

POSTMODERN POETICS OF TOM ROBBINS IN HIS NOVEL *FIERCE INVALIDS HOME FROM HOT CLIMATES*

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Abstract: Tom Robbins is a representative of the so-called “hippie narrative” stream of authors who emerged in 1960s America and marked a changing spirituality in America. His novels are full of eccentric characters and absurd situations. He uses metafictional techniques to subvert the traditional norms in society and parodies subjects such as religion or politics. In his novels he uses amusing metaphors and similes, especially in his novel *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*. Humour and irony are the key tools in most of his fiction. The aim of the paper is to explore the narrative techniques in his novel *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (2000) and the way how the contemporary novelist has transgressed boundaries in his novels.

Key words: postmodernism, intertextuality, popular culture, playfulness

Introduction

Tom Robbins wrote his first novel in 1971. He represents the branch of American fiction writers who have managed to “close the gap between high and low (or popular) culture” – to quote Leslie Fiedler from his famous collection of essays in 1971 *Cross the Border – Close the Gap*.¹ Tom Robbins is not known in Slovak literary circles (no translation has been made into Slovak) and not much discussion has been dedicated to his novels. This paper explores the narrative techniques in his novel *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (2000) and the way how the contemporary novelist has transgressed boundaries in his novels. Robbins has widely employed up-to-date and slang vocabulary in his novels and made use of popular genre forms, such as detective fiction or references to popular music or pornography. Even the occasional occurrence of fantastic and extraordinary events and figures in his novels points at the emergence of a “new novel.”

Tom Robbins’s first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*, was published in 1971 and became a cult book for the newly emergent hippie counter-culture. He has been compared to Ken Kesey or Kurt Vonnegut due to their similar style of writing and subject-matter, disjointed narrative, preoccupation with flat and eccentric characters interested in spiritualism, religion, and use of hallucinogenic drugs. Tom Robbins, in his novels questions, or subverts Western institutions and established norms in society. Interested in myths and oriental philosophy, and graduating in philosophy and religion, Robbins strives for a return to the former values held by more primitive cultures (represented by nomadic tribes in the discussed novel), as compared with the corrupted values of contemporary Western society.

Tom Robbins’s diction in his novel *Fierce Invalids from Hot Climates*

The title of the novel „*Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*” is a line from Arthur Rimbaud's poem *A Season In Hell*. Robbins’s main character Switters shows parallels to Rimbaud himself, who travels to most continents and satisfies his eagerness by making himself visionary. Switters is a CIA agent who travels to different parts of the world, partly through his mission given by CIA agents, and partly to draw inspiration from different places and cultures which give meaning to his own values and opinions, reflect the reality of the world with all its peculiarities, and (try to) provide definite answers to most questions that the civilizations have faced for years. Humour, satire, sarcasm, and parody serve as a vehicle in conveying and verifying Robbins’s message.

Robbins's overt and heterodiegetic narrator questions his own characters, which reminds the reader of the style John Fowles used in his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Moreover, he suggests multiple readings of his text.

Undoubtedly, there are those who would be inclined to sneer at Switters, judging him in word and deed to have proven himself immature, frivolous, or even zany (to employ that stale adjective – from the Italian, zanni, a would-be or untalented clown – that the leaden are fond of applying to characters less stodgy and predictable than they or their friends). The psychoanalytically disposed, on the other hand, might detect in his behavior . . . a classic, arguably heroic, example of despair refusing to take itself seriously. Well, maybe.²

The narrator makes an explicit statement that reading the text may even be very problematic for the reader. He does not in any case suggest that his novel might be appreciated by literate readership only. Readers can enjoy reading the novel without their familiarity with scientific terms or philosophical concepts. The narrator comments in a playful tone: “Switters had been around the block. He had even, one might say, been around the block within the block within the block within the block; (depending upon his or her own experience, the reader will or will not know what this suggests)”³.

When a narrator in a postmodernist novel directly addresses the readers and plays with their expectations, it is an example of the postmodernist tendency. The narrator creates an illusion of the importance of his further account and arouses the interest in readers through metafictional comments. Robbins subverts the usual novelistic process of making the reader believe in a novel's illusion of reality.

The novel starts with four short accounts describing setting and some characters that will only later appear in full in the book, with the narrator commenting on the narrative strategy he uses:

...that's the way the mind works: the human brain is genetically disposed toward organization, yet if not tightly controlled, will link one imagerial fragment to another on the flimsiest of pretense and in the most freewheeling manner, as if it takes a kind of organic pleasure in creative association, without regard for logic or chronological sequence . . . it appears that this prose account has unintentionally begun in partial mimicry of the mind. Four scenes do maintain chronological order and a connective element (Switters), and while the motif is a far cry from the kind of stream-of-consciousness technique that makes the *Finnegans Wake* simultaneously the most realistic and the most unreadable book ever written (unreadable precisely because it is so unrealistic), still, alas, the preceding is probably not the way in which the effective narrative ought properly to unfold – not even in these days when the world is showing signs of awakening from its linear trance, its dangerously restrictive sense of itself as a historical vehicle chugging down a one-way street toward some preordained apocalyptic goal.⁴

The period in which Robbins wrote his previous novels saw the emergence of diverse novelists who played with the form and content of the novel, and who challenged the traditionally accepted norms of the novel through fabulation, exploration of the relations between fiction and reality, and the use of metacommentaries to draw on the construction of the novel. And he has done so in all his novels. As Patricia Waugh points out,

Any text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure problematizes more or less explicitly the ways in which narrative codes – whether literary or social – artificially construct apparently real and imaginary worlds.⁵

Metafiction was a useful literary tool and approach to narrative for American authors in 1960s. Metafictionists enable the readers to understand the process of fiction-making, thus attempting to blur the line between fiction and reality. “Robbins's style of writing is peculiar. The language the narrator uses is sarcastic, ironic, and humorous, drawing attention to the fictionality of the story itself: “After dinner they went computerside and uncorked the Fatima jug. Quickly, their cups runneth over”⁶. The voice of the narrator is clear from Robbins' style and play with words. The word *runneth*, for example, alludes to biblical archaic form.

Tom Robbins in his comment returns to an earlier mode of narration, progressing in a linear way, and thus parodies the modernists' experimentation with the narrative time and organization of the novel. In his *Romantic postmodernism in American fiction*, Eberhard Alsen distinguishes the works of so-called postmodern romantics from their counterparts postmodern realists, whose "fiction is realistic in its outlook but often non-mimetic in its representation of reality . . . and its most notable trait is its iconoclastic and disjunctive character."⁷ Those features typical of postmodern romantics are: "vision of life that is a form of philosophical idealism, an organic view of art, modes of storytelling that are reminiscent of the nineteenth-century romance, and such themes as the nature of sin or evil, the negative effects of technology on the soul, and the quest for transcendence."⁸ Tom Robbins' novel displays all traits of an organic art, with its complex and unique metaphors. It is often metaphysical in nature, and separate chapters (or rather passages) within the chapters encompass the whole history of mankind, stripped off all constraints – moral and social ones. Despite being confined to the wheelchair, Switters is attracted to many girls on the streets of Seattle and flirts with them. He kills time making miniature boats and pushing them in the rainwater. One day, he meets the Art Girls in the Pike Place Market. The girls start to make their own boats and come to compete with one another every day:

One day, to everyone's delight, a lowly garbage scow appeared in place of a windjammer, and the next day somebody launched an ark. These were followed by fishing trawlers, tugboats, barges, rafts, kayaks, houseboats, tankers, ocean liners. . . the girls began to bring in boats that bore no resemblance to boats: impressionistic boats, expressionistic boats, Cubistic boats . . . boats that wouldn't steer correctly. . . Anti-boats. Suicides. Bangladesh ferry service. Then, Luna stopped the show with a miniature Christ who walked on water. Everyone was stunned, but two days later, during which time she had neither slept nor eaten, Brie [another girl] unveiled a Christ who not only walked on water but also towed skis. Apparently, the end was near.⁹

The novel can, therefore, be read as an allegory – the image of boat-making symbolizes the whole creative or cultural history of the mankind. Moreover, it resembles the style of the modernists, such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, who in their poetry juxtapose incompatible images to get across their message and create a desirable effect.

Robbins not only closes the gap between elitist art and popular culture, but also gives a unique, Western, male perspective on the stereotyped vision of the Other world, questioning and taking pleasure in the controversial issues, such as religion or ethics. In Thailand, the narrator describes Switters' sexual encounter with a prostitute:

He spent his last hours in Bangkok in the company of an actual adolescent. He bought her a new silk dress, jeans, and a compact disc player. Then he put her on a bus to her native village with six thousand dollars in her pink plastic purse, her brief career as a whore at an end. She would rescue her family financially, and – since sexual shame was nonexistent in Thailand and would see that she was free of disease – eventually marry her childhood sweetheart in a jolly public ceremony beside a field apop with ripening rice."¹⁰

Throughout the novel, Robbins explores philosophical concepts, other than Western-focused, which focus on such issues as the past, history, time, truth, reality, and similar topics that entered the literary and philosophical circles in the second half of the 20th century. He looks at those phenomena from the point of view of different cultures, thus providing the postmodern plurality of opinions. He often attacks the doctrines of religious thinkers or challenges passages in the Bible, which is in accord with French theoretician Jean-François Lyotard's view that postmodernism shows "incredulity towards meta-narratives." The narrator of the story comments in one of his contemplations:

In Genesis 3:22, a peevish voice attributed to Yahweh said of Adam . . . "Behold, the man is become one of us." Us? More than one god, then? Goddesses, perhaps: a Ms. Yahweh? Was Yah's collective pronoun meant to include his beaming lieutenant, Lucifer? Or, for that matter, the Serpent?¹¹

Robbins expresses humour by applying intertextuality as a driving force in many of his metaphors and similes. In those similes a wide range of images are juxtaposed: religious combined with secular ones

(*If God had meant for animals to live indoors, he would have given them second mortgages*), or religious with pagan ones (*What Gaia the Hairdresser hath styled, let no man shear asunder*). Intertextuality plays a crucial part here.

While reading Tom Robbins's novel *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates* published in 2000, the reader's mind is put to work twice as much as it is with Irving's novels. The metaphors, similes, puns, intertextual references (Alan Ginsberg and his Howl, Houdini, Jesus, John Wayne, Tennessee Williams, Billy Graham, Salvador Dalí, the Beatles, John Deere, Carlos Castaneda), allusions to various literary, biblical, and cultural issues – these all make his novel a demanding yet rewarding task for the contemporary reader.

Switters's friend Bad Bobby Case says to Switters:

Any adult male heterosexual who says he isn't ever turned on by pubescent girls is liar or a geek, and you can tell him Bad Bobby said so. But we're in denial over that, too . . . A man go Humbert-Humbering in America, he'll find himself thrown into the volcano, a sacrifice to appease the gods who've blighted humanity with all these nasty, unwanted, upsetting transgenerational cravings.¹²

Robbins expresses in the previous extract archetypal motifs of adult lust, so often depicted in the works of his contemporaries, such as John Irving's novels (*The World According to Garp*), and provides an intertextual link to the main character Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*.

At times, the novel reminds us Richard Brautigan's *Troutfishing in America*, in which, as Waugh says, „metaphorical constructions where the extreme polarity and tenor implicitly reminds the reader of the way in which metaphor constructs an image of reality by connecting apparently quite disparate objects“¹³. Tom Robbins does more than this: he uses personification, similes, and metaphors which both explicitly draw on the contemporary sensibility of the reader and contain references to such subjects as Spanish culture, information technology, geology, biology, Asian religion, the occult, and astrology. He is known for his use of alliteration (*pecked at papaya pulp, shelling beans into a blue enamel basin balanced on her lap*), which appears to have a cosmic or universal nature. As Linda Hutcheon states:

The social and intellectual gap between author and reader is closed or at least lessened by a novel which overtly acknowledges that it only exists insofar as (and while) it is read. Typical of this new kind of high/low self-reflexive fiction is the work of Tom Robbins: there are two epigraphs to his *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, one from William Blake and one from Roy Rogers.¹⁴

The playfulness of Robbins's language is demonstrated in his narrator-observer's description of the objects poetically: “Switters ... looked down upon a clean-swept courtyard. There, white chickens scratched white chicken poetry into the sad bare earth, and a trio of pigs squealed and grunted, as if in endless protest against a world that tolerated the tragedy of bacon.”¹⁵

Reading the novel often requires the use of dictionaries (etymological, urban) and encyclopedias, for Robbins' diction is far from being straightforward. Archaic words: *orbs* instead of eyes¹⁶, *hue* instead of color¹⁷, slang words such as *noggin*, which is a slang expression meaning head¹⁸, neologisms, foreign words such as *canine* instead of dog¹⁹, as well as words which do not have reference in the history (non-existent tribes in the Amazon – Kandakandero and Nacanaca) - these all not only contribute to the complexity of the narrative, but also heighten the comic effects in the story and arouse curiosity. Robbins's concrete images intermingle with abstract ones, presence with the past, secular with spiritual, sensuous with rational, transcendental with natural, microcosmic with macrocosmic.

Despite being set in the second half of the 1990s, Robbins's story reflects the sensibility of the 1960s hippie era, through his use of adventurous characters who take trips to various countries and live lives free from constraints imposed on them by the materialized society. Switters is the product of the material world of American society and finds objective correlative in the Amazon or Syria, where he

encounters peoples with strange behaviour. Yet Switters does not abandon his manners or values. The setting – odors, animals, or inanimate objects – only justify his epiphanic moments. Shamans as well as Switters use drugs in the jungle. Under the influence of XTC drug, Switters spots a stalk of bananas. Trying to reach for the bananas, a spider comes out. Tom Robbins offers a cartoonish picture of the event with Switters's application of both Western (namely Darwin's theory) and Eastern philosophies, which are not in mutual contradiction at all. In fact, they supplement each other effectively to help the main character express his viewpoints.

[Switters] fished out the automatic pistol. "Nothing personal," he said, as he stood facing the stalk. "I respect all the living things, and I'm aware that to you, I, myself, must appear monstrosity. But you've got my goddamn bananas, pal, and this is the law of the jungle!" With that, he fired off about a dozen ear-splitting rounds, blowing bits of spider and banana all over the bow. "Anyone for fruit salad?" he asked politely.²⁰

Switters's revelations in every-day controversial issues are often based on facts and observations in the material world. Obsessed with religion and traditions, he attacks, mocks, makes use, and subverts its very nature, especially rituals, historical and religious figures and facts, myths and superstitions. Therefore,

...angels . . . appeared as wrathful avengers, delivering stern messages, wrestling with prophets, while bats were sweet tempered, harmless (less than 1 per cent rabid) little mammals who aided humankind by devouring immense amounts of insects and pollinating more plants and trees than bees and birds together. The angels' "pollination" was restricted to begetting children on astonished mortal women" "Which would you rather meet in a midnight alley?"²¹

The subversion of the narrative forma, especially traditional genres and cultural norms, is a recurrent feature in Robbins's novels. This marks a considerably distinct approach to narration and story-telling in the contemporary (postmodern) literature.

Conclusion

Tom Robbins's novel *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* features many characteristics typical of many contemporary American authors. His narrative shows a clear distinction from the traditional understanding of the novel (transgression of the genre novel through employment of various novelistic techniques, such as metafiction, parody, or intertextuality). Besides, his novel contains language full of intertextual links, humorous and ironic remarks, and well-crafted diction. Tom Robbins's style is idiosyncratic, reflecting "new sensibility" in American literature of the post World War II period, so it would be a challenge for Slovak translators to translate some of his novels.

Notes

¹Fiedler, Leslie, "The New Mutants," *Partisan Review*, vol. 32, no. 4 (Fall 1965), pp. 379 – 400.

²Tom Robbins (2000), *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*, Harpenden, Herts, p. 177.

³Tom Robbins, p. 91.

⁴Tom Robbins, pp. 7 – 8.

⁵Patricia Waugh (1984) *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of the Self-Conscious Fiction*. Routledge, p. 22.

⁶Tom Robbins, p. 151.

⁷Eberhard Alsen (1996), *Romantic postmodernism in American fiction*. Amsterdam & Atlanta, p. 23.

⁸Eberhard Alse, p. 23

⁹Tom Robbins, p. 191.

¹⁰Tom Robbins, p. 65.

¹¹Tom Robbins, p. 193

¹²Tom Robbins, p. 135

¹³Patricia Waugh, p. 17

¹⁴Linda Hutcheon (1985), *A theory of parody: the teachings of twentieth-century art forms*, Routledge, p. 81.

- ¹⁵Tom Robbins, p. 77
¹⁶Tom Robbins, p. 52
¹⁷Tom Robbins, p. 78
¹⁸Tom Robbins, p. 92
¹⁹Tom Robbins, p. 78
²⁰Tom Robbins, p. 52
²¹Tom Robbins, p. 169

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