

# Merging Identities and Multiple Interpretations in John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey"

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## Abstract

The present article approaches John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey", a particular story from *Lost in the Funhouse* collection (1968), from different perspectives. Such postmodern themes as fluidity of identity, spatio-temporal ambiguity, and plurality of interpretations are detected in this analysis. As stated properly by Charles A. S. Ernst (2004), "Night-Sea Journey" in Barth's corpus is "a functioning narrative within a single larger Barthian discourse" (2004: 1). While Ernst focuses mostly on the text as "an experimental reading strategy", this paper unravels the writing, or better to say, the narrating strategies of Barth's achievement.

The objectives of this scrutiny are to show the inexhaustibility and responsiveness of this postmodern text to different readings, present the constructedness of interpretations, pinpoint the interdiscursivity of the text, and emphasize the role of ideology in the text. This paper draws its arguments on the theories of different disciplines; for the definition of a text, it deploys the notions of Roland Barthes. The narratological aspects of the analysis depend on the views of Rimmon-Kenan, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck.

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### **Work to Text**

In his essay, "From Work to Text," Barthes clearly pinpoints the differences between both work and text and shows his interests lie with the text. These differences are quite conducive to a more comprehensive appreciation of Barth's "Night-Sea Journey". The first difference is that "the work can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses), the text is a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse. . . . The Text is experienced only in an activity of production" (1977: 286). The way that Barth involves the reader in the process of producing his story is a testimony of its textuality. The other difference is that the work closes on a signified, but the text practices the infinite deferment of the signified. Barthes attributes the infinity of the signifier to the idea of *playing*: "the generation of the perpetual signifier . . . in the field of the text is realized . . . according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations" (1977: 287-288). "Night-Sea Journey" provides a textual field for the reader to freely *play* with different interpretations. This view is in the line of Charles A. S. Ernst's which takes Barthian discourse as "an ever increasing text-filed" (2004: 1). Barth creates this productive field play through his experimentations with the narratological aspects of the text.

### **Plurality of the Text**

The plurality of the text is the other feature which Roland Barthes defines as the text's irreducibility: "The Text is not a coexistence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation . . . but to an explosion, a dissemination" (1977: 288). All such features lead us to view the text as a productive process rather than a concrete entity ready to be digested by the reader. As a processual text, Barth's story yields to multiple readings as it thematically displays "Barth[']s plays with the myth of creation" (1988: 151) and stylistically his "play[s] with language and allusion" (Mistri 1988: 152).

For Roland Barthes, literature is not a finished product, but "a writing practice" (Vollbrecht, 1994: 72). This view has deep roots in his belief in the productivity of the text. He writes:

The text is a productivity. . . . Even when written (fixed), it does not stop working, maintaining a process of production. The text works what? Language. It deconstructs the language of communication, representation or expression . . . and reconstructs another language, voluminous, having neither bottom nor surface, for its space is not of the figure, the painting, the frame, but the stereographic space of combative play, which is infinite once one has gone outside the limits of current communication. (1981: 36-37).

### **Materiality of the Signifiers**

Barthes regards a literary text as "the very materiality of the signifiers" (Klinkowitz, 1988: 48). This materiality is the realm of interaction or play. It is the signifying practice where the text and the reader meet. For this meeting to take place, the text must be conceived of as a production. Barthes replaces signification with signifiante. In this regard, Klinkowitz explains, "signification is something which happens on the level of product, but the signifying work of signifiante happens in the realm of production. The language of writing enters the reader in order to work him or her and undo previous senses of signification—*signifiante* is therefore the text actively at work within the reader" (1988: 78).

### **Focus of This Paper**

The present paper takes Barth's "Night-Sea Journey" as the textual signifiante for the active participation of the reader. As Jeff Rackham rightly states on John Barth's fiction, "Perhaps what we need now is not another reading of the work, but a new reader. . . . the reader must negotiate his role" (1981: 1).

Through the notion of signifiante, Barthes equates reading with writing:

Now, I am convinced that a theory of reading (that reading which has always been the poor relation of literary creation) is absolutely dependent on a theory of writing: to read a text is to discover – on a corporeal, not a conscious level – *how*

*it was written*, to invest oneself in production, not the product. This movement of coincidence can be initiated either in the usual fashion, by pleasurably reliving the poetics of the work, or in a more modern way, by removing from oneself all forms of censorship to allow the text the freedom of all its semantic and symbolic excesses; at this point, to read is truly to write: I write – or rewrite – the text I am reading, even better and more searchingly than its author did. (1985: 189)

### **Writer's Text - *Night-Sea Journey***

Envisaged through Barthes' view, John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey" is a writer-ly text which provides the signifiante for the reader's productive interaction. Zenobia Mistri contends that "Barth uses several traps for the reader or would-be serious symbol and reference hunter" (1988: 151). While Mistri specifies the nature of these "traps" to "Biblical overtones, mythic and epic allusions, Freudian analysis, philosophical musings and sexual puns" (1988: 151), this paper focuses on the narrative structure of the story. It is argued that the Barthesian field of play is provided by the specific narrative features of the text.

### **A Long Quotation**

Narratologically, "Night-Sea Journey" is a long direct quotation uttered by an I-narrator. This narrator is variously described as a "muse-sperm" (Mistri 1988: 151) or an "existential voyager" (Olson 1990: 56). None of the critics, however, has focused on the protean nature of the narrating I. All through the text, there is no hint of the narratee to which it is addressed, hence a monologue. As in monologues, the narratee constructed by the I-narrator is silent and detached from the process of the harangue. As quoted by Rimmon-Kenan (2002: 95), Genette calls the narrator who is "'above' or superior to the story he narrates" as extradiegetic; on the other hand, if the narrator is also diegetic character in the first narrative told by the extradiegetic narrator, then he is a second-degree, or intradiegetic narrator".

Based on this definition, the I-narrator in "Night-Sea Journey" is the intradiegetic narrator and the narrator who directly quotes the I's speech, that is the whole text, is an extradiegetic narrator. It should be noted, however, that the role of the extradiegetic narrator here is ambivalent. With respect to the (intradiegetic) narrator-narratee relationship, the silent narrator

is a narratee, and because s/he is outside the world of the text, s/he is extradiegetic narratee. On the other hand, in the reader-narrator relationship, the extradiegetic narratee plays the role of an extradiegetic narrator. This ambivalence is an inherent feature of this postmodern text which plays with narratological norms.

### **Ambivalence**

In terms of focalization also, Barth's text is ambivalent. As defined by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck (2005), focalization "refers to the relation between that which is focalized – the characters, actions, and objects offered to the reader – and the focalizer, the agent who perceives and who therefore determines what is presented to the reader" (70). There are two types of focalizer: the internal and external. If the focalizer belongs to the fictional universe, s/he is internal; if s/he remains outside of it, s/he is external (Herman and Vervaeck 2005: 71).

The intradiegetic narrator of "Night-Sea Journey" is internal focalizer, and the silent extradiegetic narrator is external focalizer. However, this distinction is not so clear-cut in this text; within the narrative of the I's speech there appear some cases in which there happen shifts from the internal to the external and vice versa.

In this respect, this paper applies the strategy Hermand and Vervaeck adopt in their distinctions between the internal and the external focalizers. These critics comment: "If the narrating I considers something the experiencing I did, then there is external focalization if the scene is perceived by the narrating I, and internal focalization if it is perceived by the experiencing I" (2005: 73). Here, the distinction is based on who presents the scene; if the presenter is the one who experiences the scene, it is internal; but if the scene is presented by the one who narrates it, it is external focalization. The alternation between internal and external focalization is a feature of most texts, but they abound in texts in which the narrator constantly puts under question him/herself and/or fluctuates between different states of mind.

### **Oscillation**

This oscillation is the other factor which adds to the complexity of Barth's text and calls for a more active commitment on the part of the reader. "Night-Sea Journey" exhibits this

complication from the beginning paragraph: “One way or another, no matter which theory of our journey is correct, it’s myself I address” (Yeganeh 2002: 660). The first part of this sentence, which is more often a comment on the *status qua*, is uttered by the I who is external, whereas the second part, “it’s myself I address”, is produced by the internal focalizer. The external position of the I speaker here is further backed up by the cataphoric occurrence of the personal deixis of “our”, a linguistic trait which prompts the reader to keep on reading. Moreover, the intradiegetic act of addressing himself in the text in an attempt to set up his narratee adds to the multi-layeredness of the narrative.

### **A Monologue**

Hence, viewed generally, this text is a monologue in which the I-speaker addresses himself; the whole address/text is put in quotation marks, which determines the presence of another addressee who is the silent extradiegetic narratee. This narratee in turn addresses the text to the implied reader. Such an intricate structure gives the text multiple narrative levels. In Rimmon-Kenan’s terminology, “the diegetic level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, the hypodiegetic level [a level ‘below’ another level of diegesis] by a diegetic (intradiegetic) one” (2002: 93). However, none of the functions that Rimmon-Kenan enumerates for hypodiegetic narratives is applicable to Barth’s text. Here, it could be argued that the relation between the diegetic and hypodiegetic narrative has a stylistic function which adds to the complexity of the text. This stylistic function realizes the ambiguity of the text which is also semantically conveyed through the beginning words “One way or another, no matter which theory”, and the deixis of “our”.

### **Split in the Self and Act**

Moreover, linguistically speaking, the beginning paragraph constructs the I-narrator as a passive figure. Almost all the verbs in the first paragraph show the passivity of the narrating I. One might counter-argue that the verb “address” is also an active verb showing the speaker’s determination. It should be noted however that the act of addressing as used here implies two important issues; one is the fracture of the I-speaker’s identity between the addressee and the addressed. This split in the self and the act of addressing one’s self signify the estrangement which the narrator nurtures with respect to his self. This point is further developed in the following phrase when the speaker states: “to whom [myself] I rehearse as to a stranger our

history and condition". Not only is "myself" described as a stranger, but also the narrator adopts for himself the role of one who "rehearses"; this term brings into the text the discourse of drama. It could be contended that here the I-narrator is more a performer, an actor, than a character; this interpretation somehow makes the reader doubt the sincerity and reliability of the narrator's narrative. Besides, the theme of estrangement and the split identity are two key themes of postmodernism which have begun with modernism.

### **Syntactic Objectification**

The second point regarding the act of addressing is that this act is itself objectified syntactically. The I-speaker chooses to say "it's myself I address" instead of saying "I address myself." Linguistically, there is a great difference between the two grammatical structures. In the latter, I sits in the position of the subject of the sentence and is therefore the agent or doer of the act of addressing; whereas in the former, both "myself" and "address" stand as the object of compliment for "it's", hence subordinated. This structure not only doubles the objectification of "myself", but it also diminishes the power of the doer of the act. The only active verb in this short paragraph is "will disclose" which clearly enough sets up the role and determination of the first-person speaker as the narrator. The force of the act of disclosing is intensified by the consequence which follows it: "and will disclose my secret hope though I sink for it". (Yeganeh 2002: 660). This intensification arouses the curiosity of the reader to figure out the conditions which lead him to a suicidal and/or self-sacrificial resolve. Besides the verb "sink" foreshadows the spatial setting of the narrative, the sea.

The second paragraph abounds in ontological questions which the intradiegetic narrator asks himself. These questions are: "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?" (Yeganeh 2002: 660). Such philosophical questions show that the narrator here is viewing himself from a distance, hence he is the external focalizer. This external focalization objectifies the addressee, that is, his own self. Only when he expresses his wonder, he shifts to an internal position. Furthermore, these questions reveal the narrator's doubts about himself, his identity, his journey, and the world in which he resides. The occurrence of these

questions from the very beginning of the text demands a more active part for the reader. The narrator's monologue is intertextualized with other discourses like philosophy of phenomenology (in words like "exist", "experience", "who am I?"), psychology (in such words as "dream" and "invention"). The text is interdiscursive with the discourses of biology (in "Heritage") and mechanics (in "transport", "vessel", and "contents"). Syntactically also, the paragraph is highly demanding, especially with the question "The Heritage I supposedly transport?". This question is an ellipsis which is to be completed by the reader. The options are "What/How about the Heritage I supposedly transport?"; "What is the Heritage I supposedly transport?"; "What happens to the Heritage I supposedly transport?"; "Where is the Heritage I supposedly transport?". Each one of these questions opens a new angle on the theme of the question and helps the reader "write" the story in different ways. Apart from the reader's participation in "writing" this text, the omission of the question words here adds to the ambiguity of the question itself which highlights its importance within the context of the narrative.

### **Passivity**

Linguistically, the second paragraph evinces the passivity of the narrator. Such verbs as "exist, is, am, be, are" are relational ones; the others show actions in which either the monologuer is impressed as in "wonder" and "beset", or he is compared metaphorically to a passive bearer or container like a "vessel" which transports contents. Describing himself either as the vessel or the contents of the heritage deprives the I-narrator of his volition, another facet of his passivity.

### **Different Interpretations and Predicament**

It is from the third paragraph onwards that the intradiegetic narrator posits different interpretations of his own predicament; but for each stance he constantly expresses his sense of doubt. This point is explicitly expressed in the beginning sentence: "My problem is, I lack conviction". As pinpointed by Ernst, this statement intertextualizes with Yeats (1988: 7).

The rest of the paragraph shows his lack of conviction. Before detailing this point, it should be reminded that disbelief is the postmodern key issue which has roots in the modernist state of doubt. Disbelief itself culminates in pluralism which is the legacy of Einstein's Relativity



Theory. What the narrating I here presents is a dramatization of this pluralism. He observes: “Many accounts of our situation seem plausible to me . . . . But implausible ones as well, perhaps, especially those, I must admit as possibly correct. Even likely” (Yeganeh 2002: 660).

The narrator justifies that if there has been any belief, it has been as “a moodslength” (Yeganeh 2002: 660). Calling the belief in a Maker as “absurd”, the monologuer intertextualizes his narrative with *The Theatre of the Absurd*, hence interdiscursivity between the fictional narrative and the drama. Linguistically, in the third paragraph, the narrator apparently takes up a more active role, that of a swimmer. However, his protean philosophical notions which mingle with the theological discourse regarding the presence of and belief in a Maker all hint at his passivity in the act of swimming. This point is quite clear when he states: “I have supposed that we have after all a common Maker . . .who engendered us . . . and launched us forth toward some end known but only to Him” (Yeganeh 2002: 660). The absurdity of this belief is expressed in such words: “One might even say; I can believe them [such notions about the Maker] because they are absurd”. Elsewhere, he ponders: “swimming itself I find at best not actively unpleasant, more often tiresome, not infrequently a torment” (Yeganeh 2002: 661). This view along with his justification that they are doomed to perish in order to fulfill Someone Else’s destiny (Yeganeh 2002: 661) account for the naturalistic and thereby deterministic interpretation that he has for swimming.

### **Interceding Question**

The third paragraph is linked to the next one by an interceding question: “Has that been said before?” Here, one can take this as the shift from the internal focalizer to the external. However, the speaker of this single question cannot be determined clearly; this indeterminacy about the focalizer is one of the mysteries of Barth’s text.

The same sense of passivity governs the narrator’s next paragraph. However, the sense of absurdity is taken into extremes so that the intradiegetic narrator thinks of suicide. Remembering all the drowned swimmers and grief-stricken by the meaninglessness of the journey, he reflects: “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” (Yeganeh 2002: 661). The narrator’s

monologue is interdiscursive with the discourse of politics when he now and then talks of his companion as a “comrade” which bears into the text its Communist connotations. Contextually, this interdiscursivity could be taken as the Marxist revolution of the 1960s. Moreover, the speaker’s comment, “The heartless zeal of (departed) leaders, like the blind ambition and good cheer of my own youth, appalls me now” (Yeganeh 2002: 661) could be taken as his political aversion in that fervent context. In an ambiguous shift the narrator (internal or external focalizer) exclaims: “Oh, to be sure, Love!’ One heard on every side: ‘Love it is that drives and sustains us!’” (Yeganeh 2002: 661). This direct quotation is immediately followed by the I-narrator’s reaction as a translator: “I translate: we don’t know what drives us and sustains us, only that we are most miserably driven and, imperfectly, sustained. Love is how we call our ignorance of what whips us” (Yeganeh 2002: 661).

### **Politicization**

The ideological connotations of these points further politicize the stance of the intradiegetic narrator whose translation here stands for his interpretations of the *status qua*. The verb “whip” itself belongs to the discourse of punishment. This discourse is mixed with “ignorance” which cognates philosophy and “love” which brings on the stage the discourse of emotion. The resultant interdiscursivity shows the ideological dominance of politics over the mind (ignorance) and the heart (love). This turns the monologue into a self-trial where the narrator accuses himself and the others of ignorance and blind imitation, both of which are signs of passivity. This political aspect will be discussed later on with reference to Barth’s political context.

Commenting on the objective of swimming which is “to reach the Shore”, the monologuer observes: “but what if the Shore exists in the fancies of us swimmers merely, who dream it to account for the dreadful fact that we swim, have always and only swum, and continue swimming without respite . . . until we die?” (Yeganeh 2002: 661). It should be noted that this comment itself draws on at least two discourses; such words as “dream” and “fancy” are psychological terms and others like “account for” is linked to the discourse of economics. The capitalization of the Shore somehow reminds one of the religious scriptures in which the holy entities like the Heaven, the Maker, or the Hell are capitalized. Envisaged as such, this

interdiscursivity is of significance here. The Shore could be taken as the Promised Land which is refuted here by the narrator as a fancy or a dream. However, it does not escape the notice of the I-narrator that it is this religious fancy which prompts the swimmers to continue swimming. Mere swimming in sheer ignorance is what they are suffering from. Giving the notion of the Shore a religious dimension is Barth's denouncement of the discourse of religion as a fancy which founds the productive structure of the society. This harsh rejection is furthered by the narrator's view that

Supposing even that there were a Shore like that, as a cynical companion of mine once imagined, we rise from the drowned do discover all those vulgar superstitions and exalted metaphors to be literal truth; the giant Maker of us, the Shores of Light beyond our night-sea journey! –whatever would a swimmer do there? The fact is, when we imagine the Shore, what comes to mind is just the opposite of our condition; no more night, no more sea, no more journeying. In short, the blissful estate of the drowned (Yeganeh 2002: 661).

### **Pointlessness**

This comment takes the denouncement of religious discourse to extremes and evinces “the pointlessness of swimming” (Yeganeh 2002: 662) even on the point of destination. When the narrator explains, “Ours not to stop and think, ours to swim and sink” (Yeganeh 2002: 661), he challenges the ideology that forces them to swim on without thought. This sentence which initiates the following paragraph in fact dehumanizes the swimmers by depriving them of their power to think and reduces them to mere hands for whom some other force is to think and decide.

### **Different States of Mind**

The other obvious sign of the first-person narrator's passivity is his fluctuations between different states of mind. When he posits two justifications of the “thoughtful” swimmers regarding their existence, he boldly denounces both and even calls the swim-in-itself as “obscene” (Yeganeh 2002: 662). Immediately after this, he changes into a coward who continues swimming only under the impulse of survival (Yeganeh 2002: 662) and even envies the drowned. This moment is followed by another contradictory mood, “But in reasonable moments

I remind myself that it's their very freedom and self-responsibility I reject, as more dramatically absurd, in our senseless circumstances, than tailing along in conventional fashion" (Yeganeh 2002: 662). Elsewhere, he clearly admits: "Very likely I have lost my sense" and attributes this loss to the physical conditions of the sea such as "the carnage at our setting out; our decimation by whirlpool, poisoned cataract, sea-convulsion . . . . Thus I admit, with the other possibilities, that the present sweetening and calming of the sea . . . maybe hallucinations of disordered sensibility" (Yeganeh 2002: 665). His doubt about his own state of living is well expressed in this statement: "Perhaps, even, I am drowned already" (Yeganeh 2002: 665). But immediately afterward, he regains himself and justifies: "In any case, I'm no longer young, and it is we spent old swimmers, disabused of every illusion, who are most vulnerable to dreams" (Yeganeh 2002: 665). With the following sentence, however, the I-narrator sulks in another mood: "Sometimes I think I am my drowned friend" (Yeganeh 2002: 665). For the philosophical reflections, the intradiegetic narrator heavily depends on the notions posited by a drowned comrade; but later on, the narrator doubts his own identity as distinct from that of his comrade, hence, he says: "Sometimes I think I am my drowned friend" (Yeganeh 2002: 665).

This fluidity and merging of identities which he presents shows the schizoid structure of the narrative, coming from the mind of a schizophrenic. The same merge of identity occurs when the I-narrator quotes his friend's ideas on the Shore. Madly, the comrade rejects the existence of a He-Maker and instead vouches for a She-being: "he could not say how he knew or why he bothered to tell us, any more than he could say what would happen after She and Hero, Shore and Swimmer, 'merged identities' to become something both and neither" (Yeganeh 2002: 666). The schizoid texture further motivates the reader not to take for granted the monologuer. Moreover, the schizophrenic, as defined and detected by Fredrick Jameson, is the postmodern mental illness. This is another proof of the postmodernity of this text and the unreliability of the narrator. Apart from this structure, the logic of both/neither is also the postmodern one which has taken the place of either/nor of the modern era.

### **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity**

While the monologuer contemplates over his survival and the fact that he is the only survivor of his tribe, he justifies it in Darwinian Theory, "the doctrine of survival of the fittest"

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(Yeganeh 2002: 662). However, he gives his own definition of fitness which, on the part of Barth, could be taken as an operationalizing act which paves the way for his narrator to comment on the norms of the American society. The intertextuality with Darwin leads to the interdiscursivity of fiction, biology, and religion – suggested by the term “doctrine” – which is given a political dimension by the I-narrator’s definition. Therefore, he defines parenthetically: “fitness meaning, in my experience, nothing than survival-ability. . . but whose chief ingredients seem to be strength, guile, callousness” (Yeganeh 2002: 662). There should be mention of the word “ingredient” which cognates with itself the discourse of chemistry as well. The “ingredients” of “fitness” all stand for the norms constructed and inflicted by the late capitalist society; hence “strength” could imply economic, social, even racial authority, “guile” crosses out all religious and moral values, and “callousness” eradicates the humanitarian values.

Being a schizophrenic, the intradiegetic narrator immediately denounces his own interpretation of his survival and shifts to another philosophical interpretation, that of Chance. He states: “But the doctrine [of survival of the fitness] is false as well as repellent: Chance drowns the worthy with the unworthy” (Yeganeh 2002: 662). Not sufficing to this, he interrupts further thoughts by “You only swim once, Why bother, then?” (Yeganeh 2002: 662). Here there could be a shift of position from the internal to the external focalization, but the text gives no clue for determining it. Nonetheless, this rhetorical question itself opens the philosophy of epicurism. This philosophy is again challenged by the parodic statement which resembles the Biblical texts: “Expect ye drown, ye shall not reach the shore of Life, Poppycock” (Yeganeh 2002: 663). The spelling change of “you” to “ye” gives the sentence a historical base, apart from its religious connotations. In this way, Barth brings both the old and the new together and makes his text a pastiche, another postmodern trait highlighted by Jameson.

Almost from the middle of the text, the I-narrator intertextualizes his speech with that of a late companion and brings in his diverse notions and “odd conjectures” (Yeganeh 2002: 663) which are sometimes labeled as “mad visions”, or “wild fancies”. These conjectures, expressed and commented on by the narrating I, display pluralism of belief. He starts with “our ‘Father’” as the Maker whose descriptions are highly dependent upon the moods of the speaker: sometimes Father is described as wise and kind; other times, He is inattentive, “stupid, malicious,

insensible, perverse, or asleep and dreaming” (Yeganeh 2002: 663). Once He is One, the sole Maker; then the late comrade changes his view and replaces Him with “millions and billions of ‘Fathers’, perhaps in some ‘night-sea’ of their own!” (Yeganeh 2002: 664). While the single Father stands for monotheism, the plural “Fathers” signifies polytheism. All such views between which the schizoid I-narrator constantly oscillates portray the history of theology; the schizophrenic fluctuation can be taken as the impotence of each view in bringing the skeptic narrator to any sort of conviction. Lack of certainty can aptly be described in the time setting of the text which is always night, hence vague incomplete notions.

### **Heroic Role**

From the beginning, the text and its diction signify the passivity of the first-person narrator; however, it is in the middle of the text that the monologuer takes up a heroic role by revealing his innermost belief. This heroic action starts with the paragraph which starts with “Out with it” (Yeganeh 2002: 665), which reminds one of his attempt to disclose his secret hope in the first paragraph. Here, unlike the previous notions, the narrator under the guise of the late comrade substitutes the He-Maker with a She, “Other-than-a-he” (Yeganeh 2002: 666). Here, the narrator adopts a Heideggerian gesture and thus makes his harangue interdiscursive with philosophy. He states: “I’ve begun to believe, not only that She exists, but that She lies not far ahead, and stills the sea, and draws me Herward!” (Yeganeh 2002: 665).

This heroism is however destabilized immediately after he discloses it; thus he reveals: “the thing is too preposterous; it is myself I talk to, to keep my reason in this awful darkness. There is no She! There is no You! I rave to myself; it’s Death alone that hears and summons” (Yeganeh 2002: 666). Not only does the schizoid narrator dispense with the notion of a She-being, but for the first time he addresses the silent extradiegetic narrator by the capitalized deixis of “You”. Here, he says “There is no You!”, but he starts the next paragraph instantly with the imperative “Listen” followed by a colon. This imperative which is a maneuver of power of the monologuer over the silence of the extradiegetic narrator brings on stage the extradiegetic narrator and assigns to him/her the role of the narratee.

From here onward, the I-narrator addresses the extradiegetic being and tells him in a flashback of his youth and his mocking reactions towards the drowned friend's mad notions. In a glimpse, he reveals the absurdity of his youthful heroism degenerated into nothingness: "Our moment came, we hurtled forth, pretending to glory in the adventure, thrashing, singing, cursing, strangling, rationalizing, rescuing, killing, inventing rules and stories and relationships, giving up, struggling on, but dying all, and still in darkness, until only a battered remnant was left to croak 'onward, upward', like a bitter echo" (Yeganeh 2002: 667). These descriptions quite well portray a lifetime of heroic (Homeric) struggle and its collapse into absurdity; this gives it a mock-epic tone. While young, he has been an energetic adventurer, full of ambitions, actions, doing, and undoings; but all those have ended up in "a battered remnant" which "croaks", hence a gradual dehumanization.

### **No Escape from Bewitchment**

The ending paragraphs of the text show the I-narrator's inability to escape Her bewitchment: "Lucidity passes from me; in a moment I'll cry 'Love!' bury myself in Her side, be 'transfigured'" (Yeganeh 2002: 667). This transfiguration has many connotations which will be discussed later on from different perspectives; suffice to say here that it recalls the theme of "merging identities". This key issue is immediately picked up by the I-narrator in the penultimate paragraph of the text which starts: "You who I may be about to become, whatever you are: with the last twitch of my real self I beg you to listen" (Yeganeh 2002: 667). While in the previous address to the extradiegetic narrator/narratee, the monologuer imperatively wants him/her to listen, here he requests him/her to listen to him.

This act of request "I beg you" itself stands for his lapse into passivity once again and stands for his helplessness. This shows a shift of power from the authoritative position to a requesting one. Moreover, the deixis "you" is not capitalized because he sees that being transfigured he is going to merge into the addressee. However, in the same paragraph, the deixis "you" is again capitalized: "I may transmit to You, along with Your official Heritage" (Yeganeh 2002: 667). This way of directly addressing You runs against his first claim that he is addressing himself. In his following reference to You, again this deixis is de-capitalized. Such shifts are characteristic of a schizophrenic.

## **Begging**

In the penultimate paragraph of the text, the I-narrator begs his narratee, “You”, to do what himself could not achieve, being enticed by Her calls. Thus he speaks of his 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, some reflection of these reflections . . . may you, through whom I speak, do what I cannot; terminate this aimless, brutal business!” (Yeganeh 2002: 667). This request is interdiscursive with biology (“embodiment”), psychology (“mad”; “dream”), translation (“translation”), economics (“business”), and politics (“radical”; “brutal”). However, the more important part of this expression is the ambiguous phrase “some reflection of these reflections” which somehow could refer to the fragmented narrative itself or to its diverse interpretations. Moreover, this phrase can be interpreted variously, which will be discussed after the analysis of the final paragraph.

## **A Contradictory Gesture**

“Night-Sea Journey” ends up by a contradictory gesture with respect to the previous paragraph. Here, the I-narrator forgets all about the You to whom he previously assigned the role of a transmitter and instead generalizes his address. He asserts: “Whoever echoes these reflections: be more courageous than their author! An end to night-sea journeys! Make no more!” (Yeganeh 2002: 667). According himself the role of the author of the reflections, the I-narrator describes himself a coward who could not resist the call of Love. This may stand for the irresistibility of Her summons and thereby his call for putting an end to all this sounds illogical and inevitable.

The highly fragmented narrative structure of Barth’s story renders it impervious to a wide variety of interpretations. On the whole, this is the narrative of a process of becoming, process of transfiguration, and of transmitting. Hence, it is marked by a strong sense of towardness. As properly defined by Rimmon-Kenan, “‘Towards’ is usually associated with an intermediary stage, place, or position, ‘in the direction of’, ‘in the area or vicinity of’, ‘turned to, facing’” (2002: 144). All these definitions are applicable to this postmodern text not only in its very



texture, characterization, theme, contents, but also in the signifiacnce that it creates for the productive play of the reader with the text. As analyzed above, the I-narrator is constantly shifting between different states of mind, ideological stands, narrative positions, philosophical premises, even his relationship with the extradiegetic narrator who retains his silence all through the text. In this towardness, one can aptly refer to the text's assimilation of many other literary texts, hence intertextuality. Ernst calls this feature "a comic appropriation" which "reinforce[s] the mock-heroic epic of Barth's microscopic Ishamel, the long-tailed 'tale-bearer of a generation'" (2004: 7). The other cases of intertextuality that Ernst enumerates are Whitman, Tennyson, Allen Ginsberg, Todd Andrews, Ian Flemming – to name a few. (2004:7-8). Another critic, Zenobia Mistri, pinpoints Barth's intertextual reliance on Dantean allusions (1988: 151-152).

"Night-Sea Journey" lacks any specific time setting; the monologuer draws contrasts between his present age and his youth, albeit the time duration remains a mystery. However, all through the text both semantically and grammatically there is implied a sense of towardness. Similarly, the reader, led by the schizophrenic reflections of the narrator, moves "towards" or is put in a process of becoming without knowing its whatness. This processual indeterminacy opens the text to multiple interpretations in which the reader can freely move or jump like the I-narrator from one stance to another. This article just presents a few of these fluctuations only to show the inexhaustibility of the text.

Literally, this story can be the narrative of a sperm addressed to the father who remains silent in the text. In this reading, the sperm is moving in the fluid dark womb of the mother (the She-being) towards the egg to be swallowed up by the ovum and transfigure into a human being; the sperm is said to be the carrier of the Heritage. Biologically, this sperm accomplishes its mission only when it merges with the female egg. The animate being who is thus created becomes one resembling both the sperm and the female egg, hence merged identities.

Culturally speaking, the I-narrator could stand for a sign or a code which like the sperm bears and transmits the cultural signification. In this light, the narrative could signify cultural communication. The fact that the origin of the sign is the father gives the interpretation a

feministic turn. Psychoanalytical feminists, who base their theories on Lacanian psychoanalysis, claim that language which embodies culture has roots in and is controlled by The Law of the Father. The night-sea as the setting denotes the fluidity and feminity of the atmosphere which, favored by Helen Cixous, mobilizes the androcentric cultural sign and leads it towards reunification with the She, the (M)other. Feministically, therefore, there is a gradual inevitable shift of power from the patriarchal side to the matriarchy. In the protean identities of the resisting I-narrator with the (m)other, the cultural code or sign mingles with the other and the mixture neutralizes both poles. The depolarized resultant identity is neither a he nor a she, but rather a mixture of both.

En route to this transfiguration, the I's reliance on his companion's wild visions, most of which are male-centered, and the death of the comrade signifies the failure of the patriarchal system. At times, the I-narrator claims to be the drowned friend; this merge with the androcentric philosophy of life shows the male-centered code that the cultural sign carries with itself but is set in the process to be depolarized and reach a balance. Feministically, the hallucinatory harangue of the speaker/sign here stands for the fracture of his logic and mind which is patriarchal; thus he gets ready for unification with the (m)other. The female side, however, is stereotypically portrayed as a witch, a siren; this Homeric portrait subordinates the role of woman but ambivalently the male side is shown to be unavoidably swallowed by the female.

Textually, the intradiegetic narrator could stand for a text laden with the cultural and ideological overtones. This interpretation countersigns the fact that "Barth has . . . been criticized for not dealing with social values or major cultural issues" (Rackham 2007: 3). This paper's turn to the ideological implications of "Night-Sea Journey" fills in the gap in Barth criticism. Viewed in this light, the whole story is a text produced by a fatherly author, and the journey can be the process of its reception and interpretation by the reader. The text is en route towards the interpreter/reader. Adopting this lens, Ernst takes the sperm "as 'fact' searching for its fiction, and Idea in quest of its Muse. 'Night-Sea Journey,'" he continues, "also gestures toward the same cyclical activity of sexual conception and imaginative reception in its human reader" (2004: 8-9). While Ernst's reading is limited to Barth's corpus in an attempt to show the writer's text-world representing his life-text, this paper takes the scope on a wider socio-political scale

and resituates it in the political events of the 1960s. This story has been written in the decade of the Marxist-orientated revolutionary upheavals of students and workers against capitalism which swept all over Europe. Although the revolution proved a failure and gave the capitalist agenda new directions to re-establish itself more invisibly and firmly, the intellectual attempt has proved to be most productive. Viewed as such, in Barth's story the narrator's free indirect quotations of his late friend's notions, his comments, all could be taken as the father/author's response to the existing issues in his social context. The fluidity and ambiguity of the setting, lack of rigid and fixed identities, the schizoid texture, all could be taken as the instability of the *status qua*; these present the cracks that began forming on the surface of the capitalist paradigm. They show the ideological clashes of the text with the counterideologies of the context. In this light, one can refer to Macherey's views on the issue of ideology and literary works. For Macherey, the ideology of the text lies in the "cracks in its façade . . . those sites where the text is not fully in control of itself (Bretens 2001: 91). Similarly, Terry Eagleton shows interest "not in what makes the text coherent, but in what makes it incoherent" (qtd. in Bretens 2001: 92). According to such notions, Barth's disintegrated narrative becomes a site of struggle for different ideological voices. This ideological confrontation mobilizes the narrator's voice which renders the text pluralistic and heteroglossic – in a Bakhtinian key note. (Holquist: 1981).

Envisaged in this light, the narrator's plea to the silent You to express "some reflection of these reflections" can aptly justify that the text's survival depends on being received and interpreted by the other. The alterity of this other is presented through gender distinctions. This point is well expressed in the I-narrator's reference to You describing it as the one through whom he speaks and his unavoidable merging with the summoning She. The merging of his narrative voice with Her song intertextualizes him and deprives him of his authorial voice, hence a detotalizing of the voice of the narrative.

Through his various allusions, deploying different discourses, and playing with narratological norms in the protean roles assigned to the characters, John Barth negotiates not only the authorial voice, especially in an autotelic story like "Night-Sea Journey", but he also brings the reader to a process of negotiation. The presented narratological analysis in this paper displays how the passive role assigned to the reader by realistic fiction is countersigned for a

more commitment. This negotiation of the role has a much wider impact in actual life. Focusing on the issue of negotiation, Jeff Rackham aptly argues, “The novel . . . has now forced us into negotiation, something that always happens when writers of any era begin to negate the former norms. Negotiation compels the reader to reconsider not only the genre but the dailiness of his life that the older norms supported” (2006: 2). Rackham’s view politicizes the deconstruction of the reader’s role in the process of interpretation. This paper through its different readings of “Night-Sea Journey” realizes this negotiation and its various politicizing impacts on the broader socio-cultural sphere.

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