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PHILOSOPHIC AMBIVALENCE IN  
JOHN BARTH'S THE END OF THE ROAD

Tony Tanner finds The End of the Road completely devoid of circumstantial detail. According to him: "It is a bleak and airless book in which ideas are more real than people, ... both the narrator and his author appear to have a rather nominal sense of reality, ... there seem to be no people, only masks; no living, only role playing; no things, only thoughts about things; no world, only a 'vaudeville'"<sup>1</sup>. Also Herbert F. Smith recognizes the allegorical character of The End of the Road and offers an interpretation in the form of a paradigm from which it is convenient to start an analysis. Smith's paradigm<sup>2</sup> is based on a Manichean dualism as also found in Hawthorne's story, "Rappaccini's Daughter", where a female character stands at the center and constitutes, as it were, a "tabula rasa", against which two opposite forces are projected. Characters involved are: Rennie Morgan /a "tabula rasa"/, Joe Morgan /Positive Force/, Jacob Horner /Negative Force/. There is evidence in the text:

Joe was The Reason, or Being /I was using Rennie's cosmos/; I was The Unreason, or Not-Being; and the two of us were fighting without quarter for possession of Rennie, like God and Satan for the soul of man<sup>3</sup>.

Jacob is indeed using Rennie's cosmos; she has frequently spoken of Joe as God. Aside from this, her past history is such that in order to remain with Joe in what he calls "a more or less permanent arrangement", Rennie has to "erase"

herself entirely. The reasoning behind this act is that she would "rather be a lousy Joe Morgan than a first rate Rennie MacMahon"/63/. Joe is only happy to start from scratch and he decides to "make" Rennie in his own image. The years of diligent cooperation turn out to be successful. Joe believes that the end justifies the varied means: from day in day out lasting discussions to occasional spanking. But, unlike the results of Dr. Rappaccini's efforts, Joe's "product" did not surpass her master. On the contrary, Rennie, when exposed to a test, fails.

On careful analysis Smith's paradigm seems to be simplistic, as Jacob recognizes /"This pretty ontological Manicheanism would certainly stand no close examination" /129//. The Manichean cosmos is based on the doctrine of two contending forces, or principles: of good /light, God, the soul/ and of evil /darkness, Satan, the body/; thus theological dualism is expressed. The ambivalence between good and evil is neither directly nor indirectly in question in The End of the Road. In addition, if Jacob fits into the context of Unreason, Joe Morgan can hardly be equated with Reason. His irrational, though, as Barth wants us to believe, human behavior is exposed one evening when Jacob and Rennie spy on him. Following a performance of making faces at himself in the mirror while producing a series of strange noises, Joe goes back to his desk to continue writing,

The show, then, was over. Ah, but one moment - yes. He turned slightly, and we could see: his tongue gripped purposefully between his lips at the side of his mouth. Joe was masturbating and picking his nose at the same time. I believe he also hummed a sprightly tune in rhythm with his work /71/.

The paradigm proposed in this paper is based on philosophic ambivalence. The allegorical ambivalence is such as to be found in Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, i.e. between Zeus, the perfect being, who represents Law, and Prometheus, the rebel, who represents Idea. In Barth's

novel the role of Zeus can be assigned to the Doctor on the one hand and Joe Morgan on the other /"the impersonated representation or symbol of the n o m o s ... Zeus is active, involved totally in his action, ordering and creating at once"<sup>4</sup>,/ and the role of Prometheus to Jacob /"the impersonated representative of Idea, or the same power as Jove, but contemplated as independent and not immersed in the product, - as law minus the productive energy, Prometheus is passive, suffering, and understanding"/. Thus, ultimately, there is no role assigned to Rennie, and Smith's "tabula rasa" seems to have described well her significance in the novel. The paradigm is:

The Doctor-Jacob Horner-Rennie Morgan-Joe Morgan-Jacob Horner

As the paradigm implies, there are two independent allegorical ambivalences exemplified in The End of the Road. They are linked by the person of Rennie Morgan and each of them represents another version of philosophic ambivalence. The triangle is evident in this paradigm as well, Rennie's position remains unchanged. The role the Doctor plays is seldom emphasized in the criticism of the novel. As Tharpe observes, the Doctor, a version of a later character from The Sot-Weed Factor, Burlingame, is a pragmatic transcendentalist and embodies a typically American paradox: "the combination of the highly idealistic with the extremely practical"<sup>5</sup>. Trachtenberg summarizes the enigmatic character of the Doctor as, "a charlatan, a criminal, a medical genius, an existential philosopher, and ... probably all of those things and more"<sup>6</sup>. The Doctor is running an extra-legal Remobilization Farm where he works on various cases of immobility. He is a mystery man /very purposefully, with the exception of his final involvement in the abortion, he is never revealed in any way although his influence is always understated,/ the reader wonders what, if any, qualifications for the job he has. His motivation for the involvement in Jacob's case is not explained either.

The action of The End of the Road begins after the

Doctor has prescribed Scriptotherapy to Jacob Horner. The technique of referring the reader back to the beginning, having just read the novel, conforms to Barth's emphasis on the element of story-telling. Barth overtly formulates this idea in Lost in the Funhouse; the reader is invited to form the Mobius strip of Barth's "Frame Tale" which reads continuously: "Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there..." In The End of the Road Jacob Horner remains on the Doctor's farm for some time to relive the story of an English teacher of prescriptive grammar at Wicomico State Teachers College in Maryland. After getting involved in a marital triangle with the first two friends he has made he has to share the responsibility for the possibility of having made his friend's wife pregnant.

The Freudian notion that society is bound together by the erotic, expressed through Barth's fascination with a triangle, is one of the affinities between his first novel and the second. Some other thematic concerns which Barth originates in The Floating Opera and continues in The End of the Road will be now briefly touched upon.

The setting of The Floating Opera is Cambridge, Maryland. The protagonist, Todd Andrews, is a lawyer at Cambridge. Retrospectively, his history begins on a day when he decides to commit suicide after having lived with the awareness of his presumably chronic heart disease for almost twenty years. Inspired, like Sartre's Pablo Ibbieta, by the loss of the illusion of being eternal, Todd seeks survival behind a series of masks: "a rake, a saint, and then a cynic ... when one mask no longer served its purpose of disguise, another had perforce to take its place at once"<sup>7</sup>. To a certain extent, the concept of masks is repeated in Mythotherapy from The End of the Road. Ultimately, the masks fail Todd and this is when he faces the alternative: suicide.

However, as Camus has written, "in a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills of the world"<sup>8</sup>. In the conflict between the mind that wants to die and the body that detests annihilation, the body wins.



Nominally, Todd's decision to live results from his feelings for Jeannine, who is the fruit of the manage-à-trois in which Todd gets involved, hence, quite possibly his daughter. Thus, having comprehended the futility of all values, Todd commits what Camus calls the "act of eluding":

The typical act of eluding, the fatal evasion ... is hope. Hope of another life one must "deserve" or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning...<sup>9</sup>

Barth was aware of the sentimentality of his first solution, and he wanted Jacob Horner to "undo that position in # 2 and carry all non-mystical value-thinking to the end of the road"<sup>10</sup>.

The novel begins with Jacob's existential statement: "In a sense, I Am Jacob Horner". This statement, confronted with some later statements such as: "All the way to the restaurant, all through the meal, all the way home, it was as though there were no Jacob Horner today"/35/, and "On those days Jacob Horner, except in a meaningless metabolic sense, ceased to exist, for I was without a personality"/36/, is interpreted as the expression of the fact that Jacob Horner identifies himself with various persons, including non-persons. Jacob is not only a person of various identities, but also the man of moods. Basically, these are three: inertia /"is mildly euphoric - my mind is neither empty nor still, but disengaged, and the idle race of fugitive thoughts that fill it spins past against a kind of all-pervasive, cosmic awareness ..."/102/, weatherlessness /"On my weatherless days my body sat in a rocking chair and rocked, and rocked and rocked, and my mind was as nearly empty as interstellar space"/36/, and cosmopsis /"When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunger, and no quick hand to terminate the moment - there

is only the light"/74/. To simplify, cosmopsis means the total withdrawal from action because the person afflicted with it has lost his sense of values, hence, can think of nothing that accomplishes anything.

Cosmopsis is the condition in which the Doctor discovers Jacob and takes an instantenous interest in him. He persuades Jacob that he ought to submit for treatment at the Remobilization Farm. He establishes Jacob's case and decides upon the therapy: directing Jacob toward the conscioussness of his existence. He recommends The World Almanac for Knowledge of the World so that Jacob will not have to use Logic or Reason when questioned but will rather know the right answer. He prescribes three principles: Sinistrality, Antecedence, and Alphabetical Priority in case Jacob will be forced to make a decision:

If the alternatives are side by side, choose the one on the left; if they're consecutive in time, choose the earlier, If neither of these applies, choose the alternative whose name begins with the earlier letter of the alphabet /85/.

The reading the Doctor recommends is Sartre and the job - teaching prescriptive /"No description at all. No optional situations. Teach the rules. Teach the truth about grammar" /5// grammar. Jacob is ashamed of this "alliance" with the Doctor; yet, he obeys precisely the suggestions and is exclusively under the Doctor's influence until he meets Joe Morgan.

When Jacob first meets Joe his reaction is symptomatic of how the relationship will evolve; he instinctively opposes Joe. There is something both absurd and comic in Jacob's game to escape the dinner invitation. He is in turn charmed by the Morgans /Joe especially/ and irritated by them /Rennie especially/. He at once recognizes the dependencies involved in this marriage: "...a touch of Pygmalion and Galatea, pretty well covers everything about their relationship..." /31/. Jacob undergoes a series of, what might be called, "éclaircissements" concerning his

recognition of Joe's arbitrary existentialism. Finally, Joe expresses his philosophy in full:

"Four things that I'm not impressed by... are unity, harmony, eternality and universality. In my ethics the most a man can ever do is be right from his point of view; there is no general reason why he should even bother to defend it, much less to expect anybody else to accept it, but the only thing he can do is operate by it, because there is nothing else"/46/.

Having recognized Joe's role in the world, Jacob finds in himself an ever-increasing interest for Rennie. The horse-riding lessons that Jacob takes from Rennie give him the opportunity to discuss her relationship with Joe and Rennie begins to realize that she is losing ground. It is when Jacob exposes Joe's irrationality that Rennie collapses mentally and her artlessness prompts her to believe that the dilemma into which she was pushed by Joe /she recognizes this fact/ is the Manichean conflict where she becomes the prey over which the two opposing forces: i.e. good /God, Joe/ and evil /Satan, Jacob/ perform their struggle. As soon as she admits this, she is no longer innocent; she is the fallen Eve /in her own code/ and must be destroyed. Consequently, she brings about her own destruction. Evidently, this reasoning is naive and does not account for the fact that not only Rennie but also Jacob becomes victimized in the end.

After Jacob has got involved with the Morgans there is some lapse of time in which he assigns for himself the role of Rennie's savior; yet, without his intending it, the domineering personality of Joe has such an impact on Jacob that the first role which he begins to play, even before Mythotherapy has been prescribed, is Joe Morgan. The Doctor is the first to notice. At this point he is yet ignorant of the consequences, but he thinks that Jacob has matured since he is submitting to Mythotherapy:

Mythotherapy is based on two assumptions: that human

existence precedes human essence, if either of the two terms really signifies anything; and that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will. These are both good existential premises, and whether they are true or false is of no concern to us - they're useful in our case /88/.

The Doctor advises Jacob that he should "turn" himself into some kind of person even if those persons /roles, masks/ are to change in different circumstances:

It's extremely important that you learn to assume these masks wholeheartedly. Don't think there's anything behind them: e g o means I, and I means e g o, and the ego by definition is a mask... If you sometimes have the feeling that your mask is i n s i n c e r e ... it's only because one of your masks is incompatible with another /90/.

In other words, cosmopsis will not afflict Jacob as long as he creates his own reality into which he makes himself fit. What the Doctor does not realize at this point is that Jacob's reality has been determined by another law-giver: Joe Morgan. Jacob continues to imitate Joe to such an extent that, acting on impulse, he seduces Joe's wife. What results from this act could have saved Jacob under another set of circumstances.

It might be interesting to recall that Todd Andrews /The Floating Opera/, when faced with a crucial situation, responds passionately rather than rationally. On the contrary, Jacob's response, in a parallel situation, i.e., when he is confronted with the possibility of Rennie's suicide, is rational rather than emotional like Todd's. Also, his actions are precise and rational for the first time in the action of the novel. Barth's protagonist undergoes what Honig labels as "dialectic transfer" in allegorical writing<sup>11</sup>, i.e., the transvaluation of an agent "from relatively static ideational figure/s/ at the start to progressively more active and meaningful role/s/



in the course of the narrative." The circumstances are these.

Rennie confesses her infidelity to Joe. Apparently, neither Jacob nor Rennie can tell, at Joe's inquisition, why they committed adultery, and Joe makes Rennie repeat the act until she can tell. All this is interspersed with a number of farcical scenes which Joe directs along with a great deal of psychoanalysis that goes on in the Morgans' household. The vaudeville ends when Rennie gets pregnant and naturally cannot tell who the father is. Rennie does not want the child; nor does she want to go on living.

As has been previously mentioned Jacob's reaction to Rennie's tragic attitude could have saved him under different circumstances. He is prepared to take the consequences whatever they imply: if Rennie is only willing to give birth to the baby he can take care of it. Likewise, he would support the baby if Rennie did not wish to part with it, take care of Rennie and her children if Joe left her, or, at last, be willing to arrange for an abortion since this is the only alternative Rennie wants to accept /"you can't vomit for Rennie or split up the labor pains with her," Joe informs Jacob/. The days that follow are probably the busiest in Jacob's life. His previously meaningless and empty life has acquired sense, and probably for the first time there is motivation for his actions. Having tried all kinds of possibilities for a safe abortion /the alternative is to risk the danger of an illegal one/ including his determined commitment to Miss Peggy Rankin in return for help, Joe asks the Doctor to perform the operation. The Doctor's decision is Satanic /ironically, he is black/: abortion for Jacob's soul. Jacob accepts conditions: he will submit for therapy and help manually on the farm. Yet, Rennie's brutish ignorance wins despite the best of Jacob's intentions. Having eaten a substantial supper of hot-dogs and sauerkraut before abortion, Rennie vomits under ether and dies of asphyxiation.

Jacob is not allowed to take any responsibility. The last conversation with Joe closes any opportunity for salvation:

"Well, what's on your mind, Jake? What do you think about things?" I hesitated, entirely nonpulsed. "God, Joe<sup>12</sup> - I don't know where to start or what to do!"

"What?"

His voice remained clear, bright, and close in the ear. Tears ran in a cold flood down my face and neck, onto my chest, and I shook all over with violent chills.

"I said I don't know what to do".

"Oh". /197/

One of Jacob's gods has failed him and there is total resignation in his voice when he gives the direction to the taxi driver: "Terminal."

It seems proper to round off this paper with a further allusion to Tanner's statement from the initial part of it. According to him, the allegorical quality of Barth's book is the grounds for criticism. He acknowledges the fact that the book basically deals with the exemplification of ideas. The End of the Road is the novel of ideas, where ideas fall into allegorical patterns. The way Barth handles allegory is typical for contemporary "fabulistic" writing<sup>13</sup>. Allegory becomes a mode of writing and is used interchangeably with a mimetic mode. This fact accounts for the difficulty in decoding modern allegory and for the existence of a number of possible meanings instead of one unimpaired meaning. Therefore the allusion previously made to Hawthorne seems to be self-explanatory<sup>14</sup>

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Tony Tanner. 1967. "The Hoax that Joke Bilked". Partisan Review 34. p. 104.
- <sup>2</sup> Herbert F. Smith. 1963. "Barth's Endless Road". Critique 6. p. 69.
- <sup>3</sup> Barth, John. 1967. The End of the Road. New York: Bantam Books. p. 129. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
- <sup>4</sup> Angus Fletcher. 1964. Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press. p. 229. The quotation which follows comes from the same edition. Philosophic

ambivalence is one of the allegorical patterns /also: theological dualism and emotive ambivalence/ that Fletcher distinguishes under the over-all category: allegorical Battle. I examined the application of all three patterns in the dissertation: Dimensions of Allegory in the American Fable of the 1960's /unpublished doctoral dissertation, Poznań 1979, pp. 36-143/

- 5 Jac Tharpe. 1974. John Barth. The Comic Sublimity of Paradox. Garbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press. p. 3.
- 6 Alan Trachtenberg. 1963. "Barth and Hawkes: Two Fabulists". Critique 6. p. 11.
- 7 John Barth. 1966. The Floating Opera. New York: Doubleday. p. 239.
- 8 Albert Camus. 1955. The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays. New York: Vintage Books. p. 6.
- 9 i b i d. p. 7.
- 10 quoted after Richard W. Noland. 1966. "John Barth and the Novel of Comic Nihilism". Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 7. p. 244.
- 11 Edwin Honig. 1959. Dark Conceit. The Making of Allegory. Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press. p. 138.
- 12 underlining is mine
- 13 For a complete definition of "fabulation" cf. Robert Scholes. 1967. The Fabulators. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. pp. 11, 99, 170, 173, and, more recently, Robert Scholes. 1979. Fabulation and Metafiction. Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press. On the same subject and on the relationship between old and new allegory, cf. Elżbieta Oleksy /forthcoming/. "Tempora Mutantur et Fabulae Mutantur in Illis: Some Reflections on Post-Modern American Fiction". Studia Anglica Posnaniensia.
- 14 On Hawthorne's handling of allegory cf. Daniel Hoffman /Form and Fable in American Fiction, New York: The Norton Library, 1961, p. 173/, who writes: "Hawthorne's artistic method is to use allegory to destroy the absolute certitude of the allegorical mind: by offering several certainties which any given phenomenon, wonder, or providence may be believed to represent, and by attributing to each of these alternatives a tenable claim to absolute belief, Hawthorne undermines the dogmatic monism of allegory itself." On the same subject cf. Richard Chase. 1957. The American Novel and Its Tradition. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, pp. 67-87.

## Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia analizę powieści J.Bartha The End of the Road jako przykład filozoficznej ambiwalencji, która jest jednym z elementów tzw. alegorycznej walki. W tym kontekście omówiono główne postacie w odpowiednio zbudowanym paradygmacie ukazując ich wzajemne powiązania i konflikty. Zastosowanie filozoficznej ambiwalencji jako zasady kompozycyjnej i ideowej ukazuje znaczenie i temat powieści Bartha.