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IN SEARCH OF THE UNPRESENTABLE: 'DETECTIVES OF THE SUBLIME' IN (POST)MODERN AMERICAN NOVEL[***]

Abstract
This paper deals with analysis of five representative American novels of the XX century – Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Barth's *Lost in The Funhouse*, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and Morrison's *Beloved* – using Nabokov's *Lolita* as a reference text and as an intersection of certain narrative strategies which appear in the mentioned novels, too. Through Lyotard's, Baudrillard's, Ricoeur's, Hutcheon's and partially Derrida's philosophical postulates, we shall endeavor to demonstrate that a common denominator of these texts is the search for some modern *unpresentable*, and the role that different forms of *marginal perspectives* play in this search. We shall also outline some provisional (and certainly incomplete) typology of the unpresentable – the paradox of desire, unreliability of reality, and indeterminacy of identity – and determine several different margins – psycho-pathological, racio-cultural, historic-anachronistic and introvertedly philosophical – at which, in various combinations, the characters who engage themselves in this search for the unpresentable are placed.

Key words: contemporary American novel, margin, unpresentable

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1.Introduction

A common denominator that, in spite of thematic diversity, we could single out and under whose auspices we would place Faulkner, Pynchon, Morrison, Barth and DeLillo – provided that it will not be reduced to some humanistic platitude, nor to their joint (though in some ways problematic) affiliation to postmodernism – will not be so easy to find, and we are afraid that our following analysis will, despite our efforts, end up on equally undesirable speculative heights. However, certain generalizations are inevitable; all the more so since we are dealing with extremely self-conscious authors – not just in the metafictional sense, which Hutcheon stresses, nor in McHale's sense of ontological problematization of the text (Hutcheon, 1988; McHale, 1987), but also at the level of social criticism, playing with literary tradition and procedures, incorporation of mass culture, complicating reception (making it *difficult*), etc. In other words, we are facing authors who play with reader a perplexing Nabokovian chess game and whose every move should be monitored with attention and disbelief, for things rarely are as they look, and readers most often will not be even capable to figure them out to the end.

2. Theoretical backgrounds: analysis of the sublime

That is why our initial thesis, in Lyotardian spirit, will invoke a Kantian basis, into which we will try to interweave all scattered narrative threads: as we will use other Lyotard's terms – differend, breakdown of metanarratives – already overexploited by now, but nonetheless appropriate to point out to some unavoidable aspects (Lyotard, 1991; Lyotard, 1984). We will not forget Baudrillard either, whose theory of simulacra takes its cue from Jameson's and McLuhan's critique of media and consumer society, and almost functions as a manual for reading DeLillo, but we will try to subsume it under Lyotard's basic dichotomies and to draw some not-so-Lyotardian conclusions (Baudrillard, 1994; Baudrillard, 1993). Our goal here is not to devise a coherent philosophical position but only to apply the already existing theoretical concepts for the sake of easier interpretation of specific literary works – not oversimplifying their complexity, but also not straying into overcrowded theoretical arguments. We will, finally, make use of Hutcheon's insistence on "the voice of the other", *i.e.* awakening

the margin – which is the direct descendant of Derrida's decentering, feminist, post-colonial and Marxist criticism – and we will "abuse" it, just like Baudrillard's simulacra (Hutcheon, 1988); thereat, we do not expect to encounter significant resistance in making this "philosophical mixture", since all postmodern thinkers essentially proceed from the same mutually interchangeable assumptions.

It is well known that Kant explains the *sublime* as incompatibility of comprehending faculty of imagination with bordering ideas of the mind (as opposed to the *beautiful*, which is a harmonized play of representations of imagination and concepts of reason; Kant, 2000). Lyotard takes over this Kantian definition, from *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and applies it in a much wider context and in different fields. To him, the distinctive feature of postmodernism, as well as of modernism, is precisely in dealing with *presenting the unpresentable*, *i.e*. with the impossibility for imagination to picture what mind must know to exist whereat modernism regrets this inability of imagination, and is overwhelmed by nostalgia for the unpresentable – while postmodernism faces the same problem in a much more serene way and finding there a cause for the play of perpetual approaching and distancing (Lyotard, 1992). We agree that the *unpresentable* is one of the most precious golden fleeces of literature not just since modernism, but already in romanticism, and even earlier, in various variants of antique and medieval mysticism. We will add that *the nature of the unpresentable*, in regard to those earlier epochs, has considerably changed; and that this change occurred in the time of positivism, realism and naturalism (which is exactly the time-frame Lyotard is interested in). Old transcendences are demystified; God is dead, phenomenology of spirit is just academic fiction and man just the most recent episteme, like the system of representation, or an even older system of similarity (Foucault, 1970). All the old *Beyonds* have been disqualified (and it would be naïve to return to them) and life yet remained unfathomable.

3. The (post)modern unpresentable and its chosen ones

The unpresentable, which is a subject of modern American novel, is no longer the eschatological or subjective-spiritual unknowns – God, afterlife, genius, inscrutability of nature, infinity of imagination – and even when they are, they come out more as a symbolist intimation than as romanticist

metaphysics (*e.g.* 'religious moments' in Pynchon or death in DeLillo). A whole new world of mysteries was opened up by scientific breakthroughs from the end of XIX-beginning of XX century – 'understandable in itself' came into focus of interest: the meaninglessness of routine, irrationality of *social reality*, impersonality of identity and logic of power and submission, to name a few. The classical answer of Emerald Tablet ("as above, so below"), taken over by Christianity, became unsustainable as soon as transcendence that supported it was refuted: it became clear that to search for the first cause would mean *regressus ad infinitum*, and that the dialectics of 'external' and 'internal' is elusive and interminable. Indeterminacy took place of certainty, and partial analyses that of total explanations. The world, in other words, became decentered and lost its transcendent pledge – the same happening to the subject, history, language, and even science. That trend of demystification of the unpresentable and exclusion of the original and final is easy to follow in structuralism and poststructuralism, as it is through great works of modernism and postmodernism; its lowest common denominator is a replacement of chain, root or arborescent model of conditioning with a network, or a rhizomatic one – where elements of 'this world' can be determined only by other similar elements, not by some instance of higher (or lower) order (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Lyotard characterizes the same phenomenon as breakdown of metanarratives – primarily metanarratives of spiritual development and the emancipation of men – accompanied by fragmentation of knowledge and rise of the utilitarian, capitalist paradigm (Lyotard, 1984). Great stories that give sense to the totality of existence have lost their credibility, and narrative space burst into multitude of smaller narratives, 'paralogisms' and 'differends', not subsumable under some higher unity. Instead of unfathomable heights of the Divine we are left with unsolvable aporias of the real.

In accordance with that change of the unpresentable, its champions have changed as well: they are no longer mystics and hermits, philosophers and artists, Faust who wrestles with Erdgeist himself. The new unpresentable is still being searched for, but now it has its *detectives*: random chosen ones, average, maladjusted, oppressed and rejected – all those who precisely because of their marginal positions have a clearer view on the realm of the real. Whether it is about some pathological ostracism or lack of social affirmation, they are the ones who are capable of stepping out and exposing the incomprehensibility of 'the normal': that is equally the case with Faulkner's Quentin, Morrison's Sethe, Barth's Ambrose, Pynchon's Oedipa

– and even with DeLillo's Gladney. Fragmentation and multiplication of stories – their 'decenteredness', as Derrida would call it (Derrida, 1966) – go hand in hand with these new searches: both when it comes to polyphony and variations of Faulkner and Morrison, and episodicity of Pynchon, Barth and DeLillo; and with them also agrees that 'irreducible residue', to which the new detectives of the sublime are condemned – unlike the old ones, who had their mystical certainty. The true story of Sutpen and his lineage is impossible to recount, as well as that of Beloved or Trystero: while in Barth and DeLillo the subject himself and his reality remain indeterminable – they are what one can speak about, but what cannot be reached. New searchers thus search for their own identity too – or at least for what can be called 'human nature' – as much as the old ones: but, that identity is no longer either the basis of itself or eternal essence or a result of simple 'external' causes. It is, in much more perfidious way, a correlate of one schizophrenically and paranoically derealized reality and is equally elusive as that reality. Baudrillard's simulacra provides us with insight in the extent of this derealization: *White Noise* is so full of them that nothing but death still seems authentic and it too, thanks to dylar, becomes its own simulacrum. But the same could be said about Pynchon's Trystero, Barth's Ambrose, Helen and *Anonymiad*. We believe we would not go too far if we understood both Morrison's Beloved and Faulkner's demon-ogre Sutpen as simulacra of their own kind.

4. Simulacra and authenticity, fiction and history

The problem of simulacra actually overlaps with the mystery of the unpresentable in (at least) one point: Derridian slippage of the signified. If signs already conceal what they signify, and make it impossible to really speak about it, than simulacra are just the last stage of that cleavage: language is merely a veil of the secret, around which one can circle, evoke it, or falsify it. Just as Faulkner stories circle around an unknown history, Pynchon's around a dubious conspiracy, and Morrison's around a mysterious ghost-imposter who, at the end, disappears with attributes of an African deity (Washington, 2005). Ineffability of reality, *i.e.* its insusceptibility to signs – whose ultimate expression is simulacrum, the sign that signifies itself – serves to conceal, push out or camouflage the unpresentable and that is precisely the mechanism of advertising, fashion and reality TV – themes that occupy

both Baudrillard and DeLillo. This whole problem was already outlined in Heidegger: falling prey, inauthenticity, forgetting and covering over of being all perfectly correspond to both mentioned philosophical concepts and themes of our novels; the important difference being that Heidegger still believes in pristine and original being, which poststructuralism – along with postmodernism – does not acknowledge anymore (Heidegger, 1996). It is almost impossible to ask what is an authentic being of Thomas Sutpen – not just because of the unreliability of various narrators, but also because of one essential 'inauthenticity' (Sutpen's 'design') in his character; it is also impossible to ask about Sethe's authenticity, since her whole life has been shaped by misery, oppression and exploitation; Gladneys for other reasons 'fall prey to inauthenticity', surrounded by an artificial reality of television, supermarkets and simulations, where even 'the true real' loses its distinctive features (and the question remains whether their obsession with death really represents a step out into the authentic); Barth almost everywhere in the *Funhouse* thematizes inauthenticity: as conventionality of narration, artificiality of the real, fictionality of personality, etc; while Pynchon never gets his Oedipa, neither Trystero, out of the dilemma: myself or the world, lie or truth, madness or conspiracy – where boundaries between authentic and inauthentic are no longer even relevant.

Close to simulacra stands Hutcheon's 'historical metafiction' too – which doubtlessly can be recognized at least in Faulkner and Pynchon (Hutcheon, 1988). The Yoknapatawpha County itself, insignia and *topos* of Faulkner's whole opus, is just an example of that problematizing of history which she talks about. Thus in *Absalom*, where this 'unknowable history' revives as Southern Gothic, fictional places and persons intertwine with real, historical ones: figures 'larger than life', at the same time exposed and mystified, stand almost as emblems of moral and political turmoil from the time of Civil War and accompanying crisis of values – and their historical accuracy and fictional expressiveness mutually exchange and equate with each other. Pynchon invents an entire 'parallel history' for the sake of his underground society – he places Trystero back in the first days of Thurn & Taxis, making him a crux of all paranoid projections, over-interpretations, and conspiracy theories (whereat *The Crying* could be exemplary of a close relationship between paranoia and historical metafiction)[1]. However, he

[1] On Pynchon's attitude to history in general, and paranoia as "a form of cognitive mapping", see: Elias (2012).

leaves it unresolved whether this is a genuine conspiracy, some obscure deception, or the vivid imagination of his female protagonist.

5. *Lolita* and two main types of margin

On the whole, if there were a unique prototype of all our five novels that would be Nabokov's *Lolita*.[2] Standing at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism, it was crucial for novels that followed, especially in Anglophone world, and its abundance of local trivia, animated with exoticism that only a naturalized alien could provide, made it a kind of lexicon of American culture, both for Americophiles and for Americophobes. The phenomenon of the 'voice from the margin' decentered focus which provides us with a fresh perspective and defamiliarization, is already multiply incarnated in *Lolita*. At a paratexual level, Nabokov himself is that displaced voice, which speaks about foreign culture in a foreign language – but which, at the same time, appropriates this culture and this language, speaking from one internal position, since there is no external perspective with which he could identify.[3] The acuteness of his insights is enabled by that indeterminacy, a stateless *otherness*, which in literature flourished with Kafka's Judaism, or Hemingway's corrida – and Humbert Humbert incorporates this Ahasverian feature of his author, replicating it in all fields indiscriminately: as a wandering expatriate, a 'conservative' European in 'liberal' America, idiosyncratic stylist, hypersensitive eccentric, sexual pervert. Otherness in all these meanings – cultural, social, psychological and pathological – will determine the focal positions of our novels too. Perverted sexuality, primarily in incestuous key (in *Lolita* it is 'a simulated incest'), is one of the main flywheels of Faulkner's *Absalom* – especially if the reader remembers Quentin from *The Sound and the Fury* and notices to what extent incestuous matrix shapes his narrative perspective (as well as moral-symbolic milieu of Faulkner's world);[4] *Beloved* is full of images

[2] We consider *Lolita* 'a prototype' despite it being published almost 19 years after *Absalom*, because the most important tendencies of all five novels converge in it: it is a reference point that 'condenses' their narrative strategies, and therefore from its different elements one can proceed to every one of them in particular. In that and only that sense we allow ourselves to call it 'prototype'.

[3] On Nabokov's ambivalent cultural-linguistic position see: Sweeney (2005).

[4] On the role and significance of incest in Faulkner see: Zender (1998).

of sexual alienation, given sometimes in extremely brutal way: starting from "the stolen milk", prostituting with the engraver and 'chokecherry tree' on Sethe's back, through various instances of oral, gustative and tactile objectification, to the scenes of savage raping, torture and sexual exploitation.[5] Morrison also points her finger to racial discrimination, position of oppressed other, who is deprived not just of free will, but also of his own culture, and condemned to always be intruder in foreign world. His situation is the inverse of that of Nabokov – he is not in an indefinite borderline area, space between 'outside' and 'inside', because he tries to appropriate a foreign culture and assimilate with a new society, but because that culture and society are simultaneously being imposed on and denied to him. On the one hand, he is irrevocably cut off from his origins, in order to be forced to accept the orders of his masters, which must become his own, while, on the other, he is being forbidden from any possibility to recognize himself as a member of new community because he is denied his very humanity – *i.e.* of right to any culture. The perspective that opens up from this 'slave' margin must concern that elementary and primal, where the human gets in touch with the bestial and *Beloved* reveals that (literally) sub-cultural world of passions and urges, and its civilizational supports, which enclose and maintain it like a reservation. The situation is similar with Faulkner, who puts an equally strong emphasis on the junction of the historical, mythical, pathological and racial, but his narrators give the impression of outsiders also because of something that is more characteristic of a highly intellectual air of romanticism and modernism: their specific mixture of personal extravagance and ideological anachronism. Conspicuous rhetoric and pathetic, as well as extreme passion in solving moral and political problems – which all can be traced back to Schiller – are just a shell behind which hides profound socio-emotional 'maladjustment', as of bitter and capricious Rosa Coldfield, so of nostalgic and sensitive Quentin and his father. All three of them live in the wrong time and experience themselves as captives of the past: of a nobler and stronger age when giants walked the earth. This fascination with the past, undead and unreconciled with, which comes back to haunt them is in fact what makes them capable to step out of everydayness and reach a no man's land, neither-here-nor-there, wherefrom they can look back at ordinary

[5] On various forms of libidinal objectification, torture and deprivation, as well as on the significance of intersubjective relationships and resocialization, see: Schapiro (1991), and Boudreau (1995).

life.[6] The matter is somewhat different with Pynchon, Barth and DeLillo, in whom history does not appear as a burdensome origin, personal, racial and national past, but as a paranoid construction, mythological pattern, textual (i.e. commercial) convention, or a sign that conceals its own absence. In the vacuum left by the withdrawal of history – which is just a reverse of multiplication of alternative, fragmented histories[7] – their hero-narrators are left on their own; that is why their otherness always develops out of specific heightened self-consciousness, as a final stage of introspection, which becomes self-destructive – awareness of the artificiality of self and the world. DeLillo's Gladney becomes prey of this centrifugal force when he gets to grips with 'the empty center', *i.e*. becomes aware of his own death. Mistrust of reality, which was already indicated by his cultural analysis, by this shift becomes a burning issue: and his intellectual distance, thanks to which he developed a critical attitude towards the real, will grow into an existential crisis proper. Pynchon's Oedipa will pass through similar ordeals, pushing herself into the world of eccentrics and rejects, of "waste" that gravitates around Trystero, and facing the alternative: solipsism or pan-determinism, madness or conspiracy; her 'mediocrity' will be irrevocably shaken when testimonies of unreliability of the real begin to pile up – so much that one moment she will even attempt suicide.

In Barth, this process is already in its 'Beckettian stage': his characters do not even belong to some reality, which they could afterward call into question, because reality is exposed as a fiction beforehand. The world is clearly falling apart before our eyes, and all that remains is multitude of reverberations – identity compromised by precursors, realism compromised by convention, a funhouse whose dozed off operator just underlines artificial character of entire construction. In other words, in all three authors, margin on which their heroes posit themselves is a product of their critical consciousness: brought to the point of suspecting reality of the world and authenticity of their own egos, they get out beyond the scope of 'normal life' and enter into vicious circle of philosophy. Is the fake reality work of a real subject, or the real subject work of a fake reality? Is the world just a hallucination, or consciousness just the creation of the world? Obsessed by these questions, they displace themselves to the position of one meta-consciousness, whose role is to deconstruct each certainty, all

[6] On various roles of history and past in Faulkner see: Rollyson (2007).

[7] On various philosophical approaches to history see: Foucault (1972) (*Introduction*) and Ricoeur (1984).

that is understandable in itself – and they insofar cease to be a part of habitual course of events; their newborn fundamental skepticism separates them from its lures. That, however, does not mean that Barth's, Pynchon's and DeLillo's heroes are not displaced in other ways too – as introvert, cumbersome, aloof, unaffirmed, dissatisfied – nor that marginality in general in them (especially in Pynchon) is not thematized; but it means that their philosophical distance plays the same role as racial otherness in Morrison, or historical anachronism in Faulkner. Gladneys are surely remarkable for many reasons (DeLillo's extraordinary skill lies in presenting them as the most unusual where they appear the most common), Ambrose is obviously maladjusted, Oedipa is hasty and unstable, which we do not infer just from her aborted 'psychiatry sessions'… After all, Nietzsche already brought to light the relationship between philosophical and artistic deviations and other sorts of abnormalities, and Mann described it beautifully in his famous novels: so there is nothing surprising in those combinations of eccentricities and insight.

6. Search and revelation

If we return to Nabokov, we will realize that the problematics of unreliable reality was already developed in *Lolita* – reaching its full expansion in *Pale Fire* – as well as that a lot of meta-fictional 'traps' and ontological indeterminacies, which will be specific to Barth and Pynchon, were already staged here. Some of the means by which Nabokov achieves that effect of derealization are literary allusions, parodies and pastiches, which Barth and Pynchon use in abundance too (as well as Faulkner; while DeLillo rather parodies sitcoms, disaster stories and pop culture) – while Humbert's paranoia, which mystifies and over-codes the plot of the novel, finds its place both in Oedipa's pursuit of Trystero, and in Gladney's uncovering Babette's infidelity and machinations over dylar (it also could be recognized in Rosa's sections about Sutpen, or in perplexities over phantom nature of Beloved). The dominant plot, however, that one finds both in *Lolita* and in our novels is the plot of search and revelation, which will be in the closest relationship with presenting the unpresentable. Here literature did not advance much further from Aristotle, who saw *anagnorisis*, in the sense of "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (Aristotle, 1452a), as a constitutive (although

not necessary) part of the tragedy: today it is equally hard to imagine a (decent) story which might do completely without it. His understanding of *anagnorisis* as discovery of one's own or other's identity or true nature also touches the vital point of modern novels: which only means that some habits and interests have not changed for the last two thousand years. But, the whole search for the unknown, the meaning of crucial revelations, went through considerable transformations since Aristotle; former solid cosmological, ethical and political setup became susceptible to the most daring relativizations – while out of inviolable root personality remained just a battlefield of impersonal forces. Hence the concepts of fate, fortune, chance, necessity, opinion and truth, so essential to Greek thought, had to change their role too: recognition could no longer be taken as confirmation of the higher order, disclosure of unexpected rule, or reconciliation with fate, because predetermined social laws, to which individual had to adapt, ceased to be universally valid; just as the guilt of that individual, which determined his place in the story, became too complex to relate just to the clash of general and individual, person and norm, two equally justified and exclusive spiritual claims, etc. Collision of irreconcilable orders – which is another name for Lyotard's differend – such as in *Antigone* or *Oresteia* lost its opportunity to be subsumed under a higher narrative: either that of tragic emancipation through suffering, or that of elevation of spirit through contradictions; and by that fact alone, nature of what has been revealed, and what remains in the gap between these incompatible language games, had to be drastically changed. The question is, therefore: for what *new* revelation search the heroes of (post)modern novels?

7. Paradox of desire and unreliability of reality

In Nabokov, the trajectory in which Humbert's 'investigations' move on follows at least two separate but intertwined tracks: and on each of them he runs up against an insurmountable obstacle, which reveals his aporetic position. The first one concerns paradox of desire, whose gratification inevitably entails upcoming destruction of its object (at least in the oral-sadistic key, which fits perfectly into eroticism of *Lolita*). The lust that drives Humbert into a shared exile, and latter chase after Lolita, will not get him what he wants – complete, mutual consummation – but only certainty about her evasion, corruption, and ultimate degradation: first

with Quilty, and then, in other way, at Schiller's. Even the retribution he carries out, as some kind of "instrument of fate", is extremely farcical, since he bears equal, if not greater blame for Lolita's "downfall", and since Quilty is just his own caricature. Humbert's pedophilic fixation is, from the very beginning, paradoxical and, in a bizarre way, utopian: ideally of his "island of nymphets" is disparate with reality of their age, his pathological need to control with his craving for love, his lyrical outbursts and pangs of conscience with wantonness of sexual exploitation; everything that burdens any passionate relationship is here intensified to the limit, in this impossible arrangement, where the roles of tutor and lover constantly undermine each other, and which is clearly condemned to brevity. The second track concerns, however, that more obvious detective work on discovering Lolita's 'kidnapper' – but is in fact a part of wider constellation of signals and clues, whereby in Nabokov the smallest details get activated. For, as Humbert advances in unraveling set of circumstances responsible for his debacle, signs begin more and more explicitly to indicate a twofold construction of events: that which reveals Humbert himself, and that which *maybe* will be revealed to the reader (and which Humbert is not aware of).[8] In this way, an increasingly fictional structure of *Humbert's story* threatens to call into question the credibility of *story of Humbert* too: and aporia in which we get caught is an undecidability between constructive or real character of the whole inner world of the novel (and, by analogy, of world in general). That already mentioned unreliability of reality postmodernism will exploit abundantly – it will be its generic 'discovery', unpresentability ex ante facto[9] – but the previous differend will be equally significant too: as incompatibility of irrational and rational, unconscious and conscious,performative and indicative. The field where all these opposites permeate each other and spark in a short circuit, is the field of *ideology*, which simulates their reconciliation; that is why it is not strange to regard Faulkner and Morrison, whose novels are the most inwrought with the ideological (political, racial, cultural), in spite of their stylistic differences as still closer to Nabokov than Pynchon, Barth and

[8] This *double coding* is a subject of many works on *Lolita*; here we will point out just three: Pifer (2007); Ferger (2004); and Stone (2010).

[9] And this unreliability will reveal itself through both what McHale calls epistemological and what he calls ontological dominant; thus, although McHale places *Lolita* in Nabokov's modernist phase, indications that issues of ontological ambiguities are in it already raised are numerous and hard to ignore. On that see: Fraysse (1995).

DeLillo; with them it is easier to recognize both impassable paths whereby in *Lolita* one searches for revelation.

8. *Lolita* and *Absalom*: desire and reality

In Faulkner we find almost identical problematics, as well as identical obsessiveness of the main characters. Racial and class prejudices, as irrational and therefore indestructible foundation, play the same part in Sutpen's design, as sexual preferences for Humbert (who even dreams of conceiving the whole dynasty of Lolitas) – while the scene at planter's mansion, from Sutpen's childhood, assumes equal significance to him as "Annabel Lee" in *Lolita*. Both obsessions develop in formative years (without going into psychological implausibility of Humbert's ironic self-analysis), when 'naïveté' of heroes allows them to leave such indelible stamp on their psyche; both heroes are slaves to their passion, which makes them blind to others' feelings; and, for both of them, fulfillment of their tyrannical desire entails its frustration too. The reason for their failure, however, cannot be attributed to fate – Aubrey McFate panders to Humbert's machinations, just as for Sutpen it sometimes seems that he is being favored by incredible luck; instead of hybris, their plans are thwarted by the past which returns to claim its debts: either in the person of Quilty, about whose acquaintance with Lolita Humbert finds out too late, or in the person of Charles Bon, whose relationship with his own half-sister Sutpen fails to prevent, not being willing to acknowledge him for his son. In both cases, psychological and social conditionality of desire that governs their actions is conspicuous, as is its inner contradiction that leads inevitably to an absurd and tragic outcome. If Sutpen had been able to renounce his beliefs, his tragedy could have been avoided, and the goal to which he strived because of those beliefs would maybe have been attainable to him – same as Lolita would have been attainable to Humbert if he had been able to renounce his passion, which led him to her in the first place. With both, it seems like the goal and the means for its fulfillment by nature exclude each other; Humbert's lust makes him too demanding to be able to keep the object of that lust – apart from forcing him to play two different roles that exclude each other – just as exclusive commitment to founding a dynasty and securing its material well-being makes Sutpen cruel enough to turn one son against another, becoming the real culprit of its downfall. It is characteristic that

both have earlier, unsuccessful attempts behind them – Humbert to achieve a relationship with a "girl-child" in Europe, Sutpen to found a family in Tahiti – and that both are trying again, after their best chance for success went down the drain – Humbert with Rita, Sutpen with Rosa and Milly. Compulsivity of their characters and Sisyphean discipline with which they devote themselves to their mania point out to desire as a center around which gravitate all other plots: its paradox is that unpresentable which is searched for in *Absalom* and *Lolita*.

But, that is not the only unpresentable. The already mentioned unreliability of reality, which is the second layer of "the Passion of Humbert", in *Absalom* does not perhaps appear with all ontological and metafictional implications that Nabokov will develop from *Lolita* to *Pale Fire*, but it certainly comes out with powerful epistemological charge and indeterminacy, which already threaten to blow up the limits of modernism. In *The Sound and the Fury* we were dealing with different versions of events, recounted by highly specific narrators (Benjy was retarded, Quentin and Jason obsessed with honor and profit, and all in their way preoccupied with Caddy), with extraordinary points of view – but the definitive story might be (at least fragmentarily) reconstructed, which is also confirmed by final interfering of omniscient narrator, and by subsequently added author's appendix (Faulkner, 2003). In *Absalom*, things are different: apart from us being left to conflicting narrators, with biased or otherwise deformed points of view, the story that reveals itself is also mediated, sometimes through multiple generations or instances of 'oral tradition', not one narrator except Rosa is really a witness of described events (and even she witnessed them only for a short period she lived in "Sutpen's Hundred"– otherwise she spreads others' hearsay in her own interpretation, as Quentin's father spreads stories of his own father, general Compson), and, on top of all that, in Quentin's and Shreve's 'improvisation' the whole narrative becomes completely hypothetical (with made up characters, like Bon's mother's lawyer, of whose existence there is not any 'evidence' in the world of the novel).[10]

[10] This, of course, applies only to the 'central story', which describes the rise of Thomas Sutpen and quadrilateral Sutpen-Judith-Henry-Charles Bon: not to the additional or secondary events, which heroes-narrators could attend as witnesses (or inform themselves about them 'from the first hand').

9. *Absalom*: fiction and past

The problem that comes out to light here is the unpresentability of the past, exactly in terms in which Linda Hutcheon discusses historical metafiction, as a difference between *fact* and *event* (Hutcheon, 1988). Something did happen (event) – of that one can (mainly) be sure: but, what is *the meaning* of that (fact)? The whole context, causes, interests and motives cannot be known to their contemporaries because they are not omniscient, and their perspective is both spatially and temporally, intellectually and hermeneutically – quantitatively and qualitatively – restricted; while, on the other hand, as one moves away from the *eyewitness position*, the dangers of retrospective projection, misrecognition, over-interpretation and ideologization become more and more noticeable. To that extent, historical distance is at the same time necessary and detrimental; some comprehensive "truth" would be available only to an ideal being, in the rank of Berkeley's God, who would be aware of *all* "external" and "internal" events (even those "without witness"), their meaning and correlations, and would be able to connect them into one coherent whole. For human beings, though, reconstruction implies construction – not just for someone who "unravels" history afterward, but also for those who are experiencing it immediately – and construction fiction (*et vice versa*; Ricoeur, 1984; Hutcheon, 1988); Faulkner's *Absalom* demonstrates that in the most striking way. Let us ask ourselves, whose 'story of Sutpens' is more convincing: Rosa's, general Compson's, his son Jason's, or Quentin's and Shrive's? Fragmentary views that complement and undermine each other in different narratives, leaving us with undisguised extrapolation and speculation, reveal nothing except that "the right past" is unknowable; if a story about any "historical event", from biography to national history, is possible, it is far from complete and reliable report – and we do not even want to clarify what "the event" by itself means, and how to limit all lateral series entering in its orbit (*i.e.* to what extent to "expand" the story, for it to have any meaning).

10. *Beloved*: the paradox of desire and indeterminacy of identity

The paradox of desire – let us call it its differend – is no less noticeable in *Beloved*. There we encounter a different, but equally possessive love – parental and filial – whose two complementary sides are protection

and recognition. Aporeticity of this relationship was already presented in *Lolita* and *Absalom*: however contaminated Humbert's "fatherhood" may have been, his attempts to 'save' Lolita from the world (although not from himself) are real – as real as aversion that he in this way arouses, and because of which she eventually leaves him (the interesting question is what is the real reason of Lolita's escape: Humbert's sexual exploitation, or his "fatherly" control? We ask this – knowing how offensive it might sound – primarily because she runs away from him only to embrace even more perverse "protector", Quilty)[11]; while, in *Absalom*, Charles' attempts to attract Sutpen's attention and be acknowledged as his son ends up in an inevitable catastrophe – the single thing he achieved is to force him to orchestrate his murder: and this with the help of other son, who also, in order to be (in another way) recognized, had to renounce the family, for whose recognition he was striving. In *Beloved*, hopelessness of parental love is even more drastic: in order to protect her daughter and save her from the school teacher and his nephews, Sethe is forced to kill her; just as Beloved, in her desire for recognition verifying her identity, physically ruins the person whose love she needs. Sethe's need to redeem herself, to 'explain' the unexplainable – how murder can be an act of love – exposes herself to an even more gruesome aporia, potentiated by the supernatural atmosphere of the novel: her devotion to 'the again found' Beloved and their reciprocal decline and exuberance show only that, in her subsequent giving of once denied, Sethe condemns herself to vanish – i.e. moves precisely toward the moment when 'giving' will become impossible. In that succubus-family circle, even the 'male intervention' of Paul D could not stop rushing into disaster – not until the whole community, in a sort of collective exorcism, casts out the intruder and 'breaks the spell': where it is impossible to determine whether this intruder really is, and to what extent, Sethe's deceased daughter (Chaningkhombee, n.d.). Isolation, as a neurotic choice par excellence – full separation of public and private – only increases entanglements of desire: as in *Lolita*, where Humbert from the beginning tries to put his nymphet under the glass bell, so in *Absalom*, where Sutpen openly withdraws from community, and limits all his aspirations to conception of a future 'dynasty'. In *Beloved* that isolation reaches even more pathological and 'psychic' heights, becoming absolute

[11] Which is certainly not to suggest that she is *not* a victim of Humbert's molestation and manipulation; on the contrary, her behaviour can be interpreted also as developing behavioural "resilience" in response to experienced trauma. See: Hamrit (2009).

and almost inescapable. And, in all three cases, breakthrough of the outside world, if not abolishes ominous circling of desire, at least gives it a decisive thrust, speeding it up to the point of breakdown. Gordian knot is not untied – desire cannot be tamed by mere involvement of 'reality principle' – but is cut off by a 'coup de grace' – when artificial paradises of the private give in before onslaughts of the public.

However, behind the impassable paths of desire, there is, in *Beloved*, an even more fundamental problematics hiding determining the fate of those "sixty million" (and more) from the dedication and reaching into the darkest corners of psycho-political abysses – the question of identity. Brought to the foreground by mentioned contradictory position of slaves, as people forcibly integrated into a foreign culture but deprived of any chance to become its members, it is already indicated in *Absalom* by indeterminable racial and family status of Charles Bon and his son (which largely resembles Smerdyakov's similar anonymity): and in Morrison it gets the most striking expression in long, variously intriguing "monologue" of Sethe, Denver and Beloved. Sethe's 'resurrected' daughter is not, of course, the only character whose self-awareness is warped and endangered – physical and mental torture equally gnaws at Sethe and Paul D, as Denver is stricken by isolation and neglect (and as, in Faulkner, both Quentin and his father are torn between old traditions and new state of affairs) – but she takes a special place in this charade of identities: because of intensity of her inner dispersion and symbolic charge that Morrison stores into her chaotic 'memories'. Fragments that flood her consciousness can in no way be attributed to a single person: some of them corroborate her being Sethe's real daughter, while others are phantasmagoric, outside any context or related to things the real Beloved could not experience (e.g. sections evoking maltreatment on a slave ship); and the climax of derangement is reached when fragmentary but still recognizable voices of Sethe and Denver in 23rd chapter merge with dispersed voice of Beloved – leaving the impression of progressive confusion and erosion of all three identities (Rimmon-Kenan, 1996). The pendulum that describes the way in which heroines experience their 'self' in the novel goes from paranoid implosion to schizophrenic dispersion[12] – from various forms of persecution, isolation and enclosure to the breakdown of personality and its effusion in unpredictable directions – and if anything is suggested through that array

[12] The polarity of paranoia-schizophrenia should be understood in the context of Deleuze's and Guattari's 'paranoid' and 'schizophrenic' poles, from: Deleuze&Guattari (2000).

of 'false salvations' it is that identity cannot be built, nor regained, without strong social foundation: i.e. interaction with some kind of group (at least with Paul D, who is a 'disturbing factor'), and its reciprocal support and recognition (*i.e*. 'outside intervention' surpassing efforts and power of the individual). Denver is the one who has the chance to make the most of that lesson and get out from the vicious circle; Sethe's future is more uncertain, although her last meeting with Paul D indicates that she is not unable to become her 'best thing' – to construct her own identity without burdens of the past, which kept her trapped in a triangle of trauma, guilt and redemption. One should, however, have in mind that community here plays the role of the 'healer' just as particular, local group, able to physically communicate with and 'embrace' endangered individual: community as an abstract, global or backstage entity can have exactly opposite effects – deconstruction of identity (either in paranoid, or in schizophrenic key) – which will be thoroughly explored by Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*. But *Beloved* too already indirectly shows us the dark side of social instinct; if we bypass symbolic reading, and refuse to recognize just the paradigm of female Negro slaves, or slaves in general, in Beloved (*i.e.* if we do not accept her only as a symbol epitomizing the fate of those 'sixty million' – which does not mean that the text forbids such reading), and do not write off surreal visions from her monologue as scenes 'from the other side', some transitional transcendence (which the text also does not exclude – especially in the light of African religious beliefs), but accept them as *real*, though hallucinatory / illusory memories, that monologue could help us discern the mechanism of her obscure socialization. In a word, either Beloved is a runaway captive from Deer Creek who really witnessed events on the slave ship, or she is embodiment of the ghost of Sethe's daughter who haunts the house no. 124, or she is somehow both – because the text fragmentarily corroborates both possibilities, in spite of their mutual exclusion – in all three cases the fact remains that it is precisely her hunger for integration, simultaneous appropriation and belonging – between dead and alive, daughter and mother, orphan and family, individual and race – that creates her schizoid omnipresence (hicstansand nuncstans) as a conglomerate of incompatible identities. The undecidability between natural and supernatural interpretation is not of essential importance for that conclusion: in Africa, the living dead and their communi(cati)on with the relatives are not a matter of fiction but of religious belief, so the appearance of ghost in flesh and blood is not a contradiction at all – but

that does not solve the problem of mixed, fragmented identity. The search for the face, smile and recognition which runs through the entire Beloved's monologue, and possessiveness of that longing, in which boundaries between self and the other, between what one is, one has and to what one belongs are lost, testify about more general crisis: the impossibility for alienated "I" from the margin to build up its identity through any universal or ideal identification – including identification with the margin itself. And Beloved is in this respect exemplary: if she is Sethe's deceased daughter then assimilation of entire "racial past" is a factor of schism in her identity; if she is a runaway slave from Deer Creek then this factor is her craving a "family shelter"; at any rate, search for unique meaning, for centering of decentered alternatives, leads to dissolution of personality, which ceases to be "its own", and becomes equally no one's and everyone's (hence such symbolic potential of Beloved). Identity, in the case of racial discrimination – and other marginalizing practices – is not opposed just to the universal imposed by colonialism as its global heritage: it opposes every universalization – because every universalization is the heir of colonialism, whatever it sets as its locus. Anguishes that Sethe, Denver and Paul D suffer, in their own search for belonging, are thereby focused and potentiated in Beloved, because the irreconcilable opposites they face are in her brought to the extreme – to a transcendent plane; but also conversely, dispersion of Beloved's identity in return dissolves all personalities within her range, all too willing to get caught in a net of pathological dependence and its inherent self-destructive individuation.

11. Identity and reality: paranoia and schizophrenia (Barth, Pynchon, DeLillo)

The unpresentability of identity in Morrison is emphasized as a result of centuries-long racial exploitation; but, already in Nabokov, the characters reflecting in each other (Humbert-Quilty, Annabel-Lolita), the system of doubles, overlaps and substitutions – and literary analogies – problematize identity as (im)possible construction. Pynchon, DeLillo and Barth will approach this problem from a different, less "moving", but no less anxious side. While in Faulkner and Morrison we deal with an ambiguous exclusion from culture or cultural and racial ostracism, in them the culture itself becomes a burden, storehouse of repetitive patterns, and torsion these

patterns require: but, since there is no more "nature" that would precede that "distortion", building up identity is like erecting castles in the air, phantasms supported by phantasms – which is graphically represented by a symbol of Moebius strip at the beginning of Barth's book: strip whose underside is just an extension of the upper side, twisted around itself in order to serve as its own basis (in Pynchon, a similar role is assigned to "weaving the world" from Varo's painting– where weavers, since they weave entire reality, must weave themselves too). Oscillating between the paranoid and schizophrenic, and its characteristic 'entropy of identity', are so conspicuous with these writers that there is almost no need to dwell on examples (Trystero, dylar, Mucho Maas, Willie Mink, Barth's echolalias, etc.): but it is important to note that, unlike Faulkner and Morrison, for whom repression, torture, and cultural and axiological deracination were factors of loss of identity, for them this role is assumed by existential insecurity, breakdown of meta-narratives and artificiality of reality – i.e. by already mentioned 'derealization of reality'. In (post)modern age which exports brutality and discrimination to the dumpsites of the "Third World", or to its own abject enclaves (ghetto, white trash, various sub-cultural groups), individuation of the average man is no longer endangered by what is traumatic and terrifying – on the contrary, they sometimes can have even therapeutic effect – but by that all too familiar, which is a factor of paralysis: maintaining at the same time illusion of continuous change, and of non-existent meaning that this commotion ostensibly evokes. Paranoia is one of the ways out that 'lends' meaning to the world without meaning, and allows recuperation of identity, even at the cost of conflict with the forces projected into its center; schizophrenia, as rendering senseless so advanced that it turns into its opposite, into omnipresence of meaning – and thereby of personality too – is the other. Boundaries between Ego and the world, *i.e*. Ego and the others, in both cases are violated: and we are not so much interested here in psychological explanation of mechanisms of this violation, as in the fact that the reality itself, especially from about the mid-twentieth century – being increasingly more 'mediated' and fictional – has become a perfect ground for these mechanisms. In other words, what Freud in his time recognized as a triumph of reality principle, on account of limitation and deformation of human drives and pleasure principle,[13] has today come to its own inversion: to releasing the drives (at least in enclosed, but globally recognized "reservations" – which are still in expansion), on

[13] *e.g*. in: Frojd (1969).

account of limitation and deformation of the reality principle. Here we will stop, because deeper delving into this would require more serious psycho-social analysis (and resorting to some terms – such as 'death drive' – which are still raising controversy even in their own fields); we will just repeat once more a distinction between Barth, Pynchon and DeLillo that applies to the unpresentability of reality, thus to unpresentability of identity (as obverse and reverse of the same process): Barth primarily 'dissolves' his characters by pointing out to their fictional, conventional and imaginary nature; Pynchon by confronting them with alternative and paradoxical interpretation of the world; DeLillo by having them taste instability and 'falseness' of reality. All three, thus – as we already said – dispatch their heroes into the labyrinths of philosophical aporias, which force them to get themselves involved in the most fundamental and essentially insolvable questions about the world and about themselves.

12. Conclusion: three types of the unpresentable; margin as a condition of their knowledge

Finally, we have distinguished desire, reality and identity as three 'modern' unpresentables: they are mutually interconnected in their unreliability and indeterminacy, and are usually signalized by simultaneous presence of several irreconcilable orders and interpretations. The prevailing plot, which gravitates around these unpresentables, is a plot of search and revelation – which is just why it is not by accident that Pynchon, by the name of his heroine, in fact alludes to *Oedipus Rex*, a play considered exemplary for its economy of reversals and recognitions (*peripeteias* and *anagnorises*) by no other than the father of both terms, Aristotle; and just because of the irreconcilability of contradictions of these unpresentables, the heroes who dare to face them must be of the people from the margin – of those who will not conform to one totalizing explanation, but live out the opposites to the full extent and to their ultimate limit. We will not claim that this is the only, not even the main thread binding the five discussed contemporary novels together: but it is no doubt there; whether we should follow it further, and how far, will depend on more general conclusions it is to provide us – and on the possibility or impossibility of applying them to a wider group of literary works.

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У ПОТРАЗИ ЗА НЕПРЕДСТАВЉИВИМ: 'ДЕТЕКТИВИ УЗВИШЕНОГ' У (ПОСТ)МОДЕРНОМ АМЕРИЧКОМ РОМАНУ

Сажетак

Овај рад бави се анализом пет репрезентативних америчких романа XX века – Фокнеровим *Absalom, Absalom!*, Пинчоновим *The Crying of Lot 49*, Бартовим *Lost in The Funhouse*, Де Лиловим *White Noise*, и Морисоновкином *Beloved* – служећи се Набоковљевом *Лолитом* као референтним текстом, и као пресеком одређених наративних стратегија, које фигурирају и у поменутим романима. Кроз Лиотарове, Бодријарове, Рикерове, Хачионкине и делимично Деридине филозофске поставке настојаћемо да покажемо како је заједнички именитељ ових текстова потрага за једним модерним *непредстављивим*, и улога коју у тој потрази играју различите форме *маргиналних перспектива*. При том ћемо скицирати једну провизорну (и свакако непотпуну) типологију непредстављи вог – парадокс жеље, непоузданост стварности, и неодредивост идентитета – и утврдити неколико различитих маргина – психопатолошку, расно-културолошку, историјско-анахрону и интровертно-филозофску – на које се, у различитим комбинацијама, смештају ликови који се упуштају у ову потрагу за непредстављивим.

Кључне речи: савремени амерички роман, маргина, непредстављиво