
The Platonic Cave Revisited: John Barth's Prison-house of Narrativity

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Abstract:

This paper sets itself the task of approaching the shorter fictions of the postmodernist American writer John Barth. It is intended here to show how in Barth's hands the narrative funhouse has become a narrative prison-house by him meshing together the typologies of fiction and labyrinth. By so doing Barth revisits the Platonic cave to question and to further problematise the time-ridden notions of imitation, mimeses, and representation in his criti-fictional writing that self-consciously lays bare the props of realism's claims to reality and reality's claims to realism.

*The labyrinthine Barthian writing is shown here as making a heavy use of the scientific metaphor of entropy that, in Barth's canon, indicates the literary exhaustion. Through the onion-folds of myth and the mirrors of his narrative funhouse Barth strives to replenish the traces of meaning long lost in the frames of writing and reality. The fictions to be studied or referred to here are selected texts from the writer's chef-d'oeuvre *Lost in the Funhouse*.*

Key words: labyrinth, metafiction, entropy, literary exhaustion, narrativity.

Introduction: The Ontology of Labyrinth and Fiction

Labyrinth as a metaphor, a motif, and a typological design, is more expressively telling of the problematic nature of the metafictional writing. First of all, both labyrinth and metafiction have the same ontological dimension that reflects the mode and status of a troubled existence in the world and/or the text. Hence they are mutually conceived as representing the text-of-the-world formula. As an existential metaphor, labyrinth shifts the existentialist *dasein* (being there in the world) into the textual *dasein* (being there in the text). Also, being either multi-coursal or circular in design, it proves to be analogous to the de-teleological self-reflexive structure of metafictional narratives.

John Barth is a creator of authorial/textual Grendels that *disseminate* signs of labyrinthine creatures. These creatures are here to be metaphorically conceived as no less than variations of that “hybrid Child, the minotaur” as described in Ovid’s account of the Cretan labyrinth. So the myth goes that Daedalus is ordered to design a “labyrinthine enclosure” to *house* that hybrid creature. This he does, but for his doom he gets lost and cannot find his way out (Faris 1988a, 692). Being lost in a labyrinth of his own devising, Daedalus is identified, literally and metaphorically, with its monster. So much the same holds true of the author-narrator-character who becomes his own text, and is thus identified with his monstrous fiction. “[T]o reach the centre of language,” Peter Stoicheff argues, “would be similarly fatal, and paradoxical, for it holds the minotaur, ‘dual and ambiguous,’ as Foucault terms both it and language” (1991). The myth of the Cretan labyrinth matches up with one of the Borgesian parables. In the “Afterword” of *The Maker* (1960), Jorge Luis Borges (1989, 327) tells the story of a man who bends over the task of drawing the world. Years later, and shortly before his death, this man finds out to his own surprise that the drawing is nothing but that of

his own face. This metafictional parable, according to Wendy B. Faris, implies a short-circuit of the two versions of the labyrinth, the Daedalian and the Thesian (1988a, 692); i.e., the labyrinth perceived from the viewpoint of the creator, and the labyrinth perceived from the viewpoint of the victim entrapped within it. This implies erasing the margin separating the world and the book/text, and the result is labyrinth envisaged as the text of the world. Faris states that the sign of labyrinth “shifts from designating the universe and picturing man’s interior to the domain of textuality, of writing and reading” (1988b, 10). Thus, the inversion of form into content, and vice versa, or the inversion of the Daedalian and Thesian interpretations of the world each into the other, results in the spatial-textual labyrinth where the self-reflexive art of metafiction operates aesthetically.

Thus designated, the ontology of labyrinth recalls the funhouse-esque scriptorium where the absurd and comic efforts are exerted to fill in that hiatus/void at the heart of language/narrative. It is tempting to say that the Minotaur, the fictional Grendel, occupies the centre of the world/text scriptorium. It creates its own *horror vacui*¹ that motivates the writerly Daedalus to inscribe his own textual labyrinth, and to become its own reader. This labyrinth is now inscribed, in Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1969), with

Love affairs, literary genres, third item in exemplary series, fourth—[where] everything blossoms and decays ..., from the primitive and classical through the mannered and baroque to the abstract, stylized, dehumanized, unintelligible, blank. (108; hereafter LF)

The Platonic cave here is revisited by the metafictionist as a textual-labyrinth designer who records the pale traces of his fiction’s descending from reality as well as this fiction’s alienation from that very reality. The Platonic cave is the fictional space, “the stage-page” (Said 1982, 203), where the labyrinthine, meta-representational, textual self represents its

own textuality by “allowing the very notion of representation to represent itself” (Said 1982, 201). This fictional space, being closed and eternally changing and changeable, represents the ontological lacuna of the writerly/readerly scriptorium where the textual self flounders, and the discourse of which is rendered “a performance of theoretical prepositions in the poetic ‘space’” (Kamuf 1991, 144).

Being self-reflexive fiction, registering the tensions between some distorted and exhausted reality and the nostalgia for that reality, the Barthian text of the world operates in the *circular ruins*, in the interregnum between the old Thebes and the newly found Thebes. It is championed by Tiresias-like authors-narrators-character-readers who are torn between two worlds:

Thebes is falling; unknown to the north-bound refugees, en route to found a new city, their seer [Tiresias] will perish on the instant the Argives take the old. He it is now, thrashing through the woods near Thespieae, who calls to his companions and *follows to exhaustion a mock response*. (LF 102; italics mine)

The seer Tiresias here is the labyrinthine “eyeless,” “disengendered tale,” that “can[not] tell the teller from the told” (LF 102), and whose Oedipal *who-am-I* is ever answered with a mock response. This mock response is echoed when “seer and seeker, prophet and lost, first met in the cave” (LF 102), “where truth and nontruth coexist as instances ... of textual repetition” (Derrida, quoted in Said 1982, 206) in the prison-house of narrativity.

Finally, the labyrinthine typology in Barth’s fictions is to be approached here in terms of the metafictional entropy; i.e., literature/text being conceived as a closed, self-reflexive system in which “the labyrinth ... represents an ingenious—almost too ingenious work of art, as well as a [textual] place where an explorer may become lost” (Faris 1988a, 692). This is where

Barth revisits the Platonic cave through the lenses of his funhouse.

The Barthian Cave of Narrativity

There are analogies to be traced between the labyrinthine complexity, the chaotic excessive self-reflexivity, of metafiction on the one hand, and the scientific metaphor of entropy on the other hand. Brian Stonehill posits that “in its cosmic extension, entropy implies that the universe, for all its apparent chaos, in fact conforms to a plot of steady decline” (1988, 153). This decline, exhaustion, and irreversibility might be symbolised by the “ouroboros: the ancient symbol of the snake biting its own tail” (Guerin et al. 2005, 187), or in the Barthian context, by the fictional chimera that cannibalises itself. Moreover, such metafictional geometrical designs as the Moebius strip of the “Frame-Tale” and the spiral in Barth’s *Chimera* (1972) are to be better conceived as comprehensive attempts to re-plot the entropy in such a way so as to fully depict literary exhaustion. Still, at the same time, they seek out in this very exhaustion a sign of replenishment through the nostalgic notion of order. This is harmonious with Alan Trachtenberg’s statement that “in the midst of an entropic universe, man represents an ‘enclave’ of opposite tendency, a tendency for ‘organization to increase’ ” (1979, 43). A more accurate definition of entropy might prove handy in this context:

Entropy is the tendency described in Newton’s Second Law of thermodynamics, of any closed system to lose energy, to run down. Another way of describing it ... is through probability theory: the probable answers to a given set of questions in a given world increase as the world grows older. (Trachtenberg 1979, 43)

Transported from their scientific environ, these definitions could be readily applied to Barth’s literary entropy as aesthetically and critically circulated in his death-of-the-novel

fiction. In fact they could operate as a typological pattern of Barth's so-called literature of exhaustion and literature of replenishment.² In view of that, the Barthian fictional whole is, in a way or another, an attempt to dramatise entropic worlds. Still, this is to be found dexterously tested out in the narratives of "Echo," "Glossolalia," and the titular story "Lost in the Funhouse."

In "Echo" Barth reworks the myth of Narcissus and Echo as an allegory of the narcissistic self-reflexive fiction as a whole, and as a dramatisation of the spatial metaphor of entropy in particular. Likened to other closed systems, metafiction's narrative processes involve introversions and involutions. These could be translated into the entropic loops that turn output into input, which entails loss of energy and thus exhaustion beyond replenishment. In Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, the mythical *donnée* of Narcissus is already replete with the genesis of literary entropy that proliferates within the larger context of *The Metamorphoses*. Narcissus is captivated by his own reflection, imprisoned in a loop of self-mirroring, when the nymph Echo tries to save him by giving him fragments of his own speech. This goes in parallel with the mythical labyrinthine narrative, where Theseus goes into the labyrinth hoping that Ariadne's rope will lead him out of it. Still Ariadne is to be spellbound by the vipers of the labyrinth, and she is bound to be lost herself. So is Echo herself who is imprisoned and "tied-tongued," and "who had to wait until she heard / Words said, and then follow them in her own voice" (1960, 59), as the Ovidian account has it.

In Barth's story, when Narcissus—the assumed original version of self-conceit and self-creation—and Echo first meet each other in the "Thespian cave" she only repeats the last words or syllables in a loop-like fashion:

I can't go on.

Go on.

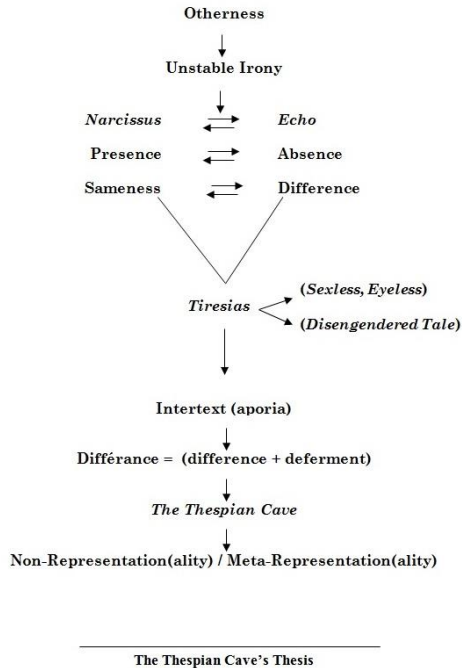
Is there anyone to hear here?

Who are you?

You.
I?
Aye.
Then let me see me!
See?
A lass! Alas. (LF 101)

This “coincidence of opposites” (LF 101), this disabled colloquy, deprived as it is of any possibility of healthy communication, is mediated by the exhausted sexless Tiresias. He, too, is imprisoned in the present moment in the confinements of his self-knowledge. Thus he turns out to be the labyrinthine fictional Minotaur, “the disengendered tale,” and therefore the intertext. The roles of Narcissus, of Echo, and of Tiresias himself in this hybrid intertext/tale are assigned by the very agency/character of the Thespian Cave—suffice to know that Thespi is the originator of the actor’s role—that also serves as a mock reminder of the Platonic cave.

The very roles of Narcissus and Echo are the dramatised entropic version of the dual nature of the Minotaur-like Tiresias. As such, the three of them duplicate the Barthian formula of the teller-tale-told that keeps metamorphosing in the Thespian cave that allows such undecidability of roles and categories. This Thespian cave in the guise of the Tiresian intertext/tale is shown as being figuratively “capable of emasculating the Platonic idea forming our views of meaning and representation, as well as the Hegelian triangle resolved in synthesis” (Said 1982, 204). The result is this characterless intertext being conceived as a performer, a secrete operator of this funhouse of narcissism.



This narcissistic textual self, this entropic ghost, wants “to rid himself of others’ histories—Oedipus’s, Echo’s—which distract him fore and aft by reason of his entire knowledge” (LF 98). This he cannot do, and instead, he succumbs to repeating these histories as part of his protean character, and to re-“telling the [selfsame] story over as it were another’s” (LF 98). Accounting for the schizoid status of the text “Echo,” Terry J. Martin states:

The story in fact gains a different focus and significance depending on whom we conceive to be narrating: if the story is Echo’s, it is about failed love; if Narcissus’s, it is about the danger of self love; if Tiresias’s, it is about the burden of self-knowledge; if Barth’s, it is about the paradoxical interplay of all four points of view. (2001, 52)

Not so far from Martin’s approach, it is tempting to say that these viewpoints sound less “the storyteller’s alternatives” (LF 111) than they are the Thespian cave’s alternatives of the text’s otherness.

Tiresias as seer is no longer the provider of answers than being, just like his doubles Narcissus and Echo, the “message” that turns into its “medium.” This Tiresian failed-love/medium is something both and neither. In other words, Tiresias is the unstable irony that is engendered in the narcissistic discourse, and that absorbs the opposites without these being resolved. This discourse is narcissistically self-reflexive, and is full of others’ echoes as well, “The teller’s immaterial, Tiresias declares; the tale’s same, and for all one knows the speaker may be the only auditor” (LF 101–102). Here the teller and tale are only present to their absence and to their being processed. Hence, the unproductive colloquy as allegorised in Narcissus-Echo’s failed love represents the plight of language/narrative as thematised in the self reflexive art. This dilemma is depicted in Barth’s text in the following meta-textual explication:

Narcissus would appear to be opposite from Echo: he perishes by denying all except himself; she persists by effacing herself absolutely. Yet they come to the same: it was never himself Narcissus craved, but his reflection, the Echo of his fancy; his death must be partial as his self-knowledge, the voice persists, persists. (LF 102–103)

Therefore, in this dialectic of the opposites (absence-presence: sameness-difference), death of language/narrative will never have the upper hand, nor will self-knowledge, simply because such dialectic is metaphysically sponsored and deferred by the god of “ironic doubling[s],” or “the god of writing [who] must also be the god of death” (Derrida 1981, 93, 91). Again this father’s narcissistic thesis (the Thespian cave’s drama) is a second-rate writing done—or imaginatively invented—by Tiresias, and edited and re-edited by the entropic Echo’s—or simply echo’s—mock responses. This Echo is finally conceived as being a Menippean reminder of the Platonic notion of misrepresentation, “Echo never, as popularly held, repeats all, like gossip or mirror. She edits, heightens, mutes, turns others’

words to her end” (LF, 100). So described, she turns out to be the embodiment of the literature-of-exhaustion writer.

The paradigm of Echo as an editor of others’ words is prone to be compared to Barth’s “Glossolalia,” literally meaning “speakers-in-tongues” (LF 115). Unlike Echo, the narrative voice here does not turn the others’ words to his end. On the contrary, he mixes up with the others’ tongues, to the extent that he loses his idiosyncratic character and identity in the labyrinthine heteroglossia of this narrative Babel Tower. Here Barth tries to create in a rather minimalist fashion the linguistic labyrinth of non-representationality, as he re-enacts the cosmic maze of the Babel Tower. This is done through his appropriating a number of primordial narrative patterns and mythoi all depicting, in an apocalyptic tone and style, one topos: the paradoxical possibility as well as non-possibility of tale-telling and the blockage of the voice at the heart of narrativity. These mythoi are: Cassandra’s abduction and her being unable to speak up her disgrace; Philomel’s rape and having her tongue severed so as not to cast her adversary to the world; Crispus’s being horrified by the god of sun and his raving being thus mis-deciphered, “my horror [is taken] for hymns, my blasphemies for raptures” (LF 114). This is to be followed by the queen of Sheba’s being overtaken by a new deity’s agency, the bird hoopoe, that “mistranslates ... [her] pain into cunning counsel,” and to which she responds, “how I’d hymn you, if his tongue weren’t beyond me—and yours” (LF 115). The result is that all these variations of the voice-blockage are sub-codes immersed in a kind of a holistic metaphysical discourse that manipulates this suspension or halt of meaning. This discourse is nothing other than the all-inclusive linguistic/narrative minotaur/logos at the centre of the glossolalia of this text of the world, that, through “constraint, and terror, generate[s] guileful art” (LF 115). Once again the Daedalian inscriber deciphers his ciphers:

The laureled clairvoyants tell our doom in riddles. Sewn in our robes are horrid tales, and the speakers-in-tongues enounce atrocious tidings.... The senselessest babble, could we ken it, might disclose a dark message, or a prayer. (LF 115)

Here both the cipherers, the riddle-making clairvoyants, and “we”, the decipherers, are but the same; they are the authors-narrators-characters who, in the middle of narrativity, anticipate the end of this very narrativity.

The title story “Lost in the Funhouse” is a full-fledged dramatisation of the labyrinthine prison-house of narrativity and its entropic self-reflexivity. It tells the story of an author who is in the middle of writing a story tentatively titled “ ‘Lost in the Funhouse’ ” about a thirteen-year old Ambrose, who gets lost in the assumed funhouse. The line of the development of Ambrose’s story goes along that of the author’s story about writing Ambrose’s story. Hence, there are two funhouses; the author’s and Ambrose’s, which are similar and different. This paradox is partly related to the dialectic holding between the world of the story and the world of story-telling. Hence, the author and Ambrose and their story/stories sound more like a Janus-faced textual self, when the author materialises, Ambrose disappears, and vice versa. Intricately, one may have recourse to the hypothesis-code that permeates the funhouse narrative: Ambrose, and in this case his narrative of himself, is nothing but “a name-coin someone else had lost or discarded [bearing the sign] *AMBROSE*” (LF 94). This name-coin metaphor is tellingly expressive of the arbitrary and provisional sign/structure intermediating between Ambrose the signifier and Ambrose the signified. This is, by extension, applied to the funhouse narrative/mirrors as being a chain of signifiers without a signified; i.e., without the real Ambrose, or the real version of Ambrose’s story. This Ambrose is witnessed earlier saying, “I and my sign are neither one nor quite two” (LF 34). So, no matter how long the dialectic holding between Ambrose the author and Ambrose the character lasts, it inevitably leads

to one synthesis: self-reflexivity. This is what Baudrillard terms as the “Abyssal vision” which he takes to be

all the games of splitting the object in two and duplicating it in every detail. This reduction is taken to be a depth, indeed a critical metalanguage, and doubtless this was true of a reflective configuration of the sign in *a dialectics of the mirror*. From now on this infinite refraction is nothing more than another type of seriality in which *the real is no longer reflected, but folds on itself to the point of exhaustion*. (1998, 497; italics mine)

The above metaphor of the name-coin might be developed into another trope. This would be a *silverless mirror*³ on both sides of which two replicas of Ambrose come into sight, reproving one another, “Not act: *be*” (LF 88). This silverless mirror is Narcissus’s new thesis that could have for its antithesis this inversion: Not be: *act*, and so forth. Given that Ambrose, the author and the character, is but one paradoxical entity, in the argument yet to come, the funhouse is to be approached as a textual labyrinth ciphered and deciphered by this textual entity beside being itself this very entity. The following description of the plot is rendered as a personification of this entity: “[T]he plot doesn’t rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires” (LF 96). As such, the funhouse allegory turns out to be meta-allegorical or “metafigural,” in that “it is an allegory of a figure ... which relapses into the figure it constructs.... [L]ike an aporia: it persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do” (Owens 1984, 228). This impossible-to-do is, in this case, the funhouse-eque conceit/text. Here, as in the text “Title,” the funhouse narrative strives to narrate its unnarratability and reads its unreadability—that interrupts the progress of life/literature—by becoming what it hesitates to be.

It follows then that “Lost in the Funhouse” re-generates another replica of the narcissistic entropy by presenting the reader with the structural concerns and thematics of the topos

of narcissism in fiction. The funhouse “mirror-maze” is self-consciously worked out so that it duplicates the textual locus/agency of the Thespian cave. This locus (stage-page) is now rendered as repeating to exhaustion its own version of self-reflexivity and distorted realities or simulacra. Just like the Daedalian artificer, here the author-narrator-character Ambrose is up to the task of writing himself in as well out of the funhouse-esque labyrinth. Typically, in the middle of the mirror-maze, he is liable to be visited by the vision of “a longhaired monster that lived in some cranny of the funhouse” (LF 90). Hence the narrativised versions of Ambrose come to ponder upon the funhouse’s narcissistic thesis:

You think you’re yourself, but there are other persons in you. Ambrose gets hard when Ambrose doesn’t want to, *and obversely*. Ambrose watches them disagree; Ambrose watches him watch. In the funhouse mirror-room you can’t see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see. (LF 85)

Just like Tiresias, he turns out to be the sum of all others’ histories which are the repetitive versions (reflections) of himself. These reflections are dispatched and fragmented all along the cunning passages of this textual labyrinth, to the extent that he wonders, “Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a figment of the author’s imagination?” (LF 88). Paradoxically enough, this assumed author is nothing but another version of Ambrose who questions his ability of being an author somewhere else in the text. In this context, the funhouse-esque textual protean self is better approximated as

an unexpressed subjectivity, [that on] refusing to submit itself to the world of experience or to bind its theoretically limitless potential to mere definitive actuality tends ... to be destructive either of self, or other or both: to be, that is, either cannibalistic or narcissistic. (Kennedy 1974, 284)

This “theoretically limitless potential” is once more the ontological/textual interregnum in the deferral of which Ambrose flounders between “The Funhouse” and “Lost in the Funhouse,” the two versions of his locus/narrative, while he is investigating how his existence/text might have its own outlet/content. The on-going provisional content—the narrative in hand—might very well be approached as a false archaeology of some *Ur-Texts* that constitute in their entirety the holistic textual funhouse. This funhouse text, in the guise of the minotaur/voice, delivers its codes in the mode of “self-erasing narratives” (McHale 1987, 108), or a *palimpsest*.⁴ In Barth’s shorter fictions and in the funhouse narrative in particular this is to be manifest in a variety of ways. The Barthian text here erases itself through questioning the use of italics in fiction, and the realistic conventions so prevalent in the nineteenth-century novel and realistic fiction such as exposition and the realistic illusion. It reminds the reader of other writers’ use of certain motifs and settings in fiction, and it discusses the use of the point of view of the fiction in hand. These are all “nothing in the way of a *theme*” (LF 77).

The palimpsest is best realised in the text in a number of permutations disseminated as a substitution for, and as a sign of, its lack of a ‘real’ theme or content. These permutations account a great deal for the text’s labyrinthine and entropic nature as well as meta-figural status. In this regard, Barth’s designation of the labyrinth as a locus where such permutations are best tested out has an instantly recognisable bearing on his funhouse narrative:

A labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction, in this case) are embodied and—bearing special dispensation like Theseus’s—must be exhausted before one reaches the heart. Where, mind, the Minotaur waits with two final possibilities: defeat and death, or victory and freedom. ([1968] 1984, 75)

These choices are alternately embodied and disembodied all throughout the funhouse narrative. The narrative voice releases this self-erasing meta-commentary: “The climax of the story must be its protagonist’s discovery of a way to get through the funhouse. But he has found none, may have ceased to search” (LF 96). As a whole, the possibility of dénouement is not completely shunned, as the text is tantalisingly suggesting this potential when the reader is told that Ambrose has finally managed to break through the funhouse’s confinement of mirrors. This potential is in accord with the traditional narrative linear trajectory of realistic fiction that must consistently have its ending (telos). In the postmodernist text, on the other hand, “we get the multiple ending, the false ending, the mock ending, or parody ending” (Lodge 1977, 226). Hence, the sense of closure in the funhouse narrative is hinted at only to be designified, for it proves to be a distorted trace in a ceaseless series of other teloi/signifiers. These signifiers are, moreover, delineated in the form of other permutations, other theoretical prepositions in the poetic space of the funhouse. Being haunted by his “dreadful self-knowledge,” Ambrose will never stop “repeat[ing] deception.” He will never cease to search, to test out, and to be a generator of, Ur-texts and “fearful ... alternatives” (LF 93), without him opting for any one of them. Hence, Ambrose, the narrative voice enunciates,

died telling stories to himself in the dark; years later, when that vast unsuspected area of the funhouse came to light, the first expedition found his skeleton in one of its labyrinthine corridors and mistook it for part of the entertainment. (LF 95)

This alternative/telos, no matter how much plausible it is, is to be erased and displaced by a seemingly more plausible one:

He died of starvation telling himself stories in the dark; but unbeknownst unbeknownst to him, an assistant operator of the funhouse, happening to overhear him, crouched just behind the playboard partition and wrote down his every word. (LF 95)

Again, this alternative as embodied by the operator as an inscriber of Ambrose's story is to be replaced in turn by the operator's daughter as herself being now the inscriber of this story, calling to mind the paradigm of Echo in Narcissus's narrative.

The aforesaid alternatives show Ambrose, the author-character, and his narrative of himself, as assimilating within himself/itself both the Daedalian and the Thesian versions of the labyrinth/funhouse of life/art, "Now and then he fell into the habit of rehearsing to himself the unadventurous story of his life, narrated from the third-person point of view" (LF 96). Ambrose, in a sense, "has gotten lost in the funhouse, and while there has seen the funhouse operator through the crack in the wall, and has discovered the illusionistic mechanism that makes the funhouse work" (Gaggi 1989, 143). The crack here is nothing else but the frame of reality being short-circuited, where the ontological barrier separating the existential funhouse and the textual funhouse is overwhelmingly erased, and where the funhouse operator is nobody else but Ambrose himself. Supposedly, the last poetic preposition left, and that which grants this textual self (palimpsest) with its Thespian character, is embodied when Ambrose assumes the role of a funhouse constructor and operator beside "be[ing] among the [unself-conscious] lovers for whom funhouses are designed" (LF, 97). This is harmonious with David Lodge's pronouncement that "John Barth floats a whole series of possible endings ..., but rejects them all except the most inconclusive and banal" (1977, 227). Finally, the funhouse thus rendered comes to be conceived as a typological pattern, or rather, a holistic meta-allegory within the meta-representational discourse of which the rest of the Barthian narratives in *Lost in the Funhouse* are echoed and reflected in a *regressus-ad-infinitum* fashion.

Conclusion

In a manner of conclusion, it is apt to say that this study has set itself the task of examining John Barth's anatomy of the Platonic cave of representationality. It has concerned itself with scrutinising how the meta-figural—or the meta-mythical—funhouse works itself into an anatomical designation of the nature of representation. The funhouse is here investigated as a typological formation as well as a poetic space, where the writer's chimerical/textual doppelgänger(s) “uses fiction to probe and divulge fiction's own presumptions” (1988, 162), to borrow Stonehill's wording. These presumptions are checked here as aiming to mull over the present fictions' border discourse that mediates the formulae of being there in the world and being there in the text. In short, the concern has been to inspect how Barth metafictionally perplexes the analogy holding between the ontology of labyrinth and the ontology of fiction. Hence, the Barthian metafictional entropy and the meta-mythical recycles have been proved to be in rapport with Barth's own poetics of the literary exhaustion.

NOTES

¹Horror vacui is “a tendency, sometimes characterized as medieval or primitive, to fill all the available pictorial space with decorative or other motifs, as if ‘afraid of a vacuum’ ” (Shaffer 2005, under “horror vacui”).

²In his epoch-making twin essays, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1968) and “The Literature of Replenishment” (1979), Barth makes a case for this entropic nature of literature. Hence, “by 'exhaustion',” He means “the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain [literary] possibilities” (1984, 64). By replenishment, on the other hand, he means that “artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted,

transformed, or deployed against themselves to generate a new lively work” (1984, 205).

³The genesis of the use of the silverless-mirror metaphor is attributed to Charles Caramello in his *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self and Postmodern American Fiction* (1983, passim).

⁴Palimpsest indicates “writing material (as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased.” It also indicates “something having usu.[ally] diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* 10th ed., under “palimpsest”).

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