A Funhouse of Reading: Ontological Foregrounding
in John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse"

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ABSTRACT

John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" is a prime example of a postmodernist short fiction. The poetics of the work is mainly concerned with questions of ontology and frequently seeks to foreground this notion in different ways so much so that the reader gets lost in a funhouse of reading. Accordingly, the story has been divided into separate worlds, each trying to call into attention its own ontological existence and significance. Barth's story self-consciously implements certain techniques at different levels of his work to foreground world formation and draw the reader's attention towards the worlds of the text. His story foregrounds different planes, each of which stands independently as an ontological world: the world of language and text, the metafictional level, the projected world level, and the external world of the author. However, the resultant ontological ruptures, which are intentionally induced, cause various complications in the narrative. Ontologies are presented as unstable, and they intrude into one another. This brings about confusion, since the horizons of two or more worlds meet at a common point which brings about a critical state of affairs – ontological crisis. The above confusion, it is argued, makes an ontological funhouse in which the reader 'gets lost.' This leads to a sense of uncertainty regarding the ontologies, that is, they flicker between existence and nonexistence. The texture of "Lost in the Funhouse" is thus suffused with such ontological indeterminacy.

Keywords: John Barth; "Lost in the Funhouse;" ontology; rupture; indeterminacy

INTRODUCTION

John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) is a remarkable example of a collection of short fiction, which as Barth suggests, contains a medley of postmodernist themes and techniques craftily designed and employed to address certain postmodernist issues. One such issue is the notion of ontology which plays a significant role in the formation of Barth's stories; as according to Jac Tharpe, *Lost in the Funhouse* is a study in ontology (1974, p. 2). As such, the title story of the series is fundamentally concerned with the question of ontology. This paper is an attempt to investigate the ontological poetics of the short story "Lost in the Funhouse" and to shed light on ontology as a complicating factor in the making of this story.

ONTOLOGY

One way of accounting for postmodernist fiction would be to focus on the notion of ontology. This notion has proven to be convenient to some postmodernist writers in order to shape a postmodernist aesthetics in their works. As a philosophical concept, ontology generally deals with the question of being and what is. In introducing and domesticating this notion into literature, postmodernist fiction has attempted to account for it through its poetics and has made the concept part of its aesthetics. Nevertheless, the use of ontology in the poetics of certain postmodernist works of fiction could bring about indeterminacy in their structure, since in them ontology has been given an unstable treatment. Once this treatment is pushed to excess, ontological confusion becomes a perceptible design in literary works where ontology is purposefully foregrounded. Furthermore, the various alternatives and possibilities common

in postmodernist literary works could have their roots in ontology. They are intentionally multiplied so that the readers have to move back and forth among the worlds they conjure up. The resultant indeterminacy and confusion create an ontological labyrinth in which the readers 'get lost'; hence a sense of 'ontological funhouse' is imitated. Since literary works are composed of different worlds at different levels, the notion of ontology can address and account for the existence of these worlds as well as the ontological indeterminacy, confusion, and ruptures among them. In this regard, the concern of what follows is to examine these issues in Barth's short story "Lost in the Funhouse"[1] to see how ontology is foregrounded in his poetics and how it has made the texture of Barthian story partake of indeterminacy so as to produce a 'funhouse of ontologies.'

The notion of ontology is dominant in LF. Coined in the seventeenth century, the term 'ontology' in philosophical language "refers to the study of what is" (Lechte, 2003, p. 176), or, as defined by Borchert, "ontology is the most general science or study of Being, Existence, or Reality" (Borchert , 2006, pp. 7-21) which addresses some purely abstract ideas that lead to abstruse arguments in philosophy. This concept has received special attention in the so-called postmodern era so much so that postmodernism can be characterized in terms of ontology. Although such arguments are not translated into literature in their original form, there are a number of writers who are concerned with the question of ontology in their literary works. As a matter of fact, some writers of fiction attempt to contain the philosophical ontology in their texts. In relation to this tendency are philosophical questions and doubts of different degrees and kinds which are interwoven in the texture of such writers. Besides the philosophical ontology, however, there is the literary ontology as well which is focused upon in this study.

In literature, the term 'ontology' has been used to describe a certain characteristic of postmodernist literature. Brian McHale asserts that what happens from modernist to postmodernist fiction is a change of the 'dominant' from epistemology to that of ontology; this does not mean that bringing ontology into focus has totally eliminated epistemology from the poetics of postmodernist works, but simply pushing it into the background at the cost of bringing ontology into the foreground. McHale contends that such fiction replaces epistemological issues dealing with world interpretation with ontological issues that are concerned with world construction (McHale, 1987, pp. 6-11). According to McHale, "postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground" ontological questions such as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (1987, p. 10) – at issue is the question regarding the existence of the world and the self. Moreover, he designates two general levels at which ontological foregrounding is realized: the literary text itself and the projected world of it. The ontological questions are generally realized in literary works in the form of different possibilities, various alternatives, other worlds, and multiple universes, each being present at different levels of a work: the projected world, the text, the language, materiality of the book, and even the actual world outside the text. Such ontological realizations have formed the poetics of John Barth's LF as a postmodernist work, and they have led to some ontological indeterminacies, ruptures, and confusions. In what follows, the objective is to elaborate on the ontological aspects of Barth's story and the way its poetics foregrounds ontology at different levels through various techniques as well as the consequences of such foregrounding.

ONTOLOGICAL FOREGROUNDING

In a general sense, the term foregrounding "may include all salient linguistic phenomena which in some way cause the reader's attention to shift from the paraphrasable content of a message ('what is said') to a focus on the message itself ('how it is said')" (Childs & Fowler, 2006, p. 91). Although a formalist reading is not the concern of this study, 'how' ontology is

brought in the foreground is the focus of the following, hence the use of the term 'foregrounding.' As a postmodernist work, LF constantly foregrounds ontology in more ways than one and at different levels, and this has brought about a narrative which is stricken with ontological ruptures and instabilities. One way to foreground ontology is through literary self-consciousness as self-consciousness is assumed to be basically at a different ontological 'horizon' from that of the projected world of the text.

LF is typically a self-conscious and self-reflexive postmodernist piece of short fiction. Different terms have been designated to describe the literary self-consciousness of postmodernism: "parafiction," "surfiction," "nouveau roman," "nouveau nouveau roman," "fabulation," and "metafiction". All of these terms suggest fictiveness and fictionality. Such texts are concerned with their formative processes, that is to say, fiction writing becomes the subject of their writing. But self-conscious fiction, according to Robert Alter, is at times a "paralyzing" force: When experimentation with techniques is held to be the only way to write – John Barth is a case in point (1975, pp. 219-220). Furthermore, Raymond Federman says, "the primary purpose of fiction will be to unmask its own fictionality" (1975, p. 8). Therefore, by calling attention to its fictiveness, postmodernist text accentuates the fictive aspect of 'reality' – implied is the relation of 'story' to 'truth' and the way fiction stands up to the actual world. This happens through ontological foregrounding, and in a sense, ontology reveals the 'fiction.' One realization of this attitude is in style.

STYLED ONTOLOGY

In order to foreground fictionality, postmodernist writers employ different techniques some of which are realized in the domain of style. One such technique is the author's direct intrusion into his own text – inherently an ontological violation. To begin with, the crucial question is who is writing the story? The self-conscious narrator of LF is writing a story with the same name about a character called Ambrose who is lost in the funhouse. Initially, the relationship between the narrator and his story and Ambrose is ontologically significant, since the narrator is aware of writing the story. In addition to this, Barth's position in the story-making should also be taken into consideration.

Right from the beginning of LF the narrator refers to the author as "'outside,' intrusive, or artificial voices", and explicitly states that all the italics throughout the story are his abrupt intrusion upon his narrative (Barth, 1968, p. 72). In fact, since he is self-conscious of writing a story, the narrator has assumed a *heterodiegetic* position, as Gérard Genette (1980) would describe it, for himself: situated as external and detached from the story he writes; and he makes this position manifest in the use of italics – so it is the narrator who is narrating the story. In other words, the point of view of the narrator has been set in such a way that we assume him at a different plane from the story and the character(s) he develops: this has been made discernible through self-consciousness and metafictionality. Indeed, the ontological horizon into which the narrator has nested himself is removed from the narrative line he produces, and his intrusions into his story, in the form of italics for instance, are in fact ontological trespassing. This entangled relationship gets even more tortuous when the reader considers Barth's position towards his work and what he has done to its formal structure and style. We should never identify the narrator with Barth in any simple way; nevertheless, Barth's fingerprint is actually there, especially as the narrator, or rather, Barth himself writes in an ambiguous phrase: "Italics mine" (1968, p. 72). Although this announcement is made by the narrator of the story and signals his intrusions upon his text, Barth could also be said to be the speaker of these words: in fact, as it is a common topos of postmodernist fiction, Barth's ontological horizon ties with that of the narrator at a narrative spatiotemporal point and brings about an incongruous zone where both Barth and his narrator are present – at issue is Barth's attempt to display his, or any author's, reappearance on the

surface of the postmodernist text. In this regard, Brian McHale compares the author of modernist and postmodernist texts. McHale is of the opinion that, as a rule, the modernist author does not intrude into the story. Instead, "the author would be invisible and unobtrusive, above or behind but not *in* his creation". The authors try to expunge their finger print from a text by effacing "their own subjectivities behind the surrogate subjectivity of a first-person narrator or interior monologuist". This "self-effacement," however, becomes a kind of "self-advertisement" on the grounds that the strategies of self-effacement eventually emphasize the author "as a strategist". What McHale does is to bring to our attention the fact that in postmodernist fiction the author has been brought to the surface once again, and "by logic of paradox, self-advertisement is conversely a form of self-effacement" (McHale, 1987, p. 199). From this view, if we assume that Barth is effacing his presence from the text by the means of choosing a(n) (author-like) narrator whose presence is recurrently made manifest in the text, Barth is actually self-advertising his presence at the surface of his own text in a postmodernist fashion, hence the presence of Barth's ontological plane at certain points in the story in addition to that of the narrator. In a sense, Barth first "*lost himself in the reflection*" of the narrator, just in the same way that Ambrose 'lost himself' in the mirrors in the funhouse, but this ultimately brings him to the narrative surface again. This is one of the ways through which Barth shows his experimental love affair with writing fiction. Therefore, the sentence "*this is what they call passion. I am experiencing it*" is an intrusion that could be ascribed to the narrator and also Barth who is aware of his fictional experience with his stories (Barth, 1968, p. 84). So it is not "*an astonishing coincidence*" to see Barth in his text.

The ontological intrusion is better *noticed* once one bears in mind Barth's remark that LF is better to be read in *print*, while other stories in his series are meant for "recorded authorial voice" or live voice (1968, p. 11) – Barth is interested in the way printed fiction evolved from the oral narrative tradition.[2] This statement insinuates the visual significance of print text, the materiality of the text itself, and the general effect of reading from a printed manuscript[3;] as a result, special attention is given to style in order to fashion and foreground some aspects of the text – it is an instance of what Brian McHale calls "styled world." It occurs when "our attention is distracted from the projected world and made to fix on its linguistic medium" (McHale, 1987, p. 148); in other words, we are separating "words" from "worlds" in the literary work in a self-conscious manner, and, thus, ontological significance is attributed to the words on the page, independent from the ontology of the projected world – at issue, as Harris suggests, is the idea of unity in Barth's canon which is pursued by him in "a variety of intellectual terrains: the epistemological, the psychological, the ontological, the mythological, and of course the esthetic" (Harris, 1983, p. 5). This could lead to, as Deborah A. Woolley contends, the tension between tale and text, which starts right from the beginning in Barth's series with "Frame-Tale" (1985, p. 468) and is noticeable in the funhouse story as well. The tension generated by styled words in Barth's story has an ontological nature in its roots.

The text of LF has been interpolated with words in italics, and this draws the reader's attention to the styled words on the page which comprises a distinct world or ontology for itself – the world of words – as they are repeatedly embedded in the text and therefore gain ontological autonomy – trying to interrupt other worlds, even momentarily, "*in* [an] *appearance not unlike*" the surrounding plane. Word ontology is at a different level from the ontology of the projected world: it is one level above the ontology of the projected world. As a matter of fact, the reader's consciousness is directed towards the words on the page, and it brings about a kind of ontological flicker in the text as far as the poetics of the text and the reader are concerned: on the one hand, the reader is absorbed into the ontology of the projected world, and, on the other hand, he is pulled to the surface of the text by the italic words. These words exist over the Barthian text; accordingly, what is foregrounded is a

continuous ontological oscillation between world and word, and it hints at the possible fictionality of all forms of reality which is basically a major concern of postmodernism. In fact, the more frequent the oscillation becomes, the more "language's referential function is weakened" (Woolley, 1985, p. 468), hence the fiction or illusion that language can 'securely' refer to some reality – or in this case some world – is exposed. The result of the oscillation between ontologies is actually bringing into "sharp focus" the "linguistic medium" (McHale, 1987, p. 148), assuming for the medium a distinct ontology, and it is achieved through ontological foregrounding. In other words, language is speaking to itself by foregrounding the lack of meaning at the center of text: the absence at the center of language becomes a truer meaning in the poetics of postmodernism.

Furthermore, there is a feeling that Ambrose's world, regardless of Barth's presence here, is in competition with the world of the words and the world of his narrator. As Westervelt suggests, "Barth makes the reader listen to the confusion of voices" (1978, p. 44). Furthermore, according to Nas (2007):

> he [Barth] mixes narrative voices and in any of the stories [of his series] we have three or sometimes four narrative layers being played out simultaneously where we usually have a pattern like (1) the narrator talking about (2) the narrator of the story who tells (3) a story, actively involving the narratee at all layers of construction.   (p. 168)

In addition to the fact that in LF voices merge with one another in a hardly distinguishable way, both the metafictional comments of the narrator and the styled words continuously try to foreground their own existence by interrupting the flow of Ambrose's world. Morris (1975, p. 71) describes this condition as "the rupture between the visual and perceptible world, centered in the self, and the world of language, which exists without a center". In other words, the story is foregrounding through ontology the opposition between narrative and language. Here "self-consciousness becomes an aspect of language" (Woolley, 1985, p. 468), and it highlights the language's inefficiency to authentically describe a given reality and produce a genuine, stable narrative, if any is intended at all because the narrator does not rule out the possibility that the reader may not "acknowledge the fact." Although at times it is quite difficult to distinguish between their voices, since they merge, both Ambrose and the narrator are aware of this inefficiency: "his eyes watered, there aren't enough ways to say that" (p. 84), "Ambrose's throat ached; there aren't enough ways to say that" (Barth, 1968, p. 94).

Although he never loses his interest in Ambrose's story, the reader is frequently frustrated by 'words'. Constantly hearing the noise of styled words on the page, the reader has to keep up with Ambrose's journey and its different versions in the funhouse – a sense of confusion and indeterminacy is intensified by wavering between the two planes. These noises, or rather, voices are actually the narrator's self-conscious ontological intrusions into his story. As Woolley suggests, it is "a tension between impersonal 'text' and person, or between convention and voice. At times, the narrative voice is that of Ambrose, therefore personal; at other times, it is that of an impersonal storyteller. But since Ambrose is an apprentice storyteller, the personal merges into the impersonal" (p. 471) – at stake is the confusion of two distinct planes. The subtle point to be taken into consideration in the case of the italic words is that when the reader's consciousness is transferred to the ontology of words from that of the projected world of the narrative crafted by the narrator inLF, he is concurrently facing Barth's actual world, as was argued above, though it is necessary to distinguish between Barth and his narrator in statements other than the italicized ones. Indeed, as the reader perceives the words as a distinct ontology besides that of the narrator, he is at the same time encountering the outside world of the text, since the words are in "italics"

which signify the intrusive voice of John Barth himself, intruding into the narrator's sentences that are themselves intrusive, and his horizon as a distinct ontology. Therefore, the ontological tension is ultimately quadri-level in the example of the italic words: a clash between the projected world's ontology and that of the narrator's horizon and from there with material, printed words realized as part of the language system, and finally the external world of Barth. In other words, at issue are four ontologies related to: the worlds of Ambrose, narrator, language, and Barth. The result of this simultaneous foregrounding is ontological crisis: each world seeks to call into attention its own existence while it is at the same time pushed into background by other worlds, and in this manner, the stability of ontologies is constantly challenged. The outcome of this condition is indefiniteness of meaning which is discussed below.

The central issue here is the way ontological ruptures and intrusions have brought about indeterminacy in narrative and a confusion of the writer, the narrator, and Ambrose's voices. There are times in Barth's story, the case of the italic words, when the writer's intrusion contaminates the narrator's sentences: Barth craftily slides in italics inside the ontology of his narrator's words and gets his own voice heard, though both are synchronically saying the same thing; hence the hybrid ontology of such statements:

> For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is *a place of fear and confusion*. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, *the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, *which in turn* is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases […].   (p. 72)

These are the opening lines of the story where the narrator starts the funhouse narration. Right from the third sentence the italic words begin to appear in the text, and this continues to the end of the story. A sentence is begun by the narrator, and it is continued by both the narrator and Barth in italics. Of course, Barth's intrusion should not be taken as Barth seeking to imply two different views or expressing his distinct ideas through his narrator; but Barth's intrusion may imply that the writer of a story, such as the narrator, has no control over what he says, and what he says are not what he thinks he is saying and are not originally his words – maybe he is a channel for an external voice. In a sense, both Barth and the narrator are breaking the illusion of realist fiction and the claim for verisimilitude; in fact, the assertion of artifice is done by both of them from two distinct ontological horizons. According to Carmichael (1986), "Barth's various techniques of narrative self-consciousness are employed both to call into question the validity of fictional strategies of order and, ironically, to substantiate a claim to verisimilitude" (1986, p. 110). Frequent intrusions and ontological breaks challenge the credibility and truthfulness of what is narrated, and they disorganize Barth's narrative. So the relevant question is: whose voice is it? The narrator's, Barth's, or Ambrose's? Or maybe the three of them at the same time? The fact is that in the italicized sentences of LF, the existing indeterminacy is due to the ontological confusion among the narrator, the writer, and the projected world's plane where we have Ambrose. Woolley (1985) describes the situation as: "Ambrose full of voices, all his, none him; or a narrator full of voices, including Ambrose's. Is Ambrose's voice within the tale, or enclosing it?" (p. 471). Thus not only is there a confusion of voices between the narrator and Ambrose, but there is also a third load of confusion from the side of Barth's ontology. As a result, the reader is forced "to experience self-consciousness" as he is aware of Barth's role as a writer (Westervelt, 1978, p. 42); so, in a sense, "Barth makes the reader listen to the confusion of voices [ontologies]" (p. 44). Accordingly, since there is no demarcated boundary or stability among ontologies and they meet and merge at a common point, the result has been a confusion of voices, each belonging to a distinct ontology.

Other techniques have also been employed to shake the readers of LF out of the primary ontology of the projected world and foreground other ontologies. Ambrose, for instance, has left some of his sentences unfinished throughout the funhouse story. This brings the reader's consciousness to the sentence level which is a sudden upward ontological jump: "The smell of Uncle Karl's cigar smoke reminded one of. The fragrance of the ocean came strong to the picnic ground" (Barth, p. 74), or the narrator says: "The brown hair on Ambrose's mother's forearms gleamed in the sun like. Though light-handed, she took her left arm from the seat-back". The reader expects to continue reading but the sentence unexpectedly dies off in full stop and is never picked up again. In the first sentence "we witness Ambrose trying to conform to narrative convention, but not yet comfortable with it" (Woolley, 1985, p. 471); the same could be said about the narrator who is struggling to apply what he has learnt from school to produce a narrative. Such sentences exist throughout LF and could further amplify a sense of incompleteness and instability towards ontologies. The reader's consciousness is dedicated to the projected world when the unfinished sentence makes him alert and brings him to the sentence level. Also ungrammaticality has been drawn on to produce sentences that frustrate the consciousness of the readers of this short story. While the narrator has brought the narration to cessation and is giving metafictional commentary, for example, he places the correlative conjunction 'but' at the end of the sentence, which is a disturbance of syntactical flow: "assertions of that sort are not effective; the reader may acknowledge the proposition, but" (p. 79). Moreover, repetitions of different linguistic units have been used in Barth's story; and such repetitions do not move the narrative forward but merely result in stasis at the sentence level: "We would do the latter. We would do the latter. We would do the latter," says Ambrose (p. 79). Something about these words attracts Ambrose's attention, so he repeats them; as a result of the repetition, also the reader's attention is attracted to the words. Commenting on a similar state of affairs, Nas (2007) says: "he [Barth] likes to 'freeze-frame' the story, suspending the action of the story, which suspension in itself then becomes the point on which the story hinges" (p. 169). In all the above examples, language has been foregrounded and is assumed to possess ontological independence. In other words, language as a system of signification is ontologically a separate, distinct world or plane which could be foregrounded apart from the projected world of the story. This is basically a foregrounding of postmodernism's concern with language in which any reference beyond language is denied; so language by disrupting other ontologies tries to seek this goal. Such oscillations among tale, text, language, and the outside worlds heighten a sense of ontological separateness, gap, and instability among them as well as in the texture of the story on the whole. In other words, "playing with these narrative levels," Nas (2007), remarks, "helps Barth in teasing out what constitutes a story…" (2007, p. 169).

Another postmodernist device of style is the catalogue. Such catalogues, says McHale, "seem inevitably to gravitate toward the word-list pole, even if they begin as assemblages of objects". However, from an ontological point of view, paradox is the inherent feature of these catalogues; the catalogue "assert[s] the full presence of a world" and simultaneously "evacuate[s] language of presence" (McHale, 1987, p. 153). In other words, when a catalogue of some world is given, it implies that the world is dense and is richly composed of many parts, hence the palpability of that world; at the same time, the components of this list are detached from their context, so they cannot hold a full, concrete picture of the intended world. Therefore, the assumed ontology is unstable and flickering. The narrator of LF, as a case in point, begins to talk about sexual reproduction of human beings and how one generation has given birth to the following one in a seemingly endless manner.[4] Then the places where the affairs are conducted and their vicinity are presented in the form of a catalogue:

> In alleyways, ditches, canopy beds, pinewoods, bridal suites, ship's cabins, coach-and-fours, coaches-and-four, sultry tool shed; on the cold sand under boardwalks, littered with *El Producto* cigar butts, treasured with Lucky Strike cigarette stubs, Coca-Cola caps, gritty turds, cardboard lollipop sticks, matchbook covers warning that A Slip of the Lip Can Sink a ship
>
> (Barth, 1968, p. 80)

In this manner, a world is conjured up in those many places the intercourses are carried on. Moreover, each of these affairs produces the descendent generation and ironically helps to sustain the world of "The Funhouse" – the narrator and in a sense Barth himself are among the descendants as well, as it is referred to in the story. However, these places bear on a degenerating influence on the world they make, that is to say, they attach a sense of fragmentation and disjointedness to it; in fact, they build up the world and at the same time negate its cohesion and presence. What is at issue here are catalogues as stylistic devices that draw attention to words and, for that matter, to a world which is ontologically outstanding. According to McHale, the consequence of such fictional practices is ontological instability: "the world flickers between presence and absence, between reconstructed reality and words on the page" (1987, p. 159).

METAFICTIONAL ONTOLOGY

Waugh (1984) defines metafiction as a "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality;" at issue are narrative structures and "the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (1984, p. 2). Furthermore, considering fiction as an "alternative world" where "truth" is attributed to fictional statements, Waugh asserts that "metafiction lays bare the linguistic basis of the 'alternative worlds' constructed in literary fiction" (1984, p. 100). In other words, the more the linguistic aspect of a text is foregrounded, the more the illusion of realistic fiction is shattered. "Metafictional texts thus," Waugh (1984) maintains, "reveal the ontological status of all literary fiction: its quasi-referentiality, its indeterminacy, its existence as words and world" (1984, p. 101). The ontological aspect of metafiction is the overriding concern of Barth's poetics which is foregrounded in LF by the anonymous narrator. As a matter of fact, when the narrator is taking a metafictional gesture, there are unannounced interruptions of his primary narrative and, in the same manner, sudden returns to it. As soon as the reader begins to get himself drowned in the narrative of the projected world, the narrative of metafiction, a paralyzing element of the whole narrative, pulls him out and frustrates his cognitive embodiment of the story. This practice makes the reader move back and forth between the primary world of the text and the metafictional comments of the narrator, not part of that world, hence the ontological orientation of the metafictional practice of Barth's postmodernist short story.

Implicit is the fact that metafictionality foregrounds the fictional status of the story. Hutcheon (1980) calls this "formal narcissism," that is to say, "art has always been 'illusion,' and as one might surmise, it has often, if not always, been self-consciously aware of that ontological status" (1980, p.17). So when a work of fiction narcissistically refers to its form, it is in fact foregrounding its ontological aspect. At issue, however, is the confrontation of two worlds: the projected world of the text, which comprises anontology of itself, with the world of theory that comprises a second line of narrative in the story – the narrator is actually narrating theory. Indeed, the anonymous narrator of Ambrose's story intentionally interferes with the projected world of the funhouse story to theorize fiction in general: "initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the

illusion of reality. […] Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means," says the narrator (Barth 1968, p.73). In other words, the story has provided a context for the narrator to theorize fiction, and this confrontation brings about an ontological instability in the text and for that matter a tension between the world of the text and that of theory; therefore, an ontological break is imposed on the narrative of LF by the narrator. In this way theory assumes a distinct ontology separate from the literary work itself; as a matter of fact, fiction is theorized in Barth's short story, or, as Waugh (1984) says, the writer "explore[s] a *theory* of fiction through the *practice*of writing fiction" (1984, p. 2). Of course, in LF this happens in a self-conscious manner by the narrator – why Barth chooses the narrator, not himself, theorizing is also a significant question; the answer to which is beyond the concerns of this study, since it is related to the question of identity of Barth's characters. However, the metafictional remarks or intrusions are so frequent in Barth's story that one may get the feeling that Ambrose's world is also in competition with the world of theory. In other words, the main narrative is presumably trying to establish, if establishing anything at all, the reality of Ambrose's world and the funhouse events, while the metafictional observations ontologically remove the reader from that world and, as a result, question the credibility of it. This credibility is further challenged by metafictional frequency. It gets extreme to the extent that a diagram of the plot development is inserted into the text, and the narrator seeks to describe the narrative pattern in this regard:

(Barth, p. 95)

The swing, however, between the two ontologies is almost so recurrent that the reader loses track of the narration line – which itself contains several ruptures, possibilities, and versions. As far as the relationship between Barth and his narrator are concerned, it should be noted that although seemingly the narrator is 'playing author,' and, in a sense, challenging Barth's position, Worthington believes that "instead of challenging the primacy of authorship, Barth's metafictional experiments serve to cement the author into a position of authority over the text" (2001, p. 114) – in fact, Barth is self-advertising himself as was argued above; yet this is not absolute, and the narrator's relationship to Barth (both as writers) destabilizes the author's ontology, as does Barth's intrusion into the narrator's ontology.

PROJECTED WORLD ONTOLOGY

The ontological poetics of Barth is also exercised in the primary world of LF. Beyond style ontology and metafiction ontology, postmodernist fiction may also develop or embody ontology(ies) within the fictional world itself – the ontological breaks take place within the frame of the projected world. So at issue are worlds-within-worlds or Chinese-box worlds. According to McHale (1987), such worlds "have the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological horizon of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction" (1987, p. 112). An example of such multiplying world is when Ambrose recalls the cigar box belonging to Uncle Karl. There is a picture on the box that the narrative after having an ontological break delves into and begins to describe it to the extent which is enough to make it ontologically foregrounded:

> He even recalled how, standing beside himself with awed impersonality in the reeky heat, he'd stared the while at an empty cigar box in which Uncle Karl kept stone-cutting chisels: beneath the words El Producto, a laureled, loose-toga'd lady regarded the sea from a marble bench; beside her, forgotten or not yet turned to, was a five-stringed lyre. Her chin reposed on the back of her right hand; her left depended negligently from the bench-arm. The lower half

> of scene and lady was peeled away; the words EXAMINED BY ----- were inked there into the wood. Nowadays cigar boxes are made of pasteboard
>
> (p. 78)

Here we are confronting a fictional technique that Genette (1980) would call "metalepsis" which is the violation of narrative levels. In this regard, McHale (1987) says, "each change of narrative level in a recursive structure […] involves a change of ontological level, a change of world" (1987, p. 113). What happens is that the image on the box is described to the extent that it gains a life or world of its own and forms an offshoot narrative – or a 'little narrative.' It is, in fact, assumed as a hypodiegetic world which is one level down from *diegesis* or the primary world of the text. Thus this world is given a prominent, autonomous ontology. The role of such minor ontologies is to militate against the primary ontology of the text acquiring full resonance and cohesion, if at all designed to do so, and to challenge the illusion of reality or the illusion of a single narrative proposed by the primary ontology, hence the destabilizing effect of such ontological disruptions. Ambrose's fancy could be also considered as an embedded world as it is developed to some significant extent:

> His son would be the second, and when the lad reached thirteen or so he would put a strong arm around his shoulder and tell him calmly: 'it is perfectly normal. We have all been through it. It will not last forever.' Nobody knew how to be what they were right. He'd smoke a pipe, teach his son how to fish and soft crab, assure him he needn't worry about himself.   (p. 85)

This passage further continues so much so that fancy constitutes a world and stands separate from the world of the story, hence the ontological significance of this passage.

FORKING PATHS ONTOLOGY

Christ (1979) discusses "Borges' influence on a whole generation of North American writers, including Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon" (1979, p. 53); Borges's influence is particularly recognized after the publication of Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967 where we see Barth's indebtedness to the Argentinian writer's "legacy to narrative procedure" (Christ, 1979, p. 53). Moreover, within the projected world or primary ontology of LF there are several possibilities and alternatives in the narrative, some of which claim ontological autonomy. On the modal structure of narrative universes Ryan (1985) asserts that "a narrative state is […] a constellation of possible worlds" (1985, p. 719). For Ryan (1985), the narrative universe is composed of an actual world that could form "a narrative with a layered ontology" (1985, p. 721) – hence the existence of layers of reality or what Pavel (1981) calls "salient" ontology. The significant point about these ontological narrative possibilities is that they all exist simultaneously. This state of affairs, simultaneity of narrative possibilities, is the principal reason why there is a sense of 'getting lost' in the funhouse of the Barthian narrative: it is actually a Borgesian influence in Barth. In this regard, Borges in "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1962) says:

> In all fiction, when a man is faced with alternatives he chooses one at the expense of the others. In the almost unfathomable Ts'ui Pen, he chooses – simultaneously – all of them. He thus creates various futures, various times which start others that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times. This is the cause of contradictions in the novel.   (p. 98)

The result of the above fictional state of affairs is a labyrinthine narrative – just like the "labyrinthine corridors" in the funhouse – in which several happenings or events are potential, and some of them are actualized at the same time in the world of the fiction; the

inevitable result of this kind of narrative is to get confused by or lost in the labyrinth of its projected world(s). In other words, it leads to confusion and indeterminacy as the reader is unable to pick one possibility at a time: he follows one narrative possibility, then he is disrupted by a second one, and the second possibility, in its turn, is stopped by a third possibility – this process continues for several times. On the interactive pole of narrative possibilities and the reader's role in encountering with them, Ronen (1994) states: "the options opened by the text, the fact that the narrative is a structure of diverging alternatives, are reflected in the reader's active participation which includes inferences, forward anticipations and gap filling" (1994, p. 169).

In Barth's story the reader gets lost in the funhouse process of reading, since narrative simultaneity disorganizes the conventional narrative causality and prevents the reader from a logical gap-filling process. In other words, the reader is bewildered in his inferences, forward or backward movement among the clues, and the possibilities opened up by the narrative. Indeed, there are puzzling moments in the reading activity when the reader has a difficult time seeing through different possibilities regarding Ambrose and the Barthian funhouse of narrative, since Barth develops various strands and versions of the story and leaves them indefinite. Here we are dealing with the idea of *a plurality of worlds* and possible worlds. According to Ronen (1994), "possible worlds [theory] enable us to describe the universe not as a single, determinate and determined set of facts but as a constellation of possible and impossible situations" (1994, p. 169); such is the world of LF. As Westervelt notes, there are "at least ten versions of Ambrose's adventures in the funhouse" (1978, p. 43); and it is similar to the forking-paths model of fiction suggested by Borges. So "one possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across another lost person in the dark" (p. 87) or Ambrose "died of starvation telling himself stories in the dark" (p. 95).

> Naturally he didn't have enough nerve to ask Magda to go through the funhouse with him. With incredible nerve and to everyone's surprise he invited Magda, quietly and politely, to go through the funhouse with him.
>
> (p. 90)

> He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator – though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.
>
> (p. 97)

"For a text to establish a fact and then take it back would violate the rules of narrative fiction," Ryan (1985, p. 271). Such anti-narrative texts or passages postulate a reality, but a second set of proposition rebuts the earlier state of affairs: this questions what Ryan calls "*factual domain*," that is "the sum of the laws, states, and events which make up the actual world of a narrative universe" (1985, p. 720), hence the flickering ontology of such worlds. Drawing on Austin, Doležel (1988) calls such self-disclosing narratives (metafiction) "self-voiding" in which the performative utterance is deprived of performative force (p. 491). Such utterances, as Doležel (1988) argues, introduce and present fictional worlds whose "existence is not definitely established" (1988, p. 491), that is to say, it is impossible to decide what exists and what does not. So it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint the true version of Ambrose's story, if any true one has ever been intended by Barth. Some of them are the narrator's versions of the plot and some are Ambrose's fantasies. However, it is mostly the narrator's versions that are developed to some extent. These versions are the ones that gain (partial) ontological coherence and can be considered as possible worlds or narrative possibilities to be picked up and followed by the reader. In one version Ambrose is dead and in another he manages to get out, hence the expressions of these two possibilities are as such:

"then he wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not" (p. 97). The result is the simultaneous existence of at times contrary versions of the narrative which is in fact an abrogation of the law of the excluded middle. This law, a classical rationalist principle, rejects a middle state of affairs between existence and non-existence. Within a possible world, statements should accord with the law of the excluded middle and be non-contradictory, or the world(s) they constitute will be counted as impossible world(s) (McHale 1987, p. 33). Now the question is: do these contradictory narrative versions make LF an impossible world, as Umberto Eco would argue? Ambrose, for instance, either manages to find the way out of the funhouse and leaves it at the end of the day with his family, or he ends up dying in a corner where after some time what remains from him is his skeleton; the existence of both possibilities seems contradictory and illogical.

In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) Umberto Eco says, "where the coincidence of opposites triumphs, the principle of identity collapses. *Tout se tient*. As a consequence, interpretation is indefinite. The attempt to look for a final, unattainable meaning leads to the acceptance of a never-ending drift or sliding of meaning" (p. 32). According to Eco, there cannot exist worlds that contain an impossibility which is treated as a logical state of affairs. So any world which is comfortable with breaking the law of the excluded middle is considered as an impossible world. As such, a reader of LF is unable to grasp the ever elusive narrative possibilities, and, in a sense, he gets lost in the funhouse of reading as the narrative does not promise either Ambrose or the reader any definite disentanglement of the events and the contradictions, hence the impossibility of Ambrose's world according to Eco's point of view. However, such kind of world building modality, the refutation of logical impossibility and believing in an either/or existence that does not bear any in-between state of affairs, that Eco argues for ignores the complexities of postmodern experience. Such a view may have its roots in the conventions of the realist writing where a clear-cut, or at least resolvable contradiction, and definite meaning is offered by the writer and his narrative; and the questions raised are generally epistemological.

Today, philosophy's pretensions to truth and total cognition of reality are undermined, and a unitary experience is rejected as illusory. People such as Hutcheon (1988) define postmodernism as anarchic, chaotic, and incorporating uncertainty and confusion (1988, p. 50). Baudrillard (1983) speaks of the "simulacrum" which is the loss of the real and inaccessibility to it – rendering of illusion as 'the real' by the general media; Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984)argues that "we no longer have recourse to grand narratives" and he valorizes "the little narrative [*petit récit*]" (p. 60), implied is the fact that "consensus" is not an adequate "criterion of validation" – instead of a single grand narrative, there are many mini-narratives, each claiming equal validity. Accordingly, as is obvious in the above typical examples, the postmodern condition or experience can be described as the fragmentation of being. Multiplicity, fragmentation, and lack of a dominant narrative are the general features that characterize postmodernism. In the absence of a unifying narrative, we experience numerous counter-narratives that produce different versions of reality or truth. At issue is a change in the nature of man's experience in the so-called postmodern era but not the repudiation of 'the existence' of the world, even if it is not a full-fledged and self-sustaining world. What Barth renders through his forking paths narratives, or 'suspended' constructs, which are at times contradictory, is perhaps the expression of the fact that postmodern experience is various and uncertain. This sacrilegious uncertainty should not be allowed to overwhelm and therefore force us to question the 'possibility' of the world, but it should help us better recognize the complexities and density of the contemporary life, as reflected in the fiction of the time. Some experiences are so peculiar - they confront us with other worlds that may unconsciously absorb us into themselves and challenge the actuality of our own world – the world of media is a good example; so the aim of such narratives is to

make us become aware of these competing worlds within our actual world, and the acceptance of these (minor) worlds is not contrary to the ontological possibility of the original world but merely challenging and questioning its 'dominance.' The reason why such a world is considered as impossible by Eco is basically epistemological in nature, since he has a problem with world interpretation – epistemological anomalies should not necessarily lead to ontological repudiation. The contradictory anomalies of the discussed world break the logic of the law of the excluded middle, and this disturbs our logically cognitive understanding and knowledge of the present state of affairs: this is an epistemological issue in nature. Instead of questioning the possibility of such a world, one should recognize its complexities.

ONTOLOGY AND DEATH

McHale (1987) asserts that in postmodernist fiction, death has a functional role, that is, it sets stories going or brings them to an end. In other words, "death often marks the *limits* of the representation. There are important exceptions to this, when death becomes itself the object of representation" (1987, p. 228). As such, postmodernists bring death into the foreground.

Death is the ontological boundary that everyone will inevitably have to cross. "In a sense," McHale (1987) says, "every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor of death; so foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination, if only in a displaced way". This is especially true of postmodernist fiction where an "other world" is projected through different strategies, such as: construction of paradoxical spaces, science-fictionalization of postmodernism, self-erasure, Chinese-box constructions, metalepsis, trope and literal confrontation, language and world, world and book, real and fictional, and so on (McHale, 1987, p. 231). Thus, in LF ontological issues are foregrounded so as to make "death" more graspable to the imagination. In fact, a sense of death pervades the story as its poetics dominantly seeks to foreground ontology and boundary crossing (ontological rupture). The funhouse in which Ambrose is lost, at a symbolic level, represents the funhouse of love, family, fiction, society, and even imagination itself that he struggles to come to terms with; if he fails, the 'funhouse' will be fatal to him and may become his tomb. The funhouse scene is a contradictory space that entails different possibilities. One of these possibilities is Ambrose's realized death:

> This can't go on much longer; it can go on forever. He died telling stories to himself in the dark; years later, when that vast unsuspected area of the funhouse came to light, the first expedition found his skeleton in one of its labyrinthine corridors and mistook it for part of the entertainment. He died of starvation telling himself stories in the dark.   (Barth, 1968, p. 95)

Apart from the expression of Ambrose's death as one of the possibilities of the story, the various techniques employed by Barth, mentioned above, further intensify a sense of death in the story as the reader recurrently experiences 'the boundaries.' In other words, "postmodernist writing models or simulates death; it produces simulacra of death through confrontations between worlds, through transgressions of ontological levels or boundaries, or through vacillation between different kinds and degrees of 'reality' (McHale, 1987, p. 232). Implied in Barth's weaving of death into his poetics is the indeterminacy of the death boundary as a possibility. Not only has he examined the possibilities of fiction writing in his story, but he has also showed death as iridescent in the funhouse of life as existing in 'the boundaries.' So arguably one of the themes of LF could be death which is evoked by ontological ruptures 'in' the boundaries of the worlds built up in the story.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, LF is the study of worlds, calling into question different issues through ontology. The poetics of the work constantly foregrounds ontology, and, as a result, it creates ontological indeterminacy, confusion, and instability; it creates a funhouse of ontologies in which the reader gets lost. The ontological ruptures induced by the text happen at different levels of the work, intruding into other planes or ontologies. It is above all the story's essential concern with ontology that makes it an instance of postmodernist work of literature.

Throughout his funhouse story, Barth has realized the notion of ontology in different ways and forms. Manipulating stylistic features, he creates ontological worlds that stand independently at the level of language and the text. Moreover, the metafictional aspect of the story has been employed to separate it from the general body of the story as a distinct ontology. Apart from his outside intrusions, Barth also includes minor worlds within the projected world of his narrative as different possibilities and versions of the story. Finally, his simultaneous rendering of these worlds has created a labyrinthine funhouse of reading out of which readers are less likely to find an exit.

Although ontology is the dominant aspect of John Barth's LF and it has been made so by pushing epistemology into the background, at certain points in the story the epistemological questions are raised simultaneously with the ontological questions, that is, both epistemological and ontological solutions are required to see through things. In other words, the reader hesitates between an explanation in epistemological terms and one which deals with ontology. The raised epistemological issues create a funhouse of 'knowing' for the readers, and this is despite the fact that they are already struggling within the ontological funhouse of the story. The above dilemma between ontology and epistemology and their simultaneous development in the story is a state experienced within the projected world where the reader encounters different ontological possibilities regarding the funhouse. Therefore, epistemology could also be a concern of (or part of) Barth's story, but its complex relation to the questions of ontology, other planes in the story, its role in the development of LF, and the philosophical issues regarding 'knowing' and 'what is' are some relevant questions, the answers to which lie beyond the scope of the present study.

ENDNOTES

1. Henceforth abbreviated to LF.
2. See "The Literature of Exhaustion" by Barth.
3. See also "Life-Story" for the relation between the reader and the text as the narrator calls the reader "print-oriented bastard" (p. 127).
4. For Barth's view on the "process of sex" see Jac Tharpe (pp. 5-6).

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