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Aspects of postmodernism and humour. A glimpse on Raymond Federman's work

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The purpose of this paper is to review aspects of postmodernism in the work of the American writer Raymond Federman, in which humour plays a very important part. This paper demonstrates that Raymond Federman's literary work is a typically postmodern creation, through the challenges towards the conventions of literature, through the use of discontinuity, fragmentation, metafiction and self-referentiality. The French-American writer captures the way in which the contemporary human being perceives reality in today's society. Raymond Federman's novel "The Twofold Vibration" illustrates very well the features of the postmodern novel. Humour is a means of reviving contemporary American fiction.

Key words: postmodernism, self-referential, metafiction, surfiction, humour

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present aspects of postmodernism in the work of the American writer Raymond Federman, in which humour plays a very important part. In the introduction to my paper I refer to the necessity of a renewed literary criticism. Then I deal with the role of literature in the postmodern society, and the role of the literary critic to "close the gap" between the audience, the readers and the writer. The postmodern literary work is open to diverse interpretations, and Raymond Federman captures the ways in which the contemporary man perceives reality in today's society. The next sections deal with aspects of postmodernism in Raymond Federman's fiction, such as metafiction, intertextuality, self-referentiality, irony, and humour, with a focus on the novel *The Twofold Vibration*.

In the famous book *Cross the Border – Close the Gap*, Leslie Fiedler (1972) refers to the beginning of a new age, the postmodern age, which is radically different from all previous ages:

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> We have, however, entered quite another time, apocalyptic, antirational, blatantly romantic and sentimental; an age dedicated to (…) prophetic irresponsibility; one, at any rate, distrustful of self-protective irony and too great self-awareness. (…)
> On the other hand, a renewed criticism certainly will no longer be formalist or intrinsic; it will be contextual rather than textual, not primarily concerned with structure or diction or syntax (…) Not words-on-the-page but words –in-the –world or rather words-in-the-head, which is to say, at the private juncture of a thousand contexts, social, psychological, historical, biographical, geographical, in the consciousness of the lonely reader (…): this will be the proper concern of the critics to come. (Fiedler 1972 in Waugh 1992, 33)

In this quotation Fiedler makes a point about the necessity of a "renewed criticism", meaning literary criticism, that would primarily be concerned with understanding the literary text in the various contexts that both the writer – producer of the text – and the reader – receiver of the text – function.

It seems that the main focus for Leslie Fiedler is the reader, not the writer. From the reader's perspective, the social context is relevant because the reader was formed and lives in a certain social medium, the psychological context defines the ways in which the reader understands the literary text, the historical context refers to the time, exactly, when the reader lives, the kind of society he/she lives in, the type of information he/she has access to. The biographical context refers to the events in the private life of the reader, because these too have a great impact on the way of understanding and interpreting a literary text.

The geographical context of the reader is relevant, because it refers to where exactly the reader lives, this giving information about how the reader understands the world and relates to the world. The "consciousness of the lonely reader" is very important as well, because it refers to the inner life of the reader, to his/her values, beliefs, concerns, and image of the world.

Therefore, the "renewed criticism" that Leslie Fiedler refers to is focused on the reader and on the inner life of the reader. It would mean that the reception of the literary work is, somehow, as important as the production of the literary work. The generation of meaning of the literary work and the value itself of the literary work would be given, created, by the reader, it would not be "out there", an independent entity.

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2. The role of literature in the new society

Another important idea of Leslie Fiedler's argumentation is that there was a reversing process that was typical of Modernism: there was an elite audience of the modern literary texts and artistic works that was forced, slowly, into accepting the values and forms of modern art. Contrary to this, in Postmodernism the young, mass audience urges certain reluctant critics to abandon their former elite status in return for a form of freedom:

> In fact, Post-Modernism implies the closing of the gap between critic and audience, too, if by critic one understands 'leader of taste' and by audience 'follower'. But most importantly of all, it implies the closing of the gap between artist and audience, or at any rate, between professional and amateur in the realm of art. (Fiedler 1972 in Waugh 1992, 43)

Concerning the role of literature in the new society of consumerism, technology and entertainment, Leslie Fiedler considers that:

> …in a time of Closing the Gap, literature becomes again prophetic and universal – a continuing revelation appropriate to a permanent religious revolution, whose function is precisely to transform the secular crowd into a sacred community: one with each other, and equally at home in the world of technology and the realm of wonder. (Fiedler 1972 in Waugh 1992, 47)

Another pertinent definition of the contemporary, postmodern society is given by Susan Sontag, in her famous book *Against Interpretation*. Sontag (1982) defines contemporary culture in terms of production of industrial goods and reception of art:

> Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life – its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness – conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities, (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed. What is important now is to recover our senses. (…)
> Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art (…) Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. (…) The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means. (Sontag 1982 in Waugh 1992, 55).

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This is exactly the concern of the French American writer Raymond Federman, i.e. to capture the way in which the contemporary man perceives the world in the contemporary society, to reflect on the difficulties of perceiving reality as such, in a society marked by consumerism and the production of clichés.

Coming back to Susan Sontag and her argument, contemporary culture generates excess and overproduction. It becomes difficult for people, as receivers of art, to perceive the work of art as it is, because the sensory faculties are weakened.

3. Raymond Federman, creator of surfiction

Raymond Federman was a writer in the postmodern style, who sought to deconstruct the traditional way of writing fiction. This type of writing is quite obvious in his novel *Double or Nothing*, in which the narrative line of the story has been broken down and reconstructed completely.

Raymond Federman's novels have been translated in twelve languages, and he lectured in many foreign countries. The novel *Double or Nothing* won the Frances Steloff Fiction Prize in 1971. The writer received the American Book Award for the novel *Smiles in Washington Square* in 1986. Raymond Federman, who was a novelist, poet, critic and translator, was preoccupied with the process of generating literary texts, the production and reception of meaning through art in general, and through literature in particular.

In his book *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays*, Raymond Federman entitles his first chapter "Fiction today or the pursuit of non-knowledge". This title in itself is a commentary on the same idea of Susan Sontag's, that criticism should focus on the literary texts as such, and that literature should capture the way in which people perceive the external world. As Raymond Federman says:

> Our relation to the world (however real or unreal it may be) has undergone radical changes. (…)
> It is only with the advent of what has been called New Fiction, Antifiction, Metafiction, Postmodern Fiction, or what I prefer to call Surfiction, that this view began to be questioned, challenged, undermined, and even rejected. (Federman 1993, 3)

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Before this idea, the writer started his argumentation by referring to the contemporary works of fiction:

> The contemporary works of fiction are often experienced with a certain anxiety, not because they threaten to extinguish the novel or the short story as recognizable genres, but because they challenge the traditional bases of both cultural and aesthetic judgement. (Federman 1993, 1)

The subversive approach of the postmodern writers, that of challenging traditional literary techniques, visions of the world and narrative structures, is understood by the contemporary readers. The contemporary writers, those who use postmodern literary devices, provoke the readers to question the traditional bases of cultural and aesthetic judgement. This provocation generates a certain anxiety in the contemporary readers. Raymond Federman continues his argument:

> Literature has most often been accepted as culturally significant to the extent that it represents the external world, either through the depiction of a socio/historical situation, or through the verbalization of psychological states. Much of contemporary fiction does not relate the reader directly to the external world (reality), nor does it provide the reader with a sense of lived experience (truth), instead contemporary fiction dwells on the circumstances of its own possibilities, on the conventions of narrative, and on the openness of language to multiple meanings contradictions, paradoxes and irony. (Federman 1993, 1-2).

This is exactly the definition of surfiction, the type of postmodern fiction that Raymond Federman created. Being a variant of metafiction, it lays the focus on the literary devices themselves, on the mechanisms of generating fiction, on the questions of identity and subjectivity.

Among the many definitions and discussions of metafiction, I choose that of Linda Hutcheon, who connects historiographic metafiction with the discourses of the marginalized, and the creations of postcolonial theory and postcolonial literature. By the marginalized, Linda Hutcheon means the feminists, the black critics and the gay critics.

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> And all of these marginalized ex-centrics have contributed to the definition of the postmodern heterogeneous different and to its inherently ideological nature. The new ideology of postmodernism may be that everything is ideological. But this does not lead to any intellectual or practical impasse. What it does is underline the need for self-awareness (…). (Hutcheon in Waugh, 1992, 211).

4. Raymond Federman's metafiction

Concerning the metafictional dimension of postmodern fiction, Brian McHale explains very pertinently:

> Postmodernist fictions (…) are fictions about the order of things, discourses which reflect upon the worlds of discourse. As such, they participate in that very general tendency in the intellectual life of our time toward viewing reality as constructed in and through our languages, discourses and semiotic systems. (…) Not everyone has been able to sympathize with postmodernist fiction's role in the project of unmasking the constructed nature of reality, however. (McHale 1987, 164)

I could say that this is exactly the main theme of Raymond Federman's work, explaining the process of understanding reality. Raymond Federman is a prominent representative of the new type of American novelists, the postmodern novelists. Together with Ronald Sukenick, he argued that novels should not represent life, but the process of capturing and expressing it. The name proposed by the French-American writer for this type of fiction is, as I mentioned above, surfiction, which is self-referential and displays the feature of intertextuality.

Federman's novel *The Twofold Vibration* – published in 1982 - is an example of an experimental novel, in which the main character is The Old Man. Like many other characters in the work of Raymond Federman, the Old Man came to the United States as a young French immigrant, who then felt alienated in a country that he does not understand. He was confronted with the difficulties of a precarious existence and with the fading of 'the American dream'.

The thesis demonstrated by Federman in his work *Journey to Chaos* (1965) is that Samuel Beckett disintegrates progressively the realistic conventions of language, artistic form and social realities. This aspect is the main source of

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surfiction. As Jerome Klinkowitz states in his book *Literary Disruptions. The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*,

> Federman's peculiarly American disruption is that he works through the problems of French experimentation in his dissertation and academic publications, rather than in an indigenous artistic form himself. Hence when he concludes in Journey to Chaos (1965) that Beckett shows how the novel form is inadequate to gain an understanding of reality, Federman is ready to leap into fiction himself, fully armed with a new form which is adequate. (Klinkowitz 1975, 130).

In Federman's novel *The Twofold Vibration* there are two complementary tendencies: one is manifested at the level of literary techniques, and is characterized by discontinuity, fragmentation and intertextuality. The other tendency is present at the level of content, where there is the attempt to capture perennial human values, such as: courage, dignity, friendship.

Fragmentation or discontinuity is present in this novel at the level of narration and at the level of narrators and the "author". The principle of narration, in this novel, seems to be digression – as in Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. The novel *The Twofold Vibration* contains scenes from the main character's life – the Old Man. Chronology is a convention to be broken: the novel begins with the imminent deportation of the Old Man to the spatial colonies on the New Year's Eve of 1999, and then it turns back to an episode from his youth when he got involved in the hippie movement in the 1960s, and so on.

According to Raymond Federman, these three things make a real story. In *The Twofold Vibration*, we see this scheme functioning, although altered to a certain extent: the protagonist is the Old Man, and it is significant that he does not have a name, therefore he is a generic character; then there are the "recorders" – named Moinous and Namredef, who research the Old Man's life. They pass on the information to the "author" himself, Federman, who simply writes the novel and quite honestly admits it. Therefore, Federman presents with irony the literary conventions that make the artifact, the novel. Klinkowitz said: "All great fiction, to a large extent, is a reflection on itself rather than a reflection of reality." (Klinkowitz 1975, 150)

The three of them: Moinous, Namredef (the author's acronym) and "Federman" - all masks of the same entity – the Author – sit together at the café *La Closerie des Lilas*, in Paris, and discuss the writing of the book, argue about the

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significance of certain facts and plan its ending. Therefore, the novel has three levels: the story of the Old Man, with flash-backs and comments, the commentary of the two narrators and the commentary of the "author". We notice a parallelism between the story of the novel – the three try to prevent the Old Man's deportation – and the implied purpose of the novel: the saving of literature. In this novel the boundary between life and art ceases to be that obvious, because reality proves to be a construct, made by us in the process of knowledge. Consequently, reality appears to be subjective, however strange it may seem. Art recreates life even if it de-structures it in the process.

The fact that postmodern literature reflects upon itself, thus is self-referential, is very well illustrated in the novel *The Twofold Vibration*. From the very beginning the reader finds out that he/she is about to explore the limits of imagination.

Another feature of postmodern literature – intertextuality – characterizes Federman's novel. The text is full of references to books written by Raymond Federman and by other authors. The quotations are integrated in the text, for instance, fragments from Samuel Beckett's books.

The apparently incoherent phrases said by the Old Man at the end of the novel are quotations from Raymond Federman's book *Voice in the Closet*. Therefore, one of the devices used by Federman in this novel is the play on literary and cultural references, and thus the text seems to be a palimpsest. Surfiction, the type of literature Federman practiced, may be seen as a manifestation of one postmodern tendency, identified by Ihab Hassan in his book *The Postmodern Turn* as 'immanences' – the capacity of the mind to generate symbols, to refer to itself. As Ihab Hassan points out:

> This noetic tendency may be evoked further by such sundry concepts as diffusion, dissemination, pulsion, interplay, communication, interdependence, which all derive from the emergence of human beings as (…) homo significans, gnostic creatures constituting themselves, and determining their universe, by symbols of their own making. (Hassan 1987, 93).

What is the significance of this abundance of references, made with an ironic touch? Jerome Klinkowitz says:

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> Federman is covered: no shoddy tricks or trumped up illusions of reality; just so much writing, the book itself. But as he redeems the method of fiction, he also saves its substance. Granted that fiction is not history, but something made up; what then is more real: one phony thing the writer decided has "happened", or all the possibilities he could contrive, given the situation? (Klinkowitz 1975, 132)

Raymond Federman admits without hypocrisy that he writes a book based on other books. The referent is no longer the outside world; the novelist does not claim to write about reality, as each of us has a different image of reality.

The Twofold Vibration is considered by the author himself as his best writing, and it gives a new dimension to Beckett's concept of "the twofold vibration', which is the continuous movement of life which determines us to look back and to go forward. In addition to constant irony of literary conventions, the self-irony of the narrator and the irony of the reader convention, the novel features another tendency of postmodern fiction: the revival of the story.

The Twofold Vibration is a kind of puzzle of fragments of stories, combined and mixed up. The reader finds out how the Old Man's family were killed by the Nazis and how he escaped by hiding in the closet, and this is, at the same time, the author's real story. The Old Man's adventure with the actress June Fanon, his trip to Germany, where he gambled all his money, his visit to the Dachau museum, and many other scenes, illustrate Raymond Federman's pleasure of telling stories. This is combined with the skill of creating a strong character who was capable, once, to get over illness by laughing.

5. Humour

Laughter is, for Federman, a means of opposing the absurdity of life. As Jerome Klinkowitz points out:

> Federman has agreed that writing can be tedium; but against it he argues for a revival in writing, which in turn most actively engages the reader in a revival of reading, all by simply recognizing the frame of the story for the arbitrary device that it is. And by not taking itself so seriously:

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> 'Perhaps the only way for the writer to escape the tedium and the anguish of such a self-imposed torture is to LAUGH at his own activity.' (Klinkowitz 1975, 153)

In an attempt to define irony, Jack Rathbun and Liviu Cotrău mention that irony relies on semantic as well as formal effects. The two authors state that:

> Kierkegaard mentions that the true ironist does not wish to be understood, and there is certainly always the possibility of misunderstanding. No sentence is ironic in itself. For a sentence to be properly ironic, it must be possible to imagine a group of readers taking it quite literally. Otherwise there is no contrast between apparent and assumed meaning, and no place for ironic play. (Rathbun and Cotrau 1983, 38)

The two authors point out that there is situational or dramatic irony, and verbal irony. Verbal irony is complex and interesting; it depends on a twin set of expectations.

> The reader first senses the incongruity of an apparent level of vraisemblance at which the literal meaning of a sentence could be interpreted. He then constructs an alternative ironic reading which accords with the vraisemblance which he is in the process of constructing for the text". (Rathbun and Cotrau 1983, 38).

Vraisemblance is a term explained by these authors themselves, it is the process of making a "literary text more intelligible by comparing and contrasting it with something else." (Rathbun and Cotrau 1983, 36).

In Raymond Federman's novel *Smiles in Washington Squire* (1985), the author creates a story in the conditional. "What would happen if" is the pattern of this book. "What would happen if" the young French immigrant Moinous and the young American Sucette, who smiled at each other in Washington Squire, met again? There is a number of possibilities, and the novel presents, in narrative succession, these possibilities.

Therefore, in this novel there are two narrative lines: one narrative line is given by the two young people that met and smiled at each other, and the other

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narrative line is given by the fact that the two invent and create each other in imagination. The novel "simply" records these narrative lines.

With great artistic ability, Federman creates a story, without traditionally narrating it, as it did not actually happen. This is an implicit irony towards all the narrative techniques, towards narrative and cultural clichés, towards the idea of the writer as a master creator of a fictional universe.

Raymond Federman examines the mechanisms by which we understand reality, on a day to day basis. In all the historical events evoked in Federman's novels, in all the narrative techniques he uses, in all the emotions of his characters, there is one element stronger than everything else: humour and the capacity of the human being to laugh, to have a pervading optimism.

6. Conclusion

Raymond Federman's work is experimental and postmodern; by challenging the conventions and clichés of fiction, he was able to create a profoundly inspiring fiction, about courage, dignity and the redeeming power of imagination.

Humour is a perfect way, for Federman, of coping with the difficulties and challenges of life and literary creation. The author of *The Twofold Vibration* used irony towards the traditional literary conventions, and used extensively discontinuity, fragmentarism, self-referentiality, in an approach that gives the novel a new dimension and perspective, by the imaginative transformation of reality.

According to Jerome Klinkowitz (1975), humour is a means of reviving contemporary fiction, a way of saving it from postmodern alienation, and the works of Raymond Federman capture this beautifully.

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