DE-CENTERING THE EGO: CHIMERA

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Abstract

This article focuses on the analysis of ***Chimera****, John Barth's well-known novels, from the point of view of novel construction. The lack of center is the main fascination for the reader in Barth's novels, and it is connected with the de-centered identity of either the characters or the author himself. In order to create his novels, Barth has no identifiable purpose, except that of playing with words, 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.*

Keywords**:** de-centered identity, archetypal story-teller, mise-en-abyme

Introduction

In the novels of John Barth there is no center that would give cohesion to the narratives. It is precisely this lack, this a-centricity that is fascinating for the reader. Of course it is difficult to imagine such a fictional universe and even after reading Barth's novels, it takes more than a while until the reader eventually realizes that ultimately these novels do not *mean* much. Definitely not more than they state for themselves. They are brilliant stories, and for whoever loves irony and parody they will be love at first sight. But does the author intend to do more than *play* with old stories, with myths, with writing itself? I am tempted to answer: no.

De-centering the ego is one of the means John Barth overtly makes use of in order to create this bizarre fictional world; it is the de-centered identity – be it of the characters or of the author himself – the one that contains *in nuce* and entails the a-centricity of the whole fictional universe. This new type of ego – no longer revolving around a center, no longer representing a center, since what remained of old-fashioned *identity* is nothing but a sum of roles to be played, of stories to be told, sometimes contradicting each other, none more important, none more *central* to identity than the others – this ego best illustrates a new type of a-centric world.

The purpose of the subsequent analysis is to see how de-centered identity reflects the de-centered fictional world of one of the best-known novels of the American writer, *Chimera*; another question to be answered is what is the purpose of Barth's undermining of literary tradition, of author-character relationship, and ultimately of identity itself, as illustrated by the same novel. I shall look only into the first part of this series of three novellas, as the author names them, which entirely focuses on *Halima*.

The tradition of story-telling characters is a few thousand years old in world's literature. What John Barth does, while concentrating on *The Thousand and One Nights*, is, as I have already mentioned, undermine this literary tradition, by recreating the environment, the characters, their names, the situations, the story-telling itself in an ironic key. Then what is the purpose of this re-writing process would normally be the reader's question. The stated purpose is to create a new type of *replenished* literature; the one I could grasp, and extremely visible at least in *Chimera*, is to *play* while drawing characters or scenes, when writing dialogues, etc. The author seems unable to resist the temptation of entering this fictional world, and so he does, but not as a character as we might suppose, but as the writer, as John Barth. All these elements will be analyzed in the next few pages in order to see exactly how the author produced this bizarre, hybrid piece of writing, via parody.

Chimera – between life and fiction

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.

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) In *Chimera*, even the characters – especially those in the third part, who are most fond of literary criticism and theoretical comments – seem to acknowledge this fact: Bellerophon speaks of "a novel in the form of artificial fragments" (Barth, 1993: 162), Anteia thinks "Perseid" is "a lie", "an utter fiction" (Barth, 1993: 287), and Belerophon a myth ("Your life is a fiction" - Barth, 1993: 293).

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. While McHale considers Pynchon's *zone* "paradigmatic for the heterotopian space of postmodernist writing" (McHale, 1989: 45) defined by the "collapse of ontological boundaries" mentioned before, I would argue that Barth's fictional worlds are no less representative for this space; at least *Chimera* would definitely fit this pattern.

"On with the story": Dunyazadiad

Since the main character of this first part of the novel is Scheherazade, i.e. the archetypal story teller, the reader will be aware, from the very beginning, of both the author's and characters' obsession with creation, embodied here by story-telling. What both the writer and the characters (especially his fictional alter-ego, Scheherazade) are in search of is an endless story; for either pragmatic reasons (the main character's survival), or aesthetic ones. It seems that the characters and the author cease to exist in the absence of creating versions of themselves through story-telling.

It is particularly interesting how the author himself is *trapped* in his own story/novel. The technique that makes this visible, *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 is present in his own text, in his fictional universe, and on the other Scheherazade ceases to be primarily the archetypal story teller who 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" (Barth, 1993: 15-16).

I shall insist on the fact that the author is more than reflected in his novel, by his alter-ego, or as a result of employing the above-mentioned technique, *la mise-en-abyme*; he is literally trapped there by the magic words "the key to the treasure is the treasure" (Barth, 1993: 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 sustain that they are different from the

perspective of modern theories. Others argue that such intrusions of authors in their texts would only be a *trompe l'oeil* effect. (McHale, 1989: 35) 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" (Barth, 1993: 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" (Barth, 1993: 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." (Barth, 1993: 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" (Barth, 1993: 36), or when he gives his own ending to Scheherazade's story.

The relationship between this fictional world and its author is even more complex than that. Let us first take a look at a couple of famous examples of *mise-en-abyme* in painting: 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 not only introduces in his painting the painter in the middle of his making of 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.

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 strongly believe 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.

Not only has the writer had the power to decide who enters the story, when, and how: the characters can also do this, and so, influence 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" (Barth, 1993: 23).

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 in his essay "The Literature of Replenishment", which "arises from the play of ontological levels". (McHale, 1992: 27) It is a world characterized by and standing for "the fusion of fact and fiction" (Hassan, 1987: 42), as Ihab Hassan puts it, or, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, "a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world" (Hutcheon, 1990: 23), definitely 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 this universe's ontological homogeneity: "'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 would meet 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 favour of this hybrid world's independence from both its literary predecessors and its author. This is why I am tempted to state that the writer 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. This is definitely what Barth *wants* to suggest.

Still, not even the end of Scheherazade's version of the story will be the finally accepted one, it will be as well rejected, 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, if it had 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 Conor, 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, 1999: 168)

What Barth *can* do and what he does, if he cannot decide on the end of this first part of the novel, is distort the original story, justified by and based on what Lyotard called the disbelief in the central meta-narratives of humanity (Lyotard, 1993: 15); it is this disbelief that justifies the opposition to these models that are most of the times parodied. Throughout *Chimera* we come across different versions of the same story that parallel, include, trigger, back up, or contradict one another. For example: Dunyazade's story includes Scheherazade's (new) story, which in its turn includes *Halima* as brought from the future by Barth, and it is paralleled by the story of Shah Zaman, which basically follows the same pattern: his account of the facts entails the story of another girl who plays the role of Scheherazade, which includes another discourse from the future, the feminist one, as emphasized by the appearance of the Amazons. All these versions of the same story create a very different picture from the original *Halima*.

The re-writing of the atmosphere, customs, characters, etc is more than obvious. What first strikes the reader is the way the characters speak and behave, their rough, even vulgar language, which seems to be preferred throughout the novel, and which reflects their modern mentality. Here are only a few examples: "Sherry shook her head grimly, 'The only thousand nights I know is the time our pig of a king has been killing the virgin daughters of the Moslems' " (Barth, 1993: 20); "For all his good intentions, our Genie of the key is either a liar or a fool when he says that any man and woman can treasure each other until death" (Barth, 1993: 45); or: "Sherry put a hundred horns a day on your brother's head". (Barth, 1993: 13) It is impossible not to notice the fact that Scheherazade resembles the dead wife of the king, not the model of purity she is supposed to be, at least in *Halima*.

Re-writing operates at all levels of the text: characters' names (Sherry, Doony), appearance, behaviour, mentalities (sexuality, i.e. homosexuality), as well as at that of language. What Barth brilliantly manages to do is convert the old *Hallima* characters into modern ones, first by changing their names: Scheherazade becomes 'Sherry', her sister Dunyazade, 'Doony', only the names of the king and his brother are intact. This change of names is extremely important because, at a first, superficial level of the reading, it is perfectly able to suggest another, more significant change, that of mentality. As I have already emphasized, Sherry and Doony behave in a very modern way, precisely because of their modern mentality.

What Scheherazade has become is particularly interesting. I insist on that, because the metamorphosis of this character is clearly indicative of the de-centering of the ego I consider paradigmatic for Barth's novel: she remains the archetypal story-teller we well know, circumscribed by the same environment and situations the reader of *The Thousand and One Nights* is familiar with, and *at the same time* she strangely becomes a 20th century, modern, emancipated woman. What Scheherazade has turned into is an excellent student "undergraduate arts-and-sciences major at Banu Sasan University" (Barth, 1993: 13), with a private library

"of a thousand volumes", who has "dropped out of school in her last semester to do full-time research on a way to stop Shahryar from killing all our sisters", and whose research in political science, psychology, mythology and folklore led nowhere, up to her meeting the genie. Her understanding of sexuality (and homosexuality) is very modern, too, and it leads to a very interesting sexual behavior (men are no longer the unique object of a woman's desire), similar to that of late 20th century women. Much more shocking than that is her feminist discourse at the end of the story. Here is Sherry's opinion about their "murdered sisters": "What are they saved from, if not a more protracted violation, at the hands of fathers, husbands, lovers? For the present, it's our masters' pleasure to soften their policy; the patriarchy isn't changed: I believe it will persist even to our Genie's time and place" (Barth, 1993: 45) – which portrays a different character, with very modern, 20th century discourse and mentality.

One final observation: none of the versions of Scheherazade – the old ideal of purity, the archetypal storyteller, the modern student or the feminist Sherry – is *central* to her identity, none of them is peripheral, and even if they contradict each other, they co-exist and are all *true* (or *false*) at the same time. Scheherazade is maybe the most striking example of the concept of de-centered identity, as illustrated in the novel.

Conclusions

Last but not least, let us remember that, with Barth, everything should be read in an ironic key. Nothing in the novel should be read in an innocent manner. Yet, the initially raised question – i.e. where does this re-writing of the original fictional world and of the archetypal story-teller lead us? – remains unanswered. There is no visible purpose of it. The result, a hybrid text, a hybrid fictional universe, does not speak for itself, as we may expect. No center of this world can be identified. 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 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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