

Micro-literature and Parodic Games in John Crace's *Brideshead Abbreviated: The Digested Read of the Twentieth Century*

Abstract:

The following article aims to discuss parodic reworkings of literary classics for the twenty-first century readers as a form of micro-literature. The short format initiated in 2000 by the British satirist John Crace in *The Guardian* has become increasingly popular and outshone longer, traditional narratives. Although it generated significant critical attention it has not been exhausted by other researchers. Thus, the main objective is the analysis of the transformative process of digestion between source-texts and their abridged versions. The most relevant aspects investigated here include generic boundaries of parody and pastiche, intertextual strategies and the role of the reader.

Keywords: micro-literature, *Brideshead Abbreviated*, digested reads, John Crace, parodic games, popular fiction

Micro-literature¹ as an alternative form of short narrative prose has gained popularity and theoretical import since the advent of the Internet and democratisation of communication. Access to social media, which generated the latter, enhanced awareness of micro- or flash fiction, which were promoted through such media as Twitter. These in turn necessitated redefinition of traditionally understood literature, book format(s) and printing standards.

Genologically, micro-literature as an overarching genre has generated such variants or subgenres as Twitter fiction or Twitterature². In its hybrid form it has blurred generic boundaries of the short story and the novel and thus outshone longer traditional narratives. In its reduced/digested format it is closest to the short story in terms of stylistic

¹ Micro-literature – an amalgamation of micro and literature – stands for a body of short in length (up to 1000 words) publications.

² Twitterature – a portmanteau of Twitter and literature – refers to the literary use of the microblogging service of Twitter. There is a trend of putting out fiction via this medium before publishing a novel in a traditional, paper format. It was initiated by Nicholas Belardes who published his 358-tweet novel *Small Places* on the Internet in 2008-2010. Next followed Jennifer Egan's short story *Black Box* (2012), published in 140-character bursts over 10 days. Also David Mitchell became an ardent enthusiast of Twitter and chose this format for his short story *The Right Sort* (2014).

and structural brevity, precision, reductive intent and emotional approach. It is available in either digitalised or traditional, printed form, with the former being more prevalent.

Although studies devoted to micro-literature have recently gained great import, the subgenre has not received the interpretative attention that it merits. Abridged versions of world classics have only been studied exiguously as there is no strong or well-established theoretical tradition. *Twitterature* (2009) and the titular *Brideshead Abbreviated* (2010), which fall into this generic subcategory, received significant critical attention in the media, yet were researched in a cursory manner. More attention has been given to Twitter fiction as a more appealing variant of micro-literature. Polish scholars such as Urszula Pawlicka³, Maryla Hopfinger⁴, Małgorzata Janusiewicz⁵, Michał Leś⁶, Piotr Marecki⁷, as well as Alina Brodzka-Wald and Hanna Gosk⁸, have significantly contributed to the discussion on the latter and studied evolution and interpretative possibilities of this subgenre. Finally, micro-literature has not yet received due theoretical attention and fails to function as a proper narratological term in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*.

Therefore, the following article aims to chart this uncharted territory and explicate the concept of micro-literature. The main objective is to study abridged versions of classical novels from a narratological perspective and delineate specific intertextual linkages between the original and originating text in the process of digestion and ironic transcontextualisation. The most relevant aspects investigated will encompass generic boundaries of parody and pastiche, inherent features of digested reads, intertextual strategies and the role of the reader. Specific modifications that original ingredients undergo in the process of digestions will be discussed in the ensuing part.

Crace's digested versions of Anglo-American fiction

John Crace's abridged versions of English and American classic novels were originally published in the Tuesday supplement of *The Guardian*. In The Digested Read column, which he has run uninterruptedly since 2000, Crace has reviewed either classic literary works or the latest fiction acclaimed by critics or receiving significant media attention. The titular digestion is a key notion and an organising principle for Crace's selection of readings, which he condensed into short 700-word narratives that resemble

³ Urszula Pawlicka, "Literatura elektroniczna. Stan badań w Polsce", *Teksty Drugie* 2014, vol. 3, pp. 141–161. See also: Urszula Pawlicka, "Towards a history of electronic literature", *Comparative Literature and Culture* 2014, vol. 16, no. 5, pp. 1–9.

⁴ Maryla Hopfinger, "Zmiana miejsca?" in: *Co dalej literaturo? Jak zmienia się współcześnie pojęcie i sytuacja literatury*, ed. A. Brodzka-Wald and H. Gosk, Warszawa: IBL 2008, pp. 143–164.

⁵ Małgorzata Janusiewicz, *Literatura doby Internetu. Interaktywność i multimedialność tekstu*, Kraków: Universitas 2013.

⁶ Michał Leś, "Flash fiction. Krótka o najkrótszych opowieściach", in: *Tradycja i przyszłość genologii*, ed. D. Kulesza, Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku 2013, pp. 197–207.

⁷ Piotr Marecki, *Liternet.pl*, Kraków: Rabid 2003.

⁸ *Co dalej literaturo? Jak zmienia się współcześnie pojęcie i sytuacja literatury*, ed. A. Brodzka-Wald and H. Gosk, Warszawa: IBL 2008.

novels in terms of composition and style. The collection is formed of a hundred digested novels from each decade of the twentieth century and every part features 10 books ordered chronologically from the 1900s to 1990s. Each abridged version is an explicit intertextualisation of the original text. Crace maps narrative and stylistic idiosyncrasies, mannerisms and tropes, reiterates themes and symbolism to adapt them to contemporary times and aesthetic principles. He reproduces (eponymous) characters, immortalized by classics. Crace's creative response, addressed to contemporary readers, reaffirms the perennial value of the selected reads and the satirist's choices are by no means random. The compilation was conditioned not solely by iconicity, but also by other factors like readability, timelessness, originality or common acclaim. The author of the selection calls his choices "conservative" as they reflect "the consensual view of the western literary canon rather than trying to reshape it"⁹. As Crace divulges in "Foreword", he applied a broader sense to the word "classics" and did not concentrate on literary value alone, but first and foremost, "wider social significance to the twentieth century"¹⁰. Crace's literary endeavour is largely imitative and the author uses a postmodernist mode of rewriting and parodic intent, relying significantly on caricature and pastiche. Thus, each digested read engages with the source-text in the form of parodic games, fusing fiction with characters' perspectives and elements of critical discourse. As opposed to *Twitterature*, which in its transformation opacifies the quintessential features and elements of source-texts so that original ingredients are unrecognizable, Crace's parodic distortion is highly decodable since the signals are pronounced for the decoder.

Pastiche or parody?

Generic boundaries between the two key intertextual genres of parody and pastiche are blurred in *Brideshead Abbreviated* since (the dominant) comic intent converges with the imitative one. *The Polish Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines parody as "a form of satirical settlement with literary conventions and ideological and aesthetic stances embedded"¹¹. However, Linda Hutcheon's understanding of parody is crucial for the interpretation of classics digested within a postmodernist paradigm. She suggests that:

[p]arody is, in its ironic transcontextualization and inversion, a repetition with a difference. It implies a critical distance between an original text – a subject of parody – and a new incorporating text. The distance is usually signalled by irony. However, the irony can be both humorous and belittling; it may be in its critical approach both constructive and destructive¹².

Jurij Tynjanov, who perceived tradition as a dynamic system of genres, saw parody as a driving force of literary evolution that was based on twofold movement: canonising

⁹ John Crace, *Brideshead Abbreviated: The Digested Read of the Twentieth Century*, London: Random House 2010, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹ Michał Głowiński et al., *Słownik terminów literackich*, Wrocław: Ossolineum 2008, p. 374 [trans. mine].

¹² Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 67.

and de-canonising¹³. For Tzvetan Todorov, every literary text either affirms or contests the literary tradition of which it is a part and is embedded in fluctuating cultural reality. The critic perceives the tradition as a dynamic intertextual space in which used up forms become replaced with new ones (parody), which in turn come to transition from the periphery to the centre of the literary system (canonisation)¹⁴. On the other hand, Stanisław Balbus, who sees pastiche and parody as polarised, claims that adopting parodic strategy does not aim at building a bridge between the past and present, but most often at critical evaluation of a source-text¹⁵. In an intertextual analysis it is often almost impossible to determine whether a particular originating text accentuates correspondences or differences towards an original text or whether it exhibits affirmative, epigonic or contestant-negating slants. As Artur Hellich justly ascertains, arbitrariness is inscribed whenever historical-literary context comes into play¹⁶.

In the case of Crace's digested reads, the author's parodic intent is often mistakenly taken for pastiche, yet the difference between these two subgenres of stylisation is constituted in the disparity of their intentions/aims, not on the scale of stylistic-narrative modifications between the original and originating text. While the former is more critical, the latter is rather affirmative towards a hypotext.

Parodic games with used up forms frequently generate new literary ones, and such is the case with Crace's digested reads. Furthermore, classic texts of literature, which undergo transformations, become inextricably linked with re-evaluation when integrated with a new context. On the surface Crace's digested reads seem abridged, faithful versions/imitations of the classics; however, upon closer inspection, a historical perspective alone unveils an individualist slant of this British satirist's literary exercise.

The process of digestion

According to Monica Latham, who analysed an abridged version of *Mrs Dalloway*, the transformative process can be divided into four basic operations: dissection, identification, extraction and re-injection. In the first stage the original text gets dissected for the purposes of identifying its quintessential elements and organising principles. Subsequently these become extracted and re-injected in a new narrative frame¹⁷. For our interpretative purposes and to fully understand the aforementioned process in the case of Crace's parodic games, we will introduce several more techniques.

(Re)creation and (re)fashioning. These techniques concern imitating and customising familiar settings, the fictitious universe or characters that are immediately recognisable to contemporary readers. In his spoof Crace seizes the pith of the whole gamut

¹³ Michał M. Markowski and Anna Burzyńska, *Teorie literatury XX wieku. Podręcznik*, Kraków: Znak 2009, p. 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Stanisław Balbus, *Między stylami*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych 1993, p. 52

¹⁶ Artur Hellich, "Jak rozpoznać pastisz (i odróżnić go od parodii?)", *Zagadnienie Rodzajów Literackich*, LVII vol. 2, p. 29.

¹⁷ Monica Latham, *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism. Rewriting Mrs. Dalloway*, London: Polgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 10.

of canonical texts in order to subvert them. His subversive strategy consists in recreating familiar settings and attendant elements, and then simultaneously annulling them by making the reader aware that artistic, postmodernist procedure is at work. In his digested reads Crace often retains the cast of main characters while discarding minor ones, which is largely necessitated by the 700-word format of the abridged novels. Avatars – contemporary versions of characters – speak the same language as their prototypes, or, in other words, perform acts of ventriloquism¹⁸. Refashioning is also reflected in narrative and stylistic mannerisms and idiolects which are imitated in such an explicit manner that the readers are aware of the transformative practices that are at work. Such is the case in a digested version of *A Clockwork Orange*. The satirist mixes Russian-influenced argot with elements of Cockney slang spoken by teenage protagonists in a dystopian novel by Anthony Burgess. Nadsat slang is naturally condensed and re-fashioned with the explicit parodic intent to confuse “iconoclasm with fictive daring”¹⁹. It is best illustrated in the narrative voice’s ascertainment: “I’ve rather lotht the will to live with all thish nadsat deliquently and slang, the malenky prietht replieud, for all preithts have satirical lithps”²⁰.

Caricature and reduction. Both strategies are visible especially on the level of characters. In digested versions of novels Crace retains quintessential elements of their properties. He distils their portraits using stylistic and literary devices such as metafictional narrative comments or the choice of verbs or adjectives. To Monica Latham, the whole cast of characters in a digested version of *Mrs Dalloway* is “monolithic and unidirectional, reduced to a single dominating feature”²¹. This compositional mannerism finds confirmation in *The Prime of Miss Jane Brodie* [by Muriel Spark]²², where a narrative voice unveils accordingly that female characters “were all hastily sketched out by a single identifying feature”²³. This criticism can apply to characters in various digested versions of the classics, as they often appear stereotypically one-dimensional and are blatantly caricatured. It is well illustrated in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* [by Truman Capote] where “more lightly sketched caricatures would dance across the pages”²⁴. In *Portnoy’s Complaint* [by Philip Roth] the narrator likewise refers to one of the characters as “a thinly disguised caricature of [his] alter ego’s first wife”²⁵. What is more, in his/her metafictional comments the narrative voice is often openly critical of the characters, so in Crace’s parody of Capote’s novel, “the story was quickly piling up a car crash of characters that were diverting but insubstantial grotesques”²⁶. While in the digested version

¹⁸ By “ventriloquism” I mean the act of fictional characters appropriating distinctive voices and argots of their prototypes, authors or critics.

¹⁹ Crace, op. cit., p. 217.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 216–217.

²¹ Ibid., p. 103.

²² Names of authors in square brackets refer to the digested reads rather than source-texts.

²³ Crace, op. cit., p. 212.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 200.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 239

²⁶ Ibid., p. 200.

of *The History Man*, a British campus novel from 1975, the narrator ventriloquises his concern that “his character will remain shallow and undeveloped”²⁷.

Caricature converges with reduction, something which became immediately synonymous with Crace’s digestion. In his narrative comments the satirist operates on reductive labels for (re)created characters, who become insubstantial when caricatured. Furthermore, criticism directed at characters exposes their imperfections, and original complexities become flattened and treated reductively. For instance, in [John Updike’s] *Couples*, the quintessence of Piet’s character is boiled down to “a pervy voyeur on the sly”²⁸. Likewise, there is an implied criticism at Harold’s manner that is an “irritating tic of inserting French words into his speech”²⁹. This often convenes with a self-reflective manner of characters, which finds illustration in [James Joyce’s] *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and [Scott Fitzgerald’s] *The Great Gatsby*. In the former, Cardinal Newman’s innermost thoughts are retained, revealing “there was no voice inside him save an annoying protean adolescent know-all”³⁰. Whereas, the eponymous character in Fitzgerald’s digested version seeks to retreat “into the safety of [his] provincial squeamishness”³¹. A plethora of adjectives are indicative of the reductive tendencies in Crace’s endeavour. Originally longer passages in source-texts naturally become reduced, so characters court “assiduously”³², as in the digested version of *The Great Gatsby*. They reply “world-wearily”³³ or “patronisingly”³⁴; make themselves “unsubtly unsympathetic”³⁵, “deferential to the last”³⁶ or judgmental: “How very lower-class!”³⁷.

On the level of plot, some events in the storyline are refined and some are evoked, although merely as points on the plot line. Accordingly, multifarious narrative or stylistic complexities become discarded by Crace. Paradoxically, reduced or abridged idiosyncrasies or eccentricities become magnified in digested reads.

Criticism espoused with mockery. In his twofold parodic strategy Crace espouses critical and narrative voices. Characters in this palimpsestic endeavour are endowed with a double role: character-cum-reader and character-cum-critic and thus pinpoint or convey criticism of:

- (1) pretentious stylistic mannerisms that become magnified by excessive reiteration;
- (2) stylistic, narrative or composition failures, inconsistencies of the original text;
- (3) hermetic critical jargon and literary and cultural criticism of the 20th century.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Narrative voices, as vehicles of Crace's opinions, are openly critical. Thus, it is quite common for ventriloquist characters to swerve from the main narrative strand into meta-fictional criticism, which often disrupts the story.

The third type is the most reiterated. In [Joseph Conrad's] *Heart of Darkness* it is delivered through Marlow who "began his two-hour, neo-Freudian critique of colonialism"³⁸, whereas in [John Fowles's] *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Charles and Sarah end up "in a postmodern cul-de-sac"³⁹. Lucy in [J. M. Coetzee] *Disgrace* states: "To them I was a symbol of apartheid repression and I must suffer for my postcolonial guilt"⁴⁰.

However, a plethora of critical remarks espoused with metafictional comments are delivered in [Jean Rhys's] *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

I was a bridesmaid when my mother married Mr Mason, but though he released us from the steamy undergrowth of our sweaty impoverishment, we could not escape the madness of the postcolonial reinterpretation of Jane Eyre.

'Why must I flit from one half-remembered scene to another?' I asked. 'Each more laden than the last with the heavy, humid symbolism of female oppression and neo-Marxist alienation'.

Madness is indeed a deterministic inevitability of a patriarchal, imperialist regime.

I too am now the victim of a proto-feminist Marxist plot to reinterpret Bronte's classic⁴¹.

The above examples also illustrate that Crace's is a two-pronged parodic slant since both the acts of creation and reception become the subjects of mockery. The latter is twofold as it involves the reader's and the critic's reception and Crace parodies the hermetic and pompous jargon of critical discourse. In other words, it is a parody embedded in a parody. According to the satirist's understanding such parody has both aesthetic and ideological implications as it can be used as a commentary on the structure/composition of a text as well as on its reception. On the level of the text, narrative and critical voices intertwine in this mixture of parodic discourses. Crace's digested versions are heavy with symbolic references, which are amply criticized in almost every text.

Metafictional discourse is delivered through the characters themselves or expressed by the narrative voice. There are several such instances in *Brideshead Abbreviated* which either allude to plot development or action (non-) progression. In [Woolf's] *Mrs Dalloway* the narrative voice criticises Clarissa's life as irreversibly inert, complaining that "it was too late in the book for that [a change]"⁴². Whereas in [Fowles's] *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the following complaint is expressed by the first-person narrator: "I must maintain the artifice that my characters have their own lives and I don't know how

³⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 237.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 352.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁴² Ibid., p. 93.

the story ends” or “I could begin a subplot where Charles [...]”⁴³. The critique regarding hampered plot development is stated verbatim in [J.K. Rowling’s] *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*:

‘It’s all quite fun’, said Harry, ‘but I can’t help noticing we are well over half the way through the book and nothing has actually happened.

‘You’ve not seen nothing yet,’ Ron replied gloomily. ‘In the later books when everyone is far too scared to edit J.K. she drones on for hundreds of pages’⁴⁴.

Crace’s parodic experiment builds a twofold subversive rapport, with the source-text and the reader. Endowing characters with critical awareness brings both aesthetic and ideological implications and benefits the latter. Moreover, making the characters vehicles of satirist’s opinions and ventriloquising criticism and mockery through them gives a new slant to Crace’s palimpsestic endeavour. Though on the surface double commentary on the composition and critical reception may seem disruptive to the reader, they provide extra layers of added meanings due to symmetrical parody on both the subject of creation and reception. Thus we get to read digested versions of classics as products of postmodernist culture.

Rapport with the reader

Direct affinity between the character, the narrator and the reader is an inherent feature of digested versions of literary classics. Relying on the literary competences of the reader significantly enhances the reception of the source-text.

The selected examples provided in the table below amply illustrate the manner the narrator repeatedly adopts towards the reader. Intimate rapport is strongly pronounced and though fraternizing, it is frequently marked by acerbic irony. The language of the digested texts is at stark contrast with the formal style of source-texts.

Novel/Author	Citations from digested versions
<i>A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man</i> (1916) [by Joyce]	“[...] My clarity lies in my opacity, my penetrability in my impenetrability. And you, poor suckers, have fallen for my myth of genius”. (68)
<i>The Great Gatsby</i> (1925) [by Fitzgerald]	“I’ve wondered since whether I should have intervened, but that might have compromised my role as a semi-detached observer. So I left quietly with my moral authority still unblemished”. (89)
<i>Brideshead Revisited</i> (1945) [by Evelyn Waugh]	“to let the reader know yours and Sebastian’s c-c-campness is p-p-purely p-p-platonic. And now is as good time as any to fill in the b-b-backstory of Sebastian’s family”. (156)

⁴³ Ibid., p. 236.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 344.

<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> (1951) [by J.D. Salinger]	"I'm also a cool, unreliable narrator dude". (177)
<i>The Bell Jar</i> (1963) [by Sylvia Plath]	"I figured if I mentioned Buddy Willard a third time it might generate a curiosity in the reader I couldn't master myself". (218)
<i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i> (1969) [by Fowles]	"I could discourse longer on Victorian science and religious hypocrisy. I could begin a subplot where Charles ...". (236) "Here I have a dilemma, for I must maintain the artifice that my characters have their own lives and I don't know how the story ends. Daringly, then, I leave you to decide". (236)
<i>The Remains of the Day</i> (1989) [by Kazuo Ishiguro]	"My sense of duty does not allow me to comment further on this, save to point out my primary role for Mr Ishiguro is to be an unreliable narrator, and therefore if I have allowed myself to look more stupid than I perhaps am, it is out of loyalty to his high-minded literary endeavours". (314)
<i>Disgrace</i> (1999) [by Coetzee]	"I think the readers will find that psychologically unconvincing". (p. 351)

As the selected citations demonstrate, self-reflective addresses of the narrators may be deprecating, imply self-delusion or ridicule and question narrative competence. While the first narrative voice is disrespectful and self-contradicting, poking fun at readers' gullibility, the second is wavering, unmasking its own role as a narrator, which is stated verbatim. Reference to "unblemished moral authority" shows a self-mocking manner. Various references to narrative functions such as "fill in the backstory", "semi-detached observer" or "unreliable narrator", are indicative of the narrators' verbosity in this jargon. Occasionally the reader gets involved in an intertextual game with the narrator or character, a kind of "blind man's buff". A good illustration is a nonchalant comment of the protagonist in [Salinger's] *The Catcher in the Rye* who "can't be bovered with all that David Copperfield crap"⁴⁵. This strategy is echoed in [Cormac McCarthy's] *Blood Meridian*. The subversive remark: "So this is like a XXX-rated Spaghetti Western? Clint Eastwood is a Disney shithead"⁴⁶ is an explicit allusion to the cultural competences of the reader.

Mrs Dalloway digested

In his spoof of *Mrs Dalloway*, Crace recreates and refashions Woolfian stylistic, narrative mannerisms and idiolects repetitively and methodically. He amply uses markers of free indirect speech and the stream of consciousness technique such as disconnected thoughts interspersed with deictic 'here' or 'there', along with self-questioning or frequent interruptions to the flow of thoughts. However, in a digested read these are retained in the form of mannerisms rather than imitative pattern. For instance, the self-questioning manner is parodied verbatim by Peter Walsh as: "Why must his images contain so many

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 296.

portentous adjectives? And why must everything be a question?"⁴⁷ Espousing narrative and stylistic mannerisms with parodic intent, discards original complexity of the Woolfian style. At first glance, Crace peruses characters' minds in a Woolfian fashion, but on closer inspection these are merely imitative practices. His digested version bristles with metafictional comments, which are a parody of literary criticism and critical jargon. An illustration of that may be Clarissa's self-reflecting and mocking remark: "Was not this impressionistic stream of consciousness confirmation of her place in the avant-garde?"⁴⁸. The same (strategy) applies to stylistic idiosyncrasies, parenthetical remarks or exclamatory sentences. In the digested version original exclamatory remarks of joy *de vivre* become subversively refashioned into Clarissa's self-reflective and self-mocking manner: "How thrilling it felt to hint at lesbianism!"⁴⁹.

As in other digested versions of classics Crace espouses criticism with mockery. Critical narrative voices become vehicles of the opinions of Crace, who endows Dalloway-esque characters with the double role of character-cum-reader and character-cum-critic. The latter role befalls Peter Walsh, who ventriloquises Crace's criticism towards the compositional principle of the original novel and unmasks narrative functions. Repetitive strikes of Big Ben are followed by the character's complaint: "How annoying [...] to be so constantly reminded that all the action was taking place on one day"⁵⁰. This critical remark, espoused with metafictional comment on the novel's compositional frame, is further developed as: "Big Ben struck out again, the bell throbbing with masculinity from within its Freudian tower"⁵¹. While in the former the acts of creation and reception become the subjects of mockery, the latter is heavy with symbolic references as the criticism is aimed at hermetic jargon of the 20th century ideologies. This is echoed in the self-mocking remark of Septimus Smith who "couldn't make it any clearer he wasn't homosexual" or Clarissa's motherly acknowledgement of Miss Kilman's "lesbian tendencies [that] were taking Elizabeth away from her"⁵². Characters who ventriloquise such remarks swerve from the main narrative into metafictional criticism, which is often disruptive to the story.

As in other digested classics, the main events in the storyline are evoked only as points on the plot line. On the level of characters, in Crace's *Mrs Dalloway* caricature converges with reduction. Although he recreated familiar settings and attendant elements and recast Dalloway-esque characters in the same roles, postmodernist procedures make it a new parodic version. Crace retains the protagonists and some minor characters, yet naturally discards Hugh Whitbread or Scrope Purvis who originally acted as choruses or reflectors. He recasts the caricatured Dalloway-esque characters

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

in the same roles retaining quintessential features/characteristics of their prototypes. In the original text Clarissa is "cold as an icicle"⁵³, "contracted, petrified"⁵⁴. Her coldness convenes together with "her woodenness"⁵⁵ as "she was like iron, like flint, rigid up the backbone"⁵⁶. This emotional and physical coldness and detachment reverberate in caricatured Clarissa, who is similarly portrayed as stiff, detached, pompous and rather shallow. As a result, Crace's Clarissa seems flattened and undeveloped. A similar strategy is used in the case of Richard Dalloway who is reduced to a single dominant feature. Crace parodied his emotional inexpressiveness in the relationship with his wife. Sentences: "But he would tell Clarissa that he loved her, in so many words"⁵⁷ and "For he would say it in so many words" are the best illustration of that. This is also echoed in the scene with flowers. Richard, who was holding out roses, "could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words"⁵⁸. In Crace's digested version Clarissa reflects on this apparent dilemma and deficiency, stating: "He wanted to say he loved me, Clarissa thought, yet he couldn't. We are trapped like icicles"⁵⁹. Accordingly, the scene with flowers becomes reduced to deictic "here" in "'Here' he said instead, thrusting the flowers into Clarissa's arms, before rushing back to the House"⁶⁰. Crace adopts and adapts a pivotal moment in Clarissa and Richard's relationship. Clumsiness, inability to express and articulate emotions become captured in the scene with flowers. This awkward and embarrassing moment makes a parody of a declaration of love towards Clarissa. The reductive strategy also applies to another Dalloway-esque protagonist, Septimus Smith. The "insane" originally intended as a counterbalance to Clarissa's "sane" narrative strand, is not just reduced but Septimus additionally becomes a minor character, randomly criss-crossing London and Clarissa's path on that specific day. Although the threads of Clarissa and Septimus intersect at some point in the digested read, the original narrative symmetry is discarded. Septimus Smith is mainly reduced to visions and suicidal moods prompted by his shell-shock war trauma, hence blatant threat: "I will kill myself"⁶¹. The following is rendered in the criticism towards his wife Rezia, only trying to "release Septimus from his horror": "Interrupting. Always interrupting. Could she not understand the importance of his shell-shock trauma as a counterpoint to superficiality?"⁶² Crace's Septimus, trembling with "the intensity of his condition" repeats the original Woolfian line: "I'll give it you"⁶³.

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Penguin Books, London 1996, p. 68.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁹ Crace, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Digested version of Virginia Woolf's seminal novel realises transformative potential of *Mrs Dalloway*. Crace appropriated a postmodernist paradigm to critically evaluate the novel's literary and cultural value of the source text. Applying slightly contestant slant, he extracted and re-injected quintessential stylistic, narrative and thematic features of *Mrs Dalloway*.

Conclusions

There is a consensus, Latham ascertains, that contemporary authors are more malleable to ineluctable features of micro-fiction, such as syncretism, synthetic aspect or brevity, that were originally reserved for the *short story* or *short short story*⁶⁴. John Crace as well as Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin seized upon this trend and subversively revived this much-admired method of writing⁶⁵. Digested read as an alternative narrative form was necessitated by the dominant forms of communication associated with new mediality. Twitter format, as a landmark in the evolution of micro-literary forms, contributed to the evolution of nontraditional variants of fiction, prompting experiments with style, narration or format.

Originally devised as a playful experiment tailored to altered aesthetic expectations and tastes of the 21st-century Twitter-literate readers, well accustomed to flash-fiction format, digested reads have fused premises of experimental prose⁶⁶ and postmodernism. Indebted to both, they rejected formal constraints and predictability of traditional prose and incorporated postmodernist tools of parody and pastiche. In turn, thanks to the parodic update, originally elitist texts entered the realm of popular entertainment for audiences with more sublime tastes and advanced literary and cultural competences. However, heavy metafictional layering espoused with characters' ventriloquising Crace's literary and cultural criticism do not make digested reads autonomous. It is because they appear too reliant on stylistic and narrative idiosyncrasies of source-texts.

As previously stated, digested reads exhibit a two-pronged approach towards the Anglo-American literary canon and micro-literature. As for the former, Crace's abridged versions revive interest in the world classics. The latter shows that the reads, which go against mainstream writing, instantiate a renewed interest in micro-fiction and short narrative forms. The selected texts and their "mimetic performances"⁶⁷ prove to have literary and (pop)cultural potential and surely become more reader-friendly in their abridged form as popular literature ready for immediate consumption. Although he is fond of complex and multilayered novels, Crace deliberately excludes *Ulysses* by Joyce, which he deems inaccessible to contemporary readers. The following motivation seems

⁶⁴ Latham, op. cit., p. 210.

⁶⁵ Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin, *Twitterature. The World's Greatest Books in Twenty Tweets or Less*, London: Penguin Books 2009.

⁶⁶ See: Philip Stevick, *Anti-story. An Anthology of Experimental Fiction*, New York: The Free Press, 1971.

⁶⁷ Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. C. Newman and C. Doubinsky, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1997, p. 6.

to indicate that writing and commercial requirements are seen as intricately intertwined and conditioned by economic factors⁶⁸.

In *Brideshead Abbreviated* Crace likewise exploits the generic potential of the genre, fusing aesthetic and ideological implications, so that parody becomes a tool to comment on the functioning of a text as well as its reception. Although some may find Crace's parodic endeavour invigorating for contemporary fiction and ensuing trends, its literariness may seem questionable. Crace's parodic texts, provided they are not taken literally, can be read as humorous pieces of literary criticism seasoned with mockery, amusing in their subversive form; book reviews or synthetic pieces of précis for undemanding readers who have developed a habit of reaching for Cliff's Notes or for literature "on the go".

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⁶⁸ Latham, op. cit., p. 210.

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