

Narrative Identity in John's Barth *Lost in the Funhouse*

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Introduction

Foucault claims that we are now realizing that “humanity” is nothing more than a fiction composed by the modern human sciences. Human self is no longer viewed as the ultimate source and ground for language; to the contrary we are now coming to see that the self is constituted in and through language. When the world seems to be nothing more than “a sea of stories”, the implicit consequence would be that man, as part of this world is nothing more than a story.

The focus of this paper is meant to be the possible correlation of self-definition /identity and the narrative/story as John Barth gives account of this in his *Lost in the Funhouse*. The first unit introduces the notion of the self as a contingent effect of language. Then it is followed by a demonstration of the failure of the imaginative stories of the 1960s American novels as providers of identities. The author's self who is "storyfying" experiences becomes the central concern of the third unit. The conclusion runs like this: there can be no mediation of and by the self through an attempt of conceiving itself with the help of stories.

1. Human Self as Linguistic Construct

The announcement that “self is dead” may have, for our time, the same kind of stunning, controversial effect that Nietzsche's famous “God is dead” had at the end of the last century. The self is being deconstructed, bit by bit, until it becomes transparent, like so many other beliefs in the postmodern age. Many theorists are calling into question any idea of self as stable, continuing entity apart from its own description of being. As Jacques Lacan has said, “I am not a poet but a poem”. Paul Kugler elaborates the following thought: “No longer is the speaking subject unquestionably assumed to be the source of language and speech, existence and truth, autonomy and freedom. The transcendence of Descartes "cogito" is no longer certain. The speaking subject appears to be not a referent beyond the first person pronoun, but rather a fragmented entity produced by the act of speaking”¹

Much good philosophy in the continental traditions have already exposed the untenability of the Cartesian conceptions of the self as immediately present to its own ideas: ignored was the role of language in constructing these ideas before they could become available to consciousness. This

¹ *The Truth about the Truth, Re-conforming and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, Walter Truett Anderson, Penguin Putnam Inc., New York, 1995, p. 150

linguistic turn certainly required an altered understanding of the self. Indeed it now appears illusory to suppose that a person speaks the language, for through her utterance it is the language itself which speaks. Whether as writer or as speaker, the individual is in any case eclipsed by language. There remains no personal centre of experience that can assert itself against the great monolith of language. Postmodernists such as Foucault and Derrida argue that self is only a “position in language”, a mere “effect of discourse”.²

Consciously that they are living in a post-humanist age, the American novelists of the 1960s dedicated themselves to the nominalist creed that the world is literally named into existence, is born of the play of language. And Barth is ready to confess his own bewilderment in fiction’s labyrinth: “*I’ve quit reading and writing; I’ve lost the track of who I am; my name’s just a bundle of letters; so’s the whole body of literature; strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code I’ve lost the key to*”. Fiction is tested as means of fictional self-creation and narrative is regarded as an act of self-mediation. The point is forcefully made by MacIntyre: “We make sense – or fail to make sense – of our lives by the kind of story we can or cannot tell about it. Narrativity is integral to my life”³. The notion of story or narrative seems to be necessary in order to make sense of the notion. Living is itself the enactment of a narrative, but MacIntyre’s point also stands: “Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction”.

2. Imagining Storied Selves

Via the stage of existential puzzlement, where the essence of the world and self had vanished behind question marks, the stage of absurdity where nothing connected with nothing and the stage of alienation, where man’s own creations threatened to rub out the self, the hero of the postwar fiction had finally maneuvered himself into a position where personal distinctions had been drained out of him. His frantic attempts to become an entity had ended in disaster, like Ebenezer Cooke’s attempts to become a someone: “...he closed and unclosed his hands and his mouth, and the strain near retched him, but it was all a false labor: no person issued from it”. Thus critics like Jean Grenier had proved to be right when they noted that “we now walk in a universe where there is no longer an echo of the ‘I’”. The heroes were all in the same position of striving for a definite sense of the self but failing to achieve it.

Then a curious thing happened to some characters in the American novel of the sixties: “they were struck with apoplexy and instantly became petrified non-persons”⁴. Jacob Horner, the central figure of John Barth’s *The End of the Road*, finds himself virtually diminished to immobility and

² Pauline Marie Rousenau, *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads and Intrusions*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992, p. 43.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, London: Duckworth, 1981, p. 202, in *Paul Ricoeur-The Hermeneutics of Action*, edited by Richard Kearney, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1996, p. 146.

⁴ Manfred Pütz, *Essays on American Literature and Ideas*, Institutul European, Iași, 1997, p.164.

nothingness in Pennsylvania, Baltimore. At the end of Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, the world itself is frozen into eternal immobility and Bokonon has no higher ambition than converting himself into a statue.

This hopeless situation proved to engender new departures. The experiences of Jacob Horner in *The End of the Road* are indicative of the solutions some authors had in mind for their characters. Horner is picked up by a bizarre doctor, who claims to have an unfailing therapy for all those who are subject to a total loss of the self. It is called *mythotherapy* and is based on the existential assumption "that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to challenge it at will." Life must be seen as a life drama in which man is invariably the author of the plot as well the director who assigns all roles to the participating actors. It is done consciously and unconsciously for the purpose of protecting your ego. If you fail to assign a role to yourself, you will consequently become a non-character. In other words, loss of identity is nothing but the failure to be cast in this or that mythical story. *The act of holding on to self-given fictional coordinates prevents existence from crumbling into nothingness.* There is safety only as long as one lives the idea that ego means mask, and mask means role in a mythical scheme.⁵

While the moderns might compare themselves to mythological figures, they also stressed that they were not these figures. The modernist use of myth as a provider of identities and the attempts of some of today's novelists towards the same end are different, since everyday reality has repudiated the heroes' efforts. The main characters of Thomas Pynchon's three novels follow a similar pattern from hope to failure, demonstrating that home-made myth is a questionable strategy. Herbert Stencil (*V.*), Oedipa Maas (*The Crying of Lot 49*) and a whole bunch of characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* sort through the bits and pieces of history and their own world in pursuit of the one structure that will give coherence and explanation to apparent chaos. The inevitable outcome, is that the questers sink into a bog of paranoia, suspecting that all stories and projections are delusions, originating from twisted states of mind.

Nabokov once formulated his belief that what we commonly call objective reality is a form of impure imagination. Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, imposes his imaginary concepts on the realities that surround him. The only thing we can be sure of is that we are never sure when and where alleged fact ends and where the more than factual begins.

Kurt Vonnegut's novels also abound in test cases for the new strategy of self-definition via applied mythotherapy. Eliot Rosewater (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*) and Billy Pilgrim (*Slaughterhouse-Five*) try to reinvent themselves and their universe, as Vonnegut puts in, using

⁵ It is apparent that a good deal of all this is parody, a charlatan's version of a belief that characterized and gave structure to the works of the great moderns. In a way, this came close to emulating the Greek approach toward self-understanding. The Greeks had a habit of first taking a few steps back before they tried to determine what they were. The distance permitted them to see the whole panorama of their mythological past, from where they then proceeded to choose an archetypal role or the personal example of a hero as the model and basis for the ensuing self-definitions.

their imagination to edge world and self out of their old moorings. Billy Pilgrim claims to have been captured by a scouting party from Tralfamadore and begins to interpret world and fate in terms of Tralfamadorian philosophy. Vonnegut's myth-makers pay a heavy price by either losing touch with the world or, as in Bokonon's case, ultimately destroying it.

The Sot-Weed Factor presents a protagonist who epitomizes the new hero's program of creating his own form or rather multiple forms when he cannot find a given identity. Eben's tutor Burlingame can live in any role, reflections of facets of his self.

The purpose of these examples is to bring into focus that recent myth-makers invent or let their characters invent new fictional worlds which are inhabited and inhabitable only by themselves. It is this general attitude of using the imagination as a weapon in the struggle with the world which brings our contemporary mythotherapy close to the romantics who declared the supremacy of the imagination which creates anew the universe. If world and self have no definable contours, no richness of meaning, then unity and meaning must be created and superimposed on an indifferent world and a wavering self. This procedure is perfectly legitimate, John Barth claims in *Chimera*, because "the truth of the fiction is that Fact is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world".

An important feature of their works is a sense of distrust in the very same fantasies that preoccupy them so much. Their novels become cases of failures where imaginary constructs do not stand the tests to which they are submitted.

3. John Barth and the Author's Fictionality

John Barth writes in a period when, as one almost-official spokesman for the American avant-garde, Ronald Sukenick, asserts, for his kind of his contemporary writer, "reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. Literature is dead"⁶. The contemporary writer was left in the role of the playful inheritor of a world already made into a story, and he himself is constructed or written from elsewhere. In 1968 the French critic Roland Barthes published his influential essay "The Death of the Author" in which he argues that the author does not write; he is written by language and discourse. In the same year his "near-namesake John Barth"⁷ came out with a book that seemed to confirm the proposal. The collection *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (1968), is the fictional complement to *The Literature of Exhaustion* in that it self-consciously reveals various kinds of fictional strategy by foregrounding conventions and techniques to the point where these supplant the traditional priorities of character, plot, and setting. His characters are given authorial functions and he makes the authorial persona subject to the logic of

⁶ *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, Emory Elliott (ed.), Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p.732.

⁷ Malcolm Bradbury, *Modern American Novel*, Penguin Books, New York, p. 228.

his own various plots. The individual fictions include a **story in which the story itself is the narrator**, a protean first-person account that dramatizes the convention of embedding, a story that enters into a dialogue with a series of writing-workshop observations about the making of fiction.

4. Lost in the *Logoshouse*

John Barth's novels and stories expose the search for self-definition. Having extensively explored in the novels the dangers of a possible fictionalization of experience, finally, in *Lost in the Funhouse* the recurrent theme of identity is transposed from a narrated problem to a problem of narration in which fictions and fiction makers in pursuit of a mediation between story and storyteller become self-destructive. The intricacies of the act of storyfying experiences become a central concern of this collection of shorter fictions: *the role and function of conceiving life stories*. If in *The Sot-Weed Factor* the story of Henry Burlingame celebrates the maxims of a Protean shape-shifting existence, since the unitary self is transcended to become a whole spectrum of varying selves, the result is a pattern of conflicting identities that cancel each other out. Concomitantly it is demonstrated that an exclusive dependence on self-reference-stories (Burlingame is presented as an inveterate fabricator of stories in constant flow) for the fixation of identity may reverse the order and the causal relationship between storyteller and tales. Frequently tales are no longer a function of their tellers, but **the storytellers are threatened with becoming a function of their tales**.⁸ This idea is suggested by the protagonist: "That life are stories, he assumed; that stories end, he allowed... But that tale **the storyteller himself must live a particular and die – Unthinkable! Unthinkable!**"⁹.

"Everything's finished, ...humanity, the self itself. Wait the story's not finished"¹⁰, the story as the product of human imagination and implicitly the self as the source of imaginative creations. Under the perspective of mutual interdependence of concord-fictions and identity, Barth's main endeavour in *Lost in the Funhouse* is dedicated, among other things, to singling out the aspect of the interrelatedness between a potential unitary consciousness of narration and its associated narrative projections. For Barth the reflections on the possibilities of narrating invariably comprise a reflection on the problem of how a unity of a narrative construct can be established through a linkage to the point of an identity behind or rather in the narration. Hence, Barth's typical narrators also reflect the **identity-founding relation between teller and tale** as the fact has become utterly

⁸ Michel Foucault in *Ordinea discursului*, Eurosong & Book, 1998, p.13: "mi-ar fi plăcut ca în momentul în care încep să vorbesc, să-mi pot da seama că o voce fără nume mă precede de multă vreme deja,... iar eu, în loc de a fi acela din care provine discursul, aș fi mai curând o mică întrerupere, punctul dispariției sale posibile" (translated by Ciprian Tudor).

⁹ *The Sot-Weed Factor*, London: Panther, 1965. p. 285, quoted by Manfred Pütz in *The Story of Identity. American Fiction of the Sixties*, American Studies, J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Stuttgart, 1979, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Lost in the Funhouse*,. *Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*, New York: Bantam, 1969, p.104.

problematical. This is why Barth can state in *Title* : "...the narrator has narrated himself into a corner, a state of affairs more tsk-tsk than boo-boo"¹¹, embracing a last possibility – "Self-extinction. Silence"¹²

Still, articulation, to turn experience into speech makes Jacob Horner feel a man, alive and kicking. Confronting us with narrator figures who focus on the implications of their own fiction making, their constructs seem to turn into tales symbolic of the plight of the creative self which is threatened of being lost in the realm of its own inventions: a form of decomposition in the very act of narration itself.¹³ Manfred Pütz charts this overall development by the following stages: "a) the prenatal existence of the artist and the act of his *procreation*; b) the protagonist's finding himself without a personal identity; c) his attempts at gaining a form of selfhood through a an imaginary investment into his works; d) the awareness that all he produces is fictional artifice; e)the writer's being lost to the products of his own imagination without the possibility of gaining himself back from it; f) the final depersonalization of the narrative voice and the abandonment of the mutual interdependence between personal identity and individual creation."¹⁴

The stories present themselves as a delineation of the act of imaginary self-creation in which the narrator attempts and finally fails to narrate himself into existence. The child-hero Ambrose appears in three sections of *Lost in the Funhouse* and his personal fate of receiving no name at birth epitomizes the American hero's plight of being born without a clear identity.¹⁵ Pattern of initiation is presented in *Night-Sea Journey*: it not only presents the protean narrator figure on his way into existence, but also programmatically raises the suspicion that the unifying meaning of his existence owes itself to acts of the imagination akin to those of the maker of fictions.

In the *Anonymiad* a former minstrel is marooned on an uninhabited island where he lives in total isolation through the Trojan war. In order to give witness to his existence to the world and in order to hold on to a self he is in danger of losing – his isolation deprives him of all interactional relations constitutive of referential forms of identity – he invents the genre of fiction. What is variously called "imagined versions", "distillations of my fancy", "pretensions of reality" takes over the function of substituting a self-generated existential context for an ungraspable given context. Fiction becomes the medium through which the fiction-maker attempts to define himself and to achieve his aim "to sing his sorry self"¹⁶. However, the story ultimately reveals the vicious circle of this construction rather than its helpfulness in the process of self-definition: in the end the narrator

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.108.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 106.

¹³ It has been noted that one of the common denominators of the stories of the stories of *Lost in the Funhouse* is the theme of the artist, the writer in his development from first glimpses of self-awareness and an increasing involvement in the dialectical relationship between teller and tale, and thus, Barth explicitly calls the various narrator personae of the series " more mythic avatars" of the same figure.

¹⁴ In *The Story of Identity: American Fiction of the Sixties*, ed.cit., p. 93.

¹⁵ *Lost in the Funhouse*, ed. cit., p. 13 (in *Ambrose His Mark*).

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.163.

fails to ensure himself of his own existence in the act of narration: "on a lorn fair shore a nameless minstrel.Wrote it."¹⁷ Conspicuously, the earlier parts of the story-life which the minstrel had intended to write are rendered in terms of how he *would* have told the story. The narrator begins his reflections on the possibilities of assembling the authentic tale of himself somewhere "in the middle - where too I'll end", which means that he never brought the story up to his actual presence: "I'll never get to where I am". The only valid point of view for his story, he holds, will be "first person anonymous" linked with the resolution "to give up language altogether and float voiceless in the wash of time like an amphora in the sea, my vision bottled".¹⁸

Life-Story offers the self-observation of an author of novels and stories and of this life-story who both suspects that his own life is a fiction and conceives of a story containing a character who not only has the same suspicion but is writing a similar account, the situation replicating itself "in both ontological directions" potentially ad infinitum. In pursuit of his "offstage identity"¹⁹, the narrator/author who has become his own character projects himself into a whole set of avatars, remains unidentified in the process of fictional self-analysis that may otherwise go on *ad infinitum*. We assist to a form of writer's suicide rather than literary self-assertion: "in fact he did at last as did his fictional character and his ending story endless by interruption, cap his pen"²⁰. *Life-Story* discovers it is just as possible to lament losing yourself in self-reflection or in infinite mirror rooms of your own creation.

The message of the following piece is the same: the narrator/Menelaus does not find, rather misses himself in the act of narrative self- mediation. Posing the familiar problem of the narrator who attempts to deduce himself from the narrative products of the self . Menelaus, reduced to the narrative voice of Menelaus, "this voice is Menelaus , all there is of him", struggles to substantiate himself by establishing a system of relationships to persons and events of his past through the medium of a tale he tells himself. However, his tale is refracted in several ways, since in the course of telling himself the story of Hellen and himself, he truly tells himself how he told certain things to several other people, the subject of which tellings was how he has discussed yet another set of things with yet another set of people. In this "epic perplexity", he is no longer and may be in no poor case as teller of his gripping history. For when his voice goes he'll turn tale, story of his life, to which he clings yet". What remains as interrelated results of Menelaus' self-scrutiny through narrative self-projections is the recognition that he himself in all situations hangs by his own narrative:" One thing's certain: somewhere Menelaus went off track, never got back on, lost hold of himself, became a record merely, the record of his own loosening grasp."²¹

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.194.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.192.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.117.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.126.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.198

Again the message of this experiment in self-search is unambiguous: **there can be no mediation of and by the self through an attempt of imagining or rather conceiving itself into existence with the help of stories about the self.**

The stories *Echo* and *Autobiography* take a final step towards a final dissociation of personal identity and narrative identity, since no clear correlation of teller and tale can be traced, “none can tell teller from told” and the question “Who’s telling the story and to whom?” can only be answered by “The teller’s immaterial”²². In *Echo* we are left with narrative echoes without a substantial narrative voice to be echoed: the narrative has become de-subjectified. The narrative imagination has turned into a form without content. This growing depersonalization in the act of self-searching narration which is brought to a head in *Autobiography*. The title suggests self-composition, “the antecedent of the first-person pronoun is not I, but the story, speaking of itself”. The first sentence: “you who listen give me life in a manner of speaking” makes the reader accept the illusion that the artifact owes its existence exclusively to the dual process of self-generation and receptive regeneration. But it all leads to a final “crise d’identité”

Is hardly surprising that in such a situation of “corrosive doubt” about identity, concord fictions, and the interrelation of both, Barth’s fictions become self-scrutinizing and then self-negating. And if it further true that there is likely to be an essential relationship between the unity of tales and the identity of their narrators, then the dissemination of the unitary narrator figure, the self-destruction of the mediator in the act of narration, and the dissociation of personal identity and narrative imagination must all have their effects upon the possibility of constructing further fictions.²³ In *Title* the prototypal narrator and his fiction are caught in the act of talking themselves out of existence - an outcome totally opposed to the initial aim of finding himself in the act of fictionalizing: a final turn towards “self-extinction”. *The narrator has narrated himself into corner.*

Conclusion

From the very beginning of Barth’s stories, his narrators were depicted in their attempts to bring order and structure to the world and the self by resorting to concord-fictions owing their existence to acts either of the creative fancy. But such attempts proved to be mere vanity, because there seems to be an underlying feeling that identity is conterminous with articulation. Everything Barth touches turns into fiction; as a writer of fictions he finds himself in the fix of being weary of producing further fictions or of relying on these fictions for a proof of his own existence. Tony

²² *ibid.*, p. 98.

²³ Printed in the *Atlantic* in 1967 and drawing a good deal of attention, “the Literature of Exhaustion” seems to prophetically take for granted “the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities” and of the traditional notion of the artist, the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect. Even if the perception that certain literary forms have been “used up” is a historical fact this should not be viewed as a cause for alarm, for the artist can accomplish new human work.

Tanner's argument with regard to Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* is quoted by Manfred Pütz: "The torment of this book is that of a man who cannot really find any sanction for writing either in world or self, yet feels that it is his one distinguishing ability, the one activity which gives him any sense of self... Words floating free in this way never encounter any necessity, so they can drift on in self-cancelling and self – undermining recessions as long as the voice lasts. If this is what identity is, it is surely in a precarious state."

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