

THE RETHINKING OF THE PAST AND THE PERPETUAL PRESENT IN WOODY ALLEN'S FICTION

Amelia Precup, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: By putting Frederic Jameson's phrase "perpetual present" to use as a means of conceptualizing the dominant temporal paradigm of Woody Allen's fiction, I will investigate the way in which Allen chooses to explore the exposure of the individual to time, following a cyclical process of gathering and dispersal of human experience. My contention is that his approach translates in an effort to store time in a perpetual present moment and to negotiate the threat of biological determinism. In order to accomplish this task, I have selected a corpus of texts which best reflect the organizing principle of temporality in Woody Allen's work, thus demonstrating how temporal regressions are performed as part of the existentialist quest for meaning. This quest is not to be understood in the sense of an attempt to identify some transcendent timeless meaning, but rather as a dialectical process of reassessing the past through the present.

Keywords: *Woody Allen, short stories, postmodern short fiction, perpetual present, rethinking of the past, temporal regression.*

Temporal regressions and the playful reinvention of the past through the deconstruction and reconstruction of history is a central preoccupation of postmodernism in general, and it is also one of the main concerns of postmodernist fiction. Postmodernist fiction pluralizes history, without necessarily envisaging entertainment or cognition, but rather in an attempt to emphasize the diversity of perspectives and the unreliability of the 'grand narratives', "because no perspective can represent the truth, because there is no wholeness of vision, neither of the past, nor of the present, nor of the future – nor of time as a whole" (Hoffman 49).

According to Fredric Jameson, one of the major features of postmodernism consists in its "peculiar way with time," which he discusses in terms of the Lacanian theory of schizophrenia (*The Cultural Turn* 6). Jameson argues that postmodernist culture has a "schizophrenic structure" built on images and simulacra, which causes the "weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality" (*Postmodernism* 6). This new form of private temporality is what Jameson calls the "perpetual present." In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", Jameson elaborates on the same idea and claims that "our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve" (*The Cultural Turn* 11). The sense of historical time underwent a series of transformations caused by "the new depthlessness" specific for the "new culture of the image or the simulacra" governed by a spatial, rather than a temporal logic (*Postmodernism* 6). In Jameson's words, "[t]he past is thereby itself modified" and retrospective perspectives "become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum" (18).

Woody Allen's temporal regressions and the use of the past in his fiction align to the idea of the loss of historical and temporal depth, and are directed towards reinforcing the

sense of the perpetual present as described by Fredric Jameson. In his fiction, the present is not degraded, but represents a satisfactory present moment of being alive, and all temporal regressions are performed as part of the quest for meaning, not in the sense of an attempt to identify some transcendent timeless meaning, but rather as a dialectical process similar to what Linda Hutcheon describes as “a reevaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present” (19).

Postmodernist fiction is preoccupied both with revisiting history and with the very act of (re)writing it, and Woody Allen’s short fiction is no exception. He engages in historiographic metaphiction (Linda Hutcheon), historiographiction (Michael Orlofsky), or whatever other name be given to the fictional rethinking of history. He operates with past forms and events from a playful postmodern position and he directs his endeavour towards exploring the present. Nevertheless, Woody Allen is not a melancholy writer, he is not stuck in the past, not trying to reconnect with a lost Paradise of yore. In an interview about one of his latest films, *Midnight in Paris*, where he explores the topos of nostalgic temporal regressions, Woody Allen clearly articulates his perspective on the past and his personal preference for the present:

I'm not happy with the time here, but I wouldn't be happier then either cause... I'm not that happy in general, so, whenever I lived, I would be unhappy... you know... that life itself is a very unhappy experience and... so it really doesn't matter when you live. The... the cosmetics change, but the problems remain the same, so... I'm fine where I am now. I don't think I'd be any happier if I lived in the Twenties or the Thirties or hundred years from now... you know. (Allen and Wilson, Interview about Midnight in Paris)

In *Midnight in Paris*, he toys with the idea of temporal regressions more than anywhere else in his work. *Midnight in Paris* is not a nostalgic film, but a film about nostalgia as a dominant human feature, common to all ages, to all present moments. As Woody Allen subtly points out by means of a temporal *mise-en-abîme* technique, for each and every present moment, be it the present of contemporary society, the Roaring Twenties (or the French “*années folles*”), the Belle Époque or that of The Gilded Age, individuals will always exhibit a tendency of valuing the past above their own present moment. Therefore, dissatisfaction with an assumingly degraded present and nostalgia for a gilded age of yore become general human dominants, unrelated to a specific contemporaneity. Moreover, temporality is not perceived as sequential and evolutionary, but rather as a juxtaposition of present moments characterized by the same ‘present’ concerns.

Film reviews relate *Midnight in Paris* with “A Twenties Memory”, a short story published in Allen’s 1971 volume, *Getting Even*, and which originally appeared in “The Chicago Daily News” and was titled “How I Became a Comedian”. The narrator of “A Twenties Memory,” a writer himself, recounts his experiences with some of the most celebrated writers and artists of modernism: spending a winter with Picasso and Alice Toklas in the South of France, having his nose broken by Hemingway, or discussing his talent with Gertrude Stein as follows: “In the afternoons, Gertrude Stein and I used to go antique hunting in the local shops, and I remember once asking her if she thought I should become a writer. In the typically cryptic way we were all so enchanted with, she said, ‘No.’ I took that to mean yes and sailed for Italy the next day” (*The Insanity Defense* 63). The short story captures and

parodies the bohemian atmosphere of the Twenties, directing it towards the ironical, the absurd, and the grotesque. In a very postmodern manner, Allen ironizes the ‘taking art seriously’ attitude to the extreme: “Juan Gris, the Spanish cubist, had convinced Alice Toklas to pose for a still life and, with his typical abstract conception of objects, began to break her face and body down to its basic geometrical forms until the police came and pulled him off” (65). Each fictional equivalent of the real life artists and writers who populate Allen’s short story is endowed with one major personality trait, easily recognizable for that particular individual. That specific characteristic receives hyperbolic dimension, emphasizing the comic-parodic effect. For instance, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald’s life style is described as follows: “They had consumed nothing but champagne for the past three months, and one previous week, in full evening dress, had driven their limousine off a ninety-foot cliff into the ocean on a dare. There was something real about the Fitzgeralds; their values were basic” (66).

Allen recuperates the cultural past from an ironic position, mocking and deconstructing the stereotypes regarding the cultural blooming of the Twenties and the modernist aesthetic autonomy as opposed to the popular culture of the second half of the twentieth century. The original title of the short story, “How I Became a Comedian”, points to the same direction: from Gertrude Stein’s point of view he has no talent, but from his perspective, her opinion is overrated: “Both Gertrude Stein and I examined Picasso’s newest works very carefully, and Gertrude Stein was of the opinion that ‘art, all art, is merely an expression of something.’ Picasso disagreed and said, ‘Leave me alone. I was eating.’ My own feelings were that Picasso was right. He had been eating” (64). In a specific postmodernist paradoxical manner, Allen both instates and overthrows the modernist attitude towards art. This praxis is one of the fundamental dominants of postmodernism which, as Linda Hutcheon points out, tackles “the notion of the work of art as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts” by continuously asserting and then undercutting “this view in its characteristic attempt to retain aesthetic autonomy while still returning the text to the ‘world’” (*A Poetics* 125).

Another revisionist leap into the past is performed in “My Apology”. As the title announces, the text is meant to continue the series of Plato’s and Xenophon’s texts which recount the speech Socrates gave during his trial, in an attempt to defend himself against the charges which ultimately led to his conviction. In Allen’s “My Apology,” the last moments of Socrates’ life are framed by a dream which allows the narrator to assume Socrates’ role. The text begins with an introduction as a first person narrative and then transforms into a play, having its dialogues interrupted by stage direction. In a metafictional game associated with temporal misattribution, Socrates is here replaced by a character called Allen in an attempt to create an ontological leap effect and allow for the author’s direct participation in the fictional dialogue by putting himself “in this great philosopher’s sandals” (*The Insanity Defense* 238).

The reason for revisiting Socrates’ last moments lies, as expected, in an attempt to explore different ways of coping with death. As Allen confessed, “the great appeal for me of this wisest of all Greeks was his courage in the face of death” (238). Reality and temporality are pictured as a layering of roles organized around a governing axial concern, *death*, which allows for overlapping and substitution. Allen treats the last moments of Socrates less as a historical event and more as an opportunity for rethinking the philosophical significance of an

existential ideal through a contemporary perspective. The text distrusts the promise of immortality gained through a Socratic death; this is no longer possible in a society where martyrdom lost its redeeming power. Fear of death is far greater than any grand philosophical principles. Allen deconstructs the idealistic attitude towards existence by exposing it as a mere opportunistic discourse with financial finality:

AGATHON: But it was you who proved that death doesn't exist.

ALLEN: Hey, listen-I've proved a lot of things. That's how I pay my rent. Theories and little observations. A pucky remark now and then. Occasional maxims. It beats picking olives, but let's not get carried away.

AGATHON: But you have proved many times that the soul is immortal.

ALLEN: And it is! On paper. See, that's the thing about philosophy-it's not all that functional once you get out of class. (242)

Heroism is transformed into something indefinable. As Allen-Socrates says, "I'm not a coward, and I'm not a hero. I'm somewhere in the middle" (242).

In "My Apology", the honour and dignity of Plato's or Xenophon's *Apology* are replaced by cowardice, anxiety, and the admittance of the emptiness of grand philosophical principles and discourses which no longer hold. Allen's reinterpretation of Socrates' last moments destroys the grandeur of Socrates' death, thus emphasizing the incongruence between the idealized Socratic death and contemporary values. As Emily Wilson points out, nowadays "[p]hilosophy is just an academic subject, not a mode of life and death – in contrast to what Seneca, Montaigne, or Voltaire might have hoped" (207). In her study, *The Death of Socrates*, she concludes that the late twentieth-century lost interest in the ideal of the Socratic death and has the tendency to represent it in a simplified, often trivial manner. She argues that this attitude can be explained through our impossibility to cope with death as individuals used to in the past, by associating a mythical dimension to the act of dying.

From a temporal perspective, "My Apology" is an artifice of the present, not of the past. It is not a projection back in time, but it drags the past into a perpetual present through a common concern: coping with death. It emphasizes the idea of a co-presence, a simultaneous unity between past and present. The text is configured as a satire on the contemporary society in which "some eggs and smoked salmon" (*The Insanity Defense* 244) are much more efficient in calming down a soul disturbed by the fear of dying than any type of high philosophical ideals. It also shows certain incredulity towards the myth of the death of Socrates, which became implausible through a late capitalist perspective.

Probably the most accomplished and poignant representation of historical events in Woody Allen's fiction is "The Schmeed Memoirs". The tragic legacy of WW II haunts the writing of most Jewish writers because, as Jews and human beings, they cannot remain insensible to the tragedies of the mid-twentieth century events. Unlike other writers, Allen does not approach the tragedy of the Holocaust in a traditional manner, by speaking from inside the Jewish community. Instead, he embraces a different approach and tells the story of the Third Reich from an insider's perspective. His text is a reaction to *The Kersten Memoirs* written by Felix Kersten, Heinrich Himmler's masseur. The controversial self-assumed heroic dimension of Kersten's actions is completely effaced by Allen's narrative. "The Schmeed Memoirs" recounts the events through the perspective of Friedrich Schmeed, "the best-known

barber in wartime Germany” who “*provided tonsorial services for Hitler and many highly placed government and military officials*” (17). Schmeed’s narration discloses an absurd and illogical world in which the Fuehrer and his high officials act as spoiled, hysterical children fighting over who gets his hair cut on the hobbyhorse.

In only seven pages Allen captures the entire array of major events which occurred inside the Third Reich between 1940 and 1945 and translates them into tonsorial affairs. Hess’ running away to the United Kingdom in May 1941 is described as fleeing to Scotland with Hitler’s bottle of Vitalis in order “to give Churchill a scalp treatment in an effort to end the war” (21), and the failure of the plot to assassinate the Fuehrer is depicted as follows: “in January of 1945, a plot by several generals to shave Hitler’s mustache in his sleep and proclaim Doenitz the new leader failed when von Stauffenberg, in the darkness of Hitler’s bedroom, shaved off one of the Fuehrer’s eyebrows instead” (22). The text also captures Goering’s erratic behaviour, Hitler’s megalomaniac outbursts and his close relationship with Bormann, as well as the change in attitude towards the end of the war, which is brilliantly rendered in one acutely ironic phrase: “The Allied armies were closing in on Berlin, and Hitler felt that if the Russians got there first he would need a full haircut but if the Americans did he could get by with a light trim” (22).

The narration always slides towards the frivolous, the farcical and the absurd, and the symbolism of hair cutting encodes each and every action. For instance, the tactical military decisions to launch the attack against the Soviet Union becomes a matter of growing sideburns: “General Staff, said it was a mistake to try to grow sideburns on two fronts at once and advised that it would be wiser to concentrate all efforts on one good sideburn. Hitler said he could do it on both cheeks simultaneously” (20). Growing and cutting sideburns and moustaches encode all the actions of the story. The choice of this particular symbolism is not random, at least not for a Jewish writer. In the Jewish tradition, men are forbidden to shave their beards and the sides of their head by an Old Testament commandment. Sideburns were a symbol of faith for the Jews, and German Nazis used to cut them off. As Mati Alon explains, “[c]utting a Jew’s side-burns is an insult, vicious, inconsiderate and total disrespect for the Jewish religion” (300). In this light, the rivalry between Hitler and Churchill over sideburns, as described in “The Schmeed Memoirs”, gains new valences; it gives the text a powerful underlayer and reconfigures its meaning by exploring the Jewish tragedy through an indirect approach.

In “The Schmeed Memoirs”, sheer parody attacks atrocity and the world’s greatest tragedy is presented as the action of hysterical and emotionally unstable individuals whose behaviour is absurd and irrational. Although written as a humorous text, the story’s tragic dimension is emphasized by the very mechanisms used to create the comic effect. Moreover, bringing together human comedy and human tragedy is a common denominator of the Jewish tradition and a fairly popular technique among Jewish writers. Allen revisits and disarms the Third Reich through humour. However, his approach does not minimize the importance of the events he describes, nor does it deny their historical weight. His reinterpretation of the Second World War through parody might soften the pain, but, at the same time, it heightens its reality and potentiates its gravity since the internal policy of the short story relies on the acute criticism of the absurdities of the war.

Undoubtedly, the most traumatic event in recent history is World War II, which brought about iniquitous evil and atrocities unimaginable before. The Holocaust is a watershed moment which caused a major shift in the paradigm of thought of the twentieth century. At first, Jewish writers were reticent in addressing the Shoah directly, but, in time, they started revisiting the event by alluding to it, by confronting it directly, or by exploring the consequences and the coping mechanisms of the survivors. These aspects make the central focus of highly praised novels, but they also enriched the short story genre with texts such as Bernard Malamud's "The Loan", Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl", or Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic". Following in the same tradition, Woody Allen chooses to approach it as the mere result of an absurd world.

In his analysis of the perception of the Holocaust in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard emphasizes the dialectic between authentic historical memory and the mediated relation with history and past events, which tends to render individuals immune to the emotional charge and the real connotation of the historical event. In Baudrillard's opinion, the recurrent exposure of the public, be it Jewish or Gentile, to the atrocity of the Holocaust results in a form of immunization, an attenuation of emotions which eventually leads to the obliteration and the annihilation of the reality of the event. This perspective might, to a certain extent, justify Allen's way of processing historical events. His approach allows for emotional detachment and makes room for the deployment of irony and sarcasm. He encodes major World War II events in a trivial, parodical discourse. The past is not only recontextualized, but reinvented in a stylized absurdist simulation. He respects historical truth as long as it serves him for the game of references on which he built the comic effect, but the truth value of the story is not his major preoccupation since he is much more concerned with reinventing and subsuming history to the absurdity and meaninglessness of the present. According to Allen, the tragedy of the World War II is the result of irrational actions performed by unstable individuals acting in a meaningless, absurd world.

Woody Allen relates to history in a specific postmodernist manner. He views history as textual construct which allows mediated access to the past. His distrust of the scientific accuracy of historical accounts is clearly articulated in texts such as "The Scrolls", where he describes an archaeological discovery as follows:

The authenticity of the scrolls is currently in great doubt, particularly since the word "Oldsmobile" appears several times in the text, and the few fragments that have finally been translated deal with familiar religious themes in a more than dubious way. Still, excavationist A. H. Bauer has noted that even though the fragments seem totally fraudulent, this is probably the greatest archeological find in history with the exception of the recovery of his cuff links from a tomb in Jerusalem. (The Insanity Defense 135)

Woody Allen also parodies the academic field of history in the "Spring Bulletin", where he describes the curricula of the discipline as relative, impressionistic, and completely lacking scientific exactness:

History of European Civilization: Ever since the discovery of a fossilized eohippus in the men's washroom at Siddo's Cafeteria in East Rutherford, New Jersey, it has been suspected that at one time Europe and America were connected by a strip of land that later sank or became East Rutherford, New Jersey, or both. This throws a new perspective on the formation

of European society and enables historians to conjecture about why it sprang up in an area that would have made a much better Asia. Also studied in the course is the decision to hold the Renaissance in Italy. (37)

Its fictional character having been proven, history continuously invites to revision, reinterpretation and reinvention through memory and imagination. Extratextual historical references are not introduced in the text with the purpose of retracing some historical truth, but rather to expose their unreliability. As Linda Hutcheon put it when describing the postmodernist attitude towards the past, postmodernist fiction (or what she calls 'historiographic metafiction') "does not pretend to reproduce events, but to direct us, instead, to facts, or to new directions in which to think about events" (154)". Allen's texts do not gather up historical events with the purpose of reenactment or nostalgic revision. They explore the exposure of the individual to time, following a cyclical process of gathering and dispersal of human experience in an effort to store time in a perpetual present moment as an attempt to win the bet against biological determinism. This becomes the organizing principle of temporality in Woody Allen's work.

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