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John Barth's Acrobatic Games: An Analysis of "Lost in the Funhouse"

In "The Literature of Exhaustion",¹ a memorable essay (with a characteristic title!), John Barth defines the problem of his generation of writers — he was born in 1930 — as "how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who've succeeded Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their careers". Among the latter who "manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still human hearts and conditions" he singles out Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges. He is fascinated by Beckett's progress towards silence and the implications of a potential final silence "After which ... it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature, such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation ... even characterization! Even *plot!* — if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one's predecessors have been up to". Barth goes on to praise Borges: although aware of confronting an intellectual dead end — a feeling also shared by Barth — he "employs it against itself to accomplish new human work". One of the ways of employing it against itself is to do what Borges has said baroque literature does: to use "that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders upon its own caricature".²

In *Lost in the Funhouse*, a collection of stories written in 1968 after he had already published four novels, Barth is writing his own literature of exhaustion. His theme is the

¹ *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1967. Reprinted in *New Society*, 16 May, 1968.

² All quotations from "Literature of Exhaustion", *New Society*, 16 May, 1968, pp. 718—719.

search for one's identity³ and he sets about exhausting its possibilities: from the agonized search of an anonymous sperm ("Night Sea — Journey") to the parody of mythic Menelaus' pursuit of truth in inconstant Helen and shifting Proteus ("Menelaiad").

Searching for identity, the narrator must come to grips with the problem of reality. What is reality? Does it (and if so, how far) help us to define and limit the self? Where is the borderline between reality and dream, fact and fiction? What is more important: the world or the word?

In Barth's work the word certainly seems to be in the foreground. Beset by doubts that literature "has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt" or that literary history "has pretty well exhausted the possibility of novelty"⁴ which in his essay he ascribes to Nabokov and Borges Barth seems to be turning from the world of "reality", as an exhausted theme, to literature as artifice and "fiction". Critics have dutifully explored this trend, which clearly appears from titles such as "The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges", "John Barth and the Aesthetics of Artifice", "The Anti-Realists", *The Fabulators*, etc.

Writing about *Lost in the Funhouse* Tony Tanner deplors this tendency in Barth's book. Barth, Tanner says, seems to believe that identity depends on articulation (what hasn't been described doesn't exist), that the world must rely on words. Yet as no reliable "reality" seems to exist for the words to attach themselves to, they can only relate to fictions. Speaking specifically about the story "Lost in the Funhouse", which gives its title to the whole collection, Tanner says

Both Ambrose (the protagonist of the story, S. B.) and Barth may be destined to remain confined in their own fictions. 'He died telling stories to himself in the dark.' Thinks Ambrose about himself. Writes Barth about Ambrose. Says Barth about Barth. Unfixed in any one frame and unlocated in any one plane, the words float before us, in multiple perspective, in no perspective at all.⁵

In this pronouncement Tanner refers to two aspects of the story which I should like to examine in detail. Firstly, the question of who is telling what and where to (and about) whom.

³ Cf. Beverly Gray Bienstock, "Lingering on the Autognotic Verge, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, Spring, 1973.

⁴ "Literature of Exhaustion", p. 719.

⁵ Cf. "What is the Case?", *City of Words*, Harper & Row, New York etc, 1971, pp. 230—260.

⁶ Tony Tanner, *City of Words*, pp. 255—256.

Secondly, the question of the levels and degrees of reality coexisting in the story. I hope to show that the frames and planes of reality and point of view, although fluid, may on the whole be located and defined in their flux. Although — in terms of meaning — the story may lack in perspective, structurally — in terms of form — it follows an intricate yet traceable pattern. I also believe that this pattern profits by the fact that Barth the anti-realist relies more heavily on realistic detail in "Lost in the Funhouse" than in any other story of this remarkable collection. This helps him "to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions".

II

Since I don't know much about reality, it will have to be abolished. What the hell, reality is a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there, and literature never did, too long... Reality is a drag.

John Barth in an interview

In his story "Lost in the Funhouse" John Barth recounts the adventures of a thirteen-year-old boy, Ambrose M-. On Independence Day, some time during the war, Ambrose makes a short trip with his family. The story begins with a description of the family in the car, riding towards Ocean City, Maryland. The description is constantly interrupted by the narrator's comments about writing techniques. He tells us that Ambrose

sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother, age fifteen, and Magda G-, age fourteen... who lived not far from them on B- Street in the town of D-, Maryland. Initials, blanks or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality... Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means.*⁷

The narrator then goes on to recount in great detail what happened in the family car during the trip. Immediately afterwards, he denies the importance of such realistic detail by adding

Actually, if one imagines a story called "The Funhouse" or "Lost in the Funhouse", the details of the drive to Ocean City don't seem especially relevant.⁸

⁷ *Lost in the Funhouse*, Penguin, 1972, p. 77. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition.

⁸ p. 82.

This as a disconcerting beginning. A story has begun to unfold featuring characters and situations "enhancing the illusion of reality", yet the narrator keeps interrupting the story with his own critical comments which modify, even destroy, that illusion. First, details are offered for our inspection as elements of a story which "might have happened", and we are supposed to accept them at their face value, even to give them a certain importance; then we are told that they are only the paraphernalia of narrative machinery and are not "especially relevant".

If in the light of Barth's attitude towards "reality" we follow carefully the progress of the story, we shall notice that from the beginning the narrative structure is based on a counterpoint created by straightforward realistic narration and the comments of the intruding narrator. Here is a passage which appears early in the story.

Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction... The brown hair on Ambrose's mother's forearms gleamed in the sun like. Though righthanded, she took her left arm from the seat-back to press the dashboard cigar lighter for Uncle Karl. When the glass bead in its handle glowed red, the lighter was ready for use. The smell of Uncle Karl's cigar smoke reminded one of. The fragrance of the ocean came strong to the picnic ground where they always stopped for lunch, two miles inland from Ocean City. Having to pause for a full hour almost within sound of the breakers was difficult for Peter and Ambrose when they were younger; even at their present age it was not easy to keep their anticipation, *stimulated by the briny spume*, from turning into short temper. The Irish author James Joyce, in his unusual novel entitled *Ulysses* now available in this country, uses the adjectives *snot-green* and *scrotum-tightening* to describe the sea. Visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory. Peter and Ambrose's father, while steering their black 1936 LaSalle sedan with one hand, could with the other remove the first cigarette from a white pack of Lucky Strikes and, more remarkably, light it with a match forefingered from its book and thumbed against the flint paper without being detached. The matchbox cover merely advertized U. S. War Bonds and Stamps. A fine metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech, in addition to its obvious "first order" relevance to the thing it describes...⁹

Sandwiched between the critical commentaries modifying the relevance of the illusion (and showing that the story proper is no more moving than its artificer's attempt to put it into words?), the illusion begins to flower. Even in spite of the unfinished similes, an amusing device reminding us of the presence of the meddling author, (also used by Joyce) the reader's frustrated instincts clamouring for a story attach themselves to the brown hair on Mother's arm, the pack of

⁹ pp. 78-79.

Lucky Strikes, the black Lassalle sedan, which are the first blocks of an emerging narrative structure. This structure is rather slight and very simple: after the ride the family arrive in Ocean City, sunbathe at the beach, swim in the pool, walk along the boardwalk, and go home in the evening. This set of events, some of them described in detail, experienced by Ambrose and accompanied by his emotions, speculations, even fantasies, constitute what I shall call the ground story.¹⁰ The ground story constitutes that portion of the text in which the illusion of realistic narration is upheld, which is recounted "as if it had really happened".¹¹ It contains a series of characteristics and events which are not invalidated by a contradictory set of events and are not disclaimed within their own context (on their own level), such as the appearance and profession of the main characters, the games they play in the car, Ambrose's exploring under the boardwalk. On this level Mother's hair does not change its colour, the car does not change its make, Uncle Karl remains a masonry contractor, etc.. To anticipate a little, we may point out that in several other sections of the story statements are found which clearly contradict each other and situations occur in which reality and dream, fact and fiction are not easily distinguished from each other.

Throughout the first few pages, the flow of the ground story is constantly interrupted by the comments of the intruding narrator and this constitutes the first pattern of oppositions to be found in the story: the opposition between a story-line, upholding the illusion of reality (while the narrator is hiding) and a running commentary offered by the narrator (who is now in full view) holding his artifact of a story in the palm of his hand like a toad. Yet apart from this intruding narrator, in the introductory pages of "Lost in the Funhouse" the facts and characters which we have attributed to the ground story remain unrivalled and unchallenged, although a few hints are dropped that another level of reality, another narrative structure, is being introduced into the story: while the family is still traveling towards Ocean City on the level of the ground story we are told that we are all in the

¹⁰ I have borrowed here from Barth's term "ground situation" used in "Life Story", another story from this collection, with considerable irony, and I wish to borrow the irony as well.

¹¹ The term *real* is used throughout the paper with "as if" in mind. A character is *real* when the kind of illusion is created which we are accustomed to find in realistic narrative, as distinct from other types of narrative.

funhouse already and will never get out of it,¹² and that our protagonist will also "remain in the funhouse forever".¹³

Thus the second pattern of opposition is announced. Leaving the artificer aside for a moment, and concentrating on the "story within a story", namely on the story of Ambrose in Ocean City, we see another level of reality taking shape. On the level of the ground story a possibly existing material Funhouse was looked forward to and feared as a climax. On this other, newly discovered level the Funhouse encloses everyone like a large, eternal anti-climax and an ambiguous symbol.

Approximately one third through the story we are given the first fuller description of Ambrose "in the funhouse". He is sick, perspiring in the dark passages. The imagery of the passage is sexual: candied apples-on-a-stick are associated with a need to vomit. Mention is made of those who "grope through hot, dark windings, past Love's Tunnel's fearsome obstacles. Some perhaps lose their way".¹⁴ Then the story returns to the ground level again with a contradiction, implicitly denying what has been affirmed in the preceding scene: Peter suggests "then and there that they do the funhouse".¹⁵ But they don't (yet?) and go to the pool instead. After a description of the family at the pool the ground story is interrupted (and contradicted) for the second time with the description of Ambrose slipping into the ambiguous, half-defined world of the funhouse again.

There's no point in going farther; this isn't getting anybody anywhere; they haven't even come to the funhouse yet. Ambrose is off the track, in some new or old part of the place that's not supposed to be used; he strayed into it by some one-in-a million chance... And they can't locate him because they don't know where to look. Even the designer and operator have forgotten this other part, that winds around on itself like a whelk shell. That winds around the right part like the snakes on Mercury's caduceus.¹⁶

This passage differs from the descriptions of the family ride or the scene at the pool. It is stylistically more elaborate, factually more ambiguous; its images are more suggestive, having symbolic resonances. A similar passage follows and it is again contradicted by the ground story which at that point shows us the children after "having decided in favour of the vast and ancient merry-go-round instead of the

¹² p. 82.

¹³ p. 83.

¹⁴ p. 85.

¹⁵ *Ib.*

¹⁶ p. 90.

funhouse".¹⁷ A pattern of contradictions has been established, yet not as a game of variations and infinite possibilities, but based on the juxtaposition of two worlds, two aspects of (imagined!) reality. The story operates on two horizontally — arranged levels: the realistic and the symbolic. These levels alternate and do not necessarily preclude one another, although they may seem to do so at first sight. The first is a world which must obey certain rules of verisimilitude, and where the real may be extricated from the imaginary. The second is a world where everything is possible, where there are no clear boundaries. These worlds are never separated for long they keep running into one another and out of one another again. Flux and relativity seem to be their constants.

I shall try to demonstrate this by analyzing a fairly long extract from the story. For the sake of convenience the extract has been divided into six sections. The last sentence of Section I and Sections II and III are all to be found in one paragraph in the story, as are Sections V and VI.

Section I

Ambrose went under the boardwalk to search for out-of-town matchbox covers with the aid of his pocket flashlight;... He turned the flashlight on and then off at once even before the woman whooped. He sprang away, heart a thud, dropping the light. What had the man grunted? Perspiration drenched and chilled him by the time he scrambled up to the family. "See anything?" his father asked. His voice wouldn't come; he shrugged and violently brushed sand from his pants legs. "Let's ride the old flying horses!" Magda cried.

Section II

I'll never be an author. It's been forever already, everybody's gone home, Ocean City's deserted, the ghost crabs are tickling across the beach and down the littered cold streets. And the empty halls of clapboard hotels and abandoned funhouse. A tidal wave; an enemy air raid; a monster crab swelling like an island from the sea. *The inhabitants fled in terror.* Magda clung to his trouser leg; he alone knew the maze's secret. "He gave his life that we might live," said Uncle Karl with a scowl of pain, as he.

Section III

The fellow's hands had been tattooed; the woman's fat white legs had. *An astonishing coincidence.* He yearned to tell Peter. He wanted to throw up for excitement. They hadn't even chased him. He wished he were dead.

¹⁷ p. 92.

Section IV

One possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across another lost person in the dark. They'd match their wits together against the funhouse, struggle like Ulysses past obstacle after obstacle, help and encourage each other. Or a girl. By the time they found the exit they'd be closest friends, sweethearts if it were a girl; they'd know each other's inmost soul, be bound together *by the cement of shared adventure*; then they'd emerge into the light and it would turn out that his friend was a Negro. A blind girl. President Roosevelt's son. Ambrose's former archenemy.

Section V

Shortly after the mirror room he'd groped along a musty corridor, his heart already misgiving him at the absence of phosphorescent arrows and other signs. He'd found a crack of light — not a door, it turned out, but a seam between the plyboard wall panels — and squinting up to it, espied a small old man, *in appearance not unlike* the photographs at home of Ambrose's late grandfather, nodding upon a stool beneath a bare, speckled bulb. A crude panel of toggle-and knife -switches hung beside the open fuse box near his head; elsewhere in the little room were wooden levers and ropes belayed to boat cleats. At the time, Ambrose wasn't lost enough to rap or call; later he couldn't find that crack. Now it seemed to him that he'd possibly dozed off for a few minutes somewhere along the way; certainly he was exhausted from the afternoon's sunshine and the evening's problems; he couldn't be sure he hadn't dreamed part or all of the sight.

Section VI

(A) Had an old black wall fan droned like bees and shim-mied two flypaper streamers ? (B) Had the funhouse operator — gentle, somewhat sad and tired-appearing, in expression not unlike the photographs at home of Ambrose's late Uncle Konrad — murmured in his sleep ? (C) Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a figment of the author's imagination ? (D) Are there other errors of fact in this fiction ? (E) Was there another sound besides the little slap slap of thigh on ham, like water sucking at the chine-boards of a skiff?¹⁸

Section I describes an event which belongs to the ground story. It consists of short sentences, colloquial dialogue, precise rendering of physical detail. Thematically it belongs to the motif of sex which is prominent in the whole story. This motif is repeated in Ambrose's memory in Section III which also records some of his feelings and belongs to the ground story as well. Section II is especially difficult to analyze. Apart from the initial first person exclamation, which we shall

¹⁸ p. 90—92. The alphabetic question-labels in this Section added by S. B.

discuss later, it seems to contain elements which belong to the ambiguous "funhouse world" ("It's been forever... he alone knew the maze's secret"), and elements of fantasies which might belong to both levels. What is certain, however, is that the images have a symbolic resonance: they express fear, adolescent sexuality, and echo the statement at the beginning of the story that the funhouse is, for Ambrose, a "place of fear and confusion". To increase the complexity of the text, in Sections II and III we find two phrases in italics, which represent Ambrose's attempt to put his experience into words. One of them ("An astonishing coincidence") represents an event that happened on the level of the ground story. The other ("The inhabitants fled in terror") refers to one of the fantasies. These comments, being in italics, are taken out of the narrative context and given a separate existence. The italics stress the importance of the Phrases as language, as products of craft, composition, combination, in short, of artifice. It is as if Barth was showing us here that literature is made both out of reality and out of dream, and that reality and dream are inextricably mixed in both art and life. He reminds us that this is a structure made out of words, to be distinguished from the things, people and events these words describe, and from that standpoint he modifies our illusion of reality, although in a more refined, different way from the intruding narrator who appears in Section IV. Section IV is told in the conditional (while the preceding sections employ the present and past tense) and offers various possibilities an author might choose from in developing Ambrose's story. Whenever the intruding narrator takes over, our attention invariably becomes directed towards the process of writing as the central subject of the story, and we are thus prevented from remaining immersed in Ambrose's adventures.

Section V belongs almost entirely to the funhouse world. Like the funhouse section we have quoted earlier, it contains elements which might be found in "real" funhouses as well as themes continued from the ground story (Ambrose is, for instance, "exhausted from the afternoon's sunshine"), but ambiguities are also strongly felt. The funhouse operator is, for instance, compared to Ambrose's late grandfather and, a little later, to his Uncle Konrad. It all resembles a dream — and Section VI, consequently, ends in a note of uncertainty which throws a final film of doubt over everything.

The pattern we have detected in this long extract may be traced throughout the whole story: the facts that belong to the ground story are described rather clearly (the family ride in the car, the food and games, the heat and the conversation;

or the swimming and diving at the pool). There is also a whole set of inside events — Ambrose's emotions and reactions, his sexual fantasies, the "hatred" for his mother typical of an adolescent — which follow the conventions of realistic narrative.

On the other hand, the scenes presenting Ambrose while "lost" in the funhouse follow different conventions. In spite of details indicating that the children might have visited a real funhouse after all, the situation remains ambiguous. The description of Ambrose's stay in the funhouse indicates that the funhouse is treated as a symbol. It represents sexual initiation, the complexity of living, the difficulties of being an artist. At the very beginning of the story the narrator points out that the funhouse is "perhaps for lovers", that the point of the funhouse was to see up the girls' dresses. In the funhouse Ambrose dreams of making love to Magda. Resenting what he imagines is lack of interest on his father's part he thinks: "His father should have taken him aside and said: 'There is a simple secret to getting through the funhouse . . . Here it is. Peter does not know it'".¹⁹ The funhouse also symbolizes art. Ambrose dreams about constructing funhouses himself and being their secret operator. In all the funhouse sections dream and fantasy predominate. Fantastic alternatives are given ("... a Negro. A blind girl. President Roosevelt's son . . ." reminding us that the story is made up, that all its events and characters have been invented by the author.

The two levels of the story rub shoulders, they appear side by side even within one and the same sentence, but they can, on the whole, be separated — with one exception which occurs towards the end of the story:

The family's going home. Mother sits between Father and Uncle Karl, who teases him good-naturedly, who chuckles over the fact that the comrade with whom he's fought his way shoulder to shoulder through the funhouse had turned to be a blind Negro girl...²⁰

The negro girl, only fantasied about in a previous section of the story now seems to intrude into the level of the ground story and confuse the reader more than is necessary. It seems to me that the Negro girl does not exist as a real character inside the family sedan because the conventions that Barth has followed throughout the story do not allow this. Ambrose might perhaps have brought her there as one of his "yarns" and Uncle Karl accepted her as such. Yet I still consider this detail as a mistake or caprice of Barth the anti-realist who

¹⁹ pp. 94—95.

²⁰ p. 100.

has foreseen that the critic will try to explain the story, and has decided to rob him of the pleasure in advance.

It seems to me that even this minor incident shows very clearly that, in spite of every appearance to the contrary, the success of this story rests to a great degree on its author's awareness that fiction as genre, especially fiction featuring Magdas and Uncle Karls who say "All right for you, Mister!", needs a strong illusion of reality. In my opinion it is thanks to Barth's ability to present a set of characters through "description of physical appearance and mannerisms", and especially to present the plight of the oversensitive boy tortured by the sexual fantasies of puberty and the problems and fears of the incipient artist, that the reader can accept the other, more sophisticated aspects of the story: the technical problem of structuring fiction and the problem of presenting the funhouse as a symbol of life and Art. What makes the story moving, other qualities aside, is Barth's ability to sustain the reader's illusion that Ambrose is a "real" character, offering us a funny, compassionate, psychologically acute presentation of the artist as a very young man.²¹

The juxtaposition of the two levels of reality is an important structural element of the story which adds to its intelligent complexity and is fundamentally logical and coherent without, however, becoming schematic.

On the level of the ground story it is possible to distinguish between fact and fiction. On the "funhouse" level reality and imagination are inextricably blended, events are described in various versions and we never know which to choose as the authentic one. On the first level the children move towards the funhouse and perhaps never really enter it. On the other level Ambrose is inside the funhouse all the time² and we are there with him.³

It is interesting to note that the actions on the first level move within conventional, chronological time; the events on the second level belong to psychological and symbolic time and mainly reflect states of mind or emotions. While the first level might be considered to be dynamic and connected

²¹ It seems to me that the balance is tipped another way in "Life-Story" where the various characters do not have a texture of sensory detail to fall back upon and the final effect depends on other devices. The various "non-characters" however, also strike us as portraits of the artist as not so young a man and, in spite of Barth's raillery, they present at least one point seriously: that the modern writer is in trouble because the world does not seem real to him any more.

²² "At this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever", p. 83.

²³ "We haven't reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse", p. 82.

with everyday reality, the second is static and presents whatever is "eternal" in human nature and in man's need to create art. As contrasted to the progressing narrative of the ground story, in scenes that take place inside the funhouse (and in a few others)²⁴ things remain the same, do not progress but have an unchanging, mysterious existence. On this second, symbolic level Ambrose is immersed in a timeless situation, he remains in it from beginning to end, placed in an ambiguous two-way relationship with life. He indicates that this state is timeless, perhaps even eternal and he becomes impatient, he rebels: "How long will it last".²⁵ "How long is this going to take?"²⁶ Inside the funhouse "wherein he lingers yet"²⁷ he looks for a way out. "But he has found none, may have ceased to search."²⁸ Yet there seem to be no alternatives. Along with the illusion that time is progressing and people are travelling or growing up, Barth creates the impression that his hero is actually living in a mysteriously determined present in which generations seem to be endlessly repeating the same pattern and actually standing still. This mythic theme of eternal unchanging repetition is also supported by the motif of procreation which is one of the reasons — the other being art — the funhouse exists. This aspect of the funhouse is evoked by the "shluppish whisper, continuous as seawash round the globe, tidelike falls and rises with the circuit of fall and dusk".²⁹

We shall also find a mythic resonance in Section II of the text we have quoted, which warrants both a Freudian (sexual repression) and Jungian (archetypal fear) interpretation, yet is brought down to earth immediately afterwards by Barth's devastating irony.

At the very end of the story, however, another surprise lies in wait for the reader. The two levels or aspects of reality which we have tried to delimit and follow through the story are blended and revealed in a new light by a typically Barthian paradoxical acrobatic somersault.

²⁴ Instances which refer to Ambrose's captivity in the funhouse, but might also refer to the writer's state of captivity in life and art: "The day wore on" (p. 89), "It's been forever already" (p. 91) and create a rich ambiguity. Also examples which clearly refer only to the process of writing: "There's no point in going farther; this isn't getting anybody anywhere" (p. 87).

Do these remarks also reflect a writer's agony — the painful slowness of the creative process?

²⁵ p. 101.

²⁶ p. 85.

²⁷ p. 98.

²⁸ p. 100.

²⁹ p. 85.

He wonders: will he become a regular person? Something has gone wrong; his vaccination didn't take at the Boy-Scout initiation campfire he only pretended to be deeply moved, as he pretends to this hour that it is not so bad after all in the funhouse, and that he has a little limp. How long will it last? He envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ. Nobody had enough imagination. He could design such a place himself, wiring and all, and he's only thirteen years old. He would be its operator: . . . He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator — though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.³⁰

A significant point made indirectly before has finally been directly made by the artificer. The limp Ambrose pretended to have when walking with Magda in a chronological, realistic setting, and the timeless and symbolic funhouse, have been blended — only to be placed into a different category altogether by the narrator's reminder that both these levels of reality may have been invented by Ambrose. Thus the writer's art and artifice become the paramount reality. The writer may be lost in the funhouse, he may feel helpless, weak and afraid while wandering through its passages. He is, however, its master and constructor as well. From that point of view the funhouse only exists in the words and images the writer has put together in his imagination. Looked at from this aspect, the distinctions between the two levels of reality become irrelevant because the reality of both levels of Ambrose's story pales before the reality of the artificer's craft. The narrative thus becomes a pretext for the operator of this "incredibly complex yet utterly controlled" story to come out of hiding and reveal that he would like to be its true protagonist after all.

From the position of this protagonist (i.e. the narrator) the story is primarily an artifice born out of conventions and rules or agonizing personal feelings and doubts. In the story the former are recited and quoted, usually in a neutral tone. They often put the passage they comment upon in ironic perspective although, as I tried to show earlier, they often seriously explain what the writer has been doing or intends to do. The latter have a moving personal urgency suggesting that writing requires extraordinary gifts, and they only mildly ironize the myth of the artist. In both cases the writer's intrusions invariably try to modify the reader's illusion that the plot and characters are real, reminding him that the process of writing is real as well. In other words, the characters and plot of the story become only means of creating an

³⁰ p. 101.

artifact, figures in a pattern while the pattern itself tends to figure as the only reality.

The intruding writer's remarks are often qualified by irony and doubt. From that point of view perhaps the most significant intrusion appears in Sections V and VI of the passage quoted earlier, in which Ambrose's doubts about the reality of his experience are modulated into the narrator's doubts about the reality of Ambrose's existence. This is Barth the anti-realist reminding us that Ambrose's adventures may have been dreamed up by Ambrose, just as Ambrose himself may have been dreamed up by the author. Yet I am not sure that we are to take Barth's doubts too seriously. Whether, that is, Barth's grasp of reality (the existence of Father's hand lighting a match and the couple love-making under the board-walk) is as tenuous as that, for instance, of Pynchon or Borges. I would rather say that Barth is toying with the idea that reality does not exist, using it as a possibility to be discussed, even made fun of (this is the funhouse, after all, in spite of its frightening aspects). It is interesting to note that the narrator is aware of the relativity of all things, and makes a point of showing that he is no naive Dickens pretending that Oliver and Fagin are real. Yet Barth is no Kafka or Beckett either, and we are finally interested in Ambrose because Barth has convinced us that Ambrose exists.

III

Donleavy's book, *The Ginger Man*, was not only funny: it seems to me there was a technically interesting thing about it... I mean the almost complete homogenization of first and third person viewpoints: *Sebastian speaks of himself, sometimes in the first person and sometimes in the third*. Like a number of finally useful artifices it's difficult to take at first, but by the third chapter you get with it, and then, Donleavy has the best of two worlds. It is a very clever thing to bring off.

Barth in an interview

Barth's words may well serve as an introduction to the question I should like to discuss in this part of the paper: Who is talking to us in this story and may the narrators (or viewpoints) be distinguished from each other? This seems to be one of the central questions which should help us to understand the complexities and solve some of the difficulties of Barth's story. Let us return to the passage we have already analyzed in the first part of this essay:

Section I is told by the traditional third-person omniscient narrator. Ambrose is observed from the outside as he explores under the boardwalk and discovers a couple making love there. The narrator considers Ambrose's feelings but remains rather detached. The style is not coloured by the urgency of rendered personal experience.

Section III is told by the same narrator, but it renders what is happening inside the protagonist. This passage clearly contains elements of the "style indirect libre", its language is coloured by Ambrose's excitement although it remains grammatically in the third person: "the woman's legs, the woman's white legs had ... He yearned to tell Peter. He wanted to throw up for excitement. They hadn't even chased him. He wished he were dead".³¹ In Section I the narrator may be separated from Ambrose. In Section III he is partly identified ("homogenized"!) with him through some kind of emotional involvement. This identification becomes particularly interesting when related to the theme of the writer struggling to become an artist.

People don't know what to make of him, he doesn't know what to make of himself, he's only thirteen, *athletically and socially inept*, not astonishingly bright, but there are antennae; he has ... some sort of receivers in his head; things speak to him, he understands more than he should, the world winks at him through its objects, grabs grinning at his coat.

In the second half of this passage there is no irony. This is a moving presentation of the budding author, of his wonderful, yet also burdensome sensibility which is one of the central motifs of this story. Yet the author's pretence (to be found in the style, even in the three dots indicating hesitation before selecting an adequate expression) that he is actually directly presenting the boy's thoughts, frees him from the accusation that he is idealizing the tortures undergone by Ambrose the future artist — and one of his own kind!

The narrator undergoes another metamorphosis in Section IV. While in Sections I and III he had been discreetly hidden, he now appears as the intruding narrator. Instead of telling us about Ambrose and enhancing the illusion of reality by

³¹ Such examples occur throughout the story, e. g.: "There ought to be a button you could push to end your life absolutely without pain; disappear in a flick, like turning out a light. He would push it instantly! ... Instantly!" (p. 94). In this example the repetitions give an emotional colouring to the text and are actually directly *thought* by the protagonist in spite of the grammatical pretence that they are *said* by the narrator. Through "style indirect libre" the narrator has partly entered Ambrose's mind and included him directly in the narrative process.

³² p. 92.

concealing the narrator, he now tells us about the process of writing about Ambrose: he writes about writing. This is the typical Sternian narrator pulling the strings and discussing the techniques (we have pointed out several examples of this earlier). Yet, if we take a better look at the text we notice that the narrator is fully there as the intruding narrator manipulating Ambrose as a character only in the first sentence: "One possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across another lost person in the dark". In the following sentence he begins to slip imperceptibly back into Ambrose's skin, only this time it isn't the skin of Ambrose the character, but of Ambrose the budding author torn between living his life and writing it (reflecting some facts, inventing others). This can also be seen in the style of the passage, which resembles that of section III: "By the time they found the exit they'd be closest friends, sweethearts if it were a girl; they'd know each other's inmost souls, be bound together *by the cement of shared adventure*" etc. A detached or just grown-up narrator wouldn't talk like that in his own name. The phrase in italics — like all other phrases in italics in the story — represents Ambrose's youthful attempts at literary expression which (as distinct from some other remarks by the intruding narrator discussed a little later) may safely be attributed to a boy. As the homogenization of first and third person viewpoints is our theme here, and we are told by Barth that in the story Ambrose is telling us "the unadventurous story of his life"³³ we might also envisage the situation as one in which Ambrose is talking about himself in the third person in which case we might consider him to be the narrator of the whole of Section IV. Yet even if this were true psychologically, formally, from the standpoint of grammar and style, we are no doubt presented here with two points of view and all the attendant ambiguities: We are presented with the narrator describing (imagining) Ambrose who is in turn describing (imagining, writing about) himself.

What happens in Section V? The narrative viewpoint returns to that of Section I, only now the narrator is narrating a scene which belongs to another level of reality: to what earlier in this paper we have called the "funhouse world", which is predominantly symbolic. A special problem is presented by Section VI which consists entirely of questions. While questions A and B are probably Ambrose's and rendered in "style indirect libre", questions C, E, and probably D can only be asked by a narrator who has now distanced himself from

³³ p. 100.

Ambrose to the point of doubting Ambrose's very existence. It is interesting to note that the degrees of doubt also vary in intensity. From the radical doubt of the artificer looking at the story from the outside and doubting the very existence of his heroes (something never to be accepted in realistic fiction) to the position of the last question which takes the existence and experience of the main hero for granted, and only doubts the complete reliability of his senses ("Was there another sound besides the little slap slap of thigh on ham . . . ?).

I have attempted to show in these examples that the point of view in the story keeps shifting from that of a detached narrator to one more or less identified with Ambrose. As this story is one of those characteristic new fictions which are shot through with the writer's own critical comments, we might look for some clues within the text itself. True enough, the writer does at some point in the story say this: "The more closely an author identifies with the narrator, literally or metaphorically, the less advisable it is, as a rule, to use the first person narrative viewpoint".³⁸ Barth has followed this precept in the story and, on the whole, avoided speaking in the first person (Section II which we have avoided so far, is an exception). Yet the emotional tone found in the "style indirect libre" and in the moving descriptions of a boy in the process of growing up both as a man and as an artist, are proof of the writer's identification with his character. Ambrose and the narrator are neither quite one — nor are they quite two! Moving from separation to homogenization Barth does not grammatically use the first and third person, yet he employs other devices to achieve an equally shifting viewpoint.

There is, however, one instance in which the first person is used. It is the opening exclamation in Section II (I'll never be an artist!) Who is this "I"? The answer, I think, will have to be ambiguous. The "I" can very well be Ambrose. He is the protagonist of both the preceding and following scenes. The vision of deserted Ocean City may be a reflection of his fear while lost in the "real" funhouse, the fear that he will be abandoned by his parents. It may be an expression of despair on the part of Ambrose the budding artist, or even a sexual fantasy (like Section III). But it may also be the cry of the narrator: the apocalyptic image "out of time", with ghost crabs tickling down deserted, littered streets may be a metaphor for the despairing artist lost in the maze of art, creating monsters out of his frustration. The "I" is expressly used only once in the story, I think yet the "style indirect libre" is a travesty of first person immediacy and involvement (and enables us to distinguish between Ambrose as "I" in those

sections where he is viewed from the inside, and as a "he" in the sections where he is viewed from the outside).³⁴

The ambiguity of point of view in the story is felt particularly in those places where the narrator expresses concern about what is convincing as coming from a thirteen-year old. Even here, it seems to me, the self-consciousness of the adolescent is imperceptibly blended with the less refined, technical concern of the adult artificer.

"Is it likely, does it violate the principle of verisimilitude, that a thirteen-year old boy could make such a sophisticated observation? A girl of fourteen is the *psychological coeval* of a boy of fifteen or sixteen; a thirteen-year old boy, therefore, even if precocious in some other respects, might be three years *her emotional junior*.³⁵

The second sentence using learned phrases that a precocious boy may be fond of using, and stilted expressions like those of an apprentice learning to use his tools, sounds more like Ambrose than the adult narrator. Yet the opening question would have no sense unless it were asked by the grown-up narrator.

The same could, I think, be said of the following example:

He was mortified, but pitched sleepless through his private catechizing, intimidated by the ancient mysteries, a thirteen-year old would never say that, resolved to experience conversion like St. Augustine.³⁶

The comment reflects Ambrose's self-consciousness although it is obviously a comment made by the narrator, as is the remark included in the following:

... as he wondered at the endless replication of his image in the mirrors, second, as he *lost himself in the reflection*³⁷ that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible, better make him eighteen at least, yet that would render other things unlikely, he heard Peter and Magda...³⁸

The confusion of the reader arises mainly because all this is found within one sentence, and the author never announces

³⁴ The "we" that occasionally appears in the text includes the narrator and his readers, as in this sentence: "At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever" (p. 83).

³⁵ p. 77.

³⁶ p. 92.

³⁷ It is interesting to note that only this part of the sentence is in italics because the boy might have used that phrase, while the rest, where that is doubtful, is not underlined. Yet the two points of view found in the same sentence and relating to the same subject do create some confusion in the reader's mind!

³⁸ p. 98.

the change in viewpoint, never prepares us for it; on the contrary he makes it as unexpected and sudden as possible, thereby exposing us to a series of stylistic shocks.

The truth was, his brother was a *happy-go-lucky-youngster*, who'd've been better off with a regular brother of his own... Ambrose's throat ached; there aren't enough different ways to say that.

Here everyone will agree that Ambrose's throat ached because he was aware of the problem of communication and the sentence reflects his point of view.

Ambrose's point of view is, for instance, certainly used in the passage from the story quoted at the beginning of this paper, in naive, simple sentences such as "Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction" or "The Irish author James Joyce, in his unusual novel entitled *Ulysses*, now available in this country...". We could imagine a pedagogically-minded intellectual spelling things out in this way to the average reader, i.e. fool, adding irony to this statement, but this interpretation is not warranted by the context, I think, and the description in italics of the two boys as *stimulated by the briny spume* does sound like a parody of a young writer's rather elaborate, "poetic" language.⁴⁰

Barth tells us himself that this is at least in part a story that Ambrose is telling himself while lost in the funhouse:

Ambrose wandered, languished, dozed. Now and then he fell into his habit of rehearsing to himself the unadventurous story of his life, narrated from the third-person point of view.⁴¹

Yet the critic who perseveres, although Barth is trying to laugh him out of existence, will have to add that it is also a story of an adult author/narrator's looking at Ambrose through "a vista

³⁹ p. 98.

⁴⁰ The reference to *Ulysses* and to the adjectives used by Joyce also show an awareness of tradition and also perhaps the self-consciousness of a writer saddled by the burden of precedent: by writers like Joyce who had invented so many things that now can't ever be invented by anyone else again. In the interview which appeared in *The Contemporary Writer*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1972, and from which I have already quoted, Barth showed an awareness of this when he said: "I wish I were Homer and could say 'rosy-fingered dawn'. That's a wonderful thing to say about the dawn. I'd say 'rosy-fingered dawn, rosy-fingered dawn', and *nobody would have beat me to it*" (emphasis added- S. B.). He adds that his irony is often a way of defending himself from all those who had "beat" him to so many themes and images, burdening him with knowledge of precedents to be avoided and narrowing the field of his choice.

⁴¹ p. 100.

of years" or inventing him (but keeping the "vista"), no matter which.

The analysis of these examples indicates that the story has two points of view (as distinguished perhaps from two separate narrators) in perpetual flux, i.e. in varying stages of overlapping or identification. One of them boyish, immature, yet often moving and passionate. The other adult, more mature, yet often self-conscious and ironical. It is an ambiguous, protean double point of view which keeps shifting between the A (uthor) who imagines the story in which Ambrose is protagonist, and A(mbrose) as narrator of bits of his own story "from the third-person point of view". Whether this adult author/narrator is Ambrose grown up is difficult to ascertain and would be rather irrelevant if certain effects of the story were not heightened by the reader's feeling that the story is autobiographical and confessional.

There is, first of all, an autobiographical nostalgia and poignancy about this personal, moving story. There are also other hints, especially those referring to Ambrose "now" as distinct from Ambrose "then". When the narrator, for instance, says: "Ambrose understands now, but didn't then"⁴² he is indicating that there is a "now", that a grown-up Ambrose exists in the present, so why could he not be the narrator of the story? At the very end of the story we read that "he pretends to this hour that it is not so bad after all in the funhouse and that he has a little limp".⁴³

This is a very good example showing that Barth in the end attempts to blend the two points of view and the two levels of reality which exist in the story. He extends Ambrose's existence "to this hour" and suggests that the two narrators might be one person at two stages of his life, while the limp which Ambrose is pretending to have at what we have called the ground level of the story is blended with the timeless confinement of the artist in the symbolic funhouse of life and art.

Summing up, I think Barth has succeeded in performing the feat he admired in Donleavy and has gone even one step further in technical mastery. Keeping almost entirely to third person narration he has nevertheless created an interplay of viewpoints ranging from separation to nearly complete homogenization, which is an acrobatic game of ambiguities, of constant flux between various levels.

⁴² p. 96.

⁴³ p. 101.

The first interplay takes place between two levels of reality. One of them is the temporal level of the "ground story" which "may have happened" and which motivates the boy as a moving character within the convention of realistic fiction. The other is the atemporal level of initiation into sex (adult life) and art, often heightening the language to a symbolic structure. The second interplay concerns the question of viewpoints and follows two directions. One points from the boy narrator to the adult narrator (who may, but need not be the same person). The other from an omniscient, outside, presentation to an emotionally coloured, inside view characterized by the use of "style indirect libre".

All of this is finally complicated by the intruding narrator appearing at various intervals and ironically disclaiming the relevance of distinguishing between levels of reality because they are all "illusions" anyway, and the craftsmanship of the writer is the only reality.

All of these levels or aspects, never quite separate and never durably "homogenized", are superimposed as if on a photographic montage. They keep blending and separating like pictures in a kaleidoscope, creating constant movement and change, constant conflicts and reconciliations, constant surprises requiring constant adjustments and readjustments on the part of the reader. It is a story rendered both from the outside and from the inside, it is both about Life creating a Book and a Book creating Life, it is a romantic story about the artist as a young man and an ironic parody of literary craftsmanship, it presents both a realistic story moving in time and a timeless, ambiguous state of bondage of man and artist to time and art. All of these in constant flux, blending and separating, complementing, contradicting, even rejecting each other, devoid of schematicism, yet a little too confusing and finally redeemed (as distinct from most stories in the collection) by just the right amount of concreteness and "interest to the emotions" which makes the cleverness and artifice worth while.