

John Barth's "Echo": The Story in Love With Its Author

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To maintain that postmodern fiction reflects upon itself would be no more than a self-evident and therefore superfluous statement, if one failed to ask what that statement implied and whether it provided hints as to the future development of postmodern literature. Before tackling these questions, however, we must ask whether postmodern literature defines its own ontological status as distinct from, or related to, that of reality. We may agree that the *attempt* at such a definition is clearly visible; but obviously this neither enables us safely to redefine fiction as, say, non-referential language, nor to redefine reality as a realm of "intentional" objects. Instead we have to take into account that it is the postmodern *author* who distinguishes between fact and fiction and, to be sure, in such a way that his reflection becomes an integral part of his fiction.

But if this sets the postmodern author apart from his immediate modernist predecessors, it at the same time points to his literary ancestors. The age of Romanticism and its tendency to extol subjectivity to the degree where the self came to be seen as the creative center of the universe provide the historical backdrop for what might be termed the neo-Romanticism of the postmodern author. The Romantic philosopher, critic, or writer, while acknowledging the ambiguities emerging from the self's encounter with the world, would yet try to transcend these ambiguities by absorbing them into an ever-expanding self. For him this act of transcendence is not, as is commonly held, irrational but rather the result of an increase in self-knowledge through self-reflection.

For the artist self-knowledge and self-reflection appear as the dual forces of self-creation and self-destruction, which in constant alternation constitute the dialectical process of Romantic irony. The function of irony then does not reside so much in the destruction of creative energy, but rather in its position as mediator between enthusiasm and skepticism. This shifting between opposite poles can best express itself in the form of paradox, which in the words of Friedrich Schlegel, the "father" of Romantic irony, represents the essence of irony: "Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is what is good and great at the same time."¹

The tension between self-creation and self-destruction is mirrored in the artist's attitude towards his own work. Romantic irony describes the dual presence of the author within the text: he is at the same time creator and commentator, author and "author who imitates the role of Author."² As creator, or author, his function is enthusiastic, combining, and synthesizing; as commentator, or author in the role of Author, it is skeptical, dissolving, and analytical. But since self-creation and self-destruction continue to presuppose

¹See *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* I-XIX, ed. Ernst Behler with the co-operation of Jean-Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner (Munich and Zurich: Schöningh and Thomas Verlag, 1958-1971), II. ed. Hans Eichner (1967), "Lyceum" no. 48, p. 153: "Ironie ist die Form des Paradoxen. Paradox ist alles, was zugleich gut und groß ist." (The translation is taken from Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue On Poetry And Literary Aphorisms*, translated, introduced, and annotated by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc [University Park and London: Penn. SU Press, 1968], p. 126).

²John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, 220 (August, 1967), 33.

each other, the process of Romantic irony, as it is mirrored in narrative, becomes an ineluctable as consciousness or the imagination itself. The Romantic author who consciously begins to intrude into his own fiction must eventually become the postmodern author who is no longer able to withdraw from it. Thus the history of the literature of irony can be described as the history of the various attempts to reflect upon the fundamental paradox of self-creation and self-destruction and of the various attempts either to flee or to embrace that paradox.

John Barth's fiction has by now created its own tradition of Romantic irony. If self-reflection appeared to be basically destructive in *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, it turned intensely creative in *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*. But not until *Lost in the Funhouse* does Barth become aware of the exemplary nature of the process of his own irony and begin to reflect upon it. The fact that *Lost in the Funhouse* was arranged as a series of short fictions which were nevertheless intended "to be received 'all at once'"³ seems to be the conscious acknowledgment on the author's part of the existence of such an irony: self-creation and self-destruction are thus being held in a tentative balance, the emblem of which can be seen in "Echo," the central story of the book.

The emblematic quality of "Echo" derives its force from the double meaning of the word "self-reflection," from both its concrete and its abstract connotations. In Barth's story, this double meaning serves to relate content and form and to establish an ironic tension between them: the encounter of mythic Narcissus, the story's protagonist, with his concrete self-reflection—his image in the pool—determines the content of the story; and his abstract self-reflection—his search for self-knowledge—provides the story's form. This ironic tension is embodied in the ambivalent nature of the complement to Narcissus, the nymph Echo, who appears as both character and voice. Yet in both functions she is again nothing but Narcissus's self-reflection: since she is in love with him, she becomes "the Echo of his fancy" (p. 99), and in repeating his words she becomes his story as he tells it to himself. Since Narcissus is capable only of self-love, he cannot return Echo's love unless she effaces herself absolutely; however, in her immortality Echo perpetuates Narcissus's story by echoing it through the centuries. Thus Narcissus, the apparent image of the self-reflective author, only seems to be capable of achieving immortality by absolutizing his own subjectivity.

Ancient myth has it that Narcissus himself died after his vain attempt to embrace his own image in the Donaconan spring, that the goddess Artemis punished him for rejecting all his lovers by making him fall in love with his own reflection, thus denying him love's consummation, save in death.⁴ In Barth's story this dilemma is repeated in the fact that Narcissus can only persist as *Echo's* voice. In other words, Narcissus as the incarnation of solipsism is able to persist only by losing the very essence of his being.

The dilemma could be solved if Narcissus, in the telling of his own story, were to find the means to expand his subjective narrative perspective and make it universal. Thus the search for such a narrative perspective evolves into the central theme of the story, for once found it could serve to dissolve the ineluctable circle of self-creation and self-destruction in which Narcissus and the author are both caught. Through the figure of the Theban prophet Tiresias the

³John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), "Author's Note," p. ix. All further references will be in parentheses.

⁴See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, I-II (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), I, 286-88.

possibility of such a universal perspective is introduced into the story. The omniscient prophet is meant to represent the omniscient author. The seer advises Narcissus to retell his story again and again "as though it were another's until like a much-repeated word it loses sense" (p. 95). Knowing past, present, and future, Tiresias also knows that even this advice will not prevent Narcissus's final discovery of himself and that this discovery will mean Narcissus's death. In spite of his omniscience Tiresias must fail Narcissus, for in craving to find himself Narcissus thirsts not for knowledge but for love.

Thus, in the person of the seer Tiresias, knowledge, as compared to love, reveals its inherent shortcomings. For although seeing and knowing, concepts deriving in ancient Greek from the same etymological root, seem in each and every present moment to coalesce in the act of perception, they are distinct from one another in the conceptualization of past and future. Even the seer, despite the name, can structure the past and the future only in his mind. (Perhaps the ancient prophet was usually portrayed as being blind for the very reason that then he would not have to comprehend past, present, and future differently.) Thus Tiresias *knows* that it is beautiful Narcissus, desired by all, who seeks refuge in his cave; however, Tiresias cannot *see* and therefore does not desire him: "Clairvoyance is anaphrodisiac" (p. 97). Only in death, when time becomes irrelevant, can love and knowledge be one—"Dead Tiresias still stares wide-eyed at Wisdom's nude entire" (p. 100)—for in life knowledge always postulates change, while love demands timelessness.

Tiresias fails Narcissus as omniscient seer because of the erotic nature of the latter's quest; and Tiresias also fails the story as omniscient author because the truth of knowledge and the truth of art do not coincide. Art does not generally ask for logical inferences or conclusions. In fact, truly ironic art must shun both forever since they short-circuit the process of self-reflection. In the story "Echo" this necessary open-endedness of self-reflective art is represented in an ironic question-and-answer style, which often leaves a question without an answer, or modifies the question by using an answering phrase like "Not quite, not quite" (p. 98; 99), or even calls the question as such into question along with the questioner: "Who says so?" (p. 95). If the sum of the questions asked in "Echo" were reduced to its essence, the basic question would then emerge as to whether one can imagine a narrative perspective which is universal but not founded on knowledge.

In the opinion of Tiresias this question would, of course, allow only one answer: that such a perspective would be not only fictitious but, moreover, deceptive. He therefore warns Narcissus about Echo, who alone could embody such a perspective, by calling her "the soul of guile and sleight-of-tongue" (p. 99). By implication Tiresias's warning cautions against storytelling as such, regarding it as an unacceptable alternative to reality. But even if Tiresias's opinion were false or at least one-sided, there still remains the question of how Narcissus can answer Echo's claim to universality in love, of which the timelessness of her own immortality is an objective correlative.

After tracing the concept of narcissism through psychoanalysis back to the original myth, Herbert Marcuse contends in *Eros and Civilization* that Narcissus, like Orpheus, represents an ideal eros that would merge man and nature, transcend un-erotic reality's distinction between subject and object, and liberate the things of nature so that they may be what they truly are.⁵ Love, then, if we

⁵See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 159-71.

extend Marcuse's interpretation of the myth, would liberate Narcissus so that he might recognize himself within a nature which, by reflecting his own image in the spring, gives him to understand that nature itself renounces all difference between man and itself and, consequently, all enmity. Understanding nature's attitude, Narcissus would joyfully yield to his own image because self-destruction would then become self-creation. Eros and Thanatos would be reconciled.

However, if Narcissus is understood in this manner he ceases to be a distinctive, if mythic, figure and becomes the symbolic representative of a future mankind. And although in Barth's story Narcissus does indeed become representative, he is not symbolic but ironic, he does not represent the future reality of mankind but the present imagination of an author who pushes his own subjectivity to the point of narcissism in the hope of employing this very narcissism against himself—in order to achieve, through the story about Narcissus, a precarious kind of objectivity. Narcissus, by telling his own story to himself in the third person, in other words, by reflecting upon it, contrives to abstract the story from his own Ego. Thus the story becomes his objective correlative, objective in the sense that it becomes the echo of each and every narcissistic or self-reflective Ego. Paradoxically, Narcissus cannot achieve this end unless he denies himself to himself or, in terms of metaphor, unless he stops short of embracing himself in the spring and instead lingers on its brink contemplating his image forever. The longed for moment when self-creation and self-destruction would become identical must remain an open possibility, must, in fact, be completely ironic: "Thus we linger forever on the autognostic verge" (p. 100). Only Echo, the persisting voice, who combines in her own being both the story's content and form, could embody the possibility of transcending this irony. But as long as Echo cannot be anything but the reflection of Narcissus's ambivalent nature, or as long as the story is in love with its author, this irony cannot be dispelled.