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MONICA BOTTEZ

**MOTLEY LANDSCAPES:  
STUDIES IN POST-WAR  
AMERICAN FICTION**

Bucharest University Press  
-1997-



*To my Parents*

**This book was made possible by a six-month Fulbright research grant at Princeton in 1992.**

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## FOREWORD

*Monica Bottez's book **Motley Landscapes: Studies in Post-War American Fiction** represents one of the first important Romanian contributions to the exegesis of contemporary American literature, and gives a very good opportunity to the readers in our country, to literary critics and to students to get familiar with the most recent trends and developments of novel-writing in The New World. Based on a rich up-to-date critical bibliography, the author's approach is illuminatingly modern and subtly original. The great variety of authors she studies, as well as the impressive number of books commented upon are structured thematically, strategy which offers the reader a clear, coherent perspective that opens both panoramically and analytically on this topic.*

*The book addresses the students who explore the evolution of American fiction after the Second World War, and also to post-graduate students who attend courses and work on MA papers in American Studies. At the same time, Monica Bottez's study provides a very useful material for college teachers of English, for young philologists who work on their PhD. dissertations devoted to this field, as well as to literary critics and university staff interested in twentieth century Anglo-American culture.*

*In the first four chapters: **The Realist Tradition and the Liberal Imagination, The Postmodernist Explosion, The Postmodernist Revolution and Realism Cum Experimentalism**, the author shows in a remarkably synthetical approach the alternation of opposite tendencies in the process of fiction writing in America, her main aim being to provide both a historical, political and social*

background and cultural context that have made possible and motivated such trends. Thus, the novelists are grouped according to ethnic, ideological and aesthetic criteria, their works being perceived as reactions to the challenges of the American shifting policy and also as responses, within the larger frame of a cultural dialogue, to late twentieth century European trends in novel writing and in literary theories of this genre.

In the next eight chapters: *The Humanist Tradition, Naturalism, Dark Humour, and Beyond, Moral Fiction, The Schizoid Pattern, Minimalist Fiction, Maximalist Fiction, Realism Cum Magic and Black Voices and The Paranoid Pattern*, Monica Bottez proceeds to analyse in turn individual authors such as Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, John Gardner, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Raymond Carver, Tony Morrison, Alice Walker and Thomas Pynchon. Her interest in exploring the field of the American novel with these writers is twofold: on the one hand, Monica Bottez pays attention to the moral dimension of the artist, whose works may point to quests for values lost, put to doubt or betrayed, and in this respect she seeks to underline the rhythmical rise and fall of humanistic drives in contemporary fiction; on the other hand, she concentrates on style, narrative technique and aesthetic vision, discovering a parallel rhythm in the alternation of minimalist and maximalist literary formulas, objective and self-reflective presentations, lyrical and ironical modes, realistic and surrealist patterns, etc.

Taking into account this twofold perspective, it seems to me that Monica Bottez's book offers a balanced, trustworthy interpretation, in her serious attempt to trace the main elements of continuity and discontinuity in the ethics and in the aesthetics of the late twentieth century American novel.

**Monica Săulescu**

## I. THE REALIST TRADITION AND THE LIBERAL IMAGINATION (1945 - 1960)

After World War II America took the leadership of the Western states as regards international political strategy, the main factor determining the atmosphere of the times being the Cold War with the Soviet Union and the Eastern countries bloc, that is the conflict between capitalism/liberalism and communism/totalitarianism from which derived the Korean War (1950-1953), the Cuban Crisis(1960), the Vietnam War (1961-1973).She took the leadership in the economic field too, the development of the affluent post industrial society having a remarkable social impact.

In the field of literature and literary criticism it took America some time to do so but she did take the leadership beginning with the postmodern explosion in the '60s. The immediate period after World War II displays an initial continuity of the stylistic modes prevailing during the interwar period: traditional realism, naturalistic social protest and the symbolic poetic realism of modernism, the most influential philosophic trend being that of French existentialism (Sartre, Camus).

A direct effect of the war was that overt ideology in the arts (be it of a left or right orientation) came to be generally discredited. Tony Hilfer considers the typical American literary ideology to be individualism and the attitude towards politics to be ambivalent, even evasive<sup>1</sup>. It is true that the 1930s with the Great Depression witnessed

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Hilfer: *American Fiction Since 1940*, Longman, London and New York, 1992. p. 2.

a powerful commitment of numerous writers to social and political issues and in 1932 such writers as Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, Theodore Dreiser gave a declaration of support for the Communist Party. Then disenchantment and disinvolvement followed after Stalin's purges of 1935-1937 and Stalin's pact with Hitler in 1939. Even the African American writers such as Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright were finally repelled when the Party told them to suspend their struggle for racial equality and serve in the segregated American army which was the ally of the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, Richard Wright and five other writers formally attracted to communism officially rejected it in their collection of essays *The God that Failed*.

The similarity between Nazi and communist totalitarianism was finally perceived and Hannah Arendt revealed it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

The 1950 book *The Authoritarian Personality* which was the result of a research project led by T.W. Adorno warned Americans against their own authoritarian tendencies which were seen as inherent in a certain psychological type which was rigid in his thought, repressed intuition and spontaneity and was intolerant of differences. Consequently radicalism was branded as too akin to the political attitude it militated against and nonconformism was considered the best way of counter-acting the authoritarian type.

A renewed impulse towards the mimetic mode and towards a new humanism could be noticed in most European countries that had been directly involved in the war, particularly in France (existential realism), Germany (Gruppe 47), Italy (neorealism) and in Britain, out of a need to record the major social changes and the state of poverty people had to suffer. Moreover after the fascist repression of freedom in the arts, and of expression in general, intellectuals had a lot to say in *all earnestness*. George Orwell warned his contemporaries of the prospect of a grim totalitarian future which represented a frightening danger to the liberal realist novel. Although modernism had promoted the Joycean notion that modern man was trying to awake from the nightmare of history and had led to the New Critical assumption that

the realm of art existed beyond any specific political and social factors, although modernism had introduced the metafictional theme emphasizing metaphor, artifice and parody and had attacked the realist tradition as a mere set of conventions, the realistic vein had not disappeared in the interwar period but had received a new, even if somewhat simplistic, impetus in the 1930s. Erich Auerbach put a very strong case for the European impulse towards the representational in his outstanding book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought* (1946) underlining the idea that even all literature that professes itself non-realistic or even antirealistic cannot help but reflect elements of reality. From a technical point of view realistic fiction presupposes "chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of characterization and above all, the ultimate concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description".<sup>2</sup>

Realism, social and "with intense moral preoccupation"<sup>3</sup>, is also seen by F.R. Leavis as the fundamental tenet of the English novel in *The Great Tradition* (1948), an idea also vindicated by Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950). Trilling regards interest in the real, in the society of the time, in its manners and morals, as the motive power behind the creative impulse of the novelist for whom the social is also indicative of the individual's soul. It is interesting that, however, Trilling first advances an idea later advocated by Richard Chase in his remarkable book *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) and Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in American Novel* (1960), namely that the American writer has been more fascinated by man's dreams, aspirations and mental projections, preferring therefore the romance which uses reality in an illustrative way<sup>4</sup>. Even if this view seems too absolutist now, it does draw the literary students' attention to the strong romantic vein in the American imagination, which is also frequently associated with the Gothic in the novel.

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Sukenick: "The Death of the Novel" in *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, Dial Press, New York, 1969, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> F.R. Leavis: *The Great Tradition*, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> R. Wellek and Warren: *The Theory of Literature*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1956, p. 213.

After the war some novelists of the interwar period continued to write. If F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein had died in quick succession (the first two in 1940 and the others respectively in 1941 and 1945), John Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Hemingway and Faulkner produced new works which did not however attain the standards of their previous best writings, although the last three were awarded Nobel Prizes. Thus Dos Passos's *Mid Century* (1961) was far below *USA*, Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (1947) and *East of Eden* (1952) did not compare with *The Grapes of Wrath*, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* was considered to be too sentimental by many critics and Faulkner's *The Town* (1947) and *The Mansion* (1960) just completed the late trilogy about the Yawknatawpha county begun with *The Hamlet* in 1941.

These writers had developed the potentials of naturalism towards a modernist, experimental style that was appropriate to the 20th century American experience. But now their writing seemed somehow "detached from the new post-war world"<sup>5</sup> with its memory of historical disaster, of thwarted destiny, of impending nuclear catastrophe, in an accumulating consumerist society changed by growing materialism and technological progress.

The affluent society of the late '40s and the '50s was conservative in outlook, with the famous campaign of Senator Joseph McCarthy. It was an age of growing antiintellectualism in spite of the fact that the American intelligensia was expected to carry international conviction and win prestige. The critical comments of the time (John Aldridge: *After the Lost Generation*, 1951; Malcolm Cowley: *The Literary Situation*, 1954) record the sense that the new post-war American novel lacked innovative energy as it was produced by an age of moral and artistic confusion where unexciting conformism prevailed. Sociologists like David Riesman (in his eye-opening book *The Lonely Crowd*, 1953) and William Whyte in *The Organization Man*, 1955) similarly describe the anonymity and conventionality of a contemporary mass man grown

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Bradbury: "Neorealist Fiction" in Emory Elliot, (gen. ed.), *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 1131.

indifferent and passive. Moreover C.Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* (1956) describes how the unification of power at the top has a mystifying effect on the individual. Hence the new generation of writers: Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Jerome David Salinger, Norman Mailer, Herbert Gold seem to voice this disorientation.

When trying to take in their contemporary literary landscape critics got different, even opposite impressions. Thus Edmund Fuller in *Man in Modern Fiction* (1958) sees images of social and philosophical alienation as prevailing in a fictional production in which the individual's personality is crushed and his uniqueness negated by a hostile environment. Marcus Klein in his book *After Alienation* (1964) considers that the post-war trend in American fiction was to transcend the modernist dark image of the alienated individual, an opinion corroborated by Nathan Scott who emphasizes the yearning to overcome despair and violence through moral energy to be discerned in the works of Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow and Lionel Trilling, the *Three American Novelists* (1973) that he regards as representative of the respective period. All these studies register the weighty influence of French existentialism with its anxiety, sense of nihilism and aspiration for moral recovery, but they differ in what aspect they sense as dominant, a difference that seems only natural considering the rich variety of the new writers.

Most of the writers we have mentioned professed the spirit of the time to be that of the "new liberalism" so aptly described in Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Centre* (1949), a realistic view that combined political and historical scepticism with a longing for certainties, with a bitter taste of recent history and with a thirst for a problematic recovery.

Lionel Trilling had great faith in the "liberal imagination", and the critical sense it engendered. Trilling believed in the existence of the writer's opposing self, that part of him which is romantically opposed to the culture around but, because of its larger liberal humanism, has to reach a compromise with it. He set a great store by the novel as it could accommodate a double sense of life, a sense that could not rely on any

political or ideological certainty. Trilling had faith in the capacity of the novelist to embody a sense of life, of the reality around in all its complex contingency, using what he called moral realism.

We see therefore that the American fiction of the late '40s and the '50s gives a complex picture of tensions between opposed attitudes: between conformism and non-conformism, alienation and adjustment, a lonely self and a social system based on urban masses and an isolated individual comically trying to understand his existential problems in the context of historical anarchy. The new realism that had to contain all these tensions was different from the previous tradition. It could not be the prescriptive realism of the late 19th century or the realism of manners and morals of Henry James. It was not the naturalist tradition of Crane, Dreiser and Steinbeck with its grim determinism nor the political realism of such writers of the 1930s as Michael Gold or James Farrell. It was a moral realism that tried to maintain a humanistic stance when confronted with totalitarian settings and which grasped an essential tragic sense of life from a reality whose surface seemed buoyant with optimistic prosperity. It was a realism perpetually baffled by the reality it reflected, a reality which Philip Roth described as stupefying, sickening, infuriating and outdoing literary talents in his essay entitled "Writing American Fiction" (1961). We can therefore say that the newly affirmed writers sometimes called the "third generation" were generally strongly influenced by French existentialism with absurdist overtones and a humanism that seemed to be trying hard to recover after a totalitarian span. They were producing a type of realism that was endeavouring to assess a historical situation, whereas the modernist period had been concerned with archetypes and mythical figures.

Malcolm Bradbury deems that the fiction written in America in the post-war years was in many ways far more "alienated" than that written in Europe. If humanism, moralism and an attendant realism seemed everywhere to be returning to the spirit of fiction, then American fiction was especially preoccupied with human existence fighting for its selfhood in an era of modern mass and power, and for its endeavour to distil some form of connectedness and civility from

the pressures of ideology, historicism and the sense of human victimization in a time tainted by totalitarian forces<sup>6</sup>.

The American novel that emerged after 1945 developed cultural diversity. It strengthened ethnic and regional traditions in addition to the former WASP mainstream:

1 *The tradition of Jewish-American fiction* that had grown with Abraham Cahan, Michael Gold and Henry Roth was further developed by Saul Bellow, Lionel Trilling, Norman Mailer, Cynthia Ozick, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Philip Roth, J.D. Salinger and Joseph Heller.

2 *The tradition of black fiction* that had developed with Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Zora Neal Hurston and Richard Wright was taken further by Ralph Ellison, Anne Petry and James Baldwin.

3 *The tradition of Southern fiction* (the "Southern Renaissance") that had been developed by William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Ellen Glasgow, Allen Tate, Katherine Anne Porter, Willa Cather grew on with Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, William Styron, Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy.

1 If there was a clear anti-Semitism in the 1920's which was reflected in the attitudes of Eliot, Cummings, Fitzgerald or Hemingway, after the war the tragedy of the holocaust produced the reaction of a philo-Semitism. The Nazi denial of humanity to Jews led to the redefinition of the Jew as universal Man.

Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Norman Mailer are among the most representative names for this period, the 1950s being often termed as "the Jewish decade". The idea of the time was that the heart's true home was probably the South, but the natural voice of the heart was the Jew, an idea still put forth by a Southern writer in 1972:

"Insofar as the 20th century novel in this country has consisted of the South and the Jews (...), it has been the product of two profoundly similar cultures - God and family-centred (...), gifted with unashamed feeling and eloquence, supported by ancient traditions of sorrow and the promise of justice, a comic vision as ultimate triumph"<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bradbury: "Neorealist Fiction" in *Op. cit.*, p. 1135.

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds Price: *A Common Room: Essays 1954-1987*, New York, 1988, p. 169.

But if Bellow, Malamud, Ozick and Roth deal with a Jewish-American identity and themes, Mailer, Salinger and Heller do not use Jewish protagonists or topics.

Bellow's works have absorbed the anguished traditions of European modernism and existentialism evidencing the heritage of Dostocvsky, Conrad, Kafka, Sartre and Camus. His first novel *Dangling Man* (1944) fairly captures the new spirit of the age, the loss of faith in left-wing attitudes and of political as well as moral certainties. The name of the protagonist, Joseph, has a Kafkaesque ring. He is an underground man who keeps a diary that records his withdrawal from a world where old values and commitments are collapsing and also his inner confusion and impossibility to make sense of the world. He feels his freedom as a burden and when, finally, his army papers come for the induction which he has been long waiting for, his shout "Long live regimentation!" makes for a rather ambiguous ending.

Bellow's second novel, *The Victim* (1947), introduces a recurrent theme in his work: the need to be a "Mensch" (a man preserving his humanity, his ethical responsibility and pursuit of ideals) in a ruthless and victimizing world. Against the background of a hot naturalistic New York with its competitive jungle, Asa Lewenthal, a Jew, is able to discover that his Gentile oppressor, Albee, is also a victim in his turn. Lewenthal is able to shoulder human responsibility, whereas other characters try to avoid it, afraid of having the liberty of free choice. In *The Adventures of Augie March*, (1953) the title hero, a sort of Adam in the American romance tradition, refuses fixated social identity and has a sense of moral identity: "I couldn't just order myself to become one of those people who do go out before the rest, who stand and intercept the big social ray or collect and concentrate it like burning glass, who glow and dazzle and make bursts of fire. It wasn't what I was meant to be".<sup>8</sup> The pressure of society is also hard, even suffocating in *Seize the Day* (1956) where the

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<sup>8</sup> Saul Bellow: *The Adventures of Augie March*. Fawcett Crest, New York, 1965, p. 324.

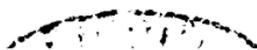
protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, feels as if he is drowning. In a dark and distressing novel only enlivened by its remarkable humour, Bellow embodies authentical suffering and the needs of the heart suppressed by a cynical and crassly materialistic society. Bellow's humanistic message is more affirmative in *Henderson, the Rain King* (1959), where the title hero determines to help his fellow beings with whom he feels a spiritual bond, in spite of the grim necessitarian surrounding world. *Herzog* (1964), Bellow's most popular embodiment of the "Mensch", is another quester for spiritual meaning. His imaginary letters to outstanding thinkers, living or dead, a fresh narrative device, set him off as the modern intellectual, alienated from the contemporary society. All his subsequent novels, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), *The Dean's December* (1982), *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) explore the problems and spiritual crisis of contemporary American culture from a humanistic stand point, an achievement for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize (1976). His highly idealistic heroes do battle with a cynical materialistic society, frequently with great comic effects that sometimes verge on the pathetic. In the Jewish tradition, Bellow writes a novel of moral dimension and after *Seize the Day*, a more religious vocabulary is substituted for that of psychological analysis. Bellow accurately seems to diagnose his contemporary society, which he sees as no longer repressive of sex but of spirituality:

"Probably the place left vacant by the movement of the Freudian unconscious upward has been occupied by religion. It is certainly hard to see how modern man could survive on what he gets now from his conscious life - especially now that there is a kind of veto against impermissible thoughts, the most impermissible being the notion that man might have a spiritual life he's not conscious of".<sup>9</sup>

Bernard Malamud too dealt with the theme of "Menschlichkeit" first in the modernist mythical mode of *The Natural* (1952), then in the mode of moral realism in *The Assistant* (1957), *A New Life* (1961), *The*

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<sup>9</sup> D. J. R. Bruckner: "A Candid Talk With Saul Bellow", *The New York Times Magazine*, 15 April 1984, p. 62



*Fixer* (1966), *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969), *The Tenants* (1971) and *Dubin's Lives* (1979), modulating into the allegorical mode of *God's Grace* (1982), a grimmer book in the Judaic mystic tradition placed in a post nuclear third World-War future.

The renewed faith in the mimetic categories of character, plot and setting, with narrative voice and artifice kept deliberately unobtrusive for the creation of the realist illusion is well illustrated by Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Road* (1947) which reads as a convincing celebration of the exploratory power of the liberal imagination. The main character, John Laskell, an intellectual strongly attracted to communism, is suddenly confronted with severe illness in his middle age. After his recovery, his friends try to win him back to commitment, to political struggle against Capitalism, to faith in Communism as a necessary historical process. But in his confrontation with mortality Laskell has come to realize that his friends only deal in abstractions, ignoring the personal nature of suffering and pain and overlooking the moral contemplation of being, which leads to the liberal acceptance of the pluralism and complexity of life, of its intractable shapelessness. The novel also expresses a new awareness of the ambiguous nature of man that was revealed by the death camps.

The struggle between traditional Jewish ethics and the desire for personal freedom shapes much of Philip Roth's early, realist, fiction (*Good Bye, Columbus*, 1959; *Letting Go*, 1962; *When She Was Good*, 1967) mirroring a reaction against the heavy moral seriousness of the Jewish fiction of the 1950s. This culminated in *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), the book that caused a great scandal because, influenced by the postmodernist black humour of the 1960s, it satirically exposed the domineering son-suffocating Jewish mother. Alexander Portnoy fulfils his mother's social ambitions, but is consequently condemned to the sexual prison of masturbation. His story, which ends on a scream, cannot achieve form, it is a mere confession told to his analyst, dr. Spielvogel.

After this breakthrough, Philip Roth proved a good deal of postmodern versatility with form and styles. In *Our Gang* (1971) he produced a political satire. In *The Breast* (1972) - a fantasy of the

Gogolian (and Kafkaesque) metamorphosis of a Jewish professor who turns into a huge female breast - Roth expresses the conflict between the Jew's desire for sexual permissiveness and his repression and feeling of guilt. The same narcissistic character reappears in *The Professor of Desire* (1977), where he is carried to Prague, on the tracks of Kafka. He meets Kafka's whore, a sort of "Mantissa" - the ambiguous muse that reveals the sexual prompts of postmodern intricate art. Another literary *alter ego* is Nathan Zuckerman, the writer that everybody blames for smearing Jewish experience and who appears in *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Counterlife* (1987) and *The Facts* (1988).

In *The Counterlife* Zuckerman dies but then is reborn to account for his Jewish responsibilities and in *The Facts* he finally displaces his creator. Roth is adept at the great postmodernist play between fact and fiction, autobiography and fantasy, ambiguity and reflection, juxtaposing the American heritage and that of international Jewish fiction. He aims, as he has confessed himself, at breaking personal inhibitions, at freeing identity by pulverizing fixed images of self and gender, a theme remarkably embodied in his 1991 novel *Deception*, the enigmatic conversational exchanges between a man and a woman. Philip Roth's black humour can be seen echoed in the demonic creations of Stanley Elkin, and his concern with the ambiguous border between history and fiction has had likely influence on E. L. Doctorow.

2. The radicalism of the 1930s had an impact on the black novel of the early 1940s, where Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) was a landmark. But with the shift in ideology and literary convention that we have already mentioned to have taken place in the wake of World War II, in the new works of Ralph Ellison, young James Baldwin, Ann Petry and the mature Wright we can see, as Tony Hilfer subtly remarked "how politics becomes solipsized and solipsism becomes politicized".<sup>10</sup> In these writers we witness how the absence of community leads to breakdown of communication. The world of their novels is made up of solipsistic sensibilities divided by class, race and gender.

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<sup>10</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

It was only from the 1970s on that a faith in the possibility of Afro-American community was renewed as a consequence of the Civil Rights Movement on the political plane and the reassertion of traditional realism in the literary field. The influence of existentialism can be seen in the title of Richard Wright's novel of the 1950s *The Outsider* which, together with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Anne Petry's neglected novel *The Street* (1945), gives a sense of human exile and displacement, of loneliness, of hunger after transcending values that often lands in despair.

It is noteworthy that *Invisible Man* was ranked in 1978 as the most important American novel since World War II<sup>11</sup>. As a writer disenchanted with communism, Ellison is impressively probing the philosophical valences of Marxism, Existentialism, Freudianism and Emersonianism; he explores various political concepts such as revolt and acceptance, black nationalism and communist overthrow, in a literary discourse that is far from overt social protest. The disembodied voice of the nameless narrator-protagonist recalls the narrative speech of *Huckleberry Finn* and Melville's *The Confidence Man* and has a disturbing hypnotic Dostoevskian ring in the Epilogue: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you"<sup>12</sup>.

The book is made up of episodes that demystify in turn all the institutions of a counterfeit society: the university, the social system (emblematically embodied in Liberty Paints, the factory that produces Optic White, the paint for national monuments), the Communist Party caricatured in *The Brotherhood*.

Likewise, each character is an allegorical embodiment of a certain ideological stand or alternative philosophy, playing against each other the psychological conception of the self as stable essence and the self as a sum of played roles.

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<sup>11</sup> Melvin J. Friedman: 'To "Make It New": The American Novel Since 1945', *Woodrow Wilson Quarterly* 2, 1978, p. 136, *Lolita* came second, *Catch 22* third, and then *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Herzog*, *All the King's Men*, *The Naked and the Dead* and *An American Dream*.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Ellison: *Invisible Man*, Dell, New York, 1972, p. 325.

Thus Ras the Destroyer embodies black nationalism which, although finally rejected by the narrator, is evidently tempting having a strong emotional appeal.

B.P. Rinehart is a more ambiguous figure as the narrator discovers that Rinehart's identity varies with the setting where he turns up, thus mocking fixed positions, social roles:

"Still could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both Rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true and I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie"<sup>13</sup>.

Rinehart is the man who most captures the protagonist's imagination and sense, the sort of man he actually tries to imitate. The initials stand for Bliss Proteus as Ellison pointed out<sup>14</sup> thus turning Reinhart into a model protean self. In the Epilogue, Reinhart is identified with Possibility, which is obviously a philosophical keyword for Ellison. But as his attempt to imitate Reinhart, to play a player of roles, has proved disastrous for the protagonist, he ends by questioning even this role, turning into the supreme ironist of everything and every part, of every identity.

3. The Southern writers also evoked a disturbing sense of the world as a place of pain and evil. In their fiction we also find a critique of the social system but not from the radical Marxist perspective of the 1930s, but on the contrary, from a traditional conservative one. Their fiction, too, recorded the shifting of the scene of conflict from the social to the individual plane. A work of historical resonance precisely because it marked the turn of the novel from politics and history to psychology

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 235.

<sup>14</sup> R. Ellison: *Shadow and Act*, New York, 1964, p. 71.

and even psychopathology as an explanation of the actual reality was Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* (1940), a remarkable achievement of poetic realism.

The Catholic Catherine Anne Porter had explored the theme of family as well as the violence and disfunction of the family, which was also Faulkner's in several of his novels, particularly in *The Sound and The Fury* and *Absalom! Absalom!* The same area, but from a less authoritarian moral stand was the area investigated by Eudora Welty. In such novels as *Delta Wedding* (1946) and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) she draws a convincing picture of the vulgarity and meanness of people lacking community life and community standards.

The themes of Flannery O'Connor stem from her Catholic vision but her idiom is specifically Southern. She characterized her fiction as "anagogical" that is an allegorical presentation of "the Divine Life and our participation in it"<sup>15</sup>. O'Connor depicts a world of violence, sometimes of an appealing nihilism and materialism. The most memorable product is perhaps the Misfit, the cruel existentialist killer from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (the title story of the volume that appeared in 1952) whose speech is strongly reminiscent of the thought of Sartre and Camus (who had just been translated and published), with echoes from Swift and Freud. Her novels *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) create a world singularly devoid of religious charity and secular humanism, the protagonists committing unpunished and unrepented murders as they seek personal salvation. They belong to and embody a world of total nihilism. The shade of Faulkner grows long over the work of William Styron, whose most remarkable novels are *Lie Down In Darkness* (1951) and the historical recreation of the slave rebellion of 1831 in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). All the fiction mentioned above, to which we could add Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), *Breakfast At Tiffany's* (1958) and the terrible *In Cold Blood* (1966), James Purdy's *Malcolm* (1959), *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964)

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<sup>15</sup> Fl. O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, New York, 1969, p. 72.

and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961)<sup>16</sup>, is touched with a tragic sense of life, reflects notions of human disablement, displacement and senseless violence. There is no trace of pastoral myth, the regional small town or the rural setting witnesses the same disquieting symptoms of American culture as the city or urban area. On the contrary, the works of McCullers, Welty and O'Connor are marked by a Gothic revival in their vision of human loneliness, decadence and evil.

The picture given by the realist fiction of the 1940s and 1950s was of a world in tragic disarray. The naturalist mode was revived to deal with the horrors of the war in such novels as Gore Vidal's *Williwaw* (1946), John Home Burns' *The Gallery* (1947), Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* (1948), Norman Mailer's *The Naked And The Dead* (1948), James Gould Cozzens' *Guard of Honor* (1948), John Hawkes' *The Cannibal* (1949), Herman Wouk's *The Cane Mutiny* (1951), James Jones' *From Here to Eternity* (1951).

The dark atmosphere of *The Naked and The Dead* derives from the world of "regimentation" it describes, where the liberal tradition and moral certainties can no longer survive. The physical jungle of *The Naked* becomes then the jungle of the post-war American city with its disorder and violence in Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947), Nelson Algren's *The Man With a Golden Arm* (1949), Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* (1951), Chandler Brossard's *Who Walk In Darkness* (1952). The nightmarish pictures these books offer reflect the other side of the affluent society of the 1950s with alienated figures and appalling instances of poverty.

Many critics would consider J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher In The Rye* (1951) the strongest and most typical novel of the 1950s, capturing as it were the mood of the times as reflected in the consciousness of the sensitive and thoughtful Holden Caulfield, the middle class adolescent expelled from his prep-school and spending a few days in New York on his own (in order to put off giving the bad

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that not all South-born writers who place their novels in Southern settings are "Southern writers" and Percy and Capote rejected the label.

news to his family before Christmas) comes into contact with a world of adults that only try to cheat him or to take advantage of his innocence. Morally superior to a "phony" world, Holden cannot accept its hypocrisy and corruption and takes refuge into mental illness. But his story probably given in its unique vernacular idiom to the hospital therapist is therapeutic for the whole American society of that time, lyrically articulating not only a religion of innocence, but one of the human decencies that are "too damn nice" to be lost.

Without being as popular as *The Catcher*, Salinger's subsequent works *Nine Stories* (1953), *Franny and Zooey* (1961) and *Raise High The Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour- An Introduction* (1963) continue his quest after the truth of vision embodied in the spiritual yearnings and exercises derived from Zen Buddhism of the members of the Glass family, but the strain of trying to grasp and attain absolute truth has led the author into silence.

An outstanding chronicler of the post-war era is John Updike, particularly owing to his Rabbit Tetralogy: *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit At Rest* (1990). Although Harold Bloom regards him as "a minor novelist with a major style"<sup>17</sup>, his singular achievement is that he is not a moralist but dramatizes moral dilemmas with a "remarkably detached, rather elegantly ego-less ability to glance without judgement on all sides of a melodramatic event"<sup>18</sup>.

Updike meant his character's nickname as emblematic of one possible attitude to life: the rabbit's way of skilfully eschewing setbacks, a way characterized by spontaneity, by lack of any profound thinking and by anxiety (hence the protagonist's name: Harry *Angstrom*) whereas the counterpart of his attitude is the horse's way of confronting life, accepting the harness and working to his last breath, an attitude that underlies *The Centaur* (1963), a novel combining myth with autobiography.

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<sup>17</sup> Harold Bloom: "Introduction" in Bloom (ed.), *John Updike: Modern Critical Views*, New York, 1987, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Joyce Carol Oates: "Updike's American Comedies" in Bloom. (ed ), *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

Set against the recognizable Eisenhower years, the first volume of the cycle recounts Rabbit's repeated urge to leave his wife and flee. Tony Tanner seems justified to grasp the underlying romance pattern of male flight from social conditioning and to read Angstrom as one of many Huck Finns wanting to quit society and avoid growing up, but with no "territory" to light out to<sup>19</sup>. Jet, Updike's merit is to make the situation problematic, to frame a moral debate with the reader. The next two volumes are interesting as social history.

The second volume records the troubled atmosphere of the 1960s with the civil rights movement and the hippie unrest, and the third the economic success of the Reagan decade. But the 4th volume account of Rabbit's death has a vibrant dramatic quality. Harry cannot help his addiction to junk food and we see him literally eating himself to death. As Tony Hilfer points out, the novel indicts the excesses of American consumer culture making Angstrom "a walking ecological disaster"<sup>20</sup>, and gives a grim picture of a terminally entropic maintenance world, a sort of machine that keeps repeating the same movement until it wears down and gives out.

Like *Rogers's Version* (1986), a sort of modern reworking of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Rabbit at Rest* also has theological queries that have the same grim ring: "We're all trash really. Without God to lift us up and make us into angels we're all trash".<sup>21</sup>

In *Roger's Version* as well as *Couples* (1968) and *Too Far to Go* (1979) Updike proves to be a fine analyst of marital troubles and divorces. Updike is considered a brilliant stylist and his thematic range is quite wide also embodying a dystopian future in *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), the father-son, mentor-pupil relationship with mythical parallels in *The Centaur* (1963); *Bech: A Book* (1969) *Bech is Back* (1982) are imitation Jewish novels and *The Coup* (1978), a mock postmodernist novel set in Kush, an imaginary African state that ridicules American consumerist philosophy, marxist rhetoric and avant-garde literary techniques.

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<sup>19</sup> Tony Tanner: *City of Words*, Jonathan Cape Paperback, London, 1970, p. 281

<sup>20</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op. cit.*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>21</sup> John Updike: *Rabbit at Rest*. Fawcett Crest, New York, 1990, p. 2.

A standard-bearer of the realist creed is the *New Yorker* school of reported manners where the name of John Cheever stands in firm relief. His pictures of the provincial old fishing town of St. Botolphs, Mass, in *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957) and *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964) and of suburb life in *Bullet Park* (1969) are based on a convincing surface realism but they also contain recurrent psychological motifs that sometimes become obsessive: macho aggressiveness and female malevolence ( a misogynistic attitude later explained by his bisexuality), the demonic impulse that lies beneath the conventional appearance of things. It is interesting to remark that just as John Updike modulated his realistic mode into the mythical dimension of *The Centaur* and the imaginary setting of *The Coup*, John Cheever also evolved towards the uncanny and the demonic in his *Falconer* (1977) becoming more experimental in form too.<sup>22</sup> He builds *The Wapshot Scandal* around nonsequitur in order to suggest the illogical structure of the world.

Mary McCarthy's name is also associated with the *New Yorker* realist school of fiction. Her novels beginning with *The Company She Keeps* (1942) and the later more famous *The Group* (1963) are narrated in a cold ironical reportorial tone, taking pioneer exploratory pictures of women's experiences. *The Group* records the lives of eight Vassar girls from the class of 1933, opening with Kay's wedding in 1933 and ending with her funeral in 1940.

The book perfectly illustrates the later feminist arguments in the account it gives of the female characters' confrontation with prevailing social ideals and we can say that it achieves what the author had set out to do: "No male consciousness is present in the book: through these eight points of view, all feminine, all consciously enlightened, are refracted, as if from a series of pretty prisms, all the novel ideas of the period concerning sex, politics, economics, architecture, city-planning, house-keeping, child-bearing, interior decoration and art. It is a crazy quilt of clichés, platitudes, and *idées reçues*. Yet the book is not meant

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<sup>22</sup> George Plimpton: "John Cheever" in *Writers at Work*, Fifth Series, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 117

to be a joke or even a satire, exactly, but a true history of the times despite the angle or angles of distortion".<sup>23</sup>

The reportorial stand was combined with attitudes and devices borrowed from fiction and other media in the style called *New Journalism*, practiced by such writers as Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, which made an early contribution to the blurring of the border line between fact and fiction, to that breakdown of the established literary genres and their merging into new hybrid forms that was characteristic of the postmodern "revolution". Tom Wolfe claimed that the novel was irrelevant to the complexity of contemporary experiences but that journalism could take over all its sensitivities and techniques. "New Journalism" could thus displace "boring" novels as the imaginative record of the times, capturing fiction's methods - scene by scene construction, imaginative recording of dialogue, interiorization of view point, detailed explication of social mores, concern with style- to record current culture. As Malcom Bradbury underlines, Wolfe and other "New Journalists" like Hunter Thomson, Joan Didion and Seymour Krim stressed the subjective in this novel technique and their social and political research"<sup>24</sup>.

This style gained a certain public acclamation when used by Norman Mailer for conveying information, his opinions and attitudes, particularly in *Armies of the Night* (1968)<sup>25</sup>. At other times its novelty was denied as happened when Truman Capote maintained that with *In Cold Blood* (1966) he had invented a new form "the non-fiction novel". Many critics regarded this claim as a mere example of "egregious self-promotion"<sup>26</sup>. But the importance of this type of social

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Carol Gelderman: *Mary McCarthy: A Life*, New York, 1988, p. 253

<sup>24</sup> Malcolm Bradbury: *The Modern American Novel*, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 202-3.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Mailer subtitled this novel/non-novel relating the march on the Pentagon of 1968 "History as a Novel, the Novel as History", enhancing the paradox of literary referentiality in all forms.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Molesworth: "Culture, Power and Society" in Emory Elliot (gen. ed.): *Op. cit.*, p. 1032

investigation was evident when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two *Washington Post* journalists explored the conspirational mystery surrounding the Watergate break-in in *All the President's Men* (1976) and forced President Nixon to resign.

As we have seen the surface optimism and buoyancy of American culture in the 1950s was counterbalanced by a sense of anxiety, alienation and incomprehension of the reality that had such extremes that the realist convention, intimately related to the certainties and optimism of empiricism and Western rationalism, came to be felt an inappropriate tool.

There could be grasped an antirealist undercurrent present in the recurrence of the Gothic romance, a sense of the absurd and metafictional devices meant to destroy the realist illusion. Thus John Hawkes' *The Cannibal* (1949) was a Gothic fable; William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955) was a baroque and encyclopaedic novel about originality and imitation or counterfeiting in art; Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), a novel that provoked a great scandal, whose restricted point of view ("I-As-Protagonist") which gives it a certain indeterminacy (is Humbert Humbert - "The Last Lover" as Lionel Trilling has pointed out<sup>27</sup> or a compulsive maniac?) and its punning and verbal complexity announces the postmodern playfulness; Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) was a "beat" novel marking the beginning of the "hippie movement" with its cult of spontaneity and freedom attained with drugs, sexual deinstitution, jazz and pure movement; William Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* (1959) was a surrealist novel with an original fragmentary and fold-in structure. All these novels ushered in the spirit of persuasive scepticism and the sense of the thorough absurdity of the world which, combined with a narcissistic self-reflexiveness, are characteristics of postmodernism, the prevailing trend of the 1960s and 1970s. But although the philosophical basis of realism was attacked by structuralism and deconstruction, the supporters of this mode never quite disappeared on account of its sense of responsibility and social commitment and then after 1975 a new "neorealism" emerged, altered and enriched by the experiments of the previous decades.

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<sup>27</sup> Lionel Trilling: "The Last Lover" in *Encounter* 11, 1958, pp. 9-19.

## II. THE POSTMODERNIST EXPLOSION: DARK HUMOUR (1960-1970)

The term postmodern is used by some historians to designate all the experimental literature written in the post-war period to the present day; but it is usually employed to refer to the spirit of dark or black humour, playfulness, parody, narcissistic self-reflexiveness and experiment with form that erupted into the American culture of the 1960s and raged on throughout the 1970s. Leslie Fiedler defines postmodernism as a "posthumanist" phenomenon, hostile and indifferent to traditional aesthetic categories and values, offering a polymorphous hedonism to its (largely youthful) audience and unmenable to formalist analysis. Its art is anti-art, and demands Death of Art Criticism<sup>1</sup>.

The birth date of this trend also differs: Raymond Federman considers it to be the publication of William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* (1959)<sup>2</sup>; Tony Hilfer places it in 1955<sup>3</sup> stressing the exemplary role played by Barth's first two novels *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End Of The Road* (1958) and Larry McCaffery takes November 22, 1963 (the day John Kennedy was assassinated) as the day postmodernism was officially ushered in<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Fiedler: "Cross the Border - Cross the Gap. Postmodernism" in Marcus Cunliffe (ed.): *American Literature Since 1900*, 1975, p. 348.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Federman: "Self Reflexive Fiction" in Emory Elliot (gen. ed.) *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Columbia University Press, 1988, New York, p. 1145.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Hilfer: *American Fiction Since 1940*, Longman, London and New York, 1992, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Larry McCaffery: *Postmodern Fiction. A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, Greenwood Press, New York, Westport Connecticut, London, 1986, p. 12.

Postmodernism is far from being a unified movement, on the contrary it has a multitude of very individual voices. But perhaps its quintessential spirit was rendered in *The Naked Lunch*: "the world cannot be expressed, it can perhaps be indicated by mosaics of juxtaposition, like objects abandoned in a hotel room defined by negatives and absence"<sup>5</sup>.

What postmodernism certainly marked was an end of the collective American optimism and naiveté based on the confident assumption of certain verities and assurances that also underlay the mimetic stance. Of course the change did not occur over the night, but had been prepared by certain evolutions in philosophy - not only existentialism but also Kant and Wittgenstein - and by certain developments in science - the theory of relativity, the second law of thermodynamics, the Uncertainty Principle, the incompleteness theory - which led to a decay in the status of science and of rational materialist thought - and by certain evolutions in the philosophy of science which stressed the role which subjectivity plays in the formation of man's systems of thought. As Christopher Nash records, in 1927 the physicist Verner Heisenberg's paper on the uncertainty principle appeared. It was necessary for the first time to recognize that the physical world differed from the ideal world conceived in terms of everyday experience. The vision of reality from "the middle distance" was finally in question. Such traditional ideas of both causality and of objective observation were defective. Totalistic perspectives could no longer hold.

"It is not possible to decide, other than arbitrarily, what objects are to be considered as part of the observed system and what as part of the observer's apparatus (Heisenberg, 1930)". To put it in comparable literary terms, by reason of this principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy no discourse (observer's apparatus) can relate any *histoire* (observed system) without the likelihood of so interfering with it that the *histoire's* inherent truth must be obscured.

In 1931 the mathematician Kurt Gödel published a paper on "formally undecidable propositions", now popularly known as the

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<sup>5</sup> William Burroughs: *The Naked Lunch* apud Federman *Op. cit.*, p. 1145.

*incompleteness theorem*: it argues, that "it is impossible within the framework of an even relatively simple mathematical system - to demonstrate the internal consistency (non-contradictoriness) of the system without using principles of inference whose own consistency is as much open to question as that of the principle of the system being tested"<sup>6</sup>.

Postmodernist literary theory extols the text, which dissolves the union of the signifier and the signified, and frees the signifier from its enthrallment to representation. As Paul Maltby clearly sums it up, the epistemological juncture of modernism is defined by a paradigm shift in which post-humanist philosophies of language have superseded Cartesian/ Phenomenological philosophies of consciousness. Hence the subject is "decentered" in relation to meaning: he/she is not the source (or author) of (private) meaning; on the contrary the subject or rather subjectivities are "called up" by discourses which position the subject within the social order or construct his/her perspectives on reality<sup>7</sup>.

It is this recognition of the primacy of discourse (as opposed to mind) in the constitution of meaning that leads postmodern theorists to see the subject as encountering the world, history, society or identity in the form of "narratives"; they are not given to consciousness immediately as essences. This "fictionality" of meaning, that is the perception that the "real", (history or nature), can only be apprehended in narrative form or "stories" informed by the deconstructive view of the sign under erasure and hence the inevitable slippage of all reference, underpins the writings of Barth, Nabokov, Gass, D. Barthelme, Coover and Pynchon.

The first wave of postmodern writers - William Burroughs, John Barth, Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Jerzy Kosinski, John Hawkes, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Kurt Vonnegut s.o. - all tried to disrupt the mimetic

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Nash: *World Games. The Tradition of Antirealist Revolt*, Methuen, London and New York, 1987, p. 36

<sup>7</sup> Paul Maltby: *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme. Coover, Pynchon.*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1991, p. 5-6.

convention deliberately cultivating disorder and chaos, dislocation and fragmentation.

Postmodernism shared with modernism its rejection of the realist tradition and its emphasis on experiment and innovation, but it also rebelled against modernism rejecting the latter's false hope that the human mind can make some sense of the chaos of the world. It also rejected the modernist "mythical method", that is the use of myths, archetypes and symbols in order to give meaning and coherence. Postmodernism used contemporary myths and clichés in order to explode them.

However postmodernist premises can be traced, as Frank Kermode does, to the theoretical assumption of classical modernism or to the Dadaist schism<sup>8</sup> which in 1916 proclaimed the rupture of art with logic, the absolute rule of spontaneity and incoherence, the necessity of destroying language. While being self-reflexive, that is reflecting upon fictional devices and artifices, the new fiction appeared as a collection of fragments, a juxtaposition or montage of disparate items which often brought together not only incongruous but even incompatible elements, thus opposing not only the metonymic (= realist) representation of reality but also the metaphoric or symbolic (= modernist) type of representation. Consequently, as Raymond Federman points out, the new novel was regarded by most critics as "caught between paranoia and schizophrenia, as though hesitating between conjunction and disjunction and thus unable to render itself coherent and logical, unable to probe below the surface"<sup>9</sup>. But Federman goes on to underline that, what was not really understood, however, was that this so called fiction of surfaces just *deliberately refused to fall into the old psychological trap of modernism*.

We have seen that the traditional novel continued its efforts to give the reality it represented a certain moral meaning, but Federman subtly maintains that the new fiction endeavoured to show the form rather than the content of American reality. It attempted to "render

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Kermode: "Objects, Jokes and Art" in *Continuities*, New York, 1968, p. 20

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Federman, *Op. cit.*, p 1146.

concrete and even visual in its language, in its syntax, in its typography and topology, the disorder, the chaos, the violence, the incongruity but also the energy and vitality of American reality"<sup>10</sup>. In Federman's opinion this made the new fiction closer to the truth of America than the old ponderous realistic novel of the 1950s.

The postmodern condition consists in the disappearance of a traditional frame of thought, be it the religious tradition, or moral humanism, or belief in the idea of progress. Hence, the disappearance of the effect of depth, even if associated with anxiety, terror or awe, that was specific to high modernism, and a confinement to surface and the superficial. Antilogical reasoning and paradox are frequently considered the characteristic modes of postmodernist discourse which generally resists reading, thus suggesting the resistance of the world to interpretation. "Where is the figure in the carpet?" Donald Barthelme has a character ask in his *Snow White* (1967), alluding to the title of Henry James' famous story that has come to be the widespread metaphor of critical interpretation, and then he adds the query "Or is it just carpet?"<sup>11</sup>. Contrary to the modernists who believed there was a "figure in the carpet", a lot of postmodernists imply that experience is "just carpet" and whatever pattern man makes out is a mere illusion.

It is not however easy to draw a clear line between modernism and postmodernism: Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov or even Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme have been convincingly placed in either class.

Both modernists and postmodernists use ambiguity and obscurity. But if the deliberate obscurity of modernist writing could be cleared through study and speculation, the postmodernist text relies on a type of uncertainty which is no longer a matter of style but of narrative. Thus, as David Lodge states, we "shall never be able to unravel the plots of John Fowles's *The Magus* (1966) or Allain Robbe-Grillet *Le Voyeur* (1955) or Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), for they are labyrinths without exits".<sup>12</sup> Endings are of

<sup>10</sup> Federman, *idem*.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Barthelme: *Snow White*, Bantam, New York, 1968, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> David Lodge: *The Modes of Modern Writing, Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature*, Edward Arnold, London, 1977, p. 226.

great significance in this respect. If the modernist "open ending" had replaced the "closed ending" of the traditional novel, postmodernism initiated the multiple ending, the false ending, the mock ending or parody ending. Thus, John Barth tries a series of possible endings to the title story of his collection *Lost In The Funhouse* (1968) and finally keeps the most inconclusive and banal of all. The story called "Title", clearly influenced by Beckett, manages a sort of "no ending": "It's about over. Let the dénouement be soon and unexpected, painless if possible, quick at least above all soon. Now now! How in the world will it ever"<sup>13</sup>.

Richard Brautigan adds to the ending of *A Confederate General from Big Sur* (1964) "A SECOND ENDING, then a third, a fourth and a fifth. There are more and more endings: the sixth, the 53rd, the 131st, the 9,435th ending, endings going faster and faster, more and more endings, faster and faster until this book is having 186, 000 endings per second"<sup>14</sup>.

A useful distinction can be established between a first postmodern phase from 1955 to 1968, characterised by an aggressive, cynical even nihilistic, black humour, and a second phase in the 1970s, when the metafictional and fabulating aspects prevailed.

The object of the scathing satire of the first wave of postmodernist writing was what the sociologist Max Weber called the "rationalization"<sup>15</sup> of the contemporary society, that is the reduction of all spheres of life, economic, social, psychological, to a rational, bureaucratized, predictable routinization and uniformity. In the political and economic fields, rationalization became manifest in the growth of bureaucracy. In the social and psychological fields it led to the popular appropriation of a social science vocabulary, that had a tendency to replace the traditional, moral and religious vocabulary for explaining the springs of human action and behaviour.

As we have seen, the 1950s were a decade of social and economic optimism. There was a boom in American economy and a

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<sup>13</sup> John Barth: *Lost in the Funhouse*, Bantam, New York, 1969, p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Brautigan: *A Confederate General from Big Sur*. Picador. 1973, p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op.cit.*, p. 101.

greater demand for higher living standards that ushered in the age of consumerism. The American culture and way of life had a great impact throughout the world. The American writers of the 1950s were often called "The Silent Generation"<sup>16</sup>, not because they said nothing or because they had nothing to say, but because their works reflect a silent agreement with the official discourse of the State, an optimistic belief that contemporary problems could find a solution. The prevailing mass culture set up the image of a rational well-ordered and organized, and therefore predictable, world (that tallied with the official version). The mass-media, especially TV, projected the image of America as the defender of liberty and the rational discourse that had defeated the totalitarian principles and the irrational discourse that shaped Fascist and Communist ideologies. It was an image that the individual viewer trusted, just as the readers trusted the fictional pictures they got, where there were moral and social solutions to the situations reflected.

Nevertheless, in quite a number of the novels published in those years there is, as we have seen, an underlying sense of the absurdity of the contemporary society, a sense that mass society denies real personal authenticity. This undercurrent that can be grasped in the creations of Saul Bellow, John Hawkes, Norman Mailer, J.D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, Herman Wouk, William Styron, did really surface in the first novels of John Barth - *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958), in William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* (1959) and Joseph Heller's *Catch - 22* (1961), which display black humour as their fundamental vision embodied in the technique of reducing action to mechanical gesture and self to role playing.

Such writers as John Hawkes and William Burroughs came to be fascinated with the power of the media discourse to structure or even replace personality by its appeal to the basic instincts of fear and desire.

John Hawkes' *The Lime Twig* (1961) takes its hero's name, Michael Banks, from *Mary Poppins* giving the reader his nightmare fantasy of sex and violence, which is derived from the collective dream of mass-mediated desire. This surrealistic dream world has however

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Federman: *Op.cit.*, p. 1147.

such a visceral immediacy<sup>17</sup> that it acquires a noxious reality whose evil source is clearly diagnosed by Hawkes in the mass-mediated images. In the end Michael has one moment of courage and wills himself out of his fantasy.

*The Naked Lunch* has been read both as a parody of pornography and as sheer pornography, yet a central and definitely serious theme emerges from the carnivalesque background, namely the theme of "sending". "Sending" is a sort of brainwashing whose mechanism transfers images to a receiver's mind so as to put him under the sender's rhetorical control. The receiver is thus infected by the sender, the Word working like a virus that helps the sender spread his own disease. The receiver may even become addicted to this transfer, the images and words working like a narcotic (a convincing metaphor of mass-media imagery). Thus the sinister way in which the narrator seduces the reader becomes a metaphoric equivalent of the way mass-media discourse seduces its audience. Burroughs achieves a disenchantment from "sending" by "baring his device" (shows how a propaganda message is transferred to the receiver) yet all the while using the device, clearly attempting to implicate his reader in his own paranoid misanthropic and misogynist construction<sup>18</sup>.

In *Mother Night* (1961), Vonnegut also drew a haunting attention to the damaging effect mass-mediated propaganda had in Nazi Germany, the black humour of the situation being that its efficient author was an American double agent.

The public and televised assassination of John Kennedy had a traumatic effect on the American consciousness, focusing a sudden impression that the society had gone mad. In his famous opening lines

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<sup>17</sup> Flannery O'Connor describes this powerful effect on the back cover of the book when first published in 1961:

"You suffer *The Lime Twig* like a dream. It seems to be something that is happening to you, that you want to escape from but can't. The reader even has that slight feeling that you have when you can't wake up and some evil is being worked on you.

This...I might have been dreaming myself."

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Channel Hilfer: "Mariner and Wedding Guests in William Burrough's *Naked Lunch*", *Criticism* 22 (1980), p. 260-265.

of his poem *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg said "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness"<sup>19</sup>, thus hitting upon a metaphoric theme that was going to be recurrent in the decades to come.

There were symptoms of collective madness in the Cold War, in the arms race, in the racial tensions in America, in the riots and assassinations of the 1960s, in the Vietnam War. Individual insanity-neurotic or psychotic-suicidal impulses became a richly explored theme. How to maintain one's sanity in an insane world was the query that many writers tried to find an answer to. The answer frequently pointed schizophrenia as the inevitable condition of contemporary man, such Vonnegut heroes as Campbell or Billy Pilgrim being illustrative examples. The British psychiatrist R.D.Laing also suggested in his book *The Divided Self* (1960) that schizophrenia might be a normal and even healthy response to an insane world. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) are all centred round certifiably insane protagonists. The metaphoric setting of Kesey's novel is a mental institution and his hero is a convicted rapist. The representative of order is the Big Nurse, who is actually the villain of the book. In *Pale Fire* Kinbote has changed his dull and obscure life as a gay academician into his glorious existence as the exiled king of Zembla. Billy Pilgrim has taken refuge from mad society into his own private madness: his travelling in time or to other planets, the latter having a clear compensatory function. Heller's protagonist, Yossarian, is considered crazy by the people around him as he puts personal survival above everything, submission to authority included.

*Catch-22* captured most vividly the ever growing unreality of the public scene, not so much during, as after, World War II, during the McCarthy period with its House Committee on un-American Activities. Unreality is a postmodern sensation. It is also reflected by John

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<sup>19</sup> Allen Ginsberg: "Howl" in Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (eds), *Naked Poetry*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., Indianapolis and New York, p. 189.

Cheever who realistically records the feeling of a woman whom her husband finds in tears when he returns from work:

"I have this terrible feeling that I'm a character in a television situation comedy... I mean I'm nice looking, I'm well dressed, I have humorous and attractive children but I have this terrible feeling that I'm in black-and-white and that I can be turned off by anybody"<sup>20</sup>.

*Catch-22* is based on logic, the logic of the absurd, rather than on character, it is a perfect illustration of Ron Suikerick's idea that postmodernists have substituted for the ego psychology an emphasis on the whole cognitive faculty and just how we make sense of patterns. The major rhetorical devices Heller uses are *reductio ad absurdum*, *non sequitur* and logical inversion since they reflect the logic of an absurd society. Thus when Yossarian refuses to fly a dangerous mission to Bologna, the other characters make the following remarks:

"That crazy bastard"

"He's not so crazy", Dunbard said. "He swears he's not going to fly to Bologna"

"That's just what I mean" Dr. Stubbs said. "That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left"<sup>21</sup>.

The novel confronts the reader with an inverted world, where everything is rationalized but nothing makes sense: the logic is inverted, the absurd reigns supreme. One of the most famous statements expressing it is the protagonist's explanation to Clevinger:

"Yossarian had done his best to warn him the night before. You haven't got a chance, kid", he had told him.

"They hate Jews".

"But I'm not Jewish", answered Clevinger

"It will make no difference" Yossarian promised and Yossarian was right. "They're after everybody"<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> John Cheever: "A Vision of the World" in *Collected Stories*, Dell, New York, 1974, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Heller: *Catch 22*, Dell Publishing Co, Inc., New York, 1970, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 83.

Paranoia is therefore a reality principle, an attribute of society, not a sick individual's condition. Yossarian's cynical definition of the enemy as "anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter which side he's on...",<sup>23</sup> also shows his complete alienation. Only in the end does Heller weaken and lets his hero become sentimental. Heller's next novel *Something Happened* (1974) emphasizes the paranoia of modern times: the protagonist, Bob Slocum, works in a modern corporation where everyone is afraid of everybody else working in this institution, and at home there is the same atmosphere of a general reciprocal fear (with the exception of a brain-damaged son). Slocum appears as part of the generalized corruption, anaesthetized morality and guilty complicity.

The blunders of the Johnson administration, then the lies of the Nixon administration, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal were all elements that led to a rupture between the official mass-mediated discourse and the individual. The American subject no longer trusted the official discourse, there was a general awareness that the content of history could be manipulated, that television and newspapers could falsify or distort historical facts and thus the clear line that separates fact from fiction was blurred. Consequently a need was felt that history, particularly the recent history should be re-examined and disentangled from the mass media version. Thus, after Watergate all the official discourse about the Cold War, the McCarthy years, the Korean and Vietnam wars, about CIA activities abroad was questioned not only by some of the politicians and by the New Journalists that had evolved their new genre as a result of this blurring or even erasure of the line between fact and fiction, but also by the novelists whose fiction established a new relation with reality and history, a relation based on doubt.<sup>24</sup>

Now the referential element was denounced as a mere electronic image, hence one could no longer bring into discussion questions like *credibility, historical truth, the stability of the real or the psychological*

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Federman: "Self-Reflexive Fiction", in E. Elliot, (gen. ed.) *Op.cit.*, p. 1149.

depth of the subject. The official discourse was not only doubted but mocked and parodied.

Therefore we can say that the first stage of the postmodernist revolution is one of subject matter. The syntax remained within the boundaries of the norm, the narrative - mainly metonymic - becomes however a fragmentary, discontinuous and ironic picturing of the individual in history as the subject of a huge collective farce. The black humour novels of the 1960s often employ the picaresque technique with a burlesque dressing. What the mimetic mode considers reality is viewed now only as a fraudulent verbal network, a set of illusions. Consequently most periods of American history are revisited and replayed ironically (and often self-reflexively) in these *parody novels* brilliantly illustrated by the early fictions of John Barth, Robert Coover, Donald Bartheleme, Richard Brautigan.

In *The Sotweed Factor* (1960) Barth parodically demystifies the colonial period, reworking 18th century fictional themes and techniques. He uses the picaresque narrative in an inverted direction: it is not the European who heads for the New World to seek his fortune but the American who heads for the Old World to retrace his roots and lose his fortune. The numerous digressions and the non-existent documents, the baroquely excessive action and dialogue are not functional, that is do not contribute to the delineation of Ebenezer Cook, the protagonist, but are included in the novel for their parodic effect.

Richard Brautigan in *A Confederate General from Big Sur* (1964) ironically recreates the Civil War story in order to expose its absurdity. The parodic ending which keeps multiplying, reaching as we have seen a rate of 186,000 endings per second, annihilates the drama of that event, dissolving it into laughter.

Robert Coover in *The Origin of the Brunists* (1965) mocks the religious cults in America exploring the origins of a modern religion, based on obvious Christian parallelism. He uses a complex plot constructed out of multiple perspectives and literary forms. The result is a parody, Coover abusing a literary form in order to subvert the hold that the content of this form has on the people.

The same parodic and satiric impulse underlies Ishmael Reeds's historical novels too. Thus *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) ironically explodes the established black novel of identity crisis and search for self. The protagonist Bukko Doopeyduk looks very much like an inversion of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The novel is not only a parody of previous black writers but an extremely funny allegory of the black condition.

Set in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1969) presents an aesthetic Reed derived from the myths of Ancient Egypt (Osiris in particular), the voodoo practices of West Indian magic and the uncanny powers of black people.

*Flight to Canada* (1976) achieves a parody of the Civil War that is generally considered to have liberated the blacks in America. The parody works through anachronism and inverted characters in the case of Robert Lee and Abraham Lincoln, who are multinational businessmen flying everywhere in the world. The theme of black identity is embodied by Raven Quickskill, a slave run away from a Virginia plantation who writes a poem entitled *Flight to Canada*, an act which frees him from his old slave identity. The novel thus extols the liberating power of art.

As we have seen World War II and the Cold War particularly became the main target of the black humour parody novels. The heroic element that could be discerned in the novels of the previous decades such as Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* is totally dissolved by lacerating irony and satire in *Catch-22*, Th. Pynchon's *V* (1963), Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night* (1961) and *Slaughterhouse 5* (1968), Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* (1965), John Barth's *Giles Goat Boy* (1966), the absurd and the arbitrary ruling supreme in their universe. The hero of the 1960s novel has to live with absurdity and hence he becomes a *protean man*. Robert Jay Lifton describes this type in a remarkable essay<sup>25</sup> based on research with refugees from communist China and with young Japanese. Lifton speaks

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Jay Lifton: "Protean Man" in *History and Human Survival*, New York, 1970, p. 316-331.

about a "style of self-process", a self that is exploratory and open to possibility, responding to rapid change (social, technological, or ideological) with a "polymorphous versatility". Lifton discovers that "Chinese intellectuals of varying ages had gone through an extraordinary array of what I ... called identity fragments - of combinations of belief and emotional involvement each of which they could readily abandon in favour of another". Protean man evidently lacks the classical super-ego, "the internalization of clearly defined criteria of right and wrong transmitted within a particular culture by parents to their children. Protean man requires freedom from precisely that kind of super-ego - he requires a symbolic fatherlessness in order to carry out his explorations". Not only does he fluctuate in his beliefs but he cannot accept the existence of any system of beliefs, as he has a profound inner sense of absurdity which results in his general mocking tone. Like the Adamic hero, protean man evades social identity and he is always suspicious of "counterfeit nurturance" whether from institutions or even "intense individual relationships". Lifton finds Augie March and J.P. Donleavy's *Ginger Man* good examples of Protean Man with their talent of adapting themselves to divergent social worlds. Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Barth's Jacob Horner (*End of the Road*), Heller's Yossarian and Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) also fit the description. They have a sensitivity to the "inauthentic" and their picaresque adventures correspond to their shiftiness as living strategy.

The black humour novels of the 1960s have been attacked for their apparent lack of indignation, for their cool or even cold tone, which has been taken for moral indifference: the protean protagonists with their clever opportunism seem to be presented as sane models for surviving in an insane world. And the emotional repression against which Saul Bellow protested seems to have replaced the former sexual repression: there is no real love in the universe of these novels, only lust.

### III. THE POSTMODERNIST REVOLUTION: FABULATION AND METAFICTION (1970-1980)

In response to the premise that the "real" is fundamentally non-significant, postmodernist aesthetics becomes "self-reflexive", underlying works of fiction concerned with investigating the very process of signification or meaning-production. Hence the narrative conventions of plotting, use of metaphor and omniscient narrator are parodied with the aim of exposing the part they play in the fabrication of meaning. Narration - literary, historical, philosophical - and naming are revealed as inherently fictionalizing activities. In *The Names* (1982) for instance, Don DeLillo offers a fascinating investigation of the enigmatic nature of language. Malcolm Bradbury underlines the postmodernist insistence on the utter fictionality of *all* attempts at naming, structuring and ordering experience". Hence the postmodernist writing acquires "the quality of mock-text, fantasizing actuality, cartooning character, and subjecting the objective world to a surrealist awareness of alternatives, opposites, and oppositions".<sup>1</sup>

After 1968 and through the 1970s, the postmodernist revolution reaches an even more radical experimental stage as the prevailing mood shifts from dark or black humour to fabulation<sup>2</sup> and metafiction, and

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<sup>1</sup> M. Bradbury: *The Modern American Novel*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Scholes used the term in his two books on postmodernism: *The Fabulators* and *Fabulation and Metafiction*. "Modern fabulation, like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but turns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy" (*The Fabulators*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1967, p. 208). He sees fabulism as an alternative to the realist novel closely linked to romance, satire and fable, and exemplifies it with works by Lawrence Durrell, Kurt Vonnegut, John Hawkes and John Barth.

the use of language becomes even more innovative, going so far as pulverizing syntax, a phenomenon that can be seen in such works as Steve Katz's *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (1968), Madeline Gin's *Word Rain* (1969) or William Gass's *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* (1971).

The year 1968 has been chosen as it was the year when John Barth published his collection of stories *Lost in the Funhouse*, which can be seen as a sort of manifesto of self-reflexiveness. It was also the year that saw the publication of Ronald Sukenick's first novel *UP* which is an amalgamation of fantasies, autobiographical fragments, literary parodies, passages from a narrative entitled *The Adventures of Strap Banally* and the review of it, discussions between Sukenick and another character about the effects of *UP*, etc. Sukenick constructs a fictional illusion first and then systematically lays bare that illusion in an artefact that breaks down the distinction between fiction and criticism, between imagination and intellectual processing, the result being a new type of discourse which blends literary creation with critical interpretation. Therefore Sukenick is present in his fiction under his own name adding the negating spirit of the critic to the modernist trinity of author - narrator - protagonist (in keeping with the typically late postmodern schizoid personality). Thus the self-reflexive authorial voice outspokenly confesses towards the end of the novel, drawing the reader's attention that some of the characters are wholly imaginary and then introduces his wife Lynn Sukenick, Steve Katz and other "real" people with whom he celebrates at his novel completion party. The same technique is used in the title story of the volume *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (1969) where the real is mixed up with fictional narrative, autobiography and lectures by Professor Sukenick on the state of fiction, the story operating on the principle of simultaneous multiplicity or what has been called *the leap-frog technique*.

Character, already diminished in the black humour phase, becomes even more reduced to narrative voice and reflexively displayed as an instrument of formal inventiveness: the subtitle of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* bears witness to the fact that the short stories are

"Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice". William Gass sees character as "any linguistic location in a book toward which a great part of the rest of the text stands as a modifier".<sup>3</sup> The paradoxical thing is that some of the postmodernist characters (those of Gass included) come to life in spite of proclaiming their fictionality.

Metafictional preoccupations are not new in literature. Barth cites as his masters and models Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615), *The 1001 Nights*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, Beckett and Borges. Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1767) stands out in English literature and Melville's *Confidence Man* (1857) in American literature. In France the tendency is brilliantly illustrated by Michel Butor's *L'Emploi du temps* (1956) and Raymond Queneau's *Zazie dans le metro* (1959).

Although we have suggested the year 1968 as initiating the self-reflexive phase of postmodernism, metafictional works appeared earlier: Barth's *The Sot Weed Factor* in 1960, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* in 1962, Pynchon's *V.* in 1963 and Donald Barthelme's *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, Hawkes's *Second Skin* and Berger's *Little Big Man* in 1964. As in the last two books, self-reflexiveness often combined with black humour.

Some of the novels of this later phase continue the parodic technique and the black humour of the earlier novels, as happens with Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) or Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977).

But, on the whole, a playful tone and a blasphemous sort of humour replaces the former sombre humour of the parodic novels, to say nothing of their strong contrast to the intellectual and often moralistic novels of the 1950s, particularly those belonging to the Jewish or Southern traditions. We can say that black humour remains generally realistic in technique even if an intentionally reduced realism. Black humour however reacted against traditional realism, very much as modernism had. Metafiction carries one aspect of

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<sup>3</sup> LeClair T. and McCaffery L.: "A Debate: William Gass and John Gardner" in *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Writers*, Urbana, 1988, p. 28.

modernism to its ultimate effect: it denies the basis of any "reality", even that of the work of art which the modernists had considered sacred. In black humour, though the subjects are diminished, there is still some belief in objects, whereas metafiction reduces everything to signs within the literary text, to mere discourse, while all the time doubting the validity of that discourse. Patricia Waugh accurately and perceptively distinguishes between these two types of postmodernism:

"One that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests that there can never be an escape from the prison-house of language and either delights or despairs in this. The first sort employs *structural* undermining of convention, or parody, using a specific previous text or system for its base (...) Because language is so pre-eminently the instrument that maintains the everyday. The second is represented by those writers who conduct their fictional experiments even at the level to the sign (...) and therefore fundamentally disturb the ...everyday'."<sup>4</sup>

To the postmodern mind in general, there is no self but a sum of the roles one plays and the world is the sum of one's constructions of it.

Usually, the postmodernist writer delights in language and its playful use acquires what Ihab Hassan has called (referring to R. Federman's *Double or Nothing*, 1971) "visual self-reflexive exuberance (...) and typographical laughter."<sup>5</sup>

As we have seen, the various fictional traditions are subverted from within by demystifying parody and by the sexual revolution that led to the introduction of explicit sexuality into the ethnic, regional and moral traditions within which the novels are written.

Thus the heavy morality with its sense of responsibility and even culpability of the Jewish novel ( typically represented by Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Isaac Bashevis Singer) is now counterparted by

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Waugh: *Metafiction*, London, 1984, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Ihab Hassan apud R. Federman: "Self-Reflexive Fiction", p. 1152

the irony and satire of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and the more experimental playfulness of Sukenick's *UP* or Raymond Federman's *Take It or Leave It* (1976).

In the case of the black novel, the high seriousness of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) is radically transformed in the experimental, metafictional works of Ishmael Reed that we have already briefly discussed and those of Clarence Major. The latter's *Emergency Exit* (1978), for instance, is a combination of fantasy, dream, surrealistic images, anecdotes and story that defies the traditional narrative rules of consistency, coherence and generic conventions.

As regards the Southern tradition, the great mythic evocations of Faulkner continued by William Styron (*Lie Down in Darkness*, 1951) or Walker Percy (*The Moviegoer*, 1962) are now reduced to a kind of comic-strip fiction<sup>6</sup> in Richard Brautigan's and especially Flannery O'Connor's fiction and stories. Although she is mostly writing within the modernist formula, Flannery O'Connor produces fragmented narratives and makes a parodic use of *clichés* that reduces the seriousness of the Southern novel to mockery. Thus the burlesque of the stories in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* (1955) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) entitles us to place them within the post modern mood.

In the ironical and often surrealistic work of Donald Barthelme, especially in his volumes of short stories *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), *City Life* (1970), *Great Days* (1979), but also in his two thin-plotted novels *Snow White* (1967), and *The Dead Father* (1976) there is a typical play of self-reflexiveness (for example *Snow White* includes a brief questionnaire for the reader in the midst of it asking for commentary on characters in the novel and evaluations as to its success or failure) and an extremely innovative use of language (based on punning, the poetic quality of image-making and digression as a structural principle).

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond Federman: "Self-Reflexive Fiction" in E. Elliot, (gen. ed.) *Op.cit.*, p. 1153.

William Burroughs's trilogy of the 1960s: *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962), *Nova Express* (1964), went a very long way in the direction of a radical and innovative use of language. In an irreverent mood he experimented with the "cut-up" technique, creating passages of prose and poetry out of previously existing texts and documents collated together, a technique strongly reminiscent of the Dadaist aesthetics.

The most prominent writers who in the 1970s and 1980s work in this direction of a more radical use of language combined with a constant metafictional vein are, besides those already mentioned, Walter Abish, Steve Katz, William Gass, William Gaddis, Don DeLillo, Joseph McElroy, Gilbert Sorrentino, Raymond Federman and Kenneth Gangemi.

In *Alphabetical Africa* (1976), Walter Abish gives a most arbitrarily and artificially constructed fiction as the first chapter uses only words beginning with "a", the second chapter with "a" and "b", the third with "a", "b", and "c" and so on until the 26 letters are used; then the technique is used in diminishing reversed order. By this arbitrary and artificial structure, Abish deconventionalizes plot and character and draws attention to the novel's construction as fiction.

Steve Katz's *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* takes the reader into a universe where fact and fiction intermingle as Katz's own experiences are juxtaposed to overtly imagined fragments of narrative. Katz appears under his own name in the novel, disclosing the anxieties of the author struggling towards coherence in a world where no order can be put even by the artist. The very shape of the book, with the protean features of its pages, though described by some critics as mere typographical circus, iconoclastically tries to suggest to the reader the variety of forms human experience can take that require multiple perspectives. In *Saw* (1972) he uses the artist-as-alien perspective, assuming the identity of *The Astronaut*, a strange extraterrestrial being, temporarily imprisoned on the Earth.

William Gass is one of the most prominent postmodernist writers that has also turned into one of the leading theoreticians of metafiction. What makes his first novel *Omensetter's Luck* (1966) most remarkable

is not the well-achieved Adamic title hero, but the craftsmanship of the choice of words. It is perhaps, Richard Schneider opines, "the first American novel written as carefully as if it were a poem".<sup>7</sup>

Much more experimental is his second book *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968), a collection of five short stories out of which the title story is the most famous. Actually plotless, it is made up of 36 brief sections that have an individual title and reveals the central character's efforts to find order in his mess of a life through language. Some of the sections are miniature essays, the work being a landmark in the postmodernist blurring or even breakdown of generic limits.

Gass firmly believes that words are the ultimate human reality. He so much cares for the word that he considers it ought not to be required to mimic external reality. In his debates with John Gardener, the defender of moral fiction, Gass has maintained that the purpose of fiction is just the creation of a verbal world. This theoretical position is put forth in three collections of essays: *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970), *The World Within the Word* (1978) and *The Habitations of the Word* (1985).

William Gaddis's remarkable encyclopaedic novel *Recognitions* (1955) was followed by a second only twenty years later, *J.R.* (1975) and then by *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985). In *J.R.* he develops an extremely original structure made up mostly of colloquial dialogues and monologues interspersed with very few scraps of narration in a chapterless, sectionless flow of 726 pages - about an 11-year-old boy turned tycoon. Gaddis's novels never lack a moral centre and for all their innovative techniques, they are enjoyable to read.

William Gaddis, Don DeLillo and Joseph McElroy have frequently been compared to Pynchon and grouped together as "the Paranoids".<sup>8</sup>

DeLillo briefly experimented with science fiction in *Ratner's Star* (1976), but most of his works of the 1970s, *End Zone* (1972),

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Schneider: "William Gass" in Larry McCaffery, (ed.) *Postmodern Fiction*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1986, p. 384.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op.cit.*, p. 145.

*Players* (1977) and *White Noise* (1984) have a remarkable consistency of vision and technique. The richness of incident is often baroque but it is not governed by the law of cause and effect, creating an impression of discontinuity. Characters are not presented in their evolution, they are defined by gesture and speech. The characters do not determine the action but are determined by it, which highlights a sense of randomness in human life and of ultimate mystery. Character does not imply a self but role-playing.

McElroy's best book *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), like *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel about power and control and about the contemporary network of correspondences and information loops that render a sort of intellectual map of the postmodern world. Like DeLillo, he too made a thrust at science fiction in *Plus* (1977), where the protagonist is a disembodied brain launched into space in a rocket.

Gilbert Sorrentino uses colour and alphabetical sequence as structuring factors in *Splendide-Hotel* (1973), pushing the experimental use of language to listing pure words. *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971) and *Mulligan's Stew* (1979) give a picture of New York art and publishing world using a complex amalgamation of authorial asides, pauses and footnotes in the former, and stories-within-stories, letters, diary extracts, plays, pornographic poems, baffling lists in the latter.

Kenneth Gangemi attempts to make the signified impossible to glimpse as he tries to arrest the viewer's vision with the opacity of the sign. In his *Interceptor Pilot* (1980) he gives the reader pure narrative, ignoring everything except what is to be seen: a copy of *Le Monde* on the journalist's car seat or two columns of smoke rising from the jungle where a crash has taken place. This purely visual treatment is a way of keeping the sign apart from reality.

Federman is one of the most representative metafictional novelists. His *Double or Nothing* or *Take It or Leave It* (1976) are first and foremost concerned with the problems of telling a story, but they also promise to record the protagonist's journey across America in quest of his real self. However a series of adventures delay his journey forever, given in the exaggerated second-hand tales Federman delights

in. He playfully borrows phrases from other writers and from his own previous fiction.

Therefore we can say that the new fiction writers no longer set out to represent or explain or justify American reality, on the contrary, by constantly drawing attention to the process of fiction, they want to denounce the very vehicle that was used to represent that reality: discursive language and the mimetic novel. As Federman maintains, they "confront their own writing, place themselves in front or inside their own texts in order to question the very act of using language and of writing fiction, even at the risk of alienating the reader".<sup>9</sup>

Federman answers the charges that have been brought against the narcissistic self-reflexive writers: they have been accused of having no social consciousness, of avoiding commitment, of refusing to explain reality, of refusing to pretend any longer that reality is equivalent to truth and therefore of failing to render reality coherent and rational. He contends that the self-reflexive writers abandoned realism as a deliberate act in order to challenge the oppressive forces of social and literary authorities. The new writers were chaos-drunk anarchists. But Federman underlines that they saw culture or rather the discourse produced by culture as a mystification and as a reaction they wanted to empty language of its symbolic power. They were involved in an act of disruptive complicity as they confronted the mess of reality. These novelists abandoned the traditional novel's search for stable points of reference in reality and in history and also the purely formalistic temptation of modernism which had led to *Finnegan's Wake*. Instead, these writers chose the play of irrationality, the free play of language over discursive coherence and formalistic unity. Gradually the stable syntax and readable parody of the early black humour novels of the 1960s was disintegrated into a form of intentional *unreadability* not unlike that of *Finnegan's Wake*, only not for aesthetic reasons but for subversive ones. By their books they wanted to raise serious questions about the role of fiction in contemporary society. Federman states that by rendering language seemingly irrational, illogical, incoherent and

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Federman: "Self-Reflexive Fiction", *Op.cit.*, p. 1155.

even meaningless - as in much of Samuel Beckett's later fiction which remains the model for most serious fiction written in America during the 1960s and 1970s, the self-reflexive fictions negate the symbolic power of language while proposing at the same time a purification of the language that will perhaps prevent it from structuring or even enslaving the individual into a social historical scenario prepared in advance and replayed by the discourse on TV, in the mass media and on the political stage.

However the very opposite point has been made by Steven Connor among others. He has demonstrated that postmodernism is a rather helpful ideology for a consumer society mesmerized by the insubstantial sensations offered by the postmodern media of television and advertising.<sup>10</sup> Indeed we may say with Tony Hilfer that the postmodernist attack on traditional spiritual and family values help to undermine the few surviving sources of resistance to the utter dominance of media and market.<sup>11</sup>

One cannot but admit that postmodernism revitalized contemporary fiction: it has enriched the possibilities of literary expression by (re)discovering a number of literary devices and conventions. It has gone a long way towards demystifying fetishes and exposing clichés but it has also led to an oversimplification of the possibilities of life, to a reduction of love to lust, to a depreciation of family relationship, to a generalized playful superficiality and to an all too easy cynicism.

On the whole we can say that the postmodernist impetus has spent itself and that the fiction of the 1980s registered a revigoration of the realistic impulse which had diminished but never disappeared through the self-reflexive boom.

As we consider that David Lodge's description of the formal principles that underlie postmodernist writing is quite an illuminating and useful tool for the student we shall briefly enumerate its main points.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Connor: *Postmodern Culture*, Oxford, 1989, pp. 201-247.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op.cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> David Lodge: *Op. cit.*, pp. 228-245.

He starts from Roman Jakobson's assumption that all discourse tends either towards the metaphoric or the metonymic pole of language. That means that all discourse connects one topic with another either because they are in some sense similar to each other or because they are in some sense contiguous with each other. If however, a writer attempts to group topics according to another principle, or no principle, the human mind will still persist in trying to make sense of the resulting text by looking in it for relations of similarity and/or contiguity and insofar as a text defeats such interpreting it defeats itself.

Lodge states that although postmodernist writers may be identified individually as either metaphoric or metonymic, when considered collectively it would be difficult to establish a bias towards one pole or the other. A formal analysis reveals that they make efforts to use both metaphoric and metonymic devices in radically new ways and to defy (even if it ultimately in vain) the obligation to choose between these two principles of connecting one topic with another.

< The formal principles that Lodge highlights as underlying postmodernist writing are *contradiction*, *permutation*, *discontinuity*, *randomness*, *excess* and *short circuit*.

### ***Contradiction***

Considering that Samuel Beckett has an undoubted claim to be regarded as the first postmodernist writer, Lodge gives as a first example of the principle of contradiction at work a passage from *The Unnamable* that cancels itself out as it goes along:

"But what is the good of talking about what they will do as soon as Worm sets himself in motion, so as to gather himself without fail into their midst, since he cannot set himself in motion, though he often desires to, if when speaking of him one may speak of desire, and one may not, one should not, but there it is, that is the way to speak of him as if he were alive, even if it seems to no purpose, and it serves none",<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Whereas about the romantic text and the modernist text we can generally say that they are predominantly metaphoric, just as the realist text is metonymic.

<sup>14</sup> S. Beckett: *The Unnamable in Three Novels by Samuel Beckett*, New York, 1965, p. 357.

a passage that ends with the famous sequence: "You must go on. I can't go on, I'll go on"...

We can give another example of this postmodernist principle which is as illustrative: the religion of Bokonomism in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) is based on "the cruel paradox... the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it".<sup>15</sup>

The hermaphrodite is one of the most powerful emblems of contradiction as it affronts the fundamental binary opposition male/female. Therefore it is not surprising that the hermaphrodite's transsexuality looms large in many postmodern literary creations (the image had already been used by Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*, 1928), for example Gore Vidal's sex-changing character Myra/Myron Beckinridge (*Myra Beckinridge*, 1968; *Myron*, 1975).

### ***Permutation***

This technique may be seen as a special type of contradiction as it defies the fundamental narrative principle of selection. Many postmodernist writers incorporate alternative narrative lines in the same text, the archetypal models being not only Samuel Beckett but also the influential Jorge Luis Borges' "The Garden of the Forking Paths" which self-reflexively puts forth the principles underlying the labyrinthine novel of Ts'ui Pen, principles which have had a liberating effect on the imagination.

"In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pen he chooses - simultaneously - all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures which themselves also proliferate and fork. Here, then, is the explanation of the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him.

Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both

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<sup>15</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Cat's Cradle*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston. New York, 1963, p. 229.

can die, and so forth. In the work of Ts'ui Pen, all possible outcomes occur; each one is point of departure for other forkings".<sup>16</sup>

The reader meets alternative narrative lines in John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse", in Robert Coover's stories "The Magic Poker" and "The Babysitter" (in *Pricksongs and Descants*, 1969), in Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971).

### *Discontinuity*

Coherence, the seamless logical inevitability in an essay's or book's progress from one topic to another is a traditional expectation of writing. In fiction, the realist text (metonymic discourse) offers a readily intelligible kind of continuity based on spatio-temporal contiguities; the metaphorical discourse contains a less obvious sort of continuity which is however not impossible to identify. It is by a rhetoric based on continuity that a work of fiction displaces the "real world" with an imagined world in which the reader participates vicariously, particularly in the case of realistic fiction. But postmodernist writers are suspicious of continuity and more often than not defy it. Some of them even base their narrative discourse upon discontinuity, as reads a self-reflexive statement in *98.6* (1975) by Ronald Sukenick: "Interruption. Discontinuity. Imperfection. It can't be helped"<sup>17</sup>. This fictional piece figures reality as a holy land, a Palestine embraced by a new Mosaic law - the law of mosaics, or how to deal with parts in the absence of wholes, and it illustrates a clear vein in contemporary fiction, that of making the narrative discourse up of very short sections, often just one-paragraph long, and often quite disparate in content. The breaks between sections are sometimes underlined by capitalized headings as in Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968), by numbers as in Robert Coover's "The Gingerbread House" (in *Pricksongs and Descants*) or by typographical devices (like the arrows in Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, 1973). Brautigan's novels and Vonnegut's later fictions are composed in this way, out of

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<sup>16</sup> Jorge Luis Borges: *Labyrinths*, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Sukenick: *98. 6*, Fiction Collective, New York, 1975, p. 167.

sections that are too short to be recognized as conventional chapters, achieving a staccatto effect. Donald Bartheleme uses strange illustrations to break up the text of some of the pieces in *City Life* (1971) and Raymond Federman ingeniously uses techniques borrowed from concrete poetry in order to vary the typographical layout of *Double or Nothing* (1971).

This technique can be said to have led to the emergence of virtually a new genre: *the cluster* of short passages (based on the principle of discontinuity, it is programmatically *not a sequence*) illustrated by Leonard Michael's *I Would Have Saved Them if I Could* (1975) made up stories, anecdotes, reflections, quotations, prose-poems, jokes, each with an individual title in large type. For example the title piece, which is concerned with the life/death/time theme in the context of capital punishment, consists of seventeen sections, each with a title of its own and only after several readings does a kind of thematic coherence begin to take shape. Michaels's use of discontinuity can be very well illustrated with the opening lines of the cluster entitled "In the Fifties":

"In the fifties I learned to drive a car. I was frequently in love.  
I had more friends than now.

When Krushchev denounced Stalin my roommate shit blood,  
turned yellow and lost most of his hair.

I attended the lectures of the excellent E. B. Burgum until  
Senator McCarthy ended his tenure. I imagined NYU would burn.  
Miserable students, drifting in the halls, looked at one another.

In less than a month, working day and night, I wrote a bad novel.

I went to school - NYU, Michigan, Berkeley - much of the time.  
I had witty, giddy conversations, four or five nights a week, in a  
homosexual bar in Ann Arbor.

I read literary reviews the way people suck candy.

Personal relationships were more important to me than  
anything else.

I had a fight with a powerful fat man who fell on my face and was  
immovable.

I had personal relationships with football players, jazz musicians, ass-bandits, nymphomaniacs, non-specialized degenerates, and numerous Jewish premedical students.

I had personal relationships with thirty-five rhesus monkeys in an experiment on monkey addiction to morphine. They knew me as one who shot reeking crap out of cages with a hose".<sup>18</sup>

The discourse goes on in the same mode: bold statements of fact without any connection, except their belonging to the narrator's life in the 1950s. There is no apparent logic of selection - randomness and non-sequitur being the actual principles. Although most statements have no bearing upon it there emerges a sort of recurrent theme after all: the political impotence of the fifties. This very risky procedure of textual collage works because of the natural brilliance of the writing and the writer persuades us that the discontinuity of his text is the truth of his experience, that there is "no figure in the carpet".

In the work of Donald Bartheleme the principle of non-sequitur appears not only at the level of paragraphs but also at that of the sentences: "Edward looked at his red beard in the tableknife. Then Edward and Pia went to Sweden, to the farm" <sup>19</sup>.

Although there is a temporal continuity between the two actions, the absence of any causal connection and the huge difference in scale between them bring about a complete sense of discontinuity.

One of Bartheleme's favourite devices is to take a number of contiguous characters and scramble their conversations or streams of consciousness to produce a montage of random, bizarrely contrasting verbal fragments (e.g. "The Viennese Opera Hall" in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, 1964).

### **Randomness**

Although the discontinuity of the discourse in the creations of Brautigan, Michaels or Bartheleme often looks like randomness, it would

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<sup>18</sup> Leonard Michaels: *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*, Farrer, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1975, pp. 56-60.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Bartheleme: "Edward and Pia" in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, Bantam, New York, 1969, p. 75

be more accurately described as *the logic of the absurd*. The human mind cannot help being selective, therefore true randomness can only be introduced into literary texts by mechanical means: for instance William Burroughs cuts up pieces of different texts, his own among them, sticks them together at random and transcribes the result (a technique that can be called the "cut-up method") or the writer issues his book in loose-leaf form, the reader being asked to shuffle the leaves and therefore produce a random text (the method was used by B.S. Johnson with his *The Unfortunates*, 1969).

### ***Excess***

Postmodernist writers have made excessive use of a metaphoric or metonymic device with a remarkable parodic effect in order to escape the respective device's tyranny. Thus the recurrent *V.* motif in Pynchon's first novel (1963) has so many symbolic valences that it mocks interpretation by the plurality of its manifestations. In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) the author uses to excess the analogy between rocket and phallus with a grotesque effect. Donald Bartheleme can also practise metaphoric overkill to the absurd. A most famous example is Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) where the title syntagm can stand for anybody and anything. Trout Fishing in America can be a person, a corpse or the name of the hotel:

"And this is a very small cook book for Trout Fishing in America as if Trout Fishing in America were a rich gourmet and Trout Fishing in America had Maria Callas for a girlfriend and they ate together on a marble table with beautiful candles".<sup>20</sup>

"This is the autopsy of Trout Fishing in America as if Trout Fishing in America had been Lord Byron and had died in Missolonghi, Greece, and afterwards never saw the shores of Idaho again".<sup>21</sup>

"Half a block away from Broadway and Columbus is Hotel Trout Fishing in America, a choap hotel. It is very old and run by some Chinese".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20, 21, 22</sup> Richard Brautigan: *Trout Fishing in America*, Fourth Season Foundations, San Francisco, 1967, p. 13, p. 43, p. 89.

Trout Fishing In America receives and answers letters; but it can be an adjective as well as a lovely pen nib:

"THE LAST MENTION OF TROUT FISHING IN AMERICA SHORTY".<sup>23</sup>

"WITNESS FOR TROUT FISHING IN AMERICA PEACE".<sup>24</sup>

"I thought to myself what a lovely nib trout fishing in America would make with a stroke of cool green trees along the river's shore, wild flowers and dark fins pressed against the paper".<sup>25</sup>

The whole texture of the novel is full of bizarre similes, as the following illustrative examples perfectly demonstrate:

"My book was like birds sitting on a telephone wire strung out down the world, clouds tossing the wires carefully".<sup>26</sup>

"His eyes were like the shoelaces of a harpsichord".<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting that the equivalent on the axis of combination of the excess of substitution would be the permutation of variables, which has already been discussed. But any overloading of the discourse with specificity has the same effect: the reader is presented with more details than he can synthesize into a whole and thus the discourse affirms the resistance of the world to interpretation. The immensely detailed descriptions of objects Alain Robbe-Grillet makes in his writings actually prevent the reader from visualizing them. The same effect of "metonymic overkill" has the famous description of *Madame Bovary* or Jorge Luis Borges' description in his story "Funes, the Memorius" (in *Labyrinths*) of a man who, because of the shock of an accident, is able to perceive everything that is happening to him and unable to forget anything, thus inhabiting a world of intolerable specificity that makes him incapable of any generalization.

### **Short Circuit**

At the highest level of generality literature as a whole is metaphoric and nonliterature is metonymic. When we interpret the literary text we apply it to the world as a total metaphor but assuming

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<sup>23, 24, 25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 129, p. 131, p. 148.

<sup>26, 27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31, p. 34.

a gap between art and life, between the text and the words. Postmodernist writers try to short-circuit this gap, to blur the distinction fact/fiction and thus resist the assimilation into the conventional categories of the literary. The short-circuit is usually achieved by combining in one word the violently contrasting modes of the obviously fictive and the apparently factual and introducing the author and self-reflexiveness into the text thus usually exposing conventions while using them ( or "laying bare the device" as the Russian formalists would say). These devices are not new, they are prominently used by Cervantes and Laurence Sterne but they are specific to postmodernists because of the frequency and lengths to which they have been used).

Nabokov was among the first to use the technique with great cunning in *Pale Fire* (1962). The novel consists of a poem (normally metaphoric and fictional) and a commentary (normally metonymic and factual). However the prose commentary appears to be more obviously fictive than the poem because its author Kinbote is a mad man who thinks he is the exiled King of Zembla, an imaginary Central European State, and who interprets the poem from the perspective of his delusion. The poem is a meditation by John Shade upon a personal experience. But Shade is also a fiction, an illusion created by a "real" author, Nabokov, whose personal biography is similar to Kinbote's. The Murder of Shade (by an escaped criminal who mistook Shade for the judge who sentenced him) has also an autobiographical basis drawing on the murder of Nabokov's father by political assassins who were attacking somebody else. In his subsequent novels Nabokov continues to make such teasing allusions to the author.

J.D Salinger too produces the same short-circuit effect in his later stories about the Glass family. Thus in the story "Seymour - an Introduction" the narrator Buddy Glass mentions that he has written two other stories about his brother Seymour - "*Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*" and "*A Nice Day for Bananafish*" and also that he is the author of a novel whose description corresponds to *The Catcher in the Rye*, all these fictions having of course been signed and published by Salinger. Buddy maintains that he is telling a "true" family history but he also hints that he is the same person as

J.D Salinger; on the other hand he repeatedly insists on the autonomy of art and the irrelevance of biographical criticism. He thus subverts both the fictionality of the events and the literariness of the manner in which he describes them. Ihab Hassan is among the first critics to have placed Salinger in a postmodernist context underlining that these later narratives "ungainly, prolix and allusive... define a kind of anti-form. Their impertinent exhortations of reader and writer undercut the authority of the artistic act".<sup>28</sup>

In his *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) Kurt Vonnegut also collapses the traditional relationship between author-narrator-protagonist. The frame story makes self-reflexive remarks about writing the anti-war novel that the author has been trying to write after his witnessing the event of Dresden's firebombing (Vonnegut was actually employed as a prisoner of war in digging some of the 130,000 burnt out corpses out of the rubble after the air raid). The author confesses his type of narrative could not be accommodated into the conventions of traditional story-telling: "It has to be so short and jumbled jangled... because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre".<sup>29</sup>

What Vonnegut has produced is actually an anti-novel made up of a bricolage of fragments, short passages, grim, grotesque or fantastic, which narrate the experiences of Billy Pilgrim, the two-dimensional protagonist: his war-experiences (which resemble very much those of Vonnegut), his life after the war as a successful optometrist and a married man (social and domestic comedy) and his delusions of having been abducted by aliens and taken to their planet, Tralfamadore (science-fiction parody). These various planes of the narrative - autobiographical, fictional, fantastic - are not kept insulated from each other. After being taken prisoner of war, Billy Pilgrim is sent with other American prisoners to a German prison camp where a

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<sup>28</sup> Ihab Hassan: *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodernist Literature*, New York, 1971, p. 251.

<sup>29</sup> Kurt Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse 5*, Dell, New York, 1971, p. 19.

contingent of British veterans welcome them with a feast that gets the starved Americans violently ill and makes them crowd the latrines:

"An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains" Moments later he said, "There they go, there they go". He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book".<sup>30</sup>

The effect of this statement is double: it reminds the reader that the story has an autobiographical, documentary source, that the author "was there" and therefore the narrative is "true"; on other hand it reminds the reader that Billy and the author belong to different planes of reality, that we are reading a book, a story which is conventionalized, an artificial construction that is necessarily at a considerable distance from "the way it was".

This "baring of the device" is even more insistent in *Breakfast of Champions*, where Vonnegut several times brings himself as composing author to the "time present" of the narrative:

"Give me a Black and White and water, [Wayne] heard the waitress say, and Wayne should have pricked his ears at that. That particular drink wasn't for any ordinary person. That drink was for the person who had created all Wayne's misery to date, who could kill or make him a millionaire or send him back to prison or to do whatever he damn well pleased with Wayne. That drink was for me".<sup>31</sup>

In Robert Coover's story "The Magic Poker" too, his skill in evoking the background and generating mystery and suspense is constantly subverted by declarations of his own manipulating presence - the narrator who reveals he is the author:

"Bedded deep in the grass, near the path up to the first guest cabin, lies a wrought-iron poker. It is long and slender with an intricately worked handle and it is orange with rust. It his shadowed, not by trees, but by the grass that has grown up widely around it. I put it there".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Breakfast of Champions*, Panther, 1975, p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Coover: *Prick Songs and Descants*, Picador, 1973, p. 15.

This self-conscious attitude combined with a permanent self-reflexive or metafictional preoccupations reaches a climax in the work of John Barth. "Life-Story" for instance is a metafiction cleverly made up to outdo critics of metafiction:

"Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regress ad infinitum! Who does not prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes? That doesn't continually proclaim, ...Don't forget I'm an artifice!' That takes for granted its mimetic nature instead of asserting it in order (not so slyly after all) to deny it, or viceversa?"<sup>33</sup>

"Life-Story" traces its own story, that is the attempts of a writer to write a story about a writer who has come to suspect that the world is a fiction in which he is a character - a hypothesis which, if confirmed, would affect both writers, indeed, all writers, Barth included. The process of trying to make a story out of this "ground-situation" provokes various comments about the theory of fiction, such as the one quoted above, which seem to be comments upon the fiction but which prove to be part of the fiction. The metafictional frame is continually being absorbed into the picture. This "regressus in infinitum" which uses the alphabetical game for the name of the writer, is finally arrested by the device of the short-circuit:

"To what conclusion will he come? He'd had been about to append to his own tale inasmuch as the old analogy between Author and God, can no longer be employed unless deliberately as a false analogy, certain things follow: 1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question or deny its relevance or 3) establish some other acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader. Just as he finished doing so his real wife and imaginary mistresses entered his study; ...It's a little past midnight' she announced with smile; do you know what that means?"<sup>34</sup>. Thus interrupted he realizes that "he could not after all be a character in a work of fiction inasmuch as such a fiction would be of an entirely different character from what he thought of as a fiction", and

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<sup>33</sup> John Barth: *Lost in the Funhouse*, Bantam, 1969, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

as his wife leans to give him a birthday kiss, she obscures his view of his manuscript and makes him "end his ending story endless by interruption, cap his pen".<sup>35</sup>

Barth has called postmodernist writing "the literature of exhaustion", and has praised Borges for demonstrating "how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work - paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation".<sup>36</sup> Certainly, in seeking "some other (...) relation between itself, its author, its reader" than that of previous literary traditions, postmodernist writing takes enormous risk - the risk of abolishing itself, if ultimately successful, in silence, incoherence or what Fiedler calls "the reader's passionate, [that is non-aesthetic] apprehension and response".<sup>37</sup>

Therefore if postmodernism had really succeeded in doing what it set out to do, namely expel the idea of order, whether expressed in metonymic or metaphoric form, then it would really have abolished itself by destroying the norms against which we perceive its deviations. But the postmodernist rage was over in the late 1970s. Nevertheless it has had a huge impact on contemporary writing in liberating the imagination from rigid conventions, opening up new fictional possibilities and its new techniques and devices have enriched the arsenal of story-telling.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> John Barth: "The Literature of Exhaustion" in *Atlantic*, August 1967, p. 29.

<sup>37</sup> Leslie Fiedler: "Cross the Border - Close That Gap" in Marcus Cunliffe (ed.): *American Literature Since 1900*, 1975, p. 346.

## IV. REALISM *CUM* EXPERIMENTALISM (1980-1990)

The 1980s were a decade when, after the traumas of Watergate and Vietnam, the Americans yearned for healing and consolidation and, as Annette Kolodny pointed out "three presidents in a row - Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan - called upon the country to bind up its wounds, heal its divisions and commit itself to shared traditions".<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless it was a decade that questioned the monolithic conception of American culture. It was Sacvan Bercovich who remarked that "now it is said, in reaction against those who speak of an American literature or a national culture, that this country is sheer heterogeneity". The ruling elite has an American ideology, but the people have their own patchwork-quilt (rather than melting-pot) standing for American multifariousness: "America is many forms of ethnicity, many patterns of thought, many ways of life, many cultures, many American literatures".<sup>2</sup>

The metaphor of "the melting pot"<sup>3</sup> with its connotations of alchemy, industry and assimilation shaped American discourse on immigration and ethnicity for most of the 20th century. However after

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<sup>1</sup> Annette Kolodny: "Minority Discourse and the Pitfalls of Canon Formation", *Yale Journal of criticism*, I (1988), p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> Sacvan Bercovich: "Ideology in American Literary History", in *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (Summer 1986), p. 637.

<sup>3</sup> It originated in the title of Israel Zangwill's melodrama *The Melting-Pot* (1909) which declared that America is God's crucible, the great Melting Pot where all races of Europe are melting and reforming.

the World War II this image was mostly associated with cannibalism and cremation and the processing of mass robots. That is why the patchwork quilt, originating in women's culture, became "the new metaphor of national identity, one that acknowledged ethnic difference, heterogeneity and multiplicity, that incorporated contemporary concerns for gender, race, and class <sup>4</sup> producing what John Barth has called a "literature of replenishment".

The political context being republican, it had an impact on the literary landscape that on the whole became more conservative, although the best American writers can be said to evolve, as before, in opposition to the reigning ideologies of the official culture. With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 there was a renewed emphasis on the older assurances of patriotism, religion, consumerism and militarism. The two fundamental aspects that can now be discerned are a prolongation of postmodernism on the one hand and a rise of a new realism, its main manifestation being minimalist fiction, on the other hand.

Although on the whole high postmodernism is past its zenith, highly experimental works continue to be published by the already established postmodernist writers. Thus John Barth published *Letters* (1979), *Sabbatical* (1982), *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), Th. Pynchon produced *Vineland* (1990), Robert Coover wrote *After Lazarus* (1980), *Spanking the Maid* (1981), *In Bed One Night* (1983), *Gerald's Party* (1986), Donald Barthelme *Paradise* (1986), Joseph McElroy published *Women and Men* (1987), R. Federman wrote *Smiles on Washington Square* (1985), Don DeLillo produced *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1984), *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991).

A singularly interesting short fiction is *Spanking the Maid* which uses the theme and variations pattern which tightly controls the story centred round an image sequence( a maid enters a room, attempts to fulfil her duties , fails, is spanked by her master) in order to explore such problems as the relationship between order and disorder, life and death or the writer and the text.

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine Showalter: *Sister's Choice. Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 168.

*Gerald's Party* is a cocktail of postmodern practices and devices: it is a mock-murder mystery with stories-within-stories that mirror the cunning deceptions people play on each other and the overall manipulation of a great number of ever-shifting figures. The characters are mere voices, and voices and bodies keep changing into other clothes or even other bodies making metamorphosis a general principle.

The group of "paranoids" has enlarged to include besides Pynchon with his *Vineland* also Robert Stone with *A Flag for Sunrise* (1980), DeLillo with *Mao II*, and Mailer with *Harlot's Ghosts* (1991). These writers share a vision of a secret and dangerous other order. They glimpse behind the random surfaces and events a set of vested interests that must advance their ends through political and economic conspiracies. They see the American politics as controlled by the machinations of an elite that may at times embrace criminal groups.

Another type of experimental trend is graphic fiction which L. Olsen calls "the postmodern analogue of the medieval illuminated manuscript"<sup>5</sup>. It combines comic book art with elements of the novel as can be seen in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986). It is a tale of superheroes that inhabit a cyberpunkish alternate universe. It playfully fuses and confuses splendid drawings with a fake autobiography, a pseudo-history of one of the superheroes, a novel-within-novel, police reports, ornithological articles, letters, notes, reviews, toy brochures, advertisements, photos, a variety of cultural allusions such as to Francis Bacon's paintings or William Burroughs's novels. Its technique is strongly reminiscent of the surrealist collage-novels, Max Ernst's *La Femme à 100 Têtes* (1929) for instance.

Another example of graphic fiction is Art Spiegelman's successful *Maus* books (1986, 1992) which autobiographically documents Spiegelman's father's survival of the Holocaust in the form of expressionistic black-and-white cartoons where Jews are depicted as mice and Nazis as cats.

Generally speaking however the amount of experimental fiction is smaller in the 1980s and there is less postmodernist emphasis on

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<sup>5</sup> L. Olsen: "Introduction", *ANQ*, October 1992, p. 174.

subjectivity and indeterminacy, on self-reflexiveness, on hermeticism and on baroque eclecticism. Emerging writers choose more often than not to gaze on the everyday world, thus favouring realistic forms of fiction. This option can be clearly seen in the works of Raymond Carver, Frederick Bartheleme, Tobias Wolff, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Beattie, Richard Ford, Tom Wolfe, Mary Robinson, Anne Tyler, Alice Walker, Jay McInerney. This option is expressed by Tom Wolfe after his extremely successful New York novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1988) in an article published in *Harper's* - "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast: A Literary Manifest for the New Social Novel" - that recommends a return to the formula of the 19th century social novel (Balzac, Dickens, Thackeray and Zola). This article is extremely significant because of the way Wolfe interprets the postmodernist phenomenon. He declares that American fiction writers had capitulated to reality, that the rough facts of the world had driven them into submission, forcing a retreat into self-reflexive, self-indulgent and generally self-defeating postures. Tom Wolfe considers that American writers had handed over their authority to journalism and other purveyors of the documentary and urges them to make an effort to restore their authority.

Most younger writers have however responded differently to the challenge of contemporary reality; they do not want a return to the old formula but they have tried to renew and rejuvenate it. That is why novelists like Toni Morrison, Max Apple, Ted Mooney, Rachael Ingalls, Russel Hoban, Tim O'Brien, Steve Dixon, William Kennedy, T.C. Boyle have injected a dose of fabulation into their works. For them after the postmodernist experience, the external world could no longer be the definite, coherent whole that could elicit "a common sense of significance", as David Daiches would say. To them the everyday would increasingly appear as an ambiguous flux of information (in words and images) whose significance is deferred, making reality mysterious, unknowable. As Larry McCaffery points out the depiction of this world requires a definition of "realism" flexible enough to accommodate the claims to "realistic aims" made by writers as different as Robert Coover, Raymond Carver, Larry

McMurtry, Joyce Carol Oates, Walter Abish, Toni Morrison, William Gibson, Max Apple and Leslie Silko"<sup>6</sup>. All these "realisms" certainly need qualifications and in the case of some of the writers mentioned above their claim to "realism" relies on works that most certainly include elements that are at odds with the empiricist and rationalist aesthetics of realism, elements that we may definitely call anti-realistic.

Thus the works of Robert Coover, Toni Morrison, Max Apple to which we can add William Kennedy, Tim O'Brien, Stanley Elkin, Thomas Pynchon, Harry Mathews, Donald Barthelme have often been associated by critics with the oxymoronic concept of "magic realism", a type of fiction "propelled by the tension between realistic elements and fabulous magical or fantastic elements"<sup>7</sup>. As it is devoid of the external signs of experimentalism (self-consciousness or self-reflexiveness) this sort of fiction seems to share the assumption of the realist novel as does the opening paragraph of William Kennedy's *Ironweed* (1984):

"Riding up the winding road of Saint Agnes Cemetery in the back of the rattling old truck, Francis Phelan became aware that the dead, even more than the living, settled down in neighbourhoods. The truck was suddenly surrounded by fields of monuments and cenotaphs of kindred design and striking size, all guarding the privileged dead. But the truck moved on and the limits of mere privilege became visible, for here now came the acres of truly prestigious death: illustrious men and women, captains of life without their diamonds, furs, carriages, and limousines, but buried in pomp and glory, vaulted in great tombs built

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<sup>6</sup> Larry McCaffery: "The Fictions of the Present" in E. Elliott (gen. ed.), *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, p. 1164.

<sup>7</sup> Lory Chamberlain: "Magicking the real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing" in Larry McCaffery (ed.), *Postmodern Fiction*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1986, p. 7. He makes an interesting analogy with the magic aura of objects in the paintings of Henri Rousseau and Giorgio De Chirico and then a most illuminating discussion of the literary forefathers of "magic realism": Poe, Hawthorn, Melville, H. James, Faulkner, Hemingway, Marquez, Carpentier, José Donoso, Mario Vargas Llosa, Miguel Angel Asturias a. o.

like heavenly safe deposit boxes, or parts of the Acropolis. And ah yes, here too, inevitably, came the flowing masses, row upon row of them under simple headstones and simpler crosses. Here was the neighbourhood of the Phelans".

The third person narrative is realistically unobtrusive although the metaphoric "settled-down" seems to animate the inanimate. But the second paragraph clearly goes against any realistic description of the dead:

"Francis's mother twitched nervously in her grave as the truck carried him nearer to her; and Francis's father lit his pipe, smiled at his wife's discomfort, and looked out from his own bit of sod to catch a glimpse of how much his son had changed since the train accident."<sup>8</sup>

In Tom O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1975) the narrative alternates between the unimaginable reality of the Vietnam War and Paul Berlin's fantasy of escape, which is a sort of wish-fulfilment exploration of the possibility of desertion. The sections recording the fantasy are as realistic as the other sections and obviously involve the same characters. O'Brien insists that the fantasies are real, that "it wasn't dreaming - it wasn't even pretending, not in the strict sense. It was an idea. It wasn't dreaming and it wasn't pretending. It wasn't crazy"<sup>9</sup>. Therefore for O'Brien his novel is equally a book about the imagination as a power and reality in its own right, as well as about the war; the events of imagination are equivalent to, are as real as, the events of the external world, a principle that Lori Chamberlain regards as *the* central tenet of magical realism.

Magical realism holds an important place in women writers' vision. Afro-American women in particular find its aesthetics appropriate for representing the heritage of black culture, which can be seen in the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.

The element of fantasy may make us think of the fabulation we *have already talked about when discussing the second phase of postmodernism*. But American critics have used this term to refer to

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<sup>8</sup> William Kennedy: *Ironweed*, Penguin, New York, 1984, pp. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Tim O'Brien: *Going After Cacciato*, Dellacorte Press, 1975, p. 29.

works that are allegorical on the whole, whereas works of magic realism mostly obey the realist conventions. Donald Bartheleme's *The Dead Father* is about the problem of transporting a huge dead father to his grave, an allegory of the problem of the weight of family history on the individual.

What is however paradoxical is that magic realism is sometimes referred to as a new objectivity akin to photorealism or hyperrealism in art where the familiar is defamiliarized by foregrounding of detail. This heightened attention to the real is to be found in the fiction of Raymond Carver, Frederick Bartheleme, Marilynne Robinson, Tobias Wolff, Ann Beattie who are usually associated with the minimalist school of fiction. These writers generally produce short fiction, which has brought about a new flowering of the American story. Their works are peopled mostly with inarticulate people who altogether fail to grasp what is going on in their unhappy lives, let alone formulate it. These writers suggest causes and motives of moods and actions not by an introspection or by psychological analysis but by a foregrounding of significant surface detail. The tone is objective, the style deceptively simple with a terse, economical manner of exposition so that the overall illusion is realist.

Raymond Carver's short story "Viewfinder" begins with the following matter-of-fact flat description: "A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house. Except for the chrome hooks, he was an ordinary-looking man of fifty or so"<sup>10</sup>. Gradually however, the chrome hooks become ever more obsessing to the narrator, who behaves more and more strangely and ends up on the roof of his house shouting to the hook-man to take more photos. Because of the dispassionate and flat discourse the incident does not seem impossible, but there is a hint of eeriness. Ordinary everyday life acquires a translucent aura of mystery.

Minimalism has been frequently likened to the highly economical stylized method of Chekhov and Hemingway with their short spare but emotionally charged scenes. Still, as it is a postmodern phenomenon, the endings are much more ambiguous.

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Carver: "Viewfinder" in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Vintage Books, New York, 1982, p. 11.

There is also a difference between the minimalist type of fiction produced by Carver or Frederick Bartheleme and the radical minimalism practised by Richard Kostalanetz<sup>11</sup> who, beginning with the 1970s, started writing fictions of severely reduced elements such as mere lines, numbers, sequences of one to three words.

Frederick Bartheleme's art in *Moon Deluxe* (1983) and *Second Marriage* (1984) also defamiliarizes lower middle class life giving it fantastic edges while it describes these ordinary people's exclusive preoccupation with business and sex, their gossip, their illusory attempt at community life in condominiums and their actual "institutions": fast food joints and shopping malls.

Jay McInerney's formal technique of defamiliarizing New York night life and the atmosphere in a great magazine's editorial offices is set off by the tour de force of writing the whole novel as a second person narrative.

Another term that is frequently used for this new, postmodern realism is that suggested by Jerome Klinkovitz. For him "experimental realism" as illustrated by the works of Walter Abish, Ken Gangemi or Guy Davenport, is not a return to the tradition of verisimilitude, but a logical progression from innovative fiction and abstract expressionism which has led to superrealism in painting (illustrated by the canvases of Richard Estes). Abish for instance incorporates in his vision the new technology of the late 20th century which surrounds us with highly polished reflective surfaces as well as the way that reality is perceived on the model of the camera picture, which excludes the intellectual presenting an "unstructured load of information". "There is no interpretation, no meaning, no world-making (...) descriptions simply mean themselves as surface is the central principle of superrealism which experimental realism has adopted. In *How German Is It* (1980) Abish presents the smooth sanitized surfaces of the new Germany embodied by the new town of Brumholdstein. It is an ordered ambience in which characters change clothes and sexual partners. But when a sewer line bursts the old

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<sup>11</sup> Kostalanetz's minimalism is close to the school in music and painting that evolved in the 1960s.

Germany covered by the new town materializes as the all-pervasive stench from a mass grave. All is described in an austere defamiliarized manner, almost as in a student's copybook. All hierarchal values are removed from Abish's perception, not so that we see the thing in itself...but rather to emphasize the opaque nature of the sign".<sup>12</sup> The title alludes to the idea that what is familiar is the American public's idea of Germany whereas the new Germany is presented with the technique of defamiliarization.

In the large variety of "realisms" in the contemporary literary landscape, S. Birkerts discerns a trend made up of "novelists of ideas" who, in spite of America's deep and abiding hostility to intellectuality, "do not so much seek to provide a picture of the present as to refract an understanding of it through the crystal of the intellect".<sup>13</sup> The oldest and most anomalous of these novelists is Paul West, a maximalist modernist of great energy and verbal resource as testify such novels as *The Very Rich Hours of Count Von Stauffenberg* (1980), *Rat Man of Paris* (1986) or *The Women of White Chapel and Jack the Ripper* (1991).

Norman Rush fills his pages with a remarkable density of references. The grand courtship comedy *Mating* is told by an unnamed narrator with impressive strategies of bringing her wit and learning to bear on her narrative. Her idiom is a kind of museum of late modernity combining post-Freudian, post-feminist and post-Marxist principles and categories.

Rebecca Goldstein has produced brainy novels that betray her training as a philosopher: *The Mind-Body Problem* (1989) and *The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind* (1989).

Richard Power in his *The Goldbug Variations* (1991) makes great scholarly demands on the reader to whom he gives a crash course in genetics and microbiology.

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<sup>12</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz: "Experimental Realism" in Larry McCaffery (ed.), *Postmodern Fiction*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1986, pp. 63-74.

<sup>13</sup> S. Birkerts: "Mapping the New Reality", *Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 1992, pp. 102-110.

The postmodern historical period has witnessed a huge technological revolution particularly in the domain of information exchange and communications. Computer terminals and personal computers, satellite dishes (which bring into homes a huge number of TV channels from all over the world), xerox machines, answering machines, video-cassette recorders and compact discs - all have become part of an everyday reality that seems to outdo the imagination. The individuals live in an ambiance saturated with media-produced messages and images, where they have to continuously interface electronic machines that have created a global cyberspace, where the incredible progress of science (in vitro fertilization or organ transplants in medicine, highly sophisticated arms and missiles and surveillance equipment in warfare and espionage are only some of the most amazing achievements) challenges the most soaring imaginations. Hence perhaps *the unprecedented development of SCIENCE FICTION* which acquires a new prestige as major writers start experimenting with it in the 1960s: John Barth in *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse 5* (1968), Vladimir Nabokov in *Invitation to a Beheading* (1969). William Burroughs had set passages of his *Naked Lunch* (1959) in such dystopian states as "Freelandia" and "Interzone" and used science fiction techniques, time and space travel in *Port of Saints* (1975) and *Cities of Red Night: A Boy's Book* (1981), while *The Place of Dead Roads* (1984) happens in near-future South America. In America the genre had never had the status it enjoyed in Europe due to such writers as H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Karel Capek, Eugen Zamiatin, J.L. Borges and Italo Calvino. But the situation has changed to a large extent as an important body of science fiction works has been produced since the 1970s. They evidenced the possibilities of the genre as a vehicle for serious thematic exploration and stylistic concerns. Samuel Delany has embraced science fiction for its linguistic potentialities, for the creation of word-worlds. *Babel-17* (1966) and *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) display metafictional features. His more recent *Triton* (1976), *Neveryona* (1983), *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) show the influence of Borges, Claude Levi-Strauss and Foucault. His novels are often confusing, as there is no linear story line, characters are shifting and time is distorted. *Nova*

(1968), considered by many critics as his master, piece makes a suggestive use of myth and archetypes (The Holy Grail, Orpheus and Prometheus). *Dhalgren* (1975) records the hero's search for names and it is extremely disconcerting for the reader as it has no definite points of reference in time or space, no beginning or ends. The protagonist has no identity (he is called just "The Kid") and his quest to discover his name and background through a multiplicity of verbal and social systems begins and ends in the fractured symmetry of a name: Grendal-Dhalgren. Alongside Th. Disch, J.G. Ballard and Roger Zelazny, Samuel Delany is associated with the New Wave science fiction movement.

The influence of Delany is felt in the works of William Gibson, the leading practitioner of "cyberpunk"<sup>14</sup> - a style that combines futuristic science fiction with the tough atmosphere of crime fiction. Thus, *Neuromancer* (1984) describes the near future world of "the Sprawl", a vast urbanized area roughly covering the United States. It is a world controlled by ruthless rival multinational corporations that hire "mercs" for stealing information from each other, no matter if the operations involve kidnappings and murders. The protagonist Case belongs to the underworld which is also controlled by criminals. He is a "cowboy", that is a specialist who, by linking his brain directly with computers, manages to pirate data by breaking through the "cyberspace matrix". This notion is Gibson's most original contribution to speculative fiction: it is a subreality simulated by a sentient, globally linked computer database. Case has been brutally deprived of his semi-psychoic ability to penetrate cyberspace because he has conspired against his employers. But his new employers surgically restore his abilities and use him to penetrate a global information grid and counteract a plot involving a huge artificial intelligence. In his exploits Case is helped by Molly, who uses concealed cybernetic weapons e. g. the remarkable surgically implanted razors beneath her finger nails. The swift and colourful dialogue and the images from the punk-culture

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<sup>14</sup> The antecedent of this type of novel may be deemed Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* (1951).

play the trick of "familiarizing" the reader with a vividly described haunting future imaginatively derived from the technical developments of the 1980s. His more recent novels - *Count Zero* (1986), *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) evolve towards a greater psychological depth and sophistication.

Ursula LeGuin also achieves vivid hypothetical images of the future which are informed by close readings of Dostoevsky and Borges, Philip Dick, Taoism and the social sciences - whereas the influence of the Latin American magical realists is pregnantly felt in Steve Erickson's surreal pictures of Los Angeles in *Station to Station* (1985) or *Rubicon Beach* (1986). Striking visionary pieces are also Pat Cadigan's *Mind Players* (1987), Richard Kadrey's *Metrophage* (1988), Richard Power's brilliant maximalist puzzle *The Goldbug Variations* (1991) or Mark Leyner's hallucinatory language pockets in *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990).

More recently cyberpunk has splintered into subgenres<sup>16</sup>:

a) stream-punk: high tech alternate histories like the one found in Bruce Sterling and William Gibson's *Difference Engine* (1991) which starts from the premise that Charles Babbage actually managed to build the computer he really only dreamed of in the 1830s, which led to an informationalization of culture a whole century before it did happen.

b) splatterpunk: hard-edged grim present day universes populated by the psychotic, the affectless morally bankrupt as in Bret Easton Ellis's controversial *American Psycho* (1991) which is a scathing satiric attack on Wall Street mentality.

c) slip-stream: a term coined by Bruce Sterling to refer to that subgenre denoting the twilight zone between fantasy fiction/S.F. and mainstream fiction, a hybrid designed to make the reader feel uncomfortable epistemologically and ontologically as does Ted Mooney's *Easy Travel to Other Planets*. Such a work illustrates the fact that science fiction techniques have affected to a certain extent *main-stream* writers, such as R. Federman, John Calvin Batchelor, Rachel Ingall, Ted Mooney, Steve Erickson, Margaret Atwood, Joseph McElroy or Don DeLillo, who are not usually associated with

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<sup>15</sup> L. Olsen: "Introduction", *ANQ*, October 1992, p. 174.

the genre producing what Larry McCaffery more appropriately calls "quasi-science fiction".<sup>16</sup>

Thus Joseph McElroy's *Plus* (1977) is his only work of science fiction and a singular experiment with style. The title hero, Imp Plus, is a disembodied brain travelling in a rocket. He develops not only an outstanding consciousness of human possibility but also a language that is a strange combination of neuropsychology and Gertrude Stein.

Ted Mooney's *Easy Travel to Other Planets* (1981) is placed in a near future that enables the author to evoke familiar details of contemporary American life. But at the same time the characters experience a strange "new emotion" and suffer from "information sickness" (a disease symbolic of postmodern man's sensation of overstimulation, that is of being besieged not only by a multitude of stimuli at once, but also conflicting stimuli at that). This eerie illness can be somewhat relieved if the sick person assumes "the memory elimination posture", a remedy that suggests the individual's utter sense of confusion and his ultimate self-defence: deliberate oblivion. It is a novel that conveys a very strong sense of the strangeness and destructiveness of contemporary American life, sense of drifting and dislocation, a sense of loneliness, anxiety and even fright. Mooney achieves an interesting fusion of imaginative power (he has been compared to Hawkes, Pynchon, Borges and Marques) and daring content (the novel begins with the seduction of Melissa, a biologist, by Peter, the dolphin whom she is studying) with a cool realistic rendering of action and manners (akin to the style of R. Carver or Ann Beattie). The narration has a cinematic quality on account of the non-sequitur principle that operates the scene succession and even within paragraphs. The resulting *collage* of disparate elements graphically renders the confusing pressure of simultaneous sensations and emotions on the individual's consciousness. *Easy Travel* also dramatizes existing global tensions as it describes an impending world conflict over energy resources in Antarctica.

John Calvin Batchelor's *The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica* (1983) is also a futuristic fantasy featuring an apocalyptic

<sup>16</sup> Larry McCaffery: "The Fiction of the 1980s" in E. Elliot, (gen. ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 1169.

collapse of world order. The first-person narrator, Grim Fiddle, is making his confession in an Antarctic prison in 2037. He is a repenting former revengeful mass-murderer whose narrative is full of digressions on political, philosophical and religious subjects. The resulting fiction combines traditional forms of narrative with fantasy and philosophy in an original and inventive way. His use of strange names (e.g. Lamba Time-Thief, the protagonist's mother and even the name of the protagonist himself) as well as his wide range of knowledge have made critics find a filiation between Batchelor and Pynchon.

Don DeLillo's highly appreciated *White Noise* (1984) likewise contains an apocalyptic note in its middle section entitled "The Air-borne Toxic Event". The author's intention is however a serious social criticism of certain dehumanizing aspects of American consumer culture. The protagonist narrator, Jack Gladney, is a death obsessed Chairman of Hitler Studies in a mid-western university. He has a large but affectionate family, typical of American postmodern times: wife (the fourth) and four children from the two parents' previous marriages. Their peaceful life becomes insecure because of two outside factors: an experimental drug that the protagonist's wife illegally takes in order to relieve her fear of death and a lethal cloud of insecticide released by an industrial accident from which they flee but Jack does not escape unharmed. The bracy style which includes black humour and a few metafictional accents<sup>17</sup> conveys the strong impression of an immediate contact with an ironically reflected American reality with its steady bur of "white noise" (the all pervading sounds of traffic, radio, T.V, home appliances that constantly produce life endangering radiations and toxic substances, the reverse aspect of technological progress). The terrifying lethal cloud becomes the central symbol of a human knowledge that has got out of control: "What good is knowledge if it

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<sup>17</sup> "May the days be aimless, Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to plan" the narrator jots down for instance in a manner strongly reminiscent of the self-reflexive voice in Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. (Don DeLillo: *White Noise*, Penguin Books, p. 98).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 148-9.

just floats in the air?", exclaims the narrator's fourteen-year-old son. "It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second every day. But nobody actually knows anything".<sup>18</sup>

*White Noise* is a good example of what Larry McCaffery calls "*politics cum experimentalism*",<sup>19</sup> which is also a prominent feature of recent American fiction. Although the most popular treatment of most popular themes is still the traditional realistic approach (John Irving: *The World According to Garp*, 1978, and *The Cider House Rules*, 1985; Joyce Carol Oates: *The Angels of Light*, 1981; Alice Walker: *The Color Purple*, 1982), most writers have gone beyond the possibly limiting conventions of social realism and have produced political novels of great, even commercial, success as happened with Gore Vidal's *Burr* (1973), E.I Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1974), Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975), J.C.Oates's *Bellefleur* (1980), Tom Robbins's *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980).

Quite a number of other writers such as John Barth, Ishmael Reed, John Calvin Batchelor, Raymond Federman, Walter Abish, Ron Silliman, Robert Coover, Joanna Russ, June Arnold, Kathy Acker, Harold Jaffe have produced daringly experimental fictions that at first seem to build an illusion and then demolish it as plot elements fail to cohere and characters divide and shift. The metafictional approach is used to subvert traditional fictional assumptions, thus suggesting not only how literary conventions come into being but also how ideologies and their authority are built.

Ron Silliman, for instance, one of the Language Centred writers (with Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman) has developed since 1974 a new form of plotless, creative prose that intends to refocus attention on language. *Ketjak* is such a non-narrative work, free from the readerly expectations of creating characters. The formal rule is that each paragraph contains a double number of sentences in comparison with that preceding it. Free from the constraints of coherence and cohesion, he concentrates on the detail of

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<sup>19</sup> Larry McCaffery: "Fictions of the Present" in E. Elliot, (gen. ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 1175.

daily life in his city of San Francisco with an outstanding precision, recording a wide range of common sights and sounds seldom included in traditional forms of fiction, as can be seen in the following sample: "Every word is either current or strange, or metaphysical, or ornamental, or newly-coined, or lengthened, or contracted or altered. Weathercock, scrimshaw. Between the television and the bed was an ironing board, half-finished bottles of lager atop it. When looking out of the window you no longer see what is in there, it's time to move Narwhale, I confront you".<sup>20</sup>

Silliman uses vocabulary from various areas, from technical jargon to ghetto slang. Critics have remarked that rival codes jostle for predominance across his pages revealing the means by which language users encode and manipulate reality" and that his way of renovating the prose poem "is bringing a new realist tradition into existence."<sup>21</sup>

Another highly experimental language conscious socially-engaged writer is Harold Jaffe, who similarly rejects the traditional concepts of plot and character, focusing on the voices of marginalized people. He reveals the cultural, political and linguistic forces that oppress the underprivileged. His *Mourning Crazy Horse* (1982) and *Beast* (1986) are richly innovative, the former being made up of twenty intricate pieces of fiction and the latter of ten fictions modelled on the medieval Bestiary. These socio-political pieces are multi-layered, the narrative pattern being never linear and the characters are protean and shifting. In spite of the mordant tone, the effect is often moving on behalf of the socially oppressed, in an extremely disquieting world. Yet his fiction makes no suggestions, puts forth no solutions. However, like many other contemporary writers he is aware that "the sources of oppression and marginalization today are no longer a specific enemy - a racial bigot, an evil politician, a greedy oil company - but the larger, amorphous, less easily identifiable networks of words, images and information through which people and objects are controlled and deceived".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ron Silliman: *Ketjack*, This Press, San Francisco, 1978, pp. 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Rae Armantrout: "Ron Silliman" in Larry McCaffery, (ed.), *Postmodern Fiction*, pp. 503, 505.

<sup>22</sup> Larry McCaffery: "Fictions of the Present" in Emory Elliot (gen. ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 1176.

The 1980s also witnessed another specific literary phenomenon: the emergence of numerous new voices from formerly oppressed and marginalized categories: women writers; ethnic groups: blacks, native Americans, Mexican Americans, Oriental Americans etc.; and gays.

*American women writers* offer the same rich mosaic of modes and techniques used in fictional explorations.

The feminist movement and such pioneer works as Mary McCarthy's *The Group* (1963) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) opened up new areas of fictional investigation, certain aspects of women's lives (particularly their sexuality) that had never been literary subject matter before; so it was a novelty of content that was treated within the realistic mode as testify such novels as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), Kate Millet's *Flying* (1974), Alix Kates Shulman's *Memoires of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1973), Lisa Alter's *Kinflicks* (1976) or Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977).

Generally speaking, many women writers who are not feminists or even hostile to this movement (such as Anne Tyler, Gail Godwin, Diane Johnson, Cynthia Ozick or Joyce Carol Oates ) seem to favour the realistic conventions in their commitment to meaning and an empirically knowable reality.

Many women writers are quite memorable regional chroniclers. Joan Didion evokes Southern California, Carolyn Chute and Cathie Pelletier record the atmosphere of Maine and quite a number of women's pens describe the South. Thus Anne Tyler explores family relationships and domestic problems in Southern settings. Her *Accidental Tourist* (1985) and *Breathing Lessons* (1988) bear witness to her rich humaneness and belief that alienation can be transcended.

Josephine Humphrey's *Dreams of Sleep* (1984) and *Rich in Love* (1987) are set in her native South Carolina, Beverly Lowry's *Breaking Gentle* (1988) and Carolyn Osborn's *A Horse of a Different Color* (1977) have Central Texas as their locale whereas Bobbie Ann Mason sets *In Country* (1985) in Western Kentucky.

But Erica Jong in her *Fear of Flying* uses her protagonist narrator Isadora Wing for metafictional remarks that underline the idea that

psychoanalysis, literature and life too construct her self: "I started believing I was a fictional character invented by me". Or "I knew I did not want to be trapped in my own book".<sup>23</sup>

After the mid-seventies however, realism comes to be associated with patriarchal order and therefore inadequate for feminine writing; henceforth women authors attempt to subvert its authority by experimental devices. Self-reflexive questioning of the traditional modes appears more insistently in Joana Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Lyn Hejiman's *My Life* (1980) or Erica Jong's *Fanny* (1980). Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Marilynne Robison in *Housekeeping* (1979), Jayne Anne Phillips in *Black Tickets* (1981) use a highly metaphoric style that gives their texts an uncommonly poetic quality. A certain postmodern blurring or even merging of genres become a favourite mode for expressing feminist insights. Thus Rhoda Lerman's *Call Me Ishtar* (1973), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984) combine autobiography and fiction using mythical overtones. Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978) is something like a poetic essay, Mary Daly's *Gyn/ Ecology* (1978) suggests deconstructive readings, whereas Michelle Cliff's *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (1980) intermingles autobiography with poetic prose, philosophy and literary criticism.

In order to reach a wider audience for the problems they want to drive home women writers frequently use popular genres such as the mystery plot (Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows*, 1974), the picaresque structure (Erica Jong's *Fanny* and Lisa Alter's *Kinflicks*), horror films (Ann Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, 1977 and *Vampire Lestat*, 1985). But the two most popular genres they mostly

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<sup>23</sup> Erica Jong: *Fear of Flying*, New American Library, New York, 1973, p. 183 and p. 258.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Moers first (1975, in her pioneer book *Literary Women: Three Great Writers*) postulated the idea that the Female Gothic as a genre expressed women's dark protests, fantasies and fears. She defined two types of Female Gothic, one patterned on Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* where the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine, and

turn to are the Gothic Novel<sup>24</sup> and Science Fiction. We have already mentioned the earlier use Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor made of the Gothic tradition. New novels in this vein continue to appear: Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), Gail Godwin's *Violet Clay* (1980) or Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur* (1980). Oates's later creation *The Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982) is a tragi-comic parody of a 19th century Gothic novel about five sisters.

Women writers are drawn to Science Fiction because they find it an ideal modality to examine various implications of feminist theories. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* uses SF to probe the fragmentation of personality as experienced by a woman standing at the cross-roads of past, present and future and thus examines the past and present definitions of the feminine and glimpses one utopian and one dystopian variant of the future. The four interacting characters-Jeanette, Joanna, Janet and Jael, the husband - are actually aspects of the same female self. The text is also highly metafictional commenting on the sexes, society and its own role in bringing about social change. Ursula LeGuin in *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974) uses SF in order to explore political and cultural issues of anthropology whereas *Always Coming Home* (1985) is a multimedia work of narration, poetry, graphical art and music that presents a race of the future.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), Margaret Atwood creates a near future dystopian society based on a theocracy inspired from a literal interpretation of the Old Testament. In Gilead women have virtually

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the second deriving from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a birth myth about horrifying progeny, both literary and physiological. A new dimension was added in the late 1970s from a psychoanalytic perspective that regarded the Female Gothic as a confrontation with the reproduction of maternity and mothering, embodying "the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront", cf. Claire Kahane: "The Gothic Mirror" in Shirley Nelson, Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengether (eds), *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1985, p. 335.

In the mid '80s, poststructuralist Lacanian feminist critics then viewed the Female Gothic as a mode of writing expressive of the feminine and the romantic, the transgressive and revolutionary at the same time, they equated it with the feminine unconscious (Elaine Showalter: *Sister's Choice*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, p. 129)

no rights (no right to property, no permission to read or write, no other work but physical) and are only used for reproductive purposes. In spite of the bleak totalitarian society of Gilead it imagines, the book is relieved by humour, by an attractive oral style that includes many metafictional remarks and also by offering its own criticism and interpretation in the form of a frame story which features an academic debate on the manuscript of the tale at a Conference of Gileadean Studies that takes place in 2135.

### ***Writers belonging to ethnic groups***

Black authors offer the same variegated picture of styles, modes and techniques. Thus, in *The Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison uses fabulism and realism, superstition and myth in order to render the feeling and implication of being black in America. Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* revives the epistolary form and creates a remarkable idiom to represent the condition of being an American black woman. Toni Cade Bambara too is outstanding for her ear for black dialect. Her collections of stories - *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) and *The Sea Birds Are Singing* (1977) make a remarkable use of dreams and discontinuity in space and time. *The Salt Eaters* (1980) gives an unforgettable picture of the South by recording a few hours during which Velma Henry, a political activist who wants to commit suicide, undergoes a spiritual healing. The quick shifts in time and place include spiritual and magical elements and embrace a large number of impressive characters (welfare mothers, primeval mud mothers, singers, ex-pimps)

As we have seen, Samuel Delany is a New Wave Science Fiction writer of great originality. His writings use anticipation techniques in order to project features of the present stretched to their logical conclusions or limits into new possible cultures. His metafictional texts explore racial and social issues, but also the way language is used to generate identity and beauty.

Octavia Butler also employs Science Fiction as a means of social criticism in which sexual and racial oppression hold a prominent place. In her *Patternmaster* (1976) two sons rival to succeed their dying father

as head of a telepathic clan network which rules a rigidly hierarchical polygamist future society. *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and *Wild Seed* (1980) trace the Pattern backwards over a span of 4,000 years. The period from after 1690 is especially noteworthy for its recreation of the time when the slave trade was at its height. In *Kindred* (1979) too a young woman is repeatedly whirled back 160 years into the nightmare world of slavery. *Dawn, Xenogenesis: 1* (1987) and *Adulthood Rites, Xenogenesis: 2* (1988) imagine hybrids between an Earth woman and aliens that bring some hope of survival for a scanty and blinkered humanity of the future.

Ishmael Reed has brought new vigour to black writing drawing on black poetry, ritual and myth from which he has created a voodoo aesthetics. He has also infused parody, playfulness and black humour in his more recent novels *The Terrible Twos* (1982) and *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) that view racism and sexism from postmodern angles.

Native American writers have produced impressive creations evoking the life of this historically oppressed minority. In her *Storyteller* (1980), Leslie Silko collects stories, poems, legends that express the cultural heritage she received in her childhood spent on a Pueblo Indian Reservation. Many of these tribal myths and stories record the bitterness of Indian feeling caused by the dishonesty, betrayals and cruelty of white colonialists.

Louise Erdrich draws on her Chippewyan background in *Love Medicine* (1984). The struggle for survival of native Americans is chronicled in *The Beet Queen* (1986) by several Indian or partly Indian narrators. The novel blends magic realism with black humour and existential philosophy in its picture of the suffering and misery uprooting brings about.

Navarre Scott Momaday centres his works on his Kiowa ancestry in *House Made of Dawn* (1968), *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), *The Gourd Dancer* (1976). Old customs and traditions underlie such novels as *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978) by Gerald Vizenor, *The Death of Jim Looney* (1979) and *Fool's Crow* (1986) by James Welch.

Maxine Hong Kingston brings the experience, feelings and traditions of Oriental Americans to enrich the multicultural literary landscape of the last few decades. *The Woman Warrior: Memoires of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) combines autobiography, biography and myth to present her own life and that of female relatives; the same technique is used in *China Men* (1980) for her male relatives.

The life and problems of Mexican Americans is reflected in the works of such new writers as Richard Rodriguez, Arturo Islas and Sandra Cisneros, who in her *Woman Hollering Creak and Other Stories* uses a precise spare prose to create unforgettable characters.

Gay authors such as Kate Millet, Joanna Russ, Bertha Harris, Coleman Dowell, Edmund White, Terry Andrews have produced novels that try to counteract predictability by more experimental devices.

By way of a conclusion, we would like to emphasize again an aspect specific to recent fiction, namely the postmodern collapse of genres which, as we have seen, began in the 1960s with such works as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) and Ronald Sukenick's *Up* (1968).

The process went on and led to the production of strange unclassifiable prose works. Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *The Right Promethean Fire* (1980) seem a cross between critical essays and prose poems, John Ashberry's *Three Poems* (1972) and Lyn Hejiman's *My Life* (1980) combine self-reflexiveness with the prose poem; Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1981) and *Great Expectations* makes a new use of plagiarized texts, pornography, drawing and literary criticism.

Therefore, the study of the motley literary landscape of 1980s American fiction has given us the general impression that, on the whole, there is a renewed interest in investigating the contemporary life with its people and institutions, an attempt at rendering with an overwhelming variety of devices what it feels like to live in Fin-de-siècle America. There can be seen a certain retreat from extreme postmodernist techniques whose excessive use had produced a number of practically unreadable books and a return to the more traditional values and conventions of realism. But perhaps the most characteristic feature of the decade is the interaction of these trends, the mutual impact these modes of writing had on each other.

## V. THE HUMANIST TRADITION: BERNARD MALAMUD

Humanism is the key word to the work of Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) stemming from his conviction that man is better than is currently accepted. "I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day", Malamud confessed in his speech on the occasion of receiving the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel* in 1959. "Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed by the words he has invented to describe himself as he is now: fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, organizational (...). The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest."<sup>1</sup>

In order to convey his vision, Malamud combines sheer realism with allegory, fabulation and romance. Thus his first novel, *The Natural*, 1952, is built on the motif of the quest, which sets the deep structure pattern of most of his novels. While the main events in the protagonist's life are based on historical facts<sup>2</sup>, the narrative appears to James M. Mellard<sup>3</sup> to rely on the flexible structural archetype of the pastoral. Based upon the seasonal cycle of change, this pattern gives Malamud here and in his next three novels a central

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<sup>1</sup> Granville Hicks: "Literary Horizons", *Saturday Review of Literature*, October 12, 1963, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> They fuse the lives of three famous baseball players: the shooting of Eddie Walkins in 1949, Babe Ruth's stomach illness of 1925, the throwing of a crucial game by the White Sox in 1919.

<sup>3</sup> James Mellard: "Four Versions of Pastoral" in Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field (eds.), *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, New York University Press, New York, 1970, p.68.

controlling form in the pastoral fertility myths of dying and reviving gods, of youthful heroes replacing the aged, of the son replacing the father, the primary expression of which is found in vegetation life rituals, the myth of the Fisher King and its historical successor, King Arthur and the Grail Quest.<sup>4</sup>

Roy Hobbs starts his baseball champion career by out-pitching "Whammer Whambold", the reigning king (in the process actually killing his coach, Sam, a father figure). At the end of his career, a fertility cycle is closed and a new one opened, as he is out-pitched by Herman Youngberry, another new player fresh from the country. The major phase of Roy's career is condensed into one long season, from spring to fall. Thus, like a sun-god, Roy reaches the zenith of his stardom on June 21, and suffers decline after September 23, when he overreacts at the Knights' premature victory celebration. One can easily see Roy coming out of the West proudly bearing Wonderboy (his lance-like magical bat with phallic symbolic overtones) as a knight whose mission is to rescue a dead kingdom (that of manager, Pop Fisher and his New York Knights) and revitalize it. He breaks many records and even brings rain from heaven (Malamud makes rich use of wasteland imagery) but in the end he fails. The narrative is alive with sharp comedy, wonderfully sustained suspense and high flights of fantasy that lead to surrealistic moments. But at the core it is a serious moral fable centred round Roy's moral failure. Roy is besieged by evil without (plotting figures such as Gus the gambler/ Merlin and Memo the temptress/ Morgan le Fay) and within (his egotism which verges on narcissism). A symbolic wound is inflicted on him by Harriet Bird who tries to awaken him to a mature understanding of life, to a sense of a more glorious meaning in life than merely breaking every record in the book. After recovering from the wound, when he returns to the game, he is no longer totally selfish. For 15 years he does serve the community and infuses a new life into the whole team, but at key moments he loses form and fails. The source of these failures is his

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<sup>4</sup> C. Earl Wasserman: "The Natural: Malamud's World Ceres" in *The Centennial Review*, Fall, 1965, pp. 438-60. See also Norman Podhoretz: "Achilles in Left Field", *Commentary*, March, 1953, pp. 321-26.

inner flaw which is externalized in his attitude to the women in his life: Memo, barren and morbid and Iris Lemon/ the Lady of the Lake, so fertile that she is already a grandmother and will also bear Roy's child. Roy rejects Iris because he cannot stand the idea of becoming even nominally a grandfather. He does not care for children and his fertile energies are distorted into merely self-satisfying barren lust. The destructive quality of his exclusive preoccupation with self is emblematically expressed by Hobbs' grotesque appetite for food. The image he has of himself on a train going nowhere gives a sense of his lack of direction and scope in life. Unaware of the spiritual dimension any true quest should have, he succumbs to the forces of evil, if only for a brief span. He repents of the corrupt deal he has made with gamblers, but it is too late: his bat symbolically splits into two. He finally rejects the dirty money he received for throwing the match and beats up the plotters, leaving his last baseball game in a mood of self-hatred. He knows that as he did not learn anything out of his past life, he will have to suffer again. Suffering as a way to regeneration to a new life is the moral lesson of the book. Or, as Wasserman reads it, the novel's central concern is "the infantilism of the American hero (...), the psychic and therefore moral regression of the gifted ... natural' who could (but does not) vitalize society and reveal to it the capacities of human strength".<sup>5</sup>

*The Natural* appeared to many critics as one of the most original novels of its days, representing at the same time an excursion into hallucination and the poetic investigation of some of the distinctive sources of modern anxiety, all welded together with irresistible comedy and serious symbolism.<sup>6</sup>

In Malamud's next novel *The Assistant*, (1957), the quester, Frank Alpine, ends by undergoing a change of heart, reaching redemption through love. The narrative discourse seems to have moved toward realism, the mythical allusions being generally buried more deeply. Like *The Natural*, it is the record of a failure, the utter failure of Morris

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<sup>5</sup> Earl Wasserman: *Op. cit.*, p. 446.

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Richman: *Bernard Malamud*, Twayne Publishers, New Haven, 1966, p. 142.

Bober, the sixty-year-old poverty-stricken Jewish grocer whose last six months are related in the novel. Extremely honest, Morris has all his life been dogged by ill luck. The book opens with his being struck on the head by thieves ( ritual killing ) in November and in the ninth chapter he is buried after an attack of pneumonia in April (the use of the seasonal cycle is ironic in Bober's case). He dies deeply upset at his meaningless life in which he has achieved nothing. His only son Ephraim has died as a mere boy and his daughter, Helen, who dreams of college, has to go out working as a secretary, to help make both ends meet. And Morris' only hope, to sell the store and move to a better neighbourhood, has once more been denied. If we regard Morris as a dying Fisher King, who is then the son who must replace him? It is Frank Alpine, a shifting Westerner who is one of his original attackers. Out of remorse he comes to make amends by becoming the old man's assistant. Yet Frank cannot go quite straight and persistently steals from the grocer's nearly empty cash register. Likewise his love for Helen, at first reciprocated, culminates in a ravishment which chills her heart. The novel impressively records Frank's arduous, perpetually back-sliding struggle to be simply good, to repay Morris and to love Helen without deceit. It is a deeply moving struggle with continuous relapses into theft, lying and lust, culminating in banishment. Yet Frank decides to take the dead man's burden upon him (an act symbolically foreshadowed by his toppling into Bober's grave)<sup>7</sup>. In the last chapter we see him working in the prison-like shop in daytime and as cook at night, in order to pay the rent and help Helen through college. All of a sudden he has been able to control his lust ( he has stopped peeking at Helen in the bathroom) and his inclination to cheat in the store. In the end Helen is surprised to notice that he has "changed into somebody else". Frank has been converted to Morris' goodness,<sup>8</sup> has been

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<sup>7</sup> Attitude to paternity, the father standing for adult and selfless responsibility for others, is a touchstone in Malamud's code of values.

<sup>8</sup> This conversion is expressed by Frank's literally choosing to become a Jew. It has been remarked that contrary to other Jewish American writers, Malamud uses the Jew as a metaphor, envisioning him as mythical man. Having said "All men are Jews", Malamud uses him as the emblem of a realizable humanity. See James Mellard, *Op. cit.*, p. 80; also Robert Alter, "Jewishness as Metaphor", L. A. Field and J. W. Field (eds.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 29-42.

able to acquire a new life, a new identity, the painful emergence of selflessness from selfishness being the real theme of this parable. In the recurrent image of the prison-like store and that of the folk figure of the *Schlemiel*<sup>9</sup> who is usually its main inmate, Robert Alter reads Malamud's way of suggesting that to be fully a man is to accept the most painful limitations<sup>10</sup>. Those who can escape these limitations achieve only an illusory self-negating kind of freedom, for they become less than responsible human beings.

Malamud's conception of character is heavily influenced by the naturalistic view of human nature, but his idea of an escape from circumstance in love and an awareness of the meaning of suffering, goes back to an older tradition, *The Assistant* being also the embodiment of a basic culture conflict, namely that between ancient wisdom and traditional values (that Morris calls the Law) and the American values of success and pragmatism.<sup>11</sup> As an outsider, rootless and moving, Frank Alpine is at first attracted by the store as a stable material gain, not realizing that Bober regards it as a tomb from which they want to escape into American life. When he does become aware of what the shop really is, he tries to make it a thriving American business but finally accepts it for what it is. Frank also gradually accepts Bober's philosophy of suffering and acquiescence, symbolically represented by his conversion to Judaism. In Malamud's handling of the old myth, the wanderer at last becomes a Jew.

We should like to remark the deceptively simple style of Malamud's narrative where the style is primarily a function of character, managing to convey both hope and agony in the rhythms of an art-language from Yiddish roots that he has created. The effect of this language is frequently humorous, much of Malamud's humour lying, as Alfred Kazin has noticed about his stories, in the conscious

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<sup>9</sup> *The Schlemiel*, a plaything of the gods, is a person who is involved in the world and becomes its victim; also called picaresque saint.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Alter, *Op. cit.*, p. 35

<sup>11</sup> Walter Shear: "Culture Conflict", in L. A. Field and J. W. Field (eds.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 207-218

attitude to dissonance and his wry handling of situations.<sup>12</sup> What in life we may feel as oppressively pathetic becomes in his work surreal, overcoloured, picturesque, illustrative of a folk culture in the Chagall style. But if in the short stories the Jews frequently become mere emblems of goodness, Morris Bober is a fully convincing flesh and blood character because the novelist has managed to capture the grocer's grinding slavery to his store, his ebbing energy, his bleak lack of money, his dismal hopelessness.

It is noteworthy that the author's voice is never obtrusive, his views being diffused into, and worked out through the characters. There is also a subtle use of mythical and symbolic allusion. Helen's name bears a lot of symbolic weight without making the character less realistic. Thus the Spartan Moon - goddess was called "Helen", and Helen (the cause of the Trojan war) is also the great symbol of feminine beauty. The name is also etymologically related to Helle, bright goddess of death and resurrection. Therefore to the extent to which Helen has redeemed Frank she is a fertility goddess. Peter Hays has aptly remarked<sup>13</sup> how, in order to emphasize this role of Helen's, Malamud frequently uses symbols of fertility in the terms of her description (her body suggests birds in flight and flowers to Frank; she gives out a floral fragrance; the rose Frank carves for her becomes a symbol of his love for her). This symbolic meaning of Helen's bird and flower images is enriched by Frank's own symbolic relationship to St. Francis of Assisi (his very name, his childhood spent in San Francisco and his early fascination with that saintly figure).

A important case for Malamud's deeply significant sophistication under his deceptive clarity and simpleness is made by Ihab Hasan<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Alfred Kazin: *Bright Book of Life. American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*, Little Brown and Co., Boston & Toronto, 1973, p. 142. Mention should be made that Malamud has published three volumes of short stories *The Magic Barrel* (1958), *Idiots First* (1963), *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973), which do not enter the scope of this study, as they center mostly round the same themes as his novels. But we should like to specify that he is no less a master of the short story than of the longer type of fiction.

<sup>13</sup> Peter L. Hays: "The Complex Pattern of Redemption", in Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field (eds.), *Op. cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>14</sup> Ihab Hassan: "The Qualified Encounter", in L. A. Field and J. W. Field (eds.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 205-6.

who throws into relief the fact that whatever awareness time brings to the characters, whatever qualified dignity it confers upon their failures every act in the novel is whittled by irony, every motive is mixed with its opposite in the complicated relations of Gentile to Jew, of saviour, seducer and thief to those upon whom he preys. Thus Frank's final act can be seen as one of self-purification and initiation but also as an act of self-repudiation and even symbolic castration.<sup>15</sup>

The same amount of ambiguity can be seen in Malamud's next novel *A New Life*, (1961), which for all its humour, narrative pace and emotional power, has been generally deemed as weaker than its predecessors. The ambiguity we have referred to lies in the two possible ways of reading the protagonist, S. Levin, the past-drenched, formerly alcoholic, instructor who comes west on a quest to seek rebirth in the corrupt society of Cascadia College. The realistic detail loses in this novel the quality of the mythic placelessness from *The Assistant*, and creates the unbreathable atmosphere of the local English department. The illiberal and antihuman forces at work in that small society are embodied in an unsparing gallery of emotionally crippled or estranged characters; Levin's story is also framed by the seasonal cycle: the novel opens with his arrival at Cascadia College in August and ends with his departure in June (with a pregnant would-be wife and her two adopted children). Like the baseball season, the academic year appears as a modern variant of the vegetation myth cycle. Again as in *The Natural*, the human micro-society (baseball world or college campus) is presented in Wasteland images in ironic counterpoint to its rural setting. The mythic archetype of the Fisher King transluces this time in the character of Gerald Gilley, the professor of composition (a passionate fisherman). The irony springs from that fact that Levin has a false image of his quest for he imagines himself either as a future glorious Don Juan or a successful liberal humanist politician (the protean variants of Levin's name - S, Sy, Seymour, Lev, Sam - give the image of an unfocused identity, of the unintegrated type of hero,

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<sup>15</sup> For the view that all circumcision was originally a sacrifice to the goddess of fertility see Peter Hays, *Op. cit.*, p. 227.

familiar from the preceding novels). Levin does succeed in starting a new life by assuming fatherhood and marrying Pauline Gilley (who has been his mistress) but in order to do so he has to give up the very quest he has come on, for Gerald Gilley threateningly promises him he will see to it that Levin will never teach in a college again. Hence Glenn Meeter<sup>16</sup> reads Levin as an incurable romantic, and the novel as an antiromantic satire, an ironic comment on the futility of Levin's essays and repeated regenerations.

Tony Tanner<sup>17</sup> on the contrary considers that by making his final choice, Levin has given up dreams for reality and has paradoxically found his freedom by willingly taking on the load of family commitments. The quest for a new life ends, as in *The Assistant*, in what looks like an imprisoning set of ties and commitments, and Levin certainly has a trapped feeling up to the last moment but finally understands in a flash that the prison was really himself. The moral of the novel has become explicit, with relevance for a large number of contemporary American heroes: the real freedom is liberation from the prison of self.

Yet we consider that it is Sidney Richman's conclusion that best suggests the central ambiguity of the novel: "Success in failure, failure in success - the ritual conclusion of *A New Life* is the same as that of *The Assistant*".<sup>18</sup>

Although some critics consider *The Fixer*, (1966), a disappointing work<sup>19</sup> most assessments of this book (which brought its author a National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize) are superlative. The novel follows closely the historical data of the famous Mendel Beiliss case: wishing to ignite a pogrom in pre-Revolutionary Russia, the anti-Semite organization The Black Hundred, concocted a charge of ritual murder of a Christian child against the clearly innocent

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<sup>16</sup> Glenn Meeter: *Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Tanner: *City of Words*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1971, p. 332.

<sup>18</sup> Sidney Richman: *Op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Scholes: *Fabulation and Metafiction*, University of Illinois Press, Urbane, Chicago, London, 1979, pp. 200-203.

Beiliss. After two years in prison without a trial, in spite of the almost pathological attempts of the minister of justice to secure an indictment based on evidently false evidence, Beiliss was finally brought into Court in October 1913 and acquitted. Although he uses the historical frame quite faithfully, the author profoundly alters the character of the protagonist changing him from a blameless respectable "family man" with five children into a typically Malamudian hero: the shifting quester who through nightmarish suffering (the more appalling because of its historical truth) reaches a new awareness of himself, comes to maturity by a full acceptance of his past and a sense of responsibility and commitment.

Yakov Bok, an unpolitical fixer, leaves his ghetto in a country town, after his wife Raisl has run away with another man and seeks a new life in Kiev, wishing for a mere opportunity to live a modest peaceful life based on his work. In order to shake off his endemic poverty he shaves his beard, (he has already given up God and taken up the free thinking philosophy of Spinoza), takes a Gentile name and lives in an area forbidden to Jews, getting a foreman's job in consequence of an act of charity done to a rich, anti-Semitic Russian manufacturer. Irony is a major force in the shaping of the protagonist's fate and thus, again in consequence of another act of characteristic charity (this time to an old Hasidic Jew) Bok is found out as a Jew and accused of ritual child murder. During the over two years full of psychical and mental torture spent in prison, the man who formally sought only the fulfilment of the needs and drives of his own self, gradually becomes determined to give meaning to his excruciating suffering<sup>20</sup> by seeking not only freedom for himself but justice for all. He refuses a pardon, which will mean admitting his guilt, he rejects personal redemption by conversion to Christianity or by confession attributing murder to Jewish incitation. Although akin

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<sup>20</sup> Malamud's rendering of Bok's suffering in old Russian jails strongly echoes, not surprisingly, many scenes and descriptions in Dostoevsky's *Memoires from the House of the Dead*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*. For a more extensive presentation, see Maurice Friedberg: "History and Imagination - Two Views of the Beiliss Case" in L. A. Field and J. W. Field (eds.), *Op. cit.*, p. 227.

to the situation of Job, the archetypal suffering Jew, Yakov's plight is existentially absurd, as in his godless universe all the forces of an organized despotic society are against him. But trying hard not to give in to despair in his hopeless situation, Bok discovers *there are* some friends, people who care for human justice. These people who are willing to die for him (Bibikov, the liberal magistrate, Kogin, a Catholic prison guard and Shmuel, his Jewish father-in-law) demonstrate the universality of Yakov's role and the effectiveness of his suffering.<sup>21</sup>

A climactic moment in Bok's inner journey from egotistical self-concern to a sense of being involved with others is the scene with his faithless wife who has been allowed to visit him in prison with the confession he refuses to sign and thus betray other people for his own comfort. But she has actually come to ask him to assume formal fatherhood for her illegitimate son; this Bok does, being able to forgive Raisl and therefore his Jewish past - Raisl is an anagram for Israel - and take the mature responsibility for others that fatherhood symbolizes.

Another key moment is the confrontation of Yakov with the father figure of the Tsar, Nicholas the second, (addressed as "Little Father") in a reverie he has on his way to the trial. They talk first of children, fatherhood and blood.<sup>22</sup> The Tsar is in a rather feeble condition and weakly tries to justify his conduct in history. But Bok cannot accept the Tsar's lying excuses at starting pogroms and shoots him dead with a pistol. This dream ritual killing of a father figure symbolically reveals Bok's change of spirit: he will no longer defer to the weakening authority that is impeding his right to a full human life. The humble unpolitical Bok has acquired a sense of militant political commitment: "One thing I've learned, he thought,

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<sup>21</sup> James Mellard: *Op. cit.*, p. 80. The critic sees Malamud's Jew as an "emblem of realizable humanity", the Law in *The Fixer* being a synthesis of the Christian, Judaic and humanistic traditions.

<sup>22</sup> "Blood" and "cross" images recur throughout the novel. To Tony Tanner, these recurrent images of spilt or dribbling blood give the impression that Malamud conveys a sense that various forms of blood-letting are the very essence of history (*Op. cit.*, p. 337). We should however mention that they should also be related to the scapegoat motif of redeeming, suffering and sacrifice.

there's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can't be one without the other, that's clear enough. You can't sit still and see yourself destroyed.

Afterwards he thought, where's no fight for it, there is no freedom. What is it Spinoza says? If the state acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature, it's the lesser evil to destroy it. Death to the anti-Semites? Long live revolution! Long live liberty!.<sup>23</sup>

Significantly Malamud ends his novel here, with a man becoming fully and naturally aware of the limitations and responsibilities of man-in-history- without giving the readers the issue of the trial. In his fusion of historical fact and fiction, Malamud's centre of interest is individual moral growth.

The recurrence of "blood" and "cross" images make the reader perceptive of the scapegoat motif that runs through the novel lending it archetypal depth. The child-victim, Zhenia Golov, has been scapegoat for his murderous mother and her lover; Yakov is to be scapegoat for the murder; the Jews are to be made scapegoat for the evils of old Russia; Bibikov is sacrificed for Yakov who also becomes a martyr to the Russian Jews; the prison guard Kogin, too, dies for Bok's freedom. Over all these characters looms large the image of Christ, the great scapegoat figure. But Yakov feels that Christ gave away his life for nothing, unless the value of his sacrifice is realised in lives that follow. As James M. Mallard maintains *The Fixer* insists as strongly as *The Assistant* upon the cyclicity of life, the necessity for hope, and the value of suffering as well as its redeeming power: "Yakov Bok's ministry, the heart of this teaching, is the fact that the two and the half years in prison he maintained his innocence and became a hero and a potential saviour of his people, a people including not only the Jews but all the men who suffer without cause".<sup>24</sup> Thus one feels at the open ending that, should Bok die as a great scapegoat figure, his death will presage a better life for man.

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<sup>23</sup> B. Malamud, *The Fixer*, Mladinska Krjiga, Ljubiana, 1969, p. 335.

<sup>24</sup> James Mellard, *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

Alan Warren Friedman defines Bok's stature against that of the classical tragic hero.<sup>25</sup> He is not such a hero whose suffering is magnificent because of grandeur of character and the height from which he falls; on the contrary he is a poor *schnook*<sup>26</sup> distinguished only by misery and his sense of victimization. But because he embraces these and because, in rejecting God seemingly obsessed with the perpetuation of injustice, he finds something in himself and in his life to affirm, he becomes a paradigm of a new type of hero - one who, given the context of his meaningless arbitrary world and his own feebleness, even irrelevance, when confronting it, triumphs because he endures with integrity and dignity.

We should like to emphasize that the book derives much of its power from the craftsmanship of Malamud's disposition of analogous characters to set off underlying archetypes, from his remarkable mastery of dialect and from the centrality of the prison image, which is literal fact as well as Malamud's perfect emblem for both the Jewish and the human condition in general.

As if wishing to belie his sticking to one pattern in his novels<sup>27</sup> with *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969), Malamud produced a different type

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Warren Friedman, "The Hero as Schnook", in L. A. Field and J. . Field (eds.), *Op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>26</sup> A stupid and easily victimized person; a dupe.

<sup>27</sup> Tony Tanner sees Malamud's first four novels as roughly following the same pattern: the hero travels somewhere in quest of a new life. He is a figure of some distinct practical ability, but has no faith in anything beyond the urgencies of his own hungers and appetites. When he arrives in the world where he is to search for this new satisfying life, despite his attempts to secure only his interests and further his single development, he runs into all kinds of bad luck and hampering involvements. The search for a new freedom usually ends in an imprisoning tangle of relationships and commitments and responsibilities. The attempt to deny time and the impingements of history yields reluctantly and painfully to the discovery that when a man sets out on his travels he is involved willy-nilly in various processes and large networks of events which the individual can neither resist nor reshape. To be born is to be born into history, and various thoughts and theories concerning the freedom and the invulnerability of the individual self fade before the experienced fact of involuntary involvement in the lives of other people.

This discovery is either preceded or accompanied by a ritual slaying (or replacing, or dispossessing) of a symbolic father figure of failing powers (never an actual parent). This coming of age is signaled by the fact that the hero has to decide whether or not to take on the symbolic *role* of father (i. e. before he can have his own children he has to demonstrate that he *willingly* accepts all the ramifying responsi-

of book in point of tone, structure and design, although there is still the familiar theme of the quest for identity. It is his comic *Portrait of the Artist*<sup>28</sup>. In each of the six stories or pictures, Arthur Fidelman is caught frozen in some crucial posture on his way to an aesthetic Calvary. This episodic montage achieves an allegory of the artistic and moral life in which Fidelman plays both the parts of betrayer and betrayed, until his ultimate betrayal which is his salvation. We follow the progress of his career in Italy from one failure to the next, first as art critic, then as painter and lover, then as janitor in a whorehouse and forger of a Titian nude, then as sculpturer of perfect holes (like Claes Oldenburg). In the last story, *The Glass Blower of Venice*, Fidelman has given up painting and lives by going errands. He seduces the wife of Beppo, a glass-blower and, when caught, is initiated by the husband into homosexuality. Beppo also teaches him the craft of blowing glass and finally we see Fidelman in America working as a craftsman in glass and loving men and women. Wilfully shocking, Fidelman's submission to Beppo may read in Robert Scholes' style as "the acceptance of imperfections in existence"<sup>29</sup>. Fidelman has to accept his identity as a craftsman, not an artist, and give up a theoretical concept of Love for the love of men and women. Beautifully organized with a specific setting for each picture (a particular Italian city: Rome, Milan, Florence, Venice) and using a rich range of cultural allusion (particularly painters, such as Giotto,

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bilities and limitations on self that the role involves, by agreeing to be the nominal father of children not his own). If he refuses, then his suffering - and they all suffer - has been for nothing and his life remains devoid of meaning. This is the fate of Roy Hobbs (...) If the burden and the role of nominal paternity is accepted, then the schlemiel quester finds his true freedom, not in further gratifications of self, but in willingly undertaking to live for other people. By changing his attitude to the respective claims of self and others, he enters on his second life, the real "new life" (...). [and] achieve[s] the only true heroism in Malamud's work, the heroism of growing up. (*Op. cit.*, p. 333).

<sup>28</sup> The influence of choice on Malamud has been suggested by Norman Leerwho points out similarities between *The Assistant* and *Ulysses* in "Three American Novels in Contemporary Society", *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, III (Fall, 1962), pp. 68-86.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Scholes, *Op. cit.*, p. 192.

Rembrandt, Titian, Picasso, Modigliani ), the book reveals Malamud the craftsman at his wry and comic best, "a gentle fabulator"<sup>30</sup> that combines fact and fantasy, realism and surrealism into the moral meaning of allegory.

If *Pictures of Fidelman* does end with a new life for the protagonist, Malamud's next novel, *The Tenants* (1971) is one of unrelieved gloom. The central characters, Harry Lesser and Willie Spearmint are both writers, one white, the other black. Lesser has been writing ten years on a novel when the narrative opens and he is having trouble with the end. Spearmint, a Negro of a rather revolutionary cast of mind, moves uninvited into the dilapidated tenement, in order to write on Lesser's book. He steals and burns the former's manuscript. The frightening tension is enhanced by the neurotic Irene Bell, a Jewish, off-Broadway actress, who shifts from Willie to Lesser, so that each man has a deadly vengeance against the other. The book ends with Lesser hitting Willie with an axe "through bone and brain as the groaning black's razor-sharp sabre, in a single boiling stabbing slash, cut the white's balls from the rest of him.

Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other"<sup>31</sup>.

This closing sentence emphasizes the key word of the novel: *anguish*. It is a book about the terrible and violent anguish of racial confrontation, about the lonely grinding anguish of the creative artist, about the alienated anguish of human relations in general in the latter half of the twentieth century America. The gloomy atmosphere is almost Gothic in quality, all the familiar things are touched with strangeness in the tenement house, inducing a pathological utterly unbearable fear into the protagonist. The cry of "mercy" uttered by Levenspiel, the landlord, who has presumably witnessed the scene, a cry that is repeated in anguish for half a page after the writer has formally marked "The End", underlines by its obsessive yet defeated repetition the lack of human sympathy and compassion characteristic of modern times.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> B. Malamud, *The Tenants*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1971, p. 230.

*Dubin's Lives* (1979) takes the reader back into the more familiar realistic domain of domestic life and to the more familiar Malamud pattern, themes and motifs. The title comes from the fact that the protagonist, William Dubin, is a distinguished biographer who has probably taken to writing lives in part "to teach himself what others saw better"<sup>32</sup>. Like Emerson in *A New Life*, like Spinoza in *The Fixer*, like Giotto and the other painters we have mentioned in *Fidelman's Pictures*, D.H. Lawrence (whose life Dubin starts writing when the book opens) functions as a cultural archetype of great impact. Here we have the life of Dubin who at the age of fifty-seven sets out to write Lawrence's life. A family man with an adopted son from his wife's first marriage and a daughter of his own, he all of a sudden feels attracted to young Fanny Bick who is roughly the same age as his daughter. Dubin suffers deeply first with frustrated love and then with remorse. Under the influence of Lawrence's religion of sexuality, he sees Fanny, with whom he starts a duplicitary affair, as an earth deity, a life-giving goddess of fertility.<sup>33</sup> There is a strange identification between biographer and biographee, the former undergoing the same passion ( in the two acceptations of the word, of love and calvary) as the latter. The biographer even goes through a spell of impotence with his wife *and* work. He has hallucinatory visions of Lawrence: "A spectral face glowed like candle-flame, waxen, with red beard and rancid enraged ice-blue eyes; he cursed in an agitated high-pitched voice: You rat-faced Jew, I am known to you - as Christ who is born to the Spirit, Word, the Man, the Male. Your Jew mind is antagonistic to the active Male Principle. You dare not live as a man ought. Sex to you, is functional, equivalent to passing excrement. You fear primal impulses. Work which should be an extension of human consciousness you distort to the end - all of existence. You write muckspout lives because you fear you have no life to live. Your impotence is Jewish self-hatred. I detest and loathe you! Mud worm! Stay yer bloody distance! Th'art blind to the joy of my life. Tha a'lltna touch me. Burn yer blashsted book for s'lltna live t'see it done".<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> B. Malamud: *Dubin's Lives*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p. 313.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 328.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 318-319.

Dubin's soul is an arena where wrestle pagan hedonism and Hebraic law based on loyalty, respect for authority and responsibility. Hence responsible fatherhood plays an important role in his sense of identity and he prays: "My children help me!"<sup>35</sup> He finds it impossible to placate his grown-up children and his sensible lovely wife who is however as fallible as he is (she has an affair with her analyst). After a near brush with death (he falls ill with bacterial pneumonia), Dubin is able to find his bearings: he is reborn to a renewed loyalty to his wife and past, without putting an end to his affair. His own life enriched by his Lawrentian contact with an earth goddess, he awakes to a new commitment to his old loyalties. Although he loves Fanny, he cannot give up his wife, because "there are other things"<sup>36</sup> in a marriage, not only sex. It is what Dubin finds out for himself, it is what he finally teaches the attractive emancipated Fanny.

The book is ingeniously constructed as Dubin's affair parallels that of his daughter Maud to a man of his age and the pattern of symbolic death - rebirth is emphasized by the seasonal cycles (the book opens in late summer and ends in pre-spring, after three years). During Dubin's crises, the house becomes alive with suffering, it "sighed, moaned, made sounds like living presences".<sup>37</sup> The atmosphere gets definitely psychic when one night the ghost of the old man who had hanged himself in the barn tramped across the field to the yellow black-shuttered house and trod up the stairs. "Opening the creaking bedroom door, he flung his bloody noose on their bed".

A great story teller, humorous and suspenseful, Malamud is also a gifted creator of atmosphere, and a subtle chronicler of conscious and unconscious human feeling ( he makes a rich use of revelatory dreams) who succeeds in lending his narrative the enigmatic and puzzling quality of life. His consistent use of selective omniscience gives intensity and focus to the discourse which dramatizes a most interesting mind, deeply humane, sensitive and sophisticated.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 319.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 361.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 288.

With his last novel, *God's Grace* (1981), Bernard Malamud produced a book startlingly different from all his previous novels. It is a highly original moral fable which uses allegory and fantasy with remarkable wit and profundity in order to make a penetrating and haunting comment on human nature and the human condition. It deals with the physical, spiritual and intellectual experiences of Calvin Cohn, the only human survivor (on an oceanography research schooner) of a nuclear disaster (The Day of Devastation) followed by a God-sent Second Flood. Proffering half-humorous, half outraged railing against his apparently heartless and unheeding creator<sup>38</sup>, Cohn finds himself stranded, Crusoe-like, on a tropical island together with another survivor on the boat, a chimpanzee he calls Buz whom his former owner, professor Bunder, has equipped with a device which enables him to understand and communicate with human beings. Buz's version of the language with its German phonology is extremely vivid and hilariously comic. Through Buz, Cohn is able to communicate with the other apes that gradually appear on the island. For a while they live a life of almost idyllic harmony with Cohn as self-appointed leader. He gives the Chimps Cohn's Admonishing, a sort of modern version of Moses's ten commandments.<sup>39</sup> In his classes in the School tree, Cohn teaches the chimps history and tells them how God planned it that man had to contend with evil if he was truly to be a man. But "the awful thing was that the evil was a much bigger bag of snakes than man could

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<sup>38</sup> Cohn mentions having experienced a trial of faith - losing interest in religion, yet maintaining a more than ordinary interest in God Himself (*God's Grace*, Chalto and Windus, London, 1982, p. 56).

<sup>39</sup> Cohn's Admonitions read as follows:

"We have survived the end of the world, therefore cherish life. Thou shalt not kill.

Note: God is not love. God is God. Remember Him.

Lives as lives are equal in value, but not ideas. Attend the School tree.

Blessed are those who divide the fruit equally.

Altruism is possible, if not probable. Keep trying.

Aspirations may improve natural selection. Chimpanzees may someday be better living beings than men were. There's no hurry, but keep it in mind."  
(p. 171).

handle. We behaved toward each other like animals and therefore the Second Flood followed..."<sup>40</sup>

Before long however Cohn learns that history repeats itself, that the chimps also behave irrationally and bestially ridden by instinct (that of killing for sexual supremacy or for the pleasure of eating their fellow creatures). The light comedy changes into horrifying tragedy reminding the reader of Golding's bitter portrait of man in *Lord of the Flies* and Cohn ends by cursing the chimps and praying God for a Third Flood.

The book's deeply disturbing and extremely dense intellectual and metaphysical speculations are achieved with an uncommon economy by means of cultural allusion, particularly to Old Testament characters, Christ, Freud, Romeo and Juliet.<sup>41</sup> The very name the protagonist adopts<sup>42</sup>, Calvin, brings in connotative speculations about Original Sin, predestination and election. Likewise the Biblical archetype that Malamud uses ironically is that of Abraham and his beloved son Isaac. When tested by God, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his beloved son for the love of his God and was thus made the forefather of numerous chosen people. Cohn does not approve of the nature God has bestowed upon man, even on his way to death he cannot give God a blessing, so he will be sacrificed by Buz, his adopted son, and dies without issue. The archetype has been reversed. Yet in the end, on the sacrificial altar, Cohn suddenly becomes aware that all man can do is be grateful to God for whatever life he gets to live.<sup>43</sup> It is a bitter acceptance of man's imperfect nature, of the mystery of creation and existence, of man's fallible and mortal condition. In this

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75. Cohn makes a bitter remark about the uselessness of any religion, as none of them had prevented man's causing the Day of Devastation (p. 76).

<sup>41</sup> Such names are Esau, Luke and Saul of Tarsus, Mary Madelyn. It is also interesting to remark that the name of Buz, which might sound merely onomatopoeic to the profane is actually Biblical (Book of Genesis, 16).

<sup>42</sup> Cohn's initial name was Seymour (p. 135).

<sup>43</sup> "Merciful God", he said, "I am an old man. The Lord has let me live my life out" (p. 223).

book, Malamud has used Jewishness again as a metaphor for humaneness. Cohn argues hard that man should try to be more than a mere animal. It is a book that once again expresses the novelist's humanism and bears out Sidney Richman's remark on the place of Malamud in contemporary American literature:

"...In an age teetering on total annihilation, when little direction can be derived from our most cherished modern dreams", Malamud's "old message that we live on the Pale, threatened by extinction from within and without, and his belief that we can survive only by recourse to what is best in us, must strike deeply into all responsive men who revere their separate heritage and who long to be better than the world will seemingly permit them to be".<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Sidney Richman: *Op. cit.*, p.27.

## VI. NATURALISM, DARK HUMOUR AND BEYOND: NORMAN MAILER

Norman Mailer (b. 1923) is generally considered one of the most consistently revelatory writers about contemporary America. Engaged in documentary work, he yet asserts the force of his own style and the presence of the filtering ego in the events, thus authenticating the vision, frequently highly idiosyncratic, that he offers. He combines intensity of vision with rich invention, excelling in a genre that Tony Tanner calls the *demonized documentary*,<sup>1</sup> and has shown a continuous ability to expose himself to what is going on in America and respond with some kind of vital lexical performance.

Mailer owes his early and instant success to his first published novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), the best novel in English about the second World War, whose great merit is however that, although it presents the horror and bestiality of war more terrifyingly than any other book, it is still more than simply a war novel<sup>2</sup>. Mailer himself stated that he intended it to be a parable about the movement of man through history. He tried to explore the outrageous propositions of cause and effect, of effort and recompense in a sick society. The book finds man corrupted, confused to the point of helplessness, but it also finds there are limits beyond which he cannot be pushed, and it finds that even in his corruption and sickness there are yearnings for a better world.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Tanner: *The City of Words*, Jonathan Cape Paperback 92, London, 1970, pp. 348-349.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Allen: *The English Novel*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1965, p. 318.

The parable is expressed in human terms in the account of the capture of Anapopei, an island in the Pacific, from the Japanese. The two time planes in the narrative are the present of the fighting and the pre-war lives and backgrounds of the characters presented in flash-backs in the ten inter-chapters called "The Time Machine" - a device Mailer derived from Dos Passos, one of his most influential masters. These chapters give a panoramic view of a diseased America contaminated by social privilege, exploitation, poverty, racism and sexual decadence. The action in the present takes place on two levels: the actual fighting of the reconnaissance platoon under Sergeant Croft, which gives the reader the experience of soldier in the lines, and the master-mind strategical planning of the operation as conceived by General Cummings. The links between these two levels is the upper middle-class liberal Lieutenant Hearn, the General's staff officer, to whom the latter assigns the task of leading the platoon through the South jungle of Anapopei on a reconnaissance mission behind the Japanese line. Hearn disagrees with the General's elitist and Fascist beliefs although he greatly admires the General's intellect. Hearn is killed in action and the patrol fails in the attempt of attaining the summit of Mount Anaka, the majestic mountain that protects the rear of the Toyaku line. Yet quite ironically the island is captured, not as a result of the General's brilliant strategy but by incidental action ordered by the incompetent Major Dalleson whom the General has left in charge of operation during a brief absence. Where there should have been a pattern there is only absurd chance and irony, as the capture of the island practically serves no useful purpose. What the reader is left with is an impression of oppressed men who reach a point when they can be oppressed and pushed no further. The final irony is the way in which the men of the platoon turn in terrified flight down the side of Mount Anaka because of their sudden blundering into a nest of wild hornets - an image that seems to suggest nature's blind nemesis-like forces.

The fourteen men making up the reconnaissance platoon are carefully delineated with their social, emotional, economic and geographic differences and they are obviously intended to constitute a

microcosm of lower-class America, among the best achieved being a Mississippi dirt farmer, a sensitive Jew from Brooklyn, an oppressed Mexican American, a rebellious demonic west Texas rancher, an embittered itinerant coal miner from Montana, a reactionary Irish worker from Boston, a dull petty Kansas salesman, a cynical Chicago Polish hoodlum, a hedonistic Georgian. Yet these characters suffer from having to be representative types, they seem rather schematic and spiritually impoverished, all their experiences being generally reduced to sex in its crudest terms.

The narrative voice of Mailer is omniscient and detached, objective even to the absence of any human sympathy: whenever the reader draws close to a character, the narrative quickly shifts to another character or scene in order to avoid any real emotional involvement. It is the same attitude Dos Passos adopted to his characters in the *U.S.A* trilogy. Mailer's perspective in this novel is generally derived from American naturalism - Dreiser, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Farrell and Hemingway - also showing Marxist influences. The title of the second book "Argil and Mold" symbolically expresses the naturalist deterministic view that the human personality is moulded by the social, economic and familial milieu into which it is born. The naturalists see the individual as prey to forces over which he has no full knowledge or control, forces that may be biological (Wilson's sexual urges), social (Martinez's effort to be included in WASP society) or geographical (the jungle, the magnificent Mount Anaka). The naturalists' recurrent metaphor for society - the jungle- is the literal setting in *The Naked and the Dead*. The men who make tremendous will efforts to oppose necessity in this deterministic universe Cummings, Croft and Hearn, are the source of the remarkable dramatic tension in the novel and they represent moral value for Mailer at this stage in his creation. Cummings and Croft are men of power and of action, whereas Hearn's liberalism, which fails to turn into action, is therefore invalidated. Cummings is the intellectual Fascist with a theory. He maintains that the only morality of the future is a power morality, and a man who cannot find his adjustment to it is doomed. He considers the Army as a preview of the future. The General's intellect is brilliant and

his self discipline unrelenting, and his sense of power exhilarates him with a Napoleonic pride. His egotism and wish to humiliate make him a repulsive character. Yet there's a certain ambivalence in his delineation: his ability to reshape and recombine the elements of his tired army into a pattern of meaningful action emphasizes a creativity that wins him a certain amount of admiration translucent in the writer's presentation. It probably springs from a sense of identification Mailer seems to feel with him in his poise of Romantic artist fully confident that he can reshape or even recreate the world.

Made of the same emotional stuff like the General, Croft is the natural Fascist. He is the hunter who also kills men for the mere pleasure of killing and not only in combat (he snatches a bird from Roth's hands and crushes it to death or kills a Japanese prisoner in cold blood). He is the best soldier in the platoon endowed as he is with extraordinary courage and a ferocious hate of weakness. For all his hateful cruelty and lack of any human sympathy Croft is most impressive in his demonic rebellion that in the assault of Mount Anaka reaches archetypal dimensions. Reminiscent of Hemingway's Kilimanjaro in its stern aloofness, Mount Anaka symbolizes for Croft the immortality, eternity and immutable fate which make him more painfully aware of his own vulnerable mortality. His determination to scale Mount Anaka acquires the mythical quality of a Prometheus or Satan set on transcending their own flesh limits and limitations. There is no trace in the novel of the romantic kinship between man and nature. On the other hand Mount Anaka seems an objective correlative of man's struggle to know himself, a target as unattainable. With Croft's admitted failure, the last door is closed to significant human action in the novel, and the final statement is one of almost unmitigated blackness. The values with which the men arrived on the island, whether pervaded by selfish cynicism or by a naive acceptance of the American dream of success, are a clear condemnation of the American society. Moreover, the failed assault of Mount Anaka eliminates the possibility for a real hope for the individual by giving a frightening image of the futility of the individual courage and determination. Croft is a disturbing figure because it embodies the vision of lack of love, justice

and mercy which lies at the core of the novel.<sup>3</sup> Goldstein and Ridges persevere in carrying the wounded Wilson, out of a religious upbringing. But their struggle does not lead to any insight or regeneration. Nothing human is sacred and man is a mere mass of unpredictable lusts, anxieties and impulses.<sup>4</sup>

Through Hearn we come to understand what the novel's title means, actually its main theme. It suggests man's condition of utter naked exposure to his fate, which is death. This is the only certainty in a universe where he can turn nowhere for any sort of support. If Croft is the non-intellectual counterfoil to Cummings, Hearn is the counterpart of a different brand of intellect. Although he cannot change his thought into action, Hearn is remarkable for his independent thinking, he never gives in to ready-made technologies or to the elitism of the class he was born into or to the autocracy of General Cummings. He is able to explode bourgeois certitudes and refuses allegiance to any attitude or camp he has not reached by himself, in his own alienated way. His great valuable support is introspection, has enabled him to go beyond the mean values of the others: power, money, social prominence. The delineation of Cummings, Croft and Hearn represents a generally acknowledged great achievement. Without losing their individuality, they approximate, a Philip Buftis has aptly remarked, a modern incarnation of three great heroes of western civilization<sup>5</sup>. Cummings, in his overwhelming urge to shape reality to his own needs and make the world conform to them stands for Faustian man. Croft, in his irrepressible desire to attain to the vast strength of Mount Anaka suggests the Satanic hero. And Hearn in his dispassionate rejection of everything that would impos-

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<sup>3</sup> Chester Eisinger considers that the book is flawed, among other things because Mailer could not fully express and control the apocalyptic rage at man and society that informs almost every page of it and which wells from deep and bitter disappointment; see *Introduction to The Naked and the Dead*, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York, 1968, p. XXIV.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hearn's definition of man as "a particular envelope of lusts and anxieties and perhaps some goodness.", Norman Mailer: *The Naked and the Dead*, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Buftis: *Norman Mailer*. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York 1978, p. 25.

conditions to the autonomy of his thought approaches Socratic man. From the mythical dimension of these three characters and their naturalistic context springs the dramatic tension in the novel or to put it in artistic terms the identity of their work is given by the conflictual opposition between its romantic flashes and its realistic grain.

Self absorption is specific to every man in the platoon and the only temporary and illusory means of escaping from isolation and loneliness is sex. The shallowness of the characters' inner life pungently reveals the terrible banality that engulfs American life. The original point Mailer pessimistically makes is that banality prevails not because there are no men of original intelligence but because there is no real place for them into society. As Philip Buftis comments "Dalleson's rallying final cry "hot dog", that ubiquitous symbol of American mediocrity and meretriciousness,<sup>6</sup> is emblematic of the major's personality. Therefore ultimately, the destiny of the human race, and the American society in particular, is left not with the stiff-necked individual (Red) nor with strong military man (Cummings/Croft) or the intellectual (Hearn). It rather falls to the mediocre, placidly stupid type represented by major Dalleson. The concern of *The Naked and the Dead* with the shabbiness of the American dream and this final implicit statement on the ascendancy of reactionary mediocrity in post-war America shows Mailer to be very much of a social critic.

Mailer's style successfully even if with some rawness attempts to avoid all sentimentality, and plainly God, equality, purity and charity do not exist in the world of *The Naked and the Dead*. The writer created a hard, plain and pungent prose akin in ascetic precision and evocative power to Hemingway's muscular style so effective in the felt immediacy of its images. Mailer's choice for the war as his subject stemmed from his conviction that only a crisis situation can truly bare man's real nature. His exploration of human nature reveals both the struggle between animal desire and spiritual aspiration and the struggle between individualism and authority in their essential patterns. Through the force of his narrative Mailer makes the plight of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

reconnaissance patrol work a catharsis upon the reader. Three hundred pages of rattled nerves, quivering fatigue, fevered plodding and scaring disillusionment deplete us and make this novel an experience.

Mailer's second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951), initiates his experiment of subjective narrative technique, being told in the first person by Michael Lovett, an amnesiac. Having suffered a head wound in World War II, he is now in a dingy room on the cliffs of Brooklyn Heights that overlook the East River (this is Mailer's *Barbary Shore*), rootless and desensitized, trying to write a novel. Therefore, in addition to its central theme, which is political, *Barbary Shore* is also, like many works by Doestoevsky, Gide and Huxley, a novel about the making of a novel. Lovett becomes enmeshed in a nightmarish set of relationships with the five other inhabitants of the boarding house. The novel's setting is insular, even claustrophobic, yet its outlook is international. After the sexual drama between Lovett and Guinivere and then Lannie, the novel gains in intensity and interest through the character of McLeod, Lovett's Trotskyite friend. Through his disquisitions the book becomes a political commentary on the state of the world. In a tone of bitter despair McLeod voices his apocalyptic conviction that the world is doomed to holocaust because war is an economic necessity. These disquisitions however are a structural flaw of the novel as the plot slows down almost to a standstill and we are left with pure discourse. The novel fails because it attempts too many things: to deal with such problems as alienation in symbolic terms, while simultaneously developing credible characters and also presenting a lengthy political diatribe. Consequently the structure and the tone of the novel are inconsistent and ineffective and the parts are not integrated and *Barbary Shore* fails to be a successful allegory, or successful fiction, or successful polemic either.

*Barbary Shore* is a novel of ideas more in the European tradition in which Mailer experimented with the received tradition of the American novel. However, to use Richard Foster's apt distinction it was not an experimentaton with form in the manner of modernist novelists like Joyce but with subject matter, in the tradition of D.H. Lawrence. Although it is a novel concerned with ideology, *Barbary*

*Shore* is also in flight from any institutional ideology associated with a particular party or any group outside the searching individual. It is Mailer's first attempt to bring together his interest in both politics and psychology. In *Advertisements for Myself* he describes this imaginative synthesis as an effort to build a bridge between Marx and Freud. From this novel onward Mailer attempts to merge his ideological and philosophical interests with the more intellectual tradition of American naturalism bringing together, as Leo Braudy specifies,<sup>7</sup> the meditative European intellectual with the craftless American naïf, Malraux's scholar-adventurer with Faulkner's stay-at-home social criticism, Fitzgerald's innocence, and Hemingway's commitment to unmediated action. With *Barbary Shore* Mailer authenticates the place of ideological controversy in American literature, not because he is the first to use political topics but because he fuses them with the psychological preoccupations that had distinguished American romance from the beginning. From this novel on, thinking, ruminating and philosophizing become an essential characteristic of Mailer's work, whether it appears in the form of non-fiction or fiction.

Mailer's next novel, *The Deer Park* (1955), was, as the author explained in *Advertisements for Myself*, about individuals in a cruel, poor and unjust world. On the social level the particular evils of American society are condemned and on the individual level the two main male characters's inability to escape from alienation through love is traced. Mailer uses a first person narrator, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, having discovered that "the most powerful leverage in fiction comes from the point of view".<sup>8</sup>

Sergius comes to Desert D'Or, a resort close to the movie capital, after leaving the Air Force. He has a minor breakdown caused by the emotional realisation of the horror he had visited on the other human beings by flying napalm bombing missions over Korea and he finds himself rootless and sexually impotent. The latter problem is alleviated by his affair with Lulu Meyers, the matinee star, his friend

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<sup>7</sup> Leo Braudy: *Norman Mailer. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> N. Mailer: *Advertisements for Myself*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1959, p. 237.

Charles Eitel's ex-wife. But he soon slips into the role of Lulu's flunky. Although his financial security is gone after a trip to Las Vegas, he finds the strength to separate from Lulu and to turn down an offer of starring in a romanticized film version of his own life story. He has a frightening visit from two powerfully built and insulting government agents on account of his friendship with the blacklisted Eitel. Fighting his paralysing fear Sergius manages to put up an act of defiance. He then decides to start writing his novel and does so with painful efforts. Ultimately he defies the two agents' warning not to leave town and departs for Mexico.

As Barry H. Lees remarks what hope there is in the novel is invested in Sergius. But it is a decidedly qualified hope.<sup>9</sup> He has been able to reject the phoney love of Lulu, the false profession of movie star, the false values of a tinsel and celluloid society. But at the end of the novel he has still not found a positive commitment. His arduous progress gains relief by its contrast to the career of his friend Eitel. At the beginning a gloriously successful film director, he refuses to tell of his leftist associations before a congressional committee and consequently his success steadily declines for several years until in the end he finally capitulates. His affair with Elena is also at first based on truth and faithfulness until he finally yields to infidelity and their marriage becomes an empty form. Paralleling his ideological abdication which entails regained professional success is also his resumed relationship with his ex-wife, with whom he starts an affair. Yet he is the mouthpiece of Mailer's programmatic stance, consistent throughout his career: "(..) with the pride of the artist, you must blow against the walls of every power that exists, the small trumpet of your defiance".<sup>10</sup>

Reinforcing the doomed, airless quality of the Eitel-Elena affair is the novel's setting, Desert D'Or. It is the unifying centre of the entire book, a persistent atmospheric presence that gives palpable form to the

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<sup>9</sup> Barry H. Lees: *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer*, New York University Press, New York, University of London Press, London 1969, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> N. Mailer: *The Deer Park*, A Signet Book, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1960, p. 318.

"prisons of pain, the wading pools of pleasure and the public and professional voices of our sentimental land".<sup>11</sup> This for Mailer constitutes American culture at large. Desert D'Or is an infernal arena of "middle-aged desperadoes of corporation land and the suburb" locked in a perpetual round of greed and duplicitous lust. The desert that surrounds the resort symbolizes the spiritual wasteland within. Windowless facades and walled-in patios shelter people who have relinquished their souls to Mammon and Eros.

Mailer's purgatorial, Dantean vision of Desert D'Or imbues his realistic story with an epical gravity and intensifies its moral theme enunciated by Eitel:

"...One cannot look for a good time, Sergius, for pleasure must end as love or cruelty.' - and almost as an after-thought, he added ...or obligation' ".<sup>12</sup> *The Deer Park* is an ironic prose elegy about people seeking after pleasure as though it were happiness.

In 1959, Mailer published a personal retrospective of his literary life: *Advertisements for Myself*, a compendium of his writings (almost all previously published) from the first 18 years of his career. It is a multigeneric display of short stories, poems, plays, essays, articles, interviews, letters and excerpts from novels and columns from *The Village Voice*. This assemblage, is interlinked with commentary, what Mailer calls "Advertisements" in which he chronicles his fervent efforts - through honour and dishonour, security and mystery, aspiration and disillusion, recklessness and remorse - to realize the best in himself through art. In writing openly and movingly about these struggles, Mailer comes out from behind his fiction and establishes himself as a national personality, an undeniable literary presence whose admissions recall "the self-promoting strategies of Walt Whitman."<sup>13</sup>

The *Advertisements* provide Mailer with a rostrum from which he bombards the pieties, inhibitions and banalities that seem to him to be stultifying American life in the 1950s and to be interfering with his own growth as a writer. He rages against American society for what he

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Ph. Bufithis: *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

deems its obsessive conformity, its rigid sexual attitudes, its vulgar materialism, its virulent anti-communism. He assails right-wing America for fomenting public hatred against the Soviet Union and for bringing the country to the edge of nuclear holocaust.

In the fourth Advertisement, the book's best, relating the history of his struggles to publish *The Deer Park*, Mailer proclaims his enormous literary ambitions to make a revolution in the consciousness of his time by liberating people from taboos.

The *Advertisements* are a fugue-like construction with variations of the three fundamental Mailer themes: the individual in conflict with society, the role of the artist in the modern world and the nature of the sexual experience. The essay "The White Negro" lies at the heart of the book, revealing through Mailer's philosophy of Hip, his interest in existentialism. The hipster's response to experience is intuitive, sensuous and violent. "The White Negro" owes to Wilhelm Reich the cult of sexual pleasure as the cure-all for mental and physical ailments. Mailer was influenced by Reich's glorification of the id and the instinctual and his mistrust of the ego and superego. Mailer's Psychopath murders, if he has the courage, out of the necessity to purge his violence. Mailer even assumes that each act of individual violence, no matter how cruel, subtracts from the collective violence of the state manifested in such atrocities as the liquidation of European Jews or the nuclear bombing of Japan. Later in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* he suggested that the war there was partly the result "of our inhibited lives", war becoming a socially acceptable means of expressing violence. Robert Ehrlich sees Mailer's Hipster as a synthesis of previous cultural heroes.<sup>14</sup> Thus he is similar to Melville's Ishmael, whose willingness to experiment and desire for adventure are reflected in his voyage on the sea. He also evokes the Dostoevskian hero, as he is often trapped by intense contradictory feelings. The introspection which is the result of this emotional turmoil suggests the Proustian sensibility with its willingness to explore the roots of feeling in the past. But the hipster is a more robust figure and shares the machismo

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Ehrlich: *Norman Mailer: The Radical as Hipster*. Methuen, New York and London, The Scarecrow Press, 1978, pp. 5-6.

of Hemingway's hero. The hipster's desire for the fullest kind of sexual experience is reminiscent of Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence, whom Mailer highly admires. The fiction of Sartre and Camus provided a model for the existential man who confronts a metaphysically alien world that can only be countered by radical self assertion. Finally, like the artists of the Beat Generation, particularly Kerouac and Ginsberg, Mailer searched for apocalyptic encounter and the electric phrase.

As regards the imagery of those essays, there is a marked preference for drawing on biology and diseases in particular, and on primitive superstitions. Like Burroughs, Mailer regards cancer as an apt symbol of the forces of death gaining on humanity.

In *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer compares the national consciousness to a river that has diverged into two incompatible streams: a surface that is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull and a subterranean river of untapped ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is "the dream life of the nation". Mailer frequently speaks of this split national consciousness. "He had come to decide that the center of America might be insane. The country had been living with a controlled, even fiercely controlled, schizophrenia which had been deepening with the years. Any man or woman who was devoutly Christian and worked for the American Corporation had been caught in an unseen vise whose pressure could split their mind from their soul. For the center of Christianity was a mystery, a son of God, and the center of the corporation was a detestation of mystery, a worship of technology".<sup>15</sup> The exploration of this national schizophrenia and "dream of life" is the theme of Mailer's fourth novel *An American Dream* (1964) where he sets out to clarify the subconscious self. The novel was the subject of strong controversy and various readings owing to its deliberate ambiguity which is reflected in its very title. It ironically relates the novel to the American Dream of a better world based on the archetype of the Promised Land. The title also sounds like an echo of *An American Tragedy*, evoking the tradition of American naturalism which

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<sup>15</sup> N. Mailer: *The Armies of the Night*, Signet, New York, 1968, pp. 211-12.

Mailer had adopted in *The Naked and the Dead* but of which he is ironic now. *An American Dream*, Mailer said, "might prove for some to be my most substantial attack on the problem of writing a novel of manners".<sup>16</sup> Mailer's novel prefers the nebulous romantic causality of dream logic; and the hyperbolic events of the first person narrative reveal a romantic hypertrophy of the ego. Its subjective style is full of vitality, but its downright exuberant conglomeration of metaphors, often far-fetched or even absurd, betray a subtle self-irony which turn the novel into a parody, the typical mode of so much postmodernist writings of the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

This novel was accused of immorality, dismissed as mere melodrama and acclaimed as a unique literary achievement. The accusation of immorality came from a literal reading in the realist manner of the chain of events: the protagonist-narrator Stephen Richard Rojack unpremeditatedly strangles his wife, the fascinating demonic Deborah, daughter of the socially influential Oswald Kelly. Due to the simulated suicide that Rojack hurriedly stages, due to the cool-headed intelligent answers he gives the police inspector, but also because of some high mysterious pressures, the case is closed. The terms in which Mailer describes the murder are exalted: Rojack has the vision of a glorious heavenly city and feels purged of the hatred for Deborah that has previously filled him, experiencing a real rebirth. These terms reveal Rojack as an embodiment of the hipster, the intuitive, sensual and violent psychopath.

The novel was also rejected as too melodramatic. Indeed the action has a spectacular pace: Rojack spends some hours of great and unprecedented physical and spiritual communion with Cherry, a Harlem night-club singer he has met at the police station; he has a brawl with her formal lover, the Negro singer Shago Martin, from which he comes out victorious; finally he has a climactic nocturnal confrontation of extraordinary emotional intensity with his father-in-law. Kelly appears

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<sup>16</sup> Alfred Kazin: *Bright Book of Life. American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*, Little Brown and Co., Boston, Toronto, 1973, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Frank McConnel: *Four Postwar American Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth, Pynchon*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1977, p. 99.

as a demoniac character endowed with telepathic, even magic, powers, a rich sexual fantasy and incestuous drives. Under the urge to break free of Kelly's magic of power, Rojack feels compelled to perform an act of great courage: he precariously walks around the penthouse parapet with Kelly the sole witness and is able to counterattack when the latter wants to push him over into the dark void. Rojack has telepathic flashes of cognition too: thus he has the intuition that Cherry has to die because his courage fails him<sup>18</sup> and he cannot pass the test of parapet walking for a second time (Cherry is really beaten to death through a confusion of Shago's friends). Rojack also has the telepathic conviction that Shago, who is killed in Harlem, has died in his place. Therefore the law of cause and effect has been replaced in the novel by a psychic type of motivation. The characters, some of them demonic, are caught in a network of accidents and coincidences that remind the reader of Dickens's universe, an impression reinforced by the independent animistic force, usually aggressive, some objects seem to possess (e.g. Shago's umbrella).

All this points to the idea that *An American Dream* is not to be judged according to realist canons, but is actually a Gothic romance,<sup>19</sup> where the real is processed in the alembic of fantasy and magic. The novel is in fact a Dream populated with archetypes as fairy-tales and myths are.

Rojack may be regarded as a fairy tale hero fighting against the Ogre and his daughter. Hence he has to pass various tests to prove his worth and valiance. Yet, as this is a modern fairy tale, the forces of evil come very short of defeating the hero and anyway make his happiness impossible.

The novel may also be considered an allegory, and for Barry Leeds it reads like a modern version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as Rojack is

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<sup>18</sup> Courage, energy in the moment of crisis remains the unchallenged chief value of Mailer's code. Therefore this scene proves the limited nature of the protagonist's courage, his inner failing that makes him an inch shorter than a full-sized hero.

<sup>19</sup> John W. Aldridge: "The Energy of New Success" in Leo Braudy (ed.) *Norman Mailer: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice Hall, 1972, p. 118.

saved from a state of imminent damnation by intimately encountering evil in many forms. Moreover, Mailer's allegory seems more frightening than Bunyan's, for Rojack can survive to achieve grace only by giving himself first to the Devil (his murder, his immediate making love to Ruta). He thus needs the evil within himself in order to combat the evil besieging him in the world.<sup>20</sup> Leeds regards the world of instinct that Harlem stands for as instrumental in Rojack's defeat of Kelly (Shago's umbrella is of great help to the protagonist), whereas for Tony Tanner, Harlem symbolizes the chaotic dissolution of the presocial and sub-social dark which represent the counterpart of the traps of society (institutions and social forms) Rojack has likewise to avoid. Rojack has to walk round the parapet in order to prove that he can negotiate the edge where the two worlds meet, capitulating neither to a political nor to a demonized order of reality. For Tanner, Rojack is the man who has to live at the edges, trying to hold on to his identity between two threatening worlds, and in the end moving out towards some "placeless city of his own imagination".<sup>21</sup>

Rojack's repressed craving for independence is also the central idea in the psycho-analytical approach offered by Arthur Gordon<sup>22</sup>. He reads the novel as the anxiety dream of an obsessional neurotic who can never possess both autonomy and the mother love he wants. At the beginning of the narrative, Rojack has attained the American dream of success as he is distinguished college professor of existential psychology, a well-known television personality, whose prestige is enhanced by his quality of ex-congressman, and holder of the Distinguished Service Cross. But his success and power depend in too high a degree on Kelly, the paternal figure and on Deborah, maternal figure, "the Devil and the Devil's daughter"<sup>23</sup>. It is, as Rojack admits himself, "a Devil's contract",<sup>24</sup> which oppresses him

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<sup>20</sup> Barry Leeds: *Op. cit.*, p. 126. See also Robert Langbaum, *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, New York, Oxford, 1970, p. 154.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Tanner: *Op. cit.*, pp. 363-4.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Gordon: *An American Dreamer. A Psychoanalytic Study of the Fiction of N. Mailer*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London and Toronto, 1980, pp. 167, 168.

<sup>23</sup> N. Mailer: *An American Dream*, Dell Publishing Co., The Dial Press, New York, 1966, p. 192.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

pushing him to eliminate on the literal or symbolic level the two demonic figures.

A prophetic note has been detected in the protagonist's delineation by Bufithis who reviews Rojack as a representation of the type of the new primitive, an intellectual attuned to his non-rational being, a cultural savage that Mailer seems to hope will some day emerge in America to thrive beyond the repression of the state.<sup>25</sup> But as things are presented in the novel, Rojack has to walk out of the cankerous American society and in the Epilogue we see him heading for Yucatan, a place selected by Mailer because it is one of the most primitive areas on that continent. Rojack's primitivism is constantly emphasized by his olfactive acuity. He is extremely sensitive to the odours and waves emanating from people, places and things. Thus Deborah, Ruta and Kelly are always associated with subtly attractive yet nauseating miasmas of rot and decay. These characters, along with others the protagonist comes into conflict with, stand for corporations and institutions (such as Academia, Television, Police) which illustrate what Mailer perceives to be the de-creative impulse or turn towards death in American society.<sup>26</sup> A life rigidly ridden by conventions and corporate institutions means, says Mailer, "a slow death by conformity, with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled".<sup>27</sup>

Rojack lives in a society that makes impossible the simple dream expressed in the hero's prayer addressed to a dimly intuited transcendence: "Let me love that girl, and become a father and try to be a good man and do some decent work".<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion we think that *An American Dream* is the nightmare of a hero (this is apparently a fantasy alter ego of the author), who has

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<sup>25</sup> Bufithis, *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Sexuality becomes the main metaphor for these conflicting forces. Richard Poirier, too, finds the core of the novel to lie in the continued war between creative sexuality and a destructive perversity which reveals Mailer's revulsion from all kinds of sexuality that are degenerate and sterile and conducive to death. Cf. R. Poirier, "Morbid-Mindedness" in Robert F. Lucid (ed.), *N. Mailer: The Man and His Work*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1971, pp. 64-65.

<sup>27</sup> N. Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*, p. 339.

<sup>28</sup> N. Mailer, *An American Dream*, p. 153.

the terror of the annihilation of his identity by external social forces but also because of possible inner failings.

A varying dynamic tension between the two poles of fact and fancy is characteristic of Mailer's creative genius, and *An American Dream* marks a definite shift from the former to the latter, a shift evidenced, as we have seen, by the type of motivation, the character delineation, the frequently surrealist settings. The heavily metaphoric style<sup>29</sup> has moved from the earlier influence of Hemingway's parataxis towards a hypotactic style more akin to Hawthorne, Faulkner or Robert Penn Warren and whose eloquent cadence and gusty density recalls Henry Miller.

The stylistic force of linguistic expression is remarkable in Mailer's next novel too, *Why Are We In Vietnam?* (1967). It makes a brilliant parodic use of language that has insistently been compared with the matchless verbal play of Joyce.

The novel is an Alaskan Odyssey, narrated by a voice which introduces itself as D.J., but whose identity is deliberately kept rather ambiguous. It gives an account of an expedition to shoot bear organized by Rusty, the narrator's father and an influential, brutal business man from Texas. D.J is accompanied by Tex, his close friend with whom, when the bear-shooting is over, he takes a walk as far north as they can get. The two youths now go to this geographical extreme not to kill but to open themselves up to the awe-inspiring landscape. But in the perfect silence D.J has an experience of God who appears as a ferocious beast who calls him to the farther north to die; as he resists this urge, the Beast-God goes on to whisper: "Fulfil my will, go forth and kill". From the apparition's message the boys make out that their murderous desires are ordained by nature itself and, turning their destructive hate away from themselves and toward the whole world,

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<sup>29</sup> Through the use of metaphor, the novel opens, as Tony Tanner has remarked, on to all kinds of pre-social reality - the jungle, the forest, the desert, the swamp, the ocean bed. This metaphorical activity in the writing (for instance, the people are described in animal terms throughout) is so insistent that it conjures up a dimension of experience as real as that provided by the very detailed documentation of settings and scenes in contemporary New York. Cf. *Op. cit.*, p. 358.

the two young men return home to join the army. This ending contradicts the Rousseauistic vision of the man - nature relationship, it explodes what Bufithis calls "the Adamic tradition" of American literature<sup>30</sup> that holds that if man removes himself from the corruptness of civilization and enters the realm of unspoiled nature, he can recapture something of the purity of heart and nobility of spirit that Adam must have felt. Yet this interpretation depends very much on accepting the speaking voice as a reliable narrator, whereas it is constantly ambiguous and questionable. If Rojack prided himself on being a professor as well as a television personality and a former soldier and an ex-congressman, D.J continually suggests that he might be actually the ventriloquist's dummy of a Negro in Harlem, an element that emphasizes the uncertainty, even the lack of coherent identity of the American individual. There is a noticeable schizophrenia between surface self or selves and the deep-buried self. The narrator exploits all the available speech levels in America in an irresistible sequence of verbal parodies. Bufithis considers that nowhere else in post-war American literature do we see the contradictions of American culture so richly and variously voiced.<sup>31</sup> He reads this novel as an oratorio for many voices, each one of which infuriates, stupefies or fills us with dark laughter. He emphasizes that indeed, by recreating the duplicities and tensions that infect the national character, Mailer actually enables the reader to understand why the Americans *were* in Vietnam.

A ten-year span intervened between this novel and Mailer's next, a span during which he directed his creative energies to what we might call artistic or fictionalized journalism and other cultural activities. Journalism reflects that pole of his dichotomic creative self which is deeply anchored in American reality whereas at the other pole abides his inclination to pure flights of imagination. His on-the-spot account of the Pentagon march of 1967 published under the title of *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as a History* (1968) which won the Pulitzer Prize (1969), is remarkable for its comprehensive

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<sup>30</sup> Bufithis, *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

picture of the multifarious American society, for its unity of time and sharpness of design, as well as for the versatile articulateness of its protagonist called "Mailer", who improvises identities for himself in order to better accommodate himself to milieu or situation. The reporter's frank exposure of his problems reveals Mailer's unusual capacity for self-satire and robust humour. His sense of identification between his troubled self and America echoes the Whitmanesque outspoken stance.<sup>32</sup> So highly does this work rank in critical esteem that Richard Poirier maintains that along with parts of *Advertisements for Myself*, *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* it makes Mailer easily the equal of Fitzgerald or Hemingway, potentially of Faulkner.<sup>33</sup>

In the next journalistic evocation of the Convention of Chicago under the title of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), Mailer adopts again the "reporter persona" and in an episodic plot gives the panoramic views of the political scientist, the experienced detective, the prophet, the metaphysician, the sociologist, the psychologist making them electric with his poetic imagination and often lending them the quality of cinematic or televised images.

In *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), a book that he places under the heading "speculations", Mailer goes on experimenting with points of view assuming four "personae": The Prize Winner, The Acolyte, The Advocate, The Prisoner, in order to present and discuss several attitudes to, and facets of, Women's Liberation Movement.

In 1972 Mailer compiled and prefaced an anthology (entitled *Genius and Lust*) of the works of Henry Miller, a kindred spirit the author admires for his buoyant defiance of accepted ideas and practices, and for his hearty diabolism.

With *The Executioner's Song* (1979), a novel that won him the Pulitzer Prize, Mailer surprised his readers with a book purporting to be a new literary species styled "A True Life Novel". Based on the trial

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed analysis of this parallel, see Nathan Scott: "Norman Mailer - Our Whitman" in *Three American Moralists: Mailer, Bellow, Trilling*, University of Notre Dame Press, London, 1973, pp. 15-97.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Poirier: *Norman Mailer*, The Viking Press, New York, 1972, p. 121.

and execution of a real murderer very much like Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, the book gave rise to much controversy and much praise. The third person objective omniscient narrative uses a style whose anonymous sparsity is in sharp contrast with the flighty, ornate, lush, even baroque style the novelist started developing in the late 1950s and it seems rather a return to the simple functional prose of *The Naked and the Dead*. In this respect Mailer illuminatingly insisted to John Aldridge that he felt "a legitimate kinship to Picasso's need to keep changing his style". "Preserving one's artistic identity is not nearly so important to me as finding a new attack on the elusive nature of reality"<sup>34</sup>.

Mailer was fascinated by the personality of Garry Gilmore, the murderer who wished to die so that he could save his soul and be reincarnated, because the latter's life perfectly illustrated a number of aspects, which may be said to amount to obsessions, of the novelist's evolving philosophy such as Karma, reincarnation, occult reckoning, psychopathic rage. We may therefore state with Frank McConell that the book can be read from two perspectives, as it reflects equally the reality of Mailer's own time and the reality of his own imagination: so much so that we do not know whether to be bedazzled by the reflection outward or the one inward. "He regards the novel as mythology constructed to catch the moral ambiguity of its age"<sup>35</sup>, and Gilmore can be seen as an archetype of the American displaced soul of the 1970s.

Mailer's next creation, *Ancient Evenings* (1983), takes us to the pole opposite to the documentary realism or cinema verité used in the preceding novel. It is the pure product of the writer's imagination, with no American reality to penetrate as the setting is that of Egypt in 1130 BC. At the core of the book is Mailer's obsession with reincarnation, a concept which allows him to experiment with time through the lives of his two main characters, Menenhetet I and his great grandson, Menenhetet II. Fantasies of royal birth, heroism, and bravery, success and power, and intercourse with the famous Nefertiti

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Mills: *Mailer. A Biography*, Empire Books, New York, 1982, p.430.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 431.

amalgamate with Mailer's theories about scatology, buggery, magic, violence, incest and the whole zone of taboo in general. Nevertheless as Alfred Kazin remarked as early as 1963 "Mailer is able to make more of a world out of his obsessions than other writers are able to make out of the given material of our common social world"<sup>36</sup>.

Mailer's recent novel *Harlot's Ghost* (1991) adopts the paranoid vision that sees American politics as controlled by the machinations of an elite involved with criminal groups.

We may conclude that the magnitude of Mailer's imagination, his extraordinary expressiveness and his continuous effort to grapple both with the American post-war social reality and his own inner landscape, with the conflicts between outer forces and inner drives, all these elements contribute to making Norman Mailer at once "the most protean and the most archetypal of American authors"<sup>37</sup>. He remains one of the most fertile, energetic and challenging personalities in the motley landscapes of contemporary American fiction.

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<sup>36</sup> Alfred Kazin: "The Alone Generation" in Joseph J. Waldmeir (ed.), *Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1963, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Leo Braudy: *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

## VII. MORAL FICTION: JOHN GARDNER

In the variegated scene of contemporary American literature, the work of John Gardner (1931 -1982) can be confidently qualified as neohumanistic as it rests on a humanistic aesthetics, on the great tradition of what he calls in his literary manifesto "moral art", a tradition that "seeks to improve life, not to debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us".<sup>1</sup> Gardner has a firm aesthetic position upholding the specific Aristotelian model that emphasizes mimesis: art "imitates nature's total process in sworn opposition to chaos"<sup>2</sup>. "Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy".<sup>3</sup> The human being is thrown in the lists of life to do battle, choosing between existence and death, order and chaos, virtue and sin. Man therefore has a choice: he may either fall prey to nihilism, to a metaphysical despair of it all, or he may choose to confront the dragon of darkness within and without, he may choose to fight heroically for what he considers to be his essential human attributes: love, intuition, faith and art. True art is moral, as it makes the reader discover the world which, for all its confusing mixture of good and evil, progress and regress, belief and negation, is finally holy and humane and purposeful. Gardner adds to the Aristotelian model a metaphysics of the heart combining love and compassion, intuition and transcendent impulse of a vaguely religious quality, thus arriving at an affirmation of the world because it contains the three fundamental Platonic values: good, truth and beauty. It is not

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<sup>1</sup> John Gardner: *On Moral Fiction*, New York, Basic Books,1978, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p.6.

art that makes order out of the chaos of reality but, as Gardner insists, order exists in the reality art imitates, even though this order be invisible most of the time. It is not the artist who achieves the order, but he is able to grasp and reveal it. Struggling in a confusing universe, man who so desperately needs a sense of order and so often misses finding it, needs the artist's sensibility and imagination which enable him to apprehend the underlying order. What some critics have qualified as an obnoxious sentimentality appears most satisfying to others who appreciate the achievement of Gardner's art as a valiant effort "to keep the world sane and loving and convinced of its own moral value".<sup>4</sup>

But Gardner's essentially humanistic content does not preclude an experimentation with form and it is this experimentalism which entitles Robert Scholes to range him with Barth, Coover, Pynchon and Gass among the postmodernists<sup>5</sup> whereas other critics deny him this status.<sup>6</sup>

John Gardner's first fictional piece was his doctoral dissertation novel, *The Old Men*, completed in 1958 at the University of Iowa. Although his own later depreciating view of it as "a bad book (...) full of flaws and weak writing",<sup>7</sup> reflects its flaws in point of structure (too large a number of characters and insufficient unity between theme, character and plot), it is however an important book, as it points to the main thematic directions of Gardner's subsequent work, containing numerous names, places and ideas that are to recur later on. To begin with, the Catskill Mountains, mainly the Mohawk Valley of New York, form the geography of this book as well as they will later in *Nickel*

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory L. Morris: *A World of Order and Light. The Fiction of John Gardner*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1984, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> R. Scholes: *Fabulation and Metafiction*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, London, 1979, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Postmodernism defined as a posthumanist trend (Leslie Fiedler) and Gardner's Aristotelian model most likely determined Ihab Hassan to include Gardner in the non postmodernist line of Styron, Updike, Capote, Irving and Doctorow (in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus. Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 2nd ed., 1982, p.265).

<sup>7</sup> Gregory L. Morris: Interview with J. Gardner, Lanesboro, Pennsylvania, 22 February, 1979; *Op. cit.*, p.6.

*Mountain*. The names are fictitious, but there is real authenticity in the awesome physical presence of the mountains. We feel that "for Gardner, as for Cooper, the Catskills and their environs offer a proving ground for the testing of men and women and their ideas".<sup>8</sup>

It embodies what is perhaps Gardner's main philosophic theme, that of man's mortal condition, of the inevitability of old age and death, a theme resumed again and again in *The Resurrection*, *Grendel*, *Nickel Mountain* and *October Light*.

It also contains in old Lorward the first hypostasis of a significant Gardner type of character - *the Seer*, who, a prey to visions, dreams and nightmares, is able to envision the immaterial and the questionable. This imaginative type of character is to recur in *The Resurrection*, *Nickel Mountain*, *The King's Indian*, *October Light*, *The Art of Living* and *Mickelson's Ghosts*.

In *The Old Men*, as in all his fictions, Gardner presents a universe mainly governed by causality, wherein there is however a large room for accident and coincidence. People are subject to the shocks and grief of accidents and surprising turns of action, as more often than not it takes exceptional beings *to see* the causal sequence. In a way this novel deals with the reconciliation of past and present, inherent in deeper self-knowledge.

This first novel also introduces the themes of youthful perversity, (also to be found in *The Resurrection*, *Nickel Mountain*, *October Light*), the present sterility of organized religion and dogma, (*Nickel Mountain*, *The King's Indian*, *Freddy's Book*), the importance of "role" models in character formation (*The Resurrection*, *October Light*), the confident faith in the vitalizing force of good art, especially music (*The Resurrection*, *Grendel*, *The King's Indian*, *October Light*, *The Art of Living*). The novel also expresses a consistent Gardeneresque idea, the faith in man's humanity, enduring in spite of himself or his convictions, an idea beautifully expressed by Lorward, the Seer, in his words addressed to Rosen:

..."You, my boy, do not believe in selflessness, happiness, justice. You do believe - as a poet - in the Judaic-Christian "myth" as

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory I. Morris: *A World of Order and Light*, p.6.

you'll call it. In the fall of Adam, capitulation of David, crucifixion of God's own son - dying in a lost cause, lost from the start - you find poetic representation, so to speak, of the world's great truth: one is born, one suffers, one dies. Theoretically, all men should die in the lost cause, and if they do not die in it, must admit, at least, that not dying is wrong. There's your ethic. But breathing is good - and there are only two choices, join or live (...). But you do not live by your philosophy (...). The same non-rational force which dictates your credo dictates your violations of it - your actions - gestures without meaning, like the clapping of a single hand. You believe that nothing, not even the mind, not even art, is any hope; but you act in spite of yourself with humanity'. He raised his hand abruptly to forestall argument. "Not always. You slip. But at bottom you are moral. I pity you".<sup>9</sup>

Gardner's next work, *The Resurrection* (1966), is marred by being more of a philosophical novel, Gardner meaning to respond to the didacticism of Tolstoy's homonymous book: "I thought it was an awful, just wicked book, and I meant to answer it point by point, but the answer is obscure. Anyway it was meant to be about a person, but also people in general who love ideas to the exclusion of people, so that people become ideas. I like James Chandler, but he never really understands his wife or even looks at her, he doesn't understand his children, obviously; and he falls in love with a girl and doesn't have the faintest idea what the girl is like, although he has a fatherly feeling about her. He abstracts and, as a result, what he does causes total disaster. (...) Basically I was answering Tolstoy, and I answered too slyly to make myself clear. Tolstoy hated rote behaviour, including such behaviour as is expressed by duty. Chandler shares his theoretical distrust of theory, but his body controls him exactly as a good theory would - but with more harmful effect. What I wanted to do is show that a theory against rote behaviour and convention can be at least as monstrous as rote behaviour, that in fact it leads to the same thing".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Gardner: *The Old Men*, Ph. D. diss., University of Iowa, 1958, pp. 127-8, 129.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall Harvey: "Where Philosophy and Fiction Meet: An Interview with John Gardner", *Chicago Review* 29/Spring 1978, p. 82.

James Chandler, the protagonist of the novel, is a philosopher moulded upon the English philosopher R.G. Collingwood who, on learning at the age of 19 that he suffered from a terminal disease that brought with it the gradual decay of the brain, set out to work on his philosophical system that Gardner highly appreciated and also appropriated to a certain extent. Three of his philosophical principals are especially important for their bearing on *The Resurrection*, namely that creations of the human mind, no matter how primitive, must be studied historically, not psychologically; that historical knowledge is attainable and that history and philosophy are identical.<sup>11</sup> Gardner shares the idea of the importance of history, which also led him to his rejection of Sartre and the existentialist stress upon the present. Gardner has also been influenced by Collingwood's aesthetic theories expressed in *The Principle of Art* where he rejects the idea of art as craft, laying emphasis on imagination, intuition and the Aristotelian mode. Gardner also agrees to Collingwood's idea that art is "the cutting edge of philosophy".<sup>12</sup>

In his next novel, *The Wreckage of Agathon* (1970), Gardner also deals with a lover of ideas, Agathon, who is incapable of any emotional depth and can only resort to mockery and derision. Placed in ancient Greece, the book draws heavily, but always with greatest respect, on Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* which he however modernizes and frequently spices with humour. Related by two narrators, the protagonist and his disciple Pecker, the novel recounts Agathon's early years in Athens, his education and experiences with Solon, then Agathon's visit to Sparta and his political and intellectual arguments with Lykourgos, interspersed with Agathon's relations with his Athenian wife and their Helot friends. This historical recreation evokes the military system of Sparta with its Draconian law, the liberal, humanist democracy of Athens, playing them against each other and achieving a study in power and system management.

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory Morris, *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Gardner: *On Moral Fiction*, p. 10.

Undoubtedly this contrast may carry contemporary political overtones paralleling that between the American West with its Goldwater attitude and the East Coast, or even a totalitarian system with a democratic one. The protagonist is a cynical, egotistic clown. He suffers and witnesses suffering by which he learns nothing; all he can do is mock. He does not adopt a pitiable existentialism as does the hopeless Thales (Gardner's embodiment of Sartre), nor an embittered materialism like Konon. Agathon's refuge is "a clowning despair (...), the total indifference to anything but the monstrous foolishness of human beings".<sup>13</sup> Even his death is a self-parody, devoid of any dignity, it is a death of humiliation, a shameful wreckage of humankind. Agathon's life and death are contrasted to those of Dorkis, the peasant whose "simple faith filled the room like autumn light, like a sea breeze".<sup>14</sup> Dorkis is a Gardner hero, a bearer of light, an illuminator who is able to affirm, to act, to build, to sacrifice his own life to save another, to meet death with dignity. A counterfoil to Agathon, he cares more for people than for ideas or knowledge and his belief in a good beyond evil gives him strength, and finally enables him to transcend his mere mortality by becoming a legend, a myth.

Gardner's next creation, *Grendel* (1971), takes the reader in the realm of Anglo-Saxon legend and myth which is used as stuff for a parabolic picture of 20th century man's soul. It was the first of Gardner's fictions to win critical recognition perhaps because this non-realistic fiction was at first ranged with the experimentalism of the fashionable new "fabulators". It is Gardner's retelling of the *Beowulf* epic using the benighted monster Grendel as the narrator, a self-conscious postmodernist narrator. The chronology of the Anglo-Saxon narrative is compressed, as Gardner overlooks the story of Grendel's dam and the only hints at Beowulf's final confrontation with the dragon. The story unfolds in flashbacks, with the cinematic technique of "cuts" extending over the 12-year period of Grendel's harassment of the Danes. The narrative voice of Grendel is a funny blend of the alliterative rhythms

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<sup>13</sup> Gardner: *The Wreckage of Agathon*. New York, Harper and Row, 1970, p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 152.

of the mediaeval *scop* (= minstrel) and the comic, often savorous contemporary colloquial speech and slang. The novel, as Gardner has said, is a mix of the original *Beowulf*, William Blake, Tolkien and Walt Disney.<sup>15</sup> Existentialism is also a serious target in the novel, as Sartre's thought represents an important layer in the monster's character and philosophy. Gardner openly confessed: "I use Sartre a lot. What happened in *Grendel* was that I got the idea of presenting the Beowulf monster as Jean-Paul Sartre, and everything that Grendel says Sartre in one mood or another has said".<sup>16</sup> Besides the attack on that loveless, faithless and egotistic philosophical school, *Grendel* also emphasizes the essence of *Beowulf*: the medieval Platonic conception of man's tripartite soul - rational, irascible, concupiscent, corresponding to the Platonic properties of the just and whole man-wisdom, courage and temperance. It presents the breakdown of reason into irascibility and concupiscence. Beowulf emerges as the embodiment of the unified soul in the mediaeval conception. In contrast stand the three configurations of corrupted virtue: there is the demeaned *arma* or irascibility of Hrothgar, whose political power has been acquired with brutality and ruthlessness; there is the fouled *primus* or concupiscence of the dragon, thoroughly materialistic and vicious; and there is the blighted *virum* or irrationality of Grendel, whose anger and bloody purposefulness are the results of a flawed intellectual system. Grendel's defect is the greatest because it is rationality that rules the other two faculties, as Plato tells us. It is this "wrong reason" that has misled twentieth-century man so drastically, and "Grendel's distress is our distress, his embarrassment is our embarrassment".<sup>17</sup>

*Grendel* is an examination of virtue described in Platonic terms and of its chances in making use of the more practical and humane ethical system of Aristotle as put forth in the *Nichomachean Ethics*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Morris: *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall Harvey: *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory Morris: *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> In an interview Morris had with Gardner on October 28, 1978, the novelist mentioned that the 12 chapters correspond to the twelve Aristotelian virtues. See also Susan Strehle's "John Gardner's Novels: Affirmation and the Alien" in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, vol.8, 1976, pp. 86-96 and Craig Somme's "The Twelve Chapters of *Grendel*" in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, vol. 20, 1978.

Gardner desperately clings to the belief in the survivalability of the virtuous man and in *Grendel* he expressed this belief, working through the Aristotelian virtues as he presents the virtuous soul. Therefore the thematic substance of the novel is Platonic, its structural foundation is Aristotelian and Beowulf appears as the embodiment of Aristotle's *megalopsychus* or "great-souled man".

Tony Hilfer however makes the subtle remark that Gardner cannot help but let Grendel win the argument from a literary point of view. Right as Hrothgar, the Geats and Beowulf may be, he considers that they are unconvincing and uninteresting. Grendel, wrong as he may be, has the best lines. Thus he considers that in his battle with postmodernism Gardner lost even in his own works.<sup>19</sup>

Gardner's largest, most complex and most ambitious novel, *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972), is generally acknowledged as his greatest literary achievement, a claim it shares for many critics with *October Light*. Full of magic and thought infused into convincing characters, this brilliant resourceful book impresses by the sincerity of tone with which it formulates, as Gardner actually confessed, "a governing metaphysical system that I believed in".<sup>20</sup> As the title points out, the weight of the book is carried by the four metaphysical dialogues between the Sunlight Man, the thus self-named scarred and wild-eyed infractor held by the Batavia police and Fred Clumly, Batavia's Chief of Police. The dialogues argue themes from Babylonian cultural or religious civilization which is opposed to the Hebraic perspective.<sup>21</sup>

Besides the resistance structure represented by these four pillars, the tone of the book is reinforced by a structural network of superstitions, omens and divination, which was both a central element in Babylonian theology and a streak in the mind of numerous present

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<sup>19</sup> Tony Hilfer: *American Fiction Since 1940*, Longman, London and New York, 1992, pp. 144-45.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Laskin: "Challenging the Literary Naysayers", *Horizons* 21, July 1978, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> For the historical documentation Gardner used A. Leo Oppenheim's *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1964.

day Batavians. This intricately plotted book is on the one hand a story of detection triggered off by the Sunlight Man's appearance in Batavia, crazily painting the word "love" across the main street. In a way it is a sort of metaphysical detective story, as chief Clumly tries to capture both the man and his vision or system. With pursuit as both psychological urge and plot promoter (Clumly pursues the Sunlight Man, Will Hodge Sr. pursues Clumly, Will Hodge Jr. pursues Klepman the scoundrel, the professional thief Walter Benson-Boyle pursues Ollie Nuper, the tenant who has bedded his wife) the novel moves and is structured like a multilevel chessboard, with resolutions and endgames coming on different levels of action,<sup>22</sup> many of the characters being measured by their faith in the ominous.<sup>23</sup>

Making a rich use of the technique of the flashback, the novel is also the chronicle of the Hodge family, the structural link between the two centres of interest being the identity of the Sunlight Man, Taggart Hodge.

By means of description and of minor characters (Esther Clumly, Fred's blind and loving wife, Freeman the hippie, Benson-Boyle - the thief who leads a double life - Gardner powerfully evokes the small town of Batavia, New York, which represents the virtues and vices of middle America but also becomes a sort of metonymic symbol of America in general and even the twentieth century present world. For Gardner "setting is one of the most powerful symbols. The two central characters embody the antagonistic forces of anarchy and order, a conflict underlying Gardner's own personality".<sup>24</sup> Fred Clumly sees himself as the preserver of order, the "watchdog of society" "personally responsible for every cop in my Department and for every crook in the City of Batavia",<sup>25</sup> a city where violence and disorder are

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<sup>22</sup> Gardner's extensive use of oracles, mock-oracles, signs, symbols and forewarnings may be explained by his Welsh omen-believing family background - Gregory Morris, *Op. cit.*, p. 73. For an understanding of Gardner's brilliant achievement of the physicality and atmosphere of the small town of Batavia, New York, the reader should be aware that the writer was a native of that place, his parents holding a small farm in the neighbourhood.

<sup>23</sup> P. Ferguson, John Maier, Frank McConnell and Sarah Matthiessen: "John Gardner: The Art of Fiction LXXIII", *Paris Review*, 21, Spring 1979, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Gregory Morris, *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> J. Gardner: *The Sunlight Dialogues*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1972, p.23.

gaining fast. For all his tenacity and singleness of purpose, Clumly has not forsaken feeling or human sympathy.

The respectable family of the Hodges also relies on love of law and a belief in order. But the political and moral conservatism of Arthur Taggart Hogde Sr., the congressman farmer, is no longer valid for his sons Ben Hodge, Arthur Hodge and Taggart Hodge. His qualities somehow seem divided among his sons and to the third generation they seem utterly impossible: Will Hodge Jr. thinks that his grandfather's ideas "where no longer viable, his faith was as empty and dead as his estate, yet they'd left their mark on Will Hodge Jr. as on all of them. The American dream turned nightmare. They were not such fools - or anyway Will Jr was no longer such a fool - as to pursue the dream, but at least, with the impossible ideal in mind he could hate the forces that denied it".<sup>26</sup>

A belief in order implies one in causality, in connection and design: "It's all pattern. Find out the connections and *bam!* Everything's plain!"<sup>27</sup>

The forces of anarchy are sheer madness (The Sunlight Man, who rejects connection and avows disparateness and chance, in consequence of his great disappointment in life - his wife goes mad, sets fire to his house and thus burns their sons to death and ruins his career as well), violence (the Indian brothers whose accidental murders are just a consequence of their loveless indifference to human life) and egotism (Millie Hodge, the "bitch", who refuses the role of "mama" and only works for number one, her own pleasure and pride of intellect).

Taggart turns in his first dialogue with Clumly to Babylonian thought as it illustrates a civilization based on "a fundamental coexistence without conflict of body and spirit, both of which were of ultimate worth",<sup>28</sup> based on intuition and which also eliminated the demands of responsibility and the feeling of guilt, a Hebraic concept. As a Babylonian, Taggart declares he loves justice whereas Clumly

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 344.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 372.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 318.

loves law which, he maintains, blurs all human distinctions. It is a painful irony, as Clumly becomes aware too, that in the American society, the law has often rendered itself incapable of pursuing its own long-claimed end: justice. In the second dialogue, the Sunlight Man decides to broaden Clumly's horizon further, exploring the Babylonian concern with astrology and divination. It is the attack of the mystic temper against the arrogant, exclusively rational type of modern positivistic thought. The third dialogue expounds the Mesopotamian views on the relation between actions, time and the universe, between *istaru* or cosmic fate and *simmtu* or individual fate. Taggert uses the epic of Gilgamesh in order to illustrate the paradox of man's predicament, the conflict between his thirst for glory and immortality, and his all too mortal condition. Strangely attracted to Taggert, Clumly feels a sort of metaphysical sympathy with his antagonist and his finally letting Taggert go indicates that the Sunlight Man has charmed him into admitting a sort of metaphysical compromise between order and anarchy. Yet Taggert had killed a man, old Paxton, his tyrannical father-in-law that he held responsible for his daughter's madness. What he had intended as an act of love turns into a mad act of insane murder.

It is only Luke Hodge who is able to analyse his uncle Taggert and effectively locate the "soft places in the dragon's belly".<sup>29</sup> Luke recognizes his monstrosity and forces him to confront his viciousness. When Taggert replies "suppose I say I do believe in the past? Suppose I say I once walked and talked like you!", Luke answers: "But you don't say it. You say 'suppose'. If you said it, it would be asking to wonder what happened, what turns a human being into monster. It would be talking as if we were both human. You can't".<sup>30</sup>

Luke reveals the Sunlight Man's dark side, the side that causes random death although he preaches justice. It is a side that Taggert desperately and sometimes efficiently tries to ignore, but which repeatedly crops up. What finally redeems Taggert is the love underlying Luke's sacrifice of his own life when he's producing an accident that he hopes will be fatal not only to himself but to his uncle

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 409

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

and the Indian. It is the waste of his nephew's life that purges Taggart and determines him to go and give himself up. It is of course an ironic accident of fate that he is instantly shot dead when he turns up unarmed, as the police officer on duty didn't know that and thought the Sunlight man dangerous. When the news reaches Clumly at Grange Hall where he is making a speech he is suddenly deeply grieved at "the injustice of it".<sup>31</sup> Clumly grasps the tragic irony of Taggart's death, perceives it like the loss of a friend and the loss of a man of great imagination and scope of vision. He teaches the audience the lesson of the Sunlight Man: "I can say this: I'm proud of my boys that tracked him down, insofar as they did, and I wouldn't have it otherwise. They have a public trust, your police department, and I'm as proud of those boys as I could be of my sons, if I had any. I know they did the best they could to see true justice triumphed, and justice did triumph, and we can be proud that we live in this great free country where they can happen. Yes! But also justice didn't triumph, in a way, of course. I can't explain that if you don't see it in your heart, it's just the way it is, maybe always was and always will be".<sup>32</sup>

Clumly has become aware that justice requires imagination and a capacity to see with the heart, to act with love, according to instinct and contrary to custom. Clumly has this epiphanic moment of vision that hurtles him "where the light was brighter than the sun-filled clouds, disanimated and holy"<sup>33</sup>. Clumly as Gardner's mouthpiece sees the possibilities of a universe directed by a vision that is, as Gregory L. Morris says, "infused with love and emotion and art, a universe that makes allowances for good and evil, a universe that tries frantically not to shut down and fall apart".<sup>34</sup> Yet we think that the critic's conclusion, "It is a universe made moral", needs the qualification that it is a new type, a 20th century type of morality, where the distinctions between good and evil are more difficult to make, where the moral sense implies an awareness of the complexities and mixtures of good and evil within every individual human being.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 668.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 670.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 673.

<sup>34</sup> Morris, *Op. cit.*, p.96.

A tortured personality, Henry Soames is the protagonist of Gardner's next published novel, *Nickel Mountain*, (1973). He is at the same time monster and lofty lover, superego and id, ugliness and beauty. The first draft of the novel was contemporary with the creation of *The Old Men*, that is why the two novels share the Catskill setting, types of character and mood. Published in parts, *Nickel Mountain* has the flaw of an episodic structure and the characters, although authentic, are introduced and then abandoned for the sake of argument, without being assigned a place and function in a coherent structure, each of the eight chapters shifting the narrative focus. What makes the novel moving is the philosophical animism, all natural elements and phenomena are invested with spirit, which, whether benign or malignant, is a moulding presence in landscape and upon the human soul. In *Nickel Mountain*, Gardner creates his version of the American pastoral.

Gardner's next literary creation, *The King's Indian: Stories and Tales* (1974), on the contrary is a complex construction where each of the three sections groups stories thematically related and the collection makes a successful coherent whole. Highlighting the strange, even magic landscape of southern Illinois it achieves "with the help of Poe and Melville and many another man a queer, cranky monument, a collage: a celebration of all literature and life; an environmental sculpture, a funeral crypt"<sup>35</sup>. The five stories included in the first book reveal various social, moral and philosophical implications of the antinomic impulses towards order and anarchy. The stories in the second section centre round the artistic imagination - its quality and work, whereas the third book merges the two themes in the title tale which studies the obstacles the serious artist has to cope with, the options he must make.

Published in the bicentennial year, *October Light* (1976), is a book about America and it may be considered one of Gardner's best achievements although this position is controversial on account of the various interpretations lent to the sophisticated narrative structure. It is

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<sup>35</sup> Gardner: *The King's Indian: Stories and Talks*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1974, p. 316.

anyway a novel about the American past and the idea that even if demythologized the old heroes - George Washington, Samuel Adams, Ben Franklin, Ethan Allen - are still heroes. It is a study of the New England tradition, with its truth and prejudice, with its rigid pride and open generosity, searching in a way for a surviving American heroism. It is a tragicomic novel centring round the old Vermont farmer James Page's conflict with his 83-year-old feminist sister Sally Abbot. Although the conflict is ridiculous, they do seriously embody two heroic veins in the American consciousness - the conservative set of values derived from working the land and the myth of perpetual progress. James Page is the Anglo-Saxon hero as a Vermont Yankee whose world view is dark and fatalistic: "He knew the world was dark and dangerous. Blame it on the weather. ... 'Most people believe he liked to say, ... that any problem in the world can be solved if you know enough; most Vermonters know better'. He's had one son killed by a fall from a barn roof, another - his first born and chief disappointment - by suicide. He's lost, not long after that, his wife... he was better than most men at taking (death) in stride... he understood, what with stony-faced wit he called ... 'life's gravity', understood the importance of admitting it, confronting it head on, with the eyes locked open and spectacles in place. All life - man, animal, bird or flower - is a brief and hopeless struggle against the pull of the earth".<sup>36</sup>

Sally Abbot rebels against her age, her lost opportunities, the direction of her fate. After a good life with her husband Horace, she tried her widowed head at business but lost everything and has come to live with her brother. A Democrat among Republican Vermonters, she sympathizes with all action, all liberal causes, and cheap literature and TV often offers her a compensatory life of adventure. Finding the TV set the very symbol of what he hates, James Page shoots its face dead. When his sister defends the Equal Rights Amendment he furiously chases her to her room and locks her up. There she stays and when her niece intervenes and she might leave, it is she who chooses to stay on asserting her inalienable right to free speech.

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<sup>36</sup> John Gardner: *October Light*, A. Knopf, New York, 1976, p. 10.

We may agree with Josephine Hendin that James and Sally caricature the plight of the people who have heroic streaks in the their makes and great angers but can find no arena big enough to legitimize their energy. The determination that developed the land and the revolutionary belief in progress that created America are no longer in the service of producing a new civilization. Gardner's people are stuck in a world without new lands to conquer in which progress has become a set of small technical differences. In frustration, James sentimentalizes the past and simplifies his life to fatalism. Sally is nostalgic for a nature that does not exist. Both find the present a hard time for heroes.<sup>37</sup>

Another main concern of the book is to expose the pernicious influence of the best seller, the thriller that represents the sort of literature that Gardner considers immoral, as it supplies hip fantasies reinforcing cynicism and empty toughness. This exposure is effected by means of the inner novel in the book, *The Smugglers of the Lost Souls Rock*, the thriller Sally Abbot reads in her stubborn rebellious self-imposed imprisonment and which badly affects her, bringing out all the wicked streak in her personality: she turns spiteful, vengeful and even murderous, causing a nearly fatal accident that hurts her niece Ginny Hicks in the place of her fierce brother.<sup>38</sup>

Three more themes are interwoven in this novel: the wrongness of imposing a model on people, particularly on one's children, the theme of guilt and the past, the theme of the beneficial function of true art.

The bear-like figure of his uncle Ira who had a fundamental formative influence on James looms large in the novel, exerting

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<sup>37</sup> Josephine Hendin: *Vulnerable People*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, p. 135.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. with Gardner's more direct comment on the immorality of cheap art in *On Moral Fiction*, p. 42: "What we generally get in our books and films is bad instruction: escapist models or else moral evasiveness, or, worse, cynical attacks on traditional values such as honesty, love of country, marital fidelity, work and moral courage. This is not to imply that such values are absolute, too holy to attack. But it is dangerous to raise a generation that smiles at such values, or has never heard of them, or dismisses them with indignation, as if they were not relative goods but were absolute evils."

his bestial influence on everyone. Ira is the central symbol of the irrepressible past. His model of toughness is adopted by James who tries to impose it on his sensitive son, Richard, turning him into a coward by ever telling him he is one. The model has a deadly effect on Richard - when he assumes old Ira's identity in a farcical disguise, he provokes his uncle Horace Abbot's heart-attack which causes him the unbearable guilt that finally leads to his suicide by hanging, a suicide also modelled on Ira's. The belated understanding of the chain of causes and effects in his son's suicide through the revelations of his sister enables James to realize the perniciousness of his ideal that has sorrowed him and destroyed his son, and he apologises to both Ira and Richard. James' final illumination is intensified by Ed Thomas in his lyrical, creative "song" of Vermont. Close enough to death to envisage life's worth, Ed's reasonable yet emotion-filled voice pulls James back into life, gives Sally her victory and reconciles, even if temporarily, the contraries of the universe. It makes James able to forgive for the first time in his life (Hernandez, the Mexican priest) with the least possible grudge for an opinionated old man.

The October Light of the title suggests James' epiphanic moment of understanding and liberation from guilt. This moment is anticipated by that Lewis Hick experiences earlier, feeling the inherent mortality of things, the awesome transmutative power of the October sunset beauty that makes him more sensitive to human love and human responsibility.<sup>39</sup> There is perhaps a slight discrepancy between Gardner's conscious beliefs and the message conveyed by the implied author of his novels, a discrepancy which Josephine Hendin senses when she underlines that Gardner is too much the product of the times he condemns. "He is cynical about the aims of heroes from Beowulf to James Page, almost the first and last Anglo-Saxon ideals. Missing in his novels is a sense of masculine purposiveness of the hero as the man who can put his power in the service of a worthwhile cause. Gardner's heroes are wilful, self-absorbed narcissists who see determination as merit all the same".<sup>40</sup> Although we understand

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<sup>39</sup> Gardner: *October Light*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>40</sup> J. Hendin, *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

the point she wants to make we still think her statement is too generalizing and oversimplifying.

Gardner's next novel, *Freddy's Book* (1980), has been subject to controversy because of the problematical unity between its two parts, described as two novellas by Gardner himself.<sup>41</sup> What he does again, as in *The Wreckage of Agathon* is psychohistorical recreation and interpretation of events in sixteenth-century Sweden. The shifts in time and place that occur between the two novellas, the lack of novelty in point of technique and philosophical motifs make his novel one of the least successful.

*The Art of Living and Other Stories* (1981) is a volume that contains small masterpieces of the genre, such as the title story, "Nimram", "Redemption" or "Come Back". The main themes are art and life, the moral responsibilities of the artist but also the latent transformative powers of life lived as an art.

Gardner's last published novel, *Mickelson's Ghosts* (1982), tries to be a thriller with Gothic overtones and as it has failed to be a best-seller it has generally been considered an artistic failure although Morris, admitting that there are several lapses in creative energy in some places, thinks that there is just enough magic and mystery and intelligence in it to turn *Mickelson's Ghosts* into one of Gardner's best works.<sup>42</sup> Acutely autobiographical, the novel deals with the personal crisis of Peter Mickelson, a professor of philosophy, a teacher of ethics, with his slow slide into monstrousness and redemption through love.

The posthumous volume published by Sickers & Warburg, London, 1987, entitled *Stillness and Shadows*, includes two pieces: *Stillness*, a flagrantly autobiographic novel abandoned by the author in 1965 and dealing with the crisis of his marriage with his first wife; and *Shadows*, an unfinished metaphysical detective story whose protagonist, Craine, investigates a number of mysterious crimes while feeling pursued in his turn.

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<sup>41</sup> J. Howell: *John Gardner: A Bibliographical Profile*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1980, p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> G. Morris. *Op. cit.*, p 229.

A complex personality, novelist, poet, critic, dramatist, medievalist and libretto writer,<sup>43</sup> Gardner is a singular creator among the latter half 20th century American writers as he had the courage to reaffirm the value of the humanist moral tradition in a postmodernist, posthumanist age, producing literary achievements of remarkable value that infuse philosophical thought into realistic or fantastic characters which move in mimetic or allegoric magic landscapes within plots of remarkable authenticity and fantasy.

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<sup>43</sup> As a poet he wrote *Jason and Medeia*, 1973 and a volume of *Poems*, 1978. His critical and scholarly books include: *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, 1971; *The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet*, 1965; *The Construction of Christian Poetry in Old English*, 1975; *The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle*, 1974; *The Life and Times of Chaucer*, 1977; *On Becoming a Novelist*, 1983; *On Moral Fiction*, 1978; *The Poetry of Chaucer*, 1977. His plays are: *Death and the Maiden*, 1981; *The Temptation Game*, 1980. His opera libretti are: *Frankenstein*, 1979; *Rumpelstiltskin*, 1978; *William Wilson*, 1979.

Gardner also wrote children's books: *A Child's Bestiary*, 1977; *Dragon, Dragon and Other Tales*, 1976; *In the Suicide Mountains*, 1977; *The King of the Hummingbirds and Other Tales*, 1977.

## VIII. THE SCHIZOID PATTERN: KURT VONNEGUT

Kurt Vonnegut (b.1922) won public recognition as a major contemporary American writer only after the publication of his fifth novel *Slaughterhouse 5* in 1969. Until then he was considered to belong to the lowbrow class of dabblers at the subliterary genres of science-fiction and spy novels.

Indeed, his first novel *Player Piano* (1952), which was a rather sophisticated experiment with the formula of anti-utopian fiction in the tradition of Huxley or Waugh, was received as a mere futuristic extravaganza. Presenting Illium, New York, Vonnegut exposes the ideals of the corporation and organization man he had observed while working for General Electric in the large cities of Schenectady, Albany and Troy, New York. Although it is projected several decades forward, ten years after a hypothetical Third World War, the picture of life it presents alludes to present-day corporate life as he had experienced it at General Electric. The novel describes an extremely affluent society where all the goods are now produced entirely by machines. Only a handful of engineers are retained to keep fully automated machines oiled and plugged in, while they are operated by complicated computers whose thought capacities outrange the most intelligent human management. Mankind has been freed for permanent leisure, but in fact, it has been freed into its permanent boredom. The protagonist is dr. Paul Proteus, the director of the Illium Works, who perceives an undefinable unhappiness among the most comfortably living ex-workers and is himself subject to a clinging unease. The reverend James Lasher diagnoses the situation quite pertinently: "for generations they've been built up to worship competition and the

market, productivity and economic usefulness, and the envy of their fellow men - and boom! It's all yanked out from under them. They can't participate, can't be useful anymore. Their whole culture's being shot to hell."<sup>1</sup>

In this world of conformity, complete mechanization and boredom, the problem the characters are challenged by is staying human. It is no wonder then that the people finally start a revolution, but they end up very much where they began. Quite depressed, Paul realizes that life is an endless circle whose happiest issue is death. Unlike Paul's wife, Anita, who turns life into empty style, his friend, Ed Finnerty, who has always been a rebel against conformity, shows a hope for breaking the cycle. Proteus, Finnerty and Lasher initiate a revolt against the machines, smashing these man-made robbers of men's identities. For a few days, the people follow enthusiastically, intoxicated with their own revolutionariness. But the local disturbances are soon repressed by the larger forces of the state, as in the Huxleyan model.

In order to panoramically portray a whole society, Vonnegut resorts to several subplots and digressions which somewhat weaken the central narrative but which achieve a broad satirical view of a society which has reached the point of nightmare. Although the book is extremely funny, full of suspense and fanciful invention, its underlying thought is quite serious and the end implies that to strive for a better world in perfecting the physical conditions of the given one means going from nightmare to nightmare. Vonnegut suggests that the system is corrupting but he is not very sure about man, either. The portrayal of Rudy Hertz, Haycox or Fred Garth, imperfect human characters rather than downright villains, implies that he blames the system more than the people. Yet, like Golding, who in *Lord of the Flies* tells us that the beast is within the human being, Vonnegut seems to suggest that it is futile for man to keep looking outside of himself for the formula of a better world. The answer to the meaning of life lies within each man.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Player Piano*, a Seymour Lawrence Book, Delacorte Press, 1952, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Reed: *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* Warner, New York, 1972, p. 56.

Man's quest for meaning in his universe and purpose in his existence is further explored, in the guise of a science fiction novel, in Vonnegut's second book, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959). Malachi Constant (or Faithful messenger), who would like to be the carrier of an important message, discovers that he is being used in some interplanetary plot designed by Winston Niles Rumfoord, a strange man who now exists as "wave phenomena" in consequence of having got his spaceship into an "uncharted chrono-synclastic infundibulum". Able to hand time and space and people as he wishes, Rumfoord finds out that he too is included in some larger intergalactic scheme masterminded by the distant planet Tralfamadore. The ideas of the user used, of the plotter plotted, of every pattern as being possibly a part of a larger pattern outside its control are very common in contemporary American fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Travelling from planet to planet, Malachi meets with a plurality of systems dedicated to death or beauty, Earth-inspired or utopian: thus on Mars, he encounters a Burroughs-like system where brainwashed human beings are turned into the mere automata of the Martian army. On Mercury, on the contrary, Malachi sees the beautiful patterns of the walls made up of "harmoniums", small wall-clinging creatures who spend their time listening to constant music. Gradually, Malachi becomes aware that he is "not only a victim of outrageous fortune, but also at times, one of outrageous fortune's cruellest agents as well". Once aware of his condition of agent-victim, Malachi asserts his humanity by trying hard to cause less rather than more pain.

Beatrice Rumfoord underlines that being used does however imply a certain purpose which is preferable to no purposiveness at all "The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody", she said, "would be not to be used for anything by anybody". This vision is rounded off by Malachi's late decision that one purpose of human life "no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is round to be loved,"<sup>4</sup>. It is a statement reminiscent of Steinbeck's sentimentality

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Tanner: *City of Words*, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1971, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> K. Vonnegut: *The Sirens of Titan*, a Dell Book, Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1970, p. 162, p. 310, p. 313.

which will recur throughout Vonnegut's work. Yet, it is not the statement that carries conviction, but the moral conviction underlying the two messengers' behaviour. Both Constant and Salo feel moved to self-negation when they believe they have committed crimes against friends they love. Becoming unreliable, compassionate and emotional, Salo acquires human attributes. Like Malachi he refuses to be reduced to a machine by a mechanical and absurd universe, affirming the possibility of a moral vision, of a meaningful life<sup>5</sup>.

The courier mission of Malachi is curiously, and funnily paralleled by that of Salo, the robot messenger sent by Tralfamadore to a galaxy 18-million light-years farther beyond Titan. A minor technical failing in his spaceship forces Salo to land on Titan. Waiting for a few thousand Earth years on Titan to be sent the replacement part he has asked for, Salo examines the Earth and makes out that Tralfamadore is using Terra to send messages to him. Thus Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, The Golden House of Nero, the Palace of the League of Nations, all serve as means of Tralfamadorian communication to Salo, picturing a fantasy of total cosmic control. The comic absurdity of the century-long human effort and suffering that have been consumed in order to accomplish this minor act of delivery is emphasized by the fact that Salo's message is simply "Greetings".

Replete with social and religious satire, comedy, disillusionment, with middle class satire, with delightful inventiveness and energy of fantasy and language, *The Sirens of Titan* yet reflects a frightening existential view. There is no hope of understanding the works of the universe which is indifferent or hostile, it is useless to look for some answer from above. The evolution of Malachi shows that any meaning there can be is only man-generated.

Vonnegut's next novel, *Mother Night* (1961), explores the ambiguous interrelatedness of good and evil inspired by Goethe's Mephistopheles' definition that he quotes: "I am part of the part that

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<sup>5</sup> This vision is formulated in the religion advocated by "The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent" with its key precept "Take care of the People and God Almighty will take care of Himself", p. 180.

first was all, part of the darkness that gave birth to light and now disputes with Mother Night her ancient rank and sway".<sup>6</sup> Likewise man is a bright angel dimmed finally by his own origins by Mother Night, which is not only the initial darkness and void but can also be seen as "the void left by a human parent's withdrawal"<sup>7</sup>. Josephine Hendin sees darkness as the maternal presence sought by most of Vonnegut's characters. Once the irreplaceable woman has been lost, everyone else seems interchangeable or replaceable. The initial wholeness lost, everything is fragmentation.

Howard Campbell, the protagonist of *Mother Night*, devotedly loved his wife who died before the action of the novel begins. Their union stands for the erotic Eden Campbell described as possible in his play "Nation of Two", and which is utterly lost by the outbreak of the war. War is the strongest force for fragmentation and schiziness. *Mother Night* presents an appalling picture of the human being where everyone is so fragmented they are both themselves and their opposites: Howard Campbell is both a prominent Nazi propagandist and an American secret agent; Campbell's best friend, Kraft, a painter, turns out to be a Russian agent who gives him over to the Israelis to be hung as a war criminal; the lovely woman who suddenly turns up pretending to be his first wife is in fact his sister-in-law who has to become a communist agent. Everyone in this book betrays himself and the people he/she says they love. Against this background of separation and betrayal looms large Vonnegut's nostalgic yearning for the pre-war wholeness and love. But the only way to the initial wholeness left for Campbell is suicide and the novel ends with his decision to hang himself and join the realm of Mother Night.

Cast in the form of Campbell's confession, the novel marks a certain shift in Vonnegut's style. The short chapters giving a sense of intermittence and incompleteness unfold the narrative along skilfully interwoven time levels that are easy to distinguish as they are

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<sup>6</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Mother Night*, Avon Books, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Josephine Hendin: *Vulnerable People. A View of American Fiction Since 1945*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, p. 36.

consistently related to definite geographic areas: Campbell's pre-war childhood and youth in America, the war period in Germany, the post-war period in America, the present in the Israeli camp. Here, as later in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* or *Slaughterhouse 5*, Vonnegut also makes use of all kinds of documents - books, magazines, letters - which achieve a sense of the potentially numberless versions of events. Consequently, there lingers a probably deliberate uncertainty about the moral status of the protagonist - narrator who claims to be left with no feelings in the end. Is his decision to hang himself an act of self-judgement or only an escape from a cruel and confusing world? In Vonnegut, Robert Scholes remarks, as in most of his contemporaries, "we do not find the rhetoric of moral certainty, which has generally been a distinguishing characteristic of the satirical tradition".<sup>8</sup> Campbell is one of Vonnegut's most impressive agent-victims that also raises the question of the artist. Campbell's radio broadcasts are on the surface vilest Nazi propaganda full of anti-Semitic fantasies and accusations and of attacks on America and the Allies and, by means of a secret code of pauses, coughs, mannerisms, they also convey a hidden message to the Allies containing vital information on German positions, resources and moves. The harm done by Campbell's successful surface propaganda is expressed by Campbell's father-in-law who gratefully tells him that his programmes prevented him from thinking that Germany had gone insane. There is thus the suggestion that the surface message apologetic of Nazi ideology may have done as much or more damage than the good done by the real hidden message. Campbell had to construct lies in order to convey the truth, but he later confessed that he never knew what information passed through him. His predicament carries the implicit warning that a man's lies may carry greater influence than his truths, a warning of special importance to writers, that is fiction makers. The schiziness of most of the characters in the book also conveys the intimation that an invented or disguise self may replace, or become more authentic than,

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Scholes: *Fabulation and Metafiction*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, London, 1979, p. 161.

the real one. In his preface written five years after the publication of the novel, Vonnegut drives home this simple moral of the book: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be".<sup>9</sup>

Presenting a large range of fiction-making, from Campbell's most virulent propaganda to his most idealistic artistic productions, Vonnegut seems to suggest that the artist cannot be confident as to the harmlessness of his fictions. Campbell subsequently discovers that even his first authentic writings have been distorted and "used" and complains that his idealistic love writings were turned into pornography, his truths and beauty into lies and ugliness. We may say that, as Tony Tanner subtly remarks, it comes down to that "suspicion of all communications"<sup>10</sup> which seems to go so deep in contemporary American fiction.

Vonnegut's next novel, *Cat's Cradle* (1963) starts from a recount of the life of dr. Hoenikker, the inventor of the atomic bomb, to become a recount of the end of the world. Dr. Hoenikker's is a loveless family in which the utterly dejected mother dies bearing a child. The children discover that the parents have nothing to give them but *ice*, figuratively but also literally as dr. Hoenikker bequeathes to them his last discovery, *ice-9* which freezes all the water around. Taken to the lip, it kills by freezing the blood, dropped into the sea, it ends the world by freezing in chain reaction all the water network.

The Hoenikker children crave to be normal and whole but Angela is only a forlorn girl who keeps playing on the clarinet tunes expressing deep pain; Newt, the midget son, paints bleak nihilistic pictures; Frank, a mechanical genius, is wanted by the police. He has a playful genius for building little fantasies in plywood and he imagines and builds the Island of San Lorenzo. By a sudden leap into the fantastic utopian the fiction displaces fact or becomes it and all the characters, the narrator included, find themselves on that island for which Vonnegut invents, like Swift, a history, language and religion. If the scientist finds the truth that kills, the religious prophet looks for

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<sup>9</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Introduction to Mother Night*, p. V.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Tanner, *City of Words*, p. 188.

the lie that saves. It is what Bokonon, the run-away Negro from Tobago understands when he creates a new religion for the inhabitants of San Lorenzo as some psalm-like quotations from his Bible will prove:

*"I wanted all things*

To seem to make some sense,  
So we all could be happy, yes,  
Instead of tense.

And I made up lies  
So that they all fit nice,  
And I made a sad world  
A par-a-dise

Nothing in this book is true"

"Live by the foma\* that make you brave and  
Kind and healthy and happy".

*The Book of Bokonon, 1: 5*

\*harmless untruths<sup>11</sup>

Bokononism allows that there may be a pattern behind the most seemingly random things when it says about everything "As it was supposed to happen", knowing that a certain amount of mysterious and incomprehensible determinism will help man to put up with some appalling things that he does or are done to him. Bokonon gratifies man's innate need for pattern-making when he invents a game with his friend McCabe in order to distract the inhabitants' attention from the bad material conditions on the island. McCabe will play the merciless tyrant and will outlaw Bokonon and his religion and thus people become much happier believing to be participating in the archetypal struggle between good and evil.

"Game" is a key word in the novel as the title suggests, being usually seen as an escape. Angela's "one escape" is playing weirdly authentic blues on the clarinet, but "such music from such a woman could only be a case of schizophrenia or demonic possession".<sup>12</sup> Newt

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<sup>11</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Cat's Cradle*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1963, p. 90.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 150.

associates it with the religious lies mankind has been telling itself for ages. He remembers that "cat's cradle" (a game with string on the fingers of one's hands kept apart) was the game his father played with him the day the first A-bomb was dropped. Newt explains that lies and mere games have been humanity's parental heritage for a hundred thousand years, driving children crazy because when they look at the criss-crossed string, what do they see! "No damn cat, no damn cradle"<sup>13</sup>. Yet, lies and therefore art are necessary as Bokononism shows by one of its axioms that man has to tell himself he understands life even when he knows he doesn't. The conclusion, which clearly sends to humanity present's predicament, comes down to what the narrator calls the cruel paradox of Bokononist thought: "the heart-breaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heart-breaking impossibility of lying about it"<sup>14</sup>.

Yet, even if man's answers to ultimate questions can only be lies, Vonnegut makes it clear which his values should be in order to make life bearable: courage and kindness. The opening line of the novel, "Call me Jonah", echoing the beginning of *Moby Dick*, points to the kinship of Vonnegut's vision to Melville's who asks man to give up his "conceit of attainable felicity" and speculation on man's place in the scheme of things, and concentrate on the quality of life and shared human plight.

In the next novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater!* (1965) Vonnegut presents a Quixotic character who has the utopian<sup>15</sup> courage and means to make uncritical love for his fellow beings his absolute value. In his specific deceptively simple way, Vonnegut announces his theme in the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 137.

There is also a suggestion, as dr. Hoenikker discovers ice-9 when merely playing with substances, that men's irresponsible games may end in total annihilation. It is emphasized that it is rather dangerous for humanity if a scientist should be amoral like the playful doctor.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 229.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot drinks to Utopia, and the only writer he likes is Kilgore Trout, the science fiction writer who gives people "fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world." p. 20.

first sentence of the novel: "A pile of money is the protagonist of this story about men..".

The 87 million dollars of the Rosewater Foundation represent the typical American dream of success. Set up in order to go round the heavy taxes on the huge profits of the Rosewater estate, the Foundation is changed by its president Eliot Rosewater, the protagonist of the novel, in into an extremely original charity institution. He gives his "uncritical love"<sup>16</sup> and trifling material assistance to the useless and unattractive inhabitants of Entropyville, the capital of Rosewater County which is in the "dead centre" of the country, "deadly flat" and inhabited by "deadly dull" people. (We should note that the wasteland imagery makes us aware that Rosewater's first name is not chosen at random). Elliot's attitude is generally regarded as pathological and the plot is triggered off by the decision of the greedy lawyer Mushari to talk a side branch of the Rosewater family into bringing into Court a case for the change of the Rosewater Foundation President on the ground of his insanity. All the while accumulating "proofs" in favour of Eliot's mental derangement, the narrative gives an extensive, diachronic and synchronic, portrait of the American millionaire by the description of the members of three families: the Rosewaters, the Buntlines and the Rumfoords. The Rosewater father made unscrupulous profits taking advantage of the national disaster during and after the Civil War, not shrinking from swindling his own brother. The contemporary millionaire is delineated in four hypostases, three typical, and Eliot's atypical one:

(1) The fierce conservative senator Lister Ames Rosewater, the advocate of "laissez faire" and special philosophy expressed by the principle "swim-if-you-don't-want-to-sink" with the weak quietly disappearing on the bottom.

(2) Stewart Buntline who felt guilty in his youth and wanted to share his fortune with the poor was persuaded by the family lawyer

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<sup>16</sup> K. Vonnegut: *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1965, p. 186.

that the wealth was the foundation of his identity and value and leads now a lethargical life in which alcoholic prostration alternates with total moral and emotional indifference, a state symbolical of the entropic tendency of a supertechnologized America. The family picture includes a perverse uneducated wife full of airs and a thirteen-year-old daughter who makes intense commerce with pornographic books.

(3) The Rumfoords stand for total alienation and aristocratic isolation, secluded as they are in their magnificent castle which they only open up to visitors one day every 5 years.

(4) Eliot and his loving wife Sylvia atypically offer uncritical love and sympathy to everybody in need of it. Sylvia is the first to break down under the huge pressure of this boundless philanthropy. Eliot is a skilfully constructed character whose conscious identification with Hamlet introduces both the suggestion of a rotten and corrupted social context and the motif of simulated madness. Yet on the other hand Eliot evidences almost pathological symptoms, such as his obsessions with firemen, which cause irresistibly funny incidents. Likewise, just as his very name "rosewater" works, effecting an allegorical short circuit on the very existence of such a character, and pointing to its utopian nature, the final scene when Eliot has the hallucinatory vision of the fire-bombed Dresden projected upon the city of Indianapolis symbolically suggests the ineffectualness of his philanthropy if related to the catastrophic expanse of the social American reality on analogy with the ineffectualness of firemen in holocaust.

Eliot's final breakdown is caused by his father's reproach that by raining his love exclusively upon poor strangers, Eliot has utterly neglected his own kin and family, bringing his father to despair and his wife to neurosis. We can thus see that Vonnegut offers no solutions but gives a convincing, even if necessarily simplified, picture of contemporary America, "spoofs of the American scene"<sup>17</sup> meaning to make his readers ponder upon a loveless human reality and the value of human dignity.

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<sup>17</sup> Alfred Kazin: *Bright Book of Life*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, Toronto, p. 89.

The firestorm of Dresden is the central and climactic event in *Slaughterhouse 5*,<sup>18</sup> (1969) followed by a grey lifeless moon-like picture "a moonscape"<sup>19</sup> that haunts the reader as it has haunted the author for 24 years on account of its perfect stillness and entropic inertia. A mixture of autobiographic confession (in the Prologue and Epilogue), of anti-war novel (really a satire on the Great American War Novel), and of science-fiction, *Slaughterhouse 5* reads as a comment on human nature which made possible the instant combustion of 135,000 human beings during the night of February 13th to 14th, 1945.<sup>20</sup>

Although the first person narrator of the Prologue and Epilogue and Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of the narrative, have many biographical elements in common, there is an important distance between them on the moral axis and that of social action. Confronted with the extreme violence of the war, with physical and psychic exhaustion, Billy Pilgrim escapes from the horror of the present becoming unstuck in time, experiencing scenes of his past or future life. Billy is "the benumbed chilled man who kills his nerves so as not to kill himself"<sup>21</sup>, who develops as an unconscious means for survival, a passive and fatalistic philosophy<sup>22</sup> with hedonistic overtones which strips death of its horror and mystery. It is a system that Billy derives from Tralfamadore, the planet that has kidnapped him in a compensatory dream, a system based on a new theory of time postulating the eternal coexistence of all moments and events similar to insects in a

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<sup>18</sup> Although the title represents the real address, a meatlocker, where the American prisoners - the author included - were kept in Dresden, it reads as an emblem of the human condition that man's inhumanity to man has led to in the 20th century.

Nowhere else does Vonnegut so constantly mix fact with fiction. He includes several historical documents such as Truman's announcement that an atomic bomb has been dropped on Hiroshima.

<sup>19</sup> Kurt Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse 5*. Dell. New York. 1971. p. 213

<sup>20</sup> As Kazin records, Vonnegut's total horror of war has endeared him to the young, to whom he has given the fixed idea of human vulnerability, *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> J. Hendin, *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> It is obsessively expressed by the haunting refrain "So it goes" which recurs whenever death occurs.

drop of amber. Despite his Christly non-violence (Billy goes to the war unarmed, in order to become a chaplain's assistant) and of the horror he witnessed (which will cause his apparently unmotivated fits of silent weeping) Billy never voices any sort of protest,<sup>23</sup> only towards the end of his life will he try to deliver public lectures meant to alter his fellow Earthlings' wrong vision time and death (Vonnegut significantly gives him the emblematic profession of an optometrist). Moreover he becomes the father of a high-school problem-boy who will be straightened up when his native violence finally acts within the socially accepted violence of the war in Vietnam. Then strangely, Billy is proud of his Green Beret son. The author, on the contrary, has told his sons "that they are not under any circumstances to take part in the massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee".<sup>24</sup> The author has persisted in his determination to write an anti-war novel although many people have propounded to him the theory that wars are as natural or at least as unavoidable as glaciers.<sup>25</sup>

The blueprint of human nature sketched by the novel includes beside the delineation of the harmless, peace-loving Billy always willing to give in to death, that of his very counterfoil, the abject Paul Lazarro, the infamous apologist of violence and sweet vengeance. It also includes the stance of the romantic warrior (Roland Weary and Wild Bob), the figure of the valiant fighter who has consciously espoused a cause, and the embodiment of the ideological and political traitor (the Nazi Campbell, the protagonist of *Mother Night*).

The book the author-narrator has produced is sad, true but efficient in that it is an extremely painful effort at making things "go" differently. The onomatopoeic nonsense "poo-tee-weet" that a bird

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<sup>23</sup> His passive acceptance of this brutal world can be traced in his childhood when his own father educationally hurls him into a deep pool on the principle "swim or sink". His death-in-life total acceptance of an incomprehensible existence is terrifyingly expressed in the epitaph he wrote for a friend absurdly shot amid the ruins of Dresden for taking a teapot: "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt" - *Slaughterhouse 5*.

<sup>24</sup> K. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse*, *Slaughterhouse 5*, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

chirps in the last line of this novel becomes symbolically moving because we are witnessing, as Olderman perceives, "more than a black humorist's symbolic affirmation of life, and more than a fabulist's act of love - we are witnessing a moment of balance in Vonnegut's own life, when he finds himself capable of dealing with the intense pain of his Dresden experience and ready to go on with the delicate business of living".<sup>26</sup>

We should like to underline Vonnegut's remarkable economy and brevity of style as well as the originality of his narrative technique whose main feature is that of spatializing time. Hence the emphasis on space and ideas (with an obvious didactic purpose), a process which results in a fragmented narrative consisting of mosaic pieces that form what Vonnegut terms his telegraphic schizophrenic style. Thematically, the protagonist comes unstuck in time, travels in time and is generally out of bounds with chronological time. Time is developed into a theme that is naturally interrelated with that of death, the great human reality that the protagonist keeps struggling to transcend. We may conclude with Monica Loeb that the irregular structure of *Slaughterhouse 5* reflects the quirks and equally irregular workings of the human mind, as well as the chaotic and often disjointed state of the world.<sup>27</sup>

With the publication of *Slaughterhouse 5*, Vonnegut's sales multiplied by seven and subsequently by 25, which indicates that it was bought by young and old alike. His insight transcends generations Josephine Hendin remarks, in its statement of the shared helplessness and frustration of the fathers and sons.<sup>28</sup> Like Dwayne Hoover, the middle-aged Pontiac dealer in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) who despairs for years over his homosexual son and comes home one day to find that his wife has committed suicide, the American readers know

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<sup>26</sup> Raymond M. Olderman: *Beyond the Waste Land. The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1972, p. 214.

<sup>27</sup> Monica Loeb: *Vonnegut's Dance with Death, Theme and Structure in Slaughterhouse-Five*, Acta Universitatis Umensis, Umea Studies in the Humanities, 26, Umea, 1979, pp.21-43.

<sup>28</sup> Josephine Hendin, *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

that being a devoted husband and father no longer guarantees satisfaction. He builds characters who are American Everymen and whose sheer banality saves them. His books make a monument out of insecurity, and a "model of masculinity" out of the ground-down man. He thus makes life easy and hard times fun becoming "an instinctive pop artist" and "culture hero".<sup>29</sup>

*Breakfast of Champions* gives a depressed picture of polluted contemporary America, an America whose resources have been exhausted and turned into all-covering industrial detritus and whose inhabitants are agonizing lonely, no longer capable of real human feelings, suspiciously like robots or machines. The tone of the book is personal, the author being omnipresent and omnipotent and presenting his problems as a creator of characters and plots, lending his novel a typical air of postmodernist metafiction. The central character is Kilgore Trout, science fiction writer who is the parodical alter ego of the author that has also appeared in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater !* and *Slaughterhouse 5*. Through Trout Vonnegut drives home the simple truth of his moral fables: "we are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane"<sup>30</sup>. The simplistic recitation of American history and the naive felt-pen drawings of the author conjugate to humorously emphasize the writer's effort to reach the essence of things.

The second major theme of the book Dwayne Hoover conveys is, as we have seen, a hopeless view of things, a sense of life as a cruel practical joke played in a base world of machines, human or otherwise. In the end he goes wildly mad because he does not realize like the abstract painter Rabo Karabekian that "Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery"<sup>31</sup>. When the sense of the sacredness of man's life and conscience is gone, the only way the human being can go is the darkness of insanity or death.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Breakfast of Champions*, Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, New York, 1973, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p.73.

Like *Slaughterhouse 5*, *Slapstick* (1976) and *Jail Bird* (1979) are both frames with long Prologues that confessedly reveal their autobiographical vein. His self-portrait in the first Prologue reveals a man in his fifties with grown-up dispersed children who repeatedly reaches back to the family life of his childhood in Indianapolis. *The Prologue* celebrates two influences that have much modelled Vonnegut's life, his sister Alice and the great artistic couple of Star Laurel and Oliver Hardy. The former's memory is echoed in the central themes of the novel, the way in which extended families create both individual dignity and social stability. The latter explains the title and Vonnegut's own taste for "callous humour" and "bitter-sweet comedy"<sup>32</sup>.

The professional tone of the *Prologue* is matched by the first-person narrative of the novel, allegedly the autobiography of dr. Wilbur Daffodil Swain, formerly Wilbur Rockefeller Swain, who is about to celebrate his hundredth birthday in the 21st century. Swain is the last President of the United States, telling a futuristic tale flavouring of science fiction about an energy-exhausted America which has relapsed into a more primitive stage of civilisation. The scheme that he has inspired and implemented as a President (replacing the game of *Idiot's Delight* the wealthy former generation played madly making money<sup>33</sup>), is more democratic and less wasteful of natural resources, a "utopian scheme for creating artificial extended families in America by issuing everyone a new middle name', for families are better at caring for their own and at kinder-hearted interrelations. Swain's brilliant ideas are due to his sister Eliza with whom he is dizygotic twins. Their congenital abnormality makes them idiots each, but they

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<sup>32</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz: *Kurt Vonnegut*, Methuen, London and New York, 1982, p. 76.

<sup>33</sup> People kept "obsessively turning money into power, and then power back into money again, and the money back into power", *Slapstick*, Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, New York, 1976, p. 28.

find out by themselves that when they put their heads together, they make a genius<sup>34</sup>.

Wilbur and Eliza believe that "life can be painless, provided that there is sufficient peacefulness for a dozen or so rituals to be repeated simply endlessly"<sup>35</sup>.

Full both of up-to-date anthropological knowledge and common horse sense, the book exults both the sense of dignity and purpose of belonging to a family and the post-utopian view of humans as "innocent great apes, with limited means for doing mischief, which, in my opinion as an old, old man, is all that human beings were ever meant to be".<sup>36</sup>

Vonnegut's next novel *Jail Bird* (1979), deals with Walter Starbuck, a government clerk, who has just served a short Watergate-related sentence (for an unwittingly committed minor crime) and brings back Kilgore Trout, a lifer in the same Federal Penitentiary with Starbuck (for a small crime he never meant to commit) going on writing science fiction. Towards the end of the story, Trout is described as producing "a science fiction novel about economics"<sup>37</sup> putting forth a substantially new vision of American life, which we suspect to be the very novel we are reading. Kilgore Trout, we learn, is in fact one of the two pen names of Robert Fender, a veterinary doctor who committed an unintended act of treason during his military service. Now serving his life sentence he is friend to all, "uncritically"<sup>38</sup> kind to everybody.

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<sup>34</sup> The two twin characters are the archetypal echo of a number of myths such as the fall from innocence, the complementary halves of a pre-Platonic ideal, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, all of which the novelist applies to the theme of compassion and the complex of suffering which results from being under the same pledge. Loree Rackstraw: "Paradise Re-Lost", *North American Review*, 261 Winter 1978, pp. 63-4.

<sup>35</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Slapstick*, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Jailbird*, Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, New York, 1976, p. 233.

<sup>38</sup> Vonnegut has been frequently accused of taking no critical ethical attitude to his characters. He made an answer in the headnote to his play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, 1971: "I felt and still feel that everybody is right, no matter what he says (...) I gave a name (...) to a mathematical point where all options, no matter how contradictory, harmonized. I called it *achronosynclastic infundibulum*. I live in one", Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, New York, 1972, p.IX. In one option this strategy is a lesson in tolerance, which also means to force the reader to make his own judgements. The implied author in all of his novels is always on the side of common sense and decency.

Robert Fender used the pseudonym "Kilgore Trout" for his gentle lessons in being humane, and that of "Frank X. Barlow" for his more scathing satires.

Trout's books and Starbuck's experiences exemplify the prediction made in the Sermon of the Mount, namely that love may fail but courtesy will prevail.

Just as Christianity is reconstructed, so is the American dream given a new version in *Jailbird*. Property is redistributed, the massive holdings of the RAMJAC Corporation are broken up into a million parts and given out to the U.S citizens. Walter Starbuck's student days romance with Mary Kathlees O'Looney is resumed and reshaped along lines of simple human decency. Kindness is rewarded, in a way consistent with the American system, simple material motivation is revealed to be self destructive and again, as in *Slapstick*, simple decent rituals are shown to be the best way of making life least harmful.

*Deadeye Dick* (1982) is a sort of quiet lament for the protagonist's unlived life. Indeed Rudy Waltz's life is practically over when at the age of twelve he fires a rifle that kills a pregnant housewife on Mother's Day. He becomes, as he styles it, a "neuter" who never afterwards knows love, never has fun, never tastes any of the sins or delights of life.<sup>39</sup>

"I concluded that the best thing for me and for those around me was to want nothing, to be enthusiastic about nothing, to be as unmotivated as possible, in fact, so that I would never again hurt anyone.

To put it in another way: I wasn't to touch any thing on this planet, man, woman, child, artefact, animal, vegetable or mineral - since it was very likely to be connected to a push-pull detonator and an explosive charge".<sup>40</sup>

Parallel to Rudy's failure to live his life is the country's failure to ensure the conditions necessary for life, as America appears determined to *invent over better mechanisms of destruction*.

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<sup>39</sup> Kurt Vonnegut: *Deadeye Dick*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1982, p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112

In *Galápagos* (1985) Vonnegut returns to science fiction to warn us again that unless humans stop destroying their habitat with polluting it, then this beautiful but vulnerable planet will become impossible to inhabit. This book does not present a spectacular apocalypse like *Cat's Cradle* but a future when the human population on most of the planet is unable to reproduce and hence dies out. Only a small group survives on the new ark of the Galápagos Islands where humans evolve into new small-brained aquatic creatures that live in harmony with the natural world (they have neither brains nor fingers to damage the environment with.)

Both *Galápagos* and *Bluebeard* (1987), despite the scenario of the former and the shortcomings of the latter's protagonist, are more affirmative than Vonnegut's previous creations, if not positively optimistic.

*Bluebeard* offers a pronouncement on the function and mission of (modern) art. The hero, Rabo Karabekian, is an Abstract Expressionist painter who confidently believes that art has no content.

He is counterparted to Dan Gregory, the mere illustrator of other people's ideas who makes a huge wealth by painting things more real than they appear to the eye.

The positive alternative *Bluebeard* suggests is embodied in Karabekian's final canvas "Now It's the Women's Turn", which he hides to the last day of his life in the symbolically locked room of the legendary castle. This is neither an Abstract Expressionist painting nor, in spite of appearances, a literal illustration. His subject is the moment when World War II was over in Europe. The carefully executed huge canvas contains 6,219 diminutive characters who are convincingly real because the artist invented the war story of each of them "and then painted the person it had happened to".<sup>41</sup>

It is a work that accepts life as it is, with its limits, limitations and shortcomings. Karabekian's last monumental painting includes the ragged soldiers of an exhausted army, war prisoners, concentration camp victims and civilians - humanity in various hypostases: alive, dead, dying.

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<sup>41</sup> K. Vonnegut: *Bluebeard*, Delacorte Press. New York, 1987, p. 283.

Rabo's mother survived the great massacre of the Armenians by the Turks and Rabo himself lived to witness the end of the most destructive war fought in Europe and all its horror.

By the ending of *Bluebeard* Vonnegut suggests that the true artist will use technique in the service of human beings and their human feelings".<sup>42</sup>

We may conclude that Kurt Vonnegut has built a fictional universe<sup>43</sup> of his own with recurrent themes and motifs, characters that move from one novel into others and a certain geographical unity, both on the Earth and outside of it. Like many other postmodernist writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Donald Bartheleme, John Barth, William Burroughs or Richard Brautigan, he uses comedy, satire and parody in order to give the picture of an existential absurd, meaningless universe, with ossified and dehumanized forms and mentalities. Most of his novels are full of fantasy and are irresistibly funny, yet his fantasy is always ethically controlled and he produces moral fables with deep insight into human nature and the contemporary American reality. Vonnegut uses the postmodernist iconoclastic practice of breaking the traditional narrative patterns experimenting with the treatment of space and time and creating frequently ambiguous protean characters made up of several identities or roles and offering typical instances of the postmodern schizoid hero. Vonnegut's treatment of space and time is fluid which leads to a fragmentary, episodic narrative structure with incidents whose sequence seems random but is in fact motivated by ideatic or emotional associations triggered off by similar situations,

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<sup>42</sup> Donald E. Morse: *Kurt Vonnegut*, The Borgo Press, San Bernadino, California, 1992, p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> He has also written volumes of short stories (*Canary in a Cathouse*, 1961, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, 1968), volumes of essays (*Wampeters, Foma and Grandfalloons*, 1974, *Palm Sunday*, 1981), a play (*Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, 1971), a television script (*Between Time and Timbuktu*, 1972), a children's book (*Sun Moon Star*, 1980, with Ivan Chermaylff).

objects or characters, it is a "montage" structure that Vonnegut defines as the "telepathic, schizophrenic manner of Tralfamadorian stories" <sup>44</sup> which reflects at the level of the narrative discourse the fragmentariness of contemporary American existence and instability of the individual consciousness caused by situations of great stress and shock. In spite of using a criss-cross time diagram which frequently implies a spatial discontinuity, the pacy narrative can however be easily followed due to clear space and time signposts which help the reader's mobility.

If in *Slaughterhouse 5* Vonnegut's personal authorial voice appears to draw attention to the substantial factuality of the events narrated, in his novels of the seventies this voice, particularly in *Breakfast of Champions* keeps tearing the mimetic illusion in the manner of postmodernist metafiction. In order to drive his ideas home Vonnegut uses the technique of books-inside-books (real ones or the imaginary science fiction of Kilgore Trout), introduces real historical documents and topical allusions or cultural and mythical archetypes (Hamlet, Don Quixote, Adam, the child crusader, Christ, Jonah etc.).

As regards Vonnegut's prose, it has the same virtues as his vivid characterizations of American Everymen and suspenseful readable plotting. It is deceptively simple, suggestive of the ordinary, but capable to unexpected illuminating turns. Vonnegut uses the rhetorical potential of the short sentence and short paragraph better than anyone now writing, often bringing about rich comic or dramatic effects by isolating single sentences in separate paragraphs or excerpting a phrase from context for a bizarre chapter-heading.

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<sup>44</sup> Vonnegut's achievement in relating real and fantastic material may be best rendered in the words John Barth used in discussing the work of Jorge Luis Borges "the contamination of reality by dream" - Vonnegut, like Borges, has imagined an "alternative world" to which his fiction allude. Cf. ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer: *The Vonnegut Statement*, Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1973, p.206.

Because his texture is unsophisticated, his humour robust and his message on behalf of human decency is always clear, Vonnegut has been called a Pop artist and even met with critical censorship<sup>45</sup> but we consider with R. Scholes that he produces an "intellectual comedy" which offers us moral stimulation: he never gives fixed ethical positions which the reader can complacently assume, but thoughts to exercise our consciences and keep our essential humanity in shape, ready to respond to the humanity of the others. Among the other postmodernists he occupies an outstanding place due to his efforts to recover a new humanism in a post-humanist world.

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<sup>45</sup> See Leslie Fiedler: "The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut", *Esquire*, LXXIV, September 1970, pp.195-204.

## IX. MINIMALIST FICTION: RAYMOND CARVER

Raymond Carver (1938 - 1988) has been credited with the restoration of realism, a literary mode that, as we have seen, had been declared dead or dying in the 1960s. As David Gates pointed out his influence had been growing for two decades "as much as anyone, he may be responsible for so many of today's younger writers' abandoning the mirrored fun houses of Barth and Barthelme, the metafictionists fashionable in the '60s and '70s, in favour of austere realism".<sup>1</sup>

Carver is considered the leader of the "minimalist" movement in short fiction practised by such writers as Ann Beattie, Elizabeth Tallent, Tobias Wolff, Mary Robison and Frederick Barthelme. It is characterized by an extremely spare narrative, a focusing on the drabness of daily life, a flat narrative tone that avoids any extensive comments, therefore a remarkable restraint in both narrative texture and structure. This style has been actively disparaged and abused as "K-Mart Realism", "Hick Chic", "Coke-Fiction", "Freeze-Dried Fiction", "TV Fiction", "Hi-Tech Fiction", "Postliterate Literature", "Lo-Cal Literature", "White Trash Fiction", "Post alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism", "Around-the-house-and-in-the-yard-Fiction"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> David Gates: "Carver: To Make a Long Story Short", *Newsweek*, vol. CX, no.23, June, 6, 1988, p.70.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kim A. Herzinger: "Introduction: On the New Fiction", *Mississippi Review* 40/41, Winter 1985, p. 8 and John Barth: "A Few Words About Minimalism", *New York Times Book Review*, December 28, 1986, p. 2.

In his article on "minimalism" John Barth comments that the main reason for the respective writers' popularity is most likely the decline of literacy and the deterioration of reading habits among the television generation<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand numerous critics have acclaimed the aesthetics of minimalism. Arthur Saltzman, for example, has shown that while obviously departing from the stylistic preening and playfulness of Raymond Federman, Ronald Sukenik and Gilbert Sorrentino, minimalist fiction is far from being craftless. Programatically against the elitism of such postmoderns as William Gaddis, Th. Pynchon or Joseph McElroy, yet like other postmoderns as William Gass and Stanley Elkin, R. Carver is also a "diligent refiner of sentences"<sup>4</sup> but whereas the former writers are masters of fusion and rhythmic embellishment Saltzman compares the latter with a surgeon who concentrates on taking sentences and "paring them down to where they seem solid somehow"<sup>5</sup>. Saltzman finds that although the minimalists' "experiments" with language are subtler than those of the more notorious "desecrators of literary realism"<sup>6</sup> they share the latter's suspicion of the referential adequacy of words and their clinical appreciation of the cadences of sentences. He considers that Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary Robinson, Tobias Wolff and other similar writers are just as mannered and just as subversive in effect in their rigid jurisdiction over expansiveness as their polar opposites, the so-called maximalists, like John Barth, Ronald Sukenick, Th. Pynchon, T. Coraghessan Boyle, William Gaddis, William Gass, Joseph McElroy are in their "supermagnification and overregistration"<sup>7</sup>. Carver repeatedly underlined that he hated literary tricks<sup>8</sup> echoing his avowed

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<sup>3</sup> John Barth: "A Few Words (...), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Saltzman: *Understanding Raymond Carver*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1988, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory: "An Interview with Raymond Carver". *Mississippi Review* 40/41 Winter 1985, p.74.

<sup>6</sup> A. Saltzman, *Op. cit.*, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> R. Carver: "On Writing" in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*, Capra, Santa Barbara, 1983, p.14.

mentor, John Gardner, whose book *On Moral Fiction* is a diatribe against what he deems stylistic preciousness and self-indulgent dazzle. With his plain-dealing "postpostmodern" style and the reavowal of extratextual reality, particularly that anonymous reality of compromised aspirations, Carver reinforces John Gardner's belief in an art that "rediscovers generation by generation, what is necessary to humaneness<sup>9</sup>.

! His four collections of short stories: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (1976), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), *Cathedral* (1983), *Where I'm Calling From* (1988) chronicle the emotional history of the lower middle class generation growing up in the '60s (mostly in the pacific North West, but suggesting an all-American interpretation) mostly the lives of people whose luck had gone south on them".<sup>10</sup> Usually written in the present tense, his prose uses a functional, sternly demonstrative language, a spare style without showy effects. His stories feature characters who struggle with hurting memories and with hardly any brighter prospects before them. Carver's vision is dark, even grim, with only few alleviating notes emerging in *Cathedral* as his fictional universe is mostly populated by middle-aged divorced people of both sexes, trapped in the daily routines of empty lives. Carver confessed as to his consubstantiality with his characters, to his experience-based character delineation: "In some lives, people always succeed. In other lives, people don't succeed at what they are trying to do...These lives are, of course, valid to write about, the lives of the people who don't succeed. Most of my own experience has to do with the latter situation...It's their lives they've become uncomfortable with, the lives they see breaking down. They'd like to set things right, but they can't. And usually they do know it, I think, and after that they just do the best they can".<sup>11</sup> Like Chekhov, an acknowledged master, Carver is the bard of the unsubstantial lives of insignificant, obscure people, transcribing the thoughts of

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<sup>9</sup> John Gardner: *On Moral Fiction*, Basic Books, New York, 1977, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> R. Carver: "Elephant" in *Where I'm Calling From*, The Atlantic University Press, New York, 1986, p. 363.

<sup>11</sup> R. Carver: *Fires*, Vintage, New York, p. 201.

individuals who cannot analyze or speak for themselves! Words fail the girl in "Why Don't You Dance" when she tries to relate the story of how she has come by the furniture for the apartment she has furnished with her boyfriend. They pass by an unusual yardsale in which the interior of a house has been reassembled on the lawn, even with the television, lamps or blender functioning. The owners, she says to her friend "must be desperate or something".<sup>12</sup> In fact there is only one man inside and the furniture he is selling after the woman has left him is a metonymic symbol of his broken life. Selling it at prices that the young people find unbelievably low and asking them to dance in that open-air interior, he seems to feel a nostalgic identification with them, to hand them over his lost youthful dreams. When repeatedly telling the incident she can in no way express the deeper meaning of the action, her sympathy with the man's unexpressed despair. All she can talk about is the incredibly good bargain she had. "She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying".<sup>13</sup> This girl, like most of Carver's characters, suffers from the plague of inarticulateness, which is apparent in the brief dialogues, always hedged and in the shadow of what they need to be about. Gass diagnoses this radical divestment of development as faddishness swollen to a creed: "Images are out. It is fraudulent to politicize. Kept simple, short, direct, like a punch, the sentences avoid subordination, qualification, subtlety. Subordination requires judgement, evaluation: it creates complexity, demands definition."<sup>14</sup> We may say with Saltzman that the numbing nature of contemporary life - postatomic and atomized, where communication dwindles as information proliferates - is inherent in the verbal incapacity that pervades these stories.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> R. Carver: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1981, p. 9

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p.10.

<sup>14</sup> W. Gass: "A Failing Grade for the Present Tense", *New York Times Book Review*, October 11, 1987, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> A. Saltzman, *Op. cit.*, p.8.

"What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" and the other stories stress the difficulty of talking about what really matters as well as the gap between the values, and even capacity for feeling, of the generations: the unsentimental doctor of this title story cannot understand the passion that had made his second wife's abandoned husband to wish first to kill him, her lover, and finally only to kill himself. He cannot understand the quiet devotion of an old couple where the husband was falling apart because he could not see his wife, all plastered and bandaged after a road accident. The doctor cannot understand how feelings can change so: he had actually loved his first wife and, while the discussion that forms the substance of the story is in progress, he actually confesses he is lusting after his young friend's wife.

More deeply affected of the alteration of human feeling is the father of the girl who tells how her teen-age parents dearly loved each other and their baby yet fell apart after a while. "Things change", he tells his puzzled daughter and himself in "Everything Stuck to Him": "I don't know how they do but they do. But they do without your realizing it or wanting them to".<sup>16</sup>

Carver dwells on the first signs of coming breakdown or on the aftershocks, when words fail to bridge the gap between people: a father tries to talk and explain his life to his son who has a plane to catch and never learns the end of the story ("Sacks"), a husband goes berserk with routined life and murders two girls that have shunned his advances ("Tell the Woman We are Going"), a woman is terrified by her husband's insensitivity to murder which betrays a possible undercurrent of violence in him ("So Much Water So Close to Home"), two separating parents actually tear a baby apart ("Popular Mechanics").

/ There is little description of setting, but certain objects are suddenly highlighted by Carver, and suddenly get charged with symbolic meaning. Thus in "A Serious Talk" the ashtray that the wife of the divorcing couple prevents her husband from throwing asserting

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<sup>16</sup> R. Carver: *What We Talk About...*, p.134.

that it is *theirs*, suddenly illuminates a harmonious relationship shattered for ever. Or in "The Idea" the suburban wife living with a boring husband and next to a boring neighbour who, when a plane flies over her head in the middle of the night, imagines "the people on it sitting belted in their seats, some of them reading, some of them staring down at the ground" conveys in this image a sudden vision of man's predicament, belted as one is to one's particular place in time.

The power of Carver's prose derives from his minimalist technique of refraining from motive or interpretation that James Atlas explains by the "antiauthoritarian temper of the sixties".<sup>17</sup> When reading Carver's short stories we are left with a sense of betrayal, that life has not fulfilled its early promise of love, with its transfiguring power of an otherwise drab and meaningless universe.

Though Carver's recurrent themes have been found monotonous in effect by certain critics<sup>18</sup>, we think that his achievement is well worthy of a descendant of Hemingway. Emphasizing the heart-breaking effect that Carver's stories have, Robert Houston also praised his remarkable use of language in dialogues that seem unedited and betraying a frightening inarticulateness: "Nearly 200 years ago, Wordsworth and Coleridge started a revolution when they proclaimed their aim to write in the language really used by men. Neither of them quite achieves that. *In What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Raymond Carver has. And it is terrifying".<sup>19</sup>

R. Carver's last two collections of short stories evidence a change marked by a departure from minimalism towards a less ascetic prose style, by a traditionally developed narrative and by a vision of life that is less grim.

An important element that alleviates the former grimness is humour, as happens for instance in "Cathedral". The narrator recounts

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<sup>17</sup> James Atlas: "Less Is Less" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 247, no. 6, June 1981, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> David Kubal: "Fiction Chronicle" in *The Hudson Review*, vol. XXXIV, no. 3, Autumn 1981, p. 459.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Houston: "A Stunning Inarticulateness" in *The Nation*, vol. 233, no. 1 July 4, 1981, p. 25.

the visit of Robert, a blind man whose wife has just died and who once employed the narrator's wife as a reader, developing a friendship that extended for years. Although at a distance, the two have been "corresponding" by means of audiocassettes. The narrator is jealous, although he says nothing about it. When Robert arrives, his feeling worsens because his wife shows the blind man extra attention. A remarkable humorous effect is struck by the way dinner unfolds. To relieve a certain unease, the three ate "like there was no tomorrow".<sup>20</sup> The after dinner conversation is full of reminiscences that exclude the narrator. His jealousy becomes now apparent when he moves to flip her robe over his dozing wife's thigh, although he realizes the irony of the gesture.

But humour is not really frequent in Carver's stories. Their keytone is, on the contrary, a dead-pan seriousness. Yet they "acquire a metaphoric clarity because of pervasive unease".<sup>21</sup> This happens because his characters are inexpressive or downright inarticulate, but also movingly vulnerable.

Remarking that Carver is in fact a "highly selfconscious minimalist"<sup>22</sup>, Bradbury considers that this links his works to those of such experimental writers like Thomas Pynchon, Walter Abish or Donald Barthelme. But even if his stories have Barthelme's air of absence, sadness, disconnection and negativity, they also stick to the literal and the vernacular detail of the most banal and insignificant lives.

"Cathedral", similarly to "A little, Good Thing" or "Where I'm Calling From" elevates common characters to a higher plane, with a renewed faith in our humanity.

The few instances of coherence and communicability are the exceptions, not the rule in Carver's fictional universe. This fragmented universe made up of a series of glimpsed snap-shots recorded at the flash-light of the short story illustrates an artistic

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<sup>20</sup> R. Carver: *Cathedral*, Vintage, New York, p. 207

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Bradbury: *The Modern American Novel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1992, p. 269

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

philosophy: "To write a novel, it seemed to me, a writer should be living in a world that makes sense, a world that the writer can believe in, draw a bead on, and then write about accurately. A world that will, for a time anyway, stay fixed in one place. Along with this there has to be a belief that the known world has reasons for existing, and is worth writing about, is not likely to go up in smoke in the process. This wasn't the case I knew and was living in".<sup>23</sup>

In order to find meaning, Carver "defamiliarizes the daily - one feels as though he were trying to negotiate his cellar stairs in the dark - by holding for inspection what is typically consigned to the voiceless background of fiction".<sup>24</sup> In order to create what Stanley Elkin has called "the strange displacement of the ordinary"<sup>25</sup>, Carver chooses the opposite strategy from Elkin's: he prefers the lean to the lavish. There never are luscious or coiling sentences as cultivated by Elkin, William Gass or John Hawkes in his landscape; "to get the fish, Carver drains the lake".<sup>26</sup> As already shown, Jerome Klinkowitz has remarked, that the correlative of minimalism in painting is superrealism, as seen in the polished gleam of Richard Estes's surfaces that are made alien by their insistent foregrounding<sup>27</sup>. In the theatre, where "minimalism" has greater currency as a critical term, it conceptualizes such formidable efforts as Samuel Beckett's lifelong combat with the inexpressible and his reduction of stage event, property and personality (in *Not I*, and *Breath*) to reach dramatic bedrock. We may conclude sharing with A. Saltzman the conviction that Carver believes in the richness of a glimpse and in the artistic legitimacy of being awestruck and left gaping by contemporary American life.<sup>28</sup>

In "Whoever Was Using This Bed", a couple are trying to fight off their scare of death, of its indignity if one is hooked on a life-support machine in an intensive care unit. The two of the loving

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<sup>23</sup> R. Carver: "Fires" in *Fires*, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Elkin: *The Dick Gibson Show*, Random, New York, 1971 p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> A. Saltzman, *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> J. Klinkowitz: "Experimental Realism" in Larry McCaffery (ed.) *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1986, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> A. Saltzman. *Op. cit.*, p. 13

couple have opposite attitudes: he decides he wouldn't like to be unplugged: "No. Don't unplug me. I don't want to be unplugged. Leave me hooked up just as long as possible. Who's going to object? Are you going to object? Will I be offending anybody? As long as they don't start howling, don't unplug anything. Let me keep going, okay? Right to the bitter end. Invite my friends in to say goodbye. Don't do anything rash".<sup>29</sup> Whereas she makes him promise he will terminate her life for her if she ever were in that position: "Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm serious about this, Jack. I want you to pull the plug on me if you ever have to".<sup>30</sup>

William Stull characterizes the change these stories represent in Carver's writing as a movement away from the "existential realism" of his earlier stories toward a "humanist realism":

Existential realism (...) treats reality phenomenologically, agnostically and objectively. Whether dead or in occultation, God - the archetype of the author - is absent from the world, which is discontinuous, banal and, by definition, mundane (...). The style of existential realism is, therefore, studiously objective, impersonal and neutral (...). Humanist realism, in contrast, takes a more expressive, a more "painterly" approach to its subjects (...). Such realism treats reality metaphysically, theologically and subjectively.<sup>31</sup>

Stull considers existential realism as postmodern, while he associates humanist realism with the classic realism of Balzac, Henry James and the early James Joyce.

Arthur A. Brown tells an illustrative anecdote in order to suggest the essence of postmodernism.<sup>32</sup> He remembers the teacher of a drawing class saying as his class worked on contour drawing of a tree: "Don't lift your pencil from the page. Keep your eyes on the tree. Concentrate until you get a headache, until your pencil is on the branch

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<sup>29</sup> R. Carver: *Whoever Was Using This Bed* in *Op. cit.*, p. 328.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 327.

<sup>31</sup> William Stull: "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver", *Philological Quarterly* 64, 1985, pp. 7-8

<sup>32</sup> Arthur A. Brown: "Raymond Carver and Postmodern Humanism" in *Critique. Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. XXXI, no. 2, Winter 1990, Washington D.C., p. 125

of a tree". Brown finds the contour drawing a graphic metaphor for postmodern fiction, with its attention to surface detail, its resistance to depth and its aspect of self-consciousness, where the medium merges with the subject, the creation of the fiction becoming its subject. The pencil is on the tree. But what can happen in postmodern fiction, Brown aptly remarks, is what happened in that drawing class - when the students finally looked down at the page, they saw a good deal of contour drawing and little tree. In conclusion what makes Carver's postmodern fiction so remarkable is that the tree is still there. The writer never loses sight of his subject, that is real life, while his subject is also the creation of fiction. The critic subtly remarks that from the very beginning of his literary efforts, Carver used realism "with the resistance to depth and self-consciousness peculiar to postmodern fiction"<sup>33</sup> while cultivating the modernist themes of dissociation and alienation.

Carver himself commenting on the difference in the conception and execution of "Cathedral" said that he supposed "it reflects a change in [his] life as much as it does in his way of writing"<sup>34</sup>. He confesses to the formative impact of Chekhov on him, on the tremendous significance the master's sentence "And suddenly everything became clear to him" has for him: "I find these words filled with wonder and possibility. I love their simple clarity and the hint of revelation that is implied. There is mystery, too. What has been unclear before? Why is it just now becoming clear? What's happened? Most of all - what now?"<sup>35</sup>

In *Fires*, Carver talks about the biggest influence on his life and writing - his having two children - and about a moment in a laundromat when it suddenly became clear to him that the things he had hoped for, thinking they were possible in his life, simply were not going to happen. "But like that it came to me. Like a sharp breeze when the window is thrown open".<sup>36</sup> That is why windows and breezes or gusts of

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<sup>33</sup> Arthur Brown, *Op. cit.*, p.126.

<sup>34</sup> R. Carver: *Fires*, New York, Vintage, 1984, p. 204.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

wind are recurrent images throughout Carver's work, especially at such moments of sudden clarity about one's identity.

An interesting illustration of such a moment of self-realization would be the story entitled "The Pheasant", whose main character is a young actor who has been living with an older woman for her money and influence. The story opens one night, when they are driving up the coast from Los Angeles to her beach house, 300 miles away. As she dozes off, he speeds up to hit a pheasant flying across. Resuming his drive after he has stopped to look at the dead bird, the young man asks his woman-friend: "How well do you really know me?"<sup>37</sup>. As she doesn't know what he is talking about, the omniscient narrator at this point gives the character's brief biography, introducing him to the reader. The young man makes his question more explicit: "Do you think I'd act, that I'd ever do something against my own best interest?"<sup>38</sup>. She answers that she thinks he would. Remarking that the countryside looks to him as "something out of Steinbeck" (an allusion to the incident in *The Grapes of Wrath* when a trucker hit a turtle crossing the road), the young man tells the woman that he had hit the pheasant intentionally. "She didn't say anything. Something became clear to him then (...). [He] suddenly understood that he no longer had any values. No frame of reference, was the phrase that ran through his mind."<sup>39</sup>. These last words emphasize an element of self-consciousness, as if the story seems aware of its own existence, as if we were hearing the actor - character (and the narrator) reflexively making life into fiction. There follows the woman's question: "...Is it true? She said. He nodded. ...It could have been dangerous. It could have gone through the window shield"<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, as soon as we are conscious of the fiction, we ask the question: "Is it true?" The window of the car becomes a symbol of fiction itself. The young man has avoided danger to himself by killing the pheasant, but the bird's death leads him to discover his own identity. As A. Brown subtly asks, "Is that not the way we use

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

fiction - both in the writing and the reading of it - to take us through crises we would rather not experience firsthand?"<sup>41</sup>

Postmodern self-consciousness is even more marked in "Put Yourself in My Shoes", where the main character, Myers, is a writer.

It is one of postmodern fiction's aims to draw the reader's attention to how he reads the text and also the word. As the perceiver projects himself upon the world he perceives, the world is not only real but becomes a fictional construct at the same time, just as a text is fiction but has its own reality too. The reader identifies his search for identity with the writer's, reflecting himself in it. That is why mirrors recur so frequently in postmodern fiction, as they do in Carver's stories. They become a symbol of the text itself. The story begins with a phone call Meyers gets from his girl friend Paula, who is at the Christmas office party given by the firm Meyers has quit in order to devote his time to writing a novel. Paula tells him one of the fellows at the firm has committed suicide. The fear of not being may compare with the writer's fear of not writing, of not being able to produce a story, which is the act that gives his identity. When he is "between stories", Meyers feels "despicable".<sup>42</sup>

Paula asks Meyers to come to the party, but he refuses. While speaking, he watches the snowflakes fall outside, rubs his finger across the glass, then he writes his name on the window panel. It is a gesture that symbolically suggests that a writer's identity is given by his writing, consequent upon self-reflexive watching and observation. When later he is on his way to meet Paula at a bar, he looks at the people, the sky, the building, trying "to save it all for later".<sup>43</sup>

They then go to visit the Morgans, in whose house they had lived when the Morgans were in Europe. The Morgans are concerned about Meyers's writing and when he tells them he has written nothing that day, they are eager to provide him with some material, so they begin telling him stories. When Morgan has told the first story, he, his wife

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<sup>41</sup> A. Brown, *Op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> R. Carver: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1978, p. 132.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

and Paula put forth various ideas as to which character's point of view should be more interesting for Meyers to adopt. Morgan's tutorial remark gives the title of the story: "Put yourself in the shoes of that eighteen-year-old coed who fell in love with a married man, and then you see the possibilities for your story"<sup>44</sup>. Then he ironically adds: "It would take a Tolstoy to tell it *right*".<sup>45</sup>

The portraiture of rigid preceptorial Morgan suggests that the great traditions of the past are no longer valid for today's storytelling. The point is driven home in "Fat", the story opening *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* After the narrator has been telling a story to her friend, the latter wants to hear the interesting sequel. But in the typical postmodernist fashion, the narrator has finished the story without any conclusions or judgements, just where the traditionally trained listener was getting interested.<sup>46</sup> Later on, Morgan tells the Meyers that if he were a real writer "he would plumb the depths of that poor soul's heart and try to understand".<sup>47</sup>

But "plumbing the depth" is precisely what Meyers/Carver/the postmodern writer will not presume to do. And Carver theorizes this aesthetics of the surface: "What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things".<sup>48</sup>

Keeping only to the surface, Carver gives additional force to what is beneath it. Or sometimes the suspicion that there is nothing at all beneath the surface gets a devastating intensity. Dean Flower compares Carver's approach with Hemingway's principle that "you

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 139.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> A waitress is telling her friend a story about an incident she witnessed. When the friend wants to hear more as she finds the story is getting interesting, the narrator specifies: "That's it. Nothing else." (p. 5). The story teller provides no conclusion, no judgement, disappointing the reader accustomed to the traditional way of telling a story.

<sup>47</sup> R. Carver: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, p. 147.

<sup>48</sup> R. Carver: *Fires*, New York, vintage, 1984. p. 17.

could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood".<sup>49</sup> Flower writes about the terse objectivity and subject matter of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* as illustrating a clear similarity between the two writers. But "where Hemingway's purified style was meant to imply volumes of unspoken knowledge, like the seven-eighths of an iceberg under water, Carver's method suggests that the seven-eighths either isn't there or isn't knowable".<sup>50</sup>

Therefore Hemingway never loses sight of his frame of reference, of his values and what he leaves out is simply meant to strengthen the effect. But with Carver things are different because as A. Brown emphasizes the universal referent, the code of ethics or generally accepted values have disappeared from postmodern fiction - "there is no resource of significant events to draw from".<sup>51</sup> The reader is faced with the uncomfortable situation that there may be no real reason, no cause, for the breaking down of the contemporary individual's life. So Carver has no choice but to stay on the surface.

But as David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips have remarked the distance between the seer and the seen, that is between writer and subject is very small. "His voice barely impinges upon the story being told". He seems to have appropriated what he is writing about and to have kept the stolen thing closely intact out of fascination or respect. And so, as we read his stories, we feel we're accomplices in this faintly stealthy act of appropriation. Like the writer, we're voyeurs, peering into the disturbed lives of these unsuspecting characters. This is what is unique about Carver, his thorough manipulation of the metaphor of the voyeur at every level of his writing.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Carlos Backer: *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, New York, Avon Books, 1980, p. 143.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 281.

<sup>51</sup> A. Brown, *Op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>52</sup> David Boxer and Cassandra Philips: "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation and the Art of Raymond Carver", *Iowa Review* 10.3 (1979), pp. 79-80.

They then dwell on other instances of voyeurism in literature showing how Whitman used it as a way of resolving the paradox of the One and the Many, the individual and the other. Whitman plays at being invisibly present at the events he describes: "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there". Thus for the two critics voyeurism becomes emblematic of an ultimate form of identification and empathy. However they also appreciate that in our century a strong bond has emerged between voyeurism and alienation, disconnectedness rather than connectedness, the alienated voyeur being well represented in the works of Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and then Fowles, Barth, Pynchon, Walker Percy and Leonard Percy. Carver too makes us feel like accomplices in voyeurism, the reader participates, has a sense of intense seeing and in "Cathedral" this is the experience the main character describes.

The narrator's wife had worked for Robert, the blind man reading case studies to him in his office in the county social-service department while her first husband was training as an officer. Carver thus humanistically employs the metaphor of reading as meaningful social service.

[ The relationship of the two had become significant communication, which made the woman write a poem about the blind man touching her face when they parted. The incident makes the narrator uneasy when he thinks of it: "She told me something else. On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose - even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it. She was always trying to write a poem. She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something really important had happened to her".<sup>53</sup>

The narrator hadn't set great store by the poem, and thought that maybe he couldn't understand poetry. The description of the poem relates human intimacy to reading and writing, the very gesture of the blind man suggesting an unseeing man's Braille reading by touch. It is a gesture that Arthur Brown sees, like the contour drawing, as a

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<sup>53</sup> R. Carver: *Cathedral*, Vintage, New York, 1984, p. 210.

metaphor for postmodern fiction.<sup>54</sup> Again the attention is on the surface, but here the surface is human. The blind man's way of establishing his reading friend's identity, and consequently his own, foregrounds the idea that knowledge is blind. It appears not in the light of some connecting order but in darkness, it is simply a human connection.

The narrator is puzzled by, and even slightly jealous of, the blind man's knowledge of his wife; Robert even seems to know him very well, from the letter-tapes he has been exchanging with the narrator's wife over the years.

The narrator is just Averageman, whose daily routine shows that he takes refuge in meaningless ritual acts like watching TV and smoking dope every night in order to feel safe within an unchanged pattern. Television gives him his preconceived ideas - he confesses that his notions about the blind are derived from the films he sees on TV. He seems to have no active life, only the vicarious experience provided by passively watching TV. He seems narrow-minded and mean-spirited and rather asocial. He is Averageman in everything, even the drug he smokes is mild stuff.

After dinner, the three of them smoke marijuana over drinks and watch television. The narrator comments: "Every night I smoked dope and stayed up as long as I could before I fell asleep. My wife and I hardly ever went to bed together at the same time. When I did go to sleep, I had these dreams. Sometimes I'd wake up from one of them, my heart going crazy".<sup>55</sup> These words depict a total lack of intimacy, an estrangement that seems as total as that between the couple in "The Idea", where the situation is metaphorically revealed by the almost hyperreal symbol of the snails that the woman discovers in the garden while her husband is continuing his sleep untroubled. On the other hand, the protagonist-narrator continuously watching TV economically suggests that he lives on the surface of things. He never sees reality but only a screen, the electronic image of reality.

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<sup>54</sup> A. Brown, *Op. cit.*, p. 134

<sup>55</sup> R. Carver: *Cathedral*, p. 222

After the narrator's wife has fallen asleep, the two men go on watching television together, the blind man offering to keep the narrator company as long as he is going to sit up. If at the beginning the narrator was annoyed by the blind man and mildly jealous, now he expresses a sense of fear, even of panic, as he admits he doesn't want to be left alone with the blind man. He senses Robert does not fit the clichés he had in mind from TV but is a remarkable man. When there is a program about cathedrals on TV, the narrator tries to describe them to the blind man who says he does not have a good idea about them:

"They are massive. They're built of stone. Marble too, sometimes. In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be close to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life".<sup>56</sup>

The blind man asks the narrator if he has any religious feelings, the latter gives a negative answer, specifying he doesn't believe in anything: "The truth is cathedrals don't mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV. That's all they are".<sup>57</sup> When the narrator mentions his atheism here, the reader is already aware of his lack of sensitiveness and opacity to any spiritual values.

The blind man tells the narrator to get a pen and some heavy paper. He gets a ball point pen and a dropping bag. The blind man puts his hand over the narrator's and asks him to draw with closed eyes. Together they draw a cathedral. "His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper", the narrator tells us. Thus the blind man is feeling not the drawing, not the cathedral itself, but the process of drawing in which he is participating. Eventually, he says: "I think that's it. I think you got it (...) Take a look. What do you think?".<sup>58</sup> In a remarkable empathetic phenomenon, the blind man and the narrator, reader and writer, have merged: the narrator does not want to open his

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 226.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 228.

eyes: "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.

...It's really something', I said".<sup>59</sup>

The narrator has experienced a liberating epiphanic moment of going out of himself. Since he uses the past tense for his narrative we are entitled to think that it was an experience that changed his life, his outlook, his relationship with his wife.

When drawing the cathedral by closing his eyes, the narrator empties his mind of all the ready made images and patterns and that inner space is filled with the sudden epiphanic experience of the spiritual, which gives him the strange sensation of being in contact with the open infinite ("I didn't feel like I was inside anything."). In his inner journey from mere physical sight to spiritual insight, the narrator has been helped by a blind man much as Oedipus was guided by Tiresias and if Oedipus wants to pay for his knowledge with his eyesight, the protagonist in "Cathedral" only symbolically adopts this stance: "my eyes were still closed". The two characters' names contain a subtle suggestion that the narrator's opacity to the spiritual is a mere hypostasis in Averageman's existential evolution, that maybe the narrator is an *alter ego* of the blind man: the blind man's name is Robert and he calls the narrator Bub, which is homophonous to the American pronunciation of Bob, a familiar endearing short form of Robert. The other name in the short story is significant too: Robert's wife name is Beulah, the Biblical name of a land (see Isaiah LXII, 4) that seems a sort of earthly paradise where illumination and contemplation of heavenly bliss are possible.

The narrator's wife acts as mediator; she brings Robert to Bub as she cannot be the mentor that takes Bub on his journey of initiation into the realm of the spiritual.

It is strange that a blind man is Bub's mentor. But Robert is not bitter against God for making him blind; on the contrary, he is happy with himself and his life and tries to make other people stop being spiritually blind.

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem.*

Writing poetry, Bub's wife is obviously the more sensitive of the couple and through her the husband is finally brought to sharing her values. The complementarity and balance of a really harmonious marital relationship is discreetly suggested by Robert's symbolical gesture of keeping one half of a twenty-peso Mexican coin and putting the other half into his wife's coffin.

Arthur Brown sees this contour drawing of one hand upon another's as a metaphor for humanist postmodernism.<sup>60</sup> Through the making of an artefact together, the narrator and the blind man come to communicate, the contact is not only physical but spiritual too. The narrator gives the blind man sight through the contour drawing, while the blind man gives him insight, a spiritual dimension.

We may therefore conclude that, for all its apparent simplicity, Carver's writing does contain "experimentation"<sup>61</sup>, one that is not in the area of plot or experience, but in a new way of using dramatic urgency and structure: the open ending occurs before resolution.

This minimalized prose stripped of all ornamentation, where the syntax is stripped down too, manages to capture the inarticulated mysteries of daily life in contemporary America, and by sheer absence to express a longing for lost stable values: spiritual love, devotion, decency.

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<sup>60</sup> A. Brown, *Op. cit.*, p. 136

<sup>61</sup> Cris Maza: "Raymond Craver" in Larry McCaffery (ed.) *Postmodern Fiction*, p.300.

## X. MAXIMALIST FICTION: JOHN BARTH

John Barth (b. 1930), the leading figure of postmodernism, is also its central spokesman because of his two famous essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980).

His first two novels, *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958) reflect the climate of existential absurdity of the 1950s and use black humour within a largely traditional realistic mode. The author himself described them as "nihilistic", as they express the feeling that "reality" is elusive and meaningless, a floating signifier without any signified. The protagonist-narrator of *The Floating Opera*, Todd Andrews, a man of no stable identity, is writing about the day when he changed his mind and decided not to commit suicide. The digressive style reveals Todd's attempt at explaining things - his father's suicide, his own decision - which ends with the conclusion that there is a complete failure of communication and that nothing can be explained and also that "Nothing has intrinsic value" and "There is (...) no ultimate reason for valuing anything".<sup>1</sup> Todd considers his fellow men either as a bunch of more or less pacific animals or a colony of more or less quiet lunatics, a view that explains why he plans his suicide as a mass murder by blowing up the *Floating Opera*, a show boat.

This first book expresses recurrent themes and motifs in Barth's work as well as his specific scepticism and utter distrust of absolute values, truth and reason.

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<sup>1</sup> John Barth: *The Floating Opera*, Bantam, New York, 1980. p. 213.

*The End of the Road* continues Barth's discussion of the nature of the self. The protagonist, Jack Horner, suffers from "cosmopsis", the impossibility to take any decision and therefore an incapacity to act. His therapist discovers him at a bus terminal paralysed with indecision about what direction to travel in. When asked a question, he answers: "I don't have any opinion (...) or rather, I have both opinions at once".<sup>2</sup>

After having Mythotherapy and Scriptotherapy, he takes a job teaching English at Wicomico State Teachers' College and has an affair with Rennie, the wife of his colleague Joe Morgan, who is his very opposite, an existentialist with very precise ideas on responsibility and authenticity. The situation ends with Rennie having an abortion which causes her death. We last see Jacob Horner in his old state again, "at the end of the road", heading for the "Terminal" in a taxi.

Horner sees all human intercourse as role playing and believes that nobody is authentic. He has no stable identity, his inner self is but a series of unpredictable, disconnected moods: "My moods were little men, and when I killed them they stayed completely dead".<sup>3</sup> He is not interested in commitment or intimacy and is irritated when Peggy Ranky, whom he takes to bed, plays the trite and conventional role of sincerity. Barth's presentation of Horner's attitude to sex was perhaps part of the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s. But now, as Tony Hilfer comments, it seems rather gallow, "since cynicism and aggression have so thoroughly replaced sensitivity and compassion as the dominant convention".<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that the same year that Barth was whipping sentimentality, Bellow in *Herzog* was pleading for a return to humane feeling.

Although Jake is a rebel, his rebellion is personal. He does not aim at changing a society he despises, as then he would have nothing to revolt against. His concern is always with his own precious self:

"(...) the greatest radical in any society is the man who sees all the arbitrariness of the rules and social conventions, but who has such

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<sup>2</sup> John Barth: *The End of the Road*, Bantam, New York, 1969, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Hilfer: *American Fiction Since 1940*, Longman, London and New York, p. 106.

a great scorn or disregard for the society he lives in that he embraces the whole wagonload of nonsense with a smile. The greatest rebel is the man who wouldn't change society for anything in the world".<sup>5</sup>

In the 1960s the self-reflexive element that discretely appeared in his first novel became a fundamental feature of Barth's creation. The transition can be seen in *The Sot Weed Factor* (1960) that gets its title from an actual comic poem that a historical Ebenezer Cook published in 1708. As nothing but that poem, transcribed in chapter 3, is known about Cook (1672-1732), Barth feels free to ascribe to him an innocent personality which, as he decides to remain a virgin, reads very much like a parody. The picaresque tale looks like a pastiche of 18th century style (Smollett in particular). The playful parody is the strong part of the novel, critics generally appreciating his fantasy version of Maryland<sup>6</sup> history as less fantastic, "less surprising than the rich historical *actuality* of contradiction and paradox".<sup>7</sup>

In his next novel *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Barth combines myth and allegory the title hero being the modern version of a mythical hero: the son of a virgin by a mighty computer, WESCAC, he grows up among the goats, becoming half-goat himself, and then he engages in the quest for becoming Grand Tutor and authoring the "revised new syllabus", which is an allegory for the future of mankind. The setting - a university campus divided into West Campus and East Campus, each run by a computer - is an allegory of the contemporary world with the Cold War between the Western and Eastern blocs. This fundamental binary opposition is echoed by others: mind/ body, man/ animal, male/ female that may denote the influence of structuralist thought but also the author's fondness for twins, which will pop up throughout his literary career.

The Barthian volume that, as we have seen, marks the inception of the metafictional stage of postmodernism is *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), whose subtitle *Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* reminds us

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<sup>5</sup> John Barth: *The End of the Road*, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Maryland is Barth's home ground.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.

of the possibilities of modern technology (*Giles* too, narrated by the computer WESCAC as it is, suggests the existence of cyberspace whose vast virtual potential fascinates the SF writers and has led to the emergence of the subgenre called "the cybernetic novel"). The 14 short fictions of the volume explore and articulate the problem and possibilities of self-reflexiveness ("Title", "Autobiography", "Life-Story"). The most self-reflexive text is "Menelaïad", in which Menelaus is the bottom narrator of a story with seven frames. The volume ultimately frames Barth as "an exemplary dweller in the great literary labyrinth, a Borgesian weaver of tales within tales".<sup>8</sup> The book's comic inventiveness remarkably includes the absolutely hilarious tale of the self-reflexive spermatozoon in "Night Sea Journey", a motif that will recur in several subsequent works. In "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction" the speaking voice is that of the fiction itself. It comments sarcastically on its own use of first person narrative and on the identity crisis of modern fiction as well as on the multi-layered view of self: "I hope I'm a fiction without real hope. Where there's a voice there's a speaker.

I see myself as a halt narrative: first person, tiresome. Pronoun sans ante or precedent, warrant or respite. Surrogate for the substantive; countless form, interestless principle; blind eye blinking at nothing. Who am I? A little *crise d'identité* for you. I must compose myself".<sup>9</sup>

The same ironical remarks on manipulative rhetorical tricks are the funny substance of "Title" which exposes its own devices: "God, but I am surfeited with clever irony! Ill of sickness! Parallel phrase to wrap up stories! This last-resort idea is dead in the womb, excuse the figure. (...) to acknowledge what I'm doing when I'm doing it is exactly the point".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Bradbury: *The Modern American Novel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1992, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup> John Barth: *Lost in the Funhouse*, Bantam, New York, 1969, p.33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 107.

Then the possible tedium of self-reflexiveness is anticipated and denounced:

"Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness. I despise what we have come to; I loathe our loathsome art, this ditto necessary story. The blank of our lives".<sup>11</sup>

The idea is resumed in "Life-story" which is about a self-reflexive writer bored with his conventional metafiction, that is his antirealism turned convention: "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus ad infinitum! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes? That doesn't continually proclaim ... Don't forget I'm an artifice!"<sup>12</sup>

The disembodied discourses of "Autobiography" and "Title", (it is hard to call them narrators), are world-weary and suicidal, "painfully self-conscious about their own status as discourse"<sup>13</sup> They know that, try as they might, they cannot utter their own annihilation, for as long as they utter anything they continue to exist. The only "death" for them is silence, a blank page; and indeed they "die", breaking off in mid-sentence.

The reflexive consciousness in *Lost in the Funhouse* is that of a Maryland boy whose identity is dissolved in the mirror of the Funhouse labyrinth, thus underlying the insubstantiality of the postmodern self:

"Stepping from the treacherous passage at last into the mirror-maze, he saw once again more clearly than ever, how readily he deceived himself into supposing he was a person. He even foresaw, winking at his dreadful self-knowledge, that he would repeat the deception, at ever rarer intervals, all his wretched life, so fearful were the alternatives. Fame, madness, suicide, perhaps all three".<sup>14</sup>

After employing the image of the mirrors as a metaphor of narcissistic self-reflection, the authorial voice derides his use of "heavy-footed symbolism", and the implausibility of the boy's musings

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> Brian McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*, Methuen, New York and London, 1987, p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> J. Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 90.

In a personage too young to have heard of Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty: "(...) as he lost himself in the reflection that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible, better make him eighteen at least, yet that would render other things unlikely (...)"<sup>15</sup>

The preoccupation with classical myth in order to imaginatively fill in gaps and silences is continued in *Chimera* (1972), a volume made up of three stories that self-reflexively revisit three fundamental narratives: The Arabian Nights and the myths of Perseus and Bellerophon. In "Dunyazadiad" which is narrated by Scheherazade's sister, the famous story-teller comes to the conclusion that "the key to the treasure is the treasure", that is even if her stories do not give her any key to survival, just telling them means staying alive. At a certain moment a Genie who looks exactly like John Barth turns up to discuss aesthetics with Scheherazade, both being great supporters of "passionate virtuosity". The Genie imagines a seven-layered narrative, seven concentric stories-within-stories, that reads very much like *Menelaiad*.

The chimera of the title is the elusive reality that must lie at the heart of fiction, which Barth is convinced lies in its fictionality. "Bellerophoniad", the third story of the volume, justifies the return to myth because it contains poetic distillations of our ordinary psychic experience.

In *Chimera* Barth announces many more stories he has the intention of writing, among which a novel entitled *Letters*. It actually came out in 1979 - "an old thin epistolary novel" consisting of letters exchanged between several of the characters of his previous novels and their author - a most humorous self-mockery done by an extremely self-reflexive author. Barth not only parodies, but also revises or reconstructs these previous fictions, setting out to achieve the "replenishment" he has spoken about. The book questions and discusses the novel in general and his own fictional creation as well. The muse he invokes is a new one: she is Lady Amherst, elderly and

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

British. The book funnily introduces Barth's characters into a postmodern world where they can discuss narrative art and their own fate with their creator.

In the 1980s John Barth produced two novels, *Sabbatical* (1982) and *The Tidewater Tales* (1987) that actually make a unit, and his first non-fiction collection *The Friday Book, or Book Titles Should Be Straightforward and Subtitles Avoided: Essays and Other Non-fiction* (1984). In his discussion of modernism and postmodernism, Barth accepts the father-son relationship; yet the specific postmodernist use of parody implies his acceptance of these literary predecessors as models, but a rejection of their fictions as artefacts.

In "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), a sequel to his 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion", he supplies a rich commentary on his own works and maintains that though the traditional narrative forms and possibilities are used up and exhausted, that is certainly not a cause for despair, as new forms and techniques can be invented. He states that for him the arch story-teller remains Scheherazade. Amusingly and recurrently using academic phrases in his description of the famous queen, Barth underlines that, indeed, she must publish or perish, at least until the king grants her marriage-tenure. Barth points out that *The Thousand-and-One Nights* provide patterns of story-telling, especially of entwined narrative techniques that have always acted as incentives to his imagination. He also plays with the idea of God as a fellow novelist; our reality, he argues, is God's fiction<sup>16</sup>, and not an altogether successful one.

Barth also makes an interesting point about the ultimate justification for postmodern fiction:

"We tell stories and listen to them because we live stories and live in them. Narrative equals language equals life: to cease to narrate as the capital example of Scheherazade reminds us, is to die - literally for her, figuratively for the rest of us. One might add that if this is true, then not only is all fiction about fiction, but all fiction about fiction is also fiction about life".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The idea recurs in *The Tidewater Tales*, where Barth refers to world creation and history as "God's novel" (Putnam, New York, 1987, p. 260).

<sup>17</sup> J. Barth: *The Friday Book*, New York, 1984, p. 236.

Here is the arch metafictionist calling in the argument that even self-reflexive fiction is not only about itself but also about life. Indeed we may say the 1980s marked a new stage in Barth's career. On the evidence of Barth's two remarkable novels of this decade, John Aldridge comments that most likely the postmodernist writer "has finally found his way out of the funhouse and out in the world. Or perhaps he has learned to adjust his mirrors so that they no longer give back endless images or versions of his baffled self but instead reflect the reality he has once disdained in all its diversity and richness".<sup>18</sup>

Indeed in this decade Barth clearly returned to the conventions of realistic narrative although in the 1960s he had declared that he was not interested in contemporary socio-political matters: "Muse spare me (at the desk, I mean) from social-historical responsibility, and in the last analysis from every other kind, except Artistic".<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless he did it without renouncing things "Artistic", that is the metafictional technique of making the process of writing the respective book the very substance of the work the reader is going through. Thus in *Sabbatical* the protagonists are Fenwick Turner (a former failed novelist turned CIA officer) and his wife Susan Seckler (an English professor). Back from a sabbatical spent sailing the Caribbean, Fenwick and Susan make plans about their careers and family. Having displeased CIA with a book exposing its activities, Fenn is thinking of writing a novel and Susan of getting a teaching position at Swarthmore. They also wonder whether to decide to bring a child into a world that might be destroyed any time by a nuclear catastrophe.

Sailing through the Caribbean and then back to their home port in Maryland, the loving couple give their experiences the form of a story in which past adventures and memories are included, as well as their views on the principles of literary composition and the virtues of realism. Susan recounts the story of her drug-addicted twin-sister Miriam's torture and rape and Fenn tells the events of his first

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Quinn and Paul Dolan (eds.): *The Sense of the Sixties*, New York, The Free Press, 1988, p. 440.

<sup>19</sup> Curt Suplee's interview with John Barth: "The Barth Factor", *International Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1984

marriage. They record the happy circumstances of their first meeting and wedding. So, by the end of the novel the reader has not only a general picture of their lives and preoccupations, but the social scope is extended by their presentation of the lives of their relatives: Susan's Jewish-Gypsy mother (Carmen) and her Romanian current boyfriend (Dumitru); Susan's twin sister (Mim) and Mim's son (Edgar Allan Ho); Fenn's twin brother (Manfred) and the latter's son (Mundungus) who has disappeared in Chile where he has gone to support Allende; Fenwick's son (Oroonoko) who does not take his father seriously and Fenwick's parents, who are ordinary good tidewater people.

The central themes of the book are not only literary creation (the difficulty of making choices in a genre where the old conventions are afloat or exhausted) but also the links between the military-industrial system of American society, the ever growing wasting and polluting of nature and, at the level of the individual (that of the characters' personal lives) the difficulty of making decisions in a world characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence.

In contrast to *The Tidewater Tales. A Novel*, *Sabbatical* is called *A Romance* in the subtitle. It thus affirms Barth's relation to the central American tradition, Romanticism, it merges a love story with the grotesque mystery story and the magic of fairy-tale in a sort of literary ecumenism.

E.P. Walkiewicz considers the book's primary power as deriving from the fertility pattern (where the sterility in question is not only natural but social as well), the conventional water images, wish-fulfilment dreams and rituals of the quest romance.<sup>20</sup> Gordon Slethaug dwells on the sea imagery in the book, discussing the various nature and range of floating signifiers, "floating" with its various significations, being a leitmotif in Barth's work. Slethaug underlines that for all its playfulness, the book seriously affirms the restorative effect of the sea on the characters' vital and creative energies.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> E. P. Walkiewicz: *John Barth*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1986, pp. 140-145.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Slethaug: "Floating Signifiers in John Barth's *Sabbatical*", *Modern Fiction Studies* 33, Winter 1987, pp. 647-55.

Heide Ziegler insists on the supra-realism<sup>22</sup> of *Sabbatical* defining it both as disregard for reality and as a parody of realism: the story is seen from the conjoined "we" of Fenwick and Susan ("What we can's do as Fenn and Susan we can do as Author"<sup>23</sup>), which seems a sort of parodic semiomniscient point of view. This technique is related to the "twin" leitmotif and double patterning of the book. The story of Fenn's brother Manfred and that of Susan's sister Miriam counteract the "unrealistic" happiness that the story of Fenwick and Susan creates in the Author. Manfred - like CIA nuclear weapons expert John Arthur Paisley - disappears while on cruise on Chesapeake Bay. Miriam, victim of three rapes, one of which multiple (a motorcycle gang), is also tortured by "Savak" (the Shah of Iran's secret police). The book reads very much like a typically postmodernist amalgamation of heterogeneous forms: romance, and possibly a parody of romance that is reminiscent of Hemingway ("The Story of Fenwick Turner's *Boina*"), self-reflexive narrative about the labours of writing a novel from jotted down diary notes, bits of Vietnamese poetry, newspaper clippings about the Paisley case, additional information in the form of footnotes, a parody of Le Carré style of CIA double agent recruitment, a parody of *Police Gazette* tale of gang rape and torture ("The Story of Miriam's Other Rapes"), the wandering of mock mythic heroes, of "Brother-Battle", "Ordeals", "Big Fleshbeck", the Jewish American holocaust biographies, Chesapeake Bay popular lines, invocations to Aristotle, Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Conrad. The cast of characters is likewise heterogeneous and polyglot: associate professor of American literature, CIA agents, Washington DC bureaucrats<sup>24</sup>, Vietnamese refugee, Jewish-Gypsy survivor of Nazi concentration camp, Romanian undercover agent. Compared with the parallel but inverted stories of Manfred and Miriam, the romance of their respective twin appears as precarious at the best, that precariousness

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<sup>22</sup> Heide Ziegler: *John Barth*, Methuen, London and New York, 1987, pp. 79, 82, 83.

<sup>23</sup> J. Barth: *Sabbatical. A Romance*. Putman, New York, 1982, p. 135.

<sup>24</sup> "Why not the Great American General Services Administration Novel?" Fenn ironically asks his lecture agent (p. 276).

specific to Barth's characters ever since *The Floating Opera*. The heroic parallels of modernist descent which are quite frequent in this richly intertextual postmodernist book - seem to suggest that mythical and literary archetypes may still overlap life. Thus Fenwick is linked to Aeneas whom Virgil shows meeting Dido between his past glory in Troy and his future glory in Rome, which fills Susan with the apprehension that she might be his Dido and not his Lavinia. The use of mythic parallel, ironic and significance - enhancing at the same time - relies on Barth's belief that "our very homely, far from heroic personal experiences contain the general pattern and connect with the general myths".<sup>25</sup>

Literary archetypes are all the time present, Barth recurrently alluding to *The Odyssey*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Don Quixote*, *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn* and particularly Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, of Nantucket*.

Showing an explicit awareness of modernist and postmodernist literature and structuralist and poststructuralist critical theories,<sup>26</sup> Barth uses the principle of binarity all through his comments on Poe employing binarily drawn characters (twins) and point of view, as we have seen, which includes the male/female binarity and also permanently playing on the word "double" - double agents, double crossing, "doubling" in general.<sup>27</sup>

The central themes of *Sabbatical* are also presented binarily and are designated as twins - when Susan has aborted her twins, the two narrators decide to secure their immortality through their conjoined writing: "this story, our story, it's our house and our child"<sup>28</sup>. However, writing appears to be only one "child"; living and loving is the other and they are twins: both writing and loving come first, Fenn states. For, "How could either come before the other, except as one twin happens to get delivered earlier? The doing and the telling, our writing and our loving - they're twins. That's our story"<sup>29</sup>. As Stan Fogel and

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<sup>25</sup> Curt Supplee's interview with John Barth: "The Barth Factor", *International Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1984. p. 14

<sup>26</sup> J. Barth: *Sabbatical*, p. 231

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 147.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56-7

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 365.

Gordon Slethaug have subtly remarked twinship is not so much a matter of biological doubling as a way of perceiving and incorporating differences in order to expand, and not foreclose, human attitudes and activities.<sup>30</sup>

The very structure of the book is binary not only in that it may be likened in Susan's conception to the Vietnamese poetic form of the *luc-bat*,<sup>31</sup> but while sailing up the Chesapeake they relate the story of their meeting, courting and marrying, therefore the realistic frame narrative is counterpointally interwoven with the narrative of their romance.

These analeptic events are narrated through "flash backs" or "fleshbecks" as Susan ethnically mispronounces the word in a way that establishes a link between the protagonists' cultural and biological functions (Susan's flesh beckons to Fenwick just as female flesh has beckoned to the male ever since Adam and Eve<sup>32</sup>) and also relates their private story to all other stories. It is interesting that flashbacks are assigned to Susan, "because flashbacks, Fenwick mildly asserts, may be said to be 'female', following his notion of forks and confluences: rafting down the stream of time, they retrace what, coming up, were dilemmas, choices, channel-forks"<sup>33</sup>. Thus the past is related to the female point of view, while the present belongs to their conjoined point of view: whether they both wish to have children, whether Susan will take up a position at Swarthmore and whether Fenwick will take up teaching and writing again (the recurrently Y or fork diagram). It is important to notice that both narrative options and life choices are uttered together, so that the binary oppositions are not seen as separative but integrative. The binary opposition realism/romance is enriched by many others such as those between life and literature, doing and writing, sailing and fiction, mystery and reality creating what Fenwick calls a "Literary Marvellous" or "Trully Irreal" fiction<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Stand Fogel and Gordon Slethaug: *Understanding John Barth*, Columbia University of South Carolina Press, 1988, p. 175.

<sup>31</sup> J. Barth: *Sabbatical*, p. 270.

<sup>32</sup> H. Ziegler, *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> J. Barth: *Sabbatical*, p. 173.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

Marvellous mystery wraps up such incidents as the appearance of the Jules Vernean sea-monster Chessie, the miraculous repeated return of Fen's lost boina (cap), the discovery of an uncharted island which raises serious questions about the reliability of information, only to suggest later that the island was probably a mysterious CIA base and therefore purposefully not recorded on charts, the coincidence of Fen's encountering Dougald Taylor (by his own reckoning a 1,023,000-to-1 probability) or that of his ex-wife and present wife both quoting Kafka the same day. CIA activities are also enveloped in mystery and ambiguity: it is not certain whether Paisley is dead and if he is, whether he has been murdered or has committed suicide; Fenn's brother, Manfred (or Count or Prince of Darkness) and his nephew Mundungus have disappeared but it is not clear if they are dead and if so, by accident or murder; what has happened to the Soviet defector Shadrin is also an unsolved puzzle. As startling, even uncanny, is Susan and Fenwick's simultaneous dream that Count and Mundungus are dead. Carmen, the exotic Jewish-Gypsy (whose exoticism is enhanced by her choosing the Romanian Dumitru as a mate) maintains not only that she has seen them in her dreams but that she has actually talked to the Count's ghost as she believes in telepathy, extrasensory perception and the truth of dream visions. Susan and Fenn also have simultaneous anticipatory dreams of Fenn's death, the destruction of stable relationships, the poisoning of some places in Maryland, and the apocalyptic collapse of the environment and the whole Western world<sup>36</sup>.

The whole romance is permeated by the working of this "Mysterious Agency"<sup>37</sup> contributing to the "reality of the irreality"<sup>38</sup> and conversely, to what we perceive as the irreality of reality

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<sup>35</sup> J. Barth: *Sabbatical*: "visions, voices, apparitions, cards" (p. 255).

<sup>36</sup> From McCarthy's ramparts, which are also Pokey's cockpit, Susan sees "the West sink into the sun into the galactic vortex like Odysseus's ship-timbers into Charybdis, or whatever it was into Poe's Maelstrom. Pokey himself is now become our galaxy, now our universe, rushing headalong into one of its own Black Holes like that legendary bird that flies in ever-diminishing circles until it vanishes into its own fundament: like Pym's canoe rushing into the chasm at the foot of the c a t a r a c t at the Southern Pole: a black hole aspirating, with a cosmic shlop, us, U.S., all" *Sabbatical* (p. 321).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

Coincidence, intuition and the supernatural are used on principle to give salt to the probable, rational and natural as the conjoined authors both proclaimed: "The literally marvellous is what we want with a healthy dose of realism to keep it ballasted. Realism is your keel and ballast of your effing Ship of Story, and a good plot is your mast and sails. But magic is your wind, Suse. Your literally marvellous is mother-effing wind"<sup>39</sup>.

Therefore all these oppositional binarities promote the narrative, which suggests Fenn's tentative position of trying<sup>40</sup> a paradoxical reconciliation of oppositions. Carmen too sees in the fusion of sperm and ovum a union of contraries that is absolute, where the separate elements "become something both and neither"<sup>41</sup> which is a rather paradoxical statement.

Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug maintain that the most appropriate reading of the book is a deconstructivist emphasis on indeterminacy and deferment<sup>42</sup>. The idea is substantiated by the very pattern or rather lack of pattern of the protagonists' trip, by their continuous deferment of a final destination; Fenn's wish is "to be headed neither upstream nor downstream, upwind nor downwind, but noncommittally across both breeze and tide"<sup>43</sup> and similarly, digression is one of his narrative principles. It is noteworthy to remark that in traditional texts additional, sometimes digressive, information is provided in footnotes which are subordinated to the text. Barth however emphasizes the footnotes to such an extent that they create a sort of second or twin text, the effect being one of decentring, of reducing the primacy of the text. Thus Barth's footnotes provide important background information on Fenwick and Susan and their boat, on their families with their connections, professions and concerns. The footnotes also provide documentation on CIA, Russian

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 136-7

<sup>40</sup> He describes his boat as a "union of contraries prevailingly harmonious indeed but sometimes tense" (p. 217). He also thinks up of ways in which alternatives can come together: "He dreams our possible futures as a literal fork in the channel, or a series of such forks" (p. 139).

<sup>41</sup> J. Barth: *Sabbatical*, p. 241.

<sup>42</sup> S. Fogel and G. Slethaug, *Op. cit.*, pp. 180-88.

<sup>43</sup> J. Barth: *Sabbatical*, p. 332.

intelligence and Chilean police activities, which influence and shape so many events and characters' lives. So the footnotes untraditionally provide important facts whereas the narrative text seems to play the function of interpretation. Fogel and Slethaug relate the sense of indeterminacy to the lives of the narrators themselves and their fiction. Fenn and Susan learn to try less to determine their life, leaving a lot to chance. Like Todd in *The Floating Opera*, Fenn has a heart problem condition and Havah Seckler is now surviving on a pacemaker. But having escaped from a Communist regime, she has learned to capitalize on chance: she makes happy plans for the future. Fenn has also the sensation of a defamiliarized, indeterminate setting: on the night of his "fleshvorwert" he cannot tell whether he is in "his and Count's bedroom at Key Farm? The bedroom of his and Marilyn Marsh's first apartment, in a student apartment on St. Paul St. in Baltimore? His tourist-class stateroom on the SS *Nieuw Amsterdam* in 1960? A hospice of the indigently terminal?"<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most convincing argument would be Fenwick's discovery that he can affirm pluralistic alternatives of selfhood, his notion of the twin as a divided self leading to the "image of our plural selves" and "our love for one another".<sup>45</sup>

A certain sense of indeterminacy also results from Barth's use of narrative point of view. The first person narrative generally predominates but Susan and Fenn self-consciously propound in a satiric enumeration the use of a "unitized, shifted, cuisinated" version of "first person as either observer or protagonist and singular or plural and reliable or unreliable. Third person objective, omniscient or limited-omniscient so to speak. Third person limited-omniscient limited to protagonist or observer. Third person effaced"<sup>46</sup>. Moreover they also include wholly dramatized passages, American and Vietnamese poetry and real newspaper articles from the *Baltimore Sun*. The play with this powerful narrative tool, with its shifting of perspective, leads to many points where meaning remains

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 314.

<sup>45</sup> *ibidem*, p. 332.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 232.

indeterminate, and narrative roles and responsibilities become practically impossible to sort out. The twin narrators addicted to assuming narrative guises just as the Count in his flamboyant days in the CIA "was playing Marlon Brando playing Mister Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*".<sup>47</sup>

Fenwick and Susan share a view that "the world's regressing like crazy"<sup>48</sup>, of ineluctable entropy, decay and end, as we have seen. It is however the very purpose of fiction for them to acknowledge indeterminacy to embrace new possibilities (emblematically suggested by the fork/Y) as well as to try to impose upon or make out a pattern of the past, to reorchestrate it "into a grand finale".<sup>49</sup> Fen is aware that accounts of lives are artificially moulded into patterns that always select, omit, and leave out, hence "we ourselves may never know one another's whole story".<sup>50</sup>

Multiple or floating signification and signifiers are another source of indeterminacy: the same character maybe designated by several names: Manfred, Manny, Fred, Count, the Prince of Darkness; or since Manfred has married Susan's mother, he is both Fenn's brother and step-father and Carmen becomes both his mother-in-law and his sister-in-law.

Reliability is an important aspect of determinate signification in communication and the issue of the uncharted Key Island raises the issue of trustworthiness of information in today's world. After being long perplexed by the existence of an uncharted island in such well mapped waters, Fenn chances to overhear a conversation that suggests that the island's location has been kept a secret by CIA as it houses a camp for women junior officers trainees.<sup>51</sup> From the newspaper accounts of the Paisley case, from various versions given by characters, it is apparent that CIA presents so much information much of it contradictory, that it becomes the archdealer of "information, misinformation, even supermisinformed supercoded misinformation",<sup>52</sup> which makes all communication problematic,

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 307.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 285.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 323.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 302.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 305.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

raising important questions about factual information as truthful or the result of calculated or even uncalculated lies.

Yet, in spite of all this indeterminacy, in spite of the problematic aspects of communication, in spite of entropic tendencies and the destruction of environment, in spite of social insecurity and personal anxiety the book is not negative and despairing but asserts the human ability to act, love and write: for all human fallibility and limitations man and woman can still be creatures of moral and aesthetic achievement.

In "Hawkes and Barth Talk About Fiction", Barth is reported to have made the following affirmation: "I have at times gone father than I want to go in the direction of a fiction that foregrounds language and form, displacing the ordinary notion of context, of "aboutness". But beginning with the "Chimera" novellas - written after the *Lost in the Funhouse* series, where that foregrounding reaches its peak or its nadir, depending on your aesthetic - I have wanted my stories to be *about* things: about the passions, which Aristotle tells us are the true subject of literature. I'm with Aristotle on that. Of course form can be passionate; language itself can be passionate. These are not passions of the viscera, but that doesn't give them second-class citizenship in the republic of the passions. More and more, as I get older, I nod my head yes to Aristotle".<sup>53</sup>

This statement is certainly confirmed to a great extent by Barth's second volume of the 1980s *The Tidewater Tales* (even if less apparently by *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, 1991. But even here Barth uses the technique of time-travelling to Sindbad the Sailor's time in order to highlight certain aspects of contemporary America). This book has such a close similarity to *Sabbatical* that it may be regarded at least as a companion novel if not a sequel.<sup>54</sup> The situation is similar: a happily married couple pleurably sailing the more restricted area of Chesapeake Bay. The point of view is again first person plural "our coupled point of view"<sup>55</sup> and the conjoined

<sup>53</sup> Quoted by E. P. Walkiewickz in *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>54</sup> Barth once declared that his books tend to come in pairs and his sentences in twin members, a feature that he relates to his being an opposite-sex twin.

<sup>55</sup> John Barth: *The Tidewater Tales. A Novel*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1987, p. 29.

narrator-protagonists Peter and Katherine Sagamore are also involved with writing, teaching and preserving stories, and also marginally involved in CIA activities. They are friends with Frank Talbot who is the author of a novel about his and his wife's sailing cruise in the Carribean (the novel is actually *Sabbatical*, with the protagonists renamed)<sup>56</sup> But *The Tidewater Tales* as a whole is more affirmative of life: if Susan Seckler or Mrs. Talbot in *Sabbatical* has an abortion, she becomes happily pregnant by the end of the later novel and Katherine Sherit Sagamore, who has once had a miscarriage, is happily pregnant with twins throughout the novel and the book ends with her delivering them into the world. Like Fenn Turner, Peter Sagamore will use the experiences of their Chesapeake cruise as the substance of the novel which will be called *The Tidewater Tales*, which are the first and last words of the book.

Peter is a reputed writer of minimalist stories who has blockage and Katherine is a librarian and founder of ASPS (the American Society for the Preservation of Story telling) and "their major preoccupations involve the sea, sex and stories and the tales we hear are mostly about seamen and semen, navigation and narration, textuality and sexuality"<sup>57</sup>. On this nautical-narrative cruise, the authors tell each other episodes of their past life and their odd, sometimes uncannily anticipatory, dreams. They also meet some strange exotic people like Theodorus and Diana Dmetrikakis who seem to be contemporary incarnations of Odysseus and Nausicaa, Captain Donald Quicksoat, an avatar of Don Quixote whose adventures after a certain point in Cervantes' novel are imagined by Peter Sagamore. Scheherazade makes a real life appearance and the reader is explained why she told her stories for exactly 1,001 nights and not another number. "Huckleberry Findley on the Honga River" is also another reworking of a classical story into a present that replicates it.

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<sup>56</sup> Therefore a novel printed chronologically before its "real-life" authors and its genesis are revealed in *The Tidewater Tales*.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Lehan review: "*The Tidewater Tales: A Novel*" in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, June 28, 1987, p. 10.

In the *The Tidewater Tales* Barth recycles old myths and classical stories and his own older stories weaving a complicated warp and woof of narratives vicariously told by Peter and Katherine Sagamore that achieve "designs of chiasmatic doublings and double helixes, of the self-reflexive and the intertextual, and of endings that are beginnings and beginnings that never conclude".<sup>58</sup> Whereas *Lost in the Funhouse* is a collection of stories meant to be read as a sequential narrative, *The Tidewater Tales* is a novel that thinks of itself as a series of stories: Barth disarms the readers' possible critique<sup>59</sup> that the novel lacks a governing structure by the sly metafictionist device of having Peter put it forth as a de-centering programmatic point: Sagamore plans to write a novel "in which next to nothing happens beyond an interminably pregnant couple's swapping stories".<sup>60</sup> In the resulting collage, Barth gives ample food to please or displease everyone's taste. William Pritchard opines that it is no use regretting that Barth will write no more novels like his early, memorable and short one *The End of the Road*. Anything he produces now is calculated to tease readers into a state where they are uncertain whether it's a brilliant artistry they are in the presence of, or insufferable, inflated self-indulgence, a thousand and one ways of behaving - in the infamous words of a review of *Chimera* - like a narrative chauvinistic pig (Mr. Barth claims to relish the phrase).<sup>61</sup> It is worth remarking that through the stories that he retells Barth claims not only an American heritage but that of world fiction, to whose great master fabulators he pays great homage.

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<sup>58</sup> Max Schultz: *The Muses of John Barth*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1990, p. 151.

<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless some critics have still faulted Barth for that.

<sup>60</sup> Barth, in *The Tidewater Tales*: the Sagamores playfully plan that would be a "narrative navigation" (p. 209), a voyage "without itinerary, timetable or destination", a fortnight of "sailing whither the wind listeth and having certain small or large adventures and maybe telling each other stories as they went along, some they've never told before and some they know by heart but need or want to hear again or tell the kiddies, or some real stories from their life together and their lives apart; some made-up stories; some found stories and some lost stories"...(p. 76)

<sup>61</sup> William Pritchard: "Between Blam and Blooey" in *The New York Times Book Review*, June 28, 1987, p. 7.

The most brilliant of these reworking of literary archetypes is the Odyssean variation "The Unfinished Story of Penelope's Unfinished Web" (pp 182-96) and its continuation "The Long True Story of Odysseus's Last Voyage" (pp 196-224). Barth does not give up the self-reflexive game<sup>62</sup> in this story either. He invents Homer in the tale the bard Phemius tells, which is also the story of Odysseus to which the great protagonist himself listens. But Barth's fictive fabulation is here subject to, and controlled by, the demands and conventions of story-telling, and it derives its substance from an ingenious and imaginative late 20th century postmodern reading of the narrative gaps in the Homeric text. Thus Penelope's endless weaving and the story of her distressful life in Ulysses' absence is complemented with her solace-giving, six-year affair with the bard Phemius (that is later Homer) who was first "her fellow tactician" and "her fellow artist, then her closest friend" and "finally her lover"<sup>63</sup> The story is based on sophisticated *ad literam* observance of Penelope's vow to Ulysses: "The vow she had made upon her husband's departure, she said, neither to admit another man into their marriage bed nor herself to go to the bed of another man, she had kept, though at last in its letter only" as the lovers had used "a couch piled deep with the yarns of her art"<sup>64</sup> in her weaving room, beside her loom. After the first night confessions, Barth imagines the two spouses' estrangement and Odysseus's return to Phaeacia to claim Nausicaa as his wife, a story that duplicates each Sagamore's two-marriage saga. The description of Penelope's famous tapestry is an occasion for Barth to advocate the Chinese box technique, the duplication within duplication device or *mise-en-abîme* (e.g. Fenwick and Susan Turner/Frank and Leah Talbot/John Barth) and its Homeric source". Even the casual viewer noticed and properly admired the little panel-within a panel, but there was a further detail known only to the maker and one another. In an area no larger than her fingernail (in a tapestry itself wall-size) she had managed to suggest in

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<sup>62</sup> The "Menelaïad", "Anonymiad", "Perseid" and "Bellerophonical" of *Lost in the Funhouse* are exclusive self-reflexive experiments.

<sup>63</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 190.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*.

the tiniest stitches of the very finest thread the scenes from Panel One, being woven in Panel Two, being woven in Panel Three. That idea she had gotten from Phemius, who, as he sang of Troy, once improvised an interlude wherein an old minstrel entertains distinguished Odysseus with a song of the war itself, in course of which it described the shield forged for Achilles by the gods, on which in turn, is figured the story of the war thus far".<sup>65</sup>

On "the largest honeymoon in marital history", Odysseus and Nausicaa sail out of time, in search of "Circe's promised land", "off into the rising sunset"<sup>66</sup> attaining the "Holding Velocity" of fictive duration or timeless world by chanting the immemorial opening refrain of bards they had learned at their wedding feast from the song of their "projected honeymoon voyage"<sup>67</sup> which the poet "Demococus sang that Odysseus said that Homer told him": "Once upon a time...there was a story that began...".<sup>68</sup> Therefore Barth tells not only the story of Ulysses and Nausicaa's last voyage, but also the story of how the *Odyssey* came into being.<sup>69</sup> Using regressus ad infinitum he has Odysseus encounter its author and listening to him reciting it to the Phaeacians, then has the modern-day orators Ted and Diana Dmitrikakis tell it to Peter Sagamore who intertextually includes it in *The Tidewater Tales*, his (and Barth's) novel.

The same genius for intertextuality and self-reflexiveness is illustrated by the relationship between *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*. The former novel ends on the date (Sunday, June 15, 1980) when the latter novel begins during the Sagamores' two-week cruise taking place between "Blam" (the storm of June 15)<sup>70</sup> and "Blooeey" (its "twin" storm of June 29), the two authorial couples meet, their

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

<sup>66</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, pp. 219, 222, 223.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*. p 221

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 224; it is also an echo of "Frame-Tale" from *Lost in the Funhouse*.

<sup>69</sup> Samuel Butler imagined the *Odyssey* was composed by a woman and Rober Grave gave a feminist explanation to it in his novel *Homer's Daughter* (1955) which Barth mentions on p. 179.

<sup>70</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 82.

lives interweave and the former narrative becomes embedded<sup>71</sup> into the latter, Barth incorporating it into his text (beside *The Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Thousand and One Nights*)<sup>72</sup> with what Schulz designates as "nervy aplomb"<sup>73</sup>. As in the case of the respective masterpieces, Barth embroiders upon the earlier narrative, filling in family details and "rewrites" *Sabbatical* by making up a new context for its creation, inventing "real-life" models for its characters and modifying some data about their lives. Thus in a self-reflexive way (the *mise-en-abîme* technique is originally used) a narrative fiction tells us how the "reality" of an earlier fiction has been fictionalized, *The Tidewater Tales* changing *Sabbatical* into a *roman-à-clef* within its fictive world. But as the chronological time for both novels is the same, Barth ironically reverses the real relationship, paradoxically making the later novel the model for the earlier work.<sup>74</sup> The symbolic image that emphasizes this source-echo intertextuality of *The Tidewater Tales* and *Sabbatical* (the earlier book being *post rem* metamorphosed into a fictional by-product of the narrative complications of the later novel) is Frank's *boina*. Associated in his mind (and that of his fictionalized self, Fenwick) with his novelistic ambitions, it is for ever lost by Fenwick but it is retrieved by Peter from the Chesapeake waters. It becomes an emblem of narrative powers when just by wearing it Peter overcomes his writer's block making massive notes for his Scherazadean novel which is being shaped as *The Tidewater Tales*. He can only return the *boina* to Frank telling him "Now you go home and write your next thing, and I'll go home and write ours"<sup>75</sup> when he has been able to write a third act to Frank's

<sup>71</sup> See pp. 348-61, 411-16, 557, 572

<sup>72</sup> The novel is described as a Scheherazadean frame-tale about the Sagamores and "Their House's Increase" (p. 21).

<sup>73</sup> Max Schultz, *Op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>74</sup> Peter seems to be Frank Talbott's *alter ego* and has plenty of ideas for Frank's novel: e.g. he imagines he had the idea of turning both the *Silver sisters* and the Talbott brothers into twins (p. 557). Also because he sees Rick Talbott as "your Faust of the CIA" he suggests to his friend how to modify the chap's name in his fiction". "His middle name's Mansfield, but if I were a novelist I'd make it Manfred, after Lord Byron's Prince of Darkness" (p. 255).

<sup>75</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*. p. 633.

discarded play "Sex Education" and has imagined "a headful of good ideas for the novel Frank ought to write".<sup>76</sup>

The metaphoric equation writing/birthing couples throughout the novel the postmodern motif of metafiction with the realist themes of marital love, contemporary American nature and society: "These waters upon which we yarn and float, reader, are our birthwaters: Katherine's, Peter's, Franklin's, and America's."<sup>77</sup> The Chesapeake appears as literally the fount of America's history beginning with its colonization, fictively as Peter's birth place and self-reflexively as the agent by which the novel comes into existence since it brings to Peter the two canisters with Frank's "Sex Education", acts 1 and 2 that "in a manner of speaking catalyzed goosed - might as well say inseminated, says Peter - *inseminated* our onboard muse".<sup>78</sup> The never ending process of the always-under-construction technique of writing the *Tidewater Tales* is stressed by the ship log day to day structure but what is recorded within the novel is only Peter's preliminary note-taking. The reader is repeatedly told: "Peter Sagamore has not written the foregoing sentences. But shamelessly, possessedly, he has logged long notes upon this unfinished possible story all through the sticky morning into the fore-part of the afternoon"<sup>79</sup> but in the process Peter frequently revises what he had recorded the preceding days in order to illuminate causes to later events: e.g. his quarrel with his wife on June 23 which is better refocused by a flashback to the previous day.<sup>80</sup>

The time scheme of the novel's structure involves the multiple frames of the present, the past of the main characters' lives and the archetypal dimensions of classical texts and myth, the most playfully virtuoso being that introduced on Day 14 when there's a new *regressus* of story-tellers as May Jump recounts to the assembled 14 characters

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 572.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 441.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 421.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 493.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 440-50.

f the novel<sup>81</sup> "the unfinished story about an unfinished story"<sup>82</sup> that Scheherazade told her that she had told her sister Dunyazade about her life, twenty years after the end of *The Arabian Nights*. It is a tale about Peter's romance with the Genie<sup>83</sup> who had told her in daytime what tales to tell the Shah, providing "her from the future with exactly those stories from the past that she needed in the present".<sup>84</sup> And all of a sudden Scheherazade makes her "flesh-and-blood appearance to pay back a friend's favour and help him regain his blocked powers of invention. The genie, now called Djean by Scheherazade is of course Peter Sagamore<sup>85</sup> (both alter-egos of Barth who thus presents himself as an avatar of the Immortal spirit of Storytelling embodied in Scheherazade) who has been trying to deblock his narrative powers by inventing "a story in which a man who once magically visited Scheherazade now wishes that she could visit him, so that if what he's done must be essentially what he'll do, it might be done at least as spiritedly and whole heartedly as before. In short that story was this story, and like this one, it was not only unfinished, but stuck."<sup>86</sup>

The *regressum ad infinitum* or Chinese boxes effect is self-reflexively put forth: "when me and the guy in the story were trying to think up a way to bring Scheherazade here, I came up with WYDIWYD<sup>87</sup> trick and Blam! There you were in the story. The same afternoon, Blooey! There you were in our boat. Then you didn't fade, and it occurred to me that was just the right complication for the story,

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<sup>81</sup> The fourteen characters corresponding to the 14 days are Peter and Katherine and their yet unborn twins; Henry and Irma Sherritt. Katherine's parents; Andrew "Chip" Sherritt, Katherine's younger brother; Franklin and Leah Talbott; Carla B. Silver, Leah's mother; Marian, Leah's sister and her current lovers; Mary Jump and Donald Quicksoat. It should be noted at this point that Barth decenters the narrator from its traditionally central place, emphasizing the importance of listener/reader in making art immortal. Barth significantly calls them "the Mother and Father of Invention" (P. 410).

<sup>82</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tale*, p. 574.

<sup>83</sup> It is also the story contained in the "Dunyazadvad" of Chimera.

<sup>84</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 596.

<sup>85</sup> Peter's name is, evidently, emblematic: more sagas.

<sup>86</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 603.

<sup>87</sup> "What you've done is what you'll do" (*Tidewater Tales*), p. 595.

so I put it in"<sup>88</sup> etc. So in Barth/Sagamore's aesthetics which Katherine immediately qualifies as "postmodernist"<sup>89</sup> fiction influences "reality" and then reality fiction, in an infinite process of feedback that is however subject to the laws of aesthetics (the characters become "Prisoners" which mirror the infinite continuum and indeterminacy of life by cultivating the type of the "unfinished story unfinished."<sup>90</sup>

In the typical postmodernist way *The Tidewater Tales* devises two endings: one on Day 14 when Katherine delivers twins with their grandfather anticipatorily announcing the event with signal flags on his boat. The event is however presented using the Near Future in Carla B Silver's prediction and ends with the greeting: Sturdy little Adam! Bright-eyed Eve! Welcome to your garden".<sup>91</sup>

Then a final section called "The Ending" is formally added in which, with self-referential irony, Scheherazade is used for the "wrap-up inventory" which is a parody of all endings and underlines the difficulty and necessity of ending; which is however circumvented by the already classical postmodernist trick of closing the cycle by announcing the birth of the very novel we have been reading, therefore ending with its title. Another way of enhancing the effect of indeterminacy is by decentering the narrative as the exclusive product of two coupled narrators. Peter does not appear as the author (or the only author) of his fiction. He and Kathy both separately tell the stories of their childhood and subsequent experiences but so do Frank and Leah Talbot, Carla B Silver, May Jump and then the more famous Theodorus and Diana Dmitrikakis/Odysseus and Nausicaa, Captain Quiksoat/Don Quixote and Scheherazade. The narrative also includes the characters' criticism of books they have read (e.g. Chip makes a critical interpretation of Joyce's "Araby"). Thus, by using the reflecting device of multiple story-tellers/authors and listeners/readers the book seems to suggest it is not the divine

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<sup>88</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 603.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 604.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 638.

intuition of one author, but a sort of collective work of tens of people of all times, the careful artefact of personal, literary and cultural experiences, both contemporary and historical. Yet the careful construction also simultaneously stresses the responsibility of the author, the artistic genius who "though a person dramatically different from ordinary people" is "more finely honed to the point where this difference in degree becomes almost a difference in kind as he/she is the person who can write with a discernment, economy, pungency of detail and artfulness of arrangement".<sup>92</sup>

Barth's love of playful reverse of conventional narrative expectations and code practices also appears in his use of title, chapter and story. The reader is first struck by the nine pages that the chapter titles occupy in the table of contents as well as the varying lengths of these titles. One is a single word exclamation, "Well", whereas another runs over a page long (in amusing contrast to the narrative length of the respective chapter which is made up of one word, "Ahem"<sup>93</sup>). Two chapter titles are just followed by the three-dot ellipses.

The generic indeterminacy that we have already dwelt upon when discussing *Sabbatical* is equally, and even more richly characteristic of *The Tidewaters Tales* too and mimetic representation becomes just one artistic mode of expression among others used in the textual mirrorings of the reflexive; the latter thus interestingly reaffirms the shaping authorial self in the dramatized persona of the narrative voice. As Max Schulz underlines "through such acts of literary ecumenism he achieves simultaneously a self-reflexive meditation on the medium of art, and a mirroring of a reality outside art"<sup>94</sup> or as Barth himself puts it in his novel "language is always also but seldom simply about itself".<sup>95</sup>

What is not about itself in *The Tidewaters Tales* makes this novel one of the most beautiful sagas of marital love and domestic life that is still possible in contemporary America in spite of the post-Freudian

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 654; Scheherazade's point of view is called "omniscopic"

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>94</sup> M. Schultz, *Op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>95</sup> J. Barth, *Letters*, G.P Putnam's Sons, New York, 1979, p. 767.

and post I.U.D and pill revolution in sexual mores. Although Peter is quite aware of the challenging proposition of Donald Barthelme that "the beauty of women makes of adultery a painful duty", Peter considers that in spite of the temptations "love makes of fidelity a manageable responsibility".<sup>96</sup>

Peter and Katherine are shown as a happy example where binarity (male/female, he - a minimalist whose pet poet is Emily Dickinson, "Zero to the Bone", she - a maximalist, "I contain multitudes", with Whitman as her favourite poet; he - Cartesian, she - Rablaisian, Katherine is upper middle-class, WASP, Dorchester County; whereas Peter is lower middle-class, Hoops Island) is resolved in creative *coincidentia oppositorum* (artistically and biologically) which perpetuates at the same time binarity in the twin point of view of the narrative and the actual production of twins. The endless ludic games of pairs of names the Sagamores keep giving their as yet unborn twins with whom they are having permanent conversations is an amusing means of seriously driving home to the reader the extent to which duality and binarity pervade their personal and social lives. Thus the endless permutations give us "little Stars and Stripes" "Hide and Seek", "Safe and Sound", "Tomorrow and Tomorrow", "Fourth and Goal"<sup>98</sup>, "Arts and Sciences, and Wash and Wear and Renaissance and Reformation",<sup>99</sup> "Spit and Image"<sup>100</sup>, "Little Balls and Strikes", "Time and Again"<sup>101</sup>, "Punch and Judy"<sup>102</sup>, "Pete and Repeat"<sup>103</sup>. Filial and brotherly love that almost seem historical concepts in such novels as Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place* (1980) or Tama Janowitz's *American Dad* (1981) and her short stories *Slaves of New York* (1986) are also possible in this novel, even if the smothering solicitude of her

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<sup>96</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 424.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 237.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 478.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 479.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 507.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 512.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 522.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 526.

parents provoke eight-month-and-a-half pregnant Katherine's mock-rebellious gesture of bolting away on the cruise.

Like *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Tidewater Tales* is also permeated by a spirit of place which makes it a real hymn to nature, specifically the Chesapeake Bay which is about to be defiled and poisoned. The characters who represent this danger are Kate's brother, Willy Sherritt and her first husband, Porter ("Ponnie") Baldwin. Like WESCAC the computer in *Giles Goat-Boy*, the rapists in *Sabbatical* and certain CIA and KGB agents they are what Barth calls the "Doomsday Factor[s]"<sup>104</sup> of contemporary America and the world. Symbolically childless, their life-denying quality (clearly related to the bureaucratic urban military-industrial system they serve) is manifest in the material greed with which they are ready to dump toxic waste into the Chesapeake area.

Their melodramatic end when their helicopter is destroyed by a thunderstorm apparently suggests a sort of poetic justice that Barth doesn't really seem prone to using or the symbolic idea that nature will somehow take care of herself, which again would hardly be up to the level of the serious problems this thread of the novel raises. Maybe Barth wants to rouse the American public's indignation against this long term danger. "Compared to the Pentagon and the Kremlin, these Doomsday Factors in our backyards are no mortal threat, individually to the world at large. But daily and knowingly, Will Sheritt befouls his own nest and ours, with the same bluff indifference wherewith he passed along his herpes simple even unto his wife and Poon his crab lice unto Katherine"<sup>105</sup>.

Another Doomsday factor is certain CIA activities and those of its counterpart, the KGB, which make reality extremely problematic when the reader is told about the various interpretations of events in the light of dealing with double and triple agents. A good example would be the impossibly involuted account of CIA-KGB double dealing regarding the possible sale of a certain Bayside property to the Soviet Embassy.

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 257.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 649.

We learn about Douglas Townshend's belief in an aristocracy of character and his self assumed duty to "temper or stop what he judged to be a betrayal of what he valued about his country".<sup>106</sup> Becoming the deep conscience and "throat"<sup>107</sup> of the institution, Doug Townshend confesses that "the neutralisation of Doomsday Factors is one other cause. I double for the Constitution against the CIA, and I argue for the human race against Doomsday factors".<sup>108</sup> Douglas Townshend also puts forth the "Tragic View" of the Central Intelligence Agency: "Covert government security operations, like organized criminal operations, are cancers in the body democratic. They have in common that they corrupt and falsify individuals and institutions. They widen the gap between what things represent themselves to be and what they are. They debase the very language. The famous links between the Mafia and the CIA - involving Cuba, for example, during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations - they're quite natural. The stock-in-trade of both are hitmen, cut-outs, dummy companies, fronts, plants, puppets and extortions. Also coercions, briberies, lies, cover-ups, entrapments, conspiracies and collusions. A crooked cop and a double agent are cells of the same cancer".

The Tragic View follows upon the recognition that covert operations are sometimes justifiable, perhaps even necessary, for the protection of a good society, but like other aspects of security they are inevitably abused<sup>109</sup>. The "Information" gathered by the world clandestine organizations in the interest of saving the world is used by their "intelligence" - "which there's never enough of"<sup>110</sup> - service divisions in ways that subordinate human life to "suspicious interests". Peter's half involvement with the CIA through Douglas Townshend leads to Katherine's spontaneous abortion and his decision to give up learning more about their more or less invisible activities. Symptomatic of Pete's involvement with the CIA is his literary

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 255.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 256.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 259

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 261.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 252.

blockage. The reason Doug Townshend puts forth for trying to recruit Peter is that "Some genuine writer needs to know what's going on"<sup>111</sup>. But the more Peter is told about the Agency's blood games (that he calls "devil's work"<sup>112</sup>), the less he is able to write and finally his increasing minimalism is reduced to silence.

Another point to be noticed is the change of tone in the treatment of Douglas Townshend who appears as harsh or hardboiled in comparison with Dougald Taylor, his gentler counterpart from *Sabbatical*. This episode also serves to illustrate the author's values, as between writing and his wife Peter clearly chooses the latter<sup>113</sup>. It is also an episode (the whole of "Day 3": Madison Bay to Rhode River, pp. 227-292) that reveals the coupled authors' (an implicitly Barth's) political view, their involvement with the real world<sup>114</sup>. The lightness of tone does not beguile the reader into overlooking the underlying seriousness of their statement: "Unpolitical? Boyoboy, are we unpolitical: just your average, middle-class, high-minded liberals, Katherine and Peter, Peter especially: mildly patriotic but nowise chauvinistic, opposed to imperialist aggression all around. Get out of Southeast Asia: Hands Off South and Central America (Kate's fierce on this one)<sup>115</sup>. Equal opportunity, justice for all, save the environment, no nuclear first strikes, no nuclear second or third strikes either, beware the military-industrial complex, make our government obey

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 255.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>114</sup> This aspect is emphasized in a self-reflexive comment by the author[s]: "Whatever else we are, Katherine Sherritt and Peter Sagamore are principally the main characters in a work of fiction entitled *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel*, but the Chesapeake Bay is real; so are all the federal government operations on and around it...so are all the active and retired military and civilian government employees,...who use these ever more contaminated waters for their recreation, as we do; so was the corpse our Story ran into several cruises back, on Sunday, October 1, 1978" (p. 239). A statement that reminds the reader of Marianne Moore's line about "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (Poetry).

<sup>115</sup> Kate is one of the initiators of an active society HOSCA (p. 125): Hands Off South and Central America, an acronym that in Spanish designates a female mulatto.

the law like the rest of us - that sort of thing. Otherwise political sceptics, if not quite agnostics"<sup>116</sup>.

One of Barth's most dubious characters is the Romanian American Lascar Lupescu, ex-CIA/KGB low level operative associated with Carla B Silver who adds a touch of magic to the atmosphere by her evil powers (she is a crossing between Jewish and Romanian gypsy parents).

To her non-Romanian side of ancestry, Carla credits her head for business and to her Romanian Gypsy forebears she credits among other things her dreams "which have the authority of revelations"<sup>117</sup> for her. As a Romanian spy, Lupescu is connected with the "Wet Affairs people" (the jocular name refers to liquidation) who are endowed with ingenious equipment (they have "a fountain pen delivery system for their heart-attack juice")<sup>118</sup>. About this shady character we learn that he was "a handsome and popular fellow, an able manager in the restaurant, and a capable lover, but given to drink and, in his cups sometimes to inappropriate sexual overtures to other women. Just a short while before, fired by an excess of Premiat Cabernet Sauvignon, he had made one such overture to Marian Silver, (his mistress's daughter) "so spectacularly inappropriate that the young woman had renounced heterosexuality and moved in with her friend May Jump...while Carla B. Silver had not only dismissed Lupescu from the bed and business with a Gypsy curse, but threatened to put out a contract on him if she ever saw him in Fells Point again"<sup>119</sup>.

It is interesting to remark that Lupescu's brutality is so vile that his gesture had a consequence that Marian's former rape and even gang-rape did not.

Together with the other two villains in the story - Willy Sheritt and Poonie Baldwin, Lascar is killed into a helicopter crash. The reader last hears of him as the "handsome devil...whom Poonie thought might be induced to work two sides of the sexual sheet"<sup>120</sup> and as a man with

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<sup>116</sup> J. Barth: *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 349.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 349.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 264.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 350.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 648.

an undoubtful genius or flair at least for corrupting people, as he has acquainted his real estate new Sherbald Enterprises business associates and friends with a "particularly successful operation...bribing city garbagemen to spray toxic wastes on ordinary trash before composting it for illegal disposal at the municipal landfill"<sup>121</sup>.

In conclusion we may say, that the evolving relationship of fact and fiction has deepened in the works Barth produced in the 1980s. *The Tidewater Tales* is a literary vehicle that has incorporated everyday reality including the Doomsdays Factors of contemporary America because they "keep floating to the surface of our life like deadly fact to the surface of our fiction or rotting corpses to the surface of our Bay"<sup>122</sup>. Sharing to a certain extent Salman Rushdie's postmodernist ideology that "The real world kills; fiction sustains and gives pleasure"<sup>123</sup>, Barth has revived the frame story to reincorporate the real in a way that will be counterbalanced by the pleasures of fantasy and the metafictional.

In *Letters*, the characters who want to determine the course of social political events are jocularly presented as the clowns of History, whereas in *Sabbatical* the likes of Manfred Turner, Dougald Taylor, John Arthur Paisley and the CIA's Clandestine Services Division (KUDOVE) haunt the invisible part of the labyrinth of History, even if they may be said to have a slightly parodic flavour of the entertainment of the spy novel. Yet, Barth's socially aware readiness to include the untampered world of fact into the fictional world is convincingly illustrated in his reprinting in *Sabbatical* the nine newspaper articles from *The Baltimore Sun*, October 5, 1978 to January 24, 1980 that focus on the mysterious death of John Arthur Paisley, "former CIA nuclear weapons expert"<sup>124</sup>, sifting the contradictory evidence as to whether it was murder or suicide and also suggesting the apparent

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 649.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 246.

<sup>123</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Islam, Censorship and 'The Satanic Verses' ", *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, February 19, 1989, p. 15.

<sup>124</sup> J. Barth, *Sabbatical*, p. 89. The quoted reports run between pp. 86-105 and are followed by Susan and Fenn's comments and analysis. pp. 105-113.

cover-up and suppression of an investigation. Both novels therefore illustrate the government's manipulation of the media and their interference in the lives of important political figures and even those of obscure citizens.

In *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewaters Tales*, the Viconian/Joycean cyclicity which underpins the biographical-historical text of *Letters*, underlies only the metafictional threads of the narrative, the self-reflexive circularity of the never-ending process of story-invention or generation.

In *The Tidewater Tales* the Tragic view of the Doomsday Factors is seriously discussed and various facets of the problems are fairly presented. We are haunted by Douglas Townshend's rumination:

"In good faith as well as bad, definitions vary of defense, security, justice, and other best interests. Protection shades off into coercion, aggression, self-serving. The best cop on the force will make Policy from time to time when he's got a big fish right on the hook and knows the fellow's going to slip through the cracks of the system. He becomes a small scale Frederick Talbott. The Tragic view involves the realization that judgement, discernment, determination, vigilance, courage, goodwill and the rest can only keep in check what can't be eliminated. We control and suppress the cancer as much as possible for as long as possible, though we can never cure it and will almost certainly infect ourselves in the process".<sup>125</sup>

Barth's attitude however leaves no doubt as testifies the final authorial comment in *The Epilogue*. "The real poison", he quotes Douglas Townshend, "is the Company we keep, as embodied particularly in F. Mansfield Talbott the Prince of Darkness and his fellows".<sup>126</sup> Then he unequivocally goes on: "Do not glorify them, readers and writers. Do not romanticize their exploits. They are an amoral crowd employing immoral means to not especially moral ends: the dirty-tricks department of international grabbiness. A Gypsy curse upon them all".<sup>127</sup> Likewise the final comment on Douglas Townshend

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<sup>125</sup> J. Barth, *The Tidewaters Tales*, p. 261.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 644.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*.

implies that such people's belief in the existence of an abstract entity, the Doomsday Factor, effectively taunts them and transforms them into followers of the same death-dealing ideology as their enemies: "Not an altogether evil man, Frank Talbott's brother; good to his family, in his way (...) but to hell with him, really".<sup>128</sup>

To conclude, we share Max Schulz's opinion that in its concentration on the quotidian present, *The Tidewater Tales* "belongs with Updike's Rabbit books and Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *The Dean's December*, in that it shares the "certain quasi-fanaticism or roughness of spirit" of the "great writers of late nineteenth and early and late twentieth century realism"<sup>129</sup> that Peter Sagamore mentions (Lawrence, Hemingway, Henry James, Marcel Proust)<sup>130</sup> to which can be added the factual density and magical realism of García Marquez and Vargas Llosa.

Barth is almost single-handedly responsible for the redefinition of fiction in the late 1960s. Less antigeneric and carnivalesque in his cross breeding of genres than Robert Coover, less driven by the dialogic frenzy of voices than William Gass and Raymond Federman, less "silenced" by epistemological reticence than Walter Abish and Kenneth Gangemi, Barth practices formal acts "that gracefully merge literary contraries"<sup>131</sup>. No type of narrative discourse is really allowed as a centre, making his fiction a pluralist's delight.

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 645.

<sup>129</sup> Max Schultz, *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>130</sup> J. Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*, p. 250.

<sup>131</sup> Max Schultz, *Op. cit.*, pp. 133-4.

## **XI. REALISM CUM MAGIC AND BLACK VOICES: TONI MORRISON AND ALICE WALKER**

Toni Morrison (b. 1931) is undoubtedly the most outstanding voice of black identity in America and for her remarkable work she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. Her novels reveal her to be a very gifted and often innovative story-teller that mingles realism, myth, comedy and satire.

Her first unforgettable novel is *The Bluest Eye* (1969), the tragic story of a little black girl who wished to change her eyes to blue in order to be accepted by white people. At first the story is lyrically told in the first person by Claudia, a nine year old naive girl who observes the traumatic experiences of a black girl, Pecola, forced to find love in incest and to define beauty as the possession of eyes blue like Shirley Temple's.

As Claudia's perspective is distorted by her innocence, Toni Morrison has an omniscient narrator tell the grimmer part of the story. Pecola is ugly and unloved even by her mother who, disillusioned by her marriage, identifies with her white employers and gives their children a love she withholds from her own daughter. Her father, abandoned by his parents when a child, limits his interest in life to drinking heavily. Finally we see Pecola insanely believing, at the suggestion of a mulatto West Indian, that she has the bluest eyes of all, with the narrator expressing a feeling of guilt and complicity in the drama she has witnessed.

In *Sula* (1973), Morrison recounts the fate of two young black women, Nel and Sula, confronted by racism and sexism in the small town they live in. While Nel is unimaginative, conventional, rational

And an apparent supporter of order, Sula is imaginative, emotional, eccentric and a rebel against a male dominated social order. She just watches with interest when her mother burns to death, she puts her grandmother into an asylum in order to get the family home, she takes interest in diverse sexual experiences (among the numerous men she sleeps with is also Nel's husband) and defies the community. But the two are complementary halves of the female self. In *Sula*, Morrison demonstrates her "ability to conjure the reader into suspension of disbelief".<sup>1</sup> A woman cuts off her leg to feed her children and sets fire to her drug-dazed son; three boys of different sizes and ages become physically indistinguishable; Sula cuts off the tip of her finger to intimidate white boys by showing she is fearless; a community accepts the setting up of Suicide Day - such events do not really happen but Morrison narrates them so vividly that the reader accepts them as if by magic.

*Song of Solomon* (1977) adds to the gallery of grotesque characters a woman who lacks a navel. This novel is even more memorable than the preceding ones by a rich use of folklore and myth. The book records a male protagonist's quest for identity, "Milkman" Dead's search for his roots from his father and his father's estranged sister, at the same time journeying from the North to a remote corner of Virginia. He confronts a world where love is distorted by material interest and class barrier. It is a richly peopled and plotted novel, where Morrison succeeds again in her metaphoric trick of triumphantly stretching and straining the reader's imagination: an African who can flap his arms and fly away from oppression; an Afro-American who foolishly believes he can fly; an Afro-American woman who dangles from her ear a box containing her name, her identity.

The theme of white oppression is however expanded in this novel in comparison with her previous creations but in *Tar Baby* (1981) she returns to Blacks' interracial problems as she tells the story of two young Afro-Americans whose love cannot surmount their cultural differences in a style that is less realistic but with a sharper satirical edge.

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<sup>1</sup> Mari Evans (ed.): *Black Woman Writers*, Anchor Press, New York, 1984, p.364.

*Beloved* (1987) is one of the most highly acclaimed novels of the 1980s, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for 1988. The author draws on a historical incident: the story of Margaret Garner<sup>2</sup> that recounts the life of a fugitive slave woman who murders her almost two-year-old daughter to save her from a life of bondage. The book is not only about slavery but also about the haunting quality of the past in general and the possible destructiveness of mother love, themes that grant it rich meaning and a universal significance.

The novel's present is 1873 and the previous life of the heroine is rendered in a complex narrative wherein events are related either through interior monologues or in straight-forward third-person narrative loops: as a girl of fourteen Sethe had joined a group of slaves on "Sweet Home", a plantation in Kentucky owned by a quite decent couple. From the five young slaves (Paul A, Paul D, Paul F, Sixo and Halle, the son of old Baby Suggs) she had chosen Halle as her mate (she was denied a real marriage ceremony) and had a happy life and three children by a man she loved for his kindness and generosity. Halle was still working to pay off his mother's freedom who had gone and settled in Cincinnati. But the decent master died and the schoolmaster, the decent mistress's nephew, who came to help her run the plantation was far from decent: he beat the slaves and considered them subhuman, listing their "human" and "animal" features. Tortured by the idea that now they might never see their children grow (like Baby Suggs her mother-in-law, who had seven of her children sold) and by the prospect of a beastly life, the couple decided to join the other slaves and planned to run away north, on a freight train. But most of them got caught: Paul A was hanged, Sixo was burned alive, Paul D was put in chains with a bit in his mouth and then sold. Sethe managed to put her children on the train but returned for her husband who had

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<sup>2</sup> The story was told in Herbert Aptheker's "The Negro Woman", *Masses and Mainstream*, 11 (February 1948), and in Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class*, Random House, New York, 1981, p. 21.

The book's dedication to "Sixty Millions, And More" evokes the number of Africans who died on the way to slavery, on the slave ships which are a looming background nightmare of every character. Genocide is the only term for this historical horror.

unaccountably failed to show up. Although she was expecting a baby, the school master's nephews sportingly forced her to suckle them and then when she told on them, cruelly beat her with a cowhide.

Obsessed by her youngest infant's hunger (she was still breast-feeding her) Sethe ran away on foot, walking until her feet refused to carry her any further. She was lying half-dead when a poor white girl appeared on the road; the latter rubbed her bruised benumbed feet and then helped her new baby to be born in a boat. The baby was named Denver after her. Finally, Sethe reached her mother-in-law's home and although mysteriously her husband was never heard of or from again, the two women led a quiet life for a short year, bringing up the four children until all of the sudden the slave master showed up with a slave catcher and drove Sethe to her desperate act.

When the action opens in 1873, eighteen years have passed from that tragic event and the past is buried deep in Sethe's consciousness as she tries to perpetually repress it in order to make a living for herself and her daughter, the only child who hasn't left her. The two boys have run off in order to avoid their overwhelming mother's love as well as the spiteful actions of their murdered baby sister's ghost. The omniscient narrator quietly introduces Sethe, Denver and the house they live in. One day, Paul D walks into this haunted house and, ignorant of the details of the little girl's death, he seems to exorcise the ghost with his affectionate nature and mere manly rational determination. But in fact, the largest part of the novel recounts the ghost's desperate reappearance as a young woman of flesh and blood of about twenty who gives "Beloved" as her name, the only word inscribed on her tombstone. She is a strange girl, elegantly dressed but with oddly unworn shoes. She talks like a very young child, has an uncanny "new" skin and no lines on her hands. At first, the new avatar of Sethe's dead daughter seems harmless and sweet in her languid but fierce devotion to her mother and when eventually realizing the newcomer's identity, the mother is tremendously happy to have her back. But gradually the mysterious guest shows fierce intentions: she seduces Paul D. and finally manages to have him leave the house (upon

learning the real circumstances of the infant's death). She eats the best food in the house without caring if her slaving mother or her sister have anything left. Sethe loses her job, all her savings go while Beloved rubs the knife of guilt in the wound of her mother's troubled conscience.

Appalled by the slave/mistress relationship building between her mother and her Zombie sister, Denver goes out to find some food-providing job. The job is offered by the same white man, an active abolitionist, who had saved her mother's life after her murder. On the day he comes to fetch Denver, Sethe and Beloved appear on the porch of their house and the image of the white man makes Sethe flash back to the scene when the slave-catchers came 18 years ago. She seizes an ice pick, only this time she does not attack her children but launches towards the white man. However her new crime is prevented by the neighbours, who after years of shunning Sethe, decide to come and look into the uncanny things going on in the house. When the turmoil caused by their rushing to stop Sethe is over, they realize that Beloved has vanished as suddenly and mysteriously as she had appeared.

For all its melodramatic plot-outline, the book is extremely powerful due to the author's narrative technique, her skilful character delineation and gift to create atmosphere by physical description of setting.

The ghost story technique is justified by the folklore of black people, a visionary inheritance that apprehends the unseen. Thus Morrison can expressionistically present Sethe wrestling with the demon of past yet ever present grief. As Ann Sintow puts it, "When strong loving women would rather kill their babies than see them hauled back into slavery, the damage to every black who inherits that moment is a literal damage and no metaphor. The novel is meant to give grief body, to make it palpable".<sup>3</sup>

Margaret Atwood admires Morrison's folklore steep handling of the supernatural praising the way in which she promotes the

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Sintow: "Death Duties: Toni Morrison Looks Back in Sorrow", in *VLS*, no. 58, September 1987, p. 25.

narrative: "She is a catalyst for revelations as well as self-revelations; through her we come to know not only how, but why, the original child Beloved was killed. And through her also Sethe achieves, finally, her own form of self-exorcism, her own self-accepting peace".<sup>4</sup>

There is however a tension between the non-realistic device of the ghost with its generalizing value carried by the weight of the hard to believe detail of a baby remaining unnamed all to the age of 2, and the insistence of the physical presence of Beloved described in great details plus the fact that Beloved is seen by over 30 people, not all of them black.<sup>5</sup> That is why the book reads like a romance with evocative metaphoric images of great symbolic intensity.

Through its extremely vivid style and the technique of recounting past experiences that the characters struggle hard to repress as a sheer survival strategy, the reader experiences American slavery with all its horrors<sup>6</sup> including those of ship-crossing that Sethe's mother lives through. Its most atrocious feature is its way of denying the Blacks one of the most cherished Christian institutions: the family. Husband and wife are separated (in fact the marriage is never a legal procedure but simple mating), children are sold away from mothers and fathers or other kin.

Yet, as we have seen, Morrison is careful not to make all whites awful and all blacks wonderful. Sethe's black neighbours (Pay Stamp included) play a role in Sethe's terrible crime by refraining to announce her of the approaching slave-catchers, an attitude motivated by envy of Baby Suggs' affluent and even happy life. It is however the final intervention of the community in the action which breaks the cycle of violence that has been shaping the characters' courses most of their lives.

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Atwood: "Haunted by Their Nightmares" in *The New York Times Book Review*, September 3, 1987, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> In this respect we should note the difference between Morrison's and Emily Brontë's treatment of the ghost motif in *Wuthering Heights*.

<sup>6</sup> The repeated graphic description of physical humiliation have been found sensationalistic by some critics and the gradual unfolding of secret horror has been called unmistakably Gothic. Cf. Carol Iannone: "Toni Morrison's Career" in *Commentary*, vol. 84, no. 6, December 1987, pp. 59-63.

Paul D., though much kinder than women-bashers in the author's earlier *The Bluest Eye* or in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, has his own limitations and flaws.

The novel is remarkable for the quality of the narrator's voice. It is fairly reticent in the opening paragraphs and full of ambiguity in the final ones and its implicit technique is to require the reader to participate actively in integrating the visual images of the characters' memories into the gradually unfolding narrative. As Melissa Walker subtly remarks, the image of boys hanging from trees and Sethe's guilt about remembering the beauty of the "soughing"<sup>7</sup> trees rather than remembering the boys themselves leads readers to "see" the hidden pictures of a lynching in Sethe's carefully edited memories.<sup>8</sup>

The primary narrative of *Beloved* is that of the love story of Sethe and Paul D. who, meeting after 18 years, try to come to terms with their past lives and finally are likely to stay together. Interwoven into this primary narrative thread are tales from the past - of Baby Suggs and her son Halle, of Sethe as a slave at "Sweet Home", her escape from slavery, the delivery of her baby by a white woman, her life in Cincinnati, her infanticide. Although she tries hard to repress powerful images of the past, they keep recurring in her consciousness. She has become resigned to these haunting "thought pictures"<sup>9</sup> and she assures her daughter that nothing ever dies. The technique Morrison uses in order to recount these events is not the flashback but the characters' own rendering as they tell each other the stories of their past lives. Sethe tells Paul D. much about her past with the only careful omission of the way her baby had died, and Paul D. relates her old memories "that broke her heart"<sup>10</sup> although he imagines he has sealed the horrors of his past safely locked in "the tobacco tin lodged in his chest"<sup>11</sup>. Sethe's struggle to keep the past at bay proves futile as

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<sup>7</sup> T. Morrison: *Beloved*. Signet, New York, 1991, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Walker: *Down from the Mountaintop. Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> T. Morrison: *Beloved*, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

Denver is fond of repeating its stories and we gradually learn about the preconditions of the murder, the real circumstances of the child's death and the powerful suspense that the narrative builds is by making the reader wonder if the characters will manage to extricate themselves from their pasts to find "a way out of this no way"<sup>12</sup>.

The tragedy of Sethe's murder of the baby is caused by slavery itself and the public policies it produced: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and lynching. However "the black community's failure to stand in unity against a common enemy"<sup>13</sup> largely contributes to the tragedy.

In the context of the final climactic scene when the black women of the town who had with their men initially betrayed Sethe and then rejected her, come back to help her exorcise the ghost, the resonant title of this challenging novel gains additional significance. The epigraph of the novel is from *Romans* (9:25). St. Paul is explaining why God has chosen the Gentiles over the Jews; but, curiously, he is quoting Hosea (1&2). Of Hosea's three children, representative of the Israelites temporarily rejected because of their betrayal, one is called "not beloved". After a period of punishment, God reclaims the lost people, symbolically renaming the children, as related in *Romans*:

I will call them my people,  
which were not my people,  
and her beloved,  
which was not beloved.

In the Old Testament version, God reclaims a rejected people restoring community in Hosea and likewise in the New Testament version he establishes community in *Romans*.

Sethe purchases the inscription *Beloved* with ten minutes of stand-up sex with the engraver of headstones and then she is sorry she did not barter another ten minutes for another word *Dearly*, so as to inscribe on the headstone "every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral"<sup>14</sup>. "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered together (...)" would be the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Toni Morrison: *Beloved*, p. 5.

words commonly associated with a religious ceremony, but the absence of any other words from Sethe's consciousness symbolically reflects the gap between her and her congregation, the community.

Melissa Walker emphasizes the special significance of the word *beloved* in the struggle for racial justice<sup>15</sup>. She mentions the first use of the phrase in African-American revolutionary writing: David Walker's 1829 *Appeal* wherein he boldly advocated the overthrow of slavery by violent insurrection. Then she underlines that the speeches of Martin Luther King, John Lewis, and other civil rights leaders, are punctuated with references to the "beloved community". Melissa Walker also refers to Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) which, like *Beloved*, is a historical recreation of the past that calls for a different future from the one history has predicated. M. Walker considers that *Beloved's* affirmation of the power of gathering together in the spirit of community as the necessary step in breaking the tyranny of the violent past is at the heart of this lyrical, poetic novel that is also securely fixed in the prosaic reality of history. She concludes that, like Nel's "fine cry" at the end of *Sula*, this novel's "circles of sorrow" are contained in a profound cry for a country and community that is not "beloved".

However, as we have seen, the book raises the question of some white people's kindness and progressive ideas as well as possible co-operation with them. Thus Morrison is ready to question her own instincts which she admits tend towards "romanticizing blackness" and "vilifying whiteness".<sup>16</sup>

Sethe could never have survived her journey to freedom but for the help of the white girl who nursed her wounds and massaged her mutilated feet. The baby Amy helps Sethe bring into this world becomes for her mother a "charmed child"<sup>17</sup> destined for survival and it is perhaps symbolical that, because of Amy, Denver expects whites to be helpful, and they are. Nevertheless Morrison is careful to hint that even enlightened whites can still be charged with being slave exploiters

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<sup>15</sup> Melissa Walker, *Op. cit.*, p. 39, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Hulbert: "Romance and Race", *The New Republic*, May 18, 1992, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> T. Morrison: *Beloved*, p. 40.

and racists. Thus the Bodwins require their black servant to be at their disposal day and night, although she has a family of her own that she should attend to. Their servant teaches Denver never to knock on white people's front door, but appropriately use the back door. When she does use that door, she notices there a container in the shape of a black boy with a widely-open mouth full of coins to pay for deliveries; the inscription on its pedestal reads: "At Yo Service".

Toni Morrison's narrative often contains incidents that relate it to the present and, possibly, the future. Thus Edward Bodwin's feelings of disillusionment with the outcome of the abolitionists' struggle may well sound like those of a contemporary reformer looking back to the haydays of the civil rights movement.

Likewise, an incident that recalls contemporary racist horrors is that in which Stamp Paid finds in the river a red ribbon still attached to a piece of a girl's scalp.

Throughout the novel, Toni Morrison typically cultivates ambiguity and leaves unanswered questions: is *Beloved* a ghost or a mental projection? Does she disappear because the cycle of violence has been broken? Has breaking that cycle of violence rendered the community beloved? Can one free oneself of the past only with the help of the community? The ending leaves the reader in the middle of the process that might restore Sethe's psychic balance. Paul D. is trying to bring about a great change, to persuade Sethe that it is not the children that are the best part of her, but herself and the reader is left wondering, called upon again to take active part in the narrative. *Beloved* is a novel which, like *Finnegan's Wake* completes a cycle, in that its last word is also the first: "Beloved"; yet in the end the characters have apparently transcended the cycle of violence that has been shaping their lives. But the author refrains from commenting on that, leaving the reader to infer his own pensive conclusions.

The ending marks a healing and a possible new beginning. After she has exorcised her guilt and grief, Sethe is most likely on her way to recovery.

As some critics have suggested the kind of reconciliation that Sethe experiences is symbolically the same kind of reconciliation with the

past that blacks in general must face in order to move forward in contemporary society. They must bring slavery, the starting point of their injustice, back to life, must come to terms with the past, must mourn for those lost ancestors, must finally face the horror and the grief on a personal level before they can let go of the ghost of slavery and move forward into the future with hope and integrity.

Toni Morrison combines fantasy and fabulation, allegory and a lyrical, song-like, poetic style, black oral legend and literary myth in an epic construction that is perhaps the most powerful chronicle of slave life ever written, while being at the same time an epic of the possibility of human regeneration that has universal significance. In her belief in the power of literary myth and legend and in its use to express the paradoxes and ambiguities of human identity she has clearly been influenced by Melville, Hawthorne and Faulkner<sup>18</sup>.

The other generally acknowledged black woman writer in the contemporary landscape is ALICE WALKER (b. 1944) who shares with Morrison both an epic gift and a redeeming vision of life.

An activist for the civil rights movement in the 1960s, she writes both poetry and fiction in which she explores sexual passion and personal relationships as well as social issues, particularly racism. She regards herself as "a womanist", a term she prefers because she considers it more inclusive than "feminist", views convincingly expressed in her essay *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Thus, like Toni Morrison she focuses her attention both on intraracial relationships describing the abuse of black women by black men and on interracial cruelty. Her fictional creations, although viewing violence from the angle of the victimized, never simplify matters. They strive for moral balance, emphasizing the idea that for achieving true freedom<sup>19</sup> spiritual regeneration is necessary even among those once oppressed.

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<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Bradbury. *The Modern American Novel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1992, p. 279.

<sup>19</sup> Martha J. McGowan: "Alice Walker" in Larry McCaffery (ed.) *Postmodern Fiction*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1986, p. 537.

Thus, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) depicts the violence that sheer struggle for survival causes in a Southern black family (Walker knows the South well, having been born into a sharecropper's family in Georgia). But gradually the protagonist comes to outgrow hatred and the isolation it entails. Walker's second novel *Meridian* (1976) is centred round the issues of social revolt and even revolution, evidencing the influence of Camus' thought. Her heroine, Meridian Hill, is a rebel but she cannot bring herself to kill, even in a cause that she regards as just, that of social revolution. Her commitment shifts to a search for values that cannot include revolutionary murder. In her moral evolution she comes to grasp the significance of responsibility for one's actions and to be willing to acknowledge personal failure and errors and to accept to atone for them.

Her collections of short stories *In Love and Trouble* (1973) and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981) also recurrently insist on black women's devalued status but also on their huge creative energies and possibilities of self-assertion. We may say that Walker's fundamental theme is human responsibility, to oneself and to the people around and ultimately to all life on the planet. Her collection of essays *Living by the Word* (1988) protests the rights of animals and exhorts the protection of the land; it affirms the divine in all things and one's duty to make efforts towards healing familial estrangement and toward eradicating racial and sexual oppression.

The novel that brought Walker public acclaim and a Pulitzer Prize is *The Color Purple* (1982), a remarkable book for character creation, for its rewriting of the tradition of the epistolary novel and last but not least for its unique gift for the authentic rendering of black folk's speech.

The novel puts forth an image for the hybridity of American women's writing. Here the female protagonist, Celie is making a quilt together with her step daughter-in-law Sophia out of some torn curtains and a yellow dress: "I work in a piece every chance I get. It is a nice pattern. Call Sister's choice".<sup>20</sup> This pattern is a combination of a nine-patch block and star; the name, Sister's Choice quilt pattern,

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<sup>20</sup> Alice Walker: *The Color Purple*, Pocket Books. New York, 1982, p. 61.

suggests both the kinship tradition in American women's quilting, and the symbolic meaning of the book, or even of Walker's writing: the sister's choice to stay with the black Southern community or to move into an interracial international world. As Elaine Showalter perceives, for Walker the pieced quilt is an emblem of a "universalist, interracial, and intertextual tradition"<sup>21</sup>. It brings together elements from American and African-American history as the Olinka men, the tribe where Celie's sister Nettie becomes a missionary, also make beautiful quilts.

*The Color Purple* itself is a narrative quilt piecing together elements of cultural inheritance. In her private code, the color purple stands for the "feminist of color" or "womanist", who is to feminist "as purple is to lavender"<sup>22</sup>. Purple is also the color of black royalty associated in the novel with Shug Avery and the end of the narrative finds Celie with a room of her own that is all red and purple. The quilt piecing technique is reflected in the structure of the book - alternating letters of Celie and Nettie incorporating pieces from historical and literary tradition, female and male predecessors (Jean Toomer's *Cave*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Alex Haley's *Roots*), black and white (Zora Neale Hurston as well as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Flannery O'Connor). As Elaine Showalter concludes "writing the womanist novel in the contemporary United States is an exercise of sister's choice within a complex cultural network"<sup>23</sup>.

The novel's intensely subjective form is given by its entirely epistolary pattern: almost half of the letters are written in Celie's voice over a thirty-year period and are mostly addressed to God, and the other half are written by Nettie, a missionary in Africa; but because Celie's husband hides them from his wife, these letters do not enter the novel until years after they are written, when Celie reads them all at once. Although Nettie's letters take the reader out of the South, to Africa and indirectly relate to history, the interesting fact about the

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<sup>21</sup> Elaine Showalter: *Sister's Choice. Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Alice Walker: *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovici, 1983, p. XII.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Showalter, *op. cit.*, p.20.

novel is that it does not contain a single date<sup>24</sup> which gives it a singularly atemporal quality and highlights its theme of personal fulfilment.

*The Color Purple* is therefore the story of two sisters who, in spite of a thirty-year lack of communication, manage to remain devoted to each other. Celie remains in a remote part of rural Georgia. Plain and uneducated, she marries a man who does not love her. She cooks and keeps house for him and tends his three children, works his fields, puts up with his always unwelcome sexual appetites, tolerates and in the end learns to love his long-time mistress Shug Avery, a good-looking blues singer whom he brings into the house. Celie's letters reveal her small universe of ordinary black people: her mother who dies young and leaves her to the uncontrolled lechery of Pa who has already raped her at the age of 14 and begotten two children by her whom he gives away (she only finds out quite late that Pa was actually her step father); her husband Albert (whom she calls "Mr" - until practically the end of the novel) who beats and abuses her until Shug intervenes; her stepson Harpo and his women, Sophia and Squeak. About her real father she learns that he was lynched by white men envious of his prosperous business, an incident that caused Celie's mother to become half-crazed.

Nettie on the other hand gets an education and then works to help a missionary and his wife (Samuel and Corinne) and goes with them to Africa. The respective couple have adopted Celie's two children, Adam and Olivia, and she helps with their raising. Nettie makes friends with a tribal woman, Catherine, and her daughter, and she does her best to prevent speculative land development from destroying the traditional tribal life of the Olinka. Nettie writes of a life of hardships and sacrifice serving others, offering an altruistic model along Christian lines. But in the end she returns home with a feeling of failure in her life's work. Shug is her opposite: she professes and practices a life of

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<sup>24</sup> We can however deduce a chronological order to the events. We are told that Cellie is 14 when she has her first baby, that she is about 20 when she marries and that Nettie is returning home after about 30 years, before World War II is quite over. But none of the historical events or personalities affect the two sisters' lives directly.

self-indulgence. She has abandoned her own children and never thought of the hardships of other black people. Although she is fond of Celie, whom she lives with, she never hesitates to abandon her temporarily in order to gratify a sexual whim. Shug teaches Celie the self-confidence given by economic independence (she starts making trousers for selling) and also to enjoy luxury and to live for the moment in a narrowly personal world. Shug's voice carries an authority that the others lack. Independent, attractive, efficient and powerful, Shug controls the lives of others and convinces Celie that she can make her own living. Shug has a sort of pantheistic, pagan God of her own, a projection of her tremendous zest for life and vitality:

"I believe God is everything...my first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed". This Gospel of Shug's includes a hint at the title:

"Listen, God love everything you love -and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

What it do when it is pissed off? I ast.

Oh, it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.

Yeah? I say.

Yeah, she say. It always making little surprises and springing them on us when us least expect.

You mean it want to be loved, just like the bible say.

Yes, Celie, she says. Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make fences and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> A. Walker: *The Color Purple*, pp. 202-204.

It is Shug's Gospel that Celie finally adopts as testifies her final apostrophe to God: "Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God."<sup>26</sup>

Shug not only makes Celie an independent well-off woman but also a loving one. When she returns from her fling, she finds that Celie and Albert, whom the latter can at last call by his name, have become friends, and they talk about how much they both love her.

Celie's happiness celebrates lovemaking and money making: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children"<sup>27</sup>, she writes her sister. Though the novel describes the evils of sexism and racism (a cause in point is Sofia's fate who has to serve a twelve-year sentence in prison for refusing to become the mayor's wife's maid and for brutally beating the respective lady, a sentence that is changed to living in the Mayor's house helping to raise his children, a form of twentieth-century slavery), the protagonist becomes a prosperous business woman, enjoying her private happiness and some black critics have found fault with this. Yet, the book's tremendous popular success (it sold 4 million copies and was also made into a film) is most likely due to its affirmative note that suggests a time of reconciliation and consolidation within the black community without proposing a plan or program.

The novel has also been praised from a "womanist" point of view. When her husband brings his mistress into their house for Celie to nurse back to health, instead of considering her a rival, as patriarchal codes dictate, Celie makes friends with Shug, which shows that "the novel ultimately negates (or deconstructs) the presumed value of the male-centered nuclear family and constructs the female-centered extended family as an alternative"<sup>28</sup>.

Alice Walker's next novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) is a more ambitious work judging both by its size and its complexity. It has

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 292.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 222.

<sup>28</sup> Claudia Tate: "Alice Walker" in Lea Baechler & A. Walton Litz (gen. eds.), *Modern American Women Writers*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1991, p. 518.

an intricate narrative structure that merges the stories of two couples (middle-class, multi-racial, living in Northern California and passing through mid-life crisis) with folk history, myth, fable and high fantasy (particularly related to an elderly black couple living in Baltimore). The two couples are Carlotta, a former college teacher, and Arveyda, a rock star, and Fanny and Suwelo, former colleagues of Carlotta, who, disillusioned, have left teaching. Carlotta has come to California as a refugee from Latin America with her mother Zedé.

We first meet Suwelo travelling by train to Baltimore to the funeral of his Uncle Rafe who has left him a substantial inheritance; in Baltimore he meets Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal, two remarkable old people with whom his uncle had lived in an original triangle and who play an important role in bringing about Suwelo's reform.

Fanny, Suwelo's ex-wife, and now friend and lover from time to time, is the granddaughter of Celie and the daughter of Olivia of *The Color Purple*. She is engaged in a quest for psychic balance which has taken her to Africa where for the first time she meets her father, Ola ( a revolutionary, playwright and minister of culture), her half sister Nzingha, also a dramatist, and a white woman (Mary Jane Briden, a playwright and educator) whom Ola married so that she would not be driven out when the black regime expelled the whites.

Contrary to *The Color Purple* with its unitary first person narrator putting forth Shug's controlling vision, *The Temple* is a dialogic novel where many voices interact often putting forth contradictory views and visions. The characters evolve, and when the novel ends, the quests are not finished.

The primary action of the novel takes place in the 1980s and the characters' past is given in conversations, stories, letters or diaries. For instance Suwelo tells Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal about his marriage with Fanny and his recent affair with Carlotta when Fanny was in Africa. We also get Zedé's account of her love affair with Carlotta's father, a young Indian, accounts of Fanny's therapy sessions, Arveyda's stories about his family, Olivia's story about her youth in Africa and her subsequent life in America.

The various characters' problems give a picture of contemporary ills in America. Fanny and Suwelo are hippies at heart and for them the civil rights movement has still topical significance for although it acted as an eye opener to sources of oppression actual social or women's oppression has not disappeared. The male characters, particularly Suwelo, undergo an evolution. As a professor of history he has been satisfied with putting some Afro-American accents to the history textbooks. But he comes to take into account now unconventional documents such as Fanny's letters from Africa, uncle Rafe's papers and annotated books, Lissie's oral, written or tape-recorded stories. The magic streak of this unusual novel runs through the fabulous stories Lissie tells Suwelo about her numerous reincarnations: in one life she was captured, sold as a slave, raped and after making an escape, captured again; in another life she lived a peaceful life with her ape-like cousins in the trees until their harmony was disrupted by violence; in one life she was a white man; in another life she was a lion living as the familiar or pet of women (familiar: a supernatural spirit often embodied in an animal and at the service of a person). Lissie recalls being now a victim and now a victimizer, vividly evoking the unspeakable cruelty and injustice of slavery. Impressed by her magic accounts, Suwelo decides to write an oral history when he returns to California. The nurturing mother figure plays an important role in the revelation he has about historical reality, about social and racial oppression.

"If you want to join the company of men" they are told, "you must do something about your mother, Meekly man says; "What must I do?" Teeth already chattering from the cold he will feel without the warmth of his best friend. Hah! "We want you to shut her up", he is told. "Don't pay any attention to anything she might suggest. In return, we will help you pretend that you created yourself. Just ignore her. Don't hear her. Let her weep, let her moan, let her starve". This is what they have done to their own mothers; it certainly is what they have done to Mother Africa".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Alice Walker: *The Temple of My Familiar*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, San Diego, New York, London, 1989, p. 197.

The picture of Suwelo's mother we get from his description of a snapshot gives us the very image of affirmation, goodness and love, all the life-supporting principles of the universe:

"a sharply sun-brown woman with a look of the most anticipation of good on her face. It was a face that expected everything in nature to open, unresistingly, to it. A face that said Yes not once but over and over again. It was one of those faces that have been sufficiently kissed as very young babies and small children. Though her hands were at her sides in the picture, one had the sense that they were raised and open, offering or returning an embrace".<sup>30</sup>

Fanny is terrified of the future. She is weary of the many marches she has participated in, she is tired of being an activist. Through the stories of Tanya, her only white childhood friend, she recovers repressed memories of racist incidents. Her travelling to Africa and her meeting her father, the most political of the characters in the book, are important elements in her recovery. She debates with him and her mother the question whether violence should be used in the struggle for justice. Ola's attitude is in favour of it, whereas Fanny's mother advocates forgiveness, as violence only brings about further violence.

Fanny is able to see either position as problematic. If she may accept that perhaps her father's choice is the right one for Africa, she cannot apply it to contemporary America as there is here "the maddening illusion of freedom without the substance"<sup>31</sup>. Her mother's attitude of non-violence and forgiveness seems equally untenable to her. Although she cannot decide in this problem she does make progress on the way towards inner harmony by confronting her own racism, fear of whites and violent impulses. In the end she decides to go back to Africa to produce a play she is writing with her sister, thus continuing her father's work in her own way.

Therefore without prescribing solutions, either personal or social, the novel affirms through its characters' evolution the possibility of individual growth that leads to balance, *sanity and harmony with oneself and the people around and, hopefully, to social progress.* For

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 277.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 305.

Claudia Tate, *The Temple* celebrates the possibility of happiness restored with the reconfiguration of the family as open, extended, and loving, and with the characterization of individuals who are not afraid to abandon social prescriptions for honest relationships.<sup>32</sup>

Alice Walker's works vibrates with broad human sympathy, with generous affirmative acceptance of life, with passionate support of the ecological problem of protecting the nurturing mother Earth, and although she writes mostly within the realist mode, she uses fabulation to give a touch of magic to her creation.

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<sup>32</sup> Claudia Tate, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

## XII. THE PARANOID PATTERN: THOMAS PYNCHON

We have seen that critics usually classify Th. Pynchon (b.1937) with William Gaddis, Don DeLillo and Joseph McElroy as forming the group of "the paranoids". It is a label that comes from the fact his novels hint at world-embracing or at least nation wide plots giving a subversive narrative version of history.

Thus, Pynchon's first novel *V.* (1963) plunges the reader into the labyrinthine quest of Herbert Stencil for the mysterious V. The book is structured around the antithetical pair of the main characters Herbert Stencil/Benny Profane and other deceptively simple sets of oppositions such as mind/body, animate/inanimate, control/surrender. We follow on the one hand the story of Benny Profane, "a schlemiel and human yo-yo"<sup>1</sup> a common man, a some time sailor, a permanent clown-comedian who drifts along in constant failure, often accompanied by his friends "The Whole Sick Crew", through the underground world of modern cities, sometimes literally underground as for instance when he embarks on the enterprise of hunting alligators in New York sewers. Profane's world is made up of things and when he is aware of signs he can hardly find any significance in them. Herbert Stencil is his opposite, "a quick-change artist", and a scholarly man whose thinking shows the influence of *The Education of Henry Adams* and Wittgenstein. Here is Pynchon's account of Stencil's quest, with its play on ambiguity and punning reminiscent of Joyce's style:

"As spread thighs are to the libertine, flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pynchon: *V.*, Bantam Books, Toronto, New York, London, 1968, p. 1

machinist, so was the letter V to young Stencil. He would dream perhaps once a week that it had all been a dream, and that now he'd awakened to discover the pursuit of V. was merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*.

But soon enough he'd wake up the second, real time, to make again the tiresome discovery that it hadn't really ever stopped being the same simple-minded, literal pursuit; V. ambiguously a beast of venery chased like the hart hind or hare, chased like an obsolete, or bizarre, or forbidden form of sexual delight. And clownish Stencil capering along behind her, bells ajingle waving a wooden, toy oxgoad. For no one's amusement, but his own"<sup>2</sup>.

He is trying to put together the clues his father, a former British diplomat, has left, clues that point to a great conspiracy behind modern history in which V. seems to have played an important part. Stencil lives in a world of signs that he wants to make fit his own scheme, but he fails, thus only increasing his fear of meaninglessness. The mysterious V. seems to have been an anarchist, a spy; she has mysteriously been in the shade of major historical events of the century and certain clues suggest that she may even have been Stencil's mother. Thus the hero's quest is not only for a pattern or sense in modern history but also for personal identity or parenthood<sup>3</sup>. Yet his quest brings him no nearer to any definite meaning. V's identities are plural and protean. They include a narcissistic stage, one of sexual perversion, old age, reification. In Stencil's final dream of her she appears as a plastic technological object. The elusive initial stands for the Virgin (pure spirituality), then for Venus (the tellurian) then for Void and then the possible meanings multiply in baroque excess practically cancelling each other (now Valetta, the capital of Malta, now the strange land of Vheissu a.s.o).

Therefore Stencil's quest for the meaning of the past yields no result either on the personal or the collective level, while Profane keeps

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Bradbury: *The Modern American Novel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1992, p. 220.

wandering in the present where people are changed into mechanical tourists into the loveless modern city, where as a consequence of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics everything is tending towards inertness. Pynchon's scientific formation (he studied first physics at Cornell University and then English; he then worked for Boeing) is apparent in the vast encyclopaedic knowledge that goes into his description of the modern technological universe (his novels have been styled as Science Fiction in the large acceptation of the word, that is fiction in which science plays the prominent part it does in the postmodern world). Stencil and Profane are opposite human hypostases. The former, as his name suggests<sup>4</sup> is the intellectual who wants to make out the "figure in the carpet" the over-all design. The latter is the man living in the contingency, who de-constructs the figure or just cannot make it out.

The strange allegoric names are specific to Pynchon's postmodern technique of drawing attention to the very fictionality of his creation. It is of course a mistake to judge Pynchon's characters by realistic canons as Tony Hilfer does when he passes strictures on *V.*: "The book is heavily populated by the shades of ideas, abounding with mechanical brides, running down in entropy, etc. *ad infinitum* but lacks affective power because the characters are not so much threatened as already subdued by these malevolent forces"<sup>5</sup>, that is entropy and dehumanization. Black humour, mock-heroic, irony and satire, that is the modes and tones Pynchon uses in this novel, do not normally result in "affective power".

Pynchon's narrative technique is picaresque with excessive accumulation of incident, to produce a frantic and irresistible comedy full of bawdiness and romance, satire and allegory and the typical black humour of the 1960s, a comedy which is at the same time a tough puzzle, a mystery story whose meaning is ever deferred, as well as a

<sup>4</sup> Stencil: thin sheet of metal with a design or letters cut out of it used for putting this design onto a surface when ink or paint is applied to it.

Names are usually a source of infinite humour with Pynchon: e.g. Mafia, Kharisma, Pig, Zeitsuss, McClintic Sphere, Eigenvalue, Demivolt.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Hilfer: *American Fiction Since 1940*, p. 147.

spectacular panorama of 20th century Western life and civilization. It is amazingly rich and learned in its historical content; it moves freely in space (from New York to Cairo, Florence to Alexandria, to Malta etc.) and in time (it opens in 1955 and then shifts backwards and forwards covering about 75 years; with the recurrent motif of the madness of wars and holocaust). It is interesting that the high level of referentiality works by its very excess towards deconstructing realistic illusion, not towards building it in this parodic book that is primarily about randomness and indeterminacy.

The intricate narrative pattern of *V.* was replaced by a simpler one and a much shorter fable in Pynchon's second novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). This is also the story of a quest, that of Oedipa Maas, a Californian whose legacy from her deceased lover, Pierce Inverarity, requires her to discover the true nature of her inheritance by following clues to another major conspiracy, a cabalistic organization called Tristero that is trying to undermine the official system of communication by an alternative mail system. The mystery story takes here the form of the detective story. As her name suggests, the protagonist wants to discover the truth and the question is whether she can correctly interpret the clues which she discovers as signs leading to the conspiracy or whether they have been planted there as part of the deliberate hoax planned by Pierce; there is also the possibility that her paranoid mental make-up makes her see relations where there is no real causal relationship. Hertzberg and McClelland remark in an essay on paranoia that *The Crying* is "a story whose plot is a plot - a fiction with the structure of paranoid delusion"<sup>6</sup>. They emphasize that for paranoids nothing is coincidental or accidental, but everything falls into a pattern, a unitary explication. The question Pynchon seems to raise is whether Oedipa is "uncovering a structurally paranoid world" or the reader is "participating in a clinically paranoid perceptual process?"<sup>7</sup>

Her name by its plural suggestions does not favour either interpretation (mas = more, Sp.; maas also suggests mass, a mystic transformation) but clearly shows that the protagonist is on a quest for

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<sup>6</sup> Hertzberg and McClelland: "Paranoia", *The Norton Reader*, 1975, p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op. cit.*, p. 149.

the truth. Oedipa is a descendant of the Puritan tradition that reads the world as a collection of symbols revelatory of God. The signs and clues she investigates include hermetic learning, children's songs, the stories of Thurn and Taxis and a Jacobean play, *The Courier's Tragedy* of which Pynchon gives a fine parody. When nearing the Californian city of San Narciso she has an epiphany of the American reality as corporate and rationalized:

"Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians. There were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the center of an odd religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken".<sup>8</sup>

We should like to underline the surrealistic quality of the landscape (she and Chevy seemed parked at the center of an odd religious moment) which may remind the reader of the writings of Nathanael West or Terry Southern.

Mendelson points out that Pynchon uses here Mircea Eliade's concept of "hierophany", the manifestation of the sacred and his title plays on the Pentecost (Acts 2) when the Holy Ghost descended on the elect to enable them to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterances", yet "every man heard them speak in his own language".

So on the literal level the *Crying of Lot 49* is the auctioneer's calling of the lot number of a collection of stamps that Oedipa thinks will provide an important clue to Tristero. But Mendelson explicates "the word *Pentecost* derives from the Greek for fiftieth". *The Crying of Lot 49* is the moment before a Pentecost revelation, the end of the

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<sup>8</sup> Th. Pynchon: *The Crying of Lot 49*. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1966 pp. 24-25.

period in which the miracle is in a state of potential, not yet manifest<sup>9</sup>. Pynchon not only withholds his revelation but as Tony Hilfer suggests, he implies that it might encode an epiphany of nothingness<sup>10</sup>. Yet, Oedipa is more optimistic and she believes in the existence of "the cry that *might* abolish the night", even if she has lost it. But she ends by waiting:

"The waiting above all; if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land (...) then at least, at the very least, waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew (...). For it is now like walking among the matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twined above. (...) Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none; either a transcendent meaning, or only the earth".<sup>11</sup>

Oedipa is waiting for the final revelation; will it be annihilation or alternatives? Whether Tristero exists or not, at the end of the novel Oedipa is waiting in a frightening room with people that seem threatening and malicious.

Nevertheless the picture of the all-controlling (almost fascist) corporate society that Pynchon depicts in the Californian Tristero seems as sinister an alternative as the power it attempts to undermine and overthrow. So the novel's ultimate implied message is negative and nihilistic, although the vague possibility of making some final meanings is hinted at in the abrupt and open ending.

Pynchon's next novel *Gravity Rainbow* (1973) has again ample scope and proportions and some critics consider it the postmodern *Ulysses*. Its rich themes, its erudite references and encyclopaedic information have generated a rich academic interpreting activity and it has brought its author the cult status, a status to which Pynchon's inaccessibility and complete avoidance of publicity since the 1960s has also made a contribution.

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<sup>9</sup> E. Mendelson: "The Sacred, the Profane and *The Crying of Lot 49*" in Mendelson (ed.), *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1978, p. 122, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Hilfer: *Op. cit.*, p.151.

<sup>11</sup> Th. Pynchon: *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 181.

Set in the War-torn Europe of 1944-1945 the novel has an extremely intricate narrative construction recounting plots and counterplots in which figure prominently Nazi Lieutenant Weissmann disguised as Captain Blicero, and the American Lieutenant Slothrop doing detective work while V-2 rockets fall on London. Slothrop is trying to elucidate a secret that seems to link the sites of his sexual exploits to V-2 rockets. He has been given childhood programming at Harvard by the German scientist Lazlo Jamf and in wartime he is attached to the British forces. The fact that when the V-2 rockets fall they descend exactly on the places of his sexual adventures relates phallus and rockets (love-making and death) and take us into the Science Fictional "cybernetic" explanation that Slothrop has been programmed much as the rockets have, anyway by the same Jamf who has designed the erectile targeting plastic for the V-2 (thus randomness and purpose are also linked). Slothrop's investigations make him encounter a huge cast of characters in search of war secrets (a missing rocket and total ballistic control), of lost African tribal community, even of the Holy Grail. The post-war occupation zone in Germany is a grim picture of defeat and chaos, with an apocalyptic note sounded by the dizzying technologies of the "peaceful" Cold War times.

The novel gives a complex, carefully researched picture of contemporary history in a non linear narrative that includes the filmic technique of cut-up non-sequitur images, music-hall songs evocative of the atmosphere of the times, funny scenes that employ the comic strip technique, as well as extended scientific lecture-like presentations. The characters in the huge cast are not built traditionally: they are generally just transient two-dimensional sketches. Slothrop himself disappears half way through the story. We are told that as plans went wrong, he is broken down and scattered-terms that suggest the value of man in these postmodern, post-humanist times. The excess of reference makes a central vision problematic-indeed "only a paranoid could assemble" the farrago of the facts "into a unified system" and "no single interpretive synthesis can possibly account for the cornucopia of facts, language-games and scenes of joy and suffering"<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Khachig Tololyan: "Thomas Pynchon" in Larry McCaffery (ed.), *Postmodern Fiction*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1986, p. 491.

Nevertheless the reader is left with an over-all scaring picture of "an increasingly rationalized world fatally attracted to the void."<sup>13</sup> There are, as critics have pointed out, moments of grace, but Scott Sanders maintains, the "few interludes of tenderness and compassion" are "so fragile and evanescent that they only accentuate by contrast the general drift towards brutality". Sanders also finds that Pynchon, even if unintentionally, reinforces existent American power relations as his conspiratorial and paranoid imagination "tends to make our social organization appear even more mysterious than it is, tends to *mystify* the relations of power which in fact govern our society".<sup>14</sup>

But this "global novel", this "contemporary work of summation"<sup>15</sup> can also be read at a higher level of generalization. Malcolm Bradbury considers the fact that characters and readers share a common bafflement in the face of incomprehensible cosmic processes and unstructured boundaries with either too much meaning or none, has also evidently "a gnostic aim, a desire to produce a sense of sacred mystery".<sup>16</sup>

After the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon came to be regarded by many critics as "the most significant novelist in English since James Joyce"<sup>17</sup> He only published a new book *Vineland* in 1990, after the same (planned or coincidental?) interval as between Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. Compared with its predecessor which took 20th century Western civilization as its subject with Hitler, Albert Speer and Werner von Braun<sup>18</sup> as the unsurpassed villains of all times, *Vineland* is a much less ambitious work which illustrates what we have found to be the decade's specific, possibly merging, tendencies: attenuated postmodernism and a more experimental realism. Because,

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<sup>13</sup> Tony Hilfer, *Op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Sanders: "Pynchon's Paranoid History" in *Mindful Pleasures*, 1980, pp. 149, 157-8.

<sup>15</sup> Malcolm Bradbury: *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> James McManus: "Pynchon's Return", *Chicago Tribune-Books*, January 14, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> A. Speer - German architect and Nazi administrator; W. von Braun - German born, American engineer, division of NASA space travel.

like Barth's novels of the 1980s, it testifies to this tendency so convincingly we are likewise going to dwell extensively on it. The novel's scope is smaller: just contemporary America since the 1960s, with its characteristic TV triumph and youth culture. The story begins and ends in the enchanted redwood forest of Vineland County<sup>19</sup>, where live a mythical community of loggers, aging hippies, marijuana growers and addicts whose suicidal life style is implied in the name of the neighbouring village of Thanatoids, people who are not quite dead but striving hard to become so.

It is again the story of a quest - that of Prairie Wheeler's search for her mother. Her father, Zoyd Wheeler, is a new version of Pynchon's clown-comedian . He is a part-time key-board player, handyman (he works local lawn-care service for the Marquis de Sod) and marijuana farmer who supplements his precarious earnings performing periodical mentally-deranged acts for which he gets federal mental disability checks.

When one summer morning of 1984 Zoyd is about to leap through the window of the Cucumber Lounge for the attendant TV crew, Zoyd meets his long-time pursuer DEA field agent Hector Zuniga who has been trying to get Zoyd turn informer ever since the 1960s. Hector has just time to warn Zoyd that Frenesi, his ex-wife, has gone underground after being dropped from the Federal Witness Protection Program because of Reagan Administration cutbacks, details that build up an exciting atmosphere of political thriller. Pynchon's satirical teeth start biting when we are told that Hector has run away from NEVER (National Endowment for Video Education and Rehabilitation) an institution that studies and treats "Tubal abuse and other video-related disorders"<sup>20</sup>. Before he is caught, he tells Zoyd that his ex-wife is being hunted by a Justice Department strike force headed by Broch Vond, a federal prosecutor, her one time pursuer and then lover. Vond is

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<sup>19</sup> The historical Vineland is set to be the Pre-Columbus America that Leif Ericson discovered. In Pynchon's novel it is however a fictional county located up in Northern California, near Eureka and Arcata but whose one half of the interior has symbolically never been surveyed (see *Vineland*, Penguin Books, 1991, p. 4).

<sup>20</sup> *Vineland*, p. 33.

described in grim terms that make him a far-right type of oppressor: he is also the head of PREP (Political Reeducation Program), a zero-tolerance organization where he set up a reeducation camp with the aim of turning demonstrators into FBI informers with the bait that they can keep going to college for ever. Vond is likewise at the head of CAMP (Campaign Against Marijuana Production), a name that again has Fascist echoes.

Therefore we have the typically Pynchonesque situation where an evil, powerful and well organized enemy sows "the merciless spores of paranoia"<sup>21</sup> among a precarious muddled-thinking group of drifting souls, almost lost in a threatening world, trying half-heartedly to make sense (although they know that sense and reason are the weapons of the adversary, that is rationalized society) of what is happening to them.

Prairie, Zoyd's 14-year-old daughter, starts fleeing from their prosecutor after the Wheelers' house is seized by Vond. At the same time she sets out on a quest for her identity searching for her mother and trying to find out details about her birth. Like Zoyd, Prairie has the sense that something is missing from her life, being unconsciously dissatisfied with their ambience of stoned wackiness. The sudden swoop of the State (very much of a police-state) down on her and her father is an act of total dispossession (their house is taken over on the alleged accusation that the CAMP people have found a bloc of pressed marijuana there, an object they have planted there themselves) that suddenly resolves her to try and open a door into the secret and mysterious past that has been her, and her father's, obsession. Her mother, Frenesi Gates, an exceptionally attractive woman with blue eyes and unforgettable legs is a third generation leftist guerrilla documentary film maker who abandoned her family and tracelessly disappeared when her daughter was two.

In her search, Prairie meets Darryl Louise (DL) Chastain, a female Ninja and an old friend of Frenesi's, who takes her to the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives, a California retreat for devotees of the Orient, a commune of women militantly opposed to male militarism.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

There she hears Darryl Louise's reminiscences and learns about her mother's affair with Vond, her succumbing to sexual and then moral betrayal by turning into a Government informer, therefore a double or even triple agent. The story of the twisted relationship triggered by helpless mutual attraction of this arrogantly beautiful sixties radical and a ruthless totalitarian becomes an anatomy of betrayal. For Terence Rafferty this section of the narrative is a "frame-by-frame analysis of the moment when everything turned, when the long troubled sleep, the death in the soul really began, that initiated the subsequent Reaganite age".<sup>22</sup>

When Prairie finally finds her, Frenesi is married to a second husband, has a son and is now even more vulnerable, as her Justice Department job has been cut from the Reagan budget.

The plot appears as a series of satirical variations on the motif of betrayal, revenge, dislocation and disguise which turn the book into "an intoxicated satire of thrillers and conspiracies".<sup>23</sup> Role-playing and the quid-pro-quo is recurrently used as a slap-stick device adopted with great comic and satiric effect: for instance, the scene when Billy Barf and his band the Vomitones play at an Italian wedding secretly substituting for a famous Italian singer, and his wig goes askew to reveal a turquoise crop.

The story is told in a non-sequitur way, with multiple (sometimes exhausting) shifts of perspective, with many digressions that iconically imitate Zoyd's jazz improvisations starting with the motif of the triangle: Zoyd - the faithful hip, Brock - the Controlling authority and Frenesi - the permanent potential betrayer. Frenesi and Prairie (with her visceral reaction in the ambiguous ending) do not paint a very complimentary image of women, in contrast to clownish Zoyd's more stable and consistent responses. The image is to a certain extent counterbalanced by the reliable character of DL.

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<sup>22</sup> Terence Rafferty: "Long Last" in *The New Yorker*, vol. LXVI, no. 1, February 19, 1990, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Rhoda Koenig: "Worth the Wait" in *New York Magazine*, vol. 23, no. 4, January 29, 1990, p. 66.

In typically postmodernist fashion, the preposterous plot as a rule paradoxically eschews the law of cause and effect, yet it has an oddly convincing effect. The reader senses the author's nostalgic yearning for the vanished atmosphere and values of the 1960s, whereas his frequent burlesque of various aspects of contemporary American civilization (the specifically Pynchonesque obsession with paranoia, TV, corporate greed, film, narcotics, state control) amount to a wholesale black comedic assault of what Pynchon presents as the Republican ideal: "a timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked into the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extragood behaviour, maybe a cookie".<sup>24</sup>

The black comedy mingles with bits of very different discourses. For instance when presenting Frenesi's family, the narrative sounds like the history of the West Coast labour movement, which makes the attitude of Frenesi's generation look very much like the behaviour of pampered children (the name of Frenesi's film group is "Death to the Pig Nihilist Film Kollektive"<sup>25</sup> based in Berkeley, and her College on the Surf sets up "The People's Republic of Rock"<sup>26</sup>).

The story of Frenesi and Brock is embedded at the heart of the novel, revealing to Prairie her legacy which will be equivocally hinted at in the dangling loose ending. Apparently hating each other at their first fateful encounter, they end up in bed together. The evolution of their relationship is contrastingly paralleled by that of the good couple in the novel: DL and Takeshi Fumioto, a speed freak who runs a "karmic adjustment" service for the Thanatoid community.

Their first encounter prefigures that of Frenesi and Vond in an extremely funny parody of romantic comedy. DL has been hired by a Mafioso to terminate Vond and is waiting for him disguised as Frenesi even to the last detail of contact lenses blue eyes. The contact lenses dim her sight so she fails to notice that the man to whom she is

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<sup>24</sup> *Vineland*, p. 221-22.

<sup>25</sup> *Vineland*, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

administering the Vibrating Palm (or Ninja Death Touch, which has a one year retarded effect) in the midst of intercourse, is not the evil man she hates, but the harmless Takeshi who has been set out by Vond so that he will be mistaken by the Mafioso's men for himself. When they discover the mistake, they manage to reverse the effect with the help of DL's life contract to Takeshi to atone for her guilt and the high technology of Sister Rochelle's pride and joy - the Puncutron Machine<sup>27</sup>. This amusing machine is the Science Fiction element of the Pynchon stock-in-trade. This couple are so likeable, their life is all so good and happy that the reader realizes Pynchon is drawing them in a parody of a pulp-fiction romance, "an old-movie way"<sup>28</sup> that is a counterfoil to the realistic course of the Frenesi-Vond affair.

The Frenesi-Vond relationship bears the weight of an allegory, the two characters embodying the spirit of two facets of America which Pynchon displays with the pyrotechnics of many narrative weapons (conventions and clichés) that he parodically plays against each other achieving the typically postmodern effect of deferred meaning of multiple voices. Both Frenesi and Vond are characters that belong to the two dimensional world of fairy-tale or moral fable.

Vond, the archetypal charismatic<sup>29</sup> villain that seems to bear an enchanted life<sup>30</sup> is however just a pawn manipulated by the impersonal powers of historical forces<sup>31</sup>.

Frenesi is the embodiment of the collective beliefs and wishes of her counter-culture generation so well expressed in the comments of her films: "What viewer could believe in the war, the system, the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>29</sup> Vond is described "so thoroughly personable that maintaing even dislike for the Prosecutor was always a chore, even for the criminal degenerates he helped put away. He projected a charm that appeared to transcend politics" (p. 275).

<sup>30</sup> Roscoe speaks about "Brook's supernatural luck, the aura that everybody, winners and losers, picked up, which Roscoe swore under oath he'd observed during the pot-plantation run-in as a pure white light surrounding Brock entirely, which Roscoe believed would keep him, then and after, immune to gun fire" (p. 272).

<sup>31</sup> We are told that "no one of those among whom he wished to belong would ever regard him as other than a thug whose services have been hired" (p. 276).

countless lies about American freedom, looking into those mug shots of the bought and sold?"<sup>32</sup>

But Frenesi's beliefs are presented in unmistakably parodic terms as can be seen in her "Death to the Pig Nihilist Film Kollektive's" manifesto: "A camera is a gun. An image taken is a death performed. Images put together are the substance of an after life and a Judgement. We will be architects of a just Hell for the fascist pig. Death to everything that oinks"<sup>33</sup>.

Frenesi's boisterous beliefs stand in sharp contrast to her actions and particularly to those of her parents' generation who represent political radicalism of the late 1940s and '50s. A revival of this alternative America repressed by the media seems to be one of the "stories" Pynchon recuperates. On the other hand the Frenesi-Brock affair dramatizes Pynchon's socio-political view, which Mendelson terms as a "historical myth", that the 1960s conflict between the revolutionary radicals and the repressive authorities concealed a mutual attraction or the love/hatred relationship of children and parents: Brock Vond has had the "genius...to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order, but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story"<sup>34</sup> Brock saw the deep (...) need only to stay children for ever, safe inside some extended national Family"<sup>35</sup>.

What happens in the novel confirms Vond's intuition. Brock is indeed a charming seducer, and Frenesi easily succumbs not only to his physical charm but to his persuasion to be "a co-operative person" and spread distrust among the leaders of her campus rebellion, then to be instrumental in murderous violence, and finally to make a career as an agent in sting operations, under the federal witness-protection program. Her feelings and motives are not the object of Pynchon's

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<sup>32</sup> *Vineland*, p. 195

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 288.

<sup>35</sup> As we have seen postmodernists believe in fictionalizing reality, in "storifying" history. Pynchon too shows "everybody remembering a different story" of the last fifteen years of the time encompassed in the novel.

interest. She just calmly admits to being "a hard case and cold bitch"<sup>36</sup>. If Frenesi's first name suggests her youthful enthusiasm, her second name "Gates" symbolically suggests that she has been the way to access of a new mentality. She allegorically illustrates the willing transformation of the self-righteous revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1960s into a merely pragmatic acquisitiveness of the 1970s and 1980s. This mentality is satirically represented in Flash, Frenesi's second husband and partner: "Why should we lurk around like we're ashamed of what we do?". "Everybody's a squealer. We're in the Info Revolution here. Anytime you use a credit card you're telling the Man more than you need to"<sup>37</sup>.

Edward Mendelson sees *Vineland's* account of the past 25 years as depending on the imaginative force of "the historical myth" we have mentioned, not on the analytic power of historical argument. Pynchon's mythical history does not record power and domination of the repressed but "longings and fulfilments that occur on a vast archetypal scale"<sup>38</sup>.

Brock Vond is the archetypal villain of the authoritarian militarist type and his CAMP operation (an action in the federal "War on Drugs") looks very much like a military occupation of Vineland, in which North California rejoined "the third world"<sup>39</sup>. Later on when the CAMP search-and-destroy missions come over on a daily schedule, the Thanatoid community of Shady Creek live in an atmosphere of civic crisis, hating "the heartless power of the scabland garrison state the green free America of their childhoods"<sup>40</sup> had turned into.

In the year of Reagan's reelection the targets of the President's programme as perceived by the Vineland dwellers are to "dismantle the New Deal, reverse the effects of the World War II, restore fascism at home and around the world"<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> *Vineland*, p. 349.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> E. Mendelson: "Levity's Rainbow" in *The New Republic*, vol. 203, no. 2 & 3, July 9 & 16, 1990, pp. 40-6.

<sup>39</sup> *Vineland*, p. 221. The troops are even led by "the notorious Karl Bopp, former Nazi Luftwaffe officer and subsequently useful American citizen".

<sup>40</sup> *Vineland*, p. 314.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

Although some critics read the CAMP operations as illustrating the process of endocolonization<sup>42</sup>, that is colonization of one's own population, it would be unfair to Pynchon's sense of black humour to miss the satirical edge in Zoyd's grim depiction of future America: "...Cause soon they're gonna be coming after everything, not just drugs, but beer, cigarettes, sugar, fat, you name it, anything that could remotely please any of your senses, because they need to control all that. And they will"<sup>43</sup>.

It is clear that we have Zoyd's perspective here and the type of state control manifest in a war against drugs can hardly be taken seriously as a comparison with that of a totalitarian state whereof we have had the direct experience.

The means of control that Pynchon most fiercely satirizes is the media, particularly television, "the Tube" which is perceived as one of the main tools of structuring people's consciousness. It is the media and television that enable the Reagan administration to give drug abuse the heroic proportions of "Number one domestic issue", the great cause of "war-on-drugs" that Pynchon describes in mock-heroic terms.

We have seen that Zuniga is presented as a TV addict undergoing treatment for Tubal abuse. The grim hilarious Hymn of the House of the TV Detox Center clearly makes the satiric point that „the Tube" is an addictive whose toxic effect is like that of a mind-altering chemical:

## THE TUBE

Oh...the ...Tube!  
It's poi-soning your brain!  
Oh, yes...  
It's dri-ving you, insane!  
It's shoot-ing rays, at you,  
Over ev'ry-thing ya do,  
It sees you in your bedroom,  
And - in th' toi-let too!

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Maltby: *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1991, p. 175.

<sup>43</sup> *Fineland*, p. 313.

You Hoo! The

Tube...

It knows, your ev'ry thought,  
Hey, Boob, you thought you would -  
T'n' get caught -  
While you were sittin' there, starin' at "The  
Brandy Bunch,"  
Big fat computer jus'  
Had you for lunch, now Th'  
Tube -  
It's plugged right in, to you.

This hymn portrays television's ever deeper invasion and penetration of the private space of the home and of man's interior mental space until the human being has been practically transformed into an electronic terminal.

The therapy at NEVER (a self-defeating acronym) fails as the viewers are "irrevocably ...brain defective"<sup>44</sup>. At times however the tubal satire takes on the sinister overtones of the Orwellian nightmare. At a certain moment Zuniga wonders if the Tube might suddenly "stop showing pictures and instead announce, ...From now on, I'm watching you."<sup>45</sup>.

The way television fabricates "reality" is shown at work in the opening scene of Zoyd's transfenestration where what has been carefully staged is presented as actual reality recorded on the hint of a "mystery caller"<sup>46</sup>. Thus a spectacle has been substituted for genuine information catering in a feed-back process to the viewers' increasing appetite for spectacular events (this obsessive focus on disasters is also exposed in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*).

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 337. The whole Zuniga episode recalls to mind Jerzy Kosinski's masterful satire in *Being There*

<sup>45</sup> *Vineland*, p. 340

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

Television is shown, along with money and material advantages, as having absolute corrupting power. Prairie's boyfriend sees it as one of the main causes why the political radicalism of the sixties failed: "You believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it but sure you didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el *deado meato*, just like th' Indians, sold it to your real enemies".<sup>47</sup>

In his recreation of the sixties Pynchon emphasizes the powerful utopianism of the times, a utopian spirit that Maltby considers to be permeating the end of the novel with its magic realistic displacement of contemporary reality to the world of Yurok myth<sup>48</sup>. The episode involves the end of Brock Vond, the Federal Persecutor who embodies state-organized repression. After his fairy-tale villainous attempt to abduct Prairie fails because Reagan had officially ended the "exercise" known as REX 84,<sup>49</sup> Vond tries to pursue his intention independently but fails again as his car mysteriously breaks down and he gets lost in the Vineland forest at night, in a landscape that seems to become the eerie Yurok land of the dead evoked by the legend told by the two-truck drivers that have come to take Vond across the river.

There is no doubt that *Vineland* imaginatively grips the possible existence of that "alternative America. embodied in pre-Columbian times, in Yurok myth, in the ideals of the Left movement of the 1950s and the '60s: non-violence, harmony with nature, spirituality and faith in people's conscience and their loving friendly nature. But although critics agree that it is the clearest novel Pynchon has yet produced, the various readings of the novel are widely different, even divergent. This is only to be expected as Pynchon is a postmodernist dialogic writer and in the closing pages (and not only there) his many voices seem to strike a "moving note of sweet inconclusion"<sup>50</sup>.

If Maltby reads *Vineland* as Pynchon's ruthless denunciation of the Nixon-Reagan "garrison state" and its vocation to imagine the

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 373.

<sup>48</sup> P. Maltby: *Op. cit.*, pp 181-184/

<sup>49</sup> *Vineland*, p. 376.

<sup>50</sup> Brad Leithauer: "Any Place You Want" in *The New York Review of Books*. vol. XXXVII, no. 4, March 15, 1990, p. 9.

utopian recovery of America's aboriginal home, Edward Mendelson sees the novel as calculated to educate the reader away from the nostalgia that the book itself evokes. He regards the contrast between the admiringly nostalgic tone of the story and the harsh judgement of its content as *Vineland's* most deliberately unsettling quality<sup>51</sup>.

As Frenesi Gates's story gradually emerges it becomes clear that the nostalgia can be maintained only without a close scrutiny of the personalities involved in the events.

The contrast between tone and substance that Pynchon uses in the portrayal of Frenesi is likely meant to be extended to the ethos of the epoch she represents. All the main characters in the book spend their time adoring her and actively trying to find her. The reader is caught up in the general admiration only to find out that her exceptional features are her shapely legs and her remarkable blue eyes with an all purpose enigmatic gaze that hides no substance. The process of moral discovery that Pynchon generates between tone and substance in this novel is likened by Edward Mendelson to the subtly dosed and nuanced moral revelations of the late Jamesian novels.

As regards Vond the contrast builds between the even more melodramatic rhetoric that casts him in the archvillain's role and the logic of the plot that features him as a partner in a dance of mutual courtship. Thus Pynchon tries to surprise, even to shock the readers by revealing with apparent approval their own view that their unhappiness has resulted from the actions of the others and then quietly making them see that the actions that most afflict them are their own. It is a moral view that emerges quite clearly in the end. The 1960s radicals (the Zoyd Wheelers that Pynchon describes with affectionate sentimentality) never even got near the satisfaction of defeating Vond whose ultimate defeat comes from his own side: Reagan's cutting Vond's budget interrupts his possible abduction and appropriation of *Prairie*.

After Frenesi's ugly betrayal there can be no complete return of recovery as the anticlimactic scene of Wheeler's encounter with

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<sup>51</sup> E. Mendelson: *Op. cit.*, pp. 41-46.

her demonstrates. The future is that of Prairie who has a double heredity: love, faithfulness and warmth on Wheeler's side; but on her mother's side, the heritage includes betrayal and even murderous violence. In the case of Frenesi's behaviour too, heredity has had a say as we are told that her mother had always liked symbols of authority, particularly uniformed men. The final sentence of the book may look like a sentimental celebration of continuity, home and love until we notice an appositive reference to death which, although it remains ambiguous (whose death?), makes renewal include a sacrificial or predatory act.

The last fifteen pages of the book contain a fugue-like succession of scenes and images that replay and conclude the main concerns and themes of the book. But as they do not seem to harmonize logically, the critics either emphasize one to the detriment of other or underline the indeterminacy of the ending.

We think that the typically multi-voiced postmodernist novel we have been reading is metaphorically described towards the end of the book when Vond gets to the sinister river beyond which extends the mysterious realm where the two drivers (Vat and Blood) take him: "And soon ahead, came the sound of the river, echoing, harsh, ceaseless and beyond it the drumming, the voices, not chanting together but remembering speculating, arguing, telling tales..."<sup>52</sup> This "third world" seems to us to be the realm of art, with its ever speaking voices of deathless human shapes telling stories, presided over by a black humorous surrogate of the Author: "the foreign magician and his blond tomato assistant, out stealing a couple of innocent hours away from the harsh demands of their Act, with its *imitations* of defiance, nightly and matinees, of gravity and death"<sup>53</sup>.

The notion of imitation makes the reference to art quite likely and "gravity" looks very much like Bynchon's signature.

Pynchon's style relies heavily on playing with words and on punning, on unusual parodic names, on unexpected combinations of words. He pursues dissonance over euphony, roughness over

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<sup>52</sup> *Vineland*, p. 379.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 383-4

smoothness, and often confusion over lucidity. He adopts in his own expository prose some of the awkward contractions employed by his characters, has a penchant for breaking phrases unidiomatically, relies almost exclusively on the comma, all this leading to a prose of jumpy, tumbling disclosures. This cultivation of disharmony ranges him with J. D. Salinger and Flannery O'Connor, but he does it to excess.

*Vineland* is both an exuberant work and a troubling one, representative both of the humour and playful punning of postmodernism, of its parodic and satiric vein and its more political stance but also illustrating to a certain extent the decades' inclination towards a recuperation of humanism and mimesis.

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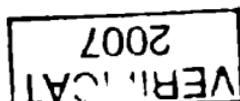
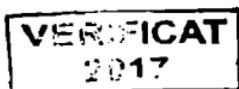
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