Levels of Discomfort: Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* as the First American Novel to Win the Man Booker Prize

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Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015) is an uncomfortable read on several levels. There are no comfortable positions to take in Beatty's novel concerning race in America; there is no comfortable generic categorization for the novel; and the question what it means for the British Booker Prize to be awarded to a novel from the USA is one with no easy answer. In an attempt to find some answers, I will refocus these problems by shifting the frame and moving theme, novel, and context out of their respective comfort zones.

The Booker Prize, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2018, may need little introduction; through its high-profile media coverage it has become widely known all over the world as a British literary prize for fiction. Since 2014, when it first invited US nominations, the prize has been awarded to two American novels: Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* in 2016 and George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* in 2017. Whereas the decision to include US nominations remains controversial, it may be promising for a literary analysis to identify features of the winning American novels that fit the paradigm established by the earlier novels honored. Although primarily concerned with *The Sellout*, possible reasons for the selection of both American winners of the prize will be suggested: the semi-postcolonial profile established in the 1980s and 1990s for the prize; the judges' attempt to focus on fiction with high literary ambitions and popular interest; and the English tradition of taking comic fiction seriously.

The colonial origins of the Booker Prize and the connection between the prize and Ian Fleming's James Bond books are perhaps less often discussed. Fleming mentioned a problem— that his James Bond books were not selling well—to his neighbor in Oxfordshire. The neighbor, a certain Jock Campbell, was at the time "the head of the Booker Company which owned most of the sugar plantations in colonial Guyana, when Guyana was invariably referred to as 'Booker Guiana.'" The short version of the story can be found online in the *Guyana Chronicle*; the long version in Clem Seecharan's *Sweetening Bitter Sugar: Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana, 1934 – 1966* (2005). Campbell suggested that the Booker Company buy the rights to Fleming's books (but not the films), be responsible for the marketing of the Bond novels, and earmark a portion of the profits for a literary prize. The Prize was established in 1968-69 as the "Booker-McConnell Prize (The

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business entities, Curtis Campbell & Co. and Booker Bros., McConnell & Co., merged in the late 1930s.) Since then, the Prize has undergone various modifications, but maintained its original objective, which is to reward the finest work of fiction" published in the United Kingdom (Persaud).

The original intention was to celebrate fiction written in English anywhere except in the USA. In 2002, however, the Man Group, an active investment management firm, took over the management of the prize, renaming it the Man Booker Prize. Their period of sponsorship, which ended on 31 May 2019, brought a broadening of scope in general. Although it was a British and Commonwealth literary prize from its conception, the Booker gradually developed an interest in other literatures, and in this process its Advisory Committee was bound to consider the fundamental question how, or indeed, whether, to include American authors. The first attempt at inclusion was to establish the Booker International Prize in 2005, a prize for which US novels could also compete. Yet in that context American novels had an unfair advantage as they were actually written in English, rather than being translations. To address that problem, the most recent solution became to consider US entries among the contestants for the main prize, while the Man Booker International calls exclusively for translated works to compete. The Man Booker International prize, like the main prize, is now awarded annually, "for a single work of fiction, translated into English and published in the UK," merging with what used to be the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, as is explained on their website newly renamed "The Booker Prizes." Between 2005 and 2015 the Man Booker International was awarded every other year for an author's contribution to fiction in general, the last such winner being, interestingly, the Hungarian László Krasznahorkai.

The list of the winners of the Booker Prize is very impressive. The most prominent awardee is Salman Rushdie, whose *Midnight's Children* received the prize in 1981; became the "Booker of the Bookers" in 1993, celebrating twenty-five years of awarding the prize; and gained the title "Best of the Booker" by popular vote in 2008, when the prize was forty years old. Winners include Margaret Atwood (*The Blind Assassin*, 2000), Hilary Mantel (*Wolf Hall*, 2009 and *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012), Julian Barnes (*The Sense of an Ending,* 2011), the 2017 Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains of the Day*, 1989) and Michael Ondaatje, whose 1992 novel *The English Patient* received the "Golden Man Booker Prize" in 2018, a special prize launched in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Booker.

As a vehicle for revitalizing the commercial viability of the publication of fiction, the achievements of the Booker Prize were considerable, as Richard Todd proved already in 1996 in *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction*

in Britain Today (57, 103). The Booker Prize, however, has also become a prestigious literary prize and a force in the formation of the canon of contemporary British fiction, as Wojciech Drąg pointed out in an article in 2014, in which he considered the history as well as several problem areas connected to the prize (18).

The way prizes are awarded, along with the controversies surrounding them, is a separate issue not to be discussed here in-depth. One of the questions that begs to be asked in this case, however, is what possessed those responsible for the prize to abandon limiting candidates to novels from the UK and the Commonwealth. If the desired effect was to reach the more extensive American market, or include a larger pool of talent, the resulting distortion of proportions is likely to push non-American fiction into relative insignificance. The aims of establishing the Booker Prize in the first place, and throughout its history, have included drawing attention to literature as part of a strategy to increase sales. In this context, and within a globalized book industry, the origins of books and their authors may be less important. Yet judges and audiences still tend to consider the prize as a fundamentally British institution, and limiting the chances of entries may become a consideration again within a newly re-nationalized Brexit-mindset.

There are unmistakable signs of an ever-increasing market orientation in publishing, working at the expense of supporting experimentation, nurturing new talent or offering a multiplicity of artistic or intellectual perspectives. Authors with several published volumes of fiction encounter difficulties trying to convince publishers to accept their new novels. It may be seen as a compliment that Tibor Fischer, author of *Under the Frog*, a comic novel on the Hungarian revolution in 1956, shortlisted for the Booker in 1993, has been able to publish five further novels, the latest of which, *How to Rule the World*, was brought out by Corsair in 2018. On the other hand, Christopher Whyte, a Glasgow-born author living in Hungary, whose career as a novelist also began with a comic work, and ran parallel to that of Fischer, still has novels awaiting publication. Whyte's first novel, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* (London, Gollancz 1995) was a satire set in Glasgow, addressing themes such as being gay and the behavior of the Catholic clergy. His latest novel published, *The Cloud Machinery* (London, Gollanz 2000), a Venice novel with a light touch, was successfully translated into Italian and German. Whyte's poetry in Scottish Gaelic, the latest volume appearing earlier in 2019, as well as his English translations of the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva, have continued to be published to great acclaim (France 71). Under the financial pressures any production of culture tends to face today, even publishers adventurous enough to entertain offers from other than bestselling

authors will check previous sales figures and may choose to publish a first novel by an unknown author in hopes of spectacular success, rather than allowing established careers to continue to develop.

The commercialization of the publishing industry has not been limited to the role of the Booker; it has been long lamented, and was discussed with particular passion and grief upon the death of the celebrated agent Pat Kavanagh in 2008. Kavanagh was reported to have been "one of the ringleaders of [the previous] year's collective walk-out from the literary agency PFD, a protest essentially against the dumbing-down of the publishing industry and its takeover by celebrity-obsessed international media conglomerates" ("The Extraordinary Life"). It is quite possible that the Booker Committee's decision to include American authors was another commercial step—in which case the resulting controversy could be seen as desirable. Headlines of any kind are to be appreciated. The question, then, remains why these particular novels, *The Sellout* and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, were chosen in these first years of inclusive intake.

In a sense, the choice of George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* is easier to explain. This novel fits in with a long list of historical fiction appreciated by the Booker Prize. Like Fischer in *Under the Frog*, or Ishiguro in *The Remains of the Day*, Saunders chose a cataclysmic period from the history of a nation. Fischer and Ishiguro, however, presented historic events from the point of view of fundamentally unheroic characters who may be unwilling, even unwitting witnesses of historic events. Saunders, in contrast, offers a closer view on an actual historical hero: his readers get to see Abraham Lincoln several times within a short period of his life, and receive some insight into his struggles not only as a grieving father but also as the President of the United States of America in the second year of the American Civil War.

This novel is also an essentially postmodernist work, in spite of features that clearly indicate that it was written after the optimistic last decades of late 20th century, in a much darker era. The postmodernist pleasures of the text, the joyous excess of lists, the free interplay of historical periods, the noticeable delight in the variability of story, character, and language provide a balance, and a somewhat irreverent distance from its own very serious and painful topic. In terms of dominant themes, the focus on the line between life and death, and the characters' hesitation between two worlds, could be identified as examples of the ontological uncertainty marked by Brian McHale as the defining feature of postmodernism (10). The metaphorical description of grief and memory work, on the other hand, are concerns of a later cultural period. The presentation of characters as remaining fixated on the moment of their death, without ever recognizing that they are dead, introduces concepts

of trauma and memory culture. In the loops of repeating their earlier traumatic memories, the characters in the Bardo are unwilling to move towards the exit. Their escape, which seems desirable for their sake, yet is a loss from the point of view of those characters who remain in the Bardo, is conditional upon their decisions to open up to admitting their own vulnerabilities. This admission, in turn, seems to depend upon recognising the vulnerability of the Other, placing the book in a period informed by the ethical turn and the concept of vulnerability that Judith Butler and others discussed in recent years, for example in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016).

The first American novel to win the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, offers a less obvious match with existing patterns in the history of the prize. Whereas many of the winners treat the situation of minorities, especially in what one might call at least a semi-postcolonial context and perspective, *The Sellout* is perhaps closest to Howard Jacobson's novel *The Finkler Question* (2010). Written in a predominantly comic tone, Jacobson's work is an exploration of what being Jewish means. Whereas appreciating postcolonial themes almost seems like a moral obligation for the Booker Prize, as if to offer restitution to colonies like those the wealth of the Booker Company originated in, ethnic minorities that are not really supposed to be minorities any more seem to present a theme too awkward to discuss. Hence the need for a comic treatment: humor offers a way to express what is impossible to say. Both Jacobson and Beatty create a rather special kind of comedy in a form that we cannot even comfortably call comic novel, creating discomfort on the level of generic terminology, since that term has been almost completely taken over to mean graphic novels.

Set in our day and age, in *The Sellout* a small area south of Los Angeles disappears off the map:

> You won't find Dickens, California, on the map, because about five years after my father died, and a year after I graduated college, it, too, perished.… But the city of Dickens's disappearance was no accident. It was part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down…. In the wee hours of the night, after the community boards, homeowner associations, and real estate moguls banded together and coined descriptive names for nondescript neighborhoods, someone would bolt a large glittery Mediterranean-blue sign high up on a telephone pole. And when the fog lifted, the residents of the soon-to-be-gentrified blocks awoke to find out they lived in Crest View, La Cienega Heights,

> or Westdale. Even though there weren't any topographical features like crests, views, heights, or dales to be found within ten miles. (57-58)

Yet Dickens is defiantly delineated and unofficially incorporated by a young Black farmer. He is the son of a social scientist who used to experiment with his son's education, and who was able to convince his fellow Black residents to resist the temptation to carry out their suicide attempts already in progress. The father was known as the "Nigger-whisperer," and the son is referred to as the Sellout, because he seems to be unable to take on his father's mantle either professionally or socially. Not at all committed to the cause of social reform, the son does, however, grow fruit of all kinds that are so juicy and tasty that they tame friend and foe alike; and he also grows superb marijuana. The plot evolves from his attempts to restore his community to the map and to oblige his few life-long friends, which involves becoming the master of a volunteer slave, giving him a birthday bus ride, appearing as a farmer at a career day in the local school, and coming up with the idea of an imaginary all-white school in order to provide some challenge for the local high school that serves the predominantly Black (not capitalized in the book) and Mexican community. As Beatty's protagonist is trying to help his friends, he reintroduces segregation in education and public transportation, both of which actively help to improve the morale and behavior of the community:

> "Charisma, I thought of a way to get the kids to behave and respect each other like they do on the bus."
> "How?"
> "Segregate the school." As soon as I said it, I realized that segregation would be the key to bringing Dickens back. The communal feeling of the bus would spread to the school and then permeate the rest of the city. Apartheid united Black South Africa, why couldn't it do the same for Dickens?
> "By race? You want to segregate the school by color?"
> Charisma looked at me like I was one of her students. Not stupid, but clueless. (167)

The story is presented in the tones of stand-up comedy with a touch of magic realism, but the main streak is dead-pan humor and the kind of irreverent Black self-irony that would be completely unacceptable coming from anybody other than this particular author, and possibly unacceptable even coming from him. It certainly makes the novel uncomfortable to discuss—and not only because outsiders, myself included, can never be

certain about understanding half of the racial jokes in the text. Given the recent growth of division within American society, along party political lines as well as in terms of identity politics, the discomfort only increases when considering the issues addressed by Beatty. This is precisely why the novel received wide acclaim. Before it was longlisted for the Booker, it had been granted the National Book Critics Circle Awards for fiction, one of a set of annual American literary awards presented since 1976. On this occasion it was hailed as "a scorching satire that wrenches humor out of painful subjects like slavery, police violence and segregation" (Alter). In its run for the Booker, it was pointed out that "Paul Beatty's sharp satire of 'post-racialism' is not for the faint-hearted" (Scholes), and the discomfort remains long after the world moves on to the next celebration of the next literary award.

One can skirt the issue by concentrating on the plot, and trying to identify the location of the novel. The fictional Dickens appears to be in California, south of Los Angeles, along highway 110 between the exits to highways 405 and 105, which, based on the map, one might identify as Compton, and from various interviews with Beatty, as Richland Farms (such as Beatty, "I Invented a Richter Scale for Racism"). The connection is further strengthened by the name of the founder of Compton being Griffith Dickenson Compton. There might be speculation that the area really refers to Willowbrook, an unincorporated area of Los Angeles County. The names of streets will resist identification, but locals will remember that the Compton exit of the 110 indeed disappeared, which is one way of being wiped off the map: the highway exit was moved from Alondra Blvd, a street leading towards the East, toward inland poverty, to Redondo Beach Blvd, a street leading towards the West, towards the ocean, towards affluence, and away from Compton. Moreover, the reputation of Compton is such that a main thoroughfare that was called Compton Boulevard, which used to go up to Manhattan Beach city limits, was renamed as Marine Avenue in three cities, following the demands of business owners who did not want to have any reference to Compton in their street addresses (Goodman).

With its mixture of fact and fiction, geographical as well as political, Beatty shows a strong vein of social criticism. His humor is a form of social practice in the sense that James F. English defines as "an activity by means of which work is performed within and upon a concrete and historically specific social situation" (1). In this approach, humor is tied to the concept of the community, rather than being seen as a formalist, psychoanalytical, or cognitive tool. In the context of the modern British novel, English's proposition is to "regard community as the contemporary horizon of the political," which would lead to reading literary texts (literary events, as he calls

them) "as in some sense a joke of or about community," even in cases where the patterns of exclusion or violence are not explicitly comic (29). I would argue that this approach could offer another explanation for the appreciation of Beatty's novel by the judges of the Booker Prize.

The location of the novel is unexpectedly bucolic for an area in the congested Los Angeles basin where suburban sprawl turned into a constant flow of buildings and traffic. Beatty calls this area Dickens. The reference to the Victorian author who is interested in the heartaches of all strata of society, especially the downtrodden, is as obvious as the obscurity of the place—where in the Dickens is it anyway? The element of social satire in the novel will also recall, along with Charles Dickens, Jonathan Swift's thoroughly logical argument from *A Modest Proposal* (1729), explaining how it is best to eat Irish babies if there is not enough food to feed them. In Beatty's novel, the argument is equally absurd.

Literary references also cover attempts to write sanitized versions of classics such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain, 1884 UK, 1885 US). These endeavors are mocked as much as female versions of words (actress, poetess), a politically correct admission that there is in fact a place one step lower to being identified by race. This is a book that decides to focus on racial problems that are so impossible to solve and so uncomfortable to even talk about that they are increasingly avoided entirely as subjects of discussion: what to do about racial discrimination; segregation; unequal educational or job opportunities in urban Black communities. The novel proceeds relentlessly to the logical conclusions the protagonist and narrator, whose given name we never learn, finds to these problems—and reminds the reader of the actual distance between the issues and the ways they are being addressed or avoided in the world outside the novel.

This book, and the fact that it was awarded the Man Booker Prize, seems to me to be one of those bridge events that bring a certain author, work, or issue into the focus of public—and not only literary—interest, in spite of leaving those who feel they own the author, work, or issue, most dissatisfied. Earlier examples included the case when the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to V. S. Naipaul (who won the Booker in 1971 for *In a Free State*), and Trinidad felt they missed their opportunity for recognition: a perfect English gentleman, educated at Cambridge (although born in Trinidad), received the prize that should have gone to someone more authentically representing Trinidad. A year later, in 2002, when the Nobel Prize was awarded to Imre Kertész, much of the Hungarian reaction seemed to be similar. These books are also bridges, however, in the sense that they are able to translate that singular experience which is shared by their community of

origin with the rest of the world in terms that are potentially understandable by many. They show what is generally relatable while retaining some of the recognizable and authentic detail, and manage to reach a multitude of people, revealing layers of meaning, despair or hope, to share. Rushdie taught his readers to appreciate India's history and culture, even if the cultural references in *Midnight's Children* were clear to readers only in proportion to how much they knew about them already. Tibor Fischer's Hungarian references were not completely explained in *Under the Frog*, creating varying levels of discomfort in the readers, some of whom knew nothing of the historical background, while others, mainly Hungarian readers, felt they knew very different truths from those presented in the novel.

The Sellout perhaps goes even further in its comic approach: with the cognitive dissonance it creates in its readers, it takes irony to its extremes and entertains very different ideas at the same time. Perhaps this is where the Booker being a British literary prize really helped in the recognition of Beatty's novel. The British literary establishment has been receptive to comedy and comic fiction from the moment Fielding embarked upon writing a comic epic in prose, as he termed the novel in the "Introduction" to *Joseph Andrews*. The list of comic novels in English being taken seriously continued through the never existent country estates of P. G. Wodehouse to works with a strong comic streak on the list of Booker Prize winners. It seems that, for British audiences as well as, eventually, for their literary reviewers, critics, and theorists, presenting the world in comic terms does not necessarily detract from the value of a literary work. In Hungary, it is less easy to imagine a comic writer being awarded literary honors.

The following excerpt from the novel is from the part where the phrase in the title is explained, along with the reason the narrator is called the Sellout. We learn that the name is Foy Cheshire's invention (98), who introduces the narrator, eventually, at "the next meeting of The Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, the closest approximation we had to a representative government" (93):

> I never much liked going to the meetings, but after my father died, unless there was an emergency on the farm, I showed up. Before Foy's appointment as lead thinker, there had been some talk of grooming me to step in as leader of the group. The Kim Jong-un of ghetto conceptualism. After all, I'd taken over the nigger-whispering duties. But I refused. Begging out by claiming I didn't know enough about black culture. That the only certainties I had about the African-American condition were that we had no concept of the phrases "too sweet" and "too salty". And in ten years . . . , I hadn't spoken a single word. During roll call Foy never called me by my proper name, but

> simply yelled, "The Sellout!" . . . Foy raised his hands, asking for calm. "The Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals respect all input. And for those who don't know, this sellout is the son of our founder." Then he turned to me with a look of pity on his face. "Go on, Sellout. Say what you came to say." (95-98)

The particular kind of humor in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* is biting, and devastatingly clear of considering Received Opinions sacred: while racism is obviously unacceptable, the sanctioned practices that are supposed to prevent racism clearly do not work either. Having grown up under the careless eyes of his father, who focused exclusively on his Black community and carried out his social engineering studies on his son, the protagonist is equally weary of identity politics in the form of the white establishment trying to wipe out the embarrassing Black enclaves and that of the excesses of Black reform efforts. He has his talents, and grows watermelons of heavenly taste in a variety of shapes. He has his dreams and desires, including his never-ending love for Marpessa, the bus driver, who can create donuts on the pavement on two wheels with her bus in the schoolyard (157) and can drive the plot off into magic realism (139-40). He also has his trajectory that follows with the inevitability of absurd logic.

Meanwhile, the text of the novel is peppered with jokes, with laugh-out-loud scenes. Some jokes are described in the terminology of social science, others in that of literary criticism and theory, or in learned words from Latin or French. The point of the comedy, however, is to present the point of view of a very much underprivileged, just-struggling-by, futureless young Black man in a very much underprivileged, just-struggling-by, futureless Black community. This is the situation he sets out to change, the only way he can see how, to the outrage of the system: by doing what works, bringing back slavery and segregation—to prove that none of the official solutions is effective.

This satire was first published in 2015, at a time when the USA all but lost its sense of humor. Voters for either of the two final candidates for the latest presidential elections had considered, and continued to consider after the election, the other camp irresponsible morons. The Democratic presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, called supporters of her opponents "deplorables" (Clinton). The media seemed to think the answer to all problems was to somehow remove the President, even at the cost of major changes to major institutions of long historical standing, even if that were to destabilize the entire political system. In explanation, in the vein of attacking sacred cows, one might refer to the high percentage of Democratic voters in the media: according to figures from 2015, only "7 percent of journalists

identify as Republicans" (Riddel; for a broader analysis, see "Party affiliation among voters: 1992-2016" by the Pew Research Center). *The Sellout* shows a world that operates on a much lower level of the political hierarchy, despite cameo appearances of high-profile Black celebrities and politicians (whose names are not spelled out fully yet are recognizable). The story stays close to the ground, close to watermelons, to schools, to public transport. There is not a lot of comfort there, as shown in the novel, except in the dogged determination of individuals to keep doing what they do best, to keep doing what they grew to consider as their job and personal responsibility.

There is a point of desperation when one feels one needs to take things to their logical conclusion. Eat your Irish babies. Call yourself with nonchalance, no special emotion attached, the name others use for you in despise. Accept a slave. Build a segregated school. None of these is more ludicrous than what is actually happening—which does not mean, in case any doubt remained, that these ideas should be taken at face value.

As the Hungarian saying goes, the situation is hopeless—but there is no need to write about it without humor.

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