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A Room of One's Own

The Author and the Reader in the Text

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THE POSTMODERNIST NOVEL prefers narrative strategies of spatialization over those that produce a temporal effect. Hence the question of borderlines demarcating the realm of the text's self-sufficiency becomes increasingly important. This question should not be confused with the deconstructive concern with the margins of the text.[1] It is not, basically, a question of the permeability of fictional texts, by which means critical discourse can enter and overtake the fictional text, deconstructing its very premise, fictionality. In fact, the question of border-lines, or the claim to self-sufficiency, may be seen as a defense strategy on the part of postmodernist authors on behalf of the fictional text. Of course, one of the pathways into the text that eroded its seemingly stable fictional status was the author's making his reflections upon the narrative process as such part of the text. Particularly the novel as a medley genre has always permitted the author as well as the reader to intrude into the text, even as early as

in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, but only on pain of denying their own real ontological status: when they enter the text, author and reader become fictional characters within the text. The reflection upon this permutation from author or reader to character, however, can genuinely be called an "intertext" in that it absorbs the ontological difference between author, text, and reader into the concept of universal "text."[2] Intertextuality is the logical outcome of the historical development of the novel as a genre that tampers with, and attempts to seduce, reality.

The recent need felt by postmodernist authors to redefine the borderlines of the fictional text in order to reconstitute its special status cannot be seen as a naive return to the origins of the novel, since it was precisely the novel as fictional genre that established the conditions for its own demise. Instead, this impulse has to be seen as an endorsement of the tacit assumption that the novel can only survive by overreaching itself. Thus, it is a clearly recognizable trait of the postmodernist novel that instead of excluding the author and the reader from the text it attempts totally to inscribe them; not in order to refine the real author or the real reader out of existence, but in order to make them appear superfluous through their over-determination within the text. If the author-reader relationship can be seen ideally, not as a condition or a consequence of the text, but as the text itself, then the temporal threat represented by intertextuality can in effect be brought to a halt.

As stated above, the novel's ontological tension between author and reader on the one hand and the text on the other hand became evident with the rise of the novel itself. It was a problem for Cervantes, whose *Don Quixote* Thomas Mann has called a novel that comprises the world, that is, a novel that attempts to deal with reality by totally inscribing it into the text. In his essay "Meerfahrt mit 'Don Quijote' " ["Sea-Voyage with *Don Quixote*"], Mann nevertheless argues that the

ending of Cervantes' novel is unsatisfactory. The fact that Don Quixote recovers from his insanity before he dies, rejecting his former idealism as folly, is all too sobering, since it is precisely this folly that the reader has become so fond of. The novel has transcended its original purpose—to vilify the adventure novels of the time—and created a character more admirable than any of his predecessors. In fact, Don Quixote has become so admirable that, according to Mann, his author has become jealous of him. Cervantes pretends to have Don Quixote die at the end of the novel in order to spare him any demeaning literary transformations at the hands of other authors. But the true reason, says Mann, is that Cervantes himself is so fond of his own character that he wants to keep him to himself: "Das ist ein Literaturtod aus Eifersucht - aber diese Eifersucht freilich bezeugt auch wieder die innige und stolz abwehrende Verbundenheit des Dichters mit seinem ewig merkwürdigen Geistesgeschöpf, ein tiefes Gefühl, nicht weniger ernst, weil es sich in scherzhaften literarischen Vorkehrungen gegen fremde Wiedererweckungsversuche äußert."[5] Cervantes is quite justified in assuming that he needs to save Don Quixote from future literary resurrections, since he himself created the conditions for this threat to his character's integrity. In the second part of Cervantes' novel, Don Quixote and Sancho Pansa have transcended the roles of characters they played in the first part. Their ontological status becomes questionable after they begin to encounter the readers of the first part of the book, who discuss Don Quixote and Sancho Pansa's past adventures with them. The question arises whether these readers treat Don Quixote and Sancho Pansa as the fictional characters of the first part of Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* or as the real characters they encounter, characters who underwent all those adventures and thus, in a sense, wrote them. In other words, in the second part of the novel Don Quixote, besides being a character, has become his own author, claiming the role of Cervantes himself. Cervantes himself is

reduced to the figure of the fictive author and narrator, Cide Hamete Benengeli, who steps in to relate the second part of the novel. Thus, Cervantes willingly diminishes his own claim to fame, transferring it to his character, in the hopes that this character will take it upon himself to carry his author along into immortality. In this Cervantes expects Don Quixote to achieve an impossible feat: to transcend the death he has prescribed for him. The example of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* can serve to demonstrate how from the very outset the novel has thematized the relationship author-text-reader with the aim of overcoming its inherent ontological barriers.

Not surprisingly, the ultimate impossibility of this endeavor reveals itself in the ending of the novel. Don Quixote's death can be seen as a symbol of the flagging of the arrogated ontological independence of the imagination. In his study *The Chapter in Fiction,* Philip Stevick deals with the problem of a novel's ending as it relates to the division into chapters. Stevick contends that the Western mind habitually thinks in linear fashion. Thus, the artificial interruption of a linear, that is, causally structured story induced by the book's division into chapters creates a shock in the reader and thus forces him to constitute his own imaginative patterns that the following chapter will either reinforce or call into question.[4] However, in treating the ending of a novel simply like the ending of its last chapter, Stevick misses its ontological, if not its narrative, implications. Stevick's theory posits the possibility of an open ending for each and every novel since nothing will prevent the reader from constituting an unlimited number of imaginative patterns once he has reached the last line of the text. However, since at the ending of a novel both the author and the reader have to leave the fictional world, they need to justify their former roles as author or reader rather than prolong them in their imaginations; for in the face of everyday requirements both the role as author and as reader must appear artificial. The solution would be for the text itself to supply

this justification, either by becoming increasingly self-sufficient so as to appear to reject the author's as well as the reader's imaginative participation in its own development, or by absorbing the roles of author and reader into the text to the point where the reflection upon the artificiality of those roles in the realm of reality becomes the *raison d'être* for the text itself.

In 1982 Robert Coover published *Spanking the Maid,* a text subtitled *A Novel.* Judged by its length, however, *Spanking the Maid* is a novelette, not a novel. Thus the subtitle calls attention to itself. *Spanking the Maid* presents us with something unexpected or novel, which pretends, moreover, to be chosen at random: *a* novel. Yet at first sight nothing in Coover's novel justifies the reader in expecting something unexpected or random. The structure of the text contradicts this expectation, just as its lacking bulk contradicts the pretentiousness of the subtitle. *Spanking the Maid* consists of a series of short chapters, involving two characters, the master and the maid, who daily repeat the same ritual: the master spanks the maid. This ritual is invoked whenever the maid inadvertently makes a mistake. Gradually, these mistakes take on a life of their own: a blanket, perfectly spread, appears to crumple itself. The apparently random develops an unexpected logic by which it perpetuates itself and thereby acquires the status of necessity. As a result, the master needs to spend more and more time studying manuals to teach him the perfect technique of spanking, for his ideal is the perfection of his power, mirrored in and justified by the perfection of the maid's daily chores. Yet, as he unsuccessfully tries to raise her to the level of this ideal, he in turn becomes dependent on her mistakes, and by implication on her existence, as the precondition of his own power: "Sometimes, especially late in the day like this, watching the weals emerge from the blank page of her soul's ingress like secret writing, he finds himself searching it for something, he doesn't know what exactly, a message of sorts, the revelation

of a mystery in the spreading flush, in the pout and quiver of her cheeks, the repressed stutter of the little explosions of wind, the . . . dew-bejeweled hieroglyphs of crosshatched stripes."[5]

Master and maid are like God and man, or like author and reader, and for all of them the day of creation is drawing to a close. For while the text repeats the same scene—spanking the maid—with few, if any variations, the time of day for the action changes from morning to late in the day. As night approaches, the master, not having been able to achieve his ideal, begins to look for the "mystery" that will explain to him why he ever had to spank the maid in the first place. In like manner, God might be looking at the imprints He has left in the human soul, treating them as "hieroglyphs" that may bear a message for Him. And the author looks at the weals he has left on the "blank page" of the reader's naked behind, since these traces are like "secret writing," revealing to him something he did not put there.

Spanking the Maid becomes an extended metaphor for the relationship between author and reader, and it thematizes their mutual dependence to the point of excluding all other concerns—just as the necessity of domination and submission will eventually infiltrate every experience of master and maid and change it into a pretext for the repeated ritual of attempting to perfect their relationship. As a consequence, Coover's text becomes increasingly hermetic and its values radically ambivalent. For example, the bedroom of the master, the locale of the novel's action, is separated from the garden by nothing but a glass door, and the garden is always in sight. But neither master nor maid ever enter the garden, which could, or perhaps should, be read as a metaphor for life, so that it becomes either the garden of paradise lost or the imaginary garden of forbidden lust. The bedroom on this side of the glass door thus becomes the realm of reality where a daily ritual of pain is performed that represents the *conditio humana*.

As a result of existing in a circumscribed place, lust has become perverted into pain, but then both lust and pain cannot ever exist except when under the pressure of limitation. The exclusiveness of the bedroom represents the rationale as well as the dilemma of the text; it is the locus of the author-reader relationship. Since there is no alternative to this relationship, executed in the form of perverse ritual, the form of perverse ritual is rendered the only genuine value the text contains. Paradoxically, for Coover the novel as genre has to become hermetic in order to survive.

The hermetic relationship between author and reader as the ideal form of the text attains an almost absolute, existential pitch in Maurice Blanchot's *récit, La folie du jour. La folie du jour* is the story of a man gone blind after an accident who, instead of experiencing eternal darkness, is confronted with the sensation of unlimited daylight. Unlimited daylight, however, is "blinding," maddening. Thus the metaphorical not the real blindness drives the narrator into a state of insanity, because unlimited daylight can be as little defined by real objects as it in turn defines them. It, too, is insane, since sanity implies limitations: "A la longue, je fus convaincu que je voyais face à face la folie du jour; telle était la vérité: la lumière devenait folle, la clarté avait perdu tout bon sens; elle m'assaillait déraisonnablement, sans règle, sans but."[6] Ernst Cassirer, in his study *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* describes how the experience of transition from darkness to daylight necessitates man's positing of values. In effect, this transition consists of the experience of being born (in French *voir le jour).* According to Cassirer, all creativity myths show that man originally attributed to daylight a positive value, to darkness a negative one. In other words: in privileging the new stage, life, man becomes dependent on daylight in order to impose order upon chaos and cope with reality. Blanchot's narrator enters yet another stage of existence when he understands that he is called upon to become an author. The transition is marked

by daylight's changing from a necessary condition of life to its sole condition. Unqualified existence, however, equals insanity. The daylight whose insanity the narrator has to face is the unlimited imagination that through ecstasy—the abovementioned "accident"—has stepped out of the reality of qualifying facts. The unlimited imagination can no longer define facts, just as the unlimited daylight can no longer define objects. When the narrator of Blanchot's *récit* turns from character to author, the story of his life begins to disappear. Its very structure dissolves, since structure depends on the facts or objects it attempts to structure. At the end of the *récit* the reader discovers that the whole story was a quotation, the narrator's attempt to explain to his doctors his former life and the reason for his blindness. In the penultimate paragraph the narrator repeats the exact beginning of the text. That was the beginning of the *text,* the doctors, being critics, say critically; what about the facts? The author's unlimited imagination has made it impossible for him to detect and relate facts, which are defined by the categories of time and space; he can only live by repeating himself, by continuously quoting his own story. But since the form of self-quotation represents a meaningless form of intertextuality—a text that continuously quotes nothing but itself constitutes no relationship between texts—Blanchot implicitly rejects the notion of intertextuality. Like Coover's *Spanking the Maid,* Blanchots's *La folie du jour* establishes itself as a self-sufficient text.

However, if Blanchot's text rejects literary critics, it does—like Coover's text—take the reader into account. After the narrator is blinded, that is, after he has become an author, the only person he still "sees" behind the backs of the doctors is the female silhouette of the Law, who represents the reader. This Law defies all expectations of liability; she concedes all the power to the narrator, yet only as long as she remains for him the Law. As in Coover's novel, the reader in Blanchot's *récit* is female and, also as in Coover's novel, the relationship between author and reader is a matter of erotics and power.

The female voice of the Law pretends to adore the narrator, but he is not permitted to ask anything of her; and although she grants him the right to be everywhere (as author), this only means that he may not ask for a fixed place in her (the reader's) life. In fact, she plays with him, by quoting him, whenever she feels like it. She will suddenly cry out, "Ah, je vois le jour, ah, Dieux,"[7] turning his existential predicament into a joke. Since the limitless daylight of the imagination that constitutes the author's blindness dissolves the borderlines of his own story, turning his life into an endless quote, he becomes a ready prey for the reader. Like an insatiable mistress, she can ask him to devote his whole being to her. Thus, living or dying no longer makes any difference to the narrator—"j'éprouve à vivre un plaisir sans limites et j'aurai à mourir une satisfaction sans limites"[8]—as long as he is able to fulfill her requirement that he be famous. Thus, he surrenders to the madness of the day.

If the metaphor of a perverse erotic relationship between male author and female reader could serve Robert Coover and Maurice Blanchot to lock both the author and the reader into the text, John Barth and Italo Calvino reject the idea of the pressure exerted by the borderlines of the text for the idea of a convergence of the identical concerns of author and reader, who gravitate towards each other in a love relationship that excludes all other concerns from the text, relegating them to a secondary order of importance. For Barth this convergence between author and reader develops from their mutual understanding that their relationship ought to be a consummate metaphor, or a metaphorical consummation. Consequently Barth attempts to turn into metaphor every element and aspect of his fiction, "the particular genre, the mode and medium, the very process of narration—even the fact of the artifact itself."[9]

A metaphor connects two realms of referentiality without ever quite letting the mystery of the borderline between those two realms become the logic of their connection. Author and

reader represent these two realms. The fictional text as metaphor allows their relationship to constitute itself, which would otherwise be impossible because of the necessary time gap involved between writing and reading; no two persons can be author and reader of the same text at the same time. Writing and reading are by definition solitary preoccupations, yet the text as metaphor can link, through the metaphorical leap, the mutual desire of author and reader. In Barth's "Dunyazadiad," the first of the three novellas that comprise the metaphorically structured novel *Chimera,* which resembles the tripartite mythic monster of that name, the author-reader relationship is explained as such a love relationship. Here, as the author, Barth can encounter Scheherazade, his favorite storyteller, from the distance of the future, after he has discovered the magic word. Delighted, he tells her that he is an avid reader of her stories, only to discover that she has not as yet told these stories. Thus, from being her reader, Barth turns into the author by daily telling her one of the stories contained in *The Thousand and One Nights.* At night, Scheherazade then tells these stories to Shahryar. So, from being the listener of the stories, she turns into their well-known author. This game of give-and-take, taking place across the centuries, is a metaphor for love, and Barth tells Scheherazade "that writing and reading, or telling and listening, were literally ways of making love" (p. 32). Barth's choice of the word "literally" is revealing as well as misleading. For in describing the way Barth and Scheherazade make love, the word retains those connotations that relate lovemaking to the written word. Only in the realm of the written word, that is, within Barth's text, can this love take place. The author never actually makes love to Scheherazade, although he admits being jealous of Shahryar. But since Barth cannot forget that the condition of his encounter with Scheherazade—of their mutual roles as author and reader—is dependent on the fact that he is visiting her from the future, he cannot plead for "actual," but only for "literal," ways of making love. However, if lovemaking

between author and reader is possible only metaphorically, even within the fictional text, then love demands that fictions be more important than reality: "Fictions, maybe—but truer than fact," (p. 53). Barth's defense strategy against the disruption of the writer-reader or teller-listener relationship is, therefore, to place the fictional text at the top of a hierarchy of texts.

The central metaphor that interrelates all the metaphorical levels of Barth's "Dunyazadiad" is its leitmotif: "It's as if—as if the key to the treasure *is* the treasure!" (p. 8). We can interpret the love relationship between author and reader, Barth and Scheherazade, as the treasure for which the text is the key, since their love can only take place with the help of the text. Yet, actually turning the key would reveal the fact that the treasure does not really exist; thus nothing but holding the key and not turning it will keep reality at bay. Holding the key means telling stories and listening to them, since telling stories and listening to them can take place at the same time—in contrast to writing and reading. The suspense created by holding the key without turning it is comparable to the suspense created in the teller and the listener by a story that is still being told or a love that is not yet consummated. Of course, Scheherazade in turn tells her stories to the king, not to Barth, but the true listener of her stories, who is comparable to Barth in that she cannot enter into an actual love relationship with Scheherazade, is Dunyazade, Scheherazade's little sister, whose sole role throughout the thousand and one nights will be to ask Scheherazade for the continuation of the present story-in-progress each time after the king has made love to her. In calling his novella "Dunyazadiad," Barth calls upon Dunyazade to help him justify, through her own reduced function, his ability to talk and listen to Scheherazade, but not to make love to her.

However, although the situation of telling and listening seems to be the most appropriate metaphor for a love relationship within the fictional text, the text's leitmotif of the key to the

treasure that *is* the treasure nevertheless privileges the relationship between author and reader. Not because the greater tension between author and reader, caused by the fact that they function in their roles at different times, is nevertheless overcome by Barth's text, but because the real author and the real reader are now becoming dispensable. The authorial device of having Barth meet Scheherazade in the past and Scheherazade dependent on a future reader for the telling of her stories propels both of them out of their real environment into the realm of the imagination. Thus overcoming the barriers of time, Barth's "Dunyazadiad" is a perfect example for the employment of the narrative strategies of spatialization in order to achieve the self-sufficiency of the text, its independence from reality.

If, for Barth, the actor in the process of the spatialization of the text is the author, this actor is represented by the reader in Italo Calvino's novel *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore.* Unlike Coover, Blanchot, and Barth, Calvino at first sight does not seem to establish an erotic relationship between the author and the reader, but between two readers, one male and the other female. Their communication begins in the bookstore, when both readers attempt to return a defective copy of Calvino's present novel. Since both readers at this point intrude into this very novel, they will never be able to find a complete copy of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* as it must have existed before they became part of it. But their conjoined search for such a copy leads them to other fragments of the novel, which turn up in strange places, and it finally leads them to one another. Thus, Calvino at first sight seems to have written the story of those two readers, treating them like characters in a novel. But it is decisive that their role as readers remains primary. For only as readers do they search for the rest of Calvino's novel, not in order to meet one another; and although the two readers decide to marry at the end of the novel, it is the story they want to bring to a happy ending,

not their relationship. In spite of their love they retain that loneliness that is the distinguishing feature of the genuine reader. And since this loneliness also distinguishes the genuine author, a relationship is also being established between author and reader, a relationship depending on a mutual ideal projection that can totally dispense with the real existence of the author and the reader. Thus, in Calvino's novel the editor of a publishing house who daily has to cope with real authors maintains that "gli autori veri restano quelli che per lui erano solo un nome sulla copertina, una parola che faceva tutt' uno col titolo, autori che avevano la stessa realtà dei loro personaggi e dei luoghi nominati nei libri, che esistevano e non esistevano allo stesso tempo, come quei personaggi e quei paesi."[10] True authors exist only for the reader or, to be more precise, they only exist during the act of reading. Traditionally, the author is believed to guarantee the "real" ontological status of the text through the fact of his own existence; his name on the title page of the book is meant to refer to him as a person. Calvino attempts to question this tradition. His novel fragments not only pretend to be written by various different authors, but they turn out to have not even been written by those authors by whom they pretend to be written (which, of course, is indeed the case). They either turn out to be translations, the originals of which have been lost, or they have been confused with other novels. The real author is thus continuously withheld from his readers, until the readers begin to react with withdrawal symptoms, having become addicted to the idea of author. Metaphorically, the reader becomes the traveler on a winter's night who can never reach his destination—just as the dependent clause, the novel's title, will never be embraced in any syntactical structure including a main clause. Even though the marriage between male and female reader seems to supply the novel with a conventional ending, the last scene still dramatizes the desire of the reader for the author as his unattainable idea. Both readers lie in

bed, each one reading a novel. The female reader is tired and would like to turn off the light. "Ancora un momento," says the male reader, "sto per finire *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino."[11]

In contrast to Stevick's theory, the ending of the postmodernist novel is no longer an open ending. On the contrary, it establishes the circular structure of the novel. Just as the ending of Calvino's novel takes up its own title page, Barth's *Chimera*, the last novella of which is entitled "Bellerophoniad," ends with the words "It's a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longeurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor— . . . It's no *Bellerophoniad.* It's a ."[12] The word that needs to be substituted is, of course, *Chimera*, the title of the book. Blanchot's narrator also ends by quoting the beginning of his own story, while Coover repeats the hermetic structure of his novel in each of its sections. The circular structure of these postmodernist novels is a metaphor for their self-sufficiency. These novels attempt to resist what Jacques Derrida calls the process of *débordement*, an overflowing of the text that erodes the notions of beginning and ending, of title and margins, and ultimately of a realm of referentiality outside of the text. Derrida wants to liberate the text in order that its meaning be triumphant.[13] For him the process of *débordement* becomes an homage to life itself; it signifies life's triumph over death, since death appears to be inherent in every self-contained structure. However, from its very inception the genre of the novel has been in danger of losing the very meaning Derrida wants to liberate, precisely by disregarding the function of its borderlines as epistemological barriers. Gradually, the novel's borderlines have come to mark nothing but the locus where the Other, that which is not the text, could infiltrate the text and endanger any meaning that depended on the fictionality of the text as its precondition.

The self-sufficiency to which postmodernist fictions aspire does not imply the denial of facts or a refusal to incorporate

them within their borderlines. But it aims to subsume facts under the head of fictionality. And in order to ensure the special status necessary for fiction to justify this subsumption of facts, the fictional text can no longer rely on its immanent aesthetic value. In a world where texts tend to be commentaries on one another, the postmodernist novel attempts to regain an independent status by fictionalizing the author-reader relationship to the point where the factual relationship between author and reader becomes irrelevant. This fictionalization, as a permutation of the relationship from actual interdependence to a mode of self-sufficiency, is achieved by changing the temporal sequence of writing and reading into the spatial concept of an erotic relationship between author and reader. And this form of spatialization once more supplies the novel with the ideal necessary to overreach itself.