, donc c'est mon livre le plus autobiographique. Mais cela me semble indispensable d'être présent, je ne pourrais pas imaginer faire autrement, par une espèce d'honnêteté vis-à-vis du lecteur... Je suis très sensible à la vieille question soixante-huitarde: d'où parle-t-il ? À quel titre ? Pour quelle raison raconte-t-il ça ? Du coup transparaissent peut-être mes préjugés, mes aveuglements, mes œillères. Je ne prétends pas dire la vérité mais ce que moi je peux former comme cons-

truction d'une réalité. Ça me paraît une honnêteté élémentaire de dire ça (Sorin 2011).

According to his view, the artist has to look at 'other lives', he needs to interpret them, in order to tell his own story as well. Taking possession of the 'literary object', the writer can re-create the reality. Carrère's autobiographical narrator joins the story, as an 'intrusive character'. In his last work, *Limonov*, the matter is made clearly more complex, because the given 'literary object' has to deal with Eduard Limonov's 'self-portraits'. Using Lotman's terms, we can observe how Carrère aims to 'portray' Limonov's life: in order to accomplish this task, he needs to interpret Edichka's 'self-projection', to re-elaborate it by means of his own literary-*alter ego*. The French author aims to convey a 'message', which is the product of the interferences between several media: Limonov-author/Limonov-self representation and Carrère-author/Carrère artistic *alter ego*. According to these passages, we can eventually consider the creation of the narrative strategies adopted by Emmanuel Carrère as the result of a multiple interaction between fiction and reality.

According to this kind of approach, we can understand the origin of a hybrid genre made by biographical, non-fiction novel and fictional elements, as stated by the author:

Depuis quatre livres, c'est-à-dire depuis *L'Adversaire*, je ne mets pas de sous-titre. On pourrait mettre 'roman', mais j'ai une acception assez stricte du roman qui implique que ce soit de la fiction. Or ce n'est pas de la fiction, les événements rapportés sont véridiques, à quelques détails d'agencement et de mise en scène près. Truman Capote, en écrivant *De sang froid*, a théorisé la notion de "non fiction novel". Je pourrais appeler ça comme ça, je préfère ne rien mettre plutôt que "roman de non-fiction". Mais il est bien évident que c'est plus proche d'un roman que d'une biographie (Sorin 2011).

Since the French author plays with different literary strategies, the product of his 'portrait' shows a strong interaction between the two literary *alter ego*. Reading Limonov's works, Carrère can introduce his character

to the European readers: he can justify the ‘verisimilitude’ of his portrait by means of constant metafictional reflections³. The interference between several layers of ‘mediation’ creates a suspended atmosphere, which can be overcome just by the intrusions of the narrator, Carrère’s literary character:

Je ne savais rien de tout ce que je viens de raconter, il m’a fallu presque quatre ans de plus pur l’apprendre, mais j’ai tout de même senti, confusément, que quelque chose clochait. C’était comme s’il avait toujours son propre rôle devant une camera de télé-réalité” (Carrère 2011: 475).

In *Limonov* we deal with an artistic ‘competition’ and ‘fascination’, which involve both the authors/characters. Portraying Edichka, the French author adds his own autobiographical accounts. The relation between

the two subjects is guaranteed by the same “*forma povedeniia*”⁴: Carrère disguises himself as Limonov, in order to stress affinities and divergences between them. The given process is the main aspect of the strategy adopted by the French author, because it points out the distance from the act of ‘mirroring’, emphasizing the results made by the technique of the literary ‘portrait’:

La compétition est un thème central du livre. Je suis comme Limonov, je ne cesse de me juger par rapport aux autres, mais je suis convaincu d’être dans l’erreur la plus complète. J’essaie de mon mieux de me corriger de ce trait. Et peindre un type comme Limonov, qui ne se vit que dans la hiérarchie, fait partie de ce processus de guérison. Ça sert aussi à ça

³ “J’ai l’impression d’avoir déjà écrit cette scène. Dans une fiction, il faut choisir: le héros peut toucher le fond une fois, c’est même recommandé, mais la seconde est de trop, la répétition guette. Dans la réalité, je pense qu’il l’a touché plusieurs fois” (Carrère 2011: 197); “Quel sale type!” pense Steven, et je pense la même chose, et sans doute toi aussi, lecteur” (203).

⁴ “Edouard Limonov est à lui seul un collage, un vivant agrégat de tout cela. Face à lui, lors d’un entretien puis pendant la rédaction du livre, Carrère se ressent en enfant sage, en homme lisse. Son omniprésence au long du récit, les digressions, les échappées sur sa propre vie, peuvent alors être lues comme une façon de soi-même s’éprouver, dans le frottement avec ce bloc râpeux d’humanité qui est son exact contraire. Son livre se présente comme la résultante superbe de cette tension. De ce travail sur soi” (Lebrun 2011).

d'écrire un livre, à s'améliorer. Je suis fier du savoir-faire littéraire mis en œuvre pour ce livre, mais je suis surtout satisfait du progrès spirituel qui s'est opéré en moi lors de son écriture (Bisson 2011).

The Historical 'Frame'

Limonov's life experience is deeply connected with the Soviet and Russian history of the last 50 years. In his literary works, the Russian author re-created his 'self-portrait', setting it in a 'historical frame': his narration of the 'self' goes from the Fifties in the Soviet Kharkov, through the second half of the XX century, and eventually tells about the context of contemporary Russian Federation. Relating to a renowned socio-cultural context, the verisimilitude of the autobiographical narration can be guaranteed. Nevertheless, Eduard Limonov uses the given narrative device in order to characterize his own *alter ego*, creating a 'truthful' impression through his narcissistic point of view:

His fictional persona – modeled on the basic facts, if not the essential truth, of his own persona – is so self-centered that the

environments he 're-creates' often emerge as projections of his own consciousness, his puerile philosophical, political, and moral ideas, his personal 'tragedies', and his problems in determining self-identity (Borden 1999: 239).

In *Limonov*, the depiction of the historical context represents a crucial aspect. Emmanuel Carrère, as the Russian author did in his works, sets his 'portrait' inside a detailed historical account. This narrative level also involves a deep interference between the 'portraitist' and the 'portrayed': Carrère explains the historical context involving the Russian writer's life but, reading Limonov's works, he can just recreate a 'reality', which has already passed through different mediations. In *Limonov*, this 'frame' works as a tool in order to emphasize the 'resemblance' of narrative to 'biographical' and 'true' events.

'Pact' Violation?

It is interesting to note how the Russian edition of Carrère's work was received by the Russian literary context: the French author's remarks about the post-Soviet world, emphasizing its

suspended and vague character, provoked a harsh reaction of the critics. The distance between Russian and European readerships staged an important role. In Europe, Limonov can work as a literary character, because, until Carrère's depiction, there was no clear understanding of his works and his life experience. Whereas in Russia, the Russian writer's 'self-portraits' are well known, and the French author's remarks on Russian history cannot be accepted as 'truth':

Для российского читателя, более или менее знакомого с книгами Лимонова, едва ли не с первых страниц станет очевидна вторичность текста Каррера [...] Книга Каррера для тех, кто хочет лишить себя удовольствия прочтения полных текстов романов Лимонова (Khasavov 2013).

Emmanuel Carrère signed a 'contract', using Lejeune's term, with European readers⁵. His artistic strategies are ineffective

⁵ "Je le soupçonne rarement de mentir: là, un peu. Il sait que j'écris un livre sur lui, pour un public français, c'est-à-dire vertueux et prompt à s'indigner, et peut être a-t-il préféré ne pas se vanter de ce qu'il doit, à part soi, considérer comme une expérience enrichissante" (Carrère 2011: 373).

with Russian readers, because the 'artistic object' loses his 'truthful' impression⁶. The 'portrayed' Limonov understands the meaning of Carrère's 'representation', and he plays once more with the relationship between reality and fiction, in order to add more details to his own 'self-portrait':

Так вот, в такую эпоху успех моей биографии, моего мифа во Франции, и ее шествие по планете [...] можно рассматривать как успех, эквивалентный Нобелевской премии старых добрых времен. Ага, Солженицын, ага, Бродский, я догнал вас! (Limonov 2012)

The 'self-portrait' stands for a literary construction of the self, which deals with a proper contradiction between what the text explicitly displays and how the rhetorical devices interfere with it. In *Limonov*, we can observe how Carrère could create a concrete illusion of 'truthfulness' made by a strategy based on narrative 'mirroring'. Eventually,

⁶ "Пора уже перестать считать, что всякий европеец – маленький принц, ведь приручить российское общественное мнение – это вовсе не значит взять на себя хоть какую-то ответственность" (Shabaeva 2013).

the result of this manipulation can give birth just to a constructed image composed by fragments, a 'de-faced' subject:

The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject (De Man 1979: 921).

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