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TRANSGRESSIVE METAFICTION: DECONSTRUCTING WORLDS IN JOYCE'S *ULYSSES* AND BARTH'S *LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE*

Abstract: The question "to what degree does metafiction construct and deconstruct worlds" generates a conceptual and paradigmatic rethinking of metafiction, based on the theoretical tools of possible worlds theory, especially fictional worlds. More specifically, to what degree does metafiction succeed in constructing a verisimilar possible world or, on the contrary, undress it of materiality and illusion of reality, turning rather to itself as a text (metafiction is self-conscious, auto-referential fiction, drawing attention to its mechanisms and its status as an artifact while a possible world is a world which is credible, ontologically different from ours only in being non-actualised). Moreover, in metafictions like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, or John Barth's *Lost in the funhouse*, deconstructing worlds means not only de-materialising worlds, turning to form in an extremely overt way, and moving from *mimesis of product* to *mimesis of process,* but also the French deconstruction praxis of denouncing structuralist dichotomy signified-signifier, thus loosing oneself in a network of signifiers which ultimately destroy the metaphysics of the signified. After poststructuralism murders the author, the latter revives as a *practical fiction* in a textual world of *indecidables*.

Key words: fiction theory, transgressive metafiction, deconstruction, practical fiction, James Joyce, John Barth

Dematerialisation and Deconstruction

Firstly, I would like to mention that I wrote this study in relationship with another one published in the first issue of *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* (50-60). In analysing one of Jorge Luis Borges' short stories, a new reading grid emerged, which privileges conceptual centres and overt fictional mechanisms over character development, setting and plot. One of the things I found was that

> The city of Immortals is placed somewhere between metaphor and image, it is not a depiction, but rather a series of ideas concentrated around the same referent. In the logic of the text, the city is as real as possible, yet it has the conceptual force of a nucleus of ideas – this is the most suitable mechanism for metafiction. (57)

What I regarded here as simply metafiction, I would come later to reffer to as *conceptual metafiction.* If conceptual metafiction still retains abstraction as logical operation and the curious reader can trace the origin of the fictional entity, *transgressive metafiction* is the kind of self-conscious fiction that disrupts figurative language and disintegrates the materiality of fictional world. For Borges, there is still a process of world building where the idea of an Aleph-text is the catalyst; what defines Barth is, by contrast, the deconstruction of the world it simultaneously generates, putting discourse itself at the centre of this world. If Borges is the *supratext*, the conceptual structure that generates/ organises the text, Barth is the *subtext*, the discourse which is the foundation of text generation. In the paradigm of possible worlds theory, the mutation from a diegetic mode to a linguistic one equates with a dematerialisation of the fictional world, ultimately presupposed as textual surface. The polysemy of the word "deconstruction" is at work here, since it does not only mean dematerialisation of the fictional world, but also the Derridean denunciation of the myth of the signified.

The potential of analysing *Ulysses* in a post-structuralist key is legitimated even by Derrida, who affirms that "there would have been no deconstruction without Joyce" ("Deconstructive"). In the chapter *Sirens*, which makes the focus of the present study, there is a continuous play of language. Even if it retains semantics, form/text/language is also the content, fiction is not only make-believe, but also what realist texts try to conceive: fictionality. Similarly, Barth's *Lost in the funhouse* functions almost like a textual funhouse, where you get lost between signifiers. It is a collection of short stories meant to be read as a novel. *Framestory* is rather a frame without a story, but it contains every possibility of story, since the whole text of this frame is a request for the reader to participate in creating the story (where story seems almost like the Text-Aleph of Borges, metonymically standing for the whole literature): "Once upon a time there was a story that began" (5-6), written as a Möbius strip, which creates a *mise-en-abîme* effect. The message prescribes the functioning of the stories together as a single, but infinite, circular text, where a signifier directs to another signifier (and not a signified), and mirrors are those non-places, substitutions of signs,

repetitions which lose referentiality, or, as Derrida formulates it, a mutation from *loci* (the partitions considered from reality) to textual functions:

> The surrogate does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow preexisted it. From then on it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center would not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. ("Structure", 232)

In post-structuralism there is no overarching system to explain the world, just as *Ulysses* makes a name for being equivoque, for proliferating signifiers. If the main modernist concern was "how can we know", the postmodern stance is that "what is to know is no longer stable". Thus Penelope from the Greek *Odissey* can mean "clever" at one layer of signification and "the sexual organ" at the level of reading the old text through Joyce's poetics. Polysemantics is always at work, but the layers of signification co-exist, there is no logic of *either/or*. In this logic, Homer's *Oddisey* is not "the original" text, but a nodal point in an intricate network of text (texture), which echoes Barth's view on literature, which will be discussed later. Musicality is another central quality of the language, the texture is sonorously meaningful: "jingle jingle jaunted jingling./ Coin rang. Clock clocked" (Joyce, 329) or "Full tup. Full throb./ Warbling. Ah, lure! Alluring" (329) and the examples are abundant. Here, alliteration as well as rhythm creates meaning, in other words, language creates meaning and the later one does not pre-exist outside of language.

The possible worlds theory makes precisely the point that a text/utterance has a world-generating power, which contradicts the principle of mimesis (the representational power of the text) and reaffirms that text precedes the world (Doležel, 785-809), a "conclusion" at which deconstruction arrives through its own means. Onomatopoeia figuratively punctuates *Sirens* and simultaneously it imprints a musical rhythm: the ``tap, tap, taps´´ of the walking stick of the piano player. From a semantic point of view, it is interesting how the words that are supposed to hold the strongest adherence to reality (through a relation of sound similarity between the signifier and the signified) are actually part of this intricate *funhouse* of language and musical texture. Yes, the ``tap, tap, tap´´ does suggest the sound of the pace of the piano player, but the emphasis is on the rhythm his walking impose to the narrative and the

omnipresence of this figure as a piano player in the bar, even when he is not playing, anticipating the love song and extending music outside of the musical act. The walking piano player is what Derrida calls *a trace*, in the sense of marking a presence (or omnipresence of music) through an absence (the temporary absence of the musical act, which is also a delay/ an anticipation of the love and war theme songs and the song that echoes Bloom's mood). For Barth, the language play is strongly related to textual functions and it will be discussed later.

Before going further, it is necessary to note that both transgressive metafiction and conceptual metafiction work like tendencies within the corpus of the texts of an author, they are not to be found decanted in the metafictional praxis. Although Barth stands for what I call transgressive metafiction, the homonymous short story from *Lost in the Funhouse* is conceptual as tendency, since it places the idea of auto-referenciality and literature as reiteration of the same image in different mirrors at the centre of the text, but starting from this idea, it generates a fictional house of mirrors in which Ambrose gets lost (as a character which populates the fictional world, even though, being in a conceptual metafiction, he exists only to suggest and stand for the author as a theoretical entity). *Ambrose His Mark* and *Water-Message* function in the same way, creating a history for the Ambrose-author, while exposing either the arbitrariness of names (*Ambrose*), or the construct of the literary heritage (*Water-Message*). By contrast, in *Frame-Story*, *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction*, *Title*, *Glossolalia* and *Life-Story*, Barth does not build a furnished (bearing the illusion of materiality) and populated fictional world (the only characters are various narrators, the author and the reader). He builds instead *textualization* and the "world" exists only though the self-imposed labour of the narrator to generate language: "I'm not the dramatic sort. May the end come quietly, then, without my knowing it. In the course of my breath. In the heart of any word. This one. This one. Perhaps I'll have a posthumous cautionary value, like gibbeted corpses" and, of course, the text does not end (*Autobiography*, 34) or "Look how far we've come together. Can't we keep on to the end? I think not. Even another sentence is too many. Only if..." (*Title*, 86). In a conceptual-metafictional key, the author's stance is expressed metaphorically: "Indeed, if I have yet to join the hosts of the suicides, it is because (fatigue apart) I find it no meaningfuller to drown myself than to go on swimming" (*Night-Sea Journey*, 7).

Decentring Myth and the *Literature of Exhaustion*

The relation of each author to myth is symptomatic for a deconstructing praxis, since myth had held the function of the centre of the structure until the abandon of Platonism in the West (around the figures of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud), as Derrida argues ("Structure", 223-242). For Barth, it follows his views on the literature of exhaustion, the mode of creating literature out of exhausted possibilities, the impossibility of origin/originality of the text: "what it comes to is that an artist does not merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it" (Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", 68). Barth assumes here the influence of Borges, where the immortal Homer, as well as the Aleph, the garden of forking paths, the Babel library, the sand book or the tiger are all metaphorical translations of the idea of an exhausted literature regarding its *topoi*, but inexhaustible as possibilities of arresting them in language. This also happens because, following the thoughts of Borges in *Pierre Menard, author of Don Quijote* in the light of modal semiotics, any caption of the same image in a new speech act generates a new fictional world within a new context. Another "mirror" of Barth, a story suggestively called *Echo*, shows Narcissus repeating his story until it loses its signification and thus he can love himself as *an-other*, since there is no founder myth in a textual empire. Let us note that Derrida uses roughly the same expressions when he talks about Joyce: "the Elijah principle of babelisation", the foreignisation of language, the division and distancing within itself (most notable in "Two Words for Joyce", 33-40).

In *Seven additional notes of the author* from 1969, the relation of Barth with myth is illuminated by the reference to Joseph Campbell and C. G. Jung. The monomyth (Campbell, *The hero*) resembles the literature of exhaustion in that that the same content can be poured into different forms, but differs from it in how the later rejects the centrality of myth and, lacking a centre, everything becomes discourse. In mythological key, Ambrose's mark, as related in *Ambrose His Mark*, relates the character to Oedipus' deformity, and it *inscribes* him in the narrative of an exceptional destiny. Surviving the exposure rite he undergoes (a bee swarm settles on his eyes and ears), uncle Konrad names him Ambrose, motivating that "Saint Ambrose had the same thing happen when he was a baby. All these bees swarmed on his mouth while he was asleep in his father's yard, and everybody said he'd grow up to be a great speaker" (30). The character anticipates the intuition from *Life-Story* that the name he holds

(this time, not as a character, but as textual voice) is misleading and he laments: "Yet only give it voice: whisper 'Ambrose' as at rare times certain people have – see what-all leaves off to answer! Ambrose, Ambrose, Ambrose! Regard that beast, ungraspable, most queer, pricked up in my soul's crannies!" (30). If Barth ironically engages in a conceptual metafiction with an essentialist view in which the signifier-signified relationship is not arbitrary, he thoroughly deconstructs it in a transgressive metafiction, reaffirming not only the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign (of which structuralists were already aware), but also the incapacity of the signifier to stand for something ontologically full (a post-structuralist novelty).

The influence of Jung's psychoanalyses transpires mostly in *Night-Sea Journey*. We read about a mythical *questa* of a swimmer who has to cross the sea during a perpetual night, with the pretext of having been initiated through *hieros gamos* (a sacred union) with something "other-than-a-he" (12), with *anima*. The hero's journey employs a series of archetypes and even metafictional allusion to Jung's theory, the night-sea journey meaning, of course, a *descensus* into Jung's collective unconscious. Along these lines, the sea is also a symbol of the matrix-uterus, but, as it is usually the case for Barth, life and writing are inseparable: the hero's sacred, erotical quest is doubled on another layer of signification with the author's own quest to find his writing motivation/vocation. The character-narrator becomes thus the voice of the author, of an inherent structural principle of the text, which reshapes the amorphous substance of the language (transcribed as the sea).

The short story (which takes part in a Möbius strip-like continuity to *Lost in the Funhouse*) starts with the following passage:

> One way or another, no matter which theory of our journey is correct, it's myself I address; to whom I rehearse as to a stranger our history and condition, and will disclose my secret hope though I sink for it. (7)

Here Barth thematically and structurally actualises the very textuality of the text, beyond the archetypal layer of signification. Following the death of the author in postmodernism, language takes place of the author and speaks on behalf of it. Even so, language can speak of a theoretical entity still called author (which dwells in language) and transcribe his labour of writing. Therefore, the schizoid language dialogise with itself as with a "stranger", because the stranger is the displaced, and the distance within language accounts for a Derridean non-

place (a place for substitutions and functions, rather than fixed and full identities). The secret hope will reveal itself as the desire to find meaning in writing or even to employ logorrhoea, and senses the ending the passage alludes to, the auto-consumption of the textual voice in a textual world where there is no reason to write or meaning in writing. The quest of the swimmer is that of searching for something that does not exist.

Imagination studies mark the dissolution of the origin through the transition from archetype to anarchetype (Braga, 249-261), the latter meaning literally "without original model", thus an anti-archetype. The rejection of the origin of the text is simultaneously a rejection of its finality, as well as the negation of a coherent (but closed) totality. Although it starts like a novel, the collection *Lost in the funhouse* does not for a single moment strive for totality, Ambrose functions as a designate for multiple textual entities (character, textual voice without a face, language itself or an *alter ego* of the author), and the text itself contains multiple intertwined levels of signification which are not mutually exclusive in interpretation. Similarly, the text reclaims an *anarchetypal sub-hermeneutics* (Braga, 256-261), a mode of reading meant to sustain and even amplify the polyphony of the text (as opposed to the reduction to a singular voice in a traditional hermeneutical equation).

Placing the Oedipal myth in a metafictional key (in *Autobiography*) is yet another Jungian influence that perpetuates the problematic relationship between author and language for Barth. He makes it clear in one of the additional notes that "The title 'Autobiography' means 'self-composition': the antecedent of the first-person pronoun is not I, but the story, speaking of itself. I am its father; its mother is the recording machine." (3) The story is an extreme case of trangressive metafiction (it does not generate a fictional world anymore, instead it deconstructs any attempt to do so) and it presents the revolt of the text against the will of the author to create it, the desire to murder its own "father", but also to be murdered "in the heart of any word. This one. This one." (34) Animated by the desire to become its own father, the textual voice affirms: "or you are me, or both're both" (31). If Oedipus' myth inverts the hierarchy and even blends the identities of father and son, the same thing happens with the rapport between art and artist in metafiction, art receives its own voice and revolts against the artist, the language auto-generates itself as a textual voice.

Ulysses too holds a substructure of myth, but only in order to systematically undermine it. There is a correspondence between the mundane sequence of events in Bloom's

life at the Ormond pub, and the episode when the hero ties himself to avoid the sirens' deadly melodic call from Odysseus' epopee. The underlying theme of music transfers from the song of the dangerous sirens to the songs of love and war from the pub, fragmented by the "tap, tap, tap" and sustained by the constructed musicality of language which lure and mesmerise the reader. At a metatextual level, language itself becomes a siren which project the reader into the abiss of textual *juissance*, as Barthes would say. The collective figure of the sirens is dissipated, polysemy being at work not only at the linguistic units level, but also at the macro level of the text: there are the beautiful barmaids which charm Bloom, and singers of tragic love songs which both hold him in place almost mesmerised and suspended in time. However, as we know, Bloom has nothing of the exceptionality of a hero, Molly's affair does not make for a tragic plot and sentimental verses does not make justice to the songs of Odysseus' sirens. As with the case of Ambrose, the wicked, authorial voice seems to protest while simultaneously reaffirm the arbitrariness of names in calling Bloom "Boowho". Not only Bloom is not a tragic hero anymore, but he is also subject to authorial irony in his own text. The language seems again liquefied, susceptible of play and mutated/re-constructed meaning, of "labour of displacement", with Roland Barthes' expression.

The Renaissance of the Author as a Practical Fiction

Thematising/flaunting the author within the text and engaging with themes like the writing process are common places in metafiction, nevertheless, transgressive metafiction goes so far as to structurally integrate these problems at the basic level of text generation. It might seem too abstract, but we are talking about the author as a fiction of language, and a necessary entity enacting the signifiers (thus, as fiction and function simultaneously). To shed light upon the status of this textual author, it is useful to consider what post-Kantian Hans Vaihinger calls *practical fiction*, meaning a logical product and artifice that credits a certain image of the world for practical, functional reasons. To act "as if" it were true, as Vaihinger puts it, means to credit the object, in this case, the author, as an important function, while not "believing" in its privileged truth or ontological fullness. The text even prescribes this mode of operating through an allusion to Dionysius the Areopagite, "I can believe them [the ideas at the base of writing/existence] *because* they are absurd" (*Night-Sea Journey*, 7), here

(de)constructing both a mystical meaning and a metafictional one – I need to credit these ideas in order to continue creating, but I acknowledge their absurdity outside their fictionality, the text seem to advocate. Moreover, the night-sea swimmer ponders:

> Yet these same reflective intervals that keep me afloat have led me into wonder, doubt, despair – strange emotions for a swimmer! – have led me, even, to suspect... that our night-sea journey is without meaning. Indeed, if I have yet to join the hosts of the suicides, it is because (fatigue apart) I find it no meaningfuller to drown myself than to go on swimming. (*Night-Sea Journey*, 7)

After poststructuralists declared the author dead, supported right afterwards by reader-oriented criticism, Linda Hutcheon states that the reader of metafiction "engage[s] himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation" (7) even more than with the case of non-self-aware fictions, in as far as metafiction overtly presupposes and interpellates the reader. Nonetheless, although metafiction depends on the engaging of the reader with the text, it simultaneously restores the authority of the author, since "a text that thematizes a self-conscious awareness of the processes of its own construction unavoidably thematizes the importance of its *constructor*" (Worthington, 118). The role of the reader in metafiction is often precisely to reconstruct the image of the author (of course, not in terms of biographism, but as a textual entity or a fictional author), which sometimes comes back as a character: "It's particularly disquieting to suspect not only that one is a fictional character but that the fiction one's in – the fiction one is – is quite the sort one least prefers" (*Life-Story*, 92). The author also comes back in *Night-Sea Journey* under the mask of the swimming character, as a conceptual centre that irradiates reflections about life and writing from this position, as Borge's Homer. In transgressive metafictions that do not explicitly claim the reconstruction of the author (*Autobiography*, *Title*), the author revives as a structural principle of the text, as textual voice or as function-fiction of the text.

If Borges still retains the dichotomy actual world – fictional world, for Barth this distinction is relevant only as a spectre following a deconstruction praxis.[1] However, the

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[1] For Barth and Joyce, the dichotomy possible world – actual world theorised by Doležel, Kripke, Ryan or Thomas Pavel in his structuralist period, which I used as a framework for analysing Borges' fiction, does not work anymore. In the case of Barth, we have seen that he transgresses this logical and logocentric opposition.

narrator of *Title* ironically resumes to the agony of not being able to realise the ontological leap from text to another kind of real: "No. The only way to get out of the mirror-maze is to close your eyes and hold out your hands. And be carried away by a valiant metaphor, I suppose, like a simile" (87). Transgressive metafiction means precisely refusing the delivery of this rescue-ticket metaphor, while incessantly delaying, anticipating and reflecting it in the "funhouse".

This self-referential language of transgressive metafiction has also the property of being constructed out of *indecidables*: affirmations that have no truth value (because we cannot decide if they are true or false), nevertheless, we retain them as possibilities (Ursa, 261). If Joyce is a master of polysemy (we can think of Penelope or the barmaids-sirens, but examples are abundant), Barth's night-sea journey is also not only a search for the archetypal uterus or the amorphous mass of signifiers, or a search for meaning in a post-Nietzschean world, or for the motivation to live/write, but all meaning co-exist in an inclusive logic (hermeneutics are foreign for polysemantic texts that abolish the logic of either/or). Reading the text means gathering all these possibilities not in order to stabilise the signification system and to determine which interpretation is true, but to gather them together for what they are: possibilities to contribute to interpretation. The fictional world of indecidables (along the lines of Derridean indecidables) is a fluid world, whose materiality is constantly constructed and immediately deconstructed, within the limits of language. Compare it to conceptual metafiction, more fond of illocutionary fictional acts than of indecidables, framing the question not in terms of (impossibility to decide) true-false, but in terms of pragmatic linguistics effect (successful or not): does the Borgesian garden of forking paths succeed in transcribing the author's metafictional intuition about literature into an image, and generating a world based on this intuition? After all, it is all a matter of different degrees of play/descentering of significations around the axis of language and about the limits of interpretation. The fiction of the author makes no exception from the text of indecidables: ultimately, Ambrose is neither (solely) the exposed child, nor the adolescent writer lost in the funhouse, nor the voice of the author, he is that textual function which, proliferating the signifier, creates a network of texts and auto-referential codes which, likewise Barth's Narcissus, loses its signified in an *ad infinitum* mirroring process.

Language is not exalted as logos which can extend the sphere from text to metatext, as was the case for Borges, instead it auto-consumes itself as a signifier.

Meta-Critique as Conclusion

After a long period of structuralist limitations, fiction theory (around the figure of Thomas Pavel, 1986) was again able to focus on the nature and mechanisms of fiction(ality), on the distance between fictional worlds and actual worlds (literature and reality), on the world-generating power of the text, and, most importantly for the present study, on the degree of materiality and completeness of the generated world.

The latter is the criterion that determined three metafictional modes, which are far from exhaustive for a species of fiction so protean, and are not to be found decanted in the praxis of metafiction, yet are the three main manners fictional world relates with actual world. The fact that metafiction contains its own commentary, its own deconstruction, makes it the ideal candidate for such fictionalist-based reading. The criterion "to what degree metafiction aims to generate a fictional world, while simultaneously deconstructing it" led to what I called *conceptual metafiction* (developed in *Metacritic*, 2015), *transgressive metafiction*, and, with a term taken from Linda Hutcheon (1989), *historiographic metafiction* (in *Proceedings of the 1st ClujLit Conference. Conflict: Not a Matter of Black and White*, 2016).

Different forms of metafiction hold different relations to the world they generate or deconstruct, and implicitly with the world we inhabit. Transgressive metafiction denies the reader the ontological truth of the actual world, as deconstruction does. A recurrence of the actual world as history is to be found in historiographic metafiction, which delimits itself from the textual self-isolation of transgressive metafiction, although retaining the awareness that both history and fiction rely on the same discursive mechanisms. In other words, historiographic metafiction is for transgressive metafiction what *new historicism* is for deconstruction – an alternative for the closed, self-sufficient text and a reopening of the discussion of referentiality.

Both Joyce after *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Barth in his post-realist writing stance manifest an extreme form of overtly textualisation and flaunting of fictionality, producing a "writerly text" which require the participation of the reader likewise the characters/textual functions, as anti-hero in a world of signs, accepting incongruity and linguistic multiplicity. The emphasis on the surface of the text, on form (the interplay of the

signifiers) marks both the absence and the postponing of the subject, simultaneously the absence and the postponing becoming the subject. Thus, transgressive metafiction deconstructs the possible world it presupposes, and this deconstructed world dwells in the phase of the perpetual pre-created world (nevertheless, constructing an empire of the text which glimpse the absence), transgresses heroic narratives and casts light upon the rupture between the signifier and the signified and a rupture (bliss) of language.

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