

TEMPORA MUTANTUR ET FABULAE MUTANTUR IN ILLIS:
SOME REFLECTIONS ON POST-MODERN AMERICAN FICTION

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One of the aims of this paper is to discuss the assumption that fiction can be blindly divided into fable or realism on the basis of whether or not it is an instance of the unselected flux of daily occurrences. According to Gindin, neither is a realistic novel simply an absolute rendition of objective reality, nor is fable completely divorced from reality, for the simple reason that "all fiction is experience which has been edited, selected, shaped by the author" (Gindin 1967:2). However, it must be emphasized that while realistic fiction gains its coherence from a general verisimilitude, the fable must depend upon its internal mechanisms for coherence. Thus, a certain connection must be made, the connection of the particular human experience to a reality beyond human experience. One has to accept this connection and believe that the fable's reality exists somewhere beyond human experience. Thus, the fable becomes a very rigorous absolute.

What is no doubt missing in this definition is the didactic aspect of the fable. It seems to be slightly simplistic to speak about a "moral" of the modern fable. Yet, what is invariably found in this kind of literature is a characteristic structuring of the plot. An adequate definition is given by Elder Olson in reference to any allegorical writing, and the fable belongs to this overall category:

The allegorical incident happens, not because it is necessary or probable in the light of other events, but because a certain doctrinal subject must have a certain doctrinal predicate; its order in the action is determined not by the action as action, but by the action as doctrine (Fletcher 1970:307).

What Olson terms as "doctrine", Honig refers to as "ideal" and Sacks as "statement", but the respective definitions reflect similar insights as Olson's.¹

¹ For the definition of "ideal" see Honig (1959:14), for the definition of "statement" see Richter (1974:10).

Speaking about the fable it is necessary to acknowledge Robert Scholes' term "fabulation". He uses the term in order to emphasize the process of fabling, i.e., storytelling, with a particular sense of pleasure in form. For Scholes, fabulation is a form more serious and engaging than a simple fable. Yet, he admits, very much like the ancient fabling of Aesop, fabulation "tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy"². He also states that fabulators are allegorists but the way in which they allegorize is modern. This has brought about a question: what is distinctively new in the way the modern fable partakes of allegory? To answer it, it is necessary to focus, briefly, on the basic distinction between the old, naive, allegory and the new, modern, allegory.

Basically, the distinction rests upon an estimation of whether or not the fiction is written in a continuous stream of allegorical reference. If this is the case, the fiction is an *allegory*, as in Dante's *Divina comedia*, the medieval allegorical romance or *The pilgrim's progress*. If, on the other hand, allegory is used intermittently, picked up by the writer and dropped again, we refer to allegory as a *mode* of writing which is used simultaneously with the mimetic mode, as in Hawthorne, Swift, Kafka, Golding and the whole generation of contemporary fabulists. Honig notes that an allegory starts with a "tabula rasa" assumption, the allegorist is the creator "making a reality and making it mean something" (Honig 1959:113). This statement refers to allegory—a genre, and to travesty it slightly in order to illustrate the fabulist's task would be to say that the contemporary fabulist *imitates* a reality and still makes it *mean* something.

To end this part of the discussion, it can be concluded that the modern fable is built on basically two assumptions. The world it presents is recognized as the one that creates the daily background for human experience. The way characterization and plot are handled by a fabulist is such as to reveal something more universal, something moving beyond human experience. The fabulist makes use of allegory as a mode of writing and the way he allegorizes is modern because this mode is used only when it aids the writer in supporting his moral vision. Therefore, it is entirely impossible to trace any continuous system of allegorical reference and, thus, allegory as used in contemporary fiction is all the more difficult to decode.

In order to establish the allegorical character of the fable three compositional elements should be taken into consideration: setting, character, and plot. It might be interesting to briefly analyze these elements in a few examples.

The setting in time and place is essential in the interpretation of William Gass' *Omensetter's luck*. The time is late nineteenth century and the place is Gilean, the biblical significance of which (Gilean-Gilead) has been discussed

² For a complete definition of "fabulation" see Scholes (1967:11, 99, 170, 173).

in the criticism of this book³. The thesis Gass formulates in the novel is not to be limited only to the nineteenth century. The version of theological dualism that Gass explores is between pure being, as personified by Brackett Omensetter, and which finds its echoes in the consciousness of Jethro Furber, and knowledge, as personified by Henry Pimber, also reflected in the consciousness of the priest. This is the type of dualism that extends beyond the limits of time.

Not only the general setting in time and place, but also the background of almost every episode is significant to the theme of *Omensetter's luck*. The presence of nature; fields, woods and streams, offers this background. Most of the narrative "takes place" outdoors, yet Jethro Furber's mental torment is occasionally shown against the background of the church. It seems to be significant that, as confronted with all these fields, woods and streams, the only negative description of natural surrounding is used in reference to the parish garden. On the other hand, Brackett Omensetter's naturalness is frequently implied in the way he fits into the natural surrounding. This is an important point. References to nature evoke notions of spontaneity, instinct and pleasure. Thus Omensetter is its outstanding representative. When the conflict issues, it is of theological character; thus, it is connected with the church and the priest is the representative of this conflict.

Omensetter's luck is detached from the actual background of its author; it is the novel which acquires significance in general terms only. By way of the combination of the setting and the theme, *Omensetter's luck* seems to be an answer to those novelists who find it difficult to complete with the fictional character of reality, i.e., to those who feel that the actuality is outdoing their talents. In order to achieve relevance, Gass does not intrude into the realm of actuality by means of devised plots or conspiracies. Rather, he creates distance by placing his action a century ago and with the fictional background so natural as to become symbolic. Most of his characters are elements of the general background; they are simple village people, with the exception of Brackett Omensetter and Jethro Furber who evolve as two-dimensional characters. Thus, there is the problem of characterization.

Characterization in the modern fable is based on a principle that the features which are in keeping with the theme are overdrawn, those irrelevant to the theme are omitted entirely. The significance of a character is grasped when his function in the plot has been determined. Thus, we are often presented with characters lacking any past, static figures that are significant only at a given moment in the narrative. Such is the case of the characterization in Ken Kesey's *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*. The book is a "collage" of various elements. It is undoubtedly fabulistic in the way Kesey handles allegory, the relationship of the real and the fantastic and its doctrine which can possibly

³ For this analogy see Shorris (1972:98).

(there can be other attempts at establishing the doctrine of this book) read as follows: the act of compassionate identification with others, of making a perfect sacrifice for them means destruction. The implication, however, is that in being destroyed one achieves a kind of sanctity. Finally, the book shows certain analogies to the romance tradition, and, specifically, to the Perceval version of the quest. In this scheme R. P. McMurphy is a Grail Knight in the fashion of Perceval on a mission to cure the Fisher King. In this version of the medieval romance the given is the sickness of the ruler of the land, the Fisher King. The sickness of the Fisher King is associated with the general wasting of the land, so it is implied that the healing of the King will result in the restoration of the land. Perceval's task is to ask about the Grail and thus restore the Fisher King, who is old and sick, to youth. A careful reading of *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* reveals striking parallels. Thus, first of all, there are some distinct stages of McMurphy's quest in the narrative.

The first one that parallels the symbolic question of Perceval is acted on the night when McMurphy discovers what he has suspected about Bromden's pretended deafness. He asks if Bromden wants one of the prescribed pills and Bromden answers by gesture. This moment is assisted by the introduction of the fish symbolism. McMurphy undresses and, "The shorts under his work pants were coal black satin covered with big white whales with red eyes" (Kesey 1962:76).

The next stage is revealed in the scene with the control panel that McMurphy attempts to lift. He demonstrates that there is something masculine in even only trying; one does not necessarily have to succeed. The scene carries a symbolic significance because a parallel action culminates in Bromden's actual lifting of the same control panel at the end of the novel.

The voting scene when Bromden raises his hand as the twenty first (deciding) vote marks the end of Bromden's paranoia; he is dragged out of the fog into the life that he will now face as a man.

When the time of the symbolic fishing trip comes, Bromden's first escape, the spiritual one, occurs. McMurphy teaches the patients that laughter is the best remedy for pain. Bromden watches everybody joined in this laughing session, he laughs with them, yet "somewhat not with them"; "I was off the boat, blown up off the water and skating the wind with these black birds, high above myself..." (Kesey 1962:212). This is the call of nature that Bromden responds to. It is very significant that at this moment the wastelandish qualities of the setting disappear. The artificial setting of the asylum gives way to the elements of nature: water with its waves, and birds. The restoration seems to be complete.

It is interesting to acknowledge that Frye's remark about romance heroes being "stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes" (Frye 1961:43), holds true as regards the characterization of *One flew over the duckoo's*

nest. R. P. McMurphy is significant as the archetypal rebel hero. Additionally, in him the two myths meet: the myth of Perceval and the myth of Christ. The latter finds evidence in the text: the "crucifixion" scene when McMurphy is led to shock therapy, and the electro-therapy table is in the shape of a crucifix ("like a cross, with a crown of electric sparks in place of thorns" (Kesey 1962:64-5)). Bromden, the narrator of Kesey's novel, makes a quintessential statement:

Like a cartoon world, where the figures are flat and outlined in black, jerking through some kind of goofy story that might be real funny if it weren't for the cartoon figures being real guys... (Kesey 1962:34).

Within the same convention of fabulistic characterization, a character may undergo what Honig calls "dialectic transfer", i.e. the transvaluation of an agent "from relatively static ideational figure(s) at the start to progressively more active and meaningful role(s) in the course of the narrative" (Honig 1959:138). Such is the case of Jacob Horner from John Barth's *The end of the road*.

At the beginning of the novel, Horner may be characterized as a man of, basically, three moods: inertia ("is mildly euphoric — my mind is neither empty nor still, but disengaged, and the idle race of fugitive thoughts that fill it spins past against a kind of all-pervasive, cosmic awareness" (Barth 1967:102)), weatherlessness ("On my weatherless days my body sat in a rocking chair and rocked and rocked and rocked, and my mind was as nearly empty as interstellar space" (Barth 1967:35)), and cosmopsis ("When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunger, and no quick hand to terminate the moment — there is only the light" (Barth 1967:74)). Cosmopsis means the total withdrawal from action because a person afflicted with it has lost the sense of values, hence, can think of nothing that accomplishes anything. The action of *The end of the road* is focused on a variety of ways in which Horner is "treated" for cosmopsis. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to present them in detail, a brief resume of the later narrative seems to be to the point.

Throughout the major part of the novel Horner's reality has been determined by Joe Morgan. Horner continues to imitate Morgan to such an extent that, acting on impulse, he seduces Rennie Morgan. What results from this act could have saved Jacob Horner under another set of circumstances.

Rennie confesses her infidelity to her husband. Apparently, neither Horner nor Rennie can tell, at Joe's inquisition, why they committed adultery, and Joe makes Rennie repeat the act until she can tell. All this is interspersed with a number of farcical scenes which Joe directs along with a great deal of psychoanalysis that goes on in the Morgans' household. The vaudeville ends. Rennie gets pregnant and the question of fatherhood arises. Rennie does not want the child, nor does she want to go on living. The days that follow are probably the

busiest in Horner's life. This is precisely the point at which the "dialectic transfer" occurs. Horner's previously meaningless and empty life has acquired sense, and probably for the first time there is motivation for his actions. Having tried all kinds of possibilities for a safe abortion (the alternative is to risk the danger of an illegal one) including his determined commitment to Miss Peggy Rankin in return for help, Joe asks the Doctor to perform the operation. Yet, Rennie's brutish ignorance wins despite the best of Horner's intentions. Having eaten a substantial supper of hot-dogs and sauerkraut before the abortion, Rennie vomits under ether and dies of asphyxiation.

Considering the plot, what seems to be a recurrent feature of the modern fable is the skillful interweaving of the real with the fantastic. The explication of allegorical meanings is gradual. This trait has been demonstrated in reference to Kesey's *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*. Thomas Pynchon's *The crying of lot 49* is a similar case. Again, the novel is structured on certain analogies to the medieval romance.

Having discovered the absence of any Grail Knight ("If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?" (Pynchon 1966:11)), Oedipa Maas is compelled to seek her own deliverance, and, thus, she takes on the role of Gawain. Finding out the meaning of Inverarity Estate constitutes Oedipa's Grail. Step by step she unveils the mystery. Thus, first she encounters the symbol of W.A.S.T.E. and connects it with the unofficial mail service. She then looks for the explication in the text of *The courier's tragedy* (Pynchon's invention) and labels the whole system after the concluding lines:

He that last as Thurn and Taxis knew
Now recks no lord but the stilleto's Thorn,
And Tacit lies the gold once-knotted horn,
No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,
Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero (Pynchon 1966:52).

Her choice of the label (Tristero) is later justified when she decodes the meaning of the W.A.S.T.E. acronym as "We Await Silent Tristero Empire".

The significance of this acronym is apparent from the moment Oedipa sets off on her pilgrimage. The California of *The crying of lot 49* is a waste land, in Oedipa's code. She comments on the conformity of the landscape and on the "infected" nature of San Francisco. San Francisco (her legacy) is more of "a grouping of concepts" than the city with any identity of its own; "... census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (Pynchon 1966:12). It is Sunday, this first day of her pilgrimage, and dominating all this is "silence and paralysis". It is only later that Oedipa realizes that the images that shoot through her mind can be generalized, that San Narciso stands for America.

With the publication of *The crying of lot 49* Pynchon is destroying the gap between the credible and the incredible of daily occurrence in America. Like his heroine, Pynchon has read the hieroglyphics of the contemporary American landscape, and he has put a frame on the apparent senselessness of the suburban sprawl. In other words, it is Pynchon's conviction that when you satirize the senselessness and write it down, you learn to live with it.

As regards the quest Oedipa Maas undertakes, it remains problematic whether or not it results in success. In fact only partial success is inherent in this type of quest.⁵ This partial success is granted only after the question concerning the Grail has been asked. Oedipa's enquiry into the nature of the Tristero parallels such a question. In two Gawain versions of the romance the person upon whom the fertility of the land depends is dead. It seems too far-fetched to equate Pierce Inverarity with the Fisher King because in Pynchon's novel he is the one who brings the desolation of the land. Yet, as the Tristero with everything it implies is inherent in Inverarity's testament, a guess can be made that Inverarity, having comprehended all the wrong he had done to America, parted with his life in order that Oedipa restore the land to its fruitfulness.

Conclusion

As the title of this paper suggests, the modern fable, though undoubtedly stemming from the long tradition of fabulistic writing, is a new form. If, on the one hand, it retains certain formal characteristics (its didacticism, the use of allegory, universal interpretation), it is, basically, the way a fabulist incorporates certain elements traditionally absent from this genre, which accounts for the new qualities of the fable today.

It is worthwhile pointing out that the range of approach in the new fable is very wide. It can be interpreted on the level of the romance, as has been indicated above. It can be approached on the existential level, e.g. Mailer's *An American dream* or Percy's *The moviegoer*. It can be the transposition of a fairy-tale, e.g. Barthelme's *Snow White*. These do not exhaust all the possibilities.

Finally, the "up-to-dateness" of the modern fable should be emphasized. Warner's criteria of evaluating whether or not a novel belongs to an early or a later tradition of allegorical writing seem to be very much to the point. For him, the method of using radical fantasy and then inviting the reader to discover himself and his world in this fantasy ("imagining normal relationships in a wholly abnormal environment") belongs to an early tradition. This point of view was successfully employed in the fiction of Swift, Huxley, Orwell and Kafka. To Warner, a modern allegorist will reverse the procedure and say, "Here is your world... look at it in a slightly different way and you will see how full it is of monstrous and unrecognized faces" (Warner 1947:147).

The modern fabulist does not distort the world in fiction. He recognizes that the world has distorted itself and he leads his reader through; he helps him to find his way in the distorted world.

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