MAXIMALIST TRAITS IN ZADIE SMITH'S NOVELS

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Abstract : This paper attempts to frame Zadie Smith's work under the genre of maximalism by identifying the maximalist traits – length, encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narrratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemioticity, ethical commitment – in her four novels.

Keywords: contemporary novel, maximalism, encyclopaedism, polyphony, intertextuality

In *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* (2014), Stefano Ercolino focuses on the novelistic genre, attempting at defining the new aesthetically hybrid genre of the contemporary novel which emerged in the United States of America in the 1970s and spread to Europe at the beginning of the 2000s. He argues that the maximalist novel is characterized by length, complexity, digressive style, excessive imagery and phraseology. To support his opinion, the author author analyses the powerful symbolic identity of the maximalist novel and explores its traits, such as: length, encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narrative omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemiocity, ethical commitment, in a number of seven contemporary novels, Zadie Smith included. Below, we try to identify the above mentioned traits in the authoress' novels.

A lengthy novel is, at the same time, a possibility and an indispensability for experimental fiction as long as the new genre emerges from the quantum of details of the text, because it offers the space for a diversity of procedures/rhetorical devices – encyclopaedism, chorality, digressions, a multitude of narrative threads. In the case of *White Teeth*, in its 2001 Penguin Books edition is five hundred and forty-one pages long, which, according to Stefano Ercolino[1], ranks it among the shortest books of the genre. Similarly, *The Autograph* is four hundred and twenty pages long, *On Beauty* is four hundred and forty one-page long, while *NW* is by far the shortest of them having only three hundred and thirteen pages.

Encyclopedic narrative refers to a specific modality of representation, its goal of being a "synthetic representation of the *totality* of the real"[2], thus responding to the novelists' desire of conceptually mastering the more and more complex and elusive reality, of representing it and the fields of knowledge necessary for its synthesis. The encyclopaedic quality of a narrative is proven by "an ample synechdoche of knowledge produced by a given culture with reference to a science or a technology; an account of arts other than literature; a sampling of

[1] Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*, translated by Albert Sbragia, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 19. In the New York Vintage edition which Ercolino refers to, *White Teeth* is 448-page long.
[2] *Idem*, p. 31.

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genres and styles; a history of language; cultural centrality"[3] as Stefano Ercolino maintains. And in this respect *White Teeth* offers a vast representation of the multiple social, cultural and historical realities: characters belong to different social classes (white-middle class, poor immigrants class), come from varied cultural spaces (England, Jamaica, Bangladesh) and have different religious beliefs (Catholic, Mosaic, Muslim, Jehova's Witness), as well as a reference to genetic engineering in very specific terms and very detailed:

A two-week-old Future Mouse@ is to be put on display at the Perret Institute in London on 31 December 1992. There it will remain on public display until 31 December 1999. This mouse is genetically normal except for a select group of novel genes that are added to the genome. A DNA clone of these genes is' injected into the fertilized mouse egg, thus linking them to the chromosomal DNA in the zygote, which is subsequently inherited by cells of the resulting embryo. Before injection into the germ line, these genes are custom-designed so they can be 'turned on' and expressed only in specific mouse tissue and along a predictable timetable. […] At the end of the first year the SV4O large-T oncogene, which the mouse carries in the insulin-producing pancreas cells, will express itself in pancreatic carcinomas that will continue to develop at a retarded pace throughout its life. At the end of the second year the H-ras oncogene in its skin cells will begin to express itself in multiple benign papillomas that an observer will be able to see clearly three months later with the naked eye. Four years into the experiment the mouse will begin to lose its ability to produce melanin by means of a slow, programmed eradication of the enzyme tyrosinase. At this point the mouse will lose all its pigmentation and become albino: a white mouse. If no external or unexpected interference occurs, the mouse will live until 31 December 1999, dying within the month after that date.[4]

Also, the novel contains detailed information from other domains of knowledge, such as botany:

Thrips, common name for minute insects that feed on a wide range of plants, enjoying in particular the warm atmosphere required for an indoor or exotic plant. Most species are no more than 1.5 mm (0.06 inch) long as adults; some are wingless, but others have two pairs of short wings fringed with hairs. Both adults and nymphs have sucking, piercing mouth parts. Although thrips pollinate some plants and also eat some insect pests, they are both boon and bane for the modern gardener and are generally considered pests to be controlled with insecticides, such as Lindex. Scientific classification: thrips make up the order Thysanoptera.[5]

The Autograph Man offers a two-continent ample representation of the multi-faceted social and religious environment – Jews, black people, black Jews, Caucasians, Judaism, Buddhism, *Kabbalah, Zohar: The Book of Enlightment*, Zen philosophy, Londoner and New

[3] *Idem*, p. 40.
[4] Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2012, p. .
[5] *Idem*, p. 238.

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Yorker rabbis (Ultra-Progressive and Orthodox), Goyishness and Jewishness – and cultural environment – Autographicana, Hollywood, films, TV shows, books, letters, photos, autobiographies, wrestling matches, sportsmen, actors, actresses, singers, dancers, musicians, memorabilia, the entertainment industry – and even historic one with all the references made to the Russian Revolution (Kitty Alexander's Russian ancestry, her "European trinkets saved from fire and theft and revolution") and the Second World War (all the things collected, sold and bought belonging to real historic characters). Likewise, the novel displays detailed information from Judaism, Buddhism and Zen philosophy, or from Hebrew language, an example being the alphabet:

Twenty-two Foundation Letters

He ordained them, He hewed them, He combined them, He weighed them, He interchanged them. And He created with them the whole creation and everything to be created in the future.

ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א
VAV	HE	DALET	GIMEL	BET	ALEPH
ל	כ	י	ט	ח	ז
LAMED	KAF	YOD	TET	HET	ZAYIN
צ	פ	ע	ס	נ	מ
TSADI	PE	AYIN	SAMECH	NUN	MEM

[6]

In the case of *On Beauty*'s encyclopaedism, besides a vast representation of the multiple social, cultural and historical realities (the characters belong to different social classes, the poor living on the streets and the middle class, coming from varied cultural spaces, they are Afro-Caribbean of Trinidadian, British, African-American), one might remark the musical knowledge regarding Mozart's Requiem and the history of arts; yet, Zadie Smith admits to have boned up on Rembrandt and his paintings and she proves it:

The first painting is *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1658. Katie has thought about the vigorous impasto that works counter-intuitively to create that somnolent, dreamy atmosphere. She makes notes on the angel's resemblance to Rembrandt's pretty son, Titus; on the perspective lines that create the illusions of frozen movement; on the personal dynamic between the angel and Jacob.[7]

NW offers a comprehensible image of the British multiracial society: again, characters belong to different social classes – middle-class, low-class, working class, unemployed, white people, black people, mixed-race people, a successful lawyer, a banker, a hairdresser, a

[6] Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man*, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 95.
[7] Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*, Penguin Books, 2005, p. 250.

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former addict, a black Frenchman from Marseille of African descent, a handsome young man of Italian and Trinidadian origin, a woman coming from an English-Irish family, therefore the condition of encyclopedism is met.

Another maximalist trait, chorality refers to the plurality of voices, none of them being the dominant one. In the novels circumscribed to the genre, narration is fragmented, i.e., fragments of different lengths, separated one from the other by typographical spacing (signaling a change of scene, variation in point of view, transition in time/space, introduction/recommencement of a narrative thread, introducing a new character) co-exist with the traditional partition into parts and chapters.

White Teeth comprises twenty fragmented chapters, the first seventeen grouped into four larger sections bearing the names of some of the protagonists, as well as the years marking important life events, and beginning with an epigraph: "Archie 1974, 1945", "Samad 1984, 1857", "Irie 1990, 1907" and "Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999". Each narrative fragment is assigned to a certain character or a single story, thus, according to Ercolino, resulting in a collectivity of characters and a plurality of stories.

The Autograph Man is divided into four parts, a prologue, "Zohar. The Wrestling Match", two books, "Mountjoy. The Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem" and "Roebling Heights. The Zen of Alex-Li Tandem", respectively, and an epilogue, "Kaddish". Each book is, in turn, divided into ten chapters, named as follows: the chapters of the first book after the *Ten Sefirot*[8]: *Sechinah, Yesid, Netsah, Hod, Tif'eret, Hesed, Gevurah, Hochmah, Binah, Keter*, and the chapters of the second book, after the Zen tradition, *In Search of the Bull, Discovery of the Footprints, Perceiving the Bull, Catching the Bull, Taming the Bull, Riding the Bull Home, The Bull Transcended, Both Bull and Self Transcended, Reaching the Source, and Return to Society*. Each chapter is divided into numbered subchapters of various lengths. The first ten chapters also bear subtitles and have each a digest (reminding, for instance, of George Sand's *Lélia):*

TE N / K e t e r

Crown • Jimmy's Antiques • Highballs with Lola-Lola • Conspiracy theories • The Youth Brand • Zen Radio • Flying into nothing • Zen Casablanca • The collector saves [9]

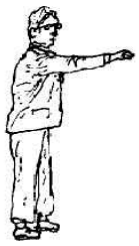
The last chapters are endowed with miniatures of Alex-Li, mimicking the paintings accompanying the short poems used in the Zen tradition to illustrate the stages of a practitioner's progression towards the purification of the mind and enlightenment.[10]

[8] *The Ten Sefirot* meaning *emanations* are the ten attributes/emanations in *Kabbalah (Tradition)*, through which *Ein Sof* (The Infinite) reveals himself and continuously creates both the physical realm and the chain of higher metaphysical realms<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Sefirot.html>.

[9] Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man*, p. 214.

[10] http://www.deeshan.com/zen.htm.

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FIVE / *Taming the Bull* [11]

Since *On Beauty* imitates *Howards End*'s structure, it observes the traditional partition into parts and chapters and, therefore, there are only three parts, each divided into numbered subchapters: "kipps and belsey", "the anatomy lesson", "on beauty and being wrong".

NW is divided into five sections, each a distinct response to the same system of social ethics – a plurality of stories. In presenting the past and the present of the protagonists, the passage of inexorable time is measured counterpoised to a desire to enter into the cosmopolitan idealized world of London. *NW*'s first section, an extended stream-of-consciousness part, reminding of Virginia Woolf, dedicated to Leah, "Visitation", comprising twenty six numbered vignettes (and there are four bearing the same number – 37, perhaps due to what it symbolizes – the number of the bus connecting Willesden to London, the number most people choose when asked to, the number of Shakespeare's plays) whilst the second, dedicated to Felix, "Guest", is tributary to James Joyce's modernist time-frame of a day-in-the-life. The longest section, devoted to Natalie, "Host" is a collection-like of distinct one hundred and eighty five titled fragments, some no longer than one sentence. After the fourth part, "Crossing", the novel closes circularly with a fifth section having the same name as the first one, "Visitation". The fragments/stories/sections are of different lengths, sometimes being separated one from the other by typographical spacing.

The maximalist novel is polyphonic, insists Ercolino, as it is heterogeneous, represents a large diversity of knowledge, languages, registers, styles, genres, characters, voices; yet polyphony never degenerates into chaos as long as there are ordering criteria to the story. All these hold true for *White Teeth*, as previously mentioned and for *The Autograph Man*, as well. To that, it might be added all the labels, lists, commentaries, types of font used and the general view becomes even more poignant. Equally, the references to other books, *Kaddish* by Leon Wieseltier and Saul Bellow's *Herzog: "And if I am out of my mind, thought Alex-Li Tandem, it's all right by me.*"[12]

On Beauty too is a polyphonic hybrid text and offers an image of a world full of possibilities and different realities in accordance with the characters' ways of seeing the world, but it could not be otherwise given the fact that they belong to different classes, come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, are of different ages and so on – and that is reality (easy to be described by Smith as she herself has mixed ancestry and lives in a multicultural neighbourhood). Intertextuality (to the already mentioned borrowings, those from Nick Laird's published poetry must be added) is used "as a means for ʿincorporating a

[11] Idem, p. 208.
[12] Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man*, p. 89.

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dual gaze into past and future' and seemingly used this form of the novel to highlight its hybrid characters"[13] as Heidemarie Krickl maintains, quoting Maeve Tynan.

The diegetic material of the maximalist novel is extremely abundant: a hypertrophic narration, innumerable characters and stories, themes and digressions. For instance, in *White Teeth*, digressions are presented under the form of interesting facts:

Interesting fact: Rubinfine's father, Rubinfine, wants Rubinfine to grow up to become a rabbi. Every time Rubinfine tells Li-Jin about this, his dearest wish for young Rubinfine, Li-Jin has no idea what to do with his face. The first time Rubinfine mentioned it, they were eating spaghetti Bolognese during a lunch meeting to discuss how Li-Jin might rejig his expenses and he was caught so unawares he had to repair to the restaurant bathroom to pull the noodles out of his nose.[14]

In *NW* too, the diegetic material is extremely rich – the natural course of the narrative is often broken by thoughts, advertisements, pop song lyrics – the contemporary pop culture imbuing life at all its levels; according to Lauren Elkis, "the narrative spins off into fake Google Maps walking directions, an Iain Sinclair-like psycho-geographic walk through Willesden, IM conversations, menus, text messages, name brands, stage directions"[15]; one of the installments consists entirely of stage direction:

165. *Stage directions*
Interior. Night. Artificial light.
Left and right back, high, one small window. Closed blind.
Front right, a door, ajar. Bookshelves to the right and left.
Simple desk. Folding chair. Books upon it.
Nat comes through door. Looks up at window. Stands close to window.
Opens blind. Closes blind. Leaves. Returns. Leaves.
A pause.
Returns with urgency, opens blind. Removes books from chair. Sits. Stands.
Walks to door. Returns. Sits. Opens laptop. Closes. Opens.
Types.
FRANK [mechanical tone, out of sight] Bed. Coming? [pause] Coming?
NAT Yes. [types quickly] No. Yes."[16]

Even the graphic presentation is skillfully accomplished – different kinds of fonts, some bolded, capitalized phrases, text running in patterns of a tree, or an apple, etc. All these

[13] Maeve Tynan, "'Only Connect': Intertextuality and Identity in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*", ed. Tracey Walters, *Zadie Smith. Critical Essays*, New York, Peter Lang, 2008, quoted in Heidemarie Krickl, "Constructions of Identity in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*", PhD thesis published at Wien Universität, May 2009, p.1 <http://othes.univie.ac.at/5213/1/2009-05-28_9801177.pdf>, p. 7.
[14] *Idem*, p. 8.
[15] **Lauren Elkins, "*NW* by Zadie Smith: Review"**
< http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/09/02/nw-by-zadie-smith-review.html >.
[16] Zadie Smith, *NW*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2012, p. 256.

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brain waves create the sensation of kaleidoscopic compositions separating slices of life and giving the narrative a certain dynamism as everything seems to "have been embarrassed into velocity"[17] as James Wood puts it.

Likewise, *NW* is a maximalist polyphonic novel. Its text is of a postmodernist conception – the compositional elements dictionary entries, song lyrics, different types of fonts, family tree, signs, quotations from religious materials, advertising, scribble – blend with well chosen chapter titles and mottos into an amalgam that creates the sensation of a vivid action to parallel the more and more agitated reality, as in the following fragment:

[…] the text says MILLENNIAL SCIENCE COMMISSION in a wide variety of fonts ranging the deliberate archaism of *viking* to the modernity of impact in order to get a feel of a thousand years in lettering (this was the brief), and all of it in the alternate colours grey, light blue and dark green because these are the colours research reveals people associate with 'science and technology' (purples and reds denote the arts, royal blue signifies 'quality and/or approved merchandise'), because fortunately after years of corporate synaesthesia (salt & vinegar blue cheese & onion green people can finally give the answers required when a space is being designed, or when something is being rebranded a room/furniture/Britain (that was the brief: a new British room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space); they know what is meant when asked how matt chrome makes them feel; and they know what is meant by national identity? symbols? paintings? maps? music? air-conditioning? smiling black children or smiling Chinese children or [tick the box]? world music? shag or pile? tile or floorboards? plants? running water? they know what they want, especially those who've lived this century, forced from one space to another like Mr. De Winter *né* Wojciech), renamed, rebranded the answer to every questionnaire nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space[18]

The amalgam of ideas, information, types of fonts, with no other punctuation than question marks is another allusion to the complex phenomenon of multiculturalism, to hybridity, to immigrants; even the millennial event to be presented (the genetic experiment) also tackles the issue of race, of expectation, of adaptation to British society.

Another trait, the completeness of a text is given by the relation at the level of the arrangement of the plot and the mechanisms of its production into specific structures: geometrical, temporal and conceptual. *White Teeth* has a circular structure; also, in the first three sections the temporal movement takes place from the present to the past, whereas in the fourth section, it evolves from the present to the future. As concerns the conceptual structures, the leitmotif present in this novel is the "white teeth", a metaphor for otherness, the more so as the a number of five chapters bear titles with clear references to teeth: "Teething Trouble", "The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal"," The Root Canals of Mangal Pande", "Canines: The Ripping Teeth", and "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden".

[17] James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman", *The New Republic* online, Thursday, August 31, 2001 <http://www.powells.com/review/2001_08_30.html>.
[18] Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 518.

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The image of teeth is a recurrent one and various description of them take on different significations as concerns characters' situation.

The geometry of *The Autograph Man* is a circular one, with a paralleled composition as concerns the body of it – the two books. In terms of temporal elaboration, the plot progresses chronologically, it starts somewhere in the past, with the scenes from Alex's childhood, and ends in the present with Alex entering the synagogue and reciting the *Kaddish*. The leitmotif present in this novel is the quest for authenticity.

A leitmotif present in Smith's third novel is "beauty", the core of the novel. According to Kaoru Urano:

As *Howards End* did about a century ago, *On Beauty* eagerly explores how the appreciation for beauty can lead to the cultivation of morality. Smith might signal that she accepts the view that we live in a depthless world, but nonetheless tries to capture some moral depth in it. Given the novel's preoccupation with the act of seeing, Smith seems to invite us to acknowledge—though it may sound quite oxymoronic—how much depth is latent on the surface of the world, not behind it.[19]

NW also has a circular structure – it opens and closes with parts similarly named. A leitmotif could be the housing estates, as long as the protagonists have been and are neighbours, although each progresses (or retrogresses) differently in spite of starting in life under equal conditions – the same housing project, the same school; another leitmotif is cosmopolitanism – and the conclusion is that it is not for everyone as there are the limitations of race, class, education; the book abounds with multicultural, globalized urban life, but the London neighbourhood is also the place of confusion and disconnection, of violence and prejudice.

Regarding narratorial omniscience, in *White Teeth* we are in the presence of an omniscient narrator, which also holds true for *The Autograph Man*, whereas in the case of *On Beauty* it is obvious that we are in the presence of a third person omniscient narrator. The *NW*'s first person narrator intersects with the third person omniscient narrator.

As concerns intersemioticity, contemporary literary imagery rests upon a semiotic exchange – a hybridization of the maximalist novel with cinema, television, video, painting, comics, pop icons having as a result hybrid imagery. In *Autograph Man*, for instance, given the main themes of the novel, we can speak not only of a hybridization, this time the hybrid imagery being the very essence of the story as to the plot is constructed upon pop-culture itself – everything happens or is connected to the universe of film and actors.

One of the most recognized characteristics of the postmodern narrative is paranoia. This is because people are so very deeply obsessed with conspiracies, intrigues and schemes. *White Teeth* deals with political terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism (KEVIN and the action of burning Rushdie's book).

[19] Kaoru Urano, "From the Country House to the Painting: an ʿAesthetic' Adaptation of *Howards End* in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*", *Revue Interdisciplinaire "Textes & contextes"* [en ligne], Numéro 7 (2012): "D'un début de siècle à l'autre – Les littératures du début des XXe et XXIe siècles dans leur rapport au siècle précédent", 14 décembre 2012<http://revuesshs.u-bourgogne.fr/textes&contextes/document.php?id=1641 ISSN 1961-991X>.

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The ethical commitment of the maximalist novel is situated within a seam of continuity with the best *engagée* literary tradition of the twentieth century, insists Ercolino. Hence, the thematic field which includes recurrent themes of great historical, political and social importance.[20] The themes in *White Teeth* are: minorities, communities, race, religion, fundamentalism, genetics, history, whereas in *NW*, they are: race (again), class, (true) self, identity, belonging. And Zadie Smith succeeds in tackling all the above in an original, witty and funny style. Equally, *On Beauty* explores the moral possibility of the taste for beauty in contemporary multicultural society.

The ethical commitment of the maximalist novel is fulfilled in the sense that Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man* "marks a return of the Jewish novel actively engaged with the pressing cultural crises of our day, specifically the complexities involved in claiming a viable identity in our increasingly multiethnic, multiracial, and transnational world"[21], as Andrew Furman puts it. In fact, Zadie Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*, approaches that aspect in that she narrates about the Chalfens, a middle-class white Jewish family. In *The Autograph Man* she takes a step further and creates a Chinese-Jew protagonist, as well as a black-Jew character.

Zadie Smith's novels comply with the maximalist traits. Maximalism – the tendency towards excess – creates a world in and of itself, as long as meaning is not inherent in the world and must be (re)created, but it lies deep inside, and not on the surface, and it is the writers' job to reveal this world to the readers. "The world is very, very complex and the writers who are going to be interesting and who are going to succeed are writers who have the kind of complexity to match the complexity of the world"[22], Zadie Smith admitted. And she has succeeded.

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[20] *Cf.* Stefano Ercolino, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

[21] Andrew Furman, "The Jewishness of the Contemporary Gentile Writer: Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*", MELUS, Vol. 30, No. 1, Indeterminate Identities (Spring, 2005), pp. 7-8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029609>.

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