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THE MIRROR EFFECT IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

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Abstract

Description is from a Barthesian perspective an in-scription through which the act of writing becomes mimetic¹. It represents not only the object described (the theme), but also the self (the author), generating then a mirror effect. Description gives way then to self-representation and self-portrait in this study of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, based on the criteria of likeness and sameness. There exists at the core of the author's writing the expression of the double which informs through a psychocritical grid the autobiographical dimension of Hemingway's fictional writing.

Keywords: self-portrait, self-representation, narcissism, sameness, (auto)biography, likeness.

Résumé

Selon Roland Barthes, la description renvoie à un acte d'inscription à travers lequel l'écriture devient mimétique. Elle représente non seulement l'objet décrite (le thème), mais aussi le moi (l'auteur), engendrant un effet miroir dans l'écriture. Ainsi, l'acte de description donne lieu à une forme d'auto-représentation et d'auto-portrait dans la présente étude du roman *Le Vieil homme et la mer* d'Ernest Hemingway basée sur les concepts de vraisemblance et de mêmeté. L'expression du double se trouve au cœur de l'écriture d'Ernest Heminway, et met en relief sous un angle de lecture psychocritique la dimension autobiographique de son œuvre de fiction.

Mots-clés: Auto-portrait, auto-representation, narcissisme, mêmeté, (auto)biographie, vraisemblance.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* précédé de *Variations sur l'écriture*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, p. 68-69.

Introduction

The Old Man and the Sea is one of Ernest Hemingway's most famous and significant novels. For that, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954. It is about an old man's tragic fishing trip. It is also a story of courage and dignity with an autobiographical resonance. Described as adventurous, Ernest Hemingway enjoyed deep-sea fishing, among others activities, reflected in his fiction.

This article examines the mirror effect in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, so as to raise the autobiographical dimension of his fiction. By establishing a correlation between fiction and non-fiction, this paper shows the mechanism of self-representation and self-portrait at work in the novelist's text. It uses the psychocritical approach defined by Charles Mauron to understand the motives of the author's writing.

I- Sameness and textual dynamics

This first part shows in the mechanism of the text, an identical self through the representation of Santiago and the little boy. The perception of the two as distinct protagonists can be limited, when a character is fundamentally considered as a persona. Santiago and the little boy are described with human attributes. This apprehension resides on referentiality, which affects the potential of the work of fiction to produce literary imagination.

The dissociation of Santiago and the little boy with human beings leading to the perception of characters as a verbal constructs, comes with the production of narrative information. It is the process through which the mirror effect is generated. Santiago and the little boy are complementary from a structural point of view. Their combination is made in the symbol of eyes, as it reads in the text : "Everything about him was old except his eyes"². The eyes are the only physical traits on the old man that are associated with the little boy.

The emphasis on the eyes comes from the parallel established with Santiago's other body parts. Distinction is perceptible with the pathetic description. Pathos is generated in the description of the character as being "thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck" as an indication of his old age. It is reinforced with

² Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, London, Toronto, Sydney, New York, Granada, 1976, p. 5.

the allusion to skin cancer in "The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer". The narrator's intention is deliberate with the mark of gradation. The comparison of his cheeks with "the brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer" creates an effect of intensification. The reflections of the sun on the tropic sea revivify his wrinkles showing in his old age Santiago's vulnerability and weakness.

Ernest Hemingway's description recreates a visual language as a mode of perception which directly involves the reader. Imagination is triggered off not only with material objects proven from the reference to verisimilitude. But it is also built on sensorial means or evocative terms, for example in the association of "skin cancer" and "wrinkles". Detailing as a narrative strategy and a mode of representation definitely constructs the visual language in the text. It gives way to representations through which signification as a process is acquired. In the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, the representation of the old man is contained in a dynamics of multiplicity which liberates out of textuality an interiorization of the reader. Affects are produced in an act of elaboration of the character. As manipulation is orchestrated in the narrative, the reader is forced to apprehend the character of Santiago with affection. The reader is implicated in fiction, that which makes Santiago be perceived as a subject whose fate is sad and sorrowful.

The narrative constructs an anti-hero through the character of Santiago. The first part of the text *The Old Man and the Sea* deprives him of traditional heroic qualities of bravery and strength. The text reveals him through the tales of his misfortune. The term used to qualify him "salao" means "the worst form of unlucky". But this representation is in parallel with an analepsis which recalls his glorious times. The double description of the character structurally generates a slippery of the signifiers. The resulting mirror effect opposes two subjects, as a way for writing to negotiate with the real³. There occurs simultaneously a distance that accounts for the non-perception of the character. Abstraction is to be understood as the impossibility of writing as an act of representation to be mimetic.

A semantic gap blurs on purpose the visibility of the character. As a narrative technique at work in the text, it turns him into an unsociable subject. Santiago is ostracized from the rest of the community. He has as a unique friend a little boy. His marginalization is all the more significant than it allows writing to reach another articulation. The description of the old man by integrating his frustrations, worries,

³ Clément Rosset, *Le Réel et son double: essai sur l'illusion*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 45.

insufficiencies, confession, and fears, is given an effect of realism⁴. In other terms, it humanizes the character.

Thick description results from detailing. It goes with direct representation and introspection making more real and evident the perception of the character. Verisimilitude participates to familiarization. The character is made ordinary and accepted as a persona. In the narrative for instance, the description of Santiago's hands with "deep-creased scars" justifies his activity which consists in "handling heavy fish on the cords". Realism is to be defined not as the reference to concrete terms. It is rather considered as a reinscription of the character into the humanly possible. Writing intends to reach a certain degree of sameness.

Sameness is embedded in textuality. It is reflected through the actantial scheme. It takes into consideration not only the enactment, but also actualization or non-actualization of each character in the story. The character of the little boy is denied the status of a persona, which corrupts literary imagination. Rather as an actant, the little boy better signifies the character of Santiago. In the poetics of the mirror effect, a character is to be assessed as a trait which helps define a persona. It is the case of Santiago and the little boy which leads to the analysis on self-representation. In other terms, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* deals with narcissism.

The relationship between Santiago and the little boy is all the more interesting that it reveals self-representation. Santiago is represented through the little boy. Or the little boy is a projection of the character of Santiago. An effect of reflection is here achieved, defining a character as a verbal construct. Age difference introduces anachronism as well in the text, since Santiago who is the old man induces an analepsis informing his past as "El Campeón" meaning the champion⁵. Meanwhile the discourse on the little boy evokes a prolepsis. Santiago finds in the little boy what he is no longer (- his youth), and what he was (- a champion). Standing as his object of desire, Santiago wants to repossess this past glory. Hence his satisfaction and self-assertion to be in the company of the little boy.

The analysis on the mirror effect from a representational point of view in Hemingway's writing evokes both a symbolic homosexuality and/or paedophilia. Santiago's narcissistic attitude is extraverted. Not self-centered, it integrates the other. His narcissism is based on the principle of reflection. The mirror effect nourishes self-perception based on the other. As a consequence, the little boy stands as the object of desire for the old man Santiago. He uses the boy to satisfy his needs.

⁴ Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de réel", in *Communication 11*, Paris, Seuil, 1968, p. 84-85.

⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, op. cit., p. 59.

That which explains from a structural view point their friendship. Their relationship is desinterested, as it procures pleasure to the old man. The expression of pleasure is one of the main characteristics of narcissism which helps understand the motives of Hemingway's writing.

II- Narcissistic pleasure

As the mirror effect remains at the core of the narrative dynamics in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the narcissistic pleasure which derives from it shows the implications of the author. It reveals the relation between the author and (the act of) writing. If the perception of the mirror effect in the text proves an existing tie between the main protagonists Santiago and the little boy, the narcissistic pleasure in turn discloses the unconscious of the text. It tells the motivations of the author unconsciously inscribed in the text⁶.

The narcissistic pleasure has to be essentially apprehended in the form of a manifestation of the unconscious. It is repressed in the text. Writing becomes accordingly its space of expression. In the novel, the old man's object of desire is the little boy. It constructs a homosexual and/or paedophile imagery justified in the actantial scheme of both characters. This relation of desire nourishes indeed the narcissistic pleasure. This articulation should not raise any allegation on the author. The description of the relationship between the old man and the little boy is integral to the dynamics of the text giving way to same-sex imagery, which discloses the writer's psyche. The architecture of the novel evokes, in other words, the psychology of the author. What Charles Mauron calls the unconscious personality of the author⁷.

Mental representations are perceived in a psychoanalytic reading which indirectly involves the author. Part of his identity is revealed in the mechanism of his writing. Even though Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* is a fictional text, there is to a lesser extent in this work an autobiographical imprint. Autobiography compared to a dream or slip of tongue - place of the manifestation of the author's unconscious, is added to fiction in an heterogeneous form. Therefore, the determination of the unconscious of the text brings out latent facts which help understand the narcissistic pleasure of the author articulated in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. This pleasure which describes the mirror effect in the text, results from an automate writing that is beyond the author's control or awareness.

⁶ Charles Mauron, *Des Métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel: Introduction à la Psychocritique*, Paris, José Corti, 1963, p. 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Reading the unconscious is synonymous with negotiating with absence. It involves the repressed and/or the hidden motivations sustaining the act of writing. This is not to be compared with the authorial intention which is rather overt, and more likely to be handled by the writer. The authorial intention turns the writer into a demiurge in his role of a creator of the fictional world. The author's intention which accompanies and justifies the act of writing is reached once the novel is done.

Even though the writer's intention is integrated in the novelist's drafting plan in a materialized form which leads to fiction, the unconscious comes in the author's writing in an unexpected way. It participates however to the dynamics of fiction. Absence manifested in the form of repression betrays the writer. It reveals in other terms the narcissistic pleasure of the author. Absence initially describes a state of lack which marks the origin of his narcissism and the nature of pleasure.

III- Narcissism in the representation of the author

The relationship between the character of Santiago and the sea leads to perceive a mirror effect in the representation of the author. There are some autobiographical implications in the writing of Ernest Hemingway, even though *The Old Man and the Sea* remains a work of fiction. The autobiographical part of this novel is the manifestation of the unconscious of the text. It is a discourse produced that lies beyond the control and awareness of the author. It more than informs, but betrays and reveals the writer.

Narcissism allows to question fictional writing, in so much as it expresses a desire on the part of the novelist of self-portrait and self-representation. This desire inscribed in the text is perceived as an emotional outlet. It serves either therapeutic purposes. Or it can be a source of jouissance. The expression of self as a way to mean one's self is an existential need. It procures satisfaction. It is in writing where it comes up, despite the author's willingness to have a work that is essentially fictional. Fiction definitely becomes this part of the author's self that is revealed by the critic. The self is fictionalized in the writing process. It is turned into an ingredient in the whole fabric of fiction. From this angle, the autobiographical resonance in the novel neither questions, nor deletes the fictional nature of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The fictionalization of self is made in the use of obsessive metaphor. It designates an imagery that characterizes the author's writing mainly through its recurrence in the text⁸. Insistence and repetition allow to establish a link between the imagery used and the writer. In that sense, the author cannot help using it, since it is the manifestation of his unconscious. The appearance and inscription of this

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

imagery in the text result from an act of repression, which in other terms, reveals the author. Hence this study on the narcissistic representation in Ernest Hemingway's writing.

The interaction between Santiago and the sea evokes the ambiguous relationship that the author Ernest Hemingway has with women. Santiago's loneliness permits to understand this articulation in the author's text. The sea is personified, a process through which his deceased wife is symbolically brought back to life. The signification of the sea dwells in its feminization, as it reads in the passage below:

The old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them. The moon affects her as it does a woman⁹.

Gender is at the core of this part, since it shows its incidence not only on designation, but also metaphorization. The shift occurring from *el mar* to *la mar* is no less nominative. It is indeed caused by a perception which defines the framework of enunciation. It is the context from where is generated the symbol. In other words, the framework prefigures the meaning associated, as it comes in the following schema repeated in the two cases of masculinization and feminization.

The first utterance is a designation. It is a statement in which feminity is rejected and replaced by masculinity. With an affirmative tone, this discourse remains though genderly conflicted. This utterance marks a position. It is a deduction motivated by its enunciative framework. "Some of the young fishermen [...] spoke of her as *el mar* which is masculine" is definitely the outcome or a reproduction of phallographic standards. The masculinization of the sea results from a mode of perception that turns *mar* masculine, as it is demonstrated in: "They spoke of her as a contestant, or a place or even an enemy". Masculinity is inscribed in the epic nature¹⁰, as it is the case in Ernest Hemingway's text. It derives from the opposition reached, inducing a conflict in the representation of the sea as "a contestant" and or "an enemy".

⁹ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, "The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature", in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 192.

Al contrario, feminization in the representation of the sea reveals a mirror effect, which directly involves the author. Its first expression as place of pleasure or "of great favours" is a parallel drawn with the female body and her sex appeal. Going at sea becomes irresistible. It is given a sexual connotation, despite the old age, the curse victimizing Santiago, and above all masculinization that makes of the sea a place of danger. The obsession of the main protagonist is overtly sexual. Even though darkness symbolizes mystery, its exploration expressed through the following prepositions "in", "out into" procures pleasure as the old man could "feel the morning coming [...] hear[d] the trembling sound as flying fish left the water and the hissing that their stiff set wings made as they soared away in the darkness. He was very fond"¹¹. At each exploration, "*la mar*" symbolically the woman reveals herself. It accounts for Santiago's obsession to go at sea.

From this perspective, "*la mar*" becomes both an object of desire and jouissance. The nature of the relationship between the fisherman and the feminized object changes, since it is transformed into a space of realization. It discards any antagonism which leads to the negation of the other. "*La mar*" helps Santiago ostracized from the rest of the community asserts himself, and regain his lost honor. This representation is associated with the author's perception of women.

The female subject is somewhere taken as an object of inspiration from her significance and participation to the craft of the author. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, some scenes reveal Ernest Hemingway's experience with women. For example in the passage above, the ability to give or withhold great favours, to do wild or wicked thing at her will shows the place and power of women as being determinant. Or rather, it marks Hemingway's acknowledgement. This scene means how much women were significant in the author's life. Writing compares her to the sea to express her grandeur in: "The moon affects her as it does a woman"¹². The sea with its immensity that only the moon can affect is an hyperbole which unveils the author's consideration for women. It contributes to self-portrait or self-representation.

IV- The vision of the author

Self-representation is also perceived in the novel through the vision of the author. In fact, the vision of the novelist can precede the act of writing. It generally appears as a motivation. Or as a project, it turns the act of writing into an attempt at reaching the intention of the author. In the case of spontaneity, the vision of the author comes out of writing. Or it is revealed at the moment the author finishes his/her draft. In

¹¹ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

both cases, the authorial vision is materialized in the writing process, since writing *per se* is essentially a means of expression. Fictional writing is then viewed as a space of in-scription. The author's imprint is not only present in auto/biographical texts, but also in purely fictional writing, at different degrees.

The vision of the author in *The Old Man and the Sea* is rather revealed by the fictionality of writing. It is contained in the dynamics of the text. In a work of fiction, it is covert, expressed at a lesser extent, since veiled. While it remains overt in non-fiction. The difference between fiction and non-fiction lies in the use of objective means, such as places, years, the names of people, their deeds, etc. Non-fiction goes with documentary writing which is based on facts¹³. By giving a form of historicity, its objectivity comes from referential elements which allow recognition and identification with reality.

Ernest Hemingway's vision in *The Old Man and the Sea* is apprehended in the main theme. The theme is defined as the idea that comes out of the coalescence of all different articulations (actions, events, or ideas) in a work of fiction. A correlation exists as the vision carries the theme, or the other way round. The vision is related on the one hand to what the text tackles. On the other hand, it is linked to the way it is structured – the plot as it indicates the storyline. Out of it, the vision of the author definitely appears as his point of view on the theme treated in his writing. It uncovers his position, philosophy, and opinion, as it comes in the storyline.

There is in fictional writing a part of self which reveals the author. From another perspective, the mirror effect giving an autobiographical dimension to the text appears in the actantial scheme of the novel. The representation of different events in *The Old Man and the Sea* can be summarized as it follows:

- The first part is characterized by multiple attempts of failure. Santiago cannot catch a single fish.
- The second part is his victory. Santiago catches the fish.
- The third part is another failure. Santiago returns to the village with a fish partly eaten by sharks.

The inscription of circularity points out the interest of this simplified plot, since the beginning and the end are identical. As in a circle, there is definitely no beginning and no end. To signify this dynamics, Santiago comes home with a symbol «the sword» from the swordfish to mean that the struggle continues.

¹³ John Warnock (Ed), "What is Literary Nonfiction?", in *Representing Reality: Readings in Literary Nonfiction*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989, p. xvii-xviii.

His obsession keeps him alive, makes him act. By getting out of possession of fish like the letter in "The Purloined Letter"¹⁴, the slippery of the signifier here the object of desire (the fish) maintains the subject Santiago in a perpetual quest of victory. The quest defines a state of self-realization. The author's philosophy of life takes the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental principle which not only humanizes, but also asserts individuals. This thematic identification shows the author's involvement, beyond fictionalization operating in the novel.

Conclusion

This article brings on a thorny debate in literary theory and criticism. On the question to know if auto/biographical writing is fictional, this reflection takes a position by asserting the autobiographical dimension of any work of fiction. It poses that dealing with whatever genre writing is nothing, but a signature that is indeniably linked to his/her author.

It is the case of *The Old Man and the Sea* an essentially fictional text which uses the autobiography as an ingredient that enhances literary imagination and inventiveness. In other words, self-representation or self-portrait can be sketched out through a rigorous analysis that reveals the motives of the author. Writing works as a mirror whose reflection uncovers the writer. By writing on a fisherman's obsession in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway definitely writes him out.

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¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter", in *An Edgar Allan Poe Reader*, New Jersey, Globe Fearon, 1992, p. 45.

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