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Lost in the Postmodern Era

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In John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," a character named Ambrose winds up lost in the

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confines of a funhouse, an attraction that is supposed to offer enjoyment by mixing the uncertain with adventure.¹ However, this story is not told through conventional means, as the narrator of this tale is lost himself. The narrator, while focused on telling the tale of Ambrose, is also distracted by the various literary devices and techniques of putting a fictional work together. The narrator's observation of how the piece is being put together as the work unfolds, or of any type of device that makes the reader aware that he or she is indeed reading a form of fiction, is known as metafiction. John Barth's use of metafiction in "Lost in the Funhouse" stops the reader from fulfilling his or her role by reflecting on how the story is pieced together stylistically. That is, metafiction stops the reader from discovering the secrets of the work for themselves, as the inner workings are spilled out in plain text. By doing this, Barth also splits the narrator into two "selves." There is a story-centered voice, the self that wishes to convey the story (the self that still believes there is a story to tell), and there is a metafictional voice which explains exactly how the story is put together and by doing so dispels the notion that there is an original way in which to tell a story. These two voices are working against each other throughout "Lost in the Funhouse." However, Barth also mixes these sentiments together when Ambrose is lost in the funhouse, thereby reflecting the reader's frustration of trying to represent experience in the postmodern era.

The narrator in "Lost in the Funhouse" is very similar to a voice found in John Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," specifically during times where the narrator is revealing exactly what he is doing in order to tell the story. During these times, a bit of Barth's personal thoughts are being mixed with the story in order to create a metafictional work expressing Barth's ideas. He wrote this essay to explore the notion of "the used-upedness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" in literature.² Specifically, he explores the idea that the possibilities for novel writing have been exhausted, and that for literature to continue existing, it must move into a new era of intermedia art. He lists some examples of intermedia art, including Robert Filliou's *Ample Food for Stupid Thought*, a work comprised entirely of questions written on postcards, and Jorge Luis Borges' work "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," which includes footnotes for works that exist in the imaginary world of Tlön.

Barth also discusses the need to rediscover conventional devices used in literature: "After which, I add on behalf of the rest of us, it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature — such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation . . . even characterization! Even plot!" ("Literature of Exhaustion" 3). Here Barth spells out exactly what his narrator is doing in "Lost in the Funhouse." Through the narrator's explanation to the reader concerning exactly how the story is pieced together, Barth is rediscovering or exploring the literary devices he uses every day in order to question the old assumptions of the craft. Mainly, he focuses on characterization, plot, and form in "Lost in the Funhouse." Specifically, "Lost in the Funhouse" is an example of one of his "novels that imitate the form of a Novel, by an author who imitates the role of an Author" ("Literature of Exhaustion" 6). Again he achieves this through his use of metafiction. By examining how he has put together the story, Barth is exploring the main role of an author. Authors try, at all costs, to hide their hand within the story; they do not want the reader to think about reading a story while reading their story. However, the use of metafiction makes it almost impossible for the reader to maintain this desire, as the inner workings of

the story are explicitly spelled out to them while they are reading it. The effect here is to stop the reader from fulfilling his or her normal role. Barth does so by not fulfilling his own role as an author, but merely imitating it. He covers the responsibilities of an author in "Lost in the Funhouse," but he also explains how his tricks work, thus betraying his actual role. It's comparable to a magician who reveals the secret to his trick as he is doing it.

Unlike the magician, however, Barth has a reason for showing his hand in "Lost in the Funhouse." In order to discover this reason, one must look closely at what Barth is doing with the narrator throughout the piece. The first few lines of "Lost in the Funhouse" read, "For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday. . ." (72). These sentences are all consistent with each other; they each sound as though they have the same speaker. The voice here is the first side of the narrator who wants to continue with the story of Ambrose and his trip to Ocean City. This self is the story-centered voice. However, in this opening passage, we also meet the metafictional side of narrator, the one that reflects Barth's ideas in "The Literature of Exhaustion." The metafictional voice's first lines, in the middle of the same paragraph

where we first meet Ambrose, read, "A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, which in turn is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases [. . .] They should be used sparingly" (72). The metafictional voice reads like a textbook and is seemingly (but not entirely) unrelated to the story, as Ambrose has nothing to do with how italics are used in literature. However, this metafictional side of the narrator, evident by the complete change of subject matter, tone, and voice, is not telling Ambrose's story but the story of how Ambrose's story is put together. Both sides of the narrator are working together to tell the story of Ambrose and the funhouse, but each side is focused on a different aspect of the story. The narrator's split selves start off on completely different sides with distinct voices, but they continually mix with each other in an attempt both to tell the story and to explore the possibilities that exist in writing it. In a way the two narrating voices reflect the sentiments in "The Literature of Exhaustion," where Barth explains he is both worried about representing experience in a refreshing way (represented by the constant effort to continue the story of Ambrose), as well as worried about how the story is being pieced together in regards to the exploration of old assumptions of his craft (represented by the metafictional ele-

ments that examine how the work is put together).

A good example of the voices continually mixing together is through the characterization of the relationship between Ambrose and Magda. Barth knows that characterization can be strongly achieved through action. For example:

Ambrose pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose with his left hand, which he then negligently let fall to the seat cushion immediately behind her. He even permitted the single hair, gold on the second joint of his thumb to brush the fabric of her skirt. Should she have sat back at that instant, his hand would have been caught under her. (77)

This passage is written in only one voice, the story-centered voice, and it suggests Barth cares about the Ambrose story despite his interruptions with notes on style. The detail in which he describes the situation brings the nervous energy of a first love alive through hesitation. The tension created by the lingering questions, will she sit back, what will happen if she does, brings these characters to life in a way that suggests that Barth wants to tell the story. It would have been easy to riddle a clichéd story of love with metafictional aspects to express Barth's feelings of "The Litera-

ture of Exhaustion," but by going to such lengths to present a fully original story, Barth shows he still cares about literature in general. And in fact, he does. This entire experiment with the Literature of Exhaustion is not to suggest that there is nothing left to say; quite the opposite, it's just the way we are saying leaves no possibilities for originality. Thus, right after the above paragraph, Barth continues by saying:

The function of the *beginning* of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation if necessary, plant motifs and foreshadowings where appropriate, and initiate the first complication or whatever of the 'rising action'. (77)

Here we have a passage composed completely of the metafictional voice, but it is explaining exactly how a beginning of a story should be. The fact remains that "Lost in the Funhouse" does not follow this pattern. We have the main characters and their relationship, but there has been no inkling of plot or foreshadowing. The metafictional voice of the narrator continues to critique the story-centered voice's style by saying the details offered up to this point of the story "don't seem especially relevant" (77). In fact, the

metafictional side of the narrator notes that the story's title is "Lost in the Funhouse" and suggests it should be more focused around the details of the funhouse. However we have not even reached Ocean City yet, the place where the funhouse is located.

This section ends with, "we will never get out of the funhouse." A fundamental shift has occurred here. Before, the two voices of the narrator have been separate. The story-centered voice narrates the details of Ambrose's story; the metafictional voice narrates details of how stories in general are put together in a textbook manner covering different details such as when to use italics and how the beginning of a story should act as multiple devices in one. However here in this one sentence, the metafictional voice starts to become familiar with the inner workings of the story of Ambrose. The two voices begin to mix here, culminating in the reference to the funhouse, one that suggests "we" (meaning everyone involved in this story: the reader, Ambrose, the story-centered voice, the metafictional voice, and even Barth himself) will never escape it.

The funhouse is itself an all important symbol within Barth's story. It is a physical representation of the story itself; more specifically, it is a representation of Barth's

frustration

with writing in a postmodern era, of which this story is a result. There are some clear moments in "Lost in the Funhouse" that point to Barth's frustration with the entire process of writing. Most of these moments are spoken by the metafictional voice. For example, "At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever" (78); "How long is this going to take?" (81); and "There's no point in going farther; this isn't getting anybody anywhere; they haven't even come to the funhouse yet" (83). There are a lot of references to not being in the funhouse yet and regarding the amount of time that we shall be stuck in the funhouse. Yet Ambrose has been in the funhouse before some of these statements. The story often jumps into the future to a point of time when Ambrose is in the funhouse, making us wonder when exactly he entered it in the first place. In any event, the reader has been in the funhouse from the onset of the story, which as the title suggests is itself the funhouse.

To further explain this idea, we must look at what a funhouse is. First, it is a place where certainty and uncertainty meet, much like the certainty of the metafictional voice meeting the uncertain voice of the story-centered side of the narrator. Also, funhouses often have mazes of mirrors that distort images of the self, much like Barth's self is being distorted in

the two voices of the same narrator within "Lost in the Funhouse." To add to this, the fact that funhouses have mirrors is a curious notion when one realizes that "Lost in the Funhouse" is composed of metafiction, or the reflection of the components used to create fiction. The story "Lost in the Funhouse" is composed of spots of reflection just as a funhouse is composed of mirrors. As Barth writes, "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" (86). In other words, thanks to the nature of mirrors and reflection, a mirror cannot show anything that is not already there. Even if one uses multiple mirrors, as the quotation is suggesting, one still cannot see something new because one's body is standing in front of the mirror. One can never see the point at which the mirrors' lines of observation meet because one cannot see past oneself. The metaphor here astutely explains what the story has been attempting to do via the two distinct voices of the narrator. Specifically, the metafictional voice has been trying to see something new through reflection of what makes fiction by using metafiction, but he keeps hitting the wall thanks to his inability to see around himself. In other words, the metafictional

voice is frustrated by the fact that the story-centered voice is in his way. The paradox is that one cannot have the reflection of what makes fiction without there first being a fictional piece to reflect. This description of mirrors in the story parallels the two voices of the narrator's situation throughout.

Of course it's not all dismal frustration that awaits one in a funhouse. Barth has Ambrose put it best when he is hypothetically asking Magda to go into the funhouse with him: "The

important thing to remember, after all, is that it's meant to be a *funhouse*; that is a place of amusement. If people really got lost or injured or too badly frightened in it, the owner'd go out of business" (90). Here the story-centered voice is reminding the metafictional voice that despite all of the frustration and hardships that they as a pair have to go through, it's a rewarding process. If it were too frustrating to put up with, there'd be no story or "the owner'd go out of business." In other words, Barth would stop creating the funhouse for the two voices to explore together. Of course, Barth cannot stop creating the funhouse, as he is lost within it, just like Ambrose: "he *lost himself in* the reflec-

tion that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible..." (94). Ambrose gets lost in reflections; the voices are lost in frustrations of writing this reflection of fiction. In a way, Ambrose being lost in the funhouse is representative of the two voices of the narrator. When Ambrose gives up on trying to get out of the funhouse, he begins to narrate stories inspired by his lost condition that shall one day inspire the unnumbered

"He wishes he had never entered the funhouse."

(96). Ambrose then becomes a narrator (to the unnumbered masses of other lost people), but it takes these

extraordinary ordeals of being desperately lost in an uncertain place to get these stories out, just as the original narrator must go through the frustrations of trying to find a way to reflect on fiction in order to find new possibilities for relating experience. Ambrose's storytelling then somehow transforms into creating funhouses for other people. The final lines of the story reflect a sentiment that the narrator may feel himself: "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" (97). Throughout all

the frustration and difficulties of finding a new way to write literature, the narrator wishes he could stop. But he cannot stop; he's entered the funhouse, he's lost within the story. All he can do is continue Ambrose's story.

"Lost in the Funhouse" is an experiment in rediscovering what makes fiction work through the use of metafictional language and in exploring how literary devices work within stories. By employing a narrator with two distinct voices, one devoted to the story and representing a strong love for writing and literature, and the other curious to find new possibilities in the age-old conventions of preceding authors, John Barth has created a fusion of ideals that speak for a need to embrace a new era of literature. Barth disagrees with letting the current happenings of relating experience proceed unquestioned, as the conventional story is constantly interrupted with the exploration of how the conventional is working. He questions the progress of the story, the plotting and situation of the characters within the story. All of this culminates with the funhouse as an encompassing symbol that holds much of what Barth is feeling as well as important thematic explanations. While from a literary angle, the funhouse may represent something more thematic, the funhouse is also a representation of the story itself. The funhouse is a frustrating place in which both

Ambrose and the narrator are lost, as there is no clear outcome for this experiment. The narrator can poke and prod fiction all he wants with his metafictional reflections, but he fails to find anything new in doing so. He has become lost in the funhouse, lost in his own work. Because he cannot figure out how to get out of the funhouse, he cannot find a way to escape the Literature of Exhaustion, and he therefore continues designing stories for others to enjoy. He may well continue his experimentation through this process, as even Ambrose imagines "a funhouse vaster by far than any yet constructed" (96), but the truth is, he is trapped in this end of writing novels forever. This fact helps to explain the contemporary condition of literature. Authors today are still creating stories for other people; there has been little change in what constitutes fiction. Literature as a concept is trapped in conventions from which it cannot break free. Literature is lost in the funhouse.

Endnotes

1 Barth, John. "Lost in the Funhouse." *Lost in the Funhouse*. New York: Anchor Books, 1988.

72-96.