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JULIAN BARNES'S THE NOISE OF TIME AS A NARRATIVE OF TRAUMA

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Abstract

In *The Noise of Time* (2016), Julian Barnes narrates the biography of the famous Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). Barnes presents Shostakovich as a trapped and anguished human being who needs to be understood and absolved from the accusations of his time. We can read the novel as the story of a great composer who lived his life as trauma, and carried this burden in a most Sisyphean sense. We watch him as he tries his best to save his personal integrity while undergoing severely distressing events, continuously distracted by the noise of his time as he is perseveringly composing his masterpieces despite it. This paper will illustrate how Barnes evokes sympathy for Shostakovich's traumatic life and how Shostakovich fought with trauma by the help of his ironic mode of living.

Keywords: *Julian Barnes, Dimitri Shostakovich, Trauma narrative, The Noise of Time.*

BİR TRAVMA ANLATISI OLARAK JULIAN BARNES'İN ZAMANIN GÜRÜLTÜSÜ ADLI ROMANI

Özet

Julian Barnes, 2016'da yayınlanan *Zamanın Gürültüsü*'nde ünlü Rus besteci Dimitri Şostakoviç'in (1906-1975) hayat hikayesini anlatır. Barnes yaşamını aslında sefil, kapana kısılmış biri olarak sürdürmüş olan Şostakoviç'i bize anlaşılmalı bekleyen ve zamanın tüm suçlamalarından aklanması gereken bir kişi olarak sunar. Biz romanı, tüm yaşamını travma olarak geçirmiş ve bu yükü Sisife gibi omuzlarında taşımış büyük bir bestecinin hikayesi olarak okuruz. Onu kişiliğini bütünlük içinde tutmak, onurunu ayaklar altına almamak için zorlu durumlarla savaşırken ve başarılarını bestelerken sürekli onu bölen zamanın gürültüsüyle baş etmeye çalışırken izleriz. Bu çalışma Barnes'ın okura Şostakoviç'in travmatik yaşamına şahit olurken duyumsattığı sempati duygusunu ve Şostakoviç'in travmayı çekilir kılmak için nasıl ironik yaşam biçimini seçtiğini incelemeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Julian Barnes, Dimitri Şostakoviç, Travma anlatısı, Zamanın Gürültüsü.*

In his latest novel *The Noise of Time* (published in 2016), Julian Barnes presents the fictional biography of the Soviet composer, Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). His interest in a Russian composer's life does not surprise those who are already acquainted with Barnes's Russophilia besides his Francophilia. Like his previous novel, *The Sense of an Ending* which borrows its title from Frank Kermode's 1967 book on narrative theory, *The Noise of Time* takes its title from Osip Mandelstam's memoir and collection of essays which was written in 1924. Neither Osip Mandelstam, nor Frank Kermode is mentioned anywhere in these novels. Barnes once again uses another book as a ghost companion, as a scope-widening and suggestive material for his readers. Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who was famous for his "Stalin Epigram", was a contemporary of Shostakovich and he was known to be one of the most outspoken critics of Stalin. He had a life of struggles, banishments, political persecutions and convictions which ended in a transit camp in 1938, when he was forty-seven. Mandelstam's *The Noise of Time*

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was an autobiographical account of an activist, revolutionary and brave figure who fought and died for his ideals. Barnes's, *The Noise of Time*, on the other hand, is about the life of a completely opposite figure, Shostakovich who is known to be a passive, loyal and introverted man in Stalinist Russia. Both men, as contemporaries, endured the same "noise of time" in their own ways. One chose heroic action and died for it whereas the other chose to survive at the cost of shattering his personal integrity. Mandelstam in his memoir remarks: "Congenital tongue-tie weighs heavily over me and many of my contemporaries. We have learned not to speak but to babble and only by listening intensely to the swelling noise of the age and bleached by the foam of its crest, did we acquire speech" (qtd in Freidin, 1978: 425). What appears as "babble" in Mandelstam's language, is perceived as "muddle" in the music of Shostakovich. Whereas Mandelstam tried to suppress the noise of time by being louder in his protests and sharper in his poetry, Shostakovich endured it silently by being thankful to the reality that "music escaped from words: that was its purpose and its majesty." (Barnes, 58) This paper will analyse *The Noise of Time* as a testimony of trauma experienced by the composer in three moments of crises on the surface level while it will claim that, on the deeper level, these seemingly separate incidents that took place in the form of twelve-year intervals merge in a way so as to make trauma for Shostakovich his life-long experience. The title of the novel implies that Shostakovich suffered a constant noise of time (the noise of repressive Power/Stalinist Soviet regime) all his life and he composed his masterpieces against and despite this noise.

Soviet pianist and composer Dimitri Shostakovich is regarded as one of the major composers of the twentieth century. His work can be received as the musical equivalent of Bakhtin's theories and Gogol's fiction in its treatment of grotesque, and of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels in its hybridity of voices combining a variety of musical techniques such as sharp contrasts, use of montage, defamiliarization, ambivalent tonality etc. "Since his death in 1975, Shostakovich has been one of the most mythologized composers of the twentieth century" (Fairclough, 2005: 452). He is known for his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, various symphonies such as Leningrad symphony; the fifth symphony which was subtitled as "A Soviet Artist's Practical Creative Response to Just Criticism"; and for his quartets and concertos. Fairclough states that "Shostakovich might just conceivably have been many seemingly contradictory things: a believer in socialist principles; a loyal Stalinist; a composer who genuinely tried to write music for all ears; a man who loathed Stalin and Stalinism; a composer who was cruelly humiliated by being forced publicly to denigrate Stravinsky; a member of Communist Party; a man who would sign official statements without reading them, etc" (2005: 453-454). He had lost most beloved friends and respected colleagues; had been forced to play official roles that humiliated him and had seen how the younger generation of Soviet composers lost respect for him as his official honors accumulated (2005: 455).

The Noise of Time opens with an epigraph, a traditional saying: "one to hear, one to remember and one to drink." A prelude in italics follows the epigraph and presents a possible narrative illustrating the epigraph: It is about three men meeting at a railway station, in the middle of war time. Two men in their thirties see a beggar on the platform. The beggar is an invalid who came back from war which blew him to bits and removed his two legs. He became "a technique for survival" (1) sitting on a trolley with wooden wheels, struggling to survive no matter how much he was deformed spiritually, morally and physically. The beggar is singing barrack-room songs so that some passengers might toss him a kopeck. "The one who heard was a thin, nervous fellow with spectacles; around his neck and wrists he wore amulets of garlic" (2). Although his name is not given, we soon understand that this man is Shostakovich, at the age of 30. His travelling companion's name is lost to history, even though he was the one who remembered. Two men join the beggar in the platform and they drink vodka together. The prelude underlines ideas about war, fear, poverty, filth through the configuration of three men: one hearing, one remembering and one drinking.

The novel is formed of three chapters, "On the Landing", "On the Plane", "In the Car", each starting with the same sentence (or a version of it):

"All he knew was that this was the worst time".

Each chapter focuses on one major traumatic event in Shostakovich's life. Each time he encounters a bigger threat, a worse crisis, he learns that there are yet the other "worst times" to come. Nothing much happens in the novel. We see Shostakovich at a train station, standing by the lift, on the plane and in the car. The narrative focuses on his consciousness and recollections. It is written in an intimately close third person, similar to Virginia Woolf's narrative style by its reliance on indirect interior monologues. The testimony focuses on three "worst times" or moments of crises in his life:

The first time we see Shostakovich, we see him on the landing of his apartment standing by the lift with a briefcase filled with underclothes, in the middle of the night resuming his vigil. He is contemplating and full of fear as he is waiting for the secret police to arrest him. The imminence of menace is intense. It is 1936 and Stalin's great purge is under way. He is already traumatized and we soon find out the reason. A couple of days before, at Arkhangelsk railway station, travelling back home from a concert, he buys *Pravda* (the party supportive journal) and in it he reads his name.

On the morning of 28th of January 1936 -“a date he chose to mark each year until his death” (18) he opens *Pravda* with chilled fingers, and finds on page three a headline describing his opera as “muddle instead of music”. The editorial condemns his opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and is followed by a summons to the KGB headquarters where the composer is invited to denounce various colleagues who are accused of plotting to assassinate Stalin. The headline is simply supportive of Stalin who goes to watch the opera two days before and leaves in the middle of it, publically showing his dislike. He reads the article five or six times thinking that after such denunciation his opera will not continue at the Bolshoi. The fact that for the last two years it has been applauded everywhere including Moscow, New York, Cleveland, Sweden and Argentina would not change a thing. “Now his opera was to be put down like a yapping dog which had suddenly displeased its master.” (27) And *Pravda* denounces it as a non-political, confusing piece which tickled a perverted taste of bourgeois with its fidgety and neurotic music. His music suddenly becomes a mixture of quacks, grunts and growls just because Stalin publically showed his disfavor. In the following days, other articles appear and Shostakovich is announced to be a petit-bourgeois and formalist. Shostakovich knows very well that this will not only entail his dismissal from the Union of Composers, but also block his chances to compose and perform. Later on, when papers declare him an “enemy of people” he knows that he is a dead man. He is supposed to repudiate his opera but he prefers to remain silent, makes no public statement, no apology, no recantation. He withdraws his fourth symphony which coincides with the attacks. All his opera and ballets are removed from the repertoires and his career simply stops (43). So, he begins to wait for the secret police to take him. He stands by the lift in the corridor because he does not want his wife and baby to be disturbed by the intruders. These nocturnal vigils last for ten days. Nobody comes. He receives a call from the “Big House” and goes to his first conversation with power. Shostakovich is only 30 when this happens and he is at the beginning of his career, newly married and father of his first child, Galina. . But after this event, he never produces another opera.

The second crisis, his next conversation with Power, occurs 12 years later, in 1948, when he is called by Stalin and blackmailed into attending a Soviet-funded Peace Conference at the Waldorf Hotel in New York. Stalin asks the composer to represent Soviet Union at the Congress. He tries to refuse by giving fake excuses but finds himself instantly rehabilitated. Dispatched to New York, he is compelled to read a long speech denouncing his idol, Stravinsky, praising Stalin's policies and then further shamed by the questions of Nicolas Nabokov (Vladimir's cousin). Nabokov asks if he personally subscribes to the banning of Western music and the work of Schoenberg and Stravinsky in Soviet concert halls; he also asks if Shostakovich personally subscribes to the views expressed in his speech that day about the music of Stravinsky (102). Shostakovich replies to each question by a “Yes, I personally subscribe to the views”. This becomes the greatest humiliation, the worst moment of his life; he feels nothing but self-disgust and self-contempt (67). He just hopes the audience will understand that it is impossible to tell the truth and stay alive in Russia, and that he is simply being ironic (107). He is 42 and has a worldwide reputation as an outstanding composer. This enforced public self-denial causes him to feel a permanent self-denigration and shame.

The third crisis comes after a gap of another 12 years. He is now 54, an elderly man, and the year is 1960. Stalin's terror has given way to the reign of Nikita Khrushchev. The power has grown vegetarian in this period contrary to Stalin's carnivorous times. Shostakovich no longer fears for his life but faces another attack on his integrity. It has been decided that he must join the Communist Party as an endorsement of the new policies of Khrushchev. He is given many honors and awards as the greatest composer of the revolution. “He swims in honors like a shrimp in shrimp-cocktail sauce, and the vegetarian Power stuffs the shrimp with vegetables.” (135) All his life Shostakovich succeeded in not becoming a party member, on the grounds that he could not join a party which killed, not even during the time of Stalin. Staying away from politics has been a consistent characteristic of him as an artist. We witness his final, most ruinous conversation with Power, when he cannot escape what he has been ordained. After joining the party, Shostakovich diagnoses his greatest fault as living too long.

The novel concentrates on these three crises as traumatic events that followed one another in 12-year intervals. The three seemingly separate identities that open the narrative at a train station gradually merge to

become one person, Shostakovich himself. The kind of trauma that is illustrated in these events transforms Shostakovich from the man who hears (the noise of time now and then), to the man who remembers, and finally to the old, crippled beggar who drinks. The prelude, in this respect, can be perceived as a brief summary of Shostakovich's life. The novel is dominated by the present consciousness of Shostakovich who has become "a technique for survival" at the cost of sacrificing his personal integrity.

Psychical trauma is the inability to assimilate an unprecedented or over-whelming event by the usual mental mechanisms. As Geoffrey Hartman puts it, "trauma is the subjection of the subject, the fading of the 'I' before the other." (548) Simply put, it is the affliction of the powerless. Each time Shostakovich experiences a traumatic charge of crisis; he feels a departure from the self and is more disempowered. In each event, he experiences what Cathy Caruth defines as, "a shock that appears to work very much like a threat to the body's spatial integrity, but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (25). Shostakovich lives his whole life with a lack of preparedness for threat and therefore constantly suffers anxiety. In each crisis, the composer makes his accommodations with power and survives. At each call "he renders unto Caesar that which was Caesar's." (54) Power always reminds itself to assure him of his weakness. We witness how he regards himself as a "neurotic man with strong emotions but is unskilled in conveying them" (33); as an "introverted" and "weak-willed man who has potential for hysteria" (38); "a mad, suicidal man; an ironist" (42) "a frightened man" (48); and, a pessimist. We understand that he was not only disturbed by the noise outside, but also by the noise inside, i.e. his conscience and consciousness.

The three moments of arrest, all traumatic, shape Shostakovich's time as no longer progressive and space no longer orientational; time and space become uncanny for him. The uncanny space that he inhabits is similar to the Kafkaesque "like the space you find yourself in, for example, when you have become a noxious insect and your own bedroom is suddenly a prison" (Weinstein, 86). Each time he says "here I am" to the call of power, he faces more degradation, mires more in shame. His fear is always accompanied by shame. And, "The more mired in shame Shostakovich becomes, the more Barnes likes him" (Lasdun, 2016). He survives and saves his family. At times he feels that he has become a fallen and abject figure, an unworthy man, a worm. At other times he assures himself that he is just being ironic in his denunciations and denials. Irony functions as his safety buoy in surviving trauma.

Although, on the surface level, the novel focuses on three separate traumatic events in intervals, it also implies that the kind of trauma as experienced by Shostakovich is permanent. It is no longer something that is externally forced but also lived internally as the noise of self-denigration constantly weakening Shostakovich. We are already acquainted with various definitions of trauma since Freud. Some definitions focus on early childhood experiences that are repressed in the unconscious and appear in adulthood in a belated form. Some other definitions relate trauma to destructive events such as the Holocaust and some focus on post trauma disorder stress. Laplanche and Pontalis's definition of trauma as "an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval of long-lasting effects that it brings about in psychical organization" (1973: 465) is symptomatic of Shostakovich. In each case, the event is intense, he is unable to respond adequately to it and suffers a long-lasting effect. He refuses to escape and his choice of staying obediently reduces his life to a form of immanent trauma which transforms the after-effects to incessant lifelong experiences because there is no "post" to the type of trauma he endures. Hence, the noise of time remains constant till the death of the composer. Trauma becomes his ontology.

Being called by Power is a traumatic experience in itself. This kind of trauma is described and analysed by Kierkegaard in his book *Fear and Trembling* (1843)¹ where he focused on Abraham's call by God in *Genesis* 22. Similar to Shostakovich, Abraham says "Here I am" three times in *Genesis* and the words epitomizes his ordeal. Once the subject is called by God or a supreme power, his "I" is no longer located in a domesticated time and space. In the statement "Here I am", "here" refers to nowhere else and "presence" is stripped off before and after. This moment of arrest, which is intensified by fear, is similar to Shostakovich's situation as he was standing by the lift, or called by Stalin and then by Khrushchev in each chapter respectively. The eye of the Party/Power is like God's constant gaze. The constant gaze and demands of Power, transform space into an uncanny place where home does not feel like home anymore; and reduce time to moments of arrest. The subject emerges as no longer individual but plural and penetrated by absent others. The noise of time functions as a metaphor

¹ Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* has been used by Philip Weinstein in his book *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*. Weinstein refers to Abraham's situation and Kierkegaard's analysis of him to illustrate the psychology of characters in modernist fiction. For Weinstein, modernist fiction differs from realist fiction epistemologically as we see the protagonists suffering a state of unknowing since their sense of space and time is no longer familiar and their subjectivity is shattered. (pp: 1-10, 130-140)

for being doomed to hear what one normally has no ear for. In this condition "Time becomes a parenthesis, a possibly lifelong parenthesis". Shostakovich is still alive, still breathing, still anxious, but halted. "Time is no longer perceived as process. It never goes anywhere; it also never familiarly repeats itself. In it one never comes home." (Weinstein, 139) Such time only repeats itself in the form of noise.

A man who constantly undergoes fear, fright and apprehension is a coward man, but Shostakovich's virtue of cowardice, which requires a special sort of persistence, pertinacity and a refusal to change, is perceived by Barnes as a special sort of courage. He could have chosen to escape from Russia like Stravinsky and Nabokovs or could have fought against oppression like Mandelstam and died young. He chooses to stay and obeys the unjust demands of Power. Although the ghost of Osip Mandelstam haunts the novel as a figure that provides a heroic vision, Barnes takes sides with Shostakovich and understands the cost of not escaping and not fighting. We generally admire those who stand up and speak truth to Power, the man like Osip Mandelstam and their bravery or moral integrity, but the case of Shostakovich deserves a different perception: sometimes being a coward is harder as it lasts a lifetime, without relaxation. Telling the truth and being shot may be the easy thing. By becoming "a technique for survival", Shostakovich at least keeps his life story safe from being rewritten by the Party because he knew that the Party would do anything to disgrace him after his death. "They would steal his story and rewrite it as his suicide note. He needed, if only in his own hopeless, hysterical way, to have some charge of his life, of his story." (97)

Haunted by the noise of time, paralyzed by the calls, Shostakovich believed, and sometimes hoped- that irony might enable him to preserve what he valued, even as the noise of time became loud enough to knock out window-panes. He valued his music, his love and his family. (86) "His disguise for truth was irony." (85) When he reads that text in New York, he wants his irony to be sensed. He would never survive the shame of his humiliation if he doubted the power of irony. In New York, he does not read the text; he rather performs reading it in a fast, senseless, uninflected gabble reinforcing the fact that he was quite unfamiliar with the text. "This has nothing to do with me, his manner insisted." (98) He just wanted to imply that he was "a victim and not a political imbecile." (105)

Destructive though it may be, trauma also becomes the creative force for the composer. We owe Shostakovich's masterpieces to this oxymoronic fact. What degrades him also upgrades him. His music mocks the oppressors, it is the mockery of their triumph and as they only hear the triumph and not the mockery, Shostakovich succeeds. He always renders unto Caesar that which was Caesar's, but with tongue-in-cheek. However his conscience disturbs him when the distinction between irony and dishonesty is blurred.

Barnes reminds us that irony has its limits. One can wake up one morning and no longer knows if his tongue is in his cheeks. Signing a letter joining the party and reading a text in New York are different things. Letters do not reveal the gestures and mimics of the ironist. Shostakovich thinks "This was the final, unanswerable irony to his life: that by allowing him to live, they had killed him." (177)

In *The Noise of Time* Barnes gives voice to Shostakovich's life by rendering his wounds perceivable, his inner voice audible, his contradictions visible and his music understandable. One of the favorite proverbs for Barnes has been a Russian one which he had used earlier in *Talking it Over* (1991) as well. The proverb is "he lied like an eye-witness": the suggestion is simply that eyewitnesses are often mistaken about important matters, and perhaps also that they nonetheless overstate their confidence in their accuracy. In *The Noise of Time* Shostakovich's testimonies allude to this proverb when we see him in self-doubt. He understands that he lies to himself like an eye-witness when he is disillusioned in the old age.

As the narrative unfolds, the beggar in the prelude becomes the metaphor of Shostakovich's destroyed soul. In the end, as an old man he feels like a cripple, a hunchback. "He was not born one, but perhaps he had become one, morally and spiritually" (115) Time blows him to bits. Only death can cure the hunchback. He drinks heavily and sometimes when he is drunk he collapses in tears and sobs and cries of self-loathing. He thinks that he should have died years ago. After joining the party he never forgives himself, because there is nothing ironic about being a party member. He becomes in old age what in youth he would have most despised. He understands that integrity is like virginity, once lost, never recoverable. By signing denunciations he betrays art and his idol artists, by becoming a party member he betrays himself and he betrays the good opinions others still held of him.

The novel closes with an epilogue in italics where it returns to the prelude by saying that what really mattered in Shostakovich's life was the triad he heard that day at the railway station: "A triad put together by three not

very clean vodka glasses and their contents was a sound that rang clear of the noise of time, and would outlive everyone and everything" (180). "Triad" refers to the three men and a set of three notes in music simultaneously.

Barnes does not forget to render unto Shostakovich that which was Shostakovich's when he thanks him for his art which functions as "the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time." (91) The noise is something we hear against our will, we are exposed to noise and resist its disturbing effects. On the other hand, music is something we willingly listen to and enjoy, as art, it gives aesthetic pleasure and outlives everyone and everything. Shostakovich's music defeats the noise of his time by translating it into music it defeats the political power as an expression of his feelings, longings and compensation in the form of art. Barnes's novel makes the invisible aspects of Shostakovich's life visible and understandable in the form of a very intimate narrative that is poetically framed and placed between a prelude and an epilogue to render audible the whispers hidden in Shostakovich's music for his listeners. In *Author's Note* at the end of the book, Barnes suggests that those who aren't satisfied with his biography of Shostakovich are free to read historical accounts such as Elizabeth Wilson's or Solomon Volkov's, Isaac Glickman's or Michael Ardon's. However, the reader is now aware that history knows no ironies and sympathies whereas novels do.

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