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ONCE UPON A TIME: A *FLOATING OPERA* JOHN BARTH'S DEATH-DEFYING ART OF WRITING

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Abstract

This study seeks to demonstrate the trend and development of Barth's concept of writing and authorial presence, and the emphasis that Barth puts on the very act of narration/writing, as a means of deferring death and entitling writing as the art that defeats death. As the ultimate storyteller of the postmodern dispensation, John Barth has achieved prominence in his treatment of the contemporary man's eternal engagement with their intuition of a hovering ultimacy and death, and the strategies of survival that his characters adopt in order to defy the diminishing of the self. He creates characters who are either literally writers or by the very nature of their existence are expected to write the story of their lives. These characters need to narrate themselves in order to avoid their disappearance into nothingness. Those who succeed in narrating themselves manage to achieve, not immortality, but existence, even if it is on the pages of books; those who fail to do so would eventually fall off the edges of the narrative into the void surrounding the fictional level of reality. The entire world, in Barth's rendering, is reduced to an act of narration. Narrative functions as a means of survival.

Keywords

author, metafiction, narration

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“Telling stories for a living is surely one of the strangest of all jobs. It is a process of controlled madness.” (Broderick 101)

IN THIS PAPER, John Barth’s concept of writing and authorial presence, and the emphasis that he puts on the very act of narration/writing as a means of deferring death, and entitling writing as the art that defeats death, is discussed with emphasis on Barth’s first novel *The Floating Opera* (1956). It is argued that the autotelic act of writing/narrating refutes the decentered status of the author; in his fiction Barth emphasizes the act of narrating and equates it with existence. Thus narrative becomes a means of survival.

The sixties and later decades in America were “transforming” periods in American art and literature: “techniques grew random, styles mixed and merged, [and] methods became increasingly provisional” (Bradbury 65). Postmodernism, as the dominant mode of production and interpretation, designates a rather all-inclusive stance in arts and letters concentrating primarily on the sense of loss, alienation, confusion, and ultimacy in the face of a chaotic universe. Susan Strehle touches upon the fact that Newtonian physics perpetuates “an inertial frame of reference, a nonearthly locus where its laws were fully valid” (128), and that in his *Principles* Newton rather defines the primary concepts of time, space, and motion as follows:

Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external. Absolute space, in its own nature, without relation to anything external remains always similar and immovable. Absolute motion is the translation of a body from one absolute space into another. (qtd. in Strehle 128–29)

Yet, the absolutes are undermined and unreliable, challenging any form of certainty concerning the foundations of the universe. It is no longer the age of unchangeable backgrounds and a cosmos “ticked out by the measure of one universal clock” (Strehle 129). It is the new era of Einstein’s theory of Relativity and Heisenberg’s theory of Uncertainty where the prevalent and reassuring beliefs in the reliability of grand narratives and the major frames of reference have gradually diminished. The implication of this, with regard to postmodernist fiction, is that the relativity of all frames of reference irrecoverably results in a sense of ultimacy and the disappearance of authorial omniscience, individuality, and any inherent sense of closure. In such an irresolute cosmos, Lacan’s “notion of the loss of the subject and all the alienations of self-consciousness” (Bowen 70) imply the diminishing of the individual’s sense of selfhood and, at the most basic level, of the finitude of their existence in a world in which the dominant (postmodern) discourse “speaks man rather than the reverse” (70). What prevails in such an atmosphere is a deep sense of “existential despair, a sense of man at road’s end, with nowhere to go. Morally

paralyzed, on the verge of suicide,” the individuals have “to either put themselves in motion or to force death to give way to life” (Lehan 172).

Social incongruities and dissonances, as well as the prevalent epistemological and ontological uncertainties, stimulate the sense of finality, futility, pointlessness, and disjunction. The postmodern condition gives birth and feeds off such nihilistic existentialism. The individual’s awareness of death can set them to think about “mortality and devising strategies for coping with their consciousness” (Leclair 6). Such concept of death and doom implicates “a contractive end, or a final and ultimate denial of the future rather than a way to some futurity or immortality” (7).

As a premier medium of postmodern representation, fictional narratives dubbed as postmodern in their status, frame of reference, epistemology, and ontology portray an engaging and intriguing play of death, and the awareness of the characters of their impending doom inform the inclusive thematic structures of these narratives. In fact, it is in their characters’ involvement with their inescapable and preordained death that such fiction prospers.

Marjorie Worthington believes that “in the face of postmodern indeterminacy, interpretive authority no longer resides with authors, and singularity of meaning no longer exists” (1). In such fiction, as Gordon Slethaug puts it, the equation that relates time and space parameters constructs a space resembling the space defined by a Möbius strip, “a nonlocus, a hole, a loss, the absence of a center or subject, a labyrinth, a universe of discourse when an infinite number of sign substitutions come into play, where nothing contains everything, and when a gap constitutes the subject” (138). Reality and the search for identity can be as illusive, misleading and chimerical as the art of narration itself. As “the premier storyteller of the postmodern dispensation” (Broderick 101), John Barth stands out among such great names as Pynchon, Barthelme, Vonnegut, Nabokov, and Calvino in his treatment of the contemporary man’s eternal engagement with their intuition of a hovering ultimacy and death, and the maneuvers and strategies of survival that his fictional characters adopt in order to defy the diminishing of the self. It is the very essential fact of survival and sustainability that they aim at.

Nearly six decades ago, John Barth published his first novel, *The Floating Opera* (1956), and thus began the weaving of the narrative spell that has enchanted readers ever since in works like *The End of the Road* (1958), *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), *Chimera* (1972), *Sabbatical* (1982), *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), *Where Three Roads Meet* (2005), *The Development* (2008), and *Every Third Thought* (2011). John Barth’s fiction and character are as controversial as the kind of criticism that has been written on him. He has been diversely described as a nihilist, a black humorist, a fabulist, and since the mid-1950s, a postmodernist throughout his long and proliferating career as a fiction writer and literary theorist. His works, as various and colorful as they are, have earned him a distinguished status as a professional and highly influential writer and literary theoretician in the way they consciously and intentionally break the

familiar grounds of narrative tradition and fiction writing while rooting themselves in the literature of the past. What distinguishes Barth from his fellow writers is the fact that in the fantasy land of his fiction, he is concerned not only with what ultimately befalls his characters, but also with the fate of Barth the author. Thus, in confronting the Barthesian death-of-the-author epidemic, he struggles to maintain the primacy of authorial selfhood and prominence, and “instead of challenging the primacy of authorship,” his “metafictional experiments serve to cement the author into a position of authority over the text” (Worthington 1). Living in the postmodern era and being determinedly productive narrative-wise, Barth addresses, in his fictions and non-fictions, the contemporary concern with the hovering sense of end and death; this vision of the end is extremely functional in his rendering of the narratives of characters trapped in a void:

In this post-modern, post-historic wilderness of minds, tethers and ends ... the end isn't near, it's already upon us; or worse, may long ago have pulverized us to powder and flakes without our knowledge. Like the English Puritan Thomas Beverly, who, having set the date of the Apocalypse for 1697, published a book in 1698 saying that the world had ended on schedule but no one had noticed it. (Rother 23)

Critics of Barth primarily focus on his works as belonging to the trend of postmodernism and thus contemplate upon the manner through which he employs his metafictional, self-reflexive techniques, his metafictional and intertextual strategies of narration, or the existentialism prevalent in his early fiction. The road not taken in the study of John Barth's oeuvre is divining the way he devises a contradictory process of apotheosis and kenosis in the body of his works through metafictionality and intertextuality in order to make one single point: that narration (as an all-inclusive act encompassing writing in its most basic form) *per se, par excellence*, is the one and only means of survival in an age of uncertainties, disjunctions, and in the face of the ubiquitous sense of ultimacy and doom. He is the writer of the age which Ronald Sukenick labels as post-realistic, where all the former grand narratives are discredited, where

[a]ll of these absolutes have become absolutely problematic. The contemporary writer—the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is a part—is forced to start from the scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now, no one knows the plot and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. (qtd. in Klinkowitz xvi–xvii)

On the fictional level, Barth creates characters who are either literally writers/artists or by the very nature of their existence are expected to write out the story of their lives. From the early novel of 1956, *The Floating Opera*, his fictional characters need to assert themselves, to give voice to their existence, to *narrate* themselves in order to avoid or at least defer their disappearance into nothingness, death. Those who succeed in narrating themselves manage to achieve, not immortality, but existence, even if it is on the pages of books; those who fail to do so or fail to do so properly would eventually and in due course fall off the edges of the narrative into the void which surrounds the fictional level of reality.

What is more, Barth, who is by temperament a narrative addict, seeks to fictionalize his own character in order to immortalize himself in the written word. In almost all of his narratives, there is a version of Barth moving in and out, socializing with his fictive characters since “a text that thematizes a self-conscious awareness of the processes of its own construction unavoidably thematizes the importance of its constructor” (Worthington 1). Apart from the fact that in so doing, he constantly reminds the readers, his characters, and himself that he exists, and thus the author is not dead after all, he paradoxically questions his authority as the author. On the level of fiction, he assigns himself a god-like status and against all the Barthesian claims of the death of the author we observe the apotheosis of Barth the author. However, on a metafictional level, he dramatizes himself as a character similar to others; we observe the kenosis of the author. The presence of multiple narrative voices and the inherent Bakhtinian dialogism of Barth’s works defy the role of an all-omniscient author minimizing the role of the writer in the process of the book to a similar and equal entity as that of the other narrators in the novel. The dichotomy, nevertheless, is never resolved, and the interface where both stances reside is in fact the narrative of the author. He is simultaneously the puppet and the puppeteer, as the dichotomy is deconstructed and overthrown. Neither has primacy and authority over the other. As such, he is the postmodern puppet master pulling the strings of his characters as his own strings are being pulled by unknown hands. The entire world, in Barth’s rendering, is reduced to a narrative, an act of narration; it can be fabricated as it is desired by any narrator who wishes so.

Narrative and writing, therefore, function as means of survival. In Barth’s fiction, characters who are authors of their lives and have the ability to narrate themselves (i.e., capable of putting themselves in words) have the chance of survival even if it is on a purely fictional and narrative level. Unlike Pirandello’s characters who seek to have a life on the ontological level of reality, these characters are in search of life on the ontology of words and narratives. They postpone the hovering sense of ultimacy through their narration as Barth’s all-time muse, Scheherazade, manages to postpone death through her nightly storytelling. According to Marzolph, based on folklore theory, the tales, “whether written down or orally performed—gain their meaning in the individual performance” (47), and this is what Barth aims at achieving: to give each character a chance of ascribing meaning to their lives

through narrating the self. Postmodern fiction entails a sense of loss, it is all about the loss of whatever is valuable and dear, and “the ultimate loss, the loss of self” (Barth, qtd. in Reilly 1). Thus, one can be all lost in eternity of words in a universe which is brimming over its edges. Barth uses his narratives and the very act of writing as a guarantee of his existence in the postmodern era of disappearances. Stories are narrated in order to re-construct and restore a sense of self that has been questioned, undermined, and nearly wiped away. He manages to draw attention to “the act of the designer in the very ingenuity of the fabulation” (Scholes 10). And it is writing which, for Barth and in his fiction, is “promoted to the rank of art to defeat death” (Couturier 5).

In *The Friday Book*, Barth calls *The Floating Opera* “a nihilist comedy” (134). The novel is, indeed, a narrative about death and how death impinges upon the consciousness of the narrator/protagonist of the story, Todd Andrews, an alienated figure, as he keeps an account of his life in what the reader will ultimately understand to be a letter to his dead father and not so much to the reader after all. As the story starts, one cannot but notice the resemblance that it carries with James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* in the way they all picture narrators who set their minds to share with their readers a significant and life-changing day in their lives, and the way their accounts of that single day are interrupted by flashbacks and foreshadowing as the protagonists attempt to reach an understanding of their provisional existence. Yet, Todd manipulates his readers. As the progenitor of Barth’s author/characters, Todd Andrews, the successful lawyer from Cambridge, Maryland, practices what would later be preached by Barth in his (in-)famous essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967); Todd Andrews makes his own sense of ultimacy the proper subject matter for his narrative.

More than any other of Barth’s protagonists, Todd Andrews deals with the concept of death. Death is a central, or rather *the* central, focus in this novel, and its centrality shapes the protagonist/narrator’s character, the “strategies of selfhood” (Leclair 5) that he adopts (self-expression through the very act of writing) and the technique that he applies in narrating his story. From the very beginning of his narrative, Todd Andrews associates his own existence and identity with death as he confides in the reader that:

So. Todd Andrews is my name. You can spell it with one or two *d*’s; ... I almost warned you against the single-*d* spelling, for fear you’d say, “*Tod* is German for death; perhaps the name is symbolic.” I myself use two *d*’s, partly in order to avoid that symbolism. But you see, I ended by not warning you at all, and that’s because it just occurred to me that the double-*d* *Todd* is symbolic, too, and accurately so. *Tod* is death, and this book hasn’t much to do with death; *Todd* is almost *Tod*—that is, almost death—and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost-death. (*The Floating Opera* 3)

Death forces itself upon him in various guises: Todd's killing in cold blood and out of fear of the German soldier in the Argonne Forest while he fought in World War I, his father's suicide after he goes bankrupt in the Market Crash of 1929, Harrison Mack's father's death, Harrison's thought of committing suicide, his elderly fellow boarders at the hotel where he resides embodying gradual death, and above all his own fatal heart condition which might stop at any given moment, "this fact—that having begun this sentence, I may not live to write its end ... that having slumbered, I may never wake, or having waked, may never living sleep—this for thirty-five years has been the condition of my existence, the great fact of my life" (*The Floating Opera* 49). The thought of death "as a possibility" (Leclair 6), *the great fact of his life*, makes him think about his mortality and as it is often the case in nihilistic fictions, it does not motivate him to live a life of virtuosity in the hope of a promised salvation in the other world.

He devises strategies, instead, to cope with this awareness about his own impending death, a result of his faulty heart: "I used to have (probably still have) a kind of subacute bacteriological carditis, with a special complication ... what that means that any day I may fall quickly dead, without warning—perhaps before I complete this sentence, perhaps twenty years from now" (*The Floating Opera* 5). He writes and writes and keeps baskets full of his notes in the (unconscious) hope that one day they will lead him to some answers regarding his father's suicide or his own hanging and uncertain situation. He resorts to narration in order to make sense of the incomprehensible and chaotic world within and outside him, attempting to bestow order upon it through the power of his words as he assumes authority through narration. He constructs himself and the world around him through his fiction. As Barth believes, "art is long, in its aggregate anyhow, and life short" (*Further Fridays* 75). With death a breath away, Todd finds a refuge in the art of storytelling since it restores a sense of purpose and control. He can assume, within the premise of his created universe, a god-like status. He starts his narrative in medias res, thus manipulating his readers' direction through his non-linear fiction, speaking as one who has the knowledge of the past and future of his narrative, sparing it upon his readers as he desires, self-consciously highlighting his own digressive patterns. He forewarns his readers, "where were we? I was going to comment on the significance of the *viz.* I used earlier, was I? Or explain my 'piano-tuning' metaphor? Or my weak heart? God heavens, how does one write a novel!" (*The Floating Opera* 2)

Death is a perpetual process to Todd Andrews; it is "the ultimate denial" (Leclair 7) of his future. It is the prominent element in his provisional existence. And it is this bleak perspective of his existence that determines the shrewd manner by which he avoids responsibility or commitment regarding having what could be called a family life or normal romantic relationship, and also eschewing integrity portrayed in the way he pays for his hotel room every day and tries to stay emotionally detached from those around him like Jane and Harrison Mack and even Jeanine who might

be his daughter after all. It is this attitude that leads him to treat life as fiction. He creates fictional *masks* of a rake, a saint, a cynic. Thus, death is not the end for Todd; it is rather the cause, the motivational factor that pushes him forward toward the fictional end now that all values are gone: "To hell with the brotherhood of man!" Social justice is "impossible to achieve, irrelevant if achieved" (*The Floating Opera* 23). The face behind all these masks is that of a storyteller.

That is why Todd sets out to create a fictional universe in which he creates layers upon layers of narrative, moving back and forth in time and avoiding any conventional order of linearity. Away with the "gesture of eternity," it is all a "gesture of temporality" (*The Floating Opera* 51). Todd the narrator's addressing of his readers in a rather humorous way might be interpreted as Todd the existential, solitary being, reaching his hand to find a companion. Yet, more truly, it could be a strategy for the manipulation of readers, to involve them as much as possible within the labyrinth that he calls his life story. It is best seen in the chapter "Calliope Music" in which he presents the reader with two versions for the beginning of his chapter, "in two voices" (*The Floating Opera* 172), thus creating alternative possibilities, alternative worlds of words simultaneously running parallel, leaving the reader more befuddled as which direction to take. As the author-surrogate, Todd tells his story since "*of what one can't make sense, one may make art*" (*Further Fridays* 109).

Barth's parodying the process of writing proper, the genre, as well as other literary techniques is indicative of his belief in the need for making the ultimacies of time the proper subject of his art. In his metafictional novel, *The Floating Opera*, he deals with the exhaustion so native to his time both in the way he toys with the process of writing in which he makes Todd Andrews the narrator a parody of authorship by pretending to be a novice, amateur writer (Barth the novice writer penning his first novel?), and thus criticizing and undermining the cliché techniques when he rambles on and on about his reason for writing and continuous digressions. Also, by centralizing death and making it the premier motive and *raison d'être*, or rather, *raison de coeur* of his central character, he pictures the contemporary sense of loss and demise. In a Poe-like, tell-tale heart fashion, Todd indulges in his confessional tale of how he decides to commit (mass) suicide, blowing up the showboat with all those on board and how, godlike and indifferent, he lets go of his plan. It is as if he is throwing off dices deciding for the life of his fellow passengers as well as his readers.

What characterizes Barth's trend of fiction writing, or better to say, what makes fiction and the very act of writing so singular and distinctive for him, is the inherent and crucial emphasis that Barth puts on the art of narration/writing as a means of deferring death and demise, and entitling writing as the art that defeats death and disappearance, the very predicament that the individual deals with in the framework of the postmodern condition. For Todd, incapable of logically justifying his father's suicide, and in the face of his imminent death, the only means left which

can help him possess a sense of self is through narration. Writing and narration possess a therapeutic essence and function since they represent the organized process of creating a *Welt* where the storyteller restores his control and is the one who determines which approach should be taken by the audience/reader. Joseph Francese believes that in fictional narratives, “unable to know the world, the author forfeits the right to impose meaning on the text” (49). Critics such as Federman and Francese argue that since the author has forfeited his right to manipulate the organization and execution of order in the text, “the center of gravity supposedly shifts from the producer to the consumer of the text” (49).

Not that any of the readings of the text would be privileged over another, but the opposite is true in the case of John Barth and his fiction, as in his narratives the author/writer still occupies the position of omniscience that authors have long held. In fact, the author is after a reaffirmation of his selfhood and authority within the constructed zone of his fiction and through the art of narrative proper; this is as much ontological certainty as possible that he can hope to attain. The autotelic act of writing and narrating (encompassing heterotelic functions) refutes the decentered status of the author. This is best seen in the central metaphor of the novel that is the image of the floating opera. Todd explains early in his narrative that he had always had the idea of building a showboat on board of which a play could be performed; the audience would be sitting along the banks of the river as the boat constantly moves back and forth. What the audience would grasp would be glimpses of the play; “to fill in the gaps they’d have to use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbors or hear the word passed along from upriver or downriver” (*The Floating Opera* 7). Here, Todd (the author-surrogate) takes control of his own metaphor, playing the role of his readers’ imagination, indirectly and tacitly telling them what to expect. And he states that he does not care about anything but his own pleasure of telling the story: “perhaps I would expire before ending it [the story]; perhaps the task was endless, like its fellows. No matter. Even if I died before ending my cigar, I had all the time there was” (*The Floating Opera* 252). As such, the fiction holds up the mirror not to *reality* but to the reality as Todd/Barth constructs and envisions.

This is how Barth manages to undermine his own status through overthrowing the hierarchical dyad of the death/life of the author, though he still manages to ascribe primacy to the narrating figure, be it a character or the author, and leaves the consumer, the reader, on a lower rung of the ladder. Thus, one can follow the paradoxical process of simultaneous apotheosis and kenosis that Barth takes upon himself to portray and display in his fiction through his solid and constant emphasis on the act of narrating and equating of narrating with existence. Although attributing human characteristics to Todd (such as his heart condition, occasional and developmental impotence, clubbed fingers, and his description of his five emotional encounters in life) lowers the status of the author figure, assigning a rank as that of other fictional characters, he nevertheless occupies the divine position of a creator much higher than that of the reader which is a fabrication

of the author. In Damien Broderick's words, "telling stories for a living is surely one of the strangest of all jobs. It is a process of controlled madness" (101), and John Barth risks this madness in search of a restored sense of self through this strangest of all jobs in order to avoid "cosmopsis," defined by himself as the time "when an individual becomes overwhelmed with the macrocosm of the world and thus realizes the insignificance and futility of one's own life" (qtd. in Martin 34). In such a situation, in Barth's own words, narration and storytelling are equatable with "being humanely alive" (112).

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