

In *Lost in the Funhouse*, a series of short stories¹, John Barth uses such postmodern literary strategies as verbal games, parody, *mise en abyme*, the exposition of fictitiousness of characters and the laying bare of the creative process in order to dispel the illusion created by the realistic and modernist novels. Hans Bertens points out that Barth shares with Murdoch, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon “a deep mistrust of modernist aesthetics” (33). This mistrust, in fact, characterizes all postmodern fiction and thus makes *Lost in the Funhouse* fall into the “category” or subgenre of postmodern fiction. Regarded as a “premier theorist and practitioner of postmodernism” (Lindsay 1), Barth calls the kind of fiction in which he is engaged the “literature of exhaustion” since literature, he believes, is almost “used up” and it is necessary to exhaust possibilities in order to create a new mode of narration. The idea that literature is *exhausted* reveals not only his “anxiety of influence” (Lindsay 54) but explains why Barth expresses his ambivalence towards the question of authorship and puts a lot of effort into experimenting narrative forms. With the abuse of syntactic rules and plenteous verbal games, *Lost in the Funhouse* is indeed a linguistic or verbal funhouse, in which the reader encounters a world of distorted mirror mazes and the deconstruction of conventional narrative form; hence, Lindsay remarks that Barth's works “invite a poststructuralist reading”(1). This “funhouse” not only exposes the **rupture** imminent in language and narration but also in a way reveals the **rapture** imminent in the text, manifesting Roland Barthes's notion of the text of pleasure and especially the text of bliss, i.e. the text of *jouissance*, or “rapture” (Lindsay 43).²

I. *Lost in the Funhouse*—Self-conscious Fiction

¹ *Lost in the Funhouse* is not regarded as a “collection” of short stories but a “series” because, as Max F. Schulz argues, Barth himself uses the word “series” in “Author's Note” and the fourteen stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* is not so much a collection or selection as a “skillfully developed sequence” (Schulz 6).

² Alan Lindsay asserts that *Lost in the Funhouse* is not only a text of pleasure but also a text of bliss (*jouissance*). However, since almost all the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* discomfort the reader rather than give them contentment, which according to Roland Barthes, is the quality of the text of pleasure (19), I propose that it is more appropriate to regard them as the texts of bliss.

Lost in the Funhouse is a fiction about fiction *per se*—the protagonists in the stories are either author figures or narrators contemplating on writing/telling their life stories. This kind of self-representational narration is one of the prevailing characteristics of metafiction. In fact, metafiction and postmodern fiction share a lot of literary strategies in common. Linda Hutcheon thinks that in discussing self-conscious fiction, “postmodern fiction” is, comparatively speaking, more “limiting” a term than “metafiction,” which is “a broader phenomenon” (2). Hutcheon’s definition makes the term “metafiction” inclusive of postmodern fiction. Patricia Waugh maintains that metafiction is not so much a “subgenre” as a “tendency *within* the novel which operates through the exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion”(14). Robert Scholes designates the term metafiction as the kind of fiction which deals with “the possibilities and impossibilities of fiction itself”(8), a definition similar to Barth’s own concept of the literature of exhaustion. The emphasis upon the fictitiousness of the fiction endows *Lost in the Funhouse* with the features of metafiction, which is also called “self-reflexive” fiction (or *Künstlerroman*) in that its author discloses his writing process in the work.

Barth’s intention to demonstrate literature as an artifact is revealed in his “auto-representational”(Hutcheon’s term) writing process and the deconstruction of the narrative framework. This series of short stories begins with “Frame-Tale,” which is not so much a story as a “frame without a story”(Musarra 228). The whole text contains solely the author’s instruction to “[c]ut on dotted lines. Twist end once and fasten *AB* to *ab*, *CD* to *cd*.” Following the instruction, the reader will make a Moebius band, on which there is an endless circulation of an altered fairy-tale formula: “ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN.” With this unconventional beginning, the author manifests to the reader that the structure of the series is a “spiral” one (Musarra 228). As Walkiewicz remarks, “Frame-Tale” serves as the emblem of the series, which contains a circular

structure (89). In fact, most stories in this series are written with this *mise en abyme* technique, a postmodern narrative device which cooperates with the spiral or circular structure to construct a self-mirroring fictional world. For instance, "Life-Story" is a story about an author writing a story about an author writing a story . . . *ad infinitum*. The self-conscious narrator offers a rhetorical question pointing out his reluctance to present such self-consciousness if it is not because that literature as a mimetic art has come to an impasse:

Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly **imitate something other than its own process**? That doesn't continually proclaim "Don't forget I'm an artifice!" That takes for granted its mimetic nature instead of asserting it in order . . . to deny it or vice-versa? (114) [emphasis added]

"Life-Story" celebrates the so-called "mimetic nature" of art simply for the purpose of denying it. The fact that the narrator unveils is that any mimesis of literary works turns out to be **self-mimetic** since the essence of the literary work is nothing but a verbal artifact. Through his self-conscious writing process, the protagonist-author in "Life-Story" reveals his fret as a writer: "But there was always the next sentence to worry about. But there was always the next sentence to worry about" (121). In other words, in this story, that which is revealed to the reader is simply a fictional author making efforts to "fill in the blank." The narrator insinuates that the purpose of the whole word-accumulating job in "Life-Story" is not so much to represent reality or an inner feeling as to fill out the blank pages and to proceed to the end of his work as soon as possible. In "Title," the narrator also expresses his anxiety to fill in the blank: "Try to fill the blank. Only hope is to fill the blank. Efface what can't be faced or else fill the blank"(102). However, in a literary work like this one, to fill in the blank is artistic: "to write this allegedly ultimate story is a form of **artistic fill in the blank**" (108) [emphasis added].

Throughout this series of short stories, Barth reveals a feeling of agony as well as ecstasy when divulging his author-protagonists' writing processes. His

narrators and writers implicitly express not only their incompetence to finish their works but their strong desire to finish them. The marooned minstrel in “Anonmiad” cuts the third part of his fiction out because it is a lacuna he can never fill in (177). The narrator in “Autobiography” reveals an urgency to rush to the end: “I’ll mutter to the end, one word after another, . . . heard or not, my last words will be my last words” (37). However, this sentence does not end with a period--Barth insinuates that the narrator’s anxious muttering would continue incessantly. With the unification of the narrator and the narrative, Barth manifests that a literary work is actually composed with an ensuing process of filling in the lacuna. However, the struggle with lacuna brings about ecstasy. For instance, lost in the funhouse and simulating a creative process, Ambrose in the title story claims, “*This is what they call 'passion.' I am experiencing it*”(81).

II. Lost in the Verbal/Linguistic Funhouse

Lost in the Funhouse, as metafiction and postmodern fiction, is a verbal funhouse constructed to show that all literary works are but linguistic funhouses. Accordingly, this “funhouse” is itself constructed simply to manifest its artifice. Besides laying bare the writing process, Barth provides what Tanner calls “a sense of fictions within fictions within fictions” (255) by producing the effect of mirror reflections in a mirror maze. This effect is tightly entangled with the *mise en abyme* framework of story-within-story, an evident example of which is “Menelaiad,” a “tale within a tale to the seventh degree”(Morrell 94). Menelaus relates how he told Telemachus and Peisistratus how he told Helen how he told Proteus how he told Proteus’s daughter Eidothea how he rehearsed to Helen his doubt for her love and its consequence. Hence, the story is told within multiple quotation marks

“ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘Why?’ I repeated.” I repeated.’ I repeated.” I repeated.’ I repeated.” I repeated. “ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘And the woman, with a bride-shy smile and hushed voice, replied: ‘Why what?’ (148)

Since the quotations extend infinitely, the identities of the one who quotes the exchanges, of the one who asks the questions "why" and of the woman who replies, have all become almost undistinguishable. John O. Stark regards this multiple folds of narration as the sets of Chinese boxes, the first one of which is, of course, Barth himself (121). This narrative can also be interpreted as the reflections of seven mirrors in a mirror maze. Because of the baffling multiple reflections, the borderline between the teller and the told becomes indiscernible. In "Menelaiad," Menelaus's voice finally fades out at the end of the story; that is, he becomes one of the seven illusory masks in his narrative. The author-protagonist of "Life-Story" lapses into the same uncanny situation. The author D is, figuratively speaking, in a verbal mirror maze, in which he sees his reflection, the author E, composing a similar account as D himself is doing, and the mirror image of E is reflected in another mirror as C and so on and so forth. In his writing process, the author D finally grows suspicious of his own existence--he suspects that he is but a fictional character, and his life, a fictional narrative, which consists in the trinity of "teller, tale, told" (118). This multiplex mirror reflection inevitably results in the disappearance of reality: the boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred. Unlike realistic novelists, Barth makes reality itself appear as a fiction instead of holding a mirror up to reality.

With the subversion of the mimetic function of literature, the presence of the metaphysical being, the "Author-God", is also called into question. Lindsay points out that "Oedipus is the implicit reference in much of Barth's fiction and is echoed in Barth's agenda for postmodernism, which is not free from the anxiety of influence" (54). The trinity of God-Father-Author stands for the reservoir of the literary tradition as well as its limitation. Given that the funhouse symbolizes a literary work, this work is a playful linguistic construct rather than the mimesis of reality. Having given up the role of the secret manipulator behind the drape, the operator of the funhouse, i.e. the author, falls into eternal slumber.

Albeit without an Author-God, the protagonists are either author figures or narrators in the "neo-trinity" of "teller, tale, told." Throughout the *Buildungsroman* collected in *Lost in the Funhouse*, namely "Ambrose His Mark,"

“Water-Message,” and “Lost in the Funhouse,” the protagonist Ambrose, whose father remains unknown, is characterized as a promising author in the making and is tortured by the anxiety accompanied with creative writing. He is very sensitive to language, inclining to transform his experience into words: “*This is what they call ‘passion’! I am experiencing it*”(81). When lost in the funhouse, he recounts to himself the “unadventurous story of his life, narrated from the third-person point of view” (92). At the end of the title story, Barth reveals Ambrose’s destiny to be an author: “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 . . .”(94). These words imply that Ambrose, sooner or later, will follow his calling and write a literary work for others. As Lindsay indicates, Barth’s protagonist authors are “self-aware of their position as authors within certain nonessential discourses. And they all, in different ways, are troubled by their own imaginations . . .”(113).

The self-consciousness of the author figures tends to causes the uncanny feeling of one's fictitiousness, just as the protagonist author of "Life-Story" does. Barth also reveals to his readers the uncanny confrontation between the character and its supposed creator--the secret operator, i.e. the “author” of the funhouse. When wandering about in the funhouse, Ambrose finds a seam on the wall, through which he sees “a small old man . . . nodding upon a stool beneath a bare, speckled bulb” (84). If the title story is an allegory of writing, then Barth reveals a fictional world in which the protagonist is on his own and even usurps the authorial position since the operator *qua* author falls asleep instead of manipulating the textual funhouse. It is important to note that only after the glimpse at the sleeping operator does Ambrose begin to question, “Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he **a figment of the author’s imagination?**”(84)[emphasis added] The character is aware of his own fictitiousness at the moment when he confronts his own creator. The slumbering secret operator insinuates the absence of the Author-God, the role of which the writer of a realistic novel must assume owing to “the genre’s assumptions”(Lindsay 113). Barth, unlike the writers of realistic fiction,

manifests the "self-imitation of language," which naturally leads to the "self-imitation of the author"(Lindsay 113). As Roland Barthes points out in "The Death of the Author," "it is language which speaks, not the author"(168). In other words, language itself has autonomy. In his deliberate description of the self-mimetic writing process, Barth reveals that a writer cannot dominate language for there is always something that is out of his control.

Characters in the Barthine labyrinth also gradually accept their precarious existence as fictional figures. As discussed above, the author D of "Life-Story" realizes his identity is a fictional character; Menelaus in "Menelaiaad" is also aware of his fictitiousness: "Menelaus! Proteus! Helen! For all we know, we're but stranded figures in Penelope's web, wove up in light to be unwoven in darkness" (145). In the title story, Ambrose, lost in the funhouse, enters the mirror room, in which he begins to suspect his own existence: "Stepping from the treacherous passage at last into the mirror-maze, he saw once again, more clearly than ever, **how readily he deceived himself into supposing he was a person**" (90) [emphasis added]. Ambrose, presumed to be real, is gradually dissolved in the mirror maze, in which the mirrors duplicate, reflect, and distort him. As Morris indicates, "at the center of the funhouse stands an **absence**: the signified is nothing at all" (75) [emphasis added]. Therefore, the traditional metaphor of the mirror in literature is severely undermined in this "funhouse". Once considered "a" mirror held up to Nature, literature is now represented as "mirrors" which constitute a verbal labyrinth. On the other hand, the mirror-maze also demonstrates the circumscribed function of language. Literature reconstructs human lives in a graphical way. What it represents is forever a two-dimensional representation, just like a reflected image in a mirror, and never a three-dimensional incarnation. The infinite regression of the reflection, thus, simply points to absence or a void.

Moreover, in this series of short stories, Barth uses repetition, fragments and words to emphasize the absurdity of linguistic system and its dominance. Repeating a certain word or sentence over and over again in order to exhaust it, Barth discloses to the reader the ultimate meaninglessness of language. For

instance, in the title story, Ambrose, thinking about sunbathing on the beach, repetitively says, “We would do the latter. We would do the latter. We would do the latter” (76). As part of Ambrose’s stream of consciousness, these repetitive sentences certainly reveal his anguish, which results from his being trapped in the funhouse. However, they also exhaust the meaning of the sentence, which gradually becomes nonsensical because of the repetition. A repetitive word or the refrain also interrupts the reader’s reading process. In the same story, Barth repeats the word “et cetera” for eight times to discontinue the progression of a long sentence (76). In “Title,” the narrator not merely repeats to interrupt the reading but also makes fun of the grammatical structure of a sentence:

And that my dear is what writers have got to find ways to write about in this adjective adjective hour of the ditto ditto same noun as above, or their, that is to say our, accursed self-consciousness will lead them, that is to say us, to here it comes (109)

The iteration of the words “adjective” and “ditto” and the recurrence of the phrase “that is to say” finally exhaust their meaning and undermine their original syntactical function to the extent of irritation. They become nonsensical murmuring.

In addition to reiteration, Barth also writes fragments, both to disturb the reader and to express a sense of incompleteness, which represents the incapacity of language to really convey what is inside the writer’s mind. In “Life-Story,” the narrator states, “One of the successfulest [sic.] men he knew was a blacksmith of the old school who et cetera” (118). He leaves his readers to figure out for themselves what might follow the relative pronoun “who.” In “Lost in the Funhouse,” there is a similar example: “The smell of Uncle Karl’s cigar smoke reminded one of”(79). Barth deliberately induces his readers to fill the blank for themselves, albeit this incompleteness is more like an exaggeration of the nature of language than an invitation for the reader to participate in the creation of the

text. Moreover, fragments serve to disappoint the reader: "Nonsense is right. For example. Oh, God damn it" ("Title," 109). There is no instance following the phrase "for example." By employing the aforementioned scheme, i.e. fragments, Barth traps the reader with interrupted, contravened sentence structure. His reconsideration of the nature of language by making it nonsensical corresponds to the literary strategy of the absurd theater like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

As Russell indicates, Barth's works display "the absurdities of our language structure—our funhouse" (358). In *Lost in the Funhouse*, he reminds his readers of the fact that it is the sentence structures which constitute a literary oeuvre. In "Title," the narrator remarks, "The novel is predicate adjective, as is the innocent anecdote of bygone days when life made a degree of sense and subject joined to complement by copula"(105). These words point out the dominance of *langue*, i.e. linguistic system. A narrative is the constitution or aggregations of subjects, verbs, adverbs, etc., organized by such syntactic rules as "subject joined to complement by copula" to make sense. In the same story, the narrator reveals a touch of grief for this phenomenon:

In this dehuman, exhausted, ultimate adjective hour, when every human value has become untenable, and not only love, decency and beauty but even compassion and intelligibility are no more than one or two subjective complements to complete the sentence . . . (104)

In other words, love, passion, anger, and any other kinds of description of emotion or action are actually nothing but words, written to "complete the sentence."

Barth also suggests that in this verbal funhouse or linguistic playground, there are many possible egresses: he provides more than one possible ending in the stories. In "Anonymiad," for instance, the marooned minstrel conceives more than one ending for his so-called "fiction." In "Lost in the Funhouse," Barth directly suggests that there could be more than one ending and "one possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across to another lost person in

the dark” (83). Yet, all the egresses lead only to the entrance of the funhouse. The circular structure of the funhouse also appears in “Menelaiad,” where Menelaus recounts his story from part one back to part one. At the end of “Anonymiad,” the minstrel returns to where he starts the narration. The author figure of “Life-Story” does not end his story, and neither does the narrator of “Autobiography.” In “Frame-Tale,” the Moebius band, showing an on-going, circulating sentence “ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN . . .,” insinuates that this linguistic funhouse is constructed with a never-ending circular skeleton. Along with the protagonist-authors, the reader is trapped in the endless on-going process of reading, getting lost in the funhouse. Hutcheon points out that *Lost in the Funhouse* is “an allegory of the position of the reader who is lost in the funhouse with Ambrose as he tries to find his way out of the mirror-maze of the story”(56). When Ambrose tries to map a way out of the linguistic funhouse, Barth is with him.

In this linguistic funhouse or labyrinth, Barth unfolds the nature of language as a free play. With reiteration, fragments, and lacunas, he makes fun of language to illustrate its absurdity and to mimic the work as a verbal construct. His goal is to decry the mimetic theory, pointing out the impasse of literature as a mimetic art. By making his work a mirror-maze, Barth also successfully demonstrates the distorted nature of language and its constructs, i.e. literature. Getting lost in Barth’s funhouse, the reader has an opportunity to retrospect the essence of literature after the firm ground he or she used to rely upon is undermined.

III. Lost in a Schizo-Text

A prevailing characteristic of metafiction is verbal games, with which the signifying function of words is called into question. Given that “metafiction” contains, as Waugh indicates, a tendency towards not only self-reflection but also self-deconstruction within contemporary novels, the best term to describe this

apparent tendency within the self-conscious fiction is "schizophrenia." Brian McHale uses the term "schizoid text" to refer to "split text," i.e. multiple-column texts, which are common in metafiction (190-3). However, Allen Thiher employs a similar term "schizo-text" to designate the kind of text in which "words and things go their separate ways"(33). Fredric Jameson uses the term "schizophrenia" in a sense much closer to Thiher to describe postmodern phenomenon (Bretens 163). In light of Lacan, by the term "schizophrenia" Jameson means "a language disorder resulting from the subject's failure to accede fully into the realm of speech and language" (qtd. in Bretens 163). John Barth's texts closely resemble the schizoid condition in Thiher's and Jameson's definitions.

As aforementioned, a conspicuous characteristic of metafiction is its emphasis upon literature as artifact or a verbal construct, opposing to the realist's mimetic theory. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, the author plays with words to highlight the unreal substance of the fictional universe with verbal games. Moreover, he also reveals a concept of language corresponding to the poststructuralist or, to put it more precisely, the Derridian theory of language as floating signifiers, contrary to the traditional understanding of language as an effective vehicle for expressing thought as well as representing reality.

This series of short stories, manifesting the poststructuralist view of language, is a de facto maze of signifiers, a *Spielraum*, to which the reader is invited and in which the reader gets lost with the author. Tony Tanner argues that in Barth's works, signs "become more important than their referents" and Barth "plays with them in such a way that any established notions of the relationship between word and world are lost or called into doubt" (240). Barth deliberately plays with words to show that a literary work is nothing but a linguistic playground, unable to represent the world as it really is. Before poststructuralists and postmodernists, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Saussure all regard language as a sort of game (Thiher 21-2, 60, 79). Wittgenstein compares language to a chess game, which is rule-bound; Heidegger uses the term *Spielraum* to indicate that language forms a space for playing, which is also confined by rules. For Saussure, language is

like a “chessboard,” within which meanings are produced. Pointing out the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, Saussure indicates that the sign, the unification of the signifier and the signified, is defined not only by its differences from other signs but also within the linguistic system. His idea overwhelms the traditional apprehension that sign is defined in itself (Thiher 71). Derrida extends Saussure’s idea further by indicating that the sign is not the full presence of meaning and that the signifier does not refer to the signified but another signifier; in other words, to define meaning is simply to encounter a constant process of differing and *deffering*. In terms of Allen Thiher, “there is no locus for meaning, only movement, dynamics, play”(92). In *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth reveals such a notion of language as a free play, insinuating the impotence of language to represent an exact and authentic meaning. As Derrida contends, since a signified always traces to the other signifieds, language is an infinite tracing game of the signifieds:

The signified concept is never present in and of itself [E]very concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. (Derrida 11)

It is not appropriate to say that Barth is directly influenced by the aforementioned concepts of game. However, it is palpable that this view of language as a game does exist in Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, in which he exaggerates the quality of literature as a verbal construct by playing with words or interrupting the regularity of sentence pattern to break the myth of realism. He suggests in his work that owing to the floating nature of language, meanings are untenable. For instance, in “Lost in the Funhouse,” in view of the disseminating nature of the word, the narrator states, “To say that Ambrose’s and Peter’s mother was pretty is to accomplish nothing; the reader may acknowledge the preposition, but his imagination is not engaged” (71). The word “pretty” cannot help the reader to have a clear picture of Ambrose’s mother. Suppose the writer uses more words

to express how pretty she is, that is to say, to define the word “pretty”, the descriptive words are merely floating signifiers. In other words, instead of being the faithful representation of reality, literature is but a game of free-floating signifiers. As Thiher suggests, literature can only exist within the playground of language (159).

In “Ambrose His Mark,” Barth discloses the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. This arbitrariness undermines nomenclature—a sort of language game that mankind has played for thousands of years. The earliest example of human being’s disposition to name things can be found in Genesis, in which God makes Adam name not only all the creatures on earth but also the other sex of his race—the woman. The power to name things implies ownership, and owning a name represents identity and position in the social network. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, naming no longer indicates a stable relationship between the proper name and the named, i.e. the referent. The motif of naming prevails in “Ambrose His Mark.” After Ambrose was born, his family did not christen him because they were preoccupied with the frame of mind of his mother Andrea, who was obsessed with her husband’s insanity. His mother, during her pregnancy, wished that the baby would be a girl so that she could name it Christine, after the heroine of the film *Anna Christie*. However, owing to his father’s lunacy, she never mentions a name after he was born. His aunt, Rosa, calls him Honig, but his uncle Konrad wants to name him after Ambrose’s father, Hector. When Ambrose narrates this personal history, he expresses his opinion:

To Rosa I was Honig; Mother, too, when “Christine” seemed unfunny, called me thus, and in the absence of anything official. Honey soon lost the quality of endearment and took the neutral function of a proper name. Uncle Konrad privately held out for *Hector*, but no one ventured to bring up her husband's name in Mother's presence. (14)

If the names are signifiers and Ambrose himself is the referent, this naming episode indicates the arbitrary relationship between the two. “Honig” means

honey in German, but when it is used as a proper name, as Ambrose himself remarks, it soon loses “the quality of endearment” as well as the quality of food. His identity does not change a bit whether he is named Honig, Hector or Ambrose. He is named Ambrose simply as a result of a farcical episode which occurred in his infancy: a swarm of bees settled upon his mother’s chest and his face. Taking it as a sign, Karl, after looking up *The Book of Knowledge*, decided to name him after Saint Ambrose, who had the same experience when he was a baby except that the bees settled upon his eyes. Nonetheless, Ambrose himself is aware of the arbitrariness as well as contingency of the linkage between the proper name and its referent: **“I and my sign are neither one nor quite two”** (32) [emphasis added]. His naming indicates that identity is nothing but a linguistic construct (Morris 75). This ambiguous relationship between a sign and its referent is the origin of the anxiety implied in the work. As one of the Siamese twin brothers claims in “Petition”, “[t]o be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But **to be both and neither is unspeakable!**” (71) [emphasis added].

The rupture between the name and its referent can also be found in “Anonymiad” and “Autobiography.” In the former story, the anonymous minstrel names nine amphorae after the nine Muses. The ludicrousness unfolds the imminent rupture between the names of the nine goddesses and the things these names refer to—nine bottles. In “Autobiography,” the narrator, who is also the narrative itself, states that “[a]mong other things I haven’t a proper name. The one I bear’s misleading, if not false” (31). The name the narrator/narrative bears might be “fiction,” “story,” or “autobiography,” but no matter what it is, the name cannot exactly define the thing it is supposed to define because the signifier is unable to carry a signified. Besides, owing to the dissemination of the meaning, a name or a signifier cannot encompass the whole reservoir of the significance. Therefore, the narrator indicates that the label he bears is either misleading or false. Such revelation of the breach between words and their referents, i.e. the world, forms what Thiher calls “schizo-text” (32-3). The Siamese twins in “Petition” can be regarded as the embodiment of the textural schizophrenia. Bond with each other “front to rear,” the brothers fell in love

with the same woman—Thalia. However, it is the brother in the front who can make love with Thalia, while the brother in the rear fantasizes about this woman, who basically exists only in his fantasy. On the one hand, the petitioning, articulate brother in the rear represents language itself while the other one represents earthly reality itself (Tanner 254). On the other hand, the Siamese twins imply the split of the subject into the body and mind, ego and id, consciousness and the unconscious (Schulz 3). Their physical deformity symbolizes the subject's split as "both and neither". The most conspicuous emblem of the impasse of "both and neither" is the Moebius strip in the frame-tale (Walkiewicz 101).

In *Lost in the Funhouse*, the technique of *mise en abyme* brings about the erasure of the borderline between the text and the narrator; that is to say, the text and the author-protagonist have become one. As Hutcheon remarks, "the *mise en abyme* becomes so extended *in size* that it is better described as a kind of allegory" (56). The schizoid inclination of the text is in a way ironically reflected in the author-protagonist's fear of schizophrenia. In "Life-Story," written in the third-person point of view, the author-narrator's identity merges with the protagonist's: they appear to be both one and two, neither one nor two. Before arguing that the manifestation of schizophrenia includes "the movement from reality towards fantasy" and "the exclusion of content", the author-protagonist first reveals the schizophrenic symptom, i.e. language disorder, in his "mumbo-jumbo": "Ed' pelut' kondo nedode; nyoing nyang" (115). Then, he admits his fear of schizophrenia:

[W]hile he did not draw his characters and situations directly from life nor permit his author-protagonist to do so, any moderately attentive reader of his oeuvre, his what, could infer for example that its author feared for example **schizophrenia**, impotence creative and sexual, suicide--in short living and dying. (121) [emphasis added]

The seemingly omniscient narrator is actually an author figure who is

contemplating on this writing process in the third person point of view. And the schizophrenia of which he is afraid is the polyvocal and self-conscious condition in which he has been trapped--this narrative device manifests the split of the narrator into the role of the author and the role of the protagonist.

IV. Textual Rupture/Rapture

Lindsay asserts that Barth shares with Roland Barthes some of his views revealed in his *The Pleasure of the Text*. In his mid-career, i.e. at the time he wrote *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth, like Barthes, highlights not only the arbitrariness and contingency of the relationship between the signifier and the signified but also the aporias or rupture in the discourse or the text (Lindsay 105). Regarding the Barthesian funhouse as a “pleasurehouse,” Lindsay suggests that, based on Barthes’s argument in *The Pleasure of the Text*, *Lost in the Funhouse* is both a text of pleasure (*plaisir*) and a text of bliss (*jouissance*). According to Barthes, the text of pleasure is “the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading;” in contrast, the text of the bliss designates “the text that imposes a *state of loss*, the text that *discomforts* (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), **unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language**” (14) [emphasis added]. For Lindsay, *Lost in the Funhouse* is a text of pleasure in that it creates “a space of pleasure in which the writing subject does not disappear, but vacillates between inside and outside, determining and determined, creating and created”(Lindsay 107). It is also a text of bliss because it demolishes the foundation of reading and exposes the rupture, the lack in the text, and a sense of loss. In other words, it is from the split/rupture of the schizoid text that the bliss (*jouissance*) abides.

With all its typical characteristics of the schizoid text as well as with the anxiety it creates and imposes upon the reader, *Lost in the Funhouse* appears more like a text of bliss than a text of pleasure. Lindsay remarks that Barth intends to

provide to the reader some comfort in the Barthesian world of fear and loss (46). The funhouse that Ambrose has in mind is, according to Lindsay, a utopian one—a funhouse that offers not only pleasure/amusement but also a sense of security (119). However, Ambrose's illusion of the funhouse does not hold because the text reveals that the adventure in the funhouse induces agony and anxiety rather than security. That's why Lindsay later on proffers an opposite viewpoint:

Bliss breaks out because the funhouse . . . is real. We need fictional house because the world creates funhouses (discourses) of a superficial kind in which people only pretend to get lost: Barth suggests a funhouse in which people get lost in order to realize that they are always actually lost. Ambrose wants to make funhouses of pleasure that a reader can see his is not really lost in. Barth, meanwhile, makes a funhouse of **bliss**. (119) [emphasis added]

In the above quotation, Lindsay apparently indicates that *Lost in the Funhouse* exposes the real existential condition of human beings—the status of loss. Instead of offering a safe harbor for the reader, the texts bombard the reader with the lack in his or her being. Accordingly, the stories are more like texts of bliss because the reader is deprived of comfort and “the consistency of his selfhood,” from which the pleasure arises (Barthes, *Pleasure*, 14).

Barthes argues that it is “the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss [*jouissance*]” (*Pleasure*, 7). This textual rupture bears witness to the reading subject's own lack--the reading subject, whom Barthes calls an “anachronic subject,” “enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and **seeks his loss (that is his bliss)**” (14) [emphasis added]. The funhouse, when exposing the textual rupture and undermining the consistency on which the reader relies, reveals not only the split and void of the linguistic construct but also those of the characters. On the one hand, the character is aware of his own split: “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.”(81) As the embodiment of the narrative, Ambrose is split into different voices and viewpoints, just as the Menelaus in "Menelaiad." On the other hand, Ambrose is trapped in a funhouse in which he undergoes the uncanny experience of confronting the ontological void—he catches a glimpse of the operator and finds himself fictitious.

The discourse of the text of bliss meanders around the brink beyond which there is the limbo of extreme ecstasy as well as pain—in terms of Lacan, it is the realm of *jouissance*. For Lacan, the pleasure principle serves as the barrier to *jouissance* but the subject persistently makes attempts to move beyond the pleasure principle and approaches the status of "painful pleasure," i.e. *jouissance* (Evans 90-1). This Lacanian view corresponds to Barthes's view that the pleasure of the text is an "Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end)"(10). The Oedipal pleasure is that which keeps the subject's desire at bay so that the subject would not dash into the limbo of *jouissance*. As Barthes points out, "pleasure can be expressed in words, bliss cannot"(*Pleasure*, 21). This text of bliss aims at moving beyond language and reveals the moment when language fails. Barthes also argues that the text of bliss brings the reader to the edge of rapture (19), which may induce fear because over the edge is the "blank," "the death of language" (6). Just as the Lacanian psychoanalyst Nasio indicates, "when *jouissance* prevails, words disappear and action dominates" (39), and, moreover, no signifier can represent *jouissance* (30); in other words, it marks the failure of language and induces fear.

Like the Siamese twins in "Petition", the contrast between Ambrose and his brother Peter manifests the subject's split into two principles: "While Peter is never aware of the imminent threat of bliss, Ambrose always is, longs for it, fears it, but can never experience it. His imagination gives him the desire; his self-consciousness keeps it at bay" (Lindsay 120). Lindsay's interpretation can be translated into Lacanian terms: In his unconscious (imagination), the **death**

drive³ urges Ambrose to move beyond the pleasure principle, whereas in his consciousness, the pleasure principle makes him "keep it at bay." When the "beyond pleasure" principle gains the upper hand, he experiences fear (Lindsay 120). Beyond the pleasure principle and beyond language *qua* the symbolic order is the limbo of loss—the loss of identity. In "Echo," the nymph's voice merges with Narcissus's, Tiresias's, as well as the narrator's to such an extent that

[t]hus we linger forever on the autognostic verge--not you and I, but
Narcissus, Tiresias, Echo. Are they still in the Thespian cave?
Have they come together in the spring? Is Narcissus addressing
Tiresias, Tiresias Narcissus? Have both expired? (100)

The commingling of voices and perspectives results in the dissolution of identity. Likewise, in "Menelaïad," even though it is for sure that the narrator is Menelaus, the juxtaposition of quotations from different mythical figures, all functioning as his masks, finally causes the narrator's evaporation. Just as Barth indicates in "Echo," one can no longer "tell teller from told" (99).

The transgression of the pleasure principle also instigates the destitution of words. Charles B. Harris contends that in the series, especially in "Night-Sea Journey" and "Autobiography," the narrator expresses a wish to stop talking (115). In fact, the wish to stop talking coincides with the narrator's awareness of the rupture/void along with his anxiety to fill in the rupture/void. Assuming an important role in the linguistic *Spielraum*, both silence and blank are vehicle for expressing ideas and feelings, as Barth states in "Literature of Exhaustion" (270). Even though the author uses blank and silence as tactics to induce the reader to contemplate on the contradictory nature of language, he writes "blank" or "silence" to fill in the blank of the pages instead of really leaving a blank space in the text. In other words, the words "blank" and "silence" serve not only as the

³ Lacan maintains that the death drive is "an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle, to the realm of excess *jouissance* where enjoyment is experienced as suffering" (Evans 33). For Lacan, the pleasure principle cooperates with the reality principle.

marks of the author figure's speechlessness but as the stand-in of the void or rupture in the narrative. The written word "blank," no doubt, cannot really create an empty locus on the page, nor can the author produce the effect of silence by simply writing down the word "silence". In "Title," Barth also represents the predicament a writer must confront: "Beginning: in the middle, past the middle, nearer three-quarters done, waiting for the end. Consider how dreadful so far: passionlessness, abstraction, pro, dis. And it will go worse. Can we possible continue?"(102) Trapped in the impasse of the writing process, the narrator wonders if nothing can be made meaningful (102). The last possibility of what the text would turn out to be is: "Silence. There is a fourth possibility, I suppose. Silence. General anesthesia. Self-extinction. Silence" (106). The voiceless or speechless condition indicated by the word "silence" informs the reader not only of its denotation but also of its sound. In addition, it also manifests the exhaustion of the author's inspiration, imagination and ideas. Hence, this word embodies the situation of "both and neither"--a situation incarnated by the Möbius band.

Under the urge of the death drive to fill in the lack/blank, and acutely aware of silence, the protagonist-authors in the stories divulge the lacuna that dominates the narration of every story in the series. Proffering a view echoing the Lacanian theory, Harris maintains that the nothingness prevailing in the texts, especially Ambrose's *Buildungsroman*, "coincides with that pre-linguistic state the separation from which generated language and the return to which all human activity, language included, secretly inclines"(115). In Lacanian terms, the pre-linguistic state is the pre-symbolic realm of the real--the abode of *jouissance* (Evans 205). This pre-symbolic or pre-linguistic state is the condition of the impossible unification with the **primordial mother**⁴ before the subject enters the state of the symbolic. As Ellie Ragland reveals, the loss of *jouissance*, which results from the separation from the primordial mother, is replaced with the

⁴ Lacan's term for the primordial mother is *das Ding*, the Thing. Lacan argues that "beyond the pleasure principle, there rises up the *Gut, das Ding*" (1992:73). The maternal Thing is "characterized by its absence" (1992: 63). This absence is that which incites the repetitious and circulating movement of the drive.

paternal Other *qua* the speech or culture (190). The renunciation of the primordial mother/*jouissance* left a **lack** in the subject's psychical structure and causes the drive to return to the impossible state of unification in search of *jouissance*, that is, to go beyond language and the pleasure principle. As Ragland also points out, language "imposes a 'no' . . . on the immediacy of satisfaction. In this way language serves as a structure of *alienation* from *jouissance*" (87). To a great extent, texts in *Lost in the Funhouse* manifest such an urge to transgress the pleasure principle. "Night-Sea Journey," narrated by a swimming spermatozoon, is emblematic of the death drive's urge to go beyond the barrier of the pleasure principle and to approach the primordial mother--an "all-in-one, one-in-all inclusiveness"(Harris 115). However, since the return is an impossible journey and the death-drive game is "aimed at what, essentially, is not there, *qua* represented"(Lacan 63), what the floating discourse leaves is the lack, lacuna, at the center of the text, just as Barth reveals at the central part of the last story of the series, "Anonymiad" :

No use, this isn't working either, we're halfway through, the end's in sight; I'll never get to where I am; Part Three; Part Three, my crux, my core, I'm cutting you cut; _____; **there, at the heart, never to be filled, a mere lacuna.** (177) [emphasis added]

The narrating voice manifests an urge to move on, to reach the end of the narrative; nevertheless, that which the narrator struggles to achieve also appears to be the limit of language--the failure of signification. With the narration circulating around the empty locus, which can never be filled in, the core at the heart of the text, where language fails and meanings are exhausted, is precisely the domain of *jouissance*. That is to say, rapture emerges in textual rupture.

Conclusion

The narration in the stories of *Lost in the Funhouse* not only exposes the split between the signifier and the signified, between the proper name and its referent, but also unveils the rupture of the text, which cannot be separated from the lack inside the subject, i.e. the narrator or the protagonist-author. The commingling of the teller with the tale told makes the protagonist's lack coincide with the text's lacuna. The author figure's anxiety to fill in the blank and to rush to the end of the story, therefore, demonstrates a drive to repetitively circulate around the void at the core of the psychic structure. Such narrative devices as verbal games, fragments and *mise en abyme* deconstruct the conventional narrative framework and simultaneously generate the rupture in the text, which brings about rapture, or *jouissance*, as Roland Barthes maintains. The funhouse to which John Barth invites his reader is ultimately a funhouse of *jouissance*, where both the reader's presumed consistency of selfhood and his or her misrecognition of the fictional world as a safe harbor are undermined.

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