



POLYMORPHOUS NATURE OF SELF: A STUDY OF THOMAS PYNCHON AND JOHN BARTH

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ABSTRACT

*In postmodernism, the individual's cutting off from ontological essence, the loss of essence and meaning of existence itself are no longer considered a tragedy and undoubtedly an abrasive environment effected by the rapid advancements in the fields of Science and Technology. The inevitable influence of Media, especially the Television, the Video and the Computer, has narrowed down, not merely the geographical but also the physical and mental edges of living. Postmodern, hyperrealist, magic realist and all the other experimental types of writing have primarily focused on this problem reflected in fictional characterization, authorship and intentionality, reception and readership, narrative technique, style, genre and thematic overlaps. Thomas Pynchon (1937-), and John Barth (1930) the two representatives of Postmodern American writers, depict the plight of contemporary humanity caught in labyrinthine, and their novels such as *V* and *THE Floating Opera* are quite symptomatic of this chaotic situation.*

Key Words: Modernity, Post-modernity, Identity, Reality, Media

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, that happened as a post-war phenomenon in Europe and America, and that has been spreading its poisonous fangs throughout, is basically an outcome of the abrasive environment effected by the rapid advancements in the fields of Science and Technology. The inevitable influence of Media, especially the Television, the Video and the Computer, has narrowed down, not merely the geographical but also the physical and mental edges of living. Ensnared and crippled by the sway of technology, Man loses his individuality, and subsequently, identity, and Thomas Pynchon (1937-), and John Barth (1930) the two

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representatives of Postmodern American writers, depict the plight of contemporary humanity caught in labyrinthine, rather than sustained by, a culture that celebrates technology, polymorphous nature of identity and death rather than humanity and life.

The theme of the fragmentation of identity is as old as the Socratic pronouncement: 'Know thyself' Yet, from Oedipus Rex to Oedipa Maas, this has been the undercurrent that enables the literary/critical text afloat, whirl or sink. However, the search for the self/identity, has basically, remained a monolithic phenomenon and narcissistic in its frame work from the Traditionalists and even to the Modernists who were quite desperate to ascertain their monolithic perception of universe by trying to bridge up the chasm between signifier and signified. Although the Modernists were bewildered by the divided/disintegrated self, they still held firm conviction that the self can be integrated through an inner sense of unity.

Turning upside down and inside out the modernist perspective on the world, postmodernism reacts against an aesthetic that 'is discarded as false, pretentious, much too experimental to match our desperate attempts at penetrating beyond surfaces' and seeks to find new ways of tackling 'cultural events derived from previously unheard of phenomena: new mechanics (including electronic ones) resisting antidote, cloning, widespread genocide, travels into space, portable communication facilitators'. Consequently, if we accept to describe our age in terms of postmodernism, we are forced to take into account the multifarious aspects it presupposes and deal with it as complex, involving a multidisciplinary effort'. The postmodern tendency conjures up a galaxy of writers and critics; to name only a few dominant ones: (other than Barth and Pynchon): Vladimir Nabokov, Italo Calvino, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jerzy Kosinski, Umberto Eco, William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, Raymond Federmnn, John Hawkes, William Gass, E. L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, D. M. Thomas, J. M. Coetzee and Salman Rushdie; W: Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, Gerald Hoffman and Geoffrey Hartman. As David Lodge comments, "Postmodernism has established itself as a *écriture*, in Barthes's sense of the word--a mode of writing shared by a significant number of writers in a given period--. . ." (1988, 221).

Among the polyversions of postmodernism, the version of Pynchon is selected for this study because of the congruity in his representations which converge on the theme of fluidity of identity. This project reflects on the pynchonesque dissemination of identity in terms of anonymity, pathology, control systems, deflated myths and deteleological texts. Each of the following chapters deals with these fragmented aspects of identity respectively.



In the study *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*, Wylie Sypher (3) demonstrates that western literature and art have been forced, since the nineteenth century to gradually change the ideas about the nature of the self and individual identity. Gradually, the Romantic notion of identity, according to which the individual is considered the supreme value and substance, made way to the existentialist search for identity, in hope of discovering “the irreducible minimum of our experience that can be honestly identified as our own” [4]

The post-war American novel, as well as the European one, presented in detail the show of the imminent loss of the self (understood as interior being, essential and assumed, that which Jung called “the personal core” (5), and William James, “the real nucleus of our personal identity”(6) and described the battles and confusions that it triggered; hence, Manfred Pütz’s coinage “identity fable”, which reveals the relationship between the allegorical projection specific by definition to a fable and the self-identity of an individual faced with a disconcerting universe in which he can no longer find the certainty anchors he used to know. The alienated, absurd, existentialist anti-heroes were all in the same position, failing to find the clear meaning of a personal, identifiable, form of existence.

Characters like Herzog, Joseph or Charles Citrine in Saul Bellow’s novels *Herzog* (1964), *The Dangling Man* (1944) and Humboldt’s *Gift* (1975); Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951); Nat Turner in W. Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967); Rabbit in John Updike’s series *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990); Tod Andrews in Barth’s *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *Giles, the goat-boy*, in the novel bearing the same title (1966) – all find themselves suspended between contradictory pressures of the environment and the self, estranged from a world in which they are outsiders. Sensitivity and the capacity for intellectual analysis, doubled by a kind of passivity sustaining introverted inclinations, are prominent features of the modernist hero, but also of the postmodernist one. The interior conflict, the sharp feeling of failure and hurt, the lack of orientation, self-alienation, even loss of identity are all visible consequences, most of the times, and if sometimes they accept the role society assigns to them, this is made at the cost of losing their dream of freedom.

Barth's Mythotherapeutic-doctors and Pynchon's Cybernetic-machine controllers fail to control the identities of their cosmoptic and entropic patients because they lack a sense of myth in the backdrop to give themselves unity and integrity. In this way, they are in sharp contrast to their modernist-controllers who played their games in accordance with the archetypal rules. The modernist-controllers offered a connection between Man and God and the survival of the individual spirit through a consciousness governed by myth. Having ruled out the connection between Man and God, Barth and Pynchon, do not give contingency to myth trying to give identity. They deem consciousness to be determined solely by language.



Only that which finds articulation can be known. Thus these writers believe that inherited languages, and the social mythical world built upon them, are not to be trusted. If no semiotic system can offer essential meaning, none can claim privileged or authoritative status. Myth is known because it was articulated, read, transcribed or translated like any other story. Consequently, Barth and Pynchon's study of humanity's effort to establish a meaningful world is conducted most frequently through the analysis of how language is used in personal and collective discourse, but not through archetypes underlying the subconscious. That is why, they revise, subvert and then rejuvenate the received notion of myth as an ordered faculty to structure reality. In this manner, Barth and Pynchon are true representatives of the postmodernist conception of myth.

Abandoning the classical concept of reality, the solution that most postmodernist fabulators have found is continuity with the artistic forms of the past, a past that modernism rejected and despised in its strive for novelty. In their vision, the great tradition should be recuperated with nostalgia and reinterpreted in a playful, ironic and parodic manner, and literary genres, such as the picaresque, the epistolary novel or the historical story should be revived. Barth proposes in novels such as *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy* or *End of the Road*, the use of creative imagination and re-use of myth in history and daily life. This is an approach to the myth that takes into account its artificiality, incomplete character, and partial numbness in the face of reality. Mythotherapy tries to force the entire world into the self and the self into the entire world, to subordinate everything that exists in this world to the drama of the tearing apart of the self. This manner of treating the myth that Toma, quoting Wasson, calls mythoplastic art, ironically returns over itself and acts towards the knowledge of the mysterious difference between the self and the other, artifice and reality [10]

For example, Jacob Horner, the protagonist of *End of the Road*, is marked by insecurity and, consequently, suffers the erasure of personal contours: "In a Sense, I Am Jacob Horner" [11], he states in the first sentence of his confessions, but does not seem to make up his mind in what specific way. The novel forwards a potential solution to his difficult situation when he is approached by a weird physician claiming that a proper use of human imagination offers an infallible therapy for all those exposed to total or partial loss of the self, mythotherapy, based on the existentialist assertion that the individual is free not only to choose his own essence, but to modify it as well.

As can be easily noticed, the identity fables with Barth are centered on the correlation between the imagined projections and the acts of instatement of the self. By contrast, Thomas Pynchon's novels focus mainly on matters of historical imagination and discourse, subordinated to the self, and covering concepts as entropy, paranoia, history of narration. Here, the search for order and pattern express a reaction of the self to its condition in the



universe of history. In *V.* (1963), for example, there are two narrative directions covering the peregrinations of the two heroes: Benny Profane, attracted in a neo-picaresque wandering in the present, and Herbert Stencil, in picaresque, intellectual journey in the past. Profane becomes a sort of a modern anti-hero, archetypal, fighting with problems of an alienated existence in a overwhelmingly disorganized world, all this leaving him passive, a human yo-yo, striving to lose himself by immersing in a conundrum of un-coordinated events. Unlike Stencil, Profane permanently tries to find or produce significant models of coherence allowing the discovery of identity. Pynchon parodies aspects of basic models in the detective or mystery novels, making of Stencil one of the amateur detectives typical of his prose; his task is to find *V.*, a fundamentally indetermined character, multitude of possible identities and places, who, at the end, proves to be what the pursuers previously presumed: a terribly defused and disconcerting concept (the same as postmodernity itself).

The purpose in which Barth and Pynchon offer a demystified version of the received myths is for "the hierophany," that is as Charles Hollander defines, "the manifestation of the sacred in the profane, or every day, or 'waking world'" (1990, 51) This concept is pushed to an extreme when Barth and Pynchon bring down the sublime to the ludicrous through their sportive subversions. Funnily enough Pynchon uses rats as images of abject physicality to subvert the spiritual/physical hierarchy maintained in traditional Christian thought. In Keith Booker's opinion

Institutionalized religion has not fared well in modern literature. While some prominent modern writers (most notably T. S. Eliot) have been strong proponents of the civilizing virtues of organized religious belief, most have viewed religion as an oppressive social force and as an insult to human dignity. Writers involved in identifiably emancipatory political projects have consistently used the church as a prime symbol of the authoritarian structures they seek to subvert (1989, 21).

Pynchon's deconstruction of hierarchies is especially clear in the conflation of rats and religion in the story of Father Fairing in *Y.* During the dark depression years of the thirties, this priest became convinced that human civilization was in its last days, and that the world would soon be ruled by rats. "This being the case, Father Fairing thought it best for the rats to be given a head start . . . which meant conversion to the Roman church" (V 118) Finally, Pynchon even hints of a possible sexual relation between Father Fairing and the rat acolyte Veronica, undermining religious dogma with insinuations of an underlying sexual motivation. This also serves to deconstruct the hierarchical opposition between the physical and the spiritual upon which so much Christian doctrine is based. Rats represent the precise antithesis of the purely spiritual existence privileged by the Church. Rats suggest the physical aspects



of human life that are often quite repressed and to which the spiritual Father finally succumbs. Succumbing thus, the Father dies unceremoniously under the sewer.

To sum up, embodying the postmodern sensibility, the use of myth by Barth and Pynchon differ from that of the modernists like Pound, Eliot and Yeats. Where myth can structure and order a chaotic reality for the modernists, the postmodernists question the very mode of perception of reality through myth and by deflating the authority/authenticity they equate the status of myth with reality. In this way, Barth exposes the self-reflexive, realistic version of myth. Pynchon does the same by giving mythical status to contemporary figures. For this, he evokes myth of popular culture, especially, the television. Though Barth shows fondness for capsizing privileged myths by fabricating them to his fictional ends, he prefers to reject them and substitute them by his own creations and narratives. Of course, these fictionalists, do make use/abuse of the classical/biblical myths of Oedipus, Orpheus and Narcissus. But they are used in such a manner to parody the contemporary American society that has pervasively become narcissistic. It was also suggested in this chapter that Barth and Pynchon puncture myth owing to its unreliable, meta narrative aspect of it

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