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THANKSGIVING DINNER OF A BAKER'S DOZEN BASED ON NANCY HUSTON'S NOVEL DOLCE AGONIA

Abstract: Our article deals with Nancy Huston's novel *Dolce Agonia* (2001) and our aim is to highlight and point out the instances that make this novel a distinguished sample of a grand narrative and a good example of a postmodernist pastiche. The text breathes and echoes with numerous literary, biblical or mythological allusions. On the other hand, *Dolce Agonia* is complete with the dedication, epigraphs, the prologue, and finally an epiphanic end. Thus, it embraces all the attributes of a classic novel as well. All these factors enable the author to produce a richly layered literary text spiced with a refreshed, engaging and highly amusing narrative style.

Key words: Nancy Huston, *Dolce Agonia*, postmodernist literature, pastiche, narrative technique.

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Introduction

In Huston's novel, the action takes place in one house, one day and one night. As it has happened before in many literary texts that deal with the fate of many people gathered in one place, in this novel by Nancy Huston we find many stories told not only retrospectively, with the 'flash-back' technique, but also, thanks to the 'omniscient author', we will follow the life thread of each of them to the end. In the prologue (called *Prologue in Heaven*), the reader seems to be in a kind of limbo, like Dante Alighieri's alter-ego descending into Hell, where the inscription on the gate warns that those who enter there should leave all their hopes outside. The moral of *The Divine Comedy* is obvious, and the Renaissance author does not hide it. Huston introduces us to her characters, showing us the roads they have taken so far, until this current Thanksgiving eve. Unlike Giovanni Boccaccio's ten characters, they do not seek a shelter from the Plague, and they do not spend time telling interesting stories. Nor do they resemble Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims, who having gathered to visit and pay their homage to the grave of Thomas Becket, the saint, are telling amusing tales all along the long way not to get bored. In *Dolce Agonia*, it is due to the heavy

snowfall that all the twelve guests are forced to prolong their visit – and thus their feast complete with conversations and memories – and to spend the night at the host's house.

Review of the Literature

In his magnum opus, William M. Thackeray presents the narrator of *Vanity Fair* as the manager of the performance, who muses at the bustling scene of the fair before the curtain rises and hails the characters of the novel as the dolls or puppets. These puppets will be loved or hated by the audience, depending on the roles they have been assigned to. Thackeray ends the prologue with the following: "And with this, and a profound bow to his patrons, the Manager retires, and the curtain rises. London, June 28, 1848" (Thackeray). Around a century and a half later, on the threshold of the new millennium, in her novel *Dolce Agonia* (2001), the author Nancy Huston also shares her views in the prologue about how she sees the future work and characters, and she also names a specific day of action: Boston, late November 2000, the Thanksgiving Day. This time the narrator happens to be God, the creator of our universe, watching from above this kind of Last Supper

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gathering of the 'faithful', because the host, who has invited his close friends, already knows that he does not have long left to live. Thackeray, while painting his fable of existence, applied the sombrest and brightest of the colors and compared human suffering and happiness to a theatrical street performance full of tearful smiles and called it "Vanity Fair". As for Huston, she employed the black humor to depict another fable of *d'être*. Indeed, if it were not for black humor, the story, full of so much pain and horror, would turn into the full-blown tragedy. Huston's benevolent creator is at the same time in awe of His creatures. In His words, even though He is the designer of destinies of human beings to the utmost detail, He still cannot help being amazed at the illusion of freedom or self-will that He finds in people. "Grand Narratives still exist, even in the new millennium; God the author is not dead, and He alone knows his characters' innermost thoughts and motivations", wrote the critic C. R. Batson shortly after the novel was published (Batson, 2003:643). The author is not dead, but there would be no coming to life of any text without it being "accomplished by the reader" (Skinner, 1972:397), for it is the reader who is (presumably in a joyful and not painstaking manner) to discover and find out all the motives, suggested both overtly and covertly by the writer. As for Huston's connection with Thackeray, it does not end there. In a letter to a friend, Thackeray recalls how he came up with the title of his novel: "At midnight I jumped out of bed and ran around the room three times. I was so happy and shouted, "Vanity Fair!" Vanity Fair! Vanity Fair!" (Thackeray, 2012:3). Apart from the direct connection to the the verse in Ecclesiastes, the title is said to have been borrowed from the writer John Bunyan, after one place described in his 1678 allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the place where everything can be bought and sold. Nancy Huston concludes the novel with a personal Thanksgiving from which we learn that the title 'Dolce Agonia' was taken from her friend's yet unpublished collection of short stories with her friend's permission.

Analysis of the Data

Sean Farrell, the host, is throwing a Thanksgiving party for his friends (which is also to be a kind of farewell dinner—unbeknownst to the guests). That evening, including the host, 13 people will gather at table. Indeed, there are symbols and religious, mythological or literary allusions galore in the novel. Heavily loaded with intertextuality and literary echoes, it is a good example of a post-modernist pastiche.

The majority of characters are first or second generation immigrants; the people from different parts of the world, with their share of pains and joys, have embarked on "a fresh green breast of the new world" and are now eagerly boiling in one socio-cultural

melting-pot that the US represents. Obviously, with much more readiness and enthusiasm than the sacrificial turkey in Sean's oven, a 'democratic' bird that is equally accommodating to the religious customs of all guests (if they have any, of course). It is the end of November, and not only the upcoming Christmas spirit is in the air, but everyone is overwhelmed by anticipation of what the new century has in store for them, which they face burdened by their own and humankind's bittersweet stories.

The architectonics of this 'long day's journey into the night' is highly rhythmic and written with a playwright's precision; between the party episodes, very methodically, God, the narrator tells the reader how each character will die as He is the one and the only who knows about it. The text pays homage to the classic novel and equips the work with all its attributes. There is a dedication, epigraphs, the prologue and finally an amazing coda, where we travel inside everyone's dreams.

The text, which begins with Goethe's last words, "Mehr Licht!" (More light!), is very multi-layered. It refers to all spheres of modern existence and, in the vein of the oxymoronic title, represents existential chiaroscuro, distributed equally.

All the sensations and senses are extremely intensified and raised to the peak. Wherever there is love or friendship, they are unconditional. So is hatred. Disasters are no less than the Chernobyl accident, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and South African massacres. All these apocalyptic events of the past century are not presented in an abstract form; instead, they are directly related to the most protagonists, having left indelible marks on them.

Sean is a well-known poet and university professor. Like a true poet, he is able to turn all experiences into poetry. Regardless his outward 'cool' image, he is a sentimental Irishman. For him even the memory of the beloved long-dead dog is so alive, that he still keeps scolding it, walks it twice a day and dedicates a lot of poems to it. Many of his friends acknowledge this fact by putting aside leftovers for the dog. The writer manages to tell us a lot of history of Ireland with one deft metaphor when he refers to the quintessentially Irish ancestors of Sean's: "My ancestors were measly potato-fed pablum-skinned beer-blooded peasants" (Huston, 2002:16). As he gets older, Sean forgets a lot. He is only 47 years old, though. He knows that due to his quite recently diagnosed incurable illness, he won't be able to outshine his dear mom in forgetfulness: "Oh, it matters not, Ma. I won't have time to beat your forgetting record" (Huston, 2002:7). It is her, he is forever talking to in his mind. He decided to write a long poem about her and to call it *What Maisie No Longer Knew*. Here's another echo to the title of the famous American classic *What Maisie Knew* by Henry James.

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Those who cannot write poems, go poetic through their daily habits. After the death of his son, Patrizia devotes her whole life to feeding birds and becomes a kind of St. Francis. Patrizia, as a symbol of eternal feminine, also evokes the sense of good old Europe. With her lacy blouses - "American women don't dress that way anymore" (Huston, 2002:8) – she brings out the elegance innate of ancient Roman Patricians. Spiritually, she misses not her mother, but her 'genuinely' Italian grandmother, and keeps an uninterrupted connection with her. One of the strong moments of 'magic realism' is related also to Patrizia. When her 26-year-old son dies in a terrible accident, her breasts become brimful of milk. Nothing can cure this condition until it passes itself after a few weeks, but due to the carelessness of the woman, it ends fatally.

There is hardly any topic that the writer does not touch in the novel. In this "La Comédie humaine", the protagonists, seized by all kinds of passions, are ordinary people. Their vulnerability is very well illustrated by many moments. For instance: the friends, all of them being well over forty, anticipate with a kind of caution and envy for Hal's 23-year-old wife to appear: it's unfair, they think, as this young creature called Chloe knows nothing about the pains and triumphs of this group, of their in-group psychology. On the other hand, they will probably never know the immeasurable traumas Chloe has undergone and still has to undergo in future. And one more thing, before they start feasting, they half playfully, half not, agree not to mention certain topics to protect each other's egos. Banned topics include: the Internet, clones, nuclear weapons, cancer, Palestine, Israel, divorce, calories, Woody Allen, Saddam Hussein, Viagra, alfalfa. There! This is another kind of political correctness!

The novel is postmodern not only with its intertextuality, 'magic realism', 'stream of consciousness', counterpoint narration technique and numerous allusions, but also with the symbolic load of individual episodes. For instance, one of the protagonists, Aron Zobotinsky, dies in an accidental fire. However, the image of fire, benevolent or punishing, has been following him all his life; as a small boy in Odessa, he watches the fire as his father bakes bread in a huge oven. Years later, in the 1980s, with fascination he also watched the thousands of fires during the riots in Johannesburg. These bittersweet memories are never put out and keep burning inside him like a fire. Like Father before him, Aron also ended his interesting career by baking bread, and now the 99-year-old deaf pensioner is reading a randomly selected book. He is so engrossed in the book that he cannot sense what is happening on the floor below him, and since the book also describes a forest fire, it looks as if he gets immune to the smoke smell.

There are many more similar episodes, but let's consider this one. Charles, a talented young black

poet, was banished for good from home by his white wife, Myrna, for a one-time infidelity (with a colored woman). As the author calls the woman, "Des-de-Myrna" took revenge on behalf of Shakespeare's Desdemona. So Charles's story is one of the moral stories. Charles was forever robbed and deprived of his greatest joy in this world: a loving and dignified relationship with his three very young children. Charles married several more times, but never became a father anymore. As if to compensate for this utter loss, he gave birth to several wonderful books. What should the postmodernist description of a poet's death be like? While thinking about the next poem, Charles is hit by a motorcycle coming at a terrible speed and he dies on the spot. "Spilled out onto the hot pavement", his brain still breathes with the fragments of his unwritten poem: "the image of his shoehorn, the memory of his mother's gingham apron and his grandmother's crab apple jelly, the rolling creases in the red earth of Canyon de Chelly – exposed, evaporated, gone" (Huston, 2002:54). Charles is the only guest who doesn't go to bed on Thanksgiving night, and heads to the kitchen table to turn his pent-up emotions into yet another poem. And then the kitchen starts to resemble a shrine of poetry, covered with snow and immersed in complete silence; when everyone else is asleep, the poet composes even whatever God disposes.

One of the hot topics of the novel is racism. Tellingly, this is one of the 'taboo' words agreed upon by the feasters. "I didn't want to spend my whole life proving that I had the right to live. I wanted – everything, Dad. Everything life had to offer. My feet on the ground *and my* head in the clouds. The right to think about something other than black and white" (Huston, 2002:193). This is Charles's interior monologue during the dinner.

Personally for the author of this article, the most telling image of racism expression is the moment when Charles with his wife and young children, during an excursion to the reservation in Arizona, comes across a small group of Navajo Indians warming their hands around a campfire. Myrna wanted to take a photo of them. This was probably the first time she saw the American Indians, but the old woman's eyes of the group said "no" and that was enough: "Even your eyes on us are too much...you are an offense to the gods" (Huston, 2002:158). Charles, a descendant of enslaved people from some African village, and Myrna, an offspring of the Europeans who migrated to America hoping to start a new life, are now standing facing this excursion 'museum exhibit', the Indigenous people, "who for centuries had been raising sheep and alfalfa, making little cooking fires and talking to one other in low voices" (Huston, 2002:158).

Friendship is another major theme that the writer develops in the novel. It is friends who are invited to Thanksgiving dinner. Sean's baker, his lawyer and his

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former painter, all three are now his friends. Among those gathered are Patrizia and Rachel, Sean's former lovers, now devoted friends. Patrizia (a symbol of eternal feminine) and Rachel (a symbol of intelligence) form a kind of triad together with Sean's ex-wife, Jody (a symbol of the new 'healthy' generation), whose traces are still palpable in the household. And yet, for Sean, his newly deceased mother is the woman he constantly talks to in his inner monologues and constantly proves something to. It's impossible not to be moved by Sean's last visit to his Alzheimer-afflicted mother in a nursing home. Mother and the son gaze lovingly at each other and when they say, first the mother and then the son, "You are so beautiful!" they both mean it.

All the characters on the Huston scene are interesting. Yes, about Rachel. The biblical Rachel is the wife of Jacob, one of the patriarchs of the tribe of Israel, and the mother of Joseph, while Huston's Rachel remained childless to the end. However, she had a motherly relationship with her step-daughters. Just as the biblical Rachel got married to her older sister Leah's husband Jacob, Huston's Rachel married her former best friend's husband after their divorce. Rachel has to play the role of the Good Samaritan in the last months of Sean's life. When everyone leaves, Rachel stays with him, to the end.

And of course, there is love. Love that is alive all the time and never fades away. It should be noted that the writer manages to show rare candor and describe all events, big or small, with amazing accuracy. And

it shouldn't seem surprising because she chose the creator of the world Himself as the narrator. Maybe that's why in the process of reading, you seem to 'guess' things in advance; you begin to hope for the narrator's mercy, because if anything – the narrator God is undoubtedly love. He admits that it is people in love who display such freedom that He seems to fall under the illusion that He might not be able to have enamoured human beings obey His will. And yet, in His merciful decision, he took the most loving couple, Leonid and Katie, out of this world together, like the mythical Philemon and Baucis. It is Katie who says a kind of prayer specially written by her for this party before they start feasting: "Hi, God. We have come here to give thanks. Well You might ask what we have left to be thankful for... Your flock has scattered every which way and our brains are fairly scattered too, to say nothing of our souls. Yet here we are. Not only that, but whether You happen to be around or not, love will be here, too" (Huston, 2002:69).

Conclusion

The author Nancy Huston managed to create the gripping and vivid canvas. One will be able by means of fixing their focus lens to travel to and fro in time accompanying novel's remarkable thirteen characters to the end. This particular set of a baker's dozen happen to share one Thanksgiving dinner (not by chance but through the narrator God's decision), which we as readers, are lucky enough to be eyewitnesses to.

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