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**Julia Rojo de Castro**

# "The Eternal Rewriting: Language, Existentialism, and Play in Barth's 'Night-Sea Journey'"

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**Abstract:** While the self-reflexivity of Barth's short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* is largely recognized, locating and defining its key focus has generated wider controversy, with most scholars adopting either a linguistic, metafictional stance, or a philosophical, existentialist one. Taking "Night-Sea Journey" as a case example, this paper aims to conflate both readings of Barth's tales in order to reveal how both principles co-construct each other, for their concerns (as featured in the book) are not only correlative but inseverable. The study's structure, mirroring that of the tale, will map the strategies employed to convey its existential preoccupations, as well as the violation of narrative expectations through which the text's postmodern playfulness breaks in. In this way, the story's concurrent deployment of materiality and transcendence, deep philosophy and light humor, canonical literature and satire, shall all be intertwined toward a comprehensive understanding of the collection's major theme: the cyclical nature of human history, and the eternal rewriting of our stories.

**Keywords:** *Lost in the Funhouse*, "Night-Sea Journey," existentialism, metafiction, recurrence, postmodern play.

**Julia ROJO DE CASTRO**

# The Eternal Rewriting: Language, Existentialism, and Play in Barth's "Night-Sea Journey"

## 1. Introduction

The short stories contained in *Lost in the Funhouse*, first published in 1968, have been widely analyzed on the basis of their self-reflexive nature. However, establishing the main locus of this self-consciousness has become a site of critical debate, with scholars tending to favor either an existentialist reading of Barth's tales, or a linguistic (postmodern) one. The former approach usually takes consciousness and voice as its focus (Fulmer; Woolley), while the latter revolves around metafictional and formal aspects (Bell; Vitanza). Indeed, both stances are arguably valid and vastly present in the texts, whose mixture of severity and humor complicates taking sides in the debate; therefore, a position of in-betweenness may grant a broader view, from which a comprehensive study can be effected.

In "The Literature of Replenishment,"[1] Barth himself defined the postmodernist quest as one of "synthesis or transcension of these [pre-modernist and modernist] antitheses," whereby postmodern fiction "will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction" (*Friday Book* 203). Ironically, this "transcension" seems inseparable from the playfulness which pervades Barth's stories. As Steven Bell notes: "It is in fact difficult to decide to what degree Barth wants to be taken seriously … in violating the expectations a particular text induces in its readers, by constantly mocking itself, and frustrating any possibility of proceeding solemnly" (86). "Nigh-Sea Journey," the subject matter of this paper, is an exemplary story in this sense, for its narrative structure builds such strong (serious) expectations in the first few pages, as to let readers at a loss when its postmodern play comes in—thus demanding their active participation in (re)construing its meaning. At the same time, the tale itself illustrates the circularity some critics have identified at the wider level of the collection (Bell; Vitanza).[2] It is this cyclical conception in both thematic and formal terms, together with Barth's narrative strategy, that articulates the story's main concerns and enables the transcension of these antithetical readings. To this effect, the present study shall follow the tale's philosophical/playful structure as far as possible, simultaneously mapping its existential, material and literary recurrence, in the hope its analysis may seep out as the interwoven, layered meanings in "Night-Sea Journey" eventually do.

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[1] "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980) was redrafted from Barth's original essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), in an attempt to appease those who had mistook him to mean that fiction and its literary forms had been exploited to the point that innovation had become impossible—instead of his intended suggestion that this "exhaustion" could become a fruitful source of creativity.

[2] Bell ascribes this circularity to the stories' thematic arrangement, leaving the collection "open-ended, or rather open at both ends" (87), while Vitanza traces it to particular references or methods linking each tale to its subsequent counterparts, finally to start over "with the sperm swimming, presumably the seed which Anonymous, the father-artist, sets afloat in the sea in the last section of the novel" (93).

## 2. A Journey Without Meaning: Negotiating the Void Through Voice

Throughout the story, but particularly recognizable in the opening pages, the sperm's reflections on the nature of his own existence run parallel to major concerns in the history of philosophy and humankind at large—to their everlasting quest for meaning. This "official Heritage," metaphorically set against the narrator's biological one, has been transmitted precisely by virtue of its written form, a linguistic medium that Bell directly associates with the intensification of self-consciousness in every field of humanities during the twentieth century (84); to the point one could term it *word-consciousness* just as well. As soon as the second paragraph—too soon yet to appreciate the pun—existentialism breaks in in the form of history-long philosophical queries, specifically the dilemma between idealism and empiricism, the dream argument,[3] and Cartesian dualism:

> Is the journey my invention? Do the night, the sea, exist at all, I ask myself, apart from my experience of them? Do I myself exist, or is this a dream? Sometimes I wonder. And if I am, who am I? The Heritage I supposedly transport? But how can I be both vessel and contents? (Barth, *Funhouse* 3)

The readerly expectations aroused by these enticements are promptly backed by the irruption of religious and teleological concerns as to the purpose of his journey, which the narrator regards as unconvincing—but just insomuch as the "You only swim [live] once" (6), *carpe diem* argument.[4] The fact that these contrasting hypotheses are mostly voiced through rewritings of the Bible propound Barth's story as a parable of religious experience that is simultaneously satirized and rejected. "Except ye drown, ye shall not reach the Shore of Life" (6), modeled after "Except ye be converted, *and become as little children,* ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, my emphasis), is immediately dismissed as "Poppycock"; however, it foreshadows the sperm's final surrender to become *a little child* by entering "the Shore of Life" (or "kingdom of heaven") that is the ovum. Cognately, his complaint that "Chance drowns the worthy with the unworthy, bears up the fit with the unfit by whatever definition, and makes the night-sea journey essentially *haphazard* as well as murderous and unjustified" (Barth, *Funhouse* 6) rises as a direct attack against the Christian doctrine of "turning the other cheek," juxtaposing the dynamics of sexual intercourse with the inscrutability of God "the Father": "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you … That ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44–45). In this wise, the sperm's progress toward the ovum is presented as a sort of "counter *Pilgrim's Progress*,"

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[3] According to Ronald Suter, the dream argument dates back to Plato's idealism and "was taken seriously by major philosophers in both the East and the West" (185). Its famous formulation by Descartes, with his complete distrust of human senses, is playfully reversed in the last pages of the story, when the sperm doubts the existence of the She-presence before him and suggests it "may be hallucinations of a disordered sensibility" (Barth, *Funhouse* 10).

[4] Such argument finds its religious counterpart later on in the story, with Barth's "trash, splash, and be merry, we were soon enough drowned" (11) echoing the Book of Mormon: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (2 *Nephi* 28:7), and *Isaiah*: "[L]et us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die" (22:13).

where his own personal growth (delineated in terms of youth and maturity—optimism and forlornness) parallels the history of humanity in moving from a blind medieval faith, to contemporary agnosticism and nihilist considerations.

This counter-progress is also present at a literary level, whereby the text's intertextuality reverses the original sense of the works it draws from. The most obvious instance—enclosed in quotes by the narrator himself—is safely "Ours not to stop and think; ours but to swim and sink" (Barth, *Funhouse* 5), following the famous lines from Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854), thus: "Theirs not to reason why / Theirs but to do and die" (88). Yet while Tennyson's poem is drafted as an ode to the courage of a suicidal army, culminating in the chant: "Honour the charge they made! / Honour the Light Brigade! / Noble six hundred!" (89), the protagonist of "Night-Sea Journey" repeatedly points to the irrationality of regarding the swim as a "a positively heroic enterprise" (Barth, *Funhouse* 9), a youthful attitude he now finds appalling (5). Less obvious, however, remains the story's metaphysical influence, whose repeated allusions to "the Shores of Light" (5), "the Shore of Life" (6), and other capitalized uses of "Shore" (4–5, 7, 10–11, 13) are reminiscent of Henry Vaughan's "They are all Gone into the World of Light" (1655). Unlike the original poem, whose elegiac form invoked the memory of these departed friends for solace: "Their very memory is fair and bright, / And my sad thoughts doth clear" (152), the sperm mourns not only their loss but the absurdity of their lives and deaths, for which he is "inconsolable" (Barth, *Funhouse* 5). Thus Vaughan's God-craving cry "They are all gone into the world of light! And I alone sit ling'ring here!" (152) is again redrafted into Barth's void-accepting "Now they are all gone down … while wretched I swim on" (*Funhouse* 4).

Indeed, the narrator relentlessly marks on the absurdity of his journey and, by extension, of any theory attempting to bestow some meaning on it. George Kurman and Roger Rouland, who take "Night-Sea Journey" to be loosely but consistently modeled after Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, note how both Marlow and the spermatozoon are constantly confronted with an existential dilemma regarding the worth of their journey within the history of their species, as well as with the impossibility to provide a definite answer (5). On the other hand, the sperm's unwillingness to put an end to it "because (fatigue apart) I find it no meaningfuller to drown myself than to go on swimming" (Barth, *Funhouse* 4) inscribes him in the very quest he professes to abhor: "I die already; this fellow transported by passion is not I; *I am he who abjures and rejects the night-sea journey!* I… … I have no will" (12). The narrator's seeming contradictions, besides being inherently human, appear closely tied to the self-consciousness that his own liminal state gives rise to, in both narrative and formal (linguistic) terms. Perhaps the clearest instance of this bewilderment lies in the disarray of pronouns and terms of addressed employed, as a matter of fact, toward *himself*—whether present or future.[5] James Fulmer, who also notes the narrator's "feeling of being and not being its future self" (340), argues that what the meaninglessness of language in *Lost in the*

[5] Given the story is, for the most part, a retrospective reflection—with a clearly present narrative standpoint appearing only as the female force becomes irresistible—it could be argued every first-person pronoun employed is also a second-person one; that the narrator is addressing his self in *potentiality* as much as in *actuality*. The capitalization of "You" immediately before his final merging would support this view: "*You* who *I* may be about to become, whatever *You* are, *I* beg *You* to listen" (12, my emphasis).

*Funhouse* actually conceals is the nothingness of consciousness, with the consequent impossibility to explain an act or locate an essence that precedes existence (335–339). Entrapped in this spiral of reasoning (or lack thereof), the sperm's private tale of "awful recollection and negative resolve" (Barth, *Funhouse* 12) becomes circumscribed in the wider (meta)narrative of the human species. His identity and sense of self, like Marlow's in *Heart of Darkness*, dissolves, his voice turning into "the recitation of a story that has been lived and told before, and is destined to be lived and told again" (Kurman and Rouland 12).

Notwithstanding such considerations, the eternal rewriting of this story—like the eternal recurrence of life cycles, or of the history of humankind—is not necessarily meaningless. Even while the narrator's individuality is at stake, the concerns he voices are universal as much as they are particular, and existential insomuch as encoded in discourse. This dual quality of his speech foregrounds the indissociable bond between philosophical and linguistic preoccupations entrenched in the narrative, and demands the acknowledgement of their reciprocal construction. As Deborah Woolley points out: "Self-consciousness is explored on two planes in *Lost in the Funhouse*, the existential and the linguistic, which come together as problems of narrative voice," resulting in a loss of narrative identity and its fading into mere discourse (468). Yet it is not only linguistic self-reflexivity that has reduced the narrator "to a voice addressing itself" (468); by his own reckoning, the horrors of existence are equally responsible for purging him "of opinions, as of vanity, … hope, vitality, everything—except dull dread and a kind of *melancholy, stunned persistence*" (Barth, *Funhouse* 9, my emphasis). The narrator's *narrative* persistence, emanating from the negative resolve shaped by these horrors, tie in again with the will to discourse and the will to being, with being "both vessel and contents"—carrying both an "official Heritage" and "a private legacy" (12), a play on words that emphasizes the individual and collective nature of human identity through a biological-historical parallel. The self-consciousness that leads Barth's *Funhouse* narrators to realize the meaninglessness of their existence thus reveals that narrative voice, like language, "has a double nature: it is both personality and the vehicle by which personality is conveyed—both signified and signifier" (Woolley 470). This definition of voice leads back to Bell's contention that self-consciousness has taken over humanistic disciplines by drawing attention to their written form, and dovetails Barth's concern for literary and linguistic exhaustion with the metafictional basis of the story. The narrator's sudden self-retort "Has that been said before?" (Barth, *Funhouse* 4) right after his first reference to absurdity may seem in itself absurd, but it denotes both an anxiety toward senseless repetition and a desire to produce new and original discourse. Once more, the sperm's anxiety to retain a sense of individuality and distinctness coincides with the larger intellectual concerns of the contemporary era—and, in clashing with the awareness that he, like the writer who penned him, is bound to perform just another life cycle in the endless cycle of history, this preoccupation becomes authorial as well as existential, humanistic, and philosophical. In this case, however, the query above calls attention to the importance of writing and storytelling within Barth's conception of metafiction.

In close reading the text, Victor Vitanza takes "Night-Sea Journey" as a metaphor of the modern writer's dilemma, suggesting that "If the reader substitutes throughout the story the verb 'to write' for the verb 'to swim,' the story becomes an exemplum of the writer who

has the impulse to write, but finds he has nothing to say that has not already been said" (85). Along these lines, he identifies a tail/tale pun associating the sperm's swimming with the act of writing (86), which he subsequently expands and surmises as the main theme in all fourteen stories, together with Barth's authorial self as their ultimate protagonist. Although Vitanza's argument on substitution is a sound one, it is also somewhat limited: the verb "to swim" could in fact be replaced by multiple verbal forms, and each of them would confer a different meaning to the tale. As the discussion above might have suggested, "to live" is a tempting choice for the reader, since Barth actually overwrites expressions originally using this verb with "to swim." "To read," on the other hand, would underscore the reader's part in the process of construing meaning in fiction: a fundamental one in postmodernist narrative, as Woolley and Barthes avouch (461; 4). Similarly, "to think" or merely "to continue" would make equally apt choices, whereby the story's fateful *joie de nager* would become *joie d'écrire, de lire, de penser, de continuer*, etc. Hence, positing some authorial identity as the "supertail" or master Maker of the story—and the rest of *Lost in the Funhouse* at that—can be a dangerous leap to take. Barth himself warned against such assumptions in a 1979 presentation entitled "The Self in Fiction," believing an authorial self should be "at least as self-knowing and self-controlled, perhaps even as self-effacing, as it is self-conscious. Its presence will be at once as functional and as finally beside the point as the novel's being set on the Mississippi, say, or in Macondo" (*Friday Book* 213–214); and it is perhaps this self-effacing functionality that allows so many readings of the story.

The anxiety of writing set against formal and literary conventions is nonetheless a prevalent theme, which may grant Vitanza's assertion that all sections "are essentially the same story" (84). This claim seems the more appropriate in that Vitanza ties the sameness and circularity of the stories to the epic genre employed in them—or rather "deployed against [itself] to generate new and lively work," as Barth theory of literary replenishment avowed (*Friday Book* 205). Most importantly perhaps, the notion of *quest* is inherent to the epic, and the intrinsically existential nature of the stories would enable the quest for voice, meaning, and identity to be suitably accommodated along the writerly quest for innovation.[6] The resemblance of the sperm's quest with that of mythical heroes is implied by Barth in his "Seven Additional Author's Notes," where he mentions Lord Raglan, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell (*Funhouse* 203) to illustrate that "all man's myths and stories have an essential sameness, but that man's creativity has given the hero and the story a thousand faces" (Vitanza 84). Analogously, the similarity and circuitousness of the tales and *Lost in the Funhouse* as a whole, as related to the act of writing, display "the homologous relation of all man's stories … that all man's stories share this same paradigmatic structure" (95–96). The very circularity of the narrator's addresser/addressee relation in "Night-Sea Journey" makes a point on the nature and purpose of storytelling, culminating in a "You to whom, *through whom* I speak" (Barth, *Funhouse* 12, my emphasis) that refers back to the initial "it's myself

[6] In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes associates the *writerly* with texts demanding the reader's active participation in construing their meaning (generally identified with postmodern literature therefrom), as opposed to the *readerly*—works turning their readers into mere recipients or consumers of the text (4). A mutually exclusive understanding of both terms would however leave Barth's story at an impasse, since its reliance on the readerly to shroud its writerly underpinning echoes the author's postmodern commitment to the transcension of literary antitheses.

I address" (3). From the broadest level of literary tradition to the tiniest portion of Barth's text, the cyclical nature and recurrence of human lives and fictions is thereby reenacted.

Following this line of thought, the different interpretations of the text could be accommodated to suggest "essentially the same" reading. From Kurman and Rouland's observation that both Marlow and the sperm explore the nature of their own storytelling as well as of human existence (6), to Bell's allegorical understanding of the tale as tracing analogies between life and literature "in the hope of finding a role or place for literature in life" (87–88), all point toward the circularity and recurrence not only of history and life, but consequently of human desire and the drive to *speak itself* through storytelling. Both self-reflexive planes are entrenched in the narrative, and seep through the narrator's discourse; as Woolley avers: "The personal dilemma and the writerly dilemma as Barth presents them, both products of the mind's and of language's capacity for self-reflection, have the same solution: voice, or rather what voice makes possible—the expression of human qualities and concerns" (479). In mourning the death of his comrades and brooding over the absurdity of his existence, Barth's nihilist spermatozoon eventually becomes—like Ginsberg's poetic persona in the original lines of "Howl"[7]—"the tale-bearer of a generation" (Barth, *Funhouse* 9), his voice the vessel and contents of the meaning he abjures and rejects.

### 3. Partaking of the Absurdity: Rewriting the Void Through Play

The existential quandary of eternal recurrence in both historical and literary terms, as anticipated, has a playful side to it. In 1967, a year before *Lost in the Funhouse* was published, Barth proposed that imitation and parody have been an intrinsic aspect of the novel since its earliest origins. The intertextual (intertemporal) dialogue and literary renewal thus generated—satirical though it may be—need not be ludicrous: "'History repeats itself as farce'—meaning, of course, in the form or mode of farce, not that history is farcical. The imitation … is something new and may be quite serious and passionate despite its farcical aspect" (*Friday Book* 72). In this light, the story's overt parody of the epic genre, religious texts, philosophical queries and elegiac forms takes on distinctly humorous connotations that further—as much as they reverse—their inherently existential nature. "Nigh-Sea Journey," like its own protagonist on entering the ovum, merges its own identity to become "something both and neither" (Barth, *Funhouse* 11); an ambivalent feature just as integral to the narrator's soliloquy, which constantly acknowledges the futility of swimming and yet refuses to give up: "The thoughtful swimmer's choices, then, they say, are two: give over trashing and go under for good, or embrace the absurdity … I find neither course acceptable" (5). Far from contradictory, this attitude foregrounds the convergence of both drives: the existential and the absurd—the absurdity of existentialism and the existential quality of absurdism—much like Barth champions the seriousness of farce. Alongside Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, despite the hardships and dissatisfaction of the journey, "both protagonists run up against

[7] The opening of Ginsberg's poem "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" (9) is redrafted in the text as "I have seen the best swimmers of my generation go under" (Barth, *Funhouse* 4).

meaninglessness" (Kurman and Rouland 12); or rather, in the sperm's case, he partakes of the absurdity and endows it with meaning in the process.

Such construal of meaning appears inseparable from the circular relations of intertextuality, history, and narrative structure in the text. The latter, while previously assessed for the virtual sameness of its addressor/addressee, can nonetheless be expanded to unveil yet another structural repetition, one encompassing the narrator's drive to continue swimming beyond existential and absurdist considerations. In the opening paragraph, he declares: "[I]t'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" (Barth, *Funhouse* 3, my emphasis). This "secret hope" will be disclosed at the very end of the tale—immediately before "sinking" into the egg and, in putting an end to his story, giving way to the recurrence of his history: "It is *not* love that sustains me! No … What has fetched me across this dreadful sea is a single hope … Mad as it may be, my dream is that some unimaginable embodiment of myself (or myself plus Her if that's how it must be) will come to find itself expressing, in however garbled or radical a translation, a reflection of these reflections" (12). The realization of this hope is, of course, problematic. On the factual (material) plane, its enactment will but translate his discourse into yet another journey—yet another Maker of night-sea journeys—resulting from his union with Her. On a more metaphorical dimension, however, inscribing his life (and voice) into the eternal chain of death and rebirth, birth and death, implies a retextualization of his discourse that parallels its drives to those behind history and storytelling. Even while the protagonist wishes his future self to terminate what he regards as an endless cycle of suffering, his words simultaneously yearn for repetition—or, as the emphasis on "translation" and "reflection" suggests, for *imitation*. This imitative principle is playfully deployed in his own speech throughout the text and constitutes the main "farcical" tenet of its intertextual references. Tennyson's memorable ode thus sings to a newly conceived "light brigade," pursuing a radically translated—but equally suicidal—incursion into "enemy ground"; while Vaughan's metaphysical poem is redrafted to become physical at a metaphorical level too—its ascent to the "World of Light" signifying but the descent onto further materiality.

Similarly, the spermatozoon's extravagant vocabulary consciously plays on the spiritual connotations of his words to preclude (and encourage) active interpretation on the part of the reader. This characteristic, although of a mainly linguistic nature, articulates the story's structure of meaning by introducing a formal difference that satirically emphasizes a thematic sameness—and wherefore the analogous nature of human quests, fictions, and history. In Bell's phrasing: "Language has the power to reveal, but it also conceals and 'differs.' Above all it is playfully indeterminant, and calls out for interpretation. Thus writing becomes infinitely self-generating or 'father-less': interpretation follows interpretation; each text generates, at times geometrically, more texts" (85). Barth's move from the "serious" (metaphysical) expectations generated by language, to their writerly violation through narrative, becomes apparent once the narrator's reflections move *beyond* our own philosophical and religious history, hinting at the tale's "farcical" (physical) overtones with such propositions as "our Maker wished us unmade … for reasons unknowable to us He wanted desperately to prevent our reaching that happy place and fulfilling our destiny … the end for which He created

us and launched us forth … was perhaps immoral, even obscene" (*Funhouse* 7). An informed reading, however, reveals these unabashed blasphemies to be frolicsome truths on the "philosophy of sex," as hinted by the narrator's puritanical attitude in repeatedly referring to the object of his journey as "obscene" (6, 7, 11). In consonance, Vitanza's take of Barth's "tail/tale" as a metafictional pun could easily accommodate Kurman and Rouland's understanding of "seaman/semen" at an intra- and inter-textual level (5), drawing the farcical and the existential—the narrative and the linguistic—again to coalesce. The playful indeterminacy of language, as of the tale's structure of meaning—whereby the theory that "Makers and swimmers *each generate the other*" (Barth, *Funhouse* 8) could refer to fathers and children, writers and characters, readers and texts—highlights the importance of active interpretation toward its construal, while its recurrent circularity signals the emptiness of artificial borders in reading and storytelling. The "void" or absurdity underlying the sperm's existentialist dilemma thus stresses how "the acts of reading and interpretation are no longer a matter of tracing the text to its center, but of recognizing the abyss at the center of the labyrinthine text and participating in its infinite combinations and recombinations of language" (Woolley 461–462). It is only in partaking of this absurdity that the reader, too, is able to create meaning out of the play of infinite possibilities within Barth's finite text. Two parallel "quests" thereby make their way together through the night-sea: a material, ontological one for the reader, who ignores *what* the narrator is—and a transcendental, epistemological one for the narrator, who ignores *why* he is. This duality is withal not dichotomous, since the reader's quest for meaning is engulfed by the narrator's own negotiation of identity, both of which are ultimately performed through discourse. Therefore, the sperm's claim "[I]t is myself I talk to, to keep my reason in this awful darkness" (Barth, *Funhouse* 10), as Bell contends of the collection as a whole, affirms the notion of "play" against existential doubt, and so "posits writing (and indirectly reading) as a possible escape from madness" (85).

Simultaneously revealed and concealed, the seriousness behind the story's farcical aspect surfaces—paradoxically and not—by means of play. From this perspective, Kurman and Rouland's constant equations between Conrad's canonical seaman and Barth's moaning spermatozoon become a hilarious instance of the extent to which "Night-Sea Journey" can be taken perhaps too seriously. The literary, historical, and ontological gap between both characters does not, of course, undermine the significance of either text—and indeed the philosophical parallels delineated in their article, like the significance of the protagonists' quest for meaning, hold as true to Marlow as to the sperm. On the contrary, the self-reflexive, metafictional, and playful nature of Barth's tale makes a point not only of Conrad's novel, but of fiction and literature at large. As Woolley frames it: "Self-reflexivity leads to the awareness that language is fiction-making, that the self and the world are fictions. … Even while Barth disintegrates the tale, the teller, and the medium—superficially *denying* human concerns—he portrays the efforts to make language signify, the desire to speak and be heard" (480). The narrator's conflicting drives, his final surrender to (pro)creation while demanding the end of all journeys, could be interpreted accordingly. The impossibility of terminating the cyclical nature of human life—be it literary, biological, historical, or philosophical—is subsumed in the story through the circularity of its play. The very

"abstractions" employed by the narrator to describe his fate—"*consummation, transfiguration, union of contraries, transcension of categories*" (Barth, *Funhouse* 11)—are applied to the dynamics of reference and self-reference throughout the text, for they point to his actual as well as his potential self, but also to the atemporal spiral both selves are entrapped in. The physical and the spiritual, the historical and the personal, the imitative and the innovative, merge and acquire a narrative meaning that does not conflict with their conventional, mutually exclusive signification. Even the denial of human concerns, which paradoxically presupposes their existence, enters this postmodern transcension of categories via the dream argument, whose distrust of material reality—as Wittgenstein avers—becomes "the game of doubting itself [and] presupposes certainty" (qtd. in Suter 190).

In turn, the protagonist's sense of self becomes engulfed in this circuitous game by continuously rewriting its own void through language and narrative voice. This continuous dispersal and reconstrual of identity ultimately parallels the fragmented image produced by the mirrors of a funhouse: simultaneously broken, distorted, and reconstructed from a multiplicity of angles. The essential sameness and difference of every image, as of every life and story, suggests the infinite possibilities for play within the finite system of language. From a different (if contiguous) angle of reading, the sperm's final surrender to the infinity of "Love" despite his alleged nihilism renders him just one more gear in the machinery of history, rehearsing a story that has been told to exhaustion but shall be retold eternally. The microstructure of Barth's story, then, mirrors the macrostructures of literature, humanity, and history it is (quite literally) immersed in—with all its linguistic, existential, and narrative farcical references. As Bell evinces in his study of the collection's narrative structure, the postmodern play tied to its circularity—like that of "Night-Sea Journey"—is also inherent to Barth's work as a whole, and so functions "as a metaphor or microcosm of the Barthian oeuvre, and ultimately of the history of Western literature itself" (85). The rewriting of this sameness in literary, personal, and historical terms is not, however, equivalent to "give over trashing and go under for good," nor to "embrace the absurdity"—literary as well as literal death in the tale. That the narrator, alongside the reader, relinquishes the swim only when his end forecasts a new beginning contrarily recalls the Nietzschean notion of *amor fati*: the unconditional salute to all that is inevitable in life and, beyond its mere acceptance, the wish for nothing in it to be different—whether future or past (Nietzsche 54). In partaking of this infinite repetition, "Night-Sea Journey" plays on the similarity of human quests and narratives, celebrating the eternal rewriting of our stories through its mirrors.

## 4. Conclusions

The different planes of self-consciousness in Barth's text, as this study aims to conclude, are inseparable insofar as they concur to articulate the story's structure of meaning. The linguistic basis of narrative voice allows both for the expression of existential concerns, and the introduction of postmodern play that simultaneously supports and satirizes them. It is in acknowledging the void that lies at the core of language, and negotiating the voice that surrounds it, that the story's overlapping concerns coalesce and co-construct each other—as farcically as they remain solemn.

Every literary device in "Night-Sea Journey" is thus wielded to several constituent and complementary ends. Intertextual references to biblical and canonical sources are reversed as to emphasize the narrator's nihilism and the professed absurdity of his being; yet their redrafting and relocation also counter their original severity, imbuing them with heavily physical implications that hint at the story's intended meaning. Writerly choices regarding vocabulary run akin to this confusion of materialism and transcendence, as does the blunder of philosophical concepts when expanded beyond their own reach. Thence the interplay of language and voice hinders, insomuch as it endorses, as self-conscious and active a reading as the act of writing itself—simultaneously latching onto existential queries whose familiarity renders them personally truthful as well as universal. The text's narrative scaffolding similarly baits the reader into assumptions that must be eventually discarded. Considered as a whole, however, its significance outreaches this writerly purpose and mirrors the circularity permeating every aspect of human life and history. The narrator's inability to escape the cyclical nature of procreation—metaphorically literary creation, interpretation, and dialogue—partakes of the collection's spiral-like structure; ultimately to stand for a microcosm of Western tradition, literature, and history at large. Concurrently denouncing and performing the eternal recurrence it is entrapped in, the narrative both rejects and acknowledges the absurdity of endless repetition, embracing instead the possibility of voice and renewal that postmodern play may grant. Therefrom, the eternal rewriting of humankind's history and stories emerges as the conflation of formal preoccupations and the existential concerns they voice, whereby both principles are rendered inseverable.

In light of these considerations, the correlativity of metafictional and philosophical readings becomes apparent—a point the narrator's condition may exemplify more clearly. At a narrative and epistemological level, the solemnity of Barth's sperm, in his nihilist attitude and puritanical views, demands that the reader take him seriously. At a formal and ontological level, on the other hand, the artful strategies whereby his "history and condition" are revealed warn directly against the temptation—into which existential readings of *Lost in the Funhouse* often fall—of taking his Author-Father *too* seriously. It is noteworthy, however, that the narrator's ontological condition is construed through narrative as much as through language—a dynamics similarly applicable to his epistemological quest—which again highlights the reciprocal relations of meaning in the text. Therefore, while such claims as Fulmer's assertion that an existentialist reading of *Lost in the Funhouse* is "superior to the linguistic, deconstructionist approach" (338–339) are too limiting, it is arguable that a purely metafictional understanding of the text would equally fail to apprehend it. The void generated by its linguistic medium becomes inseparable from its narrator's own sense of emptiness—both of which, as discussed above, can be macroscopically extrapolated. Withal, the narrative nature of this void and the discursive persistence of its narrator foreground that "the very means of negotiating absence is inescapably a mode of presence" (Woolley 481), as the sperm's (existential) negotiation of liminality and the writerly (linguistic) negotiation of literary exhaustion suggest. The farcical aspect of this negotiation, as essayed in the story, posits play as the ultimate device to perform it at both literary and philosophical levels. Its comical indeterminacy, at a time enhancing the existentialism of the text and stressing its absurdity, draws structuralist dualisms to coalesce, fulfilling Barth's aim to

transcend (pre)modern antitheses and offering a comprehensive understanding of his work. The present study, by focusing first on its philosophical implications and subsequently expanding them to encompass their satirical rewriting, has attempted to reproduce the narrative dynamics of "Night-Sea Journey" so as to expose them the more faithfully—and so that its different readings grow as indissociable as the story's own layers of meaning.

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**Bioprofile of the author**

Julia Rojo de Castro is a postgraduate student at Complutense University of Madrid, where she obtained a Degree in English Studies in 2020 and is now pursuing a Master's in North American Studies. Her research interests revolve mostly around contemporary literature, particularly postmodernism, which she tackles from a poststructuralist approach. However, she is also intrigued by the bearings of the literary past upon the present, with their resulting suspension (or transfiguration) of discursive formations and narrative concerns, a perspective she tries to incorporate into her work.

Contact: < juliaroj@ucm.es >