

ISSN 2336 9884

Logos & Littera

Issue 1 / 2014



Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches to Text

*Institute of Foreign Languages
University of Montenegro*

Editor-in-chief Neda Andrić

LOGOS ET LITTERA
Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches to Text
ISSN: 2336-9884

Issue 1

2014
Podgorica, Montenegro

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LOGOS & LITTERA
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University of Montenegro

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Received 8 May 2014
Reviewed 14 August 2014
Accepted 10 September 2014
UDC: 821.111(73).09-31

THE KEY TO THE TREASURE IS THE TREASURE: BARTH'S METAFICTION IN *CHIMERA*

Abstract: *John Barth, one of the most prominent postmodern authors, is famous for his creative literary games: while his favorite tool, metafiction, is at times hard to comprehend, he is almost always both the writer and a character of his stories. "Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story," he said, thus confirming the quite loose difference between reality and fiction in post-modernism. Bearing in mind that the story within a story is a common characteristic of his work, in this paper we shall analyze the most interesting points at which we encounter this phenomenon and discover what actually represents the treasure in one of his most perplexing, yet incredibly captivating novels, Chimera.*

Keywords: metafiction, myth, story, storytelling

Introduction

Though the term *postmodernism* might be difficult to define, John Gardner claims that "It a world which values progress, 'post-modern' in fact means *New! Improved!*", while, according to Christine Brooke-Rose, "it merely means modern modern (most-modernism?)" (Mc Hale 1989). On the other hand, for the American author John Barth postmodernism is "essentially a continuation but modification of cultural modernism, a way of 'telling stories' " (Rice & Waugh 2001). Well-known for using metafiction as one of the strongest tools associated with postmodern literature, we might as well say that Barth is one of the most significant figures of postmodernism today.

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"Once upon a time modernist literature reached the point of exhaustion; then came the postmodernist breakthrough, and literature replenished itself," says Brian McHale in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992). According to Barth, exhausted literature can be replenished by "reviving the traditional (*premodernist*) values of fiction" (McHale 1992). The strongest examples of this tendency are his most prominent works *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and *Chimera* (1972).

The simplest way to define metafiction is to say that it is a type of fiction which constantly reminds the reader of its *true* status as a work of art. Indeed, Barth is widely known for his tendency to brilliantly play with the text, have a *dialogue* with the reader at times and make himself *a part of the story*. He openly says that it is a great pleasure for him to release his imagination through writing: "One of the pleasures (of writing) is doing difficult things well... One of the delights of virtuosity, in other words, whether we are the audience or the virtuoso, is doing quite difficult things with some grace, and getting it done" (Lindsay 1995).

"The whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present day, became the problematics of language," says Roland Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero* (1967). Although it is sometimes not easy to comprehend Barth's playful language, in this paper we shall try to explore the use of metafiction as a meaningful tool of postmodernism on the example of *Chimera*, a collection of three novellas with mythical background. We shall, furthermore, touch upon the subject of *modernization of a myth*, which is a perfect metaphor for literature in need of being replenished by *recycling the old*. After all, the author himself claims that postmodernist fiction must always keep "one foot in the narrative past ... and one foot in, one might say, the Parisian structuralist present" (Barth 1984).

Chimera

Chimera is a novel which consists of three loosely connected novellas, *Dunyazadiad*, *Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad*.

They tell us the stories of three mythical characters named Donyazad, Perseus and Bellerophon. An interesting notion is that the three parts of this novel can be compared to the creature *Chimera* (killed by Bellerophon) which is part lion, part goat and part serpent (according to Walkiewicz (1986), "part heroism, part satire and part deception and convulsion").

Chimera, for Barth, is another *game* in which he demonstrates his ability to use the *old* and make it *postmodern*. In *The Literature of Replenishment* (1984) he quotes the controversial Russian author Evgeny Zamyatin who claims that "Euclid's world is very simple, and Einstein's world is very difficult; nevertheless, it is now impossible to return to Euclid's." The *ancient*, however, should not be forgotten, as it may serve as a valuable tool to *uplift* the 20th century literature.

The novel *Chimera* is full of elements of metafiction expressed in different ways that are often quite comical when put into the *ancient* context, while Barth himself explains his intentions regarding this:

"Of course, when you consciously use an old myth, a received myth, like the myth of Perseus or the myth of Helen, Paris, and Menelaus, then whatever there is of the originally mythpoetic in your own imagination is either going to come in somewhere else in that text – with new characters, or language, or new twists to the old myth – or else will simply flow in to fill in those mythic receptacles which go by the names of Paris, Menelaus, Helen. I believe firmly, in other words, that some of the serious affect that we experience in the face of genuine myth can be experienced in the face of contemporary 'comic' fiction using mythical materials" (Walkiewicz 1986).

This being said, it is no wonder why Polizzotti (Clavier 2007) compares Barth with Kurt Vonnegut, Monty Python's Flying Circus, and the films of David Lynch and the Cohen brothers. Indeed, each of his works rolls in front of the reader's eyes like some kind of avant-garde movie which never fails to surprise, or even shock.

Dunyazadiad

The first novela revolves around the most famous storyteller ever, Scheherezade, and her younger sister Dunyazad. Just like John Fowles did it in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Barth is here making himself a part of the story by assuming the role of the Genie who helps the young woman continue the story and make her *telling* actually a *retelling*.

"The real magic is to understand which words work, and when, and for what; the trick is to learn the trick" (15). It is no wonder why Barthes (1967) claimed that literature was "a language having body and hidden depths, existing both as dream and menace". As we already know, poor Scheherezade has to tell stories to Shahryar in order to save both her life and lives of many other girls he could kill, thus she has to choose her language carefully, to create literature which shall both satisfy the ruthless King, and bear a life-saving character.

In the beginning, Barth lets us know that this story is about her finding a way "to change King's mind about women and turning him into a gentle, loving husband" (16) and suggests that "the key to the treasure is the treasure" (19), or the story itself. The Genie, or Barth himself, informs Scheherezade that they are both storytellers and that he can help her think of the stories by retelling her book, which has never been off his worktable since he started writing (21). All these stories the girl is not even aware of yet, while they include the ancient ones such as *Sinbad the Sailor*, *Aladdin's Lamp*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*...

Meanwhile, Shahryar's brother Shah Zaman shares his brother's passion for deflowering and killing virgins and his next victim is none other than Sherry's sister Dunyazad. She has previously watched her sister having sex with the King which she describes as "not conjured illustrations from those texts, but things truly taking place" (29, 30). She says to Barth: "Don't desert us, friend; give Sherry the story you're working on now, and you may do anything you like with me. I'll raise your children if you have any; I'll wash your Melissa's feet. Anything" (37). The stories for the King have been exhausted, as is literature in

Barth's eyes, but we can actually *save* it (1984): "By "exhaustion" I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the fest exhaustion of certain possibilities – by no means necessarily a cause of despair." This might lead us to conclusion that all those young women, including our female protagonists, can be saved as well.

According to Barth, Shahryar represents the male-chauvinist extreme of the American academic "publish or perish" principle (Ziegler 1987), which makes him not ideal audience, but Sherry is, on the other hand, an ideal storyteller. Ziegler further suggests that Dunyazade is the one representing the ideal listener. Using metafiction, Barth presents us Doony's monologue: "Turning then to me, to my great surprise he announced that the title of the story was *Dunyazadiad*; that its central character was not my sister but myself, the image of whose circumstances, on my 'wedding-night-to-come', he found as arresting for tale-tellers of his particular place and time as was my sister's for the estate of narrative artists in general" (40).

Unfortunately, our main character is likely to suffer tragic destiny when handed to Shah Zaman, an alleged woman hater. Scheherezade still has trouble believing the Genie (Barth) and says that he "is either a liar or a fool when he says that any man and woman can treasure each other until death – unless their lifetimes are as brief as our murdered sisters' " (45). She further suggests that Doony should cut Shah Zaman's throat, as she will do to Shahryar, and then they should commit suicide to spare their sex further suffering. Nevertheless, she is prevented from doing so by Shah Zaman telling her the story that hides behind his cruelty – a whole new society consisting only of women. "All I craved was someone with whom to get on with the story of my life, which was to say, of our life together: a loving friend; a loving wife; a treasurable wife; a wife, a wife," says he (60).

It is later suggested that "he learned through life and impotence something that the responsive reader may already have suspected: the true magic words are "as if", words "which,

to a person satisfied with seeming, are more potent than all the genii in the tales" (57) (Walkiewicz 1986). Shah Zaman wants them to "end the dark night" and "take the truly tragic view of love" – "maybe it *is* a fiction, but it's the profoundest and best of all" (61). This is an excellent example of life replacing fiction and fiction replacing life – what is *true* does not matter anymore, so this novella does not have any definite *resolution*.

"Treasure me, Dunyazade!" (63), says Shah Zaman just as the morning is approaching (and bear it in mind that this should have been the time of her death). Since the story shall live, Doony shall live too – if "we can accept the 'as if' he offers, then this 'denouement' may indeed become a moment of 'untying' in which the tangled loops of story are opened up, a joyous climax that occurs concurrently in all the frames of the tale" (Walkiewicz 1986). In the last part of the novella, Barth informs us that this has not been the story of Scheherazade, but "the story of the story of her stories" (63). Finally, the author himself explains to the reader that in order "to be joyous in the full acceptance of this denouement is surely to possess a treasure, the key to which is the understanding that Key and Treasure are the same" (64). Thus we can conclude that the true treasure is storytelling itself.

Perseid

The protagonist of this novella is Perseus, the demi-god and the killer of Gorgon Medusa, who desperately struggles to obtain immortality. "Writing is... the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing," says Barthes (1968). In a similar manner, Barth now takes the role of Perseus and tells us the story of *his* life.

"Good evening.

Stories last longer than men, stones than stories, stars than stones. But even our stars' nights are numbered, and with them will pass this patterned tale to a long/deceased earth." (67)

He then continues informing us of his *history*, from a middle-aged man's point of view, while we witness a series of dialogues which are quite comical at times (they mostly talk

about sex in a, so to say, *postmodern* manner). When Perseus says to Calyxa that he is a hero, only capable of “virtuoso performance” (78), she advises him not to think of sex as a performance, or else he will suffer “stage fright” (79). After all, just like sex is a form of pleasure which should be spontaneous, for Barth the pleasure is writing, while, for us readers, it is reading and “coming to an understanding of such a complex work”, in this case, *Chimera* (Lindsay 1995). As the author suggests, the reader and writer’s joint “enterprise is noble”, “full of joy and life” (61, 62), just like sex is for two people.

Barth continues his game of metafiction further in Perseus and Calyxa’s dialogue: “You reminded me once that you’re a mythic hero, but you keep forgetting it yourself. Were you always psychosexually weak, or is that Andromeda’s doing?” (95) But the middle-aged hero is determined to tell his “second tale” which should be “truly a second, not mere replication of my first” (121). His desire to rewrite his own past, according to Susan Pozner (Clavier 2007) “parallels Barth’s shift from masterfully appropriating the literary past in the earlier manifesto to wooing and ‘replenishing’ it in the second, and emblemizes this new program of replenishment”. (1990) He will subsequently manage to achieve his goal: “his potency at least partially restored by the nymph, he went on to slay not only his remaining enemies, but also ‘unpleasant middle Perseus’ (132) and to confront a New Medusa, who supposedly had been given back her erstwhile beauty and granted the new power to turn both herself and her true lover ‘ageless as the stars’ (115)” (Walkiewicz 1986).

“My fate is to be able only to imagine boundless beauty from my experience of boundless love – but I have a fair imagination to work with,” says Perseus as we are approaching the end of the novella (142). He is content about reaching immortality as a constellation of stars, while, at the same time, crushed by not being able to be with the one he loves (“Why is it I look at empty space forever, a blank page, and not at the woman I love?” (139)). Hence Walkiewicz (1986) is right when he claims that this is not only a story about a rise, but a fall too.

“So with this issue, our net estate: to have become, like the noted music of our tongue, these silent, visible signs; to *be* the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise you up forever and know that our story will never be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars... I’m content. Till tomorrow evening, love.” (142)

Bellerophoniad

Although Barth initially intended *Dunyazad* to be the final novella of *Chimera*, the story of Bellerophon, the slayer of the creature, took the final place in the novel. It is the most complex of the three novellas, since it is neither monologue nor dialogue, not “Bellerus’s voice” (277) speaking to us or anyone’s “mortal speech”, but “written words” (Walkiewicz 1986). This novella is certainly the most unusual one, since it includes other elements beside the myth and its modernization (such as Graves’s summary of the myth, letters to Todd Andrews and King George III, a pattern of the *monomyth* (Walkiewicz 1986), as well as Barth’s own thoughts and explanations of the story).

Bellerophon is, apparently, frustrated, just like Perseus is: “Upset upset. My life’s a failure. I’m not a mythic hero. I never will be” (146). However, in an unusual manner, Philonoe replies: “Your fame as Chimeromach seems secure, judging by your fan mail; even the *Perseid*, I gather from the excerpts you chose to read me, mentions you favorably a couple of times” (147). The presence of parody and the *story within a story* is evident, though it is sometimes a perplexing task to comprehend who is actually speaking in *Bellerophoniad*.

In his controversial essay *Literature of Exhaustion* Barth “retains some of the apocalyptic tone of that ‘somewhat apocalyptic place and time’ (Barth 1984)” (McHale 1992). This essay has been inevitably brought in connection with Barthes’s *Death of the Author*. “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text,” says Barthes (1968). On the other hand, Lindsay claims that “Barth’s reading of his own fiction suggests that he believes the death of the author may be something else the real

author may consciously employ against itself in order to assert the author's control of his material." This is what Barth says in *Chimera*: "I think I'm dead. I think I'm spooked. I'm full of voices, all mine, none me; I can't keep straight who's speaking, as I used to. It's not my wish to be obscure or difficult; I'd hoped at least to entertain, if not inspire" (154), thus giving his literature its *own* life, its *own* character (we might again recall Barthes's words pronouncing literature something that has *its own body* and many other dimensions).

While we witness the story of Bellerophon, it is constantly suggested through metaphor that literature *must* be replenished: "Deterioration of the Literary Unit: yes, well, things are deteriorating; everything is deteriorated; deterioration everywhere. God knows *I'm not* what I used to be; no help for that. But never for want of words!" (165). The poor hero who "achieved potency only through rape" (Walkiewicz 1986) refuses Anteia's begging to conceive a child with her which would satisfy her need to have at least a small percent of *god* in herself ("Let the kid be a semigoddamndemigod; who cares? Even a one-eighth god's better than nothing!" (190)) by drawing a bizarre diagram, which is one of the many Barth's *games* in this novel. This calculation is humorously *modern* considering that we're talking about *ancient* heroes. The protagonist is, however, only interested in following the *Pattern* and wishing "to become transformed in an immortal *Bellerophoniad*" (Walkiewicz 1986). Ziegler (1987) suggests that his story "can serve as a 'perfect model of a text-within-the-text', for the story of Bellerophon is 'framed' by the story of his cousin Perseus". We might as well consider this also a metaphor for an artist who wishes to be immortalized through his work, such as, for instance, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus (having in mind that *Lost in the Funhouse* was actually Barth's parody of *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*).

"It was a true rape, in any case, of a true Amazon, which even this *Bellerophoniad* will sog its way to sooner or later," says Barth (2000). According to Walkiewicz (1986), both *Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad* "constitute the construction by metaphoric

means of a historical portrait of the artist that seems to reconfirm many of the worst fears about exhaustion and ultimacy”, so “Bellerophon dies ‘to immortality’ (145), becomes a story that is less lasting, because his invention is not original, because he is aware that all he can do is repeat a pattern, parody a model, that in his time neither he nor the populace can believe in his heroism”. He further suggests that this novella is an “intentional failure which reveals that, for the artist as well as the hero, self-knowledge is bad news, that too much understanding of what one is up to can leave one mired, too great an awareness of historicity can stifle spontaneity and lead one to settle for and into leaden parody, and that the writer, like Bellerophon, can achieve only limited flight by arriving at a tragic view of his own situation and turning ultimacy against itself”.

The hero eventually comes to a sad ending (unlike Perseus whose *art* shall apparently live longer thanks to the fact that he *dared* not to repeat the *pattern*) realizing that his story is not in fact reality: “It's not *my* story; never was. *I* never killed Chimarrhus or Chimera, or rode the winged horse, or slept with Philonoe, or laid my head between Melanippe's thighs: the voice that spoke to them all those nights was Bellerus's voice. And the story it tells isn't a lie, but something larger than fact ... In a word, a myth” (318). There is, however, a glimpse of consolation that Polyeidus, assuming the role of the *author*, offers to the hero: “What I *might* manage – not because I owe you any favors, but for reasons of my own – is to turn *myself* from this interview into you-in-*Bellerophoniad*-form: a certain number of printed pages in a language not untouched by Greek, to be read by a limited number of ‘Americans’. Not all of whom will finish or enjoy them” (319). Even though this story might be “a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longueurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor” (319, 320), the ending remains open (typical of postmodernism), by Bellerophon delivering his last words: “It's no Bellerophoniad. It's a “ (320).

So, the final question after we read *Chimera* might be: Is there any difference between fiction and *real* life? Does Barth

clarify postmodernism to a reader, or does he leave us utterly confused? "Today, when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality, the esthetic fascination is everywhere," says Baudrillard (Rice & Waugh 2001), confirming our confusion in desperate attempts to define postmodernism. After all, Barth believes that a critic analyzing his work might have said that he created "novels which imitate the form of the novel, by an author who imitates the role of the Author" (Lindsay 1995). Thus we may conclude this chapter by saying that, even though we have analyzed some of the examples of metafiction, which is, in this author's case, a pure *play* with the text, there shall never be enough room to discuss *Chimera*, a novel so complex and brilliant which might be considered one of the most inventive representatives of postmodern literature.

Conclusion

"For me John Barth's fiction has the enormous power it does partly because it is always positing nothingness, because it is so 'created' that it also insists on that which is vacant. To me this is frightening. I think of Barth's work as an enormous poetic celebration," says LeClaire (Lindsay 1995). Indeed, although we sometimes may think that his work tells us nothing, Barth insists that the reader should also be an active participant in literature, feeling the same pleasure as he does as an author - "What could be better than to find a message that is indecipherable, whose ink has run so that you must reconstruct it or imagine it yourself?" (Lampkin²)

Dunyazade's relationship with Shah Zaman can be compared with the author's relationship with the reader, which can, on the other hand, be brought in connection with a sexual relationship: "The teller's role, he felt, regardless of his actual gender, was essentially masculine, the listener's or reader's feminine, and the tale was the medium of their intercourse" (34).

² Taken from: Lindsay 1995.

By suggesting that Doony and the King are possibly threatened with exhaustion, Barth wants to say that literature too must be replenished. "Treasure me ... as I'll treasure you," says Shah Zaman to his lover (61). "What is gropingly now called postmodernist fiction; what I hope may also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment," said Barth (1984), and we might as well conclude that, by creating the magnificent pieces of literature such as *Chimera* and *Lost in the Funhouse*, he did manage to *replenish* the literature in his own way.

According to Walkiewicz (1986), "the writer's reward is not immortality but the pleasure of writing, the reader's reward not truth but the pleasure of reading". Bearing this in mind, Barth's imagination has no limits while his games of metafiction are endless. So, no matter how hard it is for us to *decipher* his novels, we should always remember that postmodernism is deprived of limitations and approach the literature freely, without prejudice.

"In art as in lovemaking, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill, but what you want is passionate virtuosity."

John Barth³

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