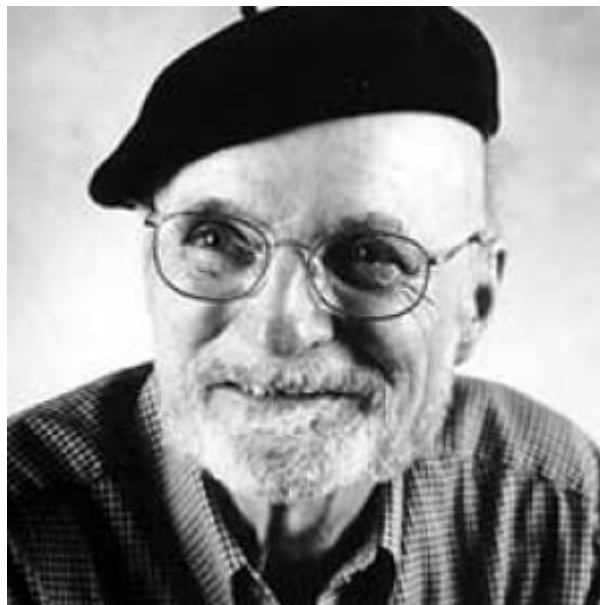


An Analysis of Barth's *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction* as a Metafiction

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John Barth

Courtesy: <http://writing.upenn.edu/wh/people/fellows/barth.html>

Abstract

The present article analyzes John Barth's meta-fictional short story entitled "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction". The direct monologue of the story is the story of his life, which dialogues directly with his father – the writer – and the reader. Unlike conventional autobiographies which narrate the developmental (procedural) course of the narrator (self-consciousness), Barth's story concentrates on and deconstructs such dichotomies as narrator/story and writer/reader. Contra responsive to other meta-fictions which mainly challenge the authorial voice, this "self-begetting" story targets the reader and destabilizes his/her writer-like performance. The paper draws on the theories of meta-fiction posited by Patricia Waugh as

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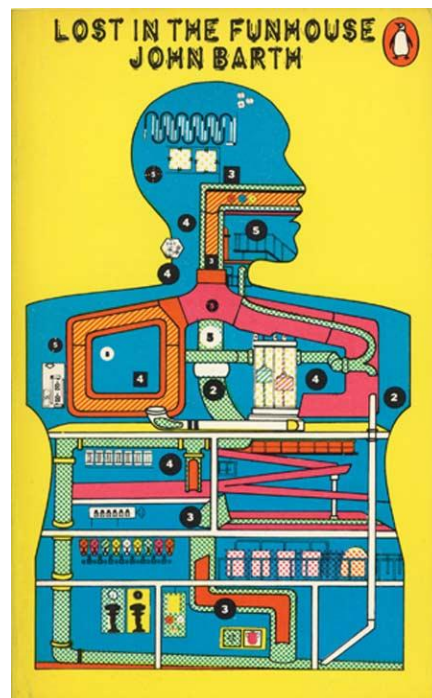
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well as the narrative notions of Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck. Besides, Bakhtinian dialogism is deployed in order to show the inter-discursive quality of the story's texture.

Key words: John Barth, autobiography, meta-fiction, deconstruction, Bakhtinian dialogism

Introduction



John Barth is the American postmodern novelist and short story writer. *Lost in the Funhouse* (1963) is his collection of fourteen short stories which most blatantly deconstructs the conventions of short story. Barth's experimentations with the genre of novel, short story, and language have led many critics to take him as a writer of meta-fiction. Comparatively, Barth's novels have been the point of interest with most critics and only some have turned their attention to his short stories. Those who have written about his short stories have generally addressed his collection as a single entity, resituating it within Barth's narrative enterprises. A critic like Charles A. S. Ernst (2004) takes *Lost in the Funhouse* as the manifestation of the writer's biographical concourse. Ernst mainly works on the story titled "Night-Sea Journey" and shows how this story stands as the text-world and life-text of the author. Similarly, Evelyn Glaser-Wohrer (1977) argues this collection bears autobiographical traits. W. Todd Martin treats this collection as a novel, relying on Barth's own note at the beginning of the 1981 edition where he

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states it is “neither a collection nor a selection, but a series . . . to have been meant to be received ‘all at once’ and here arranged”. (1981, p. vii) Alan Lindsay, likewise, numbers the collection among Barth’s novels. (1995, p. 3)

Metafictionality

Although the stories of *Lost in the Funhouse* share some basic postmodern and meta-fictional features, each cherishes its own meta-fictional status. The present analysis is concerned with “Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction” in order to achieve two objectives. First, the paper approaches the story as a meta-fiction; second, there is an attempt to pinpoint that unlike most meta-fictional stories, “Autobiography” targets the reader and his/her active role and thereby implicitly restores the author to the text. The main argument is that “Autobiography” deconstructs not only Barth’s but also the reader’s authorial voice, hence Bakhtinian dialogism.

Theoretical Framework

With the postmodern hail to the context and its constructing role, the West has been experiencing an increasing social and cultural self-awareness. The post-War-II period is the era of meta-history and meta-criticism. Hayden White, the American historiographer, attempts to bridge the gap between history and fiction through his notion of meta-history. Meta-history is historical narrative on history and historiography. In the same vein, meta-criticism is criticism on criticism itself. This self-reflexivity is the inherent trend of postmodernism, which has emerged as the notions of autonomy and representation that have been de-defined. Language has come to be thought of as having a functional role in constructing and maintaining man’s sense of the “real” and “reality”. Beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist theories, language itself was seen as the problem, as a representational and communicational means. The Lacanian idea that man’s unconscious is a linguistic construct, put more emphasis on the key role of language. The literary counterpart of the dominant socio-political self-consciousness finds its fullest expression in the textual forms of self-awareness, which is the backbone of meta-fiction.

Metafiction

As defined by Waugh, meta-fiction is “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (1984, p. 2). Meta-fiction is a fiction on fiction. A critic

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like Gerald Graff laments against the ethos of meta-fiction, arguing that “in meta-fiction the life-art connection has been either severed completely or resolutely denied” (Hutcheon 1980, p. 3); Hutcheon, conversely states, “this ‘vital’ link is re-forged, on a new level – on that of the imaginative process (of story-telling), instead of on that of the product (the story told). And it is the new role of the reader that is the vehicle for this change” (1980, p. 3). The role of the reader, accentuated by Hutcheon in her definition, reminds one of Roland Barthes and his distinction between text and work. This distinction in fact marks the institutionalization of the change in the reader’s role in fiction. In his essay, “From Work to Text”, Barthes comments,

The work can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses), the text is a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse. . . . The Text is experienced only in an activity of production. (1977, p. 286)

As “the very materiality of the signifiers” (Klinkowitz, 1988, p. 48), a literary text is the realm of interaction between the reader and the text. Barthes calls this realm “signifiante” and is of the view that the productivity of the text is the result of play which occurs between the text and the reader. Accordingly, Barthes does not take a literary text as a finished product, but “a writing practice” (Vollbrecht, 1994, p. 48). Barthes’s notions on the productivity of the text lead him to a drastic distinction between reader oriented and writer oriented texts. Reader oriented text is the one which ascribes to the reader the passive role of a consumer; writer oriented text, in contrast, involves the reader in the process of its production; it evolves out of the realm of signifiante, which is the playfield between the text and the reader. Favoring the former over the latter, Barthes equates reading with writing and observe,

I am convinced that a theory of reading (that reading which has always been the poor relation of literary creation) is absolutely dependent on a theory of writing: to read a text is to discover – on a corporeal, not a conscious level – *how it was written*, to invest oneself in production, not the product. This movement of coincidence can be initiated either in the usual fashion, by pleasurably reliving the

poetics of the work, or in a more modern way, by removing from oneself all forms of censorship to allow the text the freedom of all its semantic and symbolic excesses; at this point, to read is truly to write: I write – or rewrite – the text I am reading, even better and more searchingly than its author did. (1985, p. 189)

The active role which Hutcheon assigns to the reader of meta-fiction is the same of which Barthes speaks. Therefore, meta-fiction cannot be other than a writer oriented text which brings the reader on the playground of significance, hence its productivity and inexhaustibility to multiple interpretations. The reader's active participation in the process of rewriting the text is one of the foci of the present paper which will be attended to in the next part.

As posited rightly by Waugh, “There is no one privileged ‘language of fiction’”, for unlike sonnet and drama, fiction exposes the instability of the real world “through a continuous assimilation of everyday historical forms of communication”. (1984, p. 5) In meta-fiction different languages merge and compete for privilege. This competition among different languages and their relativity to one another is in charge of rendering the language of (meta)fiction self-conscious. (Waugh, 1984, p. 5) Waugh aptly utilizes this point to bring onstage Bakhtin and his dialogism. For Bakhtin, those novels are dialogic that introduce a “semantic direction into the word which is diametrically opposed to its original direction [. . .] the word becomes the arena of conflict between two voices”. (as cited in Waugh, 1984, p. 6) Viewed in this Bakhtinian light, this paper shows that “Autobiography” is the arena of conflict between three voices: the author's, the text's, and the reader's.

The Bakhtinian notion of dialogism renders the language of (meta) fiction highly inter-discursive; Norman Fairclough views genre mixing as “an aspect of inter-discursivity”. (2003, p. 216) Subsequently, analysis of the inter-discursivity of a text is analysis of its different genres, of its different discourses, and styles hybridized in the text.

Analysis

“Autobiography” is a monologue uttered by the story itself; since the author personifies the story thus, from now onward, the pronoun “he” is used to refer to the story. As far as

narrative methodology goes, “Autobiography” is cast in the genre of direct monologue, hence a signal to direct access to and presentation of the narrator’s consciousness. The story is woven out of the I-narrator’s self-scrutiny, which stands for meta-fictional self-awareness. As the narrator attempts to present his inner world and conflicts as directly as possible, his focalization is internal. Following the norms of autobiography, the text is marked with flashbacks called technically “analepsis”. These parts of the text in which the narrator remembers a memory about himself, his focus is homo-diegetic; whereas the parts in which he recalls his mother or father, his focus becomes hetero-diegetic. Therefore, the monologuer’s narrative is a hybrid of hetero- and homo-diegetic focalization. In conventional autobiography, this hybridity stands as a proof for the reliability of the narrator and his narrative; yet in this meta-fiction whose narrator shows mental inconsistencies this fluctuation of focalization implies the narrator’s paranoia.

“Autobiography” is not a reader oriented text, assuming the reader a mere consumer to be lectured to. Rather, it involves the reader in the process of its own narration. This makes it a writer oriented text that starts from the first sentence of the narrative, to destabilize the traditional role of the reader. Barth’s story starts with “You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking”. The ambiguous point about this statement is the agent/doer of “manner of speaking”. The reader should decide who is requested/expected to listen. This statement has at least two implications both of which seek the same objective: giving life to the I-narrator. Maybe the speaker wants the listener to let him speak so that by listening to him, his monologue becomes purposeful and turns into a dialogue; this confirms his identity, hence he is given life. In this reading, the agent of speaking is the I-narrator. In the second reading, the I-narrator asks the listener to speak to him, so that he feels alive by being the addressee of the speaker; in this also he can construct his identity and feel revived. The second interpretation makes the listener the doer of speaking and thus shifts the role of the listener to the narrator. In both interpretations, what is accentuated is the construction of identity through language, as already theorized by Lacan.

The other important point about this statement is the sense of confusion that it initiates between the two actions of listening and speaking. This could stand for the protean identities or roles that either action accords the subject. Moreover, as the beginning sentence of a so-called

autobiography, this runs counter to the sense of security and reliability that is conventionally aroused in the reader by the genre. Sufficing the first paragraph to be comprised of this single statement marks two points: the author intentionally highlights the significance of the statement; also the rest of the paragraph is left to the reader to write. The other issue, which arises here, is the incongruities that the I-narrator sets up between acts of reading, speaking, listening, and writing. The I-narrator's life story comes to the reader through written words, whereas he himself takes the audience not as readers but as listeners. This means two roles are simultaneously ascribed to the audience, reader and listener; the same applies to the narrator himself; he is writing his story but takes the position of a speaker. The significance of such an incongruity is the generalizing point it bears with itself to the text. People are identities constructed through either one of these four roles: readers, writers, speakers, and listeners. This is Barthe's strategy to attend to all identities first in their textual context and second in their constructed posture. The title introduces the I-narrator as a "Self-Recorded Fiction"; while the reader has access to the narrator only through reading.

The story's beginning statement emphasizes the verbality of either identity: listener, speaker, writer, reader. This reminds one of Barth's view of the texture of reality and identity. In this respect, Barth calls the narrator a "paper being". (1966, p. 82, Schmid, p. 59) Based on this, the roles which are constructed in the narrator's address are also "paper" beings. For Barthes, literature and language no longer hold their communicational and informative roles. As Barthes contends, "These facts of language [facts that language constructs reality instead of reflecting it] were not perceptible so long as literature pretended to be a transparent expression of either an objective calendar or of psychological subjectivity [. . .] as long as literature maintained a totalitarian ideology of the referent, or more commonly speaking, as long as literature was 'realistic'". (Waugh, p. 53-4)

The next paragraph is also a single statement: "I won't hold you responsible". The implications of this sentence vary, depending on different interpretations of a sense of responsibility in this context. First, the monologuer asks the audience to give him life by speaking/reading. This leads to the confirmation of the I-speaker's construction of identity, and thereby implicitly holds the audience responsible for this construction. Now, the monologuer

discharges the audience from any sense of responsibility. This inconsistency on the part of the I-narrator renders him and his narrative unreliable. The unreliability of the I-narrator is further confirmed in the third statement: "My first words weren't my first words. I wish I'd begun differently". (1963, p. 31) If the stress of the narrator is on "my", the sentence means his words belong to somebody else; in this light, what he says is right, because language does not belong to anybody, itself is an autonomous, power-based, hence relational system. If the narrator emphasizes "first", he means his narrative is the continuation of some other text(s), hence intertextuality. Therefore, the issue of "beginning" is challenged, since in this interpretation, no narrative really starts nor ends. This point is later on reiterated when he says: "I continue the tale of my forebears". (Barth, 1963, p. 32) As rightly described by Waugh, beginnings are "problems" which agonize contemporary writers since they are aware that "a story never has a 'real' beginning, can only ever begin arbitrarily, be recounted as a plot". (Waugh 1984, p. 27)

The narrator adopts different gestures all through his narrative and thus renders it interdiscursive. His autobiography is a hybrid of proverbs like "no news is good news", (p. 31) or "a word to the wise", (p. 31) Biblical allusions like "An eye . . . for an eye", (p. 32) mythical allusions like "for every Oedipus, a city of Thebes". (p. 33)

Narratologically, as noted by Van Dijk (1977), the "existence" of any narrative comprises Setting-Complication-Resolution-Evaluation-Moral. (Coulthard 1994, p. 27) Viewed in this light, "Autobiography" explicitly sets the problem when the narrator states: "Now that I reflect I'm not enjoying this life: my link with the world". (p. 31) Since the narrator is a "paper" being, whose existence emerges out of words, his link with the world could be taken as the metaphor for the problematic relationship between language and the real life. His lack of satisfaction with his link to the world implies that language is something more than a mere means of communication or information. Trying to find a resolution to his complication, he analyzes: "My situation appears to me as follows: I speak in a curious, detached manner, and don't necessarily hear myself. I'm grateful for small mercies. Whether anyone follows me I can't tell". (p. 31) In this paragraph, the monologuer speaks like a scientist in a logical and calculative manner; this discursive gesture best suits the situation. Besides, this gesture changes his intra-diegetic approach to an extra-diegetic one, scrutinizing his situation in a detached way. Adopting this role, the

monologuer seeks the audience's trust in his speech. However, this mood does not last long since this paragraph is immediately followed by his direct address to the listener/reader: "Are you there?" (p. 31). This question can mean two things: first, the monologuer wants to make sure that he is holding a dialogue, and not a monologue. Second, the presence of the other is needed for constructing his identity. Yet this statement is followed by, "If so I'm blind and deaf to you, or you are me, or both're both. One may be imaginary". (p. 31) The fact that the speaker is blind and deaf to the other confirms his speech as a monologue, hence lack of communication needed for a dialogue. When he says "you are me, or both're both", he actually shows his hallucinatory status. Also the identification that this comparison draws between the speaking/writing self and the reading/listening other, highlights the "paper" being of both parties involved in the process of the text. Accordingly, both sides are constructed by language, in words. Discoursally, such a similarity is expressed in the shortened form of the verb "are" condensed to "re" in "both're". This sense of constructedness is more accentuated in the following sentence: "One may be imaginary". This one can be either the self or the other; yet it could also be taken as the indefinite, generalizing pronoun, including everybody. In the second case, the constructedness of identity, regardless of their positions, is implied. This reminds us of the Lacanian definition of identity in the mirror stage, which is nothing other than an illusion.

The paradoxical sentences which end up the paragraph display the unreliability of the narrator. "I've had stranger ideas. I hope I'm a fiction without real hope. Where there's a voice there's a speaker". (p. 31) The reader/listener could continue this saying/writing: "and where there is a speaker there's a listener". This is the least expectation that a monologuer might nourish. When he precedes this with his hope to be a fiction without real hope, his real hope can be taken to be having another to address his speech to, so that the other can help him in composing his narrative. This hope is explicitly stated in the beginning sentence.

The narrator's self-reflection is his endeavor to solve his problem with the world. Thus he mentions: "I see I see myself as a halt narrative: first person, tiresome. Pronoun sans ante or precedent, warrant, or respite. Surrogate for the substantive; contentless form, interestless principle; blind eye blinking at nothing. Who am I, A little *crise d'identite* for you". (p. 31) In this paragraph, the I-narrator adopts the gesture of a grammarian in describing himself. Such a

discourse highlights the wordiness of his identity. Yet in this discourse, he challenges grammar and grammatical rules in the first sentence where he repeats: “I see I see myself . . .”. This repetition itself is of significance discursively. Grammatically, the second “I see” stands as the direct object for the first one. This syntactical reiteration marks the narrator’s identity as a duplicate/mimesis of himself, as “myself” is doubly the object for the verb “see”.

The syntactical challenge is accompanied by violation of punctuation rules. The question “Who am I” ending in full stop instead of a question mark implies the arbitrariness of his identity. This point is reiterated in the lingual shift from English to French “A little *crise d’identite*” which is italicized. This lingual shift with italicization leaves two impressions; the immediate response in the audience is de-familiarization which is emphasized by italicization. The second impression is to generalize the predicament linguistically and culturally. The other issue which arises here is that the narrator states this ironically “little” crisis of identity is “for you”, this “you” being the reader/listener/writer of the narrative. Attributing this crisis to the addressee here, it challenges the identity of the addressee as well. In the Lacanian definition of identity which is based on self-other inter-relationship, crisis in any party results in the crisis of the other as well. Therefore, the other also faces the instability of his/her identity in the text/narrative.

The narrator finds the resolution in composing himself: “I must compose myself”. (p. 31) This statement is the core of the narrative, rendering the text a “self-begetting” fiction. Waugh regards “self-begetting” story as a kind of meta-fiction. Kellman defines “self-begetting” as an “account usually by the first person, of the development of a character to a point at which he is able to take up and compose the novel we have just finished reading”. (as cited in Waugh p. 14) This definition, however, does not apply to Barth’s short story, because this text does not follow a linear scheme showing the gradual development of the character. The unreliable, schizophrenic monologuer in this text is far beyond having the potential to develop by himself, although he claims otherwise. This point is provable by the inconsistency that his authorial claim has with the beginning one, begging the other to give him life “in a manner of speaking”.

With the claim to “compose” himself, the first statement that he utters is: “Look, I’m writing. No, listen, I’m nothing but talk”. (p. 31) First he appeals to the audience’s visual potential claiming he is writing himself; then he remembers his being a “self-recorded” fiction, thus immediately he arouses the audience’s auditory dimension. This play on the visual and the auditory stands witness for his dual nature, oscillating between text and talk. He has this dualism, because later on in his analepsis over his conception, he informs us that his father is the author with the power to write, while his mother has been a tape-recorder. He states: “There’s evidence also that she [his mother] was a mere novel device, just in style, soon to become a commonplace, to which Dad resorted one day when he found himself by himself with pointless pen. . . . No wonder I’m hetero-doxical” (p. 32). Discoursally speaking, describing himself by playing on the religious term “orthodoxical” not only shows the heterogeneity of his identity, but also challenges the religious discourse itself, representing it a matter of power struggle between the discrepancies.

Rendering the narrating fiction a mixture of text and talk is Barth’s strategy to cover the two major sorts of discourse, and also to address the two different roles that the I-narrator sets up both for himself and for the addressee. Barth’s play on the word, “orthodoxical” implicitly makes religion and its fundamental discourse a protean notion, which itself is heterogeneity, despite its apparent claim to being homogeneous.

In his analepsis, the narrator speaks of his conception, birth and growth, and thus sets his American setting. His life-span covers such historical events as “Prohibition, Depression, Radicalism, and Decadence”. (p. 32) Each one of these capitalized events stands for a period in American history and invokes one aspect of the American life; for instance, Depression refers to the economic fall of America in the early 17th century; Radicalism is the revolutionary period in American politics; and Decadence denotes the failure of the American dream and its idealism in the post-WorldWar II era. The claim that the speaking fiction has lived through such great phases renders him and his life story representative of American history and also makes his identity trans-historical, one which moves through different eras of history.

What is of significance and is implicitly accentuated in his analepsis is the father-son relation which gives the text a mythical sub-text as well. Yet, unlike the mythical sub-text in which father-son relationship is based on the loss and quest of one for the other, Barth's text is one of escape and avoidance. Hence, this relationship is a problematic one. Repeatedly, the I-narrator speaks of his relation with his father – author – as one of exposition. “My beginning was comparatively interesting, believe it or not, Exposition”. (p. 32) When talks of his father's infatuation with his Mom, he explicates, “A child is not its parents, but some of their conjoined shames” (p. 32), and thus shows himself as some presence to be avoided by the father. He explains, “He [father] understood . . . that anything conceived in so unnatural and fugitive a fashion was apt to be freakish, even monstrous - and an advertisement of his folly. His second though, therefore, was to destroy me before I spoke a word”. (p. 32) Unlike the father-son seeking subtext, the text narrates the infanticide of the father to conceal his own follies. He states, “To expose ourselves publicly is frowned upon; therefore we do it to one another in private. He me, I him: one was bound to be the case”. (p. 32) Yet this is not a mere infanticide, but parricide as well. “I'm his bloody mirror! . . . upon reflection I reverse and distort him” (p. 32). In the discourse of meta-fiction parricide stands for death of the author and birth of the reader in the text.

Deconstructing this “bloody” description of his father-son relation, the unreliable narrator reflects on his father in some other way and casts his doubts on him and his destructive urges: “I suspect that my true father's sentiments are the contrary of murderous”, he justifies, “mightn't he be deceived and deadly jealous? In his heart of hearts he wonders whether I mayn't after all be the get of a nobler spirit, taken by beauty past his grasp”. (p. 32) Such a sudden shift from the murderous father to a benign one with a “nobler spirit” reflects the narrator's unreliability. However, it also brings onstage the different interpretations that human history has assigned to the author all through history. The narrator's statement that his father might have had a “nobler spirit” reminds us of Plato's definition of artist as a frenzied man, captured and inspired by the Muse, hence his holiness.

Fluctuating between these two drastically contradictory stances, the monologuer seeks resolution in plurality of his father in his two aspects; thus he decides: “I've a pair of dads, to

match my pair of moms. How account for my contradictions except as the vices of their versus?” (p. 32) Androcentrically, he does not bother himself to talk about his mom(s) more than this. Such a resolution accords the I-speaker a paradoxical base which is intrinsic to any meta-fiction. In this respect, he admits, “I despise pessimism, narcissism, solipsism, truculence, word-play, and pusillanimity, my cheifer inclinations; loathe self-loathers *ergo me*; have no pity for self-pity and so am free of that sweet baseness”; this paradoxical nature makes the narrator suspect himself: “I doubt I am”. (p. 32)

On his present identity, the monologuer finds himself stripped of heroism and conventionality. Thus he acknowledges, “In sum I’m not what either parent or I had in mind. One hoped I’d be astonishing, forceful, triumphant - heroic in other words. One dead, I myself conventional. I turn out I. . . I perceive that I have no body”. (pp. 32-33) As an instance of “self-begetting” fiction, this story is to present the fiction’s awareness of his begetting. “Autobiography”, however, discharges himself of such consciousness: “I’m not aware of myself at all, as far as I know. I don’t think [. . .] I know what I’m talking about”. (p. 33) Such schizophrenic expressions destabilize the genre of meta-fiction itself. As the norms of autobiographies dictate, the I-speaker makes a confession: “Early on I too aspired to immortality”. (p. 33) The notion of immortality which is defined by him thus: “Assumed I’d be beautiful, powerful, loving, loved. At least commonplace, Anyhow human”. (p. 32) The declining line in such descriptions from being supreme to “Anyhow human” denotes his gradual degeneration and devaluation of his values.

Besides, the narrator comments on different versions of heroism which have spread all through the history of fiction. He observes, “Crippledness affords its own heroism, does it not; heroes are typically gimpish, are they not” (p. 33). The repetition of the syntactic structure of tag question without inserting the question mark renders his ideas presented in these two sentences imperative; the tag question is not a question at all without the question mark; rather it is a gesture to just remind the audience of the truth of his speech. This accords his speech a highly persuasive tone. This imperativeness is highlighted in the following sentences when the story addresses the audience, be it the father/author or the reader. He states, “But your crippled hero’s one thing, a bloody hero after all; your heroic cripple another, etcetcetcetc”. (p. 33) Playing on

heroic crippledness and crippled hero signifies the arbitrariness of either heroism and the choice of the author in either case. The uninterrupted repetition of “etc.” signifies the contemptuous tone of the I-narrator about conventions of heroism in traditional fiction. Reflecting upon his own state, the narrator sheds light on his own authenticity in a critical way, “I wonder if I repeat myself”. (p. 33) Then he goes to deter his own state in an objective scientific tone; this makes his narrative extra-diegetic: “Perhaps I’m still in utero, hung up in my delivery; my exposition and the rest merely foreshadow what’s to come, the argument for an uninterrupted pregnancy” (p. 33). On these lines, the reader already knows that the narrator is not to be relied on; this makes such views as schizophrenic fits which disrupt the narrative and puts under question the validity of whatever has been reflected so far.

Caught up in the maze of his own self-composition with no help on the part of the writer, the monologuer reaches the state when he can no longer continue his own composition. Viewing himself imprisoned in “Womb, coffin, can”, the narrator laments his father’s failure to put an end to him. Therefore, in a mock-heroic attempt he decides and tries to end himself: “I’ll turn myself off if I can this instant”. (p. 33) Finding his own failure to end up himself, the I-narrator seeks the listener/reader’s help to end him, “*if anyone hears me, speaking from here inside like a sunk submariner, and has the means to my end, I pray him do us both a kindness*”. (p. 33) This direct address to the audience with its italicized lines signifies the distinction he makes authoritatively between his father as the narratee and the audience. When the monologuer helplessly “prays” the audience to do what his father has failed to do, signifies the death of the author and the birth of the reader in the process of its narration. Yet in his last statement he begs the audience to end him and thus “*do us both a kindness*”. The referents of “us” and “both” are ambiguous and give the text different interpretations. The referents might be the I-speaker and the failed father; in this light, the audience who is begged to do them a favor is given the authority to pity both. In another interpretation, “us” and “both” may refer to the I-narrator and the audience himself; viewed in this light, the narrator crosses out the dictatorial presence of the author and gives the reader full authority to finish up the narrative. The attempt to finish off his narrative on his own and with the help of the audience stands for the problem of ending, which like the beginning, has always been a serious problem in meta-fiction, especially in self-begetting fiction.

The next paragraph, however, castrates the reader's authoritative voice, since the narrator notifies even the reader could not help him out. Thus he returns to the father, calling him his "*ace in the hole: Father, have mercy, I dare you! Wretched old fabricator, where's your shame? Put an end to this, for pity's sake! Now! Now!*" (p. 34). Calling his author his "ace in the hole", signifies the arbitrary relation that he has with the author since this expression likens their relationship to that of a game of stud poker. The inter-discursiveness of the narrator's speech is quite clear in the way he addresses the father in a religious tone, begging him to "have mercy" on him. This gesture however does not last long, as the monologuer imperatively challenges the father, "I dare you!" Even this would not help him end himself. Neither the audience nor the father can help him in this case. The implications of this could be the apparent autonomy of the text in the face of such agents as the producer and the receptor. The narrator feels himself impotent in deciding about his own self, thus he helplessly admits, "May the end come quietly, then, without my knowing it. In the course of my breath. In the heart of any word. This one. This one" (p. 34). Through such statements, the postmodern writer dramatizes most blatantly the arbitrariness of the norms of fiction, especially the beginning and the ending. The fact that the end may come without the narrator's self-awareness crosses out the convention of meta-fiction itself based on which the story is fully conscious of its own procedural narration. The repetition of – "This one. This one", with "one" referring back to any word or any breath, marks the instability and protean structure of the narrative, governed not by law but by chance or accident. Moreover, the claim that any breath or any word can signify the ending reflects the potential of any word for serving the purpose of finishing off the narrative, hence the discourse power of any word is emphasized.

As reflected by the narrator, "A proper ending wouldn't spin out so". This highlights the challenge of the norms and definitions of "proper ending". Although the monologuer expects his uselessness, having him end up as a "Basket case. Waste" (p. 34), he sees no point in keeping silent. The narrative ends with these lines: "Nonsense, I'll mutter to the end, one word after another, string the rascals out, mad or not, heard or not, my last words will be my last words". (p. 34) These final statements accentuate the problem of ending and re-stress the arbitrariness of words and their potential to end the narrative at any point. This justifies describing the words as "rascals", highlighting their nonconformity to the conventions of the narrative genre.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to show that not all stories could fall into neatly categorized genres defined by academicians. Although “Autobiography” shares some common points with generic autobiographies, meta-fiction, and self-begetting fiction, still it cannot be called a mere self-begetting one developing out of the story’s self-awareness. The schizophrenic consciousness of the narrator not only makes his narrative unreliable, but also sheds doubts on the authenticity of its own awareness. Although the narrator in this story attempts to finish off his narrative, neither the reader nor he does that for him. Finally, it is still on the volition of the author that the story begins and finishes. This implicitly puts under question Barthes’s notion on the death of the author; although most of the story is rewritten by the reader, the reader comes up to the end exactly when and where the author determines. This paper shows the ambivalence that meta-fiction bears within itself; the ambivalence between the text-reader relations from which the author has long been eradicated but his fatherly, begetting authority still has a voice there.

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