

THE WORLD AS A STAGE: ACTING AND STORYTELLING IN *THE SOT-WEED FACTOR*

Raluca ȘERBAN *

The first words that come to mind when one thinks of *disguise* would probably be for most of us “mask”, “masquerade”, “carnival”. Postmodern writers seem to have focused on this concept more than any others, since questioning and re-creating identity is one of the key-issues of postmodernism in literature. To this we should add that characters in postmodern novels, like in a carnival, cease to exist outside or behind their masks and *become* their own masks, or, as Bakhtin puts it, “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it.” A very good example of this quest for identity are the novels of John Barth, particularly *The Sot-Weed Factor*, for the characters of this novel cease to exist in the absence of their *disguise strategies*, like in a carnival, however, with one major difference: there is no recognition of the inverted world that requires a knowledge of the order of the world which it inverts, and, in a sense, incorporates.” (4: 74) Consequently, the mask appears to have lost its original function, that of disguising, although *disguising* continues to be the main purpose of the characters’ changing of masks and roles at a first, superficial level of reading.

The problem of human identity, which appears to be artificially constructed as a sum of masks, is one of the most important issues to be discussed in relation to Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*, since almost all the characters seem to create versions of themselves and versions of history, as they tell hundreds of stories throughout the novel. Speaking – asserting, which means interpreting, creating one’s own story about the world – is the only way to survive in it, as it also happens in *The End of the Road*. This is also what Burlingame, the hero’s tutor, teaches us about the fictional universe we are going to analyze: “One must assert, assert, assert, or go screaming mad. What other course remains?” (1: 365)

The outcome of the assumption that every character must create his/her version of *self* and *reality* in order to exist would be the huge number of protean characters – shifting masks and changing roles – that the novel revolves around. The hero, Ebenezer Cooke, is a typical example for this. Here is only one piece of evidence: when confronted with McEvoy’s wager, he could choose no mask “from his overstuffed wardrobe, no particular style came readily to hand.” (1: 59) The result – he “closed and unclosed his hands and his mouth, and the strain near retched him, but it was... a false labor: no person issued from it” (1: 60), which is a way to say that being is equaled to acting only, i.e. to wearing a certain mask, and assuming a certain role.

It is interesting that acting has been assumed since early childhood. Sometimes the hero and his sister “would maintain the same role for days, sometimes only for minutes.” (1: 16) What appears for now to be an innocent game of children will soon prove an ontological void, as Ebenezer keeps playing, *acting*, even as an adult. The conclusion of the text, taking the shape of the omniscient narrator’s comments, is the same, “insofar as *to be* in essence the same Johnny-come-Friday that was John o’ Thursday, why, this Ebenezer Cooke was no man at all” (1: 55), but a “chameleon like” figure only, acting one role or another, a “mismanaged marionette.” (1: 108)

Towards the end of the first part of the novel, Ebenezer *seems* to acquire some essence, some sense of identity: he becomes poet and Laureate of Maryland. However, we must remember that this identity is imposed to him from the outside, as a social role, by Lord Baltimore alias Burlingame, his tutor. According to Manfred Putz, this is more than a (self) imposed role; it is the very “creation of his essence.” (6: 78) From this moment on, the hero acquires a

* Junior assistant. Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication, ASE Bucharest

constructed self, essence, that of a poet, which also plays the part of mythotherapy also for Jake Horner (*The End of the Road*). This “act of holding on to self-given fictional coordinates prevents existence from crumbling into nothingness.” (7: 165)

With the second part of the novel, “Going to Malden”, the reader discovers a very different Ebenezer: independent, capable of making decisions. However, this new self of ‘the poet’, this new essence, is not authentic. He goes on living under the sign of acting: when learning that some impostor passes for Ebenezer Cooke, Laureate of Maryland, he is indignant at it, “But he hath robbed me of myself; he hath poached upon my very being! I cannot permit it!” (1: 204)

The result of this event is that the hero is forced into further acting, into further creating and assuming other masks, roles, guided by Burlingame’s principles, namely that “man is whate’er he chooses to call himself” (1: 161) and that “ ‘Tis a wondrous tonic for defeat to murder an old self and beget a new!” (1: 530). If we take Burlingame’s words for granted: “If you’d live in the world, my friend, you must dance to some other fellow’s tune or call your own and try to make the whole world step to’t” (1: 350). For, we have to admit, “the world’s a happy climate for imposture” (1: 349); at least in this novel.

More than that, in the case of Eben Cooke, his assuming of different roles overlapping the basic role of poet and Laureate of Maryland is supplemented by the creation what Manfred Putz calls “alternative worlds”, yet another means of disguising: the same mask in a different world cannot be recognized or interpreted in the same way as it was in its original world. During the first half of his journey to Malden, the hero doesn’t seem to acknowledge the fact that the *real* world, or what the omniscient author refers to as the real world, contradicts his image of it, as emphasized by his panegyric poem “Marylandiad”. Cooke’s imaginary voyage may be considered part of those fantasies which “provide temporary shelter for their ingenious inventors, facilitate their self-definition or bend reality until it fits an imaginary concept of themselves” (7: 169). The result, i.e. the fact that in the end Eben Cooke is the Laureate of a Maryland that has adjusted to the main outlines of his fantasy, is even more interesting if we add that, while creating his fantasy, the hero is shown as a (post)modern DonQuixote, a victim of delusion. Beginning with the moment when Ebenezer assumes the role of poet and Laureate, he starts living within his own fictional universe.

However, we cannot deny that he constantly

sees *reality* distorted, and not only in his poem. It is precisely this why John McEvoy tells him “‘tis not simply love ye know naught of, ‘tis the *entire great real world!*” (1: 74) Due to the imaginative potentiality of the hero, life and the real world (as proposed by the omniscient narrator) tent to turn into Ebenezer’s dream. To his question, “Am I waked to the world from a thirty-year sleep? ... Or is’t only now I’ve begun to dream?” (1: 71), we would be probably tempted to take the second suggested answer. And if “all this, however, was mere disillusionment”, the fault was, “as himself felt mildly ... of the nature of Reality, which had failed to measure up to his expectations.” (1: 229) This is another way to say that the hero already lives within the fictional universe created by himself, or even that he achieves somehow a very postmodern erasure of boundaries between reality and fiction – that would suit Linda Hutcheon’s idea of postmodern representation, i.e. one which offers new possibilities of redesigning the boundaries between arts and the world(5: 38)

However, Ebenezer is not ready to accept the consequences of such a point of view – his commentaries when he is on the verge of dying are a good example, “That lives are stories, he assumed; that stories end, he allowed... But that the storyteller himself must live a particular tale and die – Unthinkable! Unthinkable!” (1: 288) The outcome of such a biased position would be the “recovery” of the poet, who will give up his fantasies, his “alternative worlds”, in favour of the real world, towards the end of the novel (he refuses to write “lies”). What is also interesting is the fact that, towards the end of the novel, *reality* changes, adjusts to his former fantasy, precisely when he stops deluding himself and when he gives up the role of poet.

There is a huge distance between the Don-Quixote-like Ebenezer who asked rhetorically “What business hath the poet with the business of the world?” (1: 501) and the new Eben Cooke, who rejects such creations in the end. To put it differently, his identity has been shaped with the aid of his own imagination, in this process of acting and changing masks.

Ebenezer Cooke is not the only character in the novel whose identity is constructed in the process of playing roles. Almost all the characters, or at least all the important ones, wear masks, hide – at a superficial level of reading, and live due to this acting. One of the most interesting figures in the novel is that of Ebenezer’s tutor, Henry Burlingame, some guiding principles of whom we have already emphasized as underlying the whole book, as a meta-text framing the story. His basic thesis resembles that of

“mythotherapy”, as emphasized in *The End of the Road*. In Henry’s words, “man is whate’er he chooses to call himself” (1: 161), idea which will be stressed throughout the novel. The tutor never loses a chance to teach his former student that “The world can alter a man entirely, Eben, or he can alter himself; down to his very essence”, for man himself, as well as the entire world, is a Heraclitean river: “a man *must* alter willy-nilly in’s flight to the grave; he is a river; so running seawards, that is ne’er the same from hour to hour.” (1: 140)

Indeed, of all the characters dwelling on this fictional universe, Burlingame is a protean character par excellence, and, since the metamorphic existence seems to have been programmatically stressed by the early postmodern novels, a postmodern character par excellence. The concept of a unitary, though not always coherent, ego is left behind and substituted by a whole range of egos, i.e. inconsistent faces/masks. (7: 81) Henry himself seems to acknowledge that his role-playing implies something deeper than a game: “I commenced to play the game of the governments; and the game itself hath made such changes in me, that none who knew me erst would know me now.” (1: 180)

The very fact that Henry does not know his real parents, his search for them could be read as the searching for substance, for identity to be found *beneath* the name, implying that Henry lacks precisely this essence which springs from the link with history. This is, as a matter of fact, both his liberty of assuming whatever role he chooses to play, and his ordeal - “what a burden and despair to be a stranger to the world at large, and have no link with history! ‘Tis as if I’d sprung *de novo* like a maggot out of meat, or dropped from the sky.” (1: 145-146)

On the other hand, this lack of links with history, this lack of essence grant him the possibility to choose his identity, his mask, as well as to change it at will. Out of this vacuum there springs the protean character I have mentioned before. His ultimate (re)created identity, if any, slips through the fingers of anyone who tries to catch it. Here is an example of Bertrand’s attempt at catching it, “From all I’ve heard from you and others, he hath posed as Baltimore, Coode, Colonel Sayer, Tim Mitchell, Bertrand Burton, and Eben Cooke, to mention no more, and hath ne’er been found out yet! But what’s the chiefest talent of John Coode, if not the same? Hath he not played the priest, minister, general, and what hath ye?” (1: 543) This is still an unsuccessful attempt, because the *real* identity of Henry is to be learnt further on, towards the end of the novel – and even then it would be tempting

to question it – the son of an Indian chief, Tayac Chicamec.

In fact, Henry seems to be literally a Proteus; here is only one example of how abused the concept of mask (*disguise*) really is: “His hands were busy as he spoke, and his appearance changed magically. Off came the powdered periwig to be replaced by a short, black hair piece; from his mouth he removed a curious device which, it turned out, had held three artificial teeth in position. Most uncannily of all, he seemed able to alter at will the set of his facial muscles: the curve of his cheeks and ... his nose changed shape before their eyes... Finally, his voice deepened and coarsened... Nicholas Lowe, in a few seconds, had become Timothy Mitchell.” (1: 777-778)

Perhaps the only difference between Henry and Eben Cooke is the fact that the former is thoroughly aware of the fictional status of his roles, of their power of disguise, while Ebenezer takes the artificial for natural, and even more, for essence.

Other characters come close to this description as well. Bertrand, the poet’s servant, plays the role of Laureate throughout the novel. It is interesting that, towards the end of the book, Bertrand comes to identify so much with the role of his master, that he actually gets married instead of the poet, and does so, not only for pragmatic reasons, but also because of his “wounded pride.” (1: 535) Another metamorphic character is Anna, the poet’s sister. “Your sister is a driven and fragmented spirit, friend; the one half of her soul yearns but to fuse itself with yours, whilst the other half recoils at the thought.” (1: 518) However, since Anna’s description is made by a character whose credibility is at least doubtful, i.e. Burlingame, it is Joan Toast the one that remains the feminine character closest to the protean hero. Not only is she interpreted in different ways, “to me she is a woman’, replied McEvoy, ’to you she is a hallucination” (1: 76), but she wears different masks throughout the novel: beginning as a prostitute in London, and later on aboard the *Cyprian*, and ending with that of beloved and wife of Eben Cooke, “Splendid girl! She is a very saint,” (1: 788) and mother of his child. We should note that we don’t witness a Romantic change of the very essence of the hero (cf. Jean Valjean or Raskolnikov), but the same changing of masks, of roles of a void yet human-like character we have witnessed with the Ebenezer himself.

I would argue that it is rather the existence of protean characters than the shift in the hero’s perception that contributes to the enforcement of the image of a Heraclitean river which is the novel itself. It is precisely this that does not allow us to read it

simply as a picaresque story. A much more appropriate reading would be as a synthesis of pre-modernist and contemporary modes of writing, one that, in John Barth's own words, "neither merely repudiates, nor merely imitates... nineteenth-century pre-modernist grandparents."

There are other reasons why we shouldn't interpret the novel as a picaresque one only: the importance of the tale, i.e. of telling, of asserting, of interpreting and (re)creating facts, together with the inflation of plots. Almost all the adventures experienced by the protagonist and by other characters alike are told from more than one point of view, and not only once do these perspectives contradict each other. Despite this abundance of perspectives, most of the times, the hundreds of tales told throughout the novel help the reader understand a world that doesn't make any sense until it is interpreted by somebody, until it puts on itself some kind of a *mask*.

It may well be precisely because of this that the characters in *The Sot-Weed Factor* do not exist unless they play a certain role or wear one of a multitude of possible masks, unless they assert, tell a story of their own. Everything is personal story, personal interpretation, and even the historic documents that are used – like John Smith's *Secret Historie of the Voyage Up the Bay of Chesapeake* or

the satirical poem *The Sot-Weed Factor* written in 1708 by "Eben Cooke, Gent" – turn into mere fantasies, or, rather, turn out to be fantasies. If we do not bear this in mind, there is the danger that the novel should seem to us a collage of redundant sequences of adventures.

In conclusion, it seems that not only Ebenezer Cooke looks at life "from the storyteller's point of view," (1: 288) but all the characters do that. Life in *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a very elaborate story, with different narrators that come and go, interrupt each other, continue each other's versions, a story which needs to be played by the same characters who *tell* it, and who always hide a mask behind another mask. Perhaps this is the reason why Christine Brooke Rose called the novel the first of a series of "palimpsest stories," (2: 182) and why Linda Hutcheon considers this type of literature highly anti-mimetic; "there is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality." (3: XII). Hence the impression that nothing is certain, nothing is ultimately true, and, if we agree to push this interpretation even farther, *nothing is* in the novel.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Barth, John, *The Sot-Weed Factor*. New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1966
2. Brooke-Rose, Christine. *Stories, Theories and Things*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991
3. Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London, Routledge, 1990
4. Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. London, Routledge, 1991
5. Hutcheon, Linda, *Politica postmodernismului*. București, Univers, 1997
6. Putz, Manfred, *Fabula Identitatii*. Iași, Institutul European, 1995
7. Putz, Manfred, *Essays on American Literature and Ideas*. Iași, Institutul European, 1997