

THE DISSOLUTION OF VALUE AND MEANING IN JOHN BARTH'S *THE FLOATING OPERA*

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Why *The Floating Opera*? ...It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along both banks. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wake until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps they'd have to use their imagination, or ask more attentive neighbors...I needn't explain that that's how much of life works: our friends float past; we become involved with them; they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely...And that's how this book will work, I'm sure. It's a floating opera...

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In his renowned essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" John Barth admits he praises writers like Robbe-Grillet and Borges because they challenge the epistemology of realism and "remind us of the fictitious aspect of our own existence" (30). Barth's own works demonstrate a similar distrust in the conventional, *exhausted* values of realism and an attempt to refurbish literature with fresh themes and techniques. His first novel *The Floating Opera* (1956) definitely lacks the high experimentalism of his subsequent novels but it is the theme of the repudiation of stable points of reference which defines its author as a truly postmodern writer still in the threshold of his literary experience. By revealing the fragmentary nature of life and art and the inconsistency of human existence Barth asserts in this work the idea that identity and reality are products of our imagination, an idea which becomes a central motive in his aesthetics.

The Floating Opera is an account of the desperate attempts of the protagonist Todd Andrews to find a sensible design for his life experience by establishing links between related events and his subsequent realization of the

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fact that reason is inadequate in coping with the drama of human existence due to the failure of absolute values in asserting definite truths. The struggle of the character to achieve rational standards thus ends with the manifestation of the idea of the essential randomness of the universe, the arbitrariness and relativity of values and the multiplicity of meaning. *The Floating Opera* The central conflict of Todd's life can be formulated as "the tension between the urge to live and the desire to die, between what human beings want to be and what they are, between subconscious sexual drives and conscious rational processes, between human violence and elaborate systems of justice, and between events and attribution of causes" (Fogel 25). The conflict is resolved by the realization that life and death are equally unmotivated. The reasons to die are as unjustifiable as the reasons to live. As Todd Andrews tries to solve this paradox he develops a new approach to life based on the irrationality of human existence. Several incidents teach him that life is governed by chance rather than reason: his father's suicide, the death of the German soldier, his relationship with Jane Mack and Betty June. These events are the outcome not of prearranged plans but unmotivated incidents that can be explained in terms of human brutality and irrationality. The participation in the First World War forces the protagonist to fight and kill and teaches him that man is a victim of emotions such as fear and despair: "I was just stupefied. Cowardice involves choice, but fear is independent of choice... But it was the purest and strongest emotion I've ever experienced. I could actually, for a part of the time it lasted regard myself objectively: a shocked, drooling animal in a mudhole" (FO 63).

This feeling gives birth to a vehement notion of skepticism. When he is in danger he experiences purely physical sensations divorced from reason and ethical concerns. After this event he can no longer rely on his humanity as well as that of the others. Initially he presumes that society is based on a stable system of human values but after the war experience his faith crumbles down. The only stable thing he believes in are Maryland beaten biscuits: "few things are stable in this world. Your morning stomach, reader, ballasted with three Maryland beaten biscuits, will be stable" (FO 53). Despite this prevailing sense of uncertainty which acquires the role of the main determining power of his life, the character seems to presume, after all, the existence of meaning. His three inquiry projects show his desire to turn the ultimate meaninglessness surrounding him into a coherent structure loaded with certain meanings. Two of the projects, *An Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Self-Destruction of Thomas A. Andrews, of Cambridge, Maryland, on Ground-Hog*

Day, 1930 (More Especially into the Causes Therefore) and *An Inquiry into the Life of Thomas T. Andrews, of Cambridge, Maryland (1867-1930), Giving Especial Consideration to His Relations with His Son, Todd Andrews (1900 -)* deal primarily with the death of the protagonist's father and form a premise for the third project titled *Self-Inquiry*. With these three inquiries Todd aims to assert the potential rationality underlying human experience by discerning the reasons for his father's suicide but it turns out that it will take "more lifespan than it takes a lazy Buddhist to attain Nirvana" (FO 51). For Barth "the constitution or resolution of traditional values is dependent on the relationship between father and son. This relationship is seen by him as representative of the principle of causation: "father relates to son as cause relates to effect...Since the son originates from his father, he must turn to him as to the source of his own actions: Their communication would establish that link which illuminates the relationship between cause and effect" (Ziegler 20). But in Todd's case this relationship fails to assert any value. It is beyond the hero's power to comprehend the real motives for his father's suicide. It seems to Andrews that it has been predetermined by an external force but the possibility of the involvement of free will seems equally possible as well. His research shows that intentionality does not form a basis for human activity and that reason fails to provide explanation for human existence. Unable to resolve the paradox of suicide, the protagonist accepts it as an inexplicable necessity and starts assuming that rational objectiveness is in fact not much different from imaginative speculation.

The protagonist faces the same problem in the process of writing his autobiography too, since his task is to give an account of himself, to comment on the book's title and warn the reader against irrelevant interpretations. He wishes to achieve this without requiring much effort from the reader and himself. "Todd writes his journal in order to gain a private, personal perspective on his own problem as an aspect of his father's suicide. If he could understand or justify his father's action, he might be able to understand his own suicidal drive and/or his reason for not blowing up himself" (Bowen 1). Todd supposes he knows enough about himself, but the long process of self-investigation ends in the composition of a huge archive of material related to his past. Finally he decides to form the autobiography by picking randomly parts of the material related to given periods of time. Consequently it comes out that all the rational investigation was futile, since the final version is based on random selection and his autobiography is therefore "doubly partial, twice biased, in the sense of

being both personal and incomplete, partisan and fragmentary" (Hasan 124). His abortive attempt to write his autobiography proves once more that obtaining any objective knowledge, even about oneself, is impossible and that even writing about oneself definitely involves subjective evaluation and deviation from truth because of inevitable misconceptions.

The discrepancy between Todd's view of himself and other people's view on him also illustrates the doubtful nature of the question of objectivity. He defines himself as reticent and consistent but for Harrison and Jane he is eccentric and unpredictable. The reason for this incompatibility is the fact that his "actions and opinions are inconsistent with *their* principles" (FO 1). Todd's principles are not reliable because, as he himself admits, they may change now and then. The book itself is about such a change – a change that took a place either on the 21st or 22nd of June 1937. Todd fails to remember the date of his abortive suicide, an incident which poses a threat to the validity of all other detail he remembers: the exact weight of Jane and Harrison's daughter, the exact number of the spectators on board of The Floating Opera and details about the clothes his father wore on the day of his suicide. The uncertainty about the day of the central incident veils with suspicion the whole narrative. How can we be sure that all his memories are reliable? How can we trust him about other issues if he fails to convince us about the date of the central event in the book? Therefore all his recollections are *almost* true rather than true. He invites the reader to approach the book in the way he looks at his name. The more he tells about himself the more inconsistent he becomes. Initially he announces as his only deformity his clubbed fingers. Then a number of other deficiencies are included in the "modest" list of imperfections: a tendency to myocardial infraction, a chronic infection of the prostate gland, fillings and crowns in his teeth, an atrophied muscle. While Todd is telling about his (im)perfections he is aware he is actually constructing a story. He is also conscious that story-telling is not a flight from reality because the so called facts are also fictitious constructs. Nevertheless his experience teaches him to be as rational as possible when he refers to his subjective responses and opinions, a fact which is stressed by Ziegler too:

The telling of his story is Todd's compensatory attempt at communication. By communicating with the reader, he chooses a counterpart who, like his father, is distant and in a sense non-existent; but as author he himself at the same time assumes the role of father toward the reader, who has to understand *his* story. Through narration Todd hopes to base communication on common inference instead of an individual

understanding. Although he believes that his reader cannot help but share his own subjective evaluations, since the reader, by accepting the role of interpreter of a text, has already voted for opinion against fact, Todd takes care that his own opinions always appear in the garb of rationalizations (Ziegler 22).

Despite his tendency for rationalization, Todd cannot avoid inconsistent ideas and irreconcilable tendencies. His attitude towards love, for example, illustrates the impossibility to assert a single point of view, and consequently a single valid meaning, because the protagonist fails to provide a single definition for "love". He distinguishes it from copulation but it seems impossible to differentiate one's love for one's wife, one's mistress, parents, pets, books, games. How then can a single term be adequate to represent so different feelings? And once uttered does this word necessarily represent genuine passions? Definitely not, since Todd, for example, admits many times that he loves a woman, not because he really does so but because he knows that she wants to hear that. So words can be used not to express genuine feelings and true facts, but to create a reality that is removed from true experience. "I was not and am not interested in the truth or falsehood of a statement," (FO 36) declares Todd, asserting the large gap between a signifier and its signified(s), between world and word. Even confirming two contradictory ideas does not trouble him because of his conviction that there is no absolute truth. "Things that are clear to me are sometimes incomprehensible to others – which fact occasions this chapter, if not the whole book," declares Todd in the chapter titled "The Puckerel Smile" to assert that there are not "particularly true" (143) ideas and assumptions. This chapter is based on Todd's recollections of the "puckerel smile" that appeared on Betty June's face when they met for the second time in a brothel and she tried to kill him with a broken bottle. The chapter includes also his speculations on the implications of the smile. Except the enigmatic meaning of the smile, Todd tries to understand also Betty June's motivation to kill him.

As with the solution of the mystery of his father's death he finds himself baffled by many possibilities. He is able to extract a number of possible meanings from a single fact: it may appear that she wants to kill him for having laughed at her during their first sexual intercourse but it is reasonable that she had come after a number of years of prostitution to see "the essential grotesqueness of the whole business" of life. He assumes the possibility for a third reason – she may have laughed at the thought of earning money for giving him "nothing more voluptuous than a rubdown" to earn money (FO 144). He

sees many other determinants for her murderousness but fails to discern any obvious implication in the puckerel smile. As a self-conscious storyteller who is aware of his limitations and therefore constructs his story on speculations rather than certainties, Todd declares that another person would not have imagined these alternatives and perhaps would have suggested completely different ones.

Sometimes reality offers him alternatives that are discordant with his own plans, a conflict, which is due again to the lack of causality in life. Todd's failure to destroy "The Floating Opera", a showboat that is in Cambridge for a performance, illustrates that it is impossible to name all the forces that regulate his life. By blowing up the showboat, Todd plans to kill not only himself but also all the spectators including the Jacks and their daughter Jeannine. But in spite of his calculations, the boat does not blow up because the gas does not explode for reasons as vague as the reasons for Todd's father's suicide and Betty's puckerel smile. At this point he realizes that there is no final reason for doing anything. Thus he formulates his last, fifth, principle: "There is no final reason for living (or for suicide)" (*FO* 245). The list of principles, including four other articles, is devised under different circumstances that teach him that the cause of any human act is elusive and obscure:

- I. Nothing has intrinsic value.
- II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are ultimately irrational.
- III. There is therefore, no ultimate reason for valuing anything...including life"
- IV. Living is action. There's no final reason for action. (*FO* 217, 223, 245).

This list of principles culminating in the idea that there is no reason to live or to die seems to reflect Todd's adherence to a "stable" approach to life expressed in his blatant nihilism but his confession about the changing nature of his philosophies shows that there is no internal logic in the successive principles and masks he assumes. The protagonist describes his life as a carnival of changing identities which demand the formulation of new principles. The moment he kills the soldier he passes from the stage of innocence to that of a "devil-maycare". When Betty June cuts him with a broken bottle the "drunken animal" residing in him turns into a "saint" who is alarmed by the rapacious presence of mortality. His father's suicide marks a new stage in his career of changing masks. He becomes a "cosmic cynic" with "no schedules, no demands, no jealousy, no fictions – all was spontaneity and candor" (*FO* 161). The

protagonist does not include the mask of an author in his list of identities but it is his final disguise in the long carnival of changing masks.

Todd sees no inconsistency in changing his principles, for he believes himself to have been relatively true to each one successively. He accepts each philosophical stance, each "mask," as real with "life-or-death significance" until yet another idea, stance, or mask displaces it. Each, including Todd's mediated suicide, seems the best and final "solution," but each, in turn, is finally unpersuasive... His firm adherence to principles is, however, the rhetoric that he uses on the reader, one of the strong assertions that he usually has to recant or, at the least, qualify; his changing philosophical stances or masks are provisional (Fogel 37).

Many critics have concentrated on the extreme nihilism of *The Floating Opera* basing their arguments on the list of Todd's principles. Fogel offers an inclusive revision of the critical debate concerning the nihilistic quality of the novel adding also new dimensions to the dispute:

Some (critics) find the nihilism as extreme as Samuel Beckett's. Others play down that philosophical leaning and look instead, as does Charles B. Harris, to the presence of psychological probing or, as Harold Farwell does, to such moral values of love – "a creative attempt to be free from the prison of the self...as noble an affirmation as is the artist's comparable attempt to transcend his limitations in his art." Yet a third interpretive position is represented by John Hawkes, Thomas LeClaire, and Campbell Tatham. As Tatham writes, "whatever else *The Floating Opera* may be about, it is fundamentally concerned with...the art of artistic creation." As this critical debate suggests, the book is about nihilism, but it is also about love and art...Set in a thoroughly modernist context, *The Floating Opera* gives a sense of the existential angst and world weariness. (Fogel 28).

Todd's experience illustrates most eloquently this "sense of the existential angst and world weariness" as he aims to achieve a guiding principle but the more he attempts to find it, the more he loses his faith in absolutes. After two years spent in examining documents, questioning people and reading relevant material, the protagonist realizes the futility of his indefatigable efforts. His endeavor fails to provide the cause for his father's death "as causation is never more than an inference; and any inference involves at some point the leap from what we see to what we can't see" (FO 218). Todd's aim is to shorten this leap. But the distance between the visible and invisible can never be eliminated completely. This renders the *Inquiry* interminable. The narrator does not nourish the illusion to leap "the gap between fact and opinion" (FO 219). His purpose is just to make it as narrow as possible. And "if Todd can no longer discover final reasons for anything, this implies that the chain of causation is broken. Yet there

are still meanings. In fact, meanings come to substitute for reasons, opinions for facts" (Ziegler 23).

Todd's awareness of the impossibility to bridge the abyss between world and words is a result also of the realization of the inadequacy of language to allege certitudes. The name Todd for example can be spelled with one or two d's. "Tod is the German for death, and this book hasn't much to do with death; Todd is almost Tod – that is almost death – and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost death" (FO 3). If we generalize Todd's speculations about his name, we reach the conclusion that in his *Inquiry* he can always reveal "almost-death" but not Death, almost-truth, or one aspect of truth, not Truth itself. His account will provide one point of view leaving lacunae for many others which treat the same issue from a different perspective.

Todd's constant encounters with the multifaceted nature of reality do not in any way discourage his preoccupation with the *Inquiry* project. He is almost aware of its potential failure but he goes on with the project because the very process of writing becomes a justification for it as he declares in the following lines: "It doesn't follow that because a goal is unattainable, one shouldn't work toward its attainment...processes continued for long enough tend to become ends in themselves, and if for no other reason, I should continue my researches simply in order to occupy pleasantly two hours after dinner! (FO 219). In a world deprived of stable values, writing proves to be a pleasant way of spending time. But it is the writer's obligation to satisfy the reader too. "Like a host fussing over a guest" he is supposed to please him, to make him as comfortable as possible, "to dunk him gently into the meandering stream of the story" (FO 2). His main obligation is to be entertaining, to provide pleasure, that is to create a *funhouse* as Barth develops the idea in a later novel: "Now, come along with me, reader, and don't fear for your weak heart; I've one myself and know the value of inserting first a toe, then a foot, next a leg, very slowly your hips and stomach, and finally your whole self into my story, and taking a good long time to do it. This is, after all, a pleasure – dip I'm inviting you to, not a baptism" (FO 5).

The fact that Todd has decided to write the *Inquiry* proves that he has found a way out of the existential paradox. He has managed to break through the nihilistic position and solve the conflict between people's essential bestiality and their claim for rational reasoning. Todd rejects the presence of absolute values, he lives in a totally irrational world where the only governing power is

arbitrariness. Doing anything proves meaningless in this world because all pretensions for adherence to rational systems fail. "Todd Andrews, like so many artists of his and past centuries, has confronted a world suddenly grown threatening in its inscrutability. His dilemma recapitulates that primal dilemma when ancient man, confronted with the primordial void, called a world out of nothingness" (Harris 29). Being therefore able to admit the fact of his essential irrationality is in fact an evidence for Todd's ability to utter rational sentences. His experience justifies once more the common belief in the urge to organize the essential chaos into units of logic and meaning. It justifies once more the impulse to write, to fill in the blanks, to go on constructing stories.

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