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"Bricks Are Undoubtedly an Essential Ingredient of Civilisation": Layers of Reconstruction in J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973)

This article aims at considering the various levels of reconstruction in J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), from the rewriting of a colonial event and of Victorian culture to critical appreciation of the latter. Yet, my contention is that the main re-construction at stake in the novel is the revival of the literary myth of the Raj, that is to say how the Raj is made into a commodified item to be consumed by modern-day readers.

J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), which was awarded the Booker Prize in 1973, parodically revisits the Indian Mutiny which occurred in 1857 and is, to some, "the first Indian war of Independence."[1] The work is part of a trilogy including *Troubles* (1970), that focused on the 1916 Easter Rising, and *The Singapore Grip* (1978), which dealt with the invasion of Singapore by the Japanese during World War Two. After writing *Troubles*, Farrell specialised in historical fiction, explaining: "the reason why I preferred to use the past is that, as a rule, people have already made up their minds what they think about the present. About the past they are more susceptible to clarity of vision" (Rovit 632).

Despite Tony E. Jackson's claim that "the turn to history as a theme may be the definitive element in British fiction in the last three decades" (170), Farrell's historical fiction has been overlooked by critics[2] until the 1990s and postcolonial studies' renewed interest in fiction about Empire which contributed to situating him among post-colonial writers.[3] In 2008, *The Siege of Krishnapur* was one of the six books selected to compete for the Best of Booker competition and in 2010, *Troubles* was rewarded the "Lost Booker" Prize, which are signs of retrospective recognition.

The Siege of Krishnapur has been alternately referred to as a Neo-Victorian novel, a reinvention of imperial adventure and romance, a postcolonial novel, a historical novel, among other designations. One may understand "reconstruction" as "identical reproduction" but also "re-creation" or "re-invention." The aim of this article is to reflect on the various levels of reconstruction involved in this novel: is it "reconstructing" Victorian discourse with a postmodern touch which could account for the "Neo-Victorian" label? "Neo-Victorian" is indeed used in the sense intended by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, i.e. a work "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (4). Is *The Siege* called a "historical novel" because it re-writes or reconstructs the history of the Indian Mutiny? In fact, one may wonder about the "postcolonial" label as well. Can the novel be considered as "postcolonial" because it was written by an Anglo-Irish man in the 1970s and is about

1. The Hindu nationalist V.D. Sarvakar termed the event "The Indian War of Independence" in 1909, as Clare Anderson notes in *The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion*. Marx and Engels also referred to it as "the first Indian war of independence" in their news summaries for the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1857 and 1858.

2. Martin Green, in *The English Novel in the Twentieth Century: The Doom of Empire* (1984), does not mention Farrell, nor does Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). Authors like Julian Barnes or Martin Amis are more visibly considered in anthologies as British authors of historical fiction of the 1970s and 1980s.

3. I am using the word "post-colonial" (with a hyphen) when the adjective has a historical meaning and literally means "after colonisation." But the word "postcolonial" will be used whenever I am referring to the critical concept as it is used in Postcolonial Studies.

colonial India? Or does it have a critical and ethical dimension which would explain why it can be considered as postcolonial from a critical – even theoretical – point of view?[4]

Revisiting History

The action in the novel takes place in the historical context of the Mutiny. In 1857, during the Raj, Indian soldiers of the British army started rebelling against the British in Northern and Central India. The reason that is generally acknowledged is that new cartridges containing pork and beef grease had been introduced in the Army. The main issue was that to use them, soldiers had to bite them which would have meant making themselves, as Hindus and Muslims, impure. Yet, other reasons are also given to account for the uprising as Nicola Flaminia recalls:

> Of course, the 1857 Rebellion is a much more complex event than the folkloric tale of the Enfield rifles and the cartridges greased with animal fat [...] that threatened the religious integrity of the Indian soldiers. The causes of the insurgency are grounded in the economic and cultural impact of the colonial policy of the Company, more and more aggressive as time went on. (20)

Indrani Sen is slightly more specific, explaining:

> Several theories about the Revolt abounded in the nineteenth-century colonial mind. It was variously held to have been caused by religious fears of conversion, by sepoy unrest, disaffection among the peasants and talukdars – and not least of all, by a yearning for lost power among the 'native' princes. (1754)

Not only does the Mutiny stand as a background for the *Siege of Krishnapur*, but Farrell acknowledges in the afterword the many sources he used to document the novel: "those familiar with the history of the time will recognise countless details in this novel of actual events taken from the mass of diaries, letters and memoirs written by eyewitnesses, in some cases with the words of the witness only slightly modified" (375). The siege depicted in the novel does actually recall the siege and relief of Lucknow immortalised by Thomas Jones Barker in his 1859 painting, *The Relief of Lucknow*.[5]

D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke yet argued that Farrell chose to name the city in his novel Krishnapur so as to move away from historical veracity:

> The "Mutiny" is remembered for events that have become legendary: the massacre at Cawnpore (alluded to in Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*), the Kashmir Gate at Delhi and the relief of Lucknow. *The Siege of Krishnapur* is based on the last and, therefore, on a major and memorable event. Farrell's city is not named Lucknow but Krishnapur, the city of Krishna. The name appears a genuinely Indian, generic one. Farrell has chosen it in preference to a precise and real Indian city for two cogent reasons: firstly, it gave him freedom in the use of history and, secondly, it permitted him to give play to the farcical aspect of his art whereas, if he used the name Lucknow, he would have set up expectations. (408-9)

4. Bill Ashcroft evokes a blurring between postmodernism and post-colonialism which needs to be addressed: "This confusion is caused partly by the fact that the major project of postmodernism – the deconstruction of the centralized, logocentric master narratives of European culture – is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse. These concerns – the decentring of discourse, the focus of the significance of language and writing in the construction of experience, the use of the subversive strategies of mimicry, parody and irony – all overlap prominent features of postmodernism and so a conflation of the two has often occurred" (Ashcroft 18).

5. See https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw08481/The-Relief-of-Lucknow-1857

Still, in his afterword, Farrell explains how some of his characters were inspired by real people, such as Mark Thornhill who was the Collector at Muttra in 1857. Words, known to have been written, reappear in the mouths of some of his characters, "only slightly modified" (375). It is noteworthy that Farrell should also speak of his sources in terms of "writers whom I have cannibalised" (375), suggesting that his act of re-writing history has to do with digesting previous works, possibly with a level of violence, and not just experimenting with them. Other events such as the circulation of chapatis or the fact that English people may have chosen to blow themselves up rather than surrender are some of the myths surrounding the Mutiny. As the historian Kim Wagner writes in his study about 1857:

> During the early months of 1857, a strange phenomenon occurred through the districts of Northern India. From village to village, the chaukidars, or watchmen, passed from one to the other a strange sign in the form of chapatis […]. The chaukidars themselves did not know what the chapatis signified or from whence they came; they knew only that it was incumbent upon them to continue the transmission. […] The circulation of chapatis was, like a rumour, a transient phenomenon that passed swiftly through the districts of Northern India […]. [B]y the time the authorities were informed of its transmission within a district, it had already moved on – an understandably disturbing sign of the efficiency of indigenous modes of communication that lay outside colonial control. (62-3)

The way the chapatis are noticed by some of the heroes and interpreted by the Collector as a sign of future trouble is an interesting fictional development of this historical event: "The first sign of trouble at Krishnapur came with a mysterious distribution of chapatis, made of coarse flour and about the size and thickness of a biscuit; towards the end of February 1857, they swept the countryside like an epidemic" (Farrell 5). This shows that history is, of course, a natural source of documentation for historical fiction but that fiction may in turn offer its own discourse on history by precisely taking liberties with the latter.

Not only is history revisited but Victorian intellectual debates, literary history and colonial fiction as well. References to Victorian trends of thought can be found in an evocation of the Victorian discussion opposing religion and progress, inspired by M.A. Crowther's *Religious Controversy of the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, and embodied here in the many debates between the Collector and the Padre. While the former is a strong defender of progress, the latter only sees it as evidence of intelligent design in divine power. The paradoxically comical and lethal debate opposing Dr McNab and Dr Dunstaple as regards the cause of cholera – one thinking that cholera was caused by contaminated water, the other by foul air – also echoes medical discussions which did take place in Victorian England and provides interesting plot developments, as Dunstaple's being wrong leads to his premature death.

The well-known Victorian interest in taxonomy is particularly hinted at by the Collector whose very name is telling, as he is both the one who collects taxes and the one who collects objects. His mania for collecting is visible in the way he has accumulated objects from the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Victorian incentive to collection can also be found in the poetics of the text, for instance in Fleury's exclamation: "I think that to dedicate is not enough. We calculate, we make deductions, we observe, we construct when we should *feel*!" (57). The verbs chosen in this enumeration all refer to rational thinking and are generally contrasted with sensitivity. They are reminiscent of

a short story by Kipling, "Wressley of the Foreign Office" (1888) in which the hero is working on "a really comprehensive survey." His actions are described as such: "He dated and cross-dated, pedigreed and triple-pedigreed, compared, noted, connoted, wove, strung, sorted, selected, inferred, calendared and counter-calendared for ten hours a day" (227). While Kipling's irony is more obviously perceptible, the mere principle of linguistic accumulation and concatenation mimics the Victorian impulse to collect. Such hints at recording and classifying could also be seen in other Victorian works of fiction such as the very title of one of Kipling's short stories, "To Be Filed For Reference" (1888), or in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), where Kurtz was asked to write a report by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs.

The Victorian ideology of separation between races and sexes, inseparable from the construction of England as an imperial nation, as opposed to the colony, is reflected in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. The Victorian era was one specific moment in European modern history when the separation between men and women was conceptualised, as in John Ruskin's "Of Sesame and Lilies" (1856) where men and women were depicted as follows: "The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest" (107), whereas the woman is the "Angel in the House," to quote Coventry Patmore. In Ruskin's words: "The woman's power is for rule, not for battle, – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (107).

The necessity of a separation between men and women was expressed even more strongly in the colonies and constructed at the very same time as that between Europeans and Indians. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann L. Stoler recalls colonial life in which "Women [were positioned as] bearers of redefined colonial morality" (57), in the face of the colonizers' pseudo immorality. Anne McClintock has also written extensively on the interdependence of the European bourgeoisie and colonialism/imperialism, as the former rested on the gender ideology of the separation of spheres and the latter on the cult of domesticity. Such theories are paraphrased in the Collector's words: "Women are weak, we shall always have to take care of them, just as we shall always have to take care of natives" (Farrell 186). More generally, in the novel, men and women are given clearly delineated roles to perform. Men are basically expected to display chivalric behaviour while women express frailty of nature and character, as the following sentence epitomises: "Harry Dunstaple, attended by Fleury […], had gone to rescue the 'fallen woman' […]. [T]his was exactly the sort of daring and noble enterprise that appealed to the two young men's imaginations" (121).

Not only are references to Victorian trends of thought or intellectual debates perceptible but the novel displays strong intertextuality with Victorian works or works dealing with the Victorians. Kipling is one intertext and Forster is another. The very first lines of the novel are: "Anyone who has never before visited Krishnapur, and who approaches from the East, is likely to think he has reached the end of his journey a few miles sooner than he expected" (3). As several critics noted, the plain landscape described in the incipit recalls Forster's depiction of the unappealing Marabar Caves at the beginning of *A Passage to India* (1924): "Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary" (Forster 31). Forster's lacklustre India is also referred to in the narrative comment: "To Fleury

India was a mixture of the exotic and the intensely boring" (27), while Anglo-Indian texts are known to often construct India's exceptional character by resorting to plural forms of accumulation. In Forster's novel, the moment when the Anglo-Indians all stand up, religiously, to the sound of the British anthem foreshadows the rigidity with which Anglo-Indian characters[6] in *The Siege of Krishnapur* are shown to stick to their positions despite the events, as a way less to preserve than to build Englishness, as if it were precisely besieged by the threat of Indian contamination. When the Residency is besieged, the gravity of the situation does not deter lady characters from wanting to be placed in the hall according to their husbands' ranks or from being wary of Lucy who is considered as the "Fallen Woman" because an officer took advantage of her. As Allen Greenberger humorously said about Farrell's novel, "constantly we are given pictures of British under attack being concerned only with the making or drinking of a cup of tea" (12).

Yet, the novel does not simply echo previous works or Victorian zeitgeist. What makes it more than a reconstruction which would be identical to what existed before is the omnipresence of humour through irony and satire. Through humour, this palimpsestic work, adding more layers to previously sedimented works, considers the situation depicted in the plot from a critical distance.

Humour and Satire: A Critical Reconstruction of Victorian and Imperial Times

Many passages aim at ridiculing Anglo-Indian characters who stick, almost insanely, to codes of Victorian behaviour despite the context: "It was by the Collector's order that these children continued to wear velvet, flannel and wool, while the other children in the cantonment were dressed in cotton or muslin for the hot weather. Even as children, it seemed, they had a position to keep up in the community" (Farrell 69). The irony of the narrative voice can also be felt in the narrative comment that the Collector's daughters should bring him their diaries so that he "may exercise supervision over their lives" (69).

One passage, both hilarious and horrific, depicts Lucy, the Fallen Woman, being taken over by thousands of cockroaches so that her white body is quickly covered with bugs. Two young men, imbued with ideas about their male chivalric attitude, wonder how they should behave as she has undressed in order to try to get rid of the cockroaches: "Any moment she would faint. But they could hardly dash forward and seize her with their bare hands. Or could they? Would it be considered permissible in the circumstances? But while they hesitated and debated, Lucy's strength ebbed away and she fell in a swoon" (174). The use of free indirect speech reinforces the irony of the narrative voice as it gives us access to the men's internal dilemmas while the lady's health is at risk. As they finally decide to help her, they wonder how they could keep the bugs off her body:

> It was Fleury who, remembering how he had made a visor for his smoking cap, found the solution by whipping his Bible out of his shirt and tearing the boards off. He gave one of those sacred boards to Harry and took the other one himself. Then, using the boards as if they were giant razor blades, he and Harry began to shave the black foam of insects off Lucy's skin. (275)

6. The term "Anglo-Indian" is used to refer to English people who, in colonial times, were traders, farmers, etc., who had come to live in India. Only in 1912 did it start being used to refer to "interracial" people (Baneth-Nouailhetas 13-4).

While this could be interpreted as a literal use of the Bible on the Fallen Woman to redeem her, this passage should rather be read as being both farcical and critical of dogmas. It parodically reactivates the theme of the Damsel in Distress, but danger is embodied by mere cockroaches while the rescuers' heroism is undermined by the ludicrous dimension of the scene.

Another series of examples showing how humour may support a critical reflection on the Victorian ethos is the questioning of the status of objects in the novel. At the beginning of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the narrative voice solemnly states that "bricks are undoubtedly an essential ingredient of civilisation: one gets nowhere at all without them" (4). The bluntness of the statement, rich with terms suggesting firmness of opinion – "undoubtedly," "essential" – arouses suspicion. The Collector's change of mind concerning artefacts is worth mentioning in that respect. The man was initially shown to worship the inventions presented at the Great Exhibition and more generally progress and civilisation, once lecturing an English woman in such terms: "The foundations on which the new men will build their lives are Faith, Science, Respectability, Geology, Mechanical Invention, Ventilation, and Rotation of Crops!" (92). The enumeration, though too long to be taken at face value as it puts many heterogeneous elements on the same level such as Geology and Ventilation, suggests that the terms may be empty shells – an idea that the spelling with capital letters specifically highlights. During the very siege, the Collector ends up using many objects for a very different purpose than their initial one, either to strengthen the mud walls around the Residency which would otherwise have collapsed under the heavy rains, or to serve as missiles when powder and cannon balls are running short. Little statuettes of famous literary figures thus end up as ammunition:

> Without a doubt the most effective missiles in this matter of improvised ammunition had been the heads of his electro-metal figures […]. And of all the heads, perhaps not surprisingly, the most effective of all had been Shakespeare's; it had scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoys advancing in single file through the jungle. The Collector suspected that the Bard's success in this respect might have a great deal to do with the ballistic advantages stemming from his baldness. The head of Keats, for example, wildly festooned with metal locks which it had proved impossible to file smooth had flown very erratically indeed, killing only a fat money-lender and a camel standing at some distance from the field of action. (362)

The slight irreverence with which the narrative voice considers Shakespeare's head as an efficient missile implies a questioning of European modernity whose eminent literary figures are turned into weapons to kill non-English people. The way the artefacts are dissociated from their use in a properly Victorian and "civilised" context suggests a form of relativism as regards Western progress. Mere daily objects, such as forks, may now be used as weapons, so what need is there for military strength, one may ask. In Goonetilleke's words, "Even the trivia of Western civilization can be as fatal, lethal, as gun powder" (417):

> There appeared to be a carpet of dead bodies. But then he (the Collector) realized that many of these bodies were indeed moving but not very much. A sepoy here was trying to remove a silver fork from one of his lungs, another had received a piece of lightning conductor in his kidneys. A sepoy with a green turban had had his spine shattered by *The Spirit of Science*; others had been struck down by teaspoons, by fish-knives, by marbles; an unfortunate *subadar* had been plucked from this world by the silver sugar-tongs embedded in his brain. (Farrell 344)

Without even mentioning the Grand Guignol dimension of the scene, the fact that futile objects may become arms can be interpreted as a signal that barbarity lies at the core of English, and by extension Western civilisation, since it can be inflicted with daily utensils, even if readers ultimately learn that "a few other metal objects had been fired, such as clocks and hair brushes… but they had proved quite useless" (362). Not everything can prove as efficient and lethal as a metallic head of the Bard. In other words, English literature – the power of the English verb and the remains of centuries of culture – is more efficient in killing natives than clocks, a mere product of technology.

The depiction of the Collector later in the novel, when he is back in London, confirms the evolution of the character, away from Victorian materialism:

> But one day, in the seventies, he and Fleury happened to come face to face in Pall Mall [a club in London]. […] Fleury asked the Collector about his collection of sculptures and paintings. The Collector said that he had sold them long ago.
> "Culture is a sham," he said simply. "It's a cosmetic painted on life by rich people to conceal its ugliness."[7] (373)

Fleury had been depicted throughout the novel as a romantic figure who aspired to seeing humanity progress from the point of view of feelings and proximity with nature: "he was thinking of civilisation, of how it must be something more than the fashions and customs of one country imported into another, of how it must be *a superior view of mankind*" (42-3). But during the siege, he appears to grow gradually interested in mechanics and physics. At the end of the novel, he seems to have suddenly become convinced of the importance of ideas:

> Fleury was taken aback by this remark. He himself had a large collection of artistic objects of which he was very proud.
> "There, Mr Hopkins, I cannot agree with you," he declared loudly. "No, culture gives us an idea of a higher life to which we aspire. And *ideas*, too, are a part of culture… No one can say that ideas are a sham. Our progress depends on them… Think of their power. Ideas make us what we are. Our society is based on ideas…" (373)

In this passage, Fleury is defending a platonic vision of the Western world, according to which ideas rule the world. His speech is here characterised by a sort of vacuity as the suspension points fill the gaps in the reasoning. But he has no time to defend his point: he has to hurry because he has a tryst with a prostitute.

One may wonder if these final reversals – the Collector's loss of faith in Progress and ideas, Fleury's admiration for romantic love turning into an appreciation of carnal love – are enough to question imperial ideology and critically engage with it. While Mutiny novels generally promoted masculine chivalry and feminine propriety, as well as English heroism and Indian effeminacy, is it sufficient for the narrative voice to ridicule English characters and their supposedly "Victorian idea(l)s" so that the novel should be perceived as adopting a critical, postcolonial, approach? Are racism and imperialism challenged as aggressively here as in works often considered as postcolonial, not just from a historical point of view? What seems at stake in *The Siege of Krishnapur* may be less to construct something anew than to construct again – to re-construct. The novel, in the end, is not necessarily about reconstructing Victorianism, but a certain vision of imperial history.

7. The statement directly echoes a sentence in Haggard's *Allan Quatermain* which reads: "Civilisation is only savagery silver-gilt. A vain glory it is, and, like a northern light, comes but to fade and leave the sky more dark" (10).

Re-Constructing Empire in a Commodified Shape for Present-Day Readers

In "De-Scribing the Centre," Ralph Goodman suggests that postcolonial discourse differs from satiric discourse in the specificity of its commitment to ethical issues, while satire's stance is a "less well-defined one, more detached because of the ironic weight which satire carries" (62). He adds that "satire does not, in general, operate from a specific moral or political agenda, preferring instead to give itself the flexibility to criticise any party, group or class" (66). This statement is relevant in the case of *The Siege of Krishnapur* as everyone is ridiculed, whatever their class or origin. Yet, Indians remain relatively voiceless, reduced to types or representatives of social or religious groups. Except for the Maharajah's son and Prime minister, Indians during the siege are merely referred to as "sepoys." Even if the way Hari, the Maharajah's son, says "frenla-ji" or "frenloudji" instead of "phrenology" could be seen as a form of disruption of European science which dissociates it from its authoritarian signifier – just as the Indian Hari questions the authority of the English Harry in a process of Bhabhaean "sly mimicry" – the narrative voice uses hackneyed colonial clichés which are not questioned such as "sea of brown faces." For Goodman, "postcolonial strategies are essentially ethically and politically driven […]; they strive to challenge attitudes and structures which perpetuate inequality within societies" (69). Goodman also quotes Helen Tiffin who wrote in *The Empire Writes Back* that good postcolonial practice works by "refusing, realigning, deconstructing the 'master narrative' of western history [while] investigating that destructive binarism 'itself'" (Tiffin 179). The issue here is that race and gender binarism remains. The more open-minded characters admit at the end of the novel that the Indians remained inaccessible to them, finally establishing them as the ultimate other. At the same time, Anglo-Indian women are essentially there to support their male counterparts, while Indian women are simply doubly silenced, made even more minor than Indian men characters. As John McLeod argues, the novel "enables a space to be opened where the contradictions of colonial discourse are exposed," but "it also remains constrained within the specific limits of Western hegemony" (117). While the author cannot be criticised for speaking on behalf of the Indians he depicts in his novel, he certainly writes within the borders of Western modes of thought and ideology.

The novel's overtly conspicuous, if not contrived, irony in the depiction of Anglo-Indian racism specifically needs to be addressed:

> Along the fourth wall […] ran primitive portraits of several past maharajahs. These faces stared down at the two young Englishmen […] though really it was just one face, Fleury noticed, as he passed along, repeated again and again with varying skill and in varying head-dresses. (80)

The insistence, on the following page, on their host having the same face as that in the portraits, and a few pages later, on the maharajah having himself the same face as his son and people painted on the walls, sounds suspicious. While the persistence of such resemblances can be seen as a sign of the strength of the dynasty of the Maharajahs who have ruled the area for centuries, it seems to illustrate the inability of English characters to distinguish one Indian from another. Yet the very lack of subtlety which accompanies the potential criticism of colonial ideology and racism is worth analysing. Another similar example can in fact be found in the following passage: "Of the score

of subalterns who had managed to escape, the majority had never seen a dead person before… a dead English person, anyway… one occasionally bumped into a dead native here and there but that was not quite the same" (110).

Specifying the origin of the dead person, along with the remark "that was not quite the same," is a way of ostensibly stressing the irony of the comment, making it deliberately stand out against the rest of the text. It is no surprise to the reader that Anglo-Indian culture and Victorian society were informed by cultural racism. But the way narrative comments are made explicitly ironic suggests a playful textual self-reflexivity which is integrally part of Farrell's postmodern project.

Theatricality is omnipresent in the novel as most characters in *The Siege of Krishnapur* are playing the roles that would be expected in Mutiny novels: General Hearsey is said to advocate a "display of confidence" (74), while many of the characters are spectators of what is going on outside the Residency, which is made obvious by the recurrent use of terms belonging to the lexical field of vision. The characters abide by a semiotic code which makes them recognisable by readers familiar with the Anglo-Indian intertext. The characters also perceive the world around them through an interpretation grid which is imposed on them by colonial doctrine, which enables them to make peremptory statements such as "the apathy of the native is well-known" (38). The male characters reconstruct themselves as colonial heroes, like Fleury who, after firing the cannon, pictures himself in a noble pose, while the smoke and haze of battle gives the whole scene "'historical' quality because everything appeared faintly blurred, as in a Crimean daguerreotype" (139). When they are not imagining themselves as heroes, such characters become powerless puppets, as signalled by the many references to the Collector's words being unheard by his fellow-countrymen. While colonial imagination plays an important role in the way characters picture themselves, the narrative voice and the many changes in focalisation use irony to reveal the constructed nature of Victorian masculine and feminine identities as in: "Miriam was tired of womanhood […]. She was tired of having to adjust to other people's ideas of what a woman should be" (259) – as well as that of racial identities. At the end of the novel, Englishmen are indeed compared with the untouchables.

Farrell is successful in showing the performative nature of culture through the exhibition of objects and in this respect his fiction echoes David Cannadine's discussion in *Ornamentalism* of the spectacular dimension of Empire. The aim of the Great Exhibition was to collect a great variety of artefacts under the unifying and homogenizing project of imperialism and identity-construction. In Cannadine's words: "The British Empire was about the familiar and the domestic, as well as the different and the exotic: indeed, it was in large part about the domestication of the exotic – the comprehending and the reordering of the foreign in parallel, analogous, equivalent, resemblant terms" (xix). But the heterogeneous aspect of the objects the Collector had gathered – "tiger-skins, bookcases full of elevating and instructional volumes, embroidered samplers, teasets of bone china" (Farrell 245) indicates the arbitrariness involved in the gathering of so many varied objects under one common banner. Referring to McLeod's reading of the novel, Crane and Livett suggest:

> The gathering of objects in any collection or exhibition imposes a taxonomy which draws together under a new heading a group of disparate objects, but the new group is always threatening to disperse into its original individualities. Each single object is a startling reminder of the potential for separation and anarchy. (96)

The objects themselves can be seen as symbols of an English culture that needs protecting while they literally construct such a culture. So Farrell exposes parodically the strategies of colonial discourse which aims at strengthening itself by highlighting the very fragility of such a construct. This reminds us of Bhabha's statement that colonial discourse had to reassert itself constantly to hide its insecurities:

> In the colonial discourse, that space of the other is always occupied by an *idée fixe*: despot, heathen, barbarian, chaos, violence. If these symbols are always the same, their ambivalent repetition makes them the signs of a much deeper crisis of authority that emerges in the lawless writing of the colonial sense. (143-4)

In an article about the history of the Booker Prize, Graham Huggan recalls that more than half of prize-winning novels "investigate aspects of – primarily colonial – history or present a 'counter-memory' to the official historical record" (419), suggesting the centrality of England in a prize-system which can be otherwise seen to encourage postcolonial production. In Huggan's terms: "Historical fictions such as Scott's, while ostensibly debunking imperial glories, might still be seen as peddling commercially profitable imperial myths" (419). In a polemical essay entitled "Outside the Whale" (1984), Rushdie, more than thirty years ago, wrote even more clearly that

> Indians [in *The Raj Quartet*] get walk-ons, but remain, for the most part, bit-players in their own history. Once this form has been set, it scarcely matters that individual fictional Brits get unsympathetic treatment from their author. The form insists that *they are the ones whose stories matter*. (90, italics in the original)

Thus, is *The Siege* about revision of history and/or revival of literary myths? It seems that the Raj is a commodity which travels and sells well around the world, as the TV show "Indian Summers" (2015-2016) or the recent release of the movie "Viceroy's House" (2017) suggest. Resorting to historical phantasy of the Raj might be seen in Huggan's terms as "a neo-colonial 'othering' process – the process by which history, transformed into an exotic cultural spectacle, becomes a packageable commodity for metropolitan consumption" (421). Even if the exoticization of (colonial) history is mostly achieved in epic film, literature participates, again in Huggan's words, in the "spectacularization of a cultural 'otherness' that is projected out in mythicized space and back in imagined time" (421-2), in this case the mythified and mystified time and space of Mutiny in 1857 India. Huggan finally adds that "irony […] functions effectively as an alibi for the revival of a discredited-decadent-imperial imaginary" (422) which strongly resonates with the unease readers might feel as regards overly ironical passages.

In conclusion, J.G. Farrell builds his work on the colonial intertext and resorts to strategies similar to those used in Mutiny novels, such as the binary construction of English heroism and Indian character, or the performance of English identity through the promotion of values such as progress, reason, civilisation, etc. Despite its use of satire to deconstruct the logic of imperialism by exhibiting the empire as a makeshift construct, which prevents Farrell from being seen as "Raj nostalgic," the novel fails to refashion imperial history and remains moored in a reconstructive aesthetics that renders it more palatable to contemporary audiences and tastes. In that respect, if one refers to Ashcroft's statement about postcolonialism and postmodernism which was quoted earlier in this article, *The Siege* adopts postmodern playfulness, irony, and preference for the fragmentary over the "coherence of the collection" (Boccardi 52) but

does not really engage with postcolonial ethical concerns like granting subaltern voices a literary space or reflecting on power imbalances in a colonial context.

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