

The Human Being as a Screen for the Postmodern Paradox

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Rezumat: *Recunoscându-le existența, homo ludens trăiește un sentiment de alienare în fața rezultatelor unui progres tehnologic fără precedent; confruntat cu imagini prezentate într-o succesiune rapidă, el nu înțelege nici contextul, nici conexiunile; rezultatul este că toate ideile îi par la fel de bune. Astfel, semnul distinctiv al postmodernului devine non-problematizarea, manifestată prin complicitate la consumism și lipsa accentelor critice. Ființa postmodernă înregistrează totul, dar nu crede în (aproape) nimic, pentru că a devenit ea însăși un ecran. În condițiile acestea, cine poate cere unui ecran să creadă ceea ce redă?*

Cuvinte-cheie: *alienare, existențialism, fabulator, identitate, postmodernitate*

For anyone trying to find their way in the labyrinth of, most often than not, contradictory definitions of post-modernism, it becomes clear that any attempt at a ‘surgical’ delimitation of the two great areas of thinking and creation of the 20th century is illusory. *Modern* and *postmodern* are terms defining rather *stări de spirit complementare, aflate în același timp în relații de ruptură, continuitate și întrepătrundere* (complementary states of spirit, in simultaneous discontinuity, continuity and interpenetration) (Cărtărescu, 1999: 107). This statement remains perfectly valid in the debate on the dichotomies *world/self* and *self/others*, or on matters characteristic of *self defining* or *individual/group identity*. The term *identity*, carrying the meaning of *uniqueness* or *unity* of something with its own self, is a key-concept in the thinking and creation of all times. Since the 19th century, Western literature and art have been forced to gradually change their ideas about the nature of the self and individual identity. Whereas the Romantics believed in individual identity as supreme value and substance, the existentialists were in permanent search for identity, in hope of discovering “*minimul ireductibil al experienței noastre, care poate fi identificat în mod onest ca aparținându-ne*” (the irreducible minimum of our experience, the one that can be honestly identified as ours) (Sypher in Pütz, 1995: 37).

If the realist-psychological modernist literature placed the focus on the relationship *self – world* as a proof of the interior exile of the writer and/or of the characters, in Lyotard’s and Foucault’s democratic and pluralist postmodernity, with its true explosion of nuances, groups and differences, the author concentrates not only on the identity of the individual but also of the group and the minority in its relationship with the majority. The syntagm *identity crisis*, recurrent in discussions of postmodernity, can be used in both ways and some more (for example, the self-identity of the text from a deconstructive perspective, or Derrida’s so much debated on *il n’y a pas dehors texte*).

The post-war American novel, as well as the European one, is a detailed (re)presentation of the imminent loss of the self (understood as interior being, essential and assumed, that which Jung called ‘the personal core’, and William James, ‘the real nucleus of our personal identity’) and a description of the battles and confusions triggered by this process. The syntagm ‘identity fable’ (coined by Manfred Pütz) reveals the relationship between the allegorical projection specific by definition to a fable and an individual self-identity faced with a disconcerting universe in which it can no longer find the certain anchors it used to know. The alienated, absurd and existentialist anti-heroes were all in the same position, failing to find the clear meaning of a personal, identifiable form of existence.

Characters like Herzog, Joseph or Charles Citrine in Saul Bellow’s novels, *Herzog* (1964), *The Dangling Man* (1944) and *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975); Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951); Nat Turner in W. Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967); Rabbit in John Updike’s series, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990); Tod Andrews in Barth’s *The Floating Opera* (1956) and Giles, the goat-boy, in the novel by the same name (1966) – all

find themselves suspended between contradictory pressures of the environment and the self, estranged from a world in which they feel outsiders. Sensitivity and the capacity for intellectual analysis, doubled by a kind of passivity sustaining introverted inclinations, all these are prominent features of the modernist hero, but also of the postmodernist one. The interior conflict, the sharp feeling of failure and hurt, the lack of orientation, self-alienation, even loss of identity, all of these are visible consequences most of the times. If sometimes they accept the role society assigns to them, this is made at the cost of losing their dream of freedom.

For the post-war fiction hero, this dream and the fear of isolation and conditioning are counter-balanced in the same time by the fear of freedom and the dream of some constraining contours. This *creatură amorfă, lipsită... de unitate, sfâșiată, eterogenă, fragmentară, ale cărei contururi se află pretutindeni..., o creatură cu neputință a fi circumscrisă vreunei scheme temporale* (this formless creature, devoided of... unity, broken, heterogeneous, fragmentary, the contours of which are everywhere..., a creature impossible to be circumscribed to any temporal structure) (Ellison in Pütz, 1997: 211)[1], placed in an *entropic universe*, sets out in search for the pattern. This anti-entropic battle of many contemporary heroes against a total chaos that denies distinction, differentiation and form, proves their desire and need for order, and gives birth to the danger of boring uniqueness and homogeneity imposed by a rigid society in all domains of existence. The pattern, or better said, the logical patterns the human being seeks – through myth, religion, history, imagination – are considered arbitrary constructs of the human mind. In search of a mysterious and incomprehensible unity, Herzog, as well as so many other modern heroes, makes up his mind in a Romantic way: he isolates himself refusing to get involved in anything, clinging to his disputable and unreliable identity, at the obvious risk of isolation and withdrawal – a risky attempt at using his identity and self as a shield against external forces.

In *Radical Innocence*, Hassan was writing:

[n]u numai că eul contemporan... s-a născut, ca Little Dorrit, într-o închisoare și a făcut din închisoarea sa... o fortăreață și un mausoleu. El a și descoperit secretele ciudate ale tuturor închisorilor: că, deși porțile nu sunt niciodată închise, prizonierii nu doresc să evadeze; că toate drumurile evadării duc la aceeași celulă; că nimic nu există cu adevărat dincolo de zidurile închisorii; că fiecare temnicer nu este altceva decât un alt pușcăriaș deghizat. Eul contemporan se dă înapoi în fața lumii, împotriva lui însuși. A descoperit absurdul. ([i]t's not only that the contemporary self... was born, like Little Dorrit, in a jail and made of its jail... a fortress and a mausoleum. It also discovered the strange secrets of all jails: that, even if the gates are never closed, the prisoners do not want to escape; that all escape ways take to the same cell; that nothing really exists beyond the jail walls; that every warden is but another prisoner in disguise. The contemporary self backs away from the world, against itself. It discovered the absurd.) (Hassan in Pütz, 1995: 40).

Neither the absurd nor the existential incoherence are accepted as final formulas. There are many versions of Sisyphus in the American prose, maybe of Camusian origin, victim-but-also-rebel-characters in search for solutions presupposing failure but also initiation, sufferance but also illumination, negation but also affirmation.

Alienation (an already cliché of cultural criticism), a result of personal identity issues and simultaneous search for a principle to reconcile the self with the world and individual existence with society, starts to make room for acceptance and adaptation, that state of the spirit emerging when the revolt is exhausted, when all of a sudden, the manner in which the individual confronts society is no longer certain, when there are no conventionalisms to limit freedom, when all theories seem to disappear.

The global mutations in the architecture of the contemporary world as well as the mentality of the postmodern being determine the cultural approach that today, more than ever, takes part in the social and communicational weaving of the world, models it and

becomes one of its most significant epiphenomena. Entering postmodernity involved a long and painful process for the writer trained in the spirit of the humanist culture and now witness of the destruction of the most fundamental premises of their role and place in the world. Restlessness and disorientation, experienced when facing an apparently indetermined, chaotic and unstable world, become more and more intense for an individual attached to some ideals and values for so long presumed eternal.

The restlessness, pressure and tension of having to live in a society characterized by an infinite and abstract complexity and a suffocating competitiveness between its individuals (as required by the performance rule), the resurrection of nationalisms, tribalisms of all kinds and fundamentalisms, all these describe, present and represent the anguished response of people and peoples facing a climax fear of the future.

The attitude of many contemporary writers (Vladimir Nabokov, William Burroughs, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan among others) is also modelled by the context of the various and varied developments in the new sciences of knowledge, where Heisenberg, Popper and Prigogine begin to become preoccupied by relations of indetermination, of far-from-equilibrium systems, by an irreversible time seen as a source of order, by the theory of catastrophies and of the fractals where thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Vattimo or Lyotard discover a new language adequate for the new image of the world and of the individual, where the modernist deconstruction of myths is followed by a deconstruction of this deconstruction. Phenomenologists like Husserl or Heidegger highlight the existence of a dynamic and conscientious self as a sole, central and unifying observer of experience. Wittgenstein's insistence on the importance of language ("the limits of my language are the limits of my world") echoes in the writings of many contemporary novelists (Barth and Pynchon even quote Wittgenstein). Existentialists like Camus or Sartre also imprinted postmodernist literature through their focus on individual freedom facing the void, hence the necessity to take over new roles and awaringly choose own values.

Robert Scholes, in *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979), sees in the definitive compromise of the idea of realism a real chance for the "new fabulators" who seem to feel that "[t]he positivistic basis for traditional realism had been eroded, and the reality, if it could be caught at all, would require a whole new set of fictional skills." (p. 4) The author believes that art does not mean a departure from reality, but an attempt to find much more subtle correspondences between *fictional reality* and *real fiction*.

Abandoning the classical concept of reality, the solution most postmodernist fabulators find is continuity with the artistic forms of the past, a past that modernism rejected and despised in its strive for novelty. In their vision, the great tradition should be recuperated with nostalgia and reinterpreted in a playful, ironic and parodic manner, and literary genres, such as the picaresque or the epistolary novels or the historical story should be revived. Barth proposes in novels such as *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy* or *End of the Road*, the use of creative imagination and re-use of myth in history and daily life [2].

Jacob Horner, for example, the protagonist in *End of the Road*, is marked by insecurity and, consequently, suffers the erasure of personal contours: "In a certain way, I'm Jacob Horner", he states in the first sentence of his confessions, but does not seem to make up his mind in what specific way. The novel forwards a potential solution for this difficult situation: he is approached by a weird physician claiming that a proper use of human imagination offers an infallible therapy for all those exposed to total or partial loss of the self (*mythotherapy*), based on the existentialist assertion that the individual is free not only to choose his own essence, but modify it as well.

The modernist use of the myth (with Yeats and Joyce, for example) as a source of identity(ies) is different in some recent novelists' writings: the 'eruptions' of imagination

in Barth's, Nabokov's, Vonnegut's or Brautigan's novels, to mention only some of them, lead to personal fantasies never paralleled before:

Acești scriitori folosesc rareori modele specifice sau 'mituri publice', așa cum făceau modernii, sub formă de cadru discret sau principii de organizare pentru întreaga operă (Ulysses al lui Joyce constituie cazul modern clasic). În schimb, creatorii recenți de mituri își pun personajele să inventeze ficțiuni complet noi... populate și populabile numai de către ele însele. (These writers rarely use specific models or 'public myths', as the modernists did, under the form of discrete frameworks or organizing principles for the entire work (Joyce's *Ulysses* is the classic example). Instead, recent myth-makers have their characters invent completely new fictions... inhabited and inhabitable only by themselves) (Pütz, op. cit.: 49).

In the same series, mention can be made of the personal myths of Jacob Horner or Ebenezer Cooke (John Barth, *End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*), Bokonon (Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*), Herbert Stencil (Thomas Pynchon, *V.*).

Contemporary supporters of fantasy, fable and myth (all presupposing the creative and synthesizing force of imagination), of disruption of the realist illusion, are aware of the doubtful authority of imagination and the precarious character of the constructs. Constructed fictions do not signify, but exist, and so do their characters, given their confusing and confused ontological status; with them, we can talk about existence rather than essence, an existence characterised by difference rather than identity: "Postmodern figures are always different, not just from other characters but also from their possible selves. Following in the wake of an existentialist philosophical tradition, many postmodern characterizations seem to argue that there is always a discrepancy between the character who acts and the character who watches himself / herself acting." (Docherty, 1991: 183)

The notion of *representation* itself being undermined, the character of the postmodernist novel can never be reduced to the status of an epistemologically accessible quality or a list of qualities, carrying Genette's *metalepsis*, an example of violation of the narrative levels, a disturber of these levels through the awareness of the structures he is part of.

Richard Brautigan's characters also try to evade and thus free themselves from the constraints exerted upon them. Withdrawing from the social reality, they start out in search of isolated places allowing for an alternative life in which to become themselves not functions of the world and others. In *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), the anonymous narrator starts on a journey as a naturalist, intending to free himself from a limited previous existence; in *The Abortion* (1971), the protagonist, autobiographic in some way, tries to isolate himself in a mysterious library in San Francisco, where his social identity is subordinated to other forms of personal identity that are to be found; in *In Watermelon Sugar*, the central character (again) isolates himself in the strange universe of death (iDeath), where the aggressive and super-dominant inclinations of the self are abandoned, and people's lives are made of an omnipresent substance (the sugar in the watermelon) that ensures a satisfying form of existence, free from alienation. Brautigan ironically rejects and exposes even the instruments and means by which the imaginary paradises were constructed. As Renato Poggioli says in *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (1975), *Atunci când este conștientă de sine, pastorală modernă devine ironică și ambiguă, deoarece începe ca imitație și sfârșește ca parodie... [p]rezintă o aspirație bucolică numai pentru a o nega*" (When it is self-conscious, the modern pastoral becomes ironical and ambiguous because it starts as imitation and ends as parody... it presents a bucolic aspiration only to deny it) (in Pütz, op. cit.: 142).

As already noticeable, the identity fables with Barth and Brautigan are centred on the correlation between the imagined projections and the acts of instatement of the self. By contrast, Thomas Pynchon's novels focus mainly on matters of historical imagination and discourse, subordinated to the self, and covering concepts such as *entropy*, *paranoia*,

history of narration. Here, the search for order and pattern expresses a reaction of the self to its condition in the universe of history. In *V.*, for example, there are two narrative directions covering the peregrinations of the two heroes: Benny Profane, in a neo-picaresque wandering in the present, and Herbert Stencil, in a picaresque, intellectual journey in the past. Profane becomes a sort of a modern anti-hero, archetypal, fighting with problems of an alienated existence in a overwhelmingly disorganized world, all this leaving him a human yo-yo, striving to lose himself by immersing in a conundrum of uncoordinated events. Unlike Stencil, Profane permanently tries to find or produce significant models of coherence allowing the discovery of identity. Pynchon parodies aspects of basic models in the detective or mystery novels, making of Stencil one of the amateur detectives typical of his prose; his task is to find V., a fundamentally indetermined character, a multitude of possible identities and places, who, in the end, proves to be what the pursuers previously presumed: a terribly defused and disconcerting concept (the same as postmodernity itself).

In Ronald Sukenick's and Vladimir Nabokov's writings, the identity fable takes on new configurations, the focus shifting from fictional characters to the character of fiction itself; this directly engages the reader in the act of decoding texts devoided of univocal identity. The issue of identity, this time materialized in identity games in which the triad *character-author/text-reader* is stimulated by an active collaboration without which the significations cannot be born.

Examples could go on and on, in an endless play of identification, differently approached or with different solutions from one writer to another, the more so once we open the gate to postcolonial novelists (K. Ishiguro, V. S. Naipaul, S. Rushdie etc.), or to representatives of feminist literature (Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys, Fay Weldon, Angela Carter etc.) and begin to understand that literary postmodernism, in its infinite variety, mirrors (however reluctant we might be of the term) this *zodie paradoxală sub care omul contemporan își trăiește viața ca pe un vis și pune în vis pasiunea existenței adevărate* (paradoxical age in which the contemporary human being lives his life as a dream and invests in this dream the passion of true existence). (Cărtărescu, 1999: 114).

In support of the idea that all judgements of who and what we are at present should remain relative, Andrew Sanders ends his *Scurtă istorie Oxford a literaturii engleze* (The Short Oxford History of English Literature) quoting Bob Dylan: *Haideți, scriitori și critici/ Profeți cu stiloul/ Deschideți bine ochii/ E o șansă unică/ Nu vă grăbiți să vorbiți/ Că roata se-nvârte încă/ Și nu se știe pe cine/ O să numească./ Cine pierde acum/ Mai încolo câștigă/ Că se schimbă vremurile* (Come writers and critics/ Who profesize with your pen/ And keep your eyes wide/ The chance won't come again/ And don't speak too soon/ For the wheel's still in spin/ And there's no tellin' who/ That it's namin'./ For the loser now/ Will be later to win/ For the times they are a-changin'.) (Dylan in Sanders, 1997: 622).

Notes

[1] In 1953, Ralph Ellison reminded us of Menelaos's advice when following Proteus: "to grasp the eternal shapeshifter firmly and never let go of him unless he turned into the one form that represented himself" (in Pütz, 1997: 211).

[2] It is an approach to the myth aware of its artificiality, incomplete character, a partial numbness in the face of reality. Mythotherapy tries to force the entire world into the self and the self into the entire world, to subordinate everything that exists in this world to the drama of the tearing apart of the self. This manner of treating the myth that Toma (2004), quoting Wasson, calls *mythoplastic art*, ironically returns over itself and acts towards the knowledge of the mysterious difference between the self and the other, between artifice and reality.

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