

IN THE NAME OF GOD



Shiraz University

Faculty of Humanities

Ph.D. Thesis in English Language and Literature

**FICTIONAL APOTHEOSIS AND
METAFICTIONAL KENOSIS: JOHN
BARTH, THE POSTMODERN
PUPPET MASTER**

By
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Supervised by
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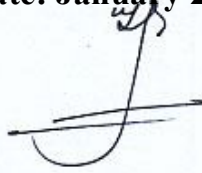
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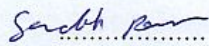
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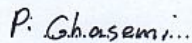
THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE
STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Ph.D

**IN
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

SHIRAZ UNIVERSITY
SHIRAZ
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS: EXCELLENT

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TO MY PARENTS

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my Advisor, Dr. Pourgiv, for her supportive and scholarly attitude toward my thesis and approach as well as her constant support in helping me with the publication of my papers. Without her guidance this dissertation would not have been possible. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Ghasemi and Dr. Anushirvani, for reading my thesis and their valuable comments. My sincere gratitude to Dr. Abjadian for his enthusiastic teaching of literature. Very special thanks to Dr. Mohammad Rahimi who has always been there for me and has encouraged me to move forward throughout my studies. Thanks to my dear friends for keeping me company all the time. And, finally, to my family, especially my mother and father, thank you for all the love and support that you bestowed upon me all my life. I owe everything to you.

Abstract

Fictional Apotheosis and Metafictional Kenosis: John Barth, the Postmodern Puppet Master

By
Mahsa Hashemi

This dissertation elaborates on the manner through which John Barth 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 *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. In the ontology of words, on a fictional level, he assigns himself a god-like status and against all the Bathesian claims of the “death of the author” we observe the apotheosis of Barth the author. However, in the porous and permeable ontology of the supposed reality, 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 and minimalize 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. As open and chaotic systems, Barth’s fictions and the assumed reality where he resides interpenetrate each other and create a postmodern interface in which the binary of apotheosis and kenosis appears unresolved forever; it is in this chaotic frenzy that Barth (as well as his fictional creations) resorts to storytelling as the art that defies death.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Foreword

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 as acclaimed and diversely colorful as *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), and *Where Three Roads Meet* (2005), *The Development* (2008) and *Every Third Thought* (2011). Throughout this long process of storytelling, his nonfiction muse urged him to write three works of nonfiction, *The Friday Book* (1984), *Further Fridays* (1995) and *Final Fridays* (2012). 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 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). Barth belongs to the postmodern age, and thus writes to and for the postmodern human who has to deal with the fact that the end is near, or indeed the end is here. The end

is the dream (or rather the nightmare) that he has every single night and the experience that he undergoes every waking hour. Some are aware of it and some are not; 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)

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 198). Postmodernism, Nietzsche believes, is “characteristic of end of era” (qtd. in Waugh 12):

What is the mark of every literary decadence? That life no longer resides in the whole. The Word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page comes to life at the expense of the whole – the whole is no longer a whole. This, however, is the simile of every style of decadence: Every time there is an anarchy of atoms.

(qtd. in Waugh 13)

In her *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (1992) 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 128-9). Yet, as Lukács puts it, “happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars” (qtd. in Bewes 8). And this is not that age anymore; 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 “no inertial, accurate, or absolute frame of reference exists” (129). The implication of this in regard with postmodernist fiction is that the relativity of all frames of reference irrecoverably results in a sense of ultimacy and the disappearance of the 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). The thought of death and the sense of ultimacy is always there as Joseph Heller’s character, most frankly and innocently puts it: “I think about death. I think about it all the time. I dwell on it. I dread it. I don’t really like it. Death runs away in my family, it seems. People die from it, and I dream about death

and weave ornate fantasies about death endlessly and ironically” (qtd. in Leclair, 16). 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 represented characters of their impending doom informs 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 Mōbius 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 “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.

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. This research, however, aims to elaborate on *the road not taken*, the way John Barth 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 *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

all 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, he 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*, through the end and his latest fiction, *Every Third Thought* (2011), 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 Bathesian 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 and minimize 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.

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. In its being simultaneously about itself as well as about other works of literature, Barth’s novels could be described, in Brian McHale’s terminology, as instances of “schizoid text” (qtd. in Slethaug 31) strengthening the confusion of the readers, the characters, the narrators, as well as the writer, the fabulist beyond the stage in which Barth’s authorial presence is “textualized” (Ouyang 7) most intricately.

Narrative, therefore, functions as a means of survival. In Barth’s fiction, those characters who are authors of their lives and have the ability to narrate themselves, that is, are 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 story telling. In Marzolph’s words, 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 since the

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 as a guarantee of his existence in the postmodern era of disappearances. One story is told and re-told by various narrators in order to construct and restore the lost self. Yet, the self that is lost cannot be retrieved. The same common destiny awaits us all: strandedness. The technique that he utilizes emphasizes “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).

1.2. The Significance of the Study

The studies and critical researches that have held Barth as the center of their attention are not few. Some consider Barth as belonging to the generation of the giants of postmodern writers as Pynchon, Vonnegut, Hawkes, Calvino and Nabokov and concentrate on the representation of postmodernism as the shaping discourse and the primary frame of reference. There are others who focus on metafictional and intertextual elements of Barth’s fiction. Still there are others who follow Barth’s recycling and reorchestrating of Western Mythology and Eastern Narrative collections such as the *Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. However, the present study seeks to follow the trend and development of Barth’s concept of authorship and authorial presence in his fiction and the inherent and crucial emphasis that Barth puts on the very act of narration 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. No study so far has dealt with Barth’s development of this equation of narration and existence in his fiction. This study, therefore, follows this pattern of the concurrent apotheosis and kenosis of the author figure as well as the fundamental role of narration in Barth’s various works of fiction.

1.3. The Object of Study

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 it is the purpose of this study to prove that the opposite is true in the case of John Barth and his fiction as in his narratives the author 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. That being proved, 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, it is the purpose of this study to prove 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. 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 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” (Martin 1).

1.4. The Review of Literature

John Barth's fiction and non-fiction has been the subject a variety of scholarly studies; what follows is a rather selective review of the significant studies on Barth's fictional enterprises.

Zaydun Ali Al-Shara, in *Creative Metacriticism: The Portrayal of Literary Theory in Contemporary Fiction* (2009) (Ph. D. dissertation) studies the impact of metafictional novels on the formation of literary and critical theory. The study focuses on metafictionists such as Robbe-Grillet, O'Brien, Calvino and Barth who emerge as creative metacritics overtly or covertly as they intend to participate in the interpretation of their fictions. The research examines the distinct techniques and the individual preferences of each of these writers in their rendering and producing of literary theories in the contextual framework of their fiction.

Innocently Enough: Story World as Rhetorical Frame, Rhetoric as World (2009) (master's thesis) by Dirk J. Mcbratney discusses the construction of reader-text nexus in works by Barth, Oates, and Plascencia and illustrates that each text engages in the making of the interplay between world-building and rhetorical structures. The study uses Linda Hutcheon's notion of narcissistic narratives and similar theoretical frameworks for the discussion of the techniques employed in the novels of these authors.

"John Barth's *The Floating Opera* and Southern Modernism of the 1950s" (2008) by Thomas F. Haddox studies Barth's fiction, especially his first novel, *The Floating Opera*, in the context of the southern modernism and its contextual framework. Haddox states that though Barth's fiction is primarily set on the Eastern shore of Maryland, he is not commonly considered as a southern writer. Barth's fiction, he continues, does not contain what is frequently deemed as "the orthodox preoccupations" (307) of southern literature especially as the writer himself has once asserted that "social history, politics and ethics have no claim on his fiction" (308). Haddox further mentions that in spite of all the common grounds for such observations, Barth has not rejected the claims of literary history as he has refuted the claims of political or social history.

Timothy L. Glenn's Ph. D. thesis, *States of Reclamation: Narrative, History, Race and Land in Contemporary American Fiction* (2008), studies the genre of alternate history which primarily revolves around the alternate outcomes of major historical events. He believes that "while alternate histories are necessarily works of fiction, they are not limited to what many consider as merely pulp science-fiction entertainment. Alternate history can transcend 'traditional cultural categories, being simultaneously a sub-field of history, a sub-genre of science fiction, and a mode of expression that can easily assume literary, cinematic, dramatic, or analytical forms'" (1). He believes that the postmodern tendencies of the latter half of the twentieth century "ushered in an era suspicious of earlier narrative techniques, and the alternate history found itself on new footing" (3). The study is engaged with four American postmodernists, Barth, Matthiessen, Erdrich, and King and their involvement, in their fiction, with the contingencies of land, race, and history as each of them represent the way postmodern refashioning of historical events construct a plurality of voices.

Noam S. Cohen's study, *Speculative Nostalgias: Metafiction, Science Fiction and the Putative Death of the Novel* (2008), considers the contemporary discourses about the death of the genre of novel as a "mode through which culture tells itself stories about itself" (IV). The study reveals that the genre remains a powerful medium and cultural image and represents the interaction between individuals and media technologies and reveals the ways novels in the contemporary fiction stay significant in their resistance against the restrictions and constraints upon the genre. "The discourse on the death of the novel thus becomes a crucial vantage from which we might understand how older power structures, far from fading away, are being rewritten into a new media ecology and its prevailing notions of subjectivity" (v).

Julie Lollar Hawk, in her dissertation, *Textual Reproduction: The Procreative Aspects of Reader-Writer Relationship in John Barth's Tidewater Tales: A Novel and The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (2005), explores the theoretical frameworks and foundations that study and shape the triangle of the text, reader and writer with regard to John Barth's above mentioned novels and probes the ways through which such texts as