



Fall 2011

Fabulating Romania: review of Filip Florian's Little Fingers and Alta Ifland's Elegy for a Fabulous World

Ania Spyra

Butler University, aspyra@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/english>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spyra, Ania. "Fabulating Romania: review of Filip Florian's Little Fingers and Alta Ifland's Elegy for a Fabulous World." *91st Meridian*. 7.2. Fall (2011).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

Book Review

Fabulating Romania

- Filip Florian, *Little Fingers*. Trans. Alistair Ian Blyth, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.
- Alta Iftand, *Elegy for a Fabulous World*. Ninebark Press, 2009.

In 2007 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania launched a public image campaign in an effort to create a new brand for the country, a brand that would build a positive image, rather than only counteract – defensively – negative stereotypes. An advertising agency created the new brand by merging the words fabulous and spirit into “fabulouspirit” – a word, which ended up sounding better in Romanian than it does in English even though it was intended for an Anglophone audience. The campaign encountered so much criticism that despite the plans to implement it over several years, the word disappeared from the public imagination as suddenly as it appeared. That a public image campaign can cause such a controversy shows how invested Romanians are in the sticky issue of the projection of their national self-image; it shows also how controversial still are the interpretations of their own history, which is so contested as to seem unreal and fabricated.

Filip Florian’s short novel *Little Fingers* centers on a discovery of a mass grave close to a Roman fort in a small mountain town in Romania. In a country with less turbulent of a history, an incident like that would be unlikely to cause a national controversy, but in one recovering from the recent Communist regime, the incident becomes a cause célèbre. Journalists use it to galvanize the repressed recesses of the national psyche. Former victims of the state apparatus want to prove their own martyrdom through the remains, and the members of the former state apparatus insist that the remains are ancient, probably dating back to the era of bubonic plagues. Since everyone’s reaction derives from their own past or their own investments in the present, a team of Argentinean forensic experts is brought in on the scene to arbitrate the conflict from a neutral standpoint. Although they are carriers of their own “los desaparecidos” virus, as the novel calls it, we are led to believe that it does not influence their judgment.

That the novel concerns itself with the writing of history becomes clear already when the young researcher, and the only first-person narrator, discovers six monographs written by local luminaries, who narrate the story of their town from very personal perspectives. Each of the writers, for example, finds an entirely different reason for why the Emperor Franz Joseph canceled a scheduled visit: beginning with a malicious plot by the Hungarian railway workers and ending with the foxhunting season or a secret amorous entanglement.

Florian alternates between several different voices, and because the narrators are many and with many names and occupations, the plot can be, at first, difficult to follow. But the way in which Aunt Jenny is also Eugenia and Lady Embury, and Gherghe is Tufty is Onufrie testify to how confusing life can be in a place where regimes and borders rapidly change; where being a lady in one regime means being persecuted in another, where even monks – especially the monks – have to be reeducated at some point. In fact, the monk Onufrie, with his mysterious growth of a tuft of hair, becomes the hero of the novel; a hero in the mold of Kafka’s burrower or Coetzee’s

Michael K, who hides away in a cave for 16 years and writes his own version of the scriptures on birch bark. He also walks the hills with a tame bear dressed in a garment knitted from his own hair. The life stories – the little fingers of sorts – of the inhabitants of the town are the real focus of the most masterful of Florian’s descriptions. The story of the dromedary Aladdin, the photographer’s prop, makes the novel worth reading in itself.

Ian Blyth’s translation sometimes reads strange, especially for a person who knows something about Romanian culture. When the national dish of eggplants and peppers – *zakuska* – is translated as *chutney* one wishes some words had been left untranslated rather than misdirected towards a whole new set of cultural associations. And as to Florian’s style, I am not opposed to long sentences, but would here repeat what an English teacher remarked once on an essay of mine: “paragraphs would help.”

Had Florian – hypothetically – migrated to America, and earned a creative writing degree here, he would have ended up writing like his compatriot who writes under the pseudonym Alta Ifland. His penchant for long, confusing sentences would have been workshopped out of him, and the novel would have become a collection of stories – brief, Kafkesque short stories such as the ones collected in Ifland’s *Elegy for a Fabulous World*.

Ifland’s collection consists of seventeen short stories, divided into two parts under headings of “There” and “Here and There;” the first part is set in the “Old World” and the second mainly in the “New.” Ifland makes a point of concealing the Transylvanian setting of the Old World stories, insisting that the girl who narrates them is instead born and grows up across the border, in Western Ukraine. She seems to be doing that in the interest of fabulation, of pretending the stories are not real or at least not as real as they really are. When I insist here on the reality of the made-up, I am like a child stomping my feet; with my own Eastern European childhood I know too much about Ukraine to believe that it was so much like Romania in the seventies. I also recognize Romania in the collection’s later stories, with the weddings held on the rooftop of a shopping mall, plum brandy served for breakfast and the belief in the country’s unique geography.

Few places in Eastern Europe survived the upheavals of the twentieth century as ethnically diverse as Ifland’s setting, Transylvania. In postwar Poland, there were no Hungarians, Ukrainians, Germans, Russians and Gypsies living together like they lived in Romania after World War II. Our world changed first with Hitler’s campaign for more Lebensraum and then with Churchill’s clean sweep of population resettlements that followed the Yalta agreement. I always marveled at Transylvania’s ethnic diversity. Even in the early years of the new millennium, it has still kept its multiethnic character, despite the wholesale deportations during the Holocaust and the subsequent migrations of Germans, Poles, and Hungarians – of all those who were able to claim citizenship outside of the country of the mad dictator (that would be Ceausescu; I am clearly picking up Ifland’s rhetoric here, making each historical figure sound like an archetype). It is this diversity that makes Ifland’s stories special, even if it also makes them more local and specific than she might have wanted. In fact, they are so specific that I wrote to a Transylvanian friend to ask if she had published a book of short stories and kept it secret from me: I knew so many of Ifland’s stories already.

But a broader reason why Ifland disguises the place where she grew up is probably because the nation does not matter, either in the face of the commonality of the absurd shared by all the communist countries or in the face of the fabulousness of every childhood. The narrator also claims herself to be an inheritor of an “Austro-Hungarian” sensibility, which suggests a transnational continuity in the region. Reading Stefan Zweig and other modernists, the narrator and her Hungarian cousin [IR2] imagine themselves transcending the narrow boundaries their totalitarian nation-states prescribe for them. Yet the “fabulous world” of Ifland’s childhood elegized here does not appear at all limited: the girl travels to neighboring countries, visits a family of eccentric characters, and reads world literature. The character – or one of them, for the stories promise no unity among the various narrators – even claims a lineage connecting her to Clarice Lispector.

The stories’ ‘ultra-real’ setting becomes a background for fantastic occurrences: bears eating children in a city park, people freezing to death on a train, aunts and uncles flying away on a comet. Reading them I was of course thinking Bruno Schultz, and Franz Kafka and Gabriel García Marquez. Ifland toys with the word “fabulous,” much like García Marquez does with “enormous” in “The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.” “Fabulous” means extraordinary and mythical, but also evokes the artificial gasp of American compliments, one which Ifland – and her immigrant character – is likely to see and hear often in L.A. at the other endpoint of her travels: “you look fabulous, my dear.” Because the America, where the second part of the collection takes us, is no less Kafkesque: no less absurd or strange. It just refuses to see itself as such.

- See more at: <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/91st/vol7-num2/ania-spyra-reviews-alta-ifland-and-filip-florian#sthash.URMgxLn4.dpuf>