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SCEPTICISM AND PLAY IN JOHN BARTH'S *THE FLOATING OPERA*

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Abstract: *The present paper presents John Barth's famous novel The Floating Opera as a postmodern writing, structured at two levels: the level of content, with nihilism and skepticism, and the level of form, with a sum of many playful artistic devices. The crisis of moral values is presented by John Barth through the destiny of the main character of the novel.*

Key words: *Scepticism, nihilism, values, postmodern, self-referentiality, parody.*

John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1956, 1967) is an almost classical example of a postmodern novel – postmodern in the sense that the author uses literary devices from the past in order to parody them, expressing in this way a sense of 'ultimacy', of the loss of values. Nihilism and scepticism on the one hand, ironic play of artistic devices on the other hand. I intend to follow these two aspects in my paper, following *The Floating Opera* – boat and book.

Taking the aspects mentioned above one by one, we may notice that there are two levels involved: the level of 'content' – to which nihilism and scepticism correspond, and the level of 'form' – where we notice the occurrence of various literary techniques, only parodied. As far as the level of 'content' is concerned, and we need to put this term into inverted commas, we may speak about an illustration of what Ihab Hassan called in *The Right Promethean Fire*, as a feature of postmodernism, "the unmaking of man, of literature, of the Book." (Hassan, 75). To this concept, such terms are associated, as: deconstruction, decentering, deformation, a.s.o. *The Floating Opera* offers an interesting example for this feature. Todd Andrews, the main character, we may call him hero, but he is an anti-hero in many ways, a lawyer in the small town Cambridge, Massachusetts, is also the narrator of the book, and decides to commit suicide, for no apparent reason. From this point of view, the novel is an expose of the reasons, actually the interpretation of various facts, which determined Todd to take such a decision. Although the narrator has as an objective to describe a day in the life of Todd Andrews, supposedly his last day – 20 or 21 of June 1937 – the story is generated actually by the digressions made by Todd. The analogy with L. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* has already been made by the critics and, at an intertextual level, we can think also of Joyce's Ulysses, the famous novel about how an ordinary person spends one day in Dublin.

In opposition with Joyce's novel, as expected, there are no grand images in *The Floating Opera* that would unify the world of the novel – a typically postmodern novel, as I mentioned from the beginning.

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Coming back to the narrative line of the book, in the end the reader realizes, together with Todd himself, that he had no actual reason for taking his own life, just as he had no reason for living. Todd Andrews is not an ordinary person: cynical, with a black sense of humour, he accepts to live in the classical triangle. In this novel, a parody of the 18th and 19th centuries literary conventions, this triangle is not secret, or leading to a matrimonial tragedy, it is a kind of game, suggested by the married couple themselves – the Macks. Todd agrees with this arrangement, because he does not care at all about himself, about Jane Mack, and most importantly, about the idea of being faithful in marriage. He does not perceive that he commits a sin, nor do the Macks. The loss of human values is perfectly illustrated by Barth, but with a humorous touch, with detachment.

There are also scenes that reveal the loss of fundamental values, that Todd experiences: for example, the war episode, told by Todd in one of his digressions. Barth explores here – describing the big hole in the ground, the dirt, the way the soldiers felt, scared, disoriented – one of the faces of war eluded by the history books, but revealed by many writers, such as, in postmodern literature, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., or Raymond Federman. Even if I said so myself, "…postmodern times bring with them a different type of novel, or better said, different types of novels, that have to give account of the world as it is now: fragmentary, extremely diverse, with extreme social mobility, with superficial and ephemeral human relationships." (Sibisan, 554).

Todd's fate was to remember the sound he heard when he sticked the gun into the German soldier's neck, after they communicated and bonded, a futile and absurd gesture, a proof that Todd acted purely out of instinct. Therefore, the idea of heroism is discussed here, deconstructing what we may call a "mythology of war", in which there are heroes, traitors, winners, losers and also suffering, physical pain and glory. Under Barth's lenses, the war becomes a matter of strategies for survival, with no moral connotations.

The lack of moral values is what characterizes the world of *The Floating Opera*, the crisis of values in general. Todd's postulate is very relevant in this respect: "Nothing is intrinsically valuable."

As Tonny Tanner notices, in his famous *City of Words*, "Todd Andrews is a man in whom the usual affective connections to the given world have been corroded, leaving him trapped inside his passionless cerebrations. (…) He is a lawyer, but he has no belief in justice and regards law as purely a game. (…) Andrews reveals that he has only been able to move and act by adopting a series of masks." (Tanner, 88).

As we remember, the masks adopted by Todd, as he himself admits, are: a party boy, a saint, then a cynic. We are not surprised when, at the end of the novel, Todd decides not to commit suicide after all, because, as he puts it, "there is no reason for living, nor for committing suicide." This apparent inconsistency is in fact what we would expect, as Todd is a kind of reversed Hamlet, instead of contemplating life, he contemplated death.

In his *Contemporary American Literature* Ihab Hassan notices:"… the narrative conveys the paradox of Todd Andrews, who contemplates suicide, caught between reason and instinct, voice and silence; and it suggests the paradox of the author, who makes art of a nihilistic theme." (Hassan, 37). I would like to refer to this paradox, at the level of form, as I mentioned at the beginning. From the incipit of the novel we notice Barth's concern to point out the correspondence between the floating opera, that is the boat,

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floating on the river, and the novel itself, the boat being a metaphor of the novel.

As is well-known, self-referentiality- the constant reference to the book itself, to the act of writing it, is one of the main features of postmodernist writings. Matei Calinescu points out this feature, in *Five Faces of Modernity*, and Brian McHale, in many instances. Self-referentiality and metafiction are Calinescu's terms for a literary reality that is quite vast, crossing boundaries of culture and geography. The concept "hard postmodernism" can be brought into discussion here, although Andrei Bodiu uses it in a different context, with a slightly different meaning (Bodiu, 172). John Barth is aware that the writer is influenced by the writings of the past, that he uses conventions, figures of speech and rhetorical figures which had been invented long ago. At the same time, the postmodern writer is not overwhelmed by the heritage of the past, on the contrary, he/she uses the old conventions in a creative way, transforming them by giving them the function of entertaining. This idea is theoretically expressed by Barth himself, in the famous essay "The Literature of Replenishment." (1980).

Apart from a lawyer, author and narrator, Todd Andrews is also a boat-builder: his dream to build his own craft is, according to Tony Tanner, "a perfect metaphor for that wish to create his own unique form or structure. "Why isn't the whole thing a sailboat?" – it is a poetic way of saying: "I wish I could escape from the impositions of the given world into the liberation of the privately created one." (Tanner, 90). Which are the artistic devices used by Barth to construct a fictional reality? At a closer look, we notice that there are quite a lot: the thematization of the author-narrator, in a parodic way, the thematization of the reader (Matei Calinescu), self-referentiality, the digression, the "scene-by-scene construct", to use J. Klinkowitz's expression (Klinkowitz, 14). I will quote more from the same critic: "Writing such fiction is by no means just self-indulgence. John Barth at times explored the deeply ethical significance of facing one's art honestly, of continuing to tell stories when one's narrative materials were exhausted. But Barth's considerations have yet to be integrated with his stories themselves." (18).

All the literary devices used by Barth should be integrated in a larger discussion about the role of fiction, the functions of literature for contemporary writers. The literary devices are not used just for their own sake, they transmit the writer's disposition, vision of the world, convictions and beliefs. The narrator refers to the act of writing a book, in other words, he is aware of the fact that he communicates a message to a reader, with the explicit purpose of being properly understood. The frequent use of the pronoun "you", meaning direct address to the reader, is a way of parodying the convention of the reader theme, so common with writers of the 18th century, but treated by Barth in a humorous way. Barth actually does what he theoretically states in his famous essay "The Literature of Exhaustion": uses fictional conventions transforming them, even denying them.

The thematization of the reader in a parodic way is one of those "re-visited" devices, specific to postmodern literature. Sometimes the narrator addresses the reader in such ways: "Now, follow me, reader", or, "take it easy, reader, let me explain." It seems that the narrator is very concerned about the way in which the reader perceives the story and its meaning. Therefore, in *The Floating Opera*, the reader becomes a kind of partner for the narrator, in a way the reader becomes a part of the text, he or she is in the text, not outside the text. The function of the reader, implied by Barth, is that of "active audience." The reader is sometimes

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presented in a cinematic form, the technique of freeze-frame, used in cinema, video or television is used sometimes, parodying the conventions of fiction.

In the novel there is another interesting aspect: a constant play with the levels of the novel: the level of story-telling and the level of the story itself, with characters, description, action and so on. The continuous shift of levels emphasizes the literary conventions and also Barth's conception about contemporary fiction, expressed in "The Literature of Exhaustion", that literature nowadays re-uses old conventions to express the inner void and loss of values.To summarise, the fascination of *The Floating Opera* lies in the tension between the level of content and the level of form: scepticism and nihilism, on the one hand, technical skills and the freedom of using artistic devices on the other hand. As moral values fade and go in the background, literary conventions are foregrounded, in a play with the purpose of entertaining the reader.

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