Representations of authorship in the postmodern American novel:
John Barth's Chimera *and Paul Auster's* City of Glass

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REPRESENTATIONS OF AUTHORSHIP IN THE POSTMODERN AMERICAN NOVEL: JOHN BARTH'S *CHIMERA* AND PAUL AUSTER'S *CITY OF GLASS*

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MOTTO

*" … The practice of fiction writers, […] may illuminate the practice of other, **less professional liars** – including us fiction writers when we're not writing fiction".*

(John Barth, *A Body of Words*)[1]

"In effect, [in mystery books – n.n.] the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective's eyes, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time […] Private eye…"

(Paul Auster, *City of Glass*)[2]

Abstract

The article focuses on the different ways in which the postmodern author is reflected in/by his writing, on the relationships author – text, author – fictional world, author – characters, author-as-character – author, in non-autobiographical writing. The examples provided are two novels by American writers: John Barth's *Chimera* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, which are analyzed from this perspective.

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[1] John Barth, "A Body of Words", *Further Fridays. Essays, lectures, and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995) 127

[2] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy. City of Glass* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990)

Consequently, special attention is given to the literary technique of *la mise-en-abyme*, as it is used in these novels.

One of the lessons taught by many postmodern authors is that nothing of what they say should be taken at face value. Or almost nothing. At least not when they are *on duty*, that is, not when they are writing novels.

Postmodern writers, in the second half of the 20th century, started making their own rules for novel writing. The playful, inconsistent, ironic postmodern author, who prefers parody and metanarrative to any other form, keen to re-write old texts, their people's 'grand narratives', as well as tradition itself[3], who questions everything, even his own role as an author, needed to be *visible* again for the reader. The easiest way to do it seemed to be stepping back into their novels, literally, doing away with the border between the real and the fictional. Maybe this is why *la mise-en-abyme* (cf. Gide's definition of the concept, 1948:41) is one of the favorite devices employed by some postmodern authors.

In this paper I shall attempt to substantiate the following thesis: one of the most undeniable peculiarities of postmodern novel-writers is their stubbornness not to let the reader – especially the professional reader, the scholar – make much sense of their statements, in other words, their ironic playfulness.

Two means of achieving this goal struck me as particularly important in the two novels I chose to discuss – John Barth's *Chimera* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*: the first is the undermining of both the 'real' and the fictional world's ontological stability, and, together with it, of the credibility, of the reliability of an authorial voice that toils – seemingly – to make a statement (about the novel, about the status and role of the author, about writing in general and even about broader issues like identity). I shall pay particular attention to the ways in which this boundary crossing, this destabilization is achieved: the construction of what Brian McHale, taking over a Foucauldian concept, named a 'heterotopian space', in which details of the 'real' world are mixed with fictional ones, the proliferation of author-characters, as unreliable as possible, and especially the projection of the author inside his fictional universe – what McHale called *trompe-l'oeil* and what, as I shall try to prove, would more appropriately be referred to as *mise-en-abyme*.

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[3] Linda Hutcheon (1990: 40) calls this a "critical revisiting of history" of anti-mimetic postmodern novels: "There is no pretense at simple mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality".

The second very important means of achieving the typically postmodern ironic playfulness is, in my opinion, the display of the author's lack of authority. The fact that the author has no control whatsoever over the writing of his text, especially visible in the end of Barth's *Chimera* (Part 1: "Dunyazadiad") and Auster's *City of Glass*, may well be an illusion, but a very forceful, a very significant one. Once the author managed to project himself and literally step into his fictional world, it becomes predictable that, sooner or later, he will be unable to (or rather, unwilling to) control the unwinding of the story he now inhabits.

In what follows I shall try to offer a more detailed view of the above-mentioned issues.
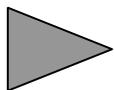
Not a mystery novel

When reading a novel, a 'mystery' or detective novel for example, the last thing the average reader expects to encounter – in the first few pages – is a self-reflexive text, in which various comments on writing send us back to the novel itself. Especially when these remarks are rather theoretical, and especially when everything is stated only to be later on challenged in the novel:

What he liked about these books was their sense of plenitude and economy. In good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so – which amounts to the same thing. The world of the book comes to life, seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions. Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the center of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end (Auster, 1990: 9).

We can sense the ironic look of the author who makes such statements via his narrator, after having stated in the second paragraph of the novel: "As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he

did are of no great importance" (ibid: 3). Could this mean that Auster intends to make us judge his novel as the opposite of "good mystery"? Most certainly, his intentions are quite different. The reader gets even more confused when – soon enough after trying to make sense of these theoretical statements in the beginning of the novel – details literally pile up in the next chapters. Therefore, it is a "good mystery" after all…

The place was almost deserted at that hour. At the back of the table sat two old men in shabby clothes, one very fat and the other very thin, intently studying the racing forms. Two empty coffee cups sat on the table between them. In the foreground, facing the magazine rack, a young student stood with an open magazine in his hands, staring at the picture of a naked woman. Quinn sat down at the counter and ordered a hamburger and a coffee. (ibid: 44)

… Or maybe it isn't? This is definitely a legitimate question any reader of mystery novels may ask. Indeed, all these details amount to nothing. They may point to a good detective's eye, ready to notice everything, because everything is potentially crucial in the solving of the mystery, and ready to put everything down (as Quinn does, in his red notebook), but does a good detective really waste his time noting and analyzing things unrelated to his case? *City of Glass* is crammed with useless detail. Here follows one more example:

Back in his apartment a quarter of an hour later, Quinn removed the photograph of Stillman and the check from his jacket pocket and placed them carefully on his desk. He cleared the debris from the surface – dead matches, cigarette butts, eddies of ash, spent ink cartridges, a few coins, ticket stubs, doodles, a dirty handkerchief – and put the red notebook in the center. (ibid: 46)

The only clear thing the novel seems to point out is not that it isn't a "good mystery", but that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary (the detective plot, etc.), *it is not a mystery*, not a detective novel, in Madeleine Sorapure's words, an "anti-detective fiction" (1995: 72), a type of fiction that William Spanos considers "paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination" (Waugh, 1992: 78-86).

There is more proof to this than the obsessive focus on details: all the detective's efforts are in vain, since all he has are mere presuppositions, false leads never to be confirmed:

As for Virginia, I am in a quandary. Not just the kiss, which might be explained by any number of reasons; not what Peter said about her, which is unimportant. Her marriage? Perhaps. The complete incongruity of it. Could it be that she's in it for the money? Or somehow working in collaboration with Stillman? That would change everything. But, at the same time, it makes no sense. For why would she have hired me? To have a witness to her apparent good intentions? Perhaps. (Auster, 1990: 49)

In spite of all his hard work, the detective-author Quinn/Auster cannot answer any of these questions. He is unable to dismiss the irrelevant ones and focus on one lead that will eventually help solve the case, as a detective should do. In the end of the novel, they all remain unanswered, and, interestingly, they multiply *ad infinitum*:

For the most part his entries from this period consisted of marginal questions concerning the Stillman case. Quinn wondered, for example, why he had not bothered to look up the newspaper reports of Stillman's arrest in 1969. He examined the problem of whether the moon landing of that same year had been connected in any way with what had happened. He asked himself why he had taken Auster's word for it that Stillman was dead. [...] He wondered what would have happened if he had followed the second Stillman instead of the first. [...] He wondered if Virginia Stillman had hired another detective after he failed to get in touch with her. He asked himself why he had taken Auster's word for it that the check had bounced. He thought about Peter Stillman and wondered if he had ever slept in the room he was in now. He wondered if the case was really over... (ibid: 154-155).

The frustration of having no clear answers is clearly acknowledged and stated towards the end of the novel:

Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the

beginning, and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine. (ibid: 124)
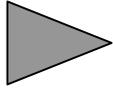
No final 'truth'

A lot of theory is put to work in the novel to sustain the idea of the inaccessibility of knowledge. The text makes it clear that nothing is certain, that there is no final 'truth', only our presuppositions, our interpretations, in one word, only 'stories'. When Quinn/Auster gets the Stillman case, he finds out the story of Peter's sad childhood and of the insanity of his father from Peter himself, who cannot really speak or think, whose discourse is fragmented, incoherent, repetitive, and which needs to be put together, interpreted by the listener, thus highly unreliable:

I know nothing of any of this. Nor do I understand my wife is the one who tells me these things. [...] But I know nothing. Perhaps I am Peter Stillman, and perhaps I am not. My real name is Peter Nobody. Thank you. And what do you think of that? (ibid: 23)

Other bits and pieces of information come from Peter's wife, who seems aware of her incapacity to put the correct version together:
No one really knows what happened. I think, probably, that he began to believe in some of the far-fetched religious ideas he had written about. (ibid: 31)

Moreover, in a Derridean fashion, words do not seem to have any reference to the outside world, but only to other words, in an endless chain of significance (cf. the self-referentiality of language). It is rather strange that Auster chooses Peter to put forth this idea, while playing with such relationships between words:

She says the father talked about God. That is a funny word to me. When you put it backwards, it spells dog. And a dog is not much like God, is it? Woof woof. Bow wow. Those are dog words. I think they are beautiful. So pretty and true. Like the words I make up. (ibid: 23)

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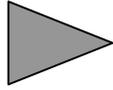
Questioning authorship

As Sorapure puts it, we are witnesses to the "detective's frustrated pursuit of authorial knowledge"[4], since, "rather than depicting detectives who invariably attain authorial omniscience, the novel presents author-characters whose experiences return them to the detective's ground-level, fragmented, and imperfect understanding". *City of Glass*, by questioning the possibility to attain knowledge, incorporates a formal and thematic questioning of authorship and authority, puts forth a "consistent critique of authorship in traditional detective fiction" (Sorapure, 1995: 72-73), and, I would argue, of authorship in general, along the lines of what McHale (1992) called ontological uncertainty[5].

This impotence of the detective to solve the mystery is indicative of the same kind of inability of the author to build and control a fictional world. For the author, too, seems to have lost his privileged position outside, beyond the fictional world, where from he can have a totalizing view.

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[4] Interestingly, this same type of calling into question of the "hermeneutic enterprise", of the "authoritative position outside the events themselves from which omniscient knowledge is attainable" (Sorapure, 1995: 72) is a very popular tendency in postmodern film, as well. A very similar frustrated detective pursuit is presented by the Coen brothers in their "The Big Lebowski" (1998), based on Raymond Chandler's novel The Big Sleep. The film directed by Ethan and Joel Coen tells the story of a few days in the life of unemployed "Dude" Lebowski, mistaken for a millionaire with the same name, and who seeks compensation for his ruined rug, together with his 'bowling buddies'. Asked by the millionaire to act as a courier for a million dollars suitcase – the ransom for his kidnapped wife Bunny – "Dude" doesn't manage to do things right, loses the suitcase, and for the rest of the movie tries helplessly to recover it, while analyzing different leads that would hopefully help him solve the mystery. Knowledge, however, is unattainable, and the crisis situation / mystery is solved, like in *City of Glass*, by itself: Bunny comes back home, unhurt, and unaware of the fake-kidnapping scheme. The directors openly acknowledge the impossibility of making sense of this story as a detective story:
"[we] wanted to do a Chandler kind of story - how it moves episodically, and deals with the characters trying to unravel a mystery. As well as having a *hopelessly complex plot that's ultimately unimportant*." (my underlining)

[5] McHale speaks about a "change of dominant"; postmodern authors stop exploring the epistemological dimension of their narrative constructs, they shift to asking ontological questions ("What world is this?").

The mixing up of the author-characters identities, that melt into one another and into the real Auster, too, helps achieve this critique of authorship. Not only are there a lot of characters who are writers – Stillman's father, who used to be a scholar and wrote a book, *The Garden and the Tower: Early Vision of the New World*, reviewed by Quinn in chapter 6; Peter Stillman himself, who is a poet in an untranslatable language; the narrator, a friend of "Auster", the detective; "Auster", the detective, inasmuch as the identity detective/author stated by the narrator in the first chapter holds true; Quinn himself, who writes mystery novels under the pseudonym William Wilson, or, finally, Quinn/Wilson's narrator/detective Max Work with whom Quinn likes to identify – but the 'real' Auster seems to enjoy seeing his reflection in each of them. There are three different ontological levels – to use Brian McHale's terms (1989, the chapter "Chinese-Box Worlds"), who, in his turn, takes on Gerard Genette's *hypo-diegesis* or *meta-diegesis*, concepts he dwells on in his "Discours du récit" (1972: 238-243) – that get so fused together that in the end, it is very difficult for the reader to keep track of who is who.

To begin with, the character-author Daniel Quinn, who, as I mentioned above, wrote mystery novels he always signed William Wilson, identifies not with 'Wilson', but with his narrator, Max Work (whom we normally find on a different ontological level: novel-within-the-novel):

Over the years, Work had become very close to Quinn. Whereas William Wilson remained an abstract figure for him, Work had increasingly come to life. In the triad of selves that Quinn had become [...] Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass himself into Work (Auster, 1990: 6-7).

The relationship of the two worlds involved in this equation, the world of the writer – Quinn – and that of his fictions – Work's world – is reversed in an uncanny way:

He had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only [...] through the imaginary person of Max Work. His detective necessarily had to be real. (ibid: 10)

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At a certain point, he takes on the identity of another character, the detective Auster, for whom he is mistaken by the Stillmans, but, at least, there is no trespassing of ontological borders, since they both inhabit the same (fictional) world, that of the novel *City of Glass*:

And then, most important of all: to remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed to be. I do not think this is a game. On the other hand, nothing is clear. For example: who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. This is not my real name. (ibid: 49)

Last, but not least, he becomes a Quixotic character, trying to achieve the unachievable (he spends a few months in the street, in front of the building in which the Stillmans live, without much food or sleep, to make sure no threat approaches Peter). He also self-consciously wonders "why he had the same initials as Don Quixote" (ibid: 155). His body is eventually unrecognizable, as if these changes of identity had to be visualized by the reader:

At 84th Street he paused momentarily in front of a shop. There was a mirror on the façade, and for the first time since he had begun his vigil, Quinn saw himself. […] he did not recognize the person he saw there as himself. […] The transformation in his appearance had been so drastic that he could not help but be fascinated by it. He had turned into a bum. His clothes were discolored, disheveled, debauched by filth. His face was covered by a thick, black beard […] His hair was long and tangled […] More than anything else, he reminded himself of Robinson Crusoe. (ibid: 143)

One more interesting detail: in the last chapter, Quinn is also acknowledged as the narrator of the novel, although in the beginning, the point of view seems to be that of an omniscient narrator, capable to anticipate events and always ready to comment on them. Here is the first paragraph of chapter 1:

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of the night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. (ibid: 3)

This narrator who opens the novel must be omniscient (although in the end he claims to be just the 'editor' of Quinn's red notebook), since he knows the character's unremembered dreams:

That night, as he last drifted off to sleep, Quinn tried to imagine what Work would have said to the stranger on the phone. In his dream, which he later forgot, he found himself alone in a room, firing a pistol into a bare white wall. (ibid: 10)

In the end of the novel, the narrator, a friend of character-writer Auster, sounds very different from the opening paragraph, denying the possibility of omniscience:

At this point the story grows obscure. The information has run out, and the events that follow this last sentence will never be known. It would be foolish even to hazard a guess (ibid: 157).
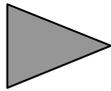
Merging the real and the fictional

To get the complete picture of this hybrid fictional universe, we should not forget about the different instances when the 'real' and the fictional merge, creating that 'heterotopian space' Brian McHale was talking about in *Postmodernist Fiction*. Sometimes, McHale argues, real individuals, places or events are incorporated in the fictional world, rather than reflected, mirrored: "the internal field of reference (fictional universe) and the external field of reference (the objective world, historical fact, ideology, other texts) overlap at many points without merging into one", creating "enclaves of ontological difference" (McHale, 1989: 27-39).

When researching at the Columbia library, Quinn's readings make up an interesting combination: Columbus, Montaigne, Thomas More, Locke and Rousseau are quoted just as Stillman's book, real and fictional authors are placed on the same ontological level, and are all read by a fictional character, Quinn. Stillman, however, is able to interact with them, too, and even alter our perception of 'real' events:

According to Stillman, as a young man Henry Dark had served as private secretary to John Milton – from 1669 until the poet's death five years later. This was news to Quinn, for he seemed to remember reading somewhere that the blind Milton had dictated his work to one of his daughters. (Auster, 1990: 55)

And this is news to the author and to the reader, too. A character/author in one fictional world can thus alter our perception of the 'real' world. We may even begin to doubt the existence of any boundary between these worlds. Even more so when the author himself has no trouble moving between them.

'Hello?' said the voice.
'Who is this?' asked Quinn.
'Hello?' said the voice again.
'I'm listening.' said Quinn. 'Who is this?'
'Is this Paul Auster' asked the voice. 'I would like to speak to Mr. Paul Auster.'
(ibid: 7)

When we realize that the character for whom Quinn is mistaken is a detective, if we put it together with the identity detective-author that is to come two pages later, and when we become aware of the fact that Quinn, who will take on this new identity (Quinn/Auster), is an author of detective stories and (finally!) when we discover in the last chapter that he is the author of this particular detective story – the effect is very disturbing.

In McHale's words, the postmodern artist is free to "represent himself in the act of making his fictional world – or unmaking it, which is also his prerogative" (1989: 30). The result of all these efforts are "impossible worlds", "anti-worlds rather than worlds proper" (ibid: 33).

McHale calls this technique *trompe-l'oeil*. I would rather identify it with what André Gide called *mise en abyme*:

J'aime assez qu'en une oeuvre d'art on retrouve ainsi transposé à l'échelle des personnages, le sujet même de cette oeuvre. Rien ne l'éclaire mieux et n'établit plus sûrement toutes les proportions de l'ensemble. Ainsi, dans tels tableaux de Memling ou de Quentin Metzys, un petit miroir convexe et sombre reflète, son tour,

l'intérieur de la pièce où se joue la scène peinte. Ainsi, dans le tableau des Ménines de Velasquez (mais un peu différemment). Enfin, en littérature, dans Hamlet, la scène de la comédie; et d'ailleurs dans bien d'autres pièces. Dans Wilhelm Meister, les scènes de marionnettes ou de fête au château. Dans la Chute de la maison Usher, la lecture que l'on fait à Roderick, etc. Aucun de ces exemples n'est absolument juste. Ce qui serait beaucoup plus, ce qui dirait mieux ce que j'ai voulu dans mes Cahiers, dans mon Narcisse et dans la Tentative, c'est la comparaison avec le procédé du blason qui consiste, dans le premier, à en mettre un second 'en abyme' (Gide, 1948: 41).

In other words, the existence of the whole subject and/or structure of the book, *in nuce*, in a fragment of it, or of a character that mirrors the author, i.e. of the author trapped in his own text – which was achieved in painting with the aid of a mirror – is, according to Gide, the essence of a technique he names *la mise en abyme*.

Linda Hutcheon seems to prefer this term, too, when she claims that "often overt narratorial comment or an internal self-reflecting mirror (a *mise-en-abyme*) will signal the dual ontological status to the reader" (Hutcheon, 1991: 31). More numerous examples of such trappings of the author in his own text are to be found in John Barth's novels.

The structure of *City of Glass* is incredibly intricate, as we could see, in brothers Coen's terms, "a hopelessly complex plot that's ultimately unimportant." The inconsistent narrator and the many characters-authors whose identities mix and merge and who act like projections of the 'real' author help complicate the picture. What is important is that consciuous effort of the author, of 'real' Auster to show the reader how impotent an author can be. That he is actually the opposite is obvious inasmuch as we can identify his complex game. He plays with us, and denies everything that is stated immediately after stating it via different characters/narrators, he freely crosses the boundaries between different worlds, including the 'real' one, he hides behind the characters to give us the illusion that he has no control over the text. As final proof to this, the main character, Quinn, literally vanishes, and nobody in or outside the novel bothers to tell the reader how or why it happened. But this is, of course, only the final *coup de grâce* of a playful, ironic author.

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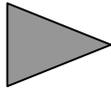
Getting trapped in one's fictional world

In John Barth's *Chimera*, even the characters – especially those in the third part, who are most fond of literary criticism and theoretical comments – seem to acknowledge the contamination of the real and fictional worlds that are reflected in the novel, as well as the fact that the only way in which the author can persuade his readers that he has no control over the fictional universe of his novel is to take a deep plunge into it, although disguised in one or another of his characters. Maybe this is why they all sound like 'authors': Bellerophon speaks of "a novel in the form of artificial fragments" (Barth, 1993: 162), Anteia thinks "Perseid" is "a lie", "an utter fiction" (ibid: 287), and Belerophon a myth: "Your life is a fiction" (ibid: 293). The author seems to melt down in his whole narrative, characters are his mirror images, at least up to a point.

It is particularly interesting how the author himself is *trapped* in his own story/novel. The technique that makes this visible and that I have already defined, *la mise-en-abyme*, is better known in painting, where the melting down of the two worlds, that of the painter and that of the painting, is usually achieved with the aid of a mirror that will reflect both the painter and the process of making that picture. In *Chimera* the mirror image of the maker and the making can be said to have been replaced by the author himself. This time Barth's reflection in the text is more complex; there are at least two versions of him: on the one hand, the flesh-and-blood author, present in his own text, in his fictional universe, and on the other, Scheherazade, who ceases to be primarily the archetypal story teller that stands for every past or future writer, and acts as his fictional alter-ego, as well. Her awareness or ability to imagine her world as a fiction is enough to sustain this idea: "pretend this whole situation is the plot of a story we're reading and you and I and Daddy and the king are all fictional characters" (ibid: 15-16).

As I have already suggested, the author is more than reflected in his novel, by his alter-ego, or as a result of employing the *mise-en-abyme* technique; he is literally trapped there by the magic words "the key to the treasure is the treasure" (ibid: 16), uttered by both Scheherazade and himself at the same time. Of course, we shall be

tempted to distinguish between Barth the writer and Barth the character in his fiction, and claim that they are different from the perspective of structuralist narrative theory. Similarly, there are authors, as we have already seen, who argue that such intrusions of the writers in their texts would only be a *trompe l'oeil* effect. On the contrary, I consider that in a postmodern text/fictional universe, no longer sharing the ontological distinction between reality and fiction, which has now become redundant, we *can* speak of the *trapping* of an author in his own fictional world, but in different terms, because he has become a sum of versions of himself, just like postmodern characters.

It is true that Barth appears in his novel under disguise, as perceived by Scheherazade and her sister, Dunyazade, i.e. as a strange-looking 'genie' that "didn't resemble anything in Sherry's bedtime stories: for one thing, he wasn't frightening, though he was strange-looking enough" (ibid: 16). So far, we do not get much help from the text if we want to prove the author's presence in the text. Only in the light of the following paragraphs describing the genie's world and customs can we conclude the whole construction is a good example of *mise-en-abyme*. Further on, we find out that this strange *character* comes from the future and that he is *a writer* himself, although "his career, too, had reached a hiatus which he would have been pleased to call a turning-point if he could have espied any way to turn". The irony is even sharper when Dunyazade adds "but whether he had abandoned fiction or fiction him, Sherry and I couldn't make out." (ibid: 17)

This obsession with story-tellers and particularly with story-telling will turn out to be the leitmotif of the entire novel. At this point it only helps us identify the *author* in this *character*, the 'genie'. Another clue will be found towards the end of *Dunyazadiad*, in a genuine *mise-en-abyme* paragraph that mirrors the whole novel:

he had set down two-thirds of a projected series of three novellas, longish tales which would take their sense from one another in several of the ways he and Sherry had discussed;
and, with irony,
and if they were successful (here he smiled at me), manage to be seriously, even passionately, about some things as well. (ibid: 36)

Rather abusing this technique, the writer/maker allows the public to see the painting-within-the-painting, or rather within the mirror, when he adds,

The two I've finished have to do with mythic heroes, true and false (ibid: 36), or when he gives his own ending to Scheherazade's story.
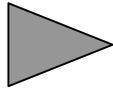
La mise en abyme

Maybe John Barth's novel is a better illustration of the complex ways in which *la mise en abyme* can be employed. This is no accident. He seems very well-informed about all the important landmarks in the definition and use of the technique, as he is influenced by the authors who produced these definitions and put them to work: André Gide and Jorge Luis Borges. Interestingly, he does not openly acknowledge his readings on the subject (although he must have been aware of Gide's famous definition, he never mentions it), but he hints at them in an oblique way. However, there is a seemingly accidental reference to Gide's *Paludes* in his *Letters*, which is a very significant detail, since the French author's novel revolves around a character who writes about life in the swamps (paludes) and in which the narrator writes a novel called *Paludes*. The second apparently innocent reference to Gide, this time to *The Counterfeiters*, is in the essay "Postmodernism Revisited": Barth speaks about authors who "begin to challenge the reality of their characters (or to have their own reality challenged by their characters)". (Barth, 1995: 123)

The mirror as a key device, at least in painting, of an author (writer) who plans to reflect his world and himself in the process of writing in the written text might have been a more overt influence of Jorge Luis Borges. This time, in "Borges and I – *a mini-memoir*", Barth openly admits to having been more than influenced, shaken by the encounter: "Upon first encountering such astonishing stories" as those of Borges, he claims, "I felt again that urgent, disquieting imperative from apprentice days: that everything must halt in my shop until I came to terms with this extraordinary artist" (Barth, 1995: 169). And one of Borges's stories he appreciates most is – not at all surprisingly – "El Aleph", the *Aleph* being an infinite mirror in which one could see reflected all the remote corners of the world.

A closer look at a couple of famous examples of *mise-en-abyme* in painting might prove helpful at this point: Van Eyck's *Portrait of the Arnolfinis*, and Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. Van Eyck only introduces, with the aid of one mirror on the back

wall of the room, the image of the artist and the process of making the picture. Velazquez does not only introduce in his painting the painter in the midst of his making the picture; he also traps in it – with the aid of the mirror on the back wall – the viewer (the king and the queen); more than this, the viewers are also trapped onto the picture-within-the-picture, as reflected in the eyes of the painter, that also act as a mirror (Foucault, 1996: 44-49). Thus, Velazquez makes use of a complex system of mirrors that help him trap everything/everybody on the canvas.

John Barth manages to do even more. I would dare argue that, because, no matter how complex, no classical *mise-en-abyme* emphasizes the power of the painted world to influence or even change the painter's choices, and this is exactly what *Chimera*'s characters can do and actually do.

It is not only the writer who has the power to decide who enters the story, when, and how: the characters can also do this, hence influencing the writer and the writing process. Maybe the best image of this narrative construction would be that of two parallel mirrors, due to which Scheherazade's world and Barth's world circumscribe, enclose each other, in a cyclic movement; this seems to be acknowledged by the characters as well, "he had gone forward by going back, to the very roots and springs of story" (Barth, 1993: 36), meaning the *real* world of the author includes – and at the same time is inspired by – that of Scheherazade, while the latter has swallowed the world of the future, that of the 'genie', who brings back Scheherazade's own forgotten stories in the past: "I'll be honored to tell your stories to you" (ibid: 23).
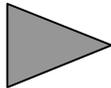
A postmodern fictional universe

The result is a seemingly independent fictional universe, which is defined by this parallel-mirror image, and which is neither Scheherazade's world, nor the author's, but a constructed, artificial one, somewhere in-between these two – the "new and lively work" which Barth promises to write, which "arises from the play of ontological levels" (Barth, 1997). It is a world characterized by and standing for "the fusion of fact and fiction", as Ihab Hassan puts it (1987: 42), or, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, "a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the

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world" (1990: 23), a postmodern type of fictional universe. The language in which these characters communicate (the author included, because, as we have seen, he partly becomes a character, or at least he behaves like one) is a good example of the apparent homogeneity characterizing this ontologically heterogeneous universe:

'Can you understand English? I don't have a word of Arabic.'(...) We didn't know these languages he spoke of; every word he said was in our language. (Barth, 1993: 16)

But how could such a constructed, in-between world be, or at least seem to be, independent? More explicitly, how could the characters take decisions about the novel and so influence the author? The answer is not to be found only in Barth's being inspired by the ancient story of Scheherazade, but also in the construction of the text, especially of the ending. The end of Scheherazade's story *is not* – as we could have expected – the end of *Halima. The Thousand and One Nights'* happy ending is strongly rejected by Scheherazade: "I haven't decided yet whether or not *I care to end the story that way'* 'Not care to?' I looked with fresh terror to the Genie. 'Doesn't she have to, if it's in the book?'" will ask Dunyazade, unconsciously equaling *life* with *fiction*, in a typically postmodern manner. The genie's answer is highly indicative of the particular independence of this fictional universe that I described as 'constructed'; he "admitted that not everything he'd seen of our situation in these visions or dreams of his corresponded exactly to the story as it came to him through the centuries […] Most significantly, it went without saying that he himself was altogether absent from the text" (Barth, 1993: 39). This helps the reader acknowledge that the fictional universe of *Chimera* is different from both the world described in the original stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* and from that described by Barth.

At this point, it is already predictable that *this* Scheherazade will reject Barth's own ending, i.e. the Genie's version, especially since it is so frightening for Dunyazade. The latter, the main character and the teller of the story of Scheherazade, would have a tragic fate from the moment she met Shah Zaman, Shahryar's brother. The 'genie' himself seems to reject this ending, since "he assured us that what he was describing was not *The Thousand and One Nights'* frame story […] but his own *novella*, a pure fiction." (Barth, 1993: 41)

It seems that neither the original story, nor this *novella*, Barth's own fiction, have any power over the characters in *this* novel, in this artificial, fictional world, which is maybe the best argument in favor of this hybrid world's independence from both its literary predecessors and its author. This is why I am tempted to state that what Barth *would like* to suggest is that he is *literally trapped* in his fiction, thus disappearing as a writer from the *real* world, and so having no power whatsoever to manipulate his characters.

Still, not even the end of Scheherazade's version of the story will be the finally accepted one, it will be rejected, as well, so the natural question to be asked is: *By whom?* Maybe by this fictional world's own logic. Scheherazade's revenge and suicide – which, as a matter of fact, resembles so much the twentieth century feminist discourse, parodied throughout *Chimera* – will not actually take place. Scheherazade will not kill her king and, eventually husband, Shahryar, nor will Dunyazade kill Shah Zaman. We would be once more tempted to read this as Barth's version – a very plausible possibility, had it not been rejected by the author: "If I could invent a story as beautiful, it should be about little Dunyazade and her bridegroom, who pass a thousand nights in one dark night […] Dunyazade's story begins in the middle […] of my own, *I can't conclude it.*" (Barth, 1993: 64)

Is it, then, Dunyazade's ending? I would see it rather as the text's own ending. This seems to have been noticed by Stephen Connor, who placed *Dunyazadiad* in the tradition of the *nouveau roman*, in the sense that it lies under the sign of the story which writes itself (Connor, 1997).

Due to this intermingling of elements belonging to the real world and fiction, the impression the reader gets is one of artificiality: not only the novel, but life itself comes to be equaled to an artifact. According to Brian McHale, this seems to hold true for most postmodern writing, which is "visibly a *made* thing", with a "visible maker" (McHale, 1989: 30). While McHale considers Pynchon's *zone* "paradigmatic for the heterotopian space of postmodernist writing" defined by a "collapse of ontological boundaries" (ibid: 45), I would argue that Barth's – and Auster's – fictional worlds are no less representative for this space; at least the two novels that I have discussed would definitely fit this pattern.

Chimera as a whole *seems* to have been written for the unique purpose of convincing the reader that there are no boundaries between real life and fiction, and that the latter should enlarge its scope and so include what we normally refer to as 'myth', 'history' and 'literature'. All three heroes of the three parts of the novel – 'Dunyazadiad', 'Perseid', and 'Bellerophoniad' – are confronted with versions of themselves. The most important thing is that there is no hierarchy among these versions, no true/false value, which is highly indicative of the melting down of the above-mentioned frontier between life and fiction.

This "life-is-fiction" message of *Chimera* goes hand in hand with the re-writing of literature, of myth, of history, through irony and parody. What comes out of this is, again in McHale's terms, "impossible worlds", "self-contradictory constructs" which "violate the law of the excluded middle", i.e. worlds simultaneously *true* and *false*, and most importantly, "subversive critiques of world and world-building, anti-worlds rather than worlds proper", (McHale, 1989: 33) with the appearance of worlds proper, I would add; hence, their artificiality.

The only identifiable purpose of the author is *play* with words, with the old stories of Scheherazade, with the characters and versions of them, with himself converted into a character, and ultimately, with the reader, with that reader who insists to find the hidden meaning of this text, who insists to organize and interpret it in a coherent way. It seems Barth, like Auster, does everything he can in order to prevent us from organizing this new fictional world around a center, from reading the text in a logical, predictable key.

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* * * "An Interview with The Coen Brothers, Joel and Ethan about *The Big Lebowski*", IndieWire, http://www.coenbrothers.net/interviewlebow.html

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