

Literature, Self-Consciousness, and Writing: The Example of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*

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Self-consciousness in prose fiction—metafiction—was not invented yesterday.¹ John Barth, one of its champions in America, himself readily concedes its unoriginality, albeit hyperbolically and with tongue-in-cheek, as is his nature: "Self-conscious, vertiginously arch, fashionably solipsistic, unoriginal—in fact a convention of twentieth-century literature. Another story about a writer writing a story!"² What such playful exaggeration does effectively point out is that, while the self-consciousness of much of today's prose fiction does not itself break new ground in the field of literature, in the history of man (which is nothing if not a history of consciousness), self-consciousness, specifically linguistic (and literary) self-consciousness, has never been so prevalent as in the present century: it has engulfed not only literature, but also history, philosophy, and the social or human sciences. The new focus is heralded by Jacques Derrida as follows: "However the topic is considered, the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others. But never as much as at present has it invaded, *as such*, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology."³ John Barth's work in the field of prose fiction, from this perspective, does not stand alone, but can be tied to parallel developments in other fields, and can in effect be considered as one manifestation of a broader and more general problematic.

Self-consciousness is itself nothing new, as the "problem of language" is not either. In its conventionally recognized origins the novel, in effect, is a product of a form of self-consciousness. *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* are openly and markedly conscious of themselves as language, as written, printed, discourse, as literature; more than the fathers of the modern novel, they are truly the paradigms for much of contemporary self-reflexive fiction. What we witness today could be a return to and intensification of the linguistic self-consciousness we find in these origins of modern prose fiction, and periodically throughout its development as well.⁴

At the root of the twentieth-century intensification of self-consciousness in the humanistic disciplines lies the notion that, reduced to their most tangible essence, all of them are made up of language or, more specifically, written discourse. This is what is meant by the so-called "linguistic turn"—what George Steiner defines as the "language revolution" of the twentieth century—and why linguistic methodologies have become to a large degree the paradigmatic ones in all of the humanities, and

¹ For further discussion of the terms "metafiction" and "self-conscious novel" see Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," *Iowa Review*, 1 (Fall 1970), pp. 100-15; his *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), esp. pp. 1-4, 115-38; and Robert Alter, *Partial Magic* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), pp. ix-xvi.

² John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 114. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. 6.

⁴ See Alter's *Partial Magic* for his account of the history of self-consciousness in the novel.

many of the social sciences.⁵ Language has the power to reveal, but it also conceals and “differs.” Above all it is playfully indeterminant, and calls out for interpretation. Thus writing becomes infinitely self-generating or “father-less”: interpretation follows interpretation; each text generates, at times geometrically, more texts.

In what follows I will discuss Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) in the context of this general, twentieth-century heightening of linguistic self-consciousness. As I read it, *Lost in the Funhouse*—Barth's fifth book and only collection of “short stories” to date—affirms “play” as a solution to existential anguish and doubt (a very Nietzschean notion), and posits writing (and indirectly reading) as a possible escape from madness. It seems unwittingly, and so all the more significantly, to embody Derrida's “program” for “the end of the book and the beginning of writing.”⁶ Seen in this light, *Lost in the Funhouse* reflects the notion of language/ written discourse as the play of infinite substitutions within the closure of finite possibilities, and it foregrounds the artist's never-ending search for new and better ways to speak the unspeakable, to write what has already been written, but has somehow never been gotten quite right. I would suggest, furthermore, that the assumptions underlying the trajectory Barth follows through the *Lost in the Funhouse* pieces undercuts his “The Literature of Exhaustion” essay of 1967, their theoretical counterpart.⁷ That is, the stories as collected *already* embody and in essence anticipate the theoretical formulations only recently recorded by Barth in his 1980 rewriting of the “exhaustion” essay, “The Literature of Replenishment”⁸; it is in the latter that Barth essays the idea of literature as a series of almost repetitions or substitutions, of “virtually infinite” play within a “doubtless finite” system, in Barth's own words, and of the movement of literature—at all levels and in all senses, by allegorical analogy—as thus circuitous, or rather spiral-like.⁹ This play, and this spiral-like movement, function not only at the level of the individual book—*Lost in the Funhouse* in this case—but also at the level of Barth's oeuvre to date, and in turn for the whole of Western literature; as such, the play in *Lost in the Funhouse* is as a metaphor or microcosm of the Barthian oeuvre, and ultimately of the history of Western literature itself.

Collections of short compositions present the serious reader or literary historian with certain special considerations. In the case of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, for example, the individual pieces can and should be considered as whole and sufficient to themselves, and in fact several of them were published separately beforehand. But because of our fascination with and dependence on the book, it is somehow only with their compilation in book form that the various, disperse pieces become a valid object

⁵ In philosophy see *The Linguistic Turn*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967); and Rorty's own *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979); in history, Hayden White's *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973). Really all of formalism, structuralism, and post-structuralism use linguistic models paradigmatically, and are thus all part of the general “linguistic turn” in the social sciences and in literary theory. In the social sciences the texts of Claude Lévi-Strauss would be representative. In the field of literary theory see *The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1972); and *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josue Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979). The reference to George Steiner is from *Extraterritorial* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), pp. vii-viii.

⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 6-26. In *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 13-14, Derrida further remarks and qualifies his “program.”

⁷ “The Literature of Exhaustion” appeared originally in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Aug. 1967), and is reprinted in *Surfiction*, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 19-33.

⁸ “The Literature of Replenishment,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (Jan. 1980), pp. 65-71.

⁹ A similar view is systematically elaborated, in terms of “intertextuality,” by Laurent Jenny: “The Strategy of Form,” in *French Literary Theory Today*, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), esp. pp. 59-60.

of consideration for the bulk of literary history, and are genuinely considered part of the author's oeuvre. Barth himself is inescapably part of this book culture. While on the one hand he gives clear evidence in his "Author's Note" of a desire to transcend the medium of the printed page and the book culture, paradoxically he too is taken in by the security of wholeness and the supposed unity of the book: "This book differs in two ways from most volumes of short fiction. First, it's neither a collection nor a selection, but a series . . . the series will be seen to have been meant to be received 'all at once' and as here arranged" (p. ix). While some Barth critics have managed to avoid consideration of the possible "serial" nature of *Lost in the Funhouse*, more often than not they have followed Barth's lead and found a meaningful unity and continuity in the collection.¹⁰

There are of course innumerable ways to categorize or group the various stories. One which deserves some attention is found in the same "Author's Note." In it Barth explains that not all of the stories were composed "expressly for print," and he proceeds to elaborate on their different, "ideal media of presentation." These prefatory remarks are clearly, if taken seriously, attempts at radical innovation of the narrative medium and of narrative technique; but as Barth suggests, anticipating his critics, they easily come off as pretentious. It is in fact difficult to decide to what degree Barth wants to be taken seriously in the matter, for the "Author's Note" and the "Seven Additional Author's Notes" represent a virtuoso performance in violating the expectations a particular text induces in its readers, by constantly mocking itself, and frustrating any possibility of proceeding solemnly. The voice that speaks in the "Note" is just one more of the roles Barth is playing, one more of the masks he dons. Toward the end of his exposition of the different ideal media of presentation, Barth, through exaggeration ad absurdum, pulls the rug out from under himself, parodies himself, and puts everything he has just said in doubt: "'Title' makes somewhat separate but equally valid senses in several media: print, monophonic recorded authorial voice, stereophonic ditto in dialogue with itself, live authorial voice, live ditto in dialogue with monophonic ditto aforementioned, and live ditto interlocutory with stereophonic et cetera, my own preference; it's been 'done' in all six" (p. ix). After ending the first "Note" with "on with the story," the hyperbole and the undercutting continue: we promptly turn the page and find "Seven Additional Author's Notes"; only to feel deceived still again upon reading that "the 'Note' means in good faith exactly what it says" (p. x).

There is indeed a certain movement or progression perceived as one moves through the pieces in *Lost in the Funhouse*, and there are indications that it is in some respects circular. But more important, *Lost in the Funhouse* does not come full circle, and it certainly does not represent a closure. Being a collection of autonomous units, and not exclusively (as in the novel) a "whole" which corresponds directly to the covers of a book, *Lost in the Funhouse* exemplifies well Maurice Blanchot's contention that the "work" of a particular writer can never correspond to a single book. Only the author's death, Blanchot insists, can put an end to the serious and truly dedicated writer's work, to a work that continues from one book to the next, and ends due to circumstances generally beyond the writer's control; it is never finished.¹¹ The "book" as Blanchot would have it, and as *Lost in the Funhouse* demonstrates, fixes or freezes illusorily what is in actuality a continuous and never-ending process.

¹⁰ David Morrell, *John Barth: An Introduction* (Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 80-96; and David Hinden, "Lost in the Funhouse: Barth's Use of the Recent Past," *Critical Essays on John Barth*, ed. J. J. Waldmeir (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. 190-200, are two critics who discuss specifically the serial nature and organic wholeness of *Lost in the Funhouse*.

¹¹ Maurice Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," in *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1981), pp. 63-78.

If we look to certain formal and technical considerations—what Barth at one point calls the “vehicle” of a particular fiction—the various compositions in *Lost in the Funhouse* can be loosely but meaningfully categorized into three groups: allegories, self-referential fictions, and myths rewritten. Allegory predominates toward the beginning of the collection (“Night-Sea Journey,” “Petition,” “Lost in the Funhouse”), self-reference or involution in the middle (“Autobiography,” “Title,” “Life-Story”), and mythical elements in the book’s final third (“Echo,” “Glossolalia,” “Menelaïad,” “Anonymiad”). These three formal devices are not of course mutually exclusive; all of them are present to some degree in most of the stories, and although the term “formal device” or “vehicle” is not very precise, the generalization is helpful and by and large valid. Such a grouping of the stories leads to insights not only into *Lost in the Funhouse* and its place in Barth’s corpus of literary production, but also is significant as an indirect indication of Barth’s ideas about literature and fiction in the broader sense—a central concern in all of his work.

The image of the spiral is again called to mind with regard to the arrangement of the pieces: the concluding stories reject in part the purely self-referential mode predominant in the center pieces; at the same time the allegorical elements—present in most of the stories but especially the opening ones—regain some importance, though mythical ones are the central motif and “vehicle” of the final stories. John Stark sees the spiral image as representative of the diachronic trajectory of Barth’s entire oeuvre, but does not comment upon its usefulness with regard to *Lost in the Funhouse*.¹² Its spiralling is just one of the ways in which the “Frame Tale”’s Möbius strip is emblematic of the work as a whole: *Lost in the Funhouse*, like the Möbius strip, is not just a circle, but rather a circle with a twist; the book does not circle back upon and close itself so much as it is open-ended, or rather open at both ends. From this point of view, if the book could be said to “close” at all, it would be only (paradoxically) at its center, an artificially static moment (as the present is so fleeting as to be practically nonexistent) in an essentially dynamic process.¹³ The movement from allegory, through self-referentiality, to myth which is perceived in *Lost in the Funhouse*—undoubtedly a protracted process for Barth—is frozen, made static, recorded for posterity, and documented with the publication of the collection, which then marks a definable moment in the evolution of the whole of Barth’s work as it stands (in progress, never finished) at present. The important role of allegorical patterning in *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), the last Barth novel published before *Lost in the Funhouse*, is picked up right where it left off in the opening stories. Likewise, the rewriting of myth, the predominant mode of the final stories, is continued in *Chimera* (1972), Barth’s next book, while hardly missing a beat.¹⁴ The self-referential pieces then, in this arrangement, are at the center of the “funhouse” in more ways than just the literal, physical one might suggest: they are clearly the collection’s most distinctive feature, the ones which most clearly differentiate it from Barth’s other texts. The center of *Lost in the Funhouse*, in this view, is as a pivot, a “twist” in the spiral which is the linear development of the tales, and in that of Barth’s entire oeuvre “in progress,” for the former are but a moment in and a metaphor for the latter.

The initial use of allegory seeks out and traces parallels between life and

¹² John Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, Barth* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 118-75.

¹³ See Blanchot, pp. 63-65.

¹⁴ Thom Seymour is one who points out the continuity from *Lost in the Funhouse* to *Chimera*: “One Small Joke and a Packed Paragraph in John Barth’s ‘Lost in the Funhouse,’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 16, 3 (1979), p. 189; as is Robert Scholes: “The Allegory of Exhaustion,” *Fiction International*, 1 (Fall 1973), pp. 106-08. See Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 145-73, on “The Allegorical Vision of *Giles Goat-Boy*.”

literature, in hopes of finding a role or place for literature in life. The subsequent self-referential pieces correspond most closely to Barth's "exhaustion" essay. "Title," the most obvious instance of this, is really a rewriting, a fictionalization of that essay. These central stories mark a vacillation, a certain recognition of and resignation to the supposed exhaustion, and the most truly static moment in the linear, spiralling progression of the book. The rewriting of the myths signals a new direction, a new beginning, an at-least-temporary solution to the crisis, and a leaving behind of pure self-referentiality and self-consciousness, which the voice in "Title" comes to "abhor." Most significantly, for my purposes, the turn to myth marks an implicit recognition in Barth of the possibilities for infinite "play," infinite, almost repetitions or substitutions, within a finite system.¹⁵

The image of the labyrinth, central in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, is not surprisingly an appropriate metaphor for the path John Barth has followed in his literary labors: he is constantly testing new possible solutions to the maze, retaining what he has found useful, and moving on in new directions. The self-referential pieces at the center of *Lost in the Funhouse*, as Robert Scholes points out, are at times painfully and paralyzingly involuted, but they are in fact only a turn in the spiral, a pivot and a moving on, both in the context of the *Funhouse* collection and the Barthian oeuvre in progress.¹⁶ In spite of the charges of narcissism leveled against him, Barth's artistic trajectory remains one of the most dynamic and refreshing in literature today. Barth is programmatic in his writing, and extremely conscious of his power to shape literary history, wherein lies the greater part of his energy and vitality.¹⁷ What Barth's most outspoken detractors do see however, which his loyal admirers tend to pass over, is the need to question the deeper implications of the artistic self-consciousness so present in all of his work.

One possible explanation for the new predominance of self-consciousness, in Barth's prose fiction and in the humanistic disciplines in general, is the very polemic notion that we are approaching the end of a significant period of Western culture, the "civilization of the book," whose origins are found in the inception of phonetic writing, and which explodes with the coming of the printing press to Renaissance Europe. The "Author's Note" to *Lost in the Funhouse*, with its pretensions of moving beyond the medium of print into the electronic media, some of the more recently developed "extensions of man," echoes unmistakably Marshal McLuhan's thought.¹⁸ Such consideration of a possible transcending of book culture is one that Barth shares not only with McLuhan, but, in a different way, with Derrida as well. For Derrida, however, this "death" of the civilization of the book "announces itself at a distance of a few centuries."¹⁹ Predictions of the end of the book or the death of the novel, proponents and opponents alike would agree, today seem premature, if not flatly mistaken.²⁰ In Barth's case, his experiments with new electronic media in *Lost in the*

¹⁵ Christopher Morris has written an article on the treatment of "the purely linguistic problem of substitution" in *Lost in the Funhouse*: "Barth and Lacan: The World of the Moebius Strip," *Critique*, 17, 1, pp. 69-77.

¹⁶ Scholes, "The Allegory of Exhaustion," pp. 106-08.

¹⁷ Both Richard Noland (pp. 14-29) and Campbell Tatham (pp. 43-54), in two articles collected in *Critical Essays*, suggest the "dead-end" possibility, as does Tony Tanner in *City of Words* (New York: Random, 1971), p. 253-59.

¹⁸ Barth discusses the influence of McLuhan in the late sixties during a 1979 interview with Charlie Reilly published in *Contemporary Literature*, 22, 1 (1981), pp. 3, 6.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 8.

²⁰ See for example Leslie Fiedler, "The Death and Rebirths of the Novel," *Salmagundi*, 50-51 (Fall '80-Winter '81), pp. 143-71.

Funhouse do come across as pretentious, and one might legitimately ask of him, dedicated and serious artist that he is, why he chose to distribute his work in print, a medium which he himself considered at the time “less than ideal.”

Another possible explanation for the self-conscious artistry in *Lost in the Funhouse*, the one set forth in this essay, is as an affirmation of the Derridean notion of the “play” of written discourse as an exit from and possible solution to existential doubt. We cannot “know,” so why not play? Play, for Derrida, is language itself: “Sign will always lead to sign, one substituting the other (playfully, since ‘sign’ is ‘under erasure’) as signifier and signified in turn. Indeed, the notion of play is important here. Knowledge is not a systematic tracking down of a truth that is hidden but may be found. It is rather the field ‘of free play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble.’”²¹ Such a conceptualization of language repeats several of the implications I have drawn from *Lost in the Funhouse*: for Barth not only language, but analogously the whole of literature can be depicted as the play of infinite formal and technical substitutions in the closure of a finite (theoretically exhaustible) set of possibilities. “One should, if it’s worthwhile, repeat the tale. I’ll repeat the tale” (p. 97), Barth’s narrator in “Echo” says, and Barth proceeds to undertake a recasting of Western myth, the very foundation of Western literature.

Following this Derridean train of thought, what Blanchot says about the writer in a generalized sense applies simultaneously to *Lost in the Funhouse* as an individual work, to Barth’s entire oeuvre, and to the whole of our literature: “The writer never knows if the work is done. What he has finished in one book, he begins again or destroys in another. . . . the work—the work of art, the literary work—is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. . . . The writer who experiences this void simply believes that the work is unfinished, and he believes that with a little more effort and the luck of some favorable moments, he—and only he—will be able to finish it. And so he sets back to work. But what he wants to finish by himself, remains something interminable, it ties him to an illusory labor.”²² This notion of the whole of literature as a single, unfinished book constantly being written upon is one we also find in Borges, and it is diverting to speculate that it came to Barth through the Argentine master.²³ *Lost in the Funhouse*, just as the whole of Barth’s literary production, is like an open book. It is always pushing forward, and yet constantly circling back, not only upon itself, but upon the entire Barthian oeuvre, and the whole of Western literature. It would seem, then, that it is not so much through his experiments with the recorded media that Barth transcends the printed book, as he may have hoped at one time, but rather a movement away from the closedness and supposed unity of the book in favor of a new concept of literature as “writing” that represents Barth’s accomplishment in the *Funhouse*.

²¹ Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” *Of Grammatology*, p. xix.

²² Blanchot, pp. 63-65.

²³ See Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, eds. and trans. Donald Yates and James Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 51-58.