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'Avoiding Closure' and 'Postmodern Temporality' in Barth's 'On with the Story'

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Mojgan Abshavi

(Corresponding author)

Department of English, Payam-e-Noor University

Iran

Mahboobeh Taghvaei

Payam-e-Noor University

Iran

ABSTRACT

Postmodern temporality in literature, as it involves non-linear time and narration, creates a discrepancy between the narrated time and the temporal time of narration, and thus the order of events within a story are playfully dealt with. Complexities become more when there is no sense of ending in such stories. John Barth's 'On with the Story' proves a good case in point in reflecting the poetics of postmodernism by manipulating nonlinear progression of time with multidimensional, discrete, and game-like temporality in creating flickering textual constructions, especially when he puts no endings for his stories and avoids closure to mirror the breakdown of traditional narrative values. Accordingly, the present paper tries to highlight Barth's narrative techniques in foregrounding nonlinearity and open-endedness in his 'On with the Story'. As such, the aim of the study is to determine to what degree Barth's play with time and narration echo postmodern concerns and how is possible to make sense of a postmodern story by investigating into its textual structure than the mere course of events. Barth's achievement in the postmodern ground in this story, just like his other ones, not only challenges traditional narrativity and temporality but also presents the reader with a new sense of understanding reality as it is happening around us.

Keywords: *Non-linear Time, John Barth, On with the Story, Multiple Endings, Postmodern Temporality*

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1. Introduction

In the final decades of the twentieth century, and even into the new millennium, the term 'postmodern' appeared to celebrate fragmentation as 'an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief' (Barry, 2009, p. 81). It means that, on a literary level, postmodernism tries 'to break free of many of the established conventions of genre and narrative' (Bradbury, 192, p. 209). This fact is well reflected in John Barth's essay, 'The Literature of Replenishment', in which he discussed the principles of literary recovery through fictional strategies such as parody in undermining the inherited literary conventions. As one of the pioneering postmodern writers of our time, Barth defends the idea that old writing is exhausted, but that playfulness now offers new forms of expression on the literary ground. In this vein, postmodernist writers

seek to break out of the linear and generic conventions of traditional writing to the extent that parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness, skepticism, temporal disorder, multiple endings, and metafiction become the central features associated with literature in postmodernism (Featherstone, 2007, p. 7). These features manifest themselves more concretely in the manipulation of narrative time which is one of the most effective devices of undermining the chronological presentation of events. In contrast to the conventional theories of time, postmodernist fiction deprives narrative from its linear coherence by twisting the sense of significant time, so that one is not able to find the difference between the time of fiction and the temporal time. As an experimental writer, John Barth tries, in a sense, to replenish the exhausted fiction by manipulating time during narration and bringing it to the foreground. To put it differently, he denies and confounds the



traditional conception of temporality in mimetic narratives. Ermarth has stated that while 'all narrative is temporal by definition because its medium is temporal, postmodern sequences make accessible new temporal capacities that subvert the privilege of historical time and bind temporality in language' (1992, p. 11).

Barth's own fiction explores these temporal capacities in a playful manner. By using different games with time, he sets narrative time in non-linear fashion and presents the story as fragmented and disrupted. In Douglass's words, while 'Bergsonian aesthetics give art the imperative of constantly reinventing itself and have furnished a useful key to Modernism', Barth's play with time applies to 'the continuities and disruptions of the 'postmodern,' with its hybrid, contradictory, pluralistic claims' (Douglass, 2012, p. 34). Moreover, Barth prevents his fiction from being ended. In other words, endings seem inaccessible in his fiction, and no single and definite ending is promised by his poetics; hence, the obsessive treatment of ending in his short narratives.

Barth's replenishment is carried out by flouting the mimetic aesthetic in fiction, which brings about certain unusual or anomalous temporalities. These anomalies are actually the very subject of his stories, especially revealing in his shorter ones such 'On with the Story'. In what follows, it has been tried to highlight Barth's manipulation of time and endings in this postmodern short story.

2. Theoretical Background

In this paper an attempt is made to show how Barth's postmodernist's attitude toward narrative time and ending has shaped the texture of 'On with the Story', and the way readers may respond to it while reading. Despite the numerous researches done on John Barth's themes and techniques, this short story has been somehow ignored to be discussed separately. Many of the researches on Barth have rather focused on his longer well-known stories, such as *The Floating Opera*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Got-Boy*, *Lost in the Funhouse*, and *Chimera*. However, the findings of other researchers about Barth's narrative techniques can be used in writing about his less known writings.

Barth's 'On with the Story' is an acclaimed postmodern story. Interpreting

Barth's themes and techniques pass through familiarity with postmodern narrativity and thematics. Accordingly, it has been tried to highlight two specific aspects of 'On with the Story' as they can be discussed within the postmodern lexicon. Therefore, 'games with time' and 'avoiding closure' are discussed below to give a better understanding of Barth's story

3. 'Games with Time' in 'On with the Story'

In 'On with the Story', time is not going to come to an end and everything is in an everlasting becoming and continuum, as in a *Möbius strip* which Barth incorporates 'as a central point' in many of his stories (García, 2015, p. 122). In other words, the author has encapsulated his conceptualization of time in the title. The title, telling about the story itself, suggests that there is an essential divergence between life and story. The narrator reveals that our lives are not our stories. It is life which finally and necessarily overcomes the story. By manipulating time and space, Barth in fact arrests time in its onward course.

'On with the Story' opens with a 'freeze-frame', in which the writer sits by the antagonist who reads a story about herself. After the freeze-frame which imposes a state of suspension on the story, the narrator's remarks follow as such:

'the writer of these lines is another, and a third one is the above-mentioned Alice, chief character of this story-now-in-progress, whose attention has been caught by the passage that you and she together have just read'. (1996, p. 71)

The situation is a correspondence between what one is reading in a piece of fiction and one's own life. Alice is reading a freeze-frame story which is very similar to her own life, while she is sitting next to a man who is the writer of both the "freeze-frame" and Alice herself. We are in fact reading about 'motions-within-motions' (p. 89), the 'zero narrative mph'¹ (p. 82), and the way these issues shape Barth's narration.

Considering the story time and the temporal time, the narrator ends his story saying that "all the stories are essentially constructs in time, and only incidentally in

¹ The narrator is here talking about the rate of Alice's story which is moving with "zero narrative mph": 'The protagonist of 'Freeze Frame' is moving from St. Louis's Gateway Arch toward University City at a velocity, alas, of zero miles per hour' (Barth, 1996, p. 81).

the linear space of written words' (Barth, 1996, p. 94). As Vukanović and Grmuša say,

Underlying this idea of separation between story and plot is an old assumption, revealing a fundamental discrepancy between literature and life: the assumption that in literature events can be variously arranged, following any sequence, whereas in real life they are always chronological. (2009, p. 10)

The narrator thus terminates his interminable termination, saying:

Written or spoken, however, these words are like points in space, through which the story-arrow travels in time ... even if and when we linger over an arresting passage, we're only apparently at rest in the story's suspended but incessant motion; likewise, in our manifold own. There. Said. On with the story? (Barth, 1996, p. 94)

At issue here are two parallel narrative domains which are put side by side by Barth. The structures of these two levels are in certain ways similar to each other so much so that the reader experiences "the physics of relative motion in the universe" of the story as long as temporality is concerned (p. 81). Barth describes the situation as such:

two trains stand side by side in the station and a passenger on one thinks momentarily that the other has begun to move, when in fact the movement is his own. (p.80)

This is experienced both by Alice and the reader as Barth stops one level of narration and gets to the other one. Therefore, two temporalities are put against each other.

In his three-volume book named *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur illustrates the complexity of the relation between the time of fiction and the story time, or between *Erzählzeit* and *erzählzeit* in German (1984, 2: p. 77). In the narrated story, we have two horizons: Alice's and that of the story she is reading. Here *Erzählzeit* is never paused while *erzählzeit* is at times: Alice's world is narrated with certain duration, but when the narrator takes us to the magazine level in her hands on the flight, the narration of Alice's world is stopped and is momentarily removed from temporality. Then the magazine world begins to unfold in time. Paradoxically, like the example of the train above, when the magazine-world is being narrated-Alice's world already fixed-we are in fact experiencing the narration of an aspect of Alice's world though its narrative is moving with 'zero narrative mph'. In other words, although

the narrated time of Alice's domain happens in a nonexistent diegetic level, it is subject to the narrative time of the magazine-world since she is experiencing a temporal version of her own life (story). So, Barth pushes the narrative pause button and 'smart[s] off' about relative motion, and that is the way for him to tell his story – hence his conclusion that 'all stories are essentially constructs in time' (1996, p.94). However, this time is inevitably humanized, that is, 'Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence' (Ricoeur, 1984, 1: 52).

What is at stake here is the concrete process by which the textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work. Barth believes that 'the observer is as essential to the creation of the universe as the universe to the creation of the observer' (1996, p. 102). So any play with time changes the readers' usual conception of temporality in fiction, and this is the very way through which Barth experiments with story writing and replenishes the exhausted fiction.

Throughout 'On with the Story' it is either the narrator or one of the characters that causes the narration to stop when a series of comments are given on the creative aspect of fiction writing, and then the narration sets off once more. This divergence and return to the story are repeated time and time again, hence a self-conscious narrative. As Waugh holds, such fiction 'self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'. As such, the narrative structures and 'the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text' become important (1984, p. 2). Accordingly, such texts undermine the status of reality beyond the textual world. If a text questions the reality of both domains, then one is to have a "fictive experience of time" since the reality of the worlds is no longer comfortably credible. One interpretation, therefore, could be this that what is at stake in Barth's story is an articulation of an experience of time which is basically a fictive one. Ricoeur defines the above experience as such: "what I am calling [...] the fictive experience of time



is the temporal aspect of this virtual experience of being-in-the-world proposed by the text” (1984, 2: p. 100). However, Barth also questions the modality of the actual world outside the text, so it does its temporal aspect as well. Therefore, in a sense, narrative configuration and refiguration are bridged. In this vein, ‘only the confrontation between the world of the text and the life-world of the reader will make the problematic of narrative configuration tip over into that of the refiguration of time by narrative’ (Ricoeur, 1984, 2: p. 100).

Generally, the events of ‘*On with the Story*’ are in a complex narrative without any linear and chronological order. But, as Holquist believes,

their order could be recovered, as it were, by rearranging the distorted pattern of events back into their proper or, as it is sometimes called, their real-life chronology, which we know is just our perspective of chronology. Therefore, stated in the most basic terms, a particular chronotope will be defined by the specific way in which the sequentially of events is deformed (always involving a segmentation, a spatialization) in any given account of those events. (2002, p. 114)

4. Multiple Endings in ‘*On with the Story*’

Narrative endings have been the main focus of attention among critics and writers since the very beginning of writing fiction. When authors started to write novels, a closed ending was the defined technique in which mystery was explained and fortunes were settled. In the modernist era, narrative ending changed to an open one that gave a general sense of satisfaction to all the events of the story. Gradually, the notion of ending ‘became more intractable by the complication and multiplication of narrative endings’ through postmodernist narrative techniques (De Lang, 1994, p. 152). Such multiplicity of narrative endings do indeed mirror the ‘breakdown of [...] traditional values’ (Waugh, 1984, p. 6), and can be seen as a manifestation of all the uncertainties and instabilities that people face nowadays. Among those who have made an attempt to define “multiple endings”, Brian McHale describes the term as “a special case of narrative self-erasure, a technique which breaches the linear sequence of a narrative because the readers are given two or more mutually exclusive lines of narrative development at the same time” (as cited in Neuditschko, 2008, p. 3), in a way that the reader faces a fragmented

narrative which does not offer any right ending.

In this case, the long-established structure of a narrative, which traditionally consisted of no more than ‘a beginning, middle, and end’ is broken up in favour of a more diverse, less stable and certainly more experimental form in which the single ending is replaced by a multiplicity of endings. (Neuditschko, 2008, p. 5)

From a narratological point of view, multiple endings are doubtlessly regarded as a device of metafiction, ‘a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact’ (Waugh, 1984, p. 2). Considering the fact that readers are players in metafictional narratives, multiple endings make the readers aware of their roles as players, and that they have to make choices in order to be able to go on playing. As a result, multiple endings attack the readers’ aesthetic illusion by having them to be active in the process of meaning-making.

Considering the fact that Barth’s works ‘construct a strong record of the significant directions and deviations of contemporary fiction’ (Bradbury, 1992, p. 231), his ‘*On with the Story*’ is one of the best manifestations of multiple endings. This short story contains metafictional multiple endings in order to bring about uncertainty and resist interpretation. The close scrutiny of the work reveals the most important aspect which comes into play when discussing fictional endings: the text’s breaking up into short fragments or sections separated by space, titles, numbers or symbols, allowing narrative to unfold in its ending again and again.

The story tells us about two characters discussing a story they are reading. One of them, who is also the story’s narrator, questions the story’s use of the ‘narrative pause button’ to deviate from the relative motion and Zeno’s paradox. In the final lines, the reader, who expects an ending, is infused with

Just now it rests at *this* point, this word, this – yet of course never resting there, but ever *en route* through it to the next, the next, from beginning through middle et cetera. Even if and when we linger over an ‘arresting passage’, we’re only apparently at rest in the story’s suspended but incessant motion; likewise in our manifold own. (Barth, 1996, p.94)

It seems that the narration continues aimlessly and it does not come to a proper conclusion, rather dissolving and disappearing. The story then proposes different endings for itself but chooses neither, closing instead with the question 'On with the Story?' Woven with Barth's characteristic wit, such stories can sharpen the reader's awareness of the combination of realistic and postmodern fictional convictions.

From another perspective, the specific feature of Barth's fiction writing 'is the inherent and crucial emphasis that Barth puts on the art of narration/writing as a means of deferring death and demise, and entitling writing as the art that defeats death and disappearance, the very predicament that the individual deals with in the framework of the postmodern condition'. (Hashemi & Pourgiv, 2012, p. 368). In other words, that avoiding closure on Barth's part can move in line with the postmodernist tradition of indeterminacy in which no center holds. When there is no ending, it is as if there is no fate established for the characters and no death to consume their lives. Such fiction thus may have a secret fish on the part of their writers against the end of life, or fear before death. This issue, furthermore, highlights Barth's contribution to Scheherazade's legacy for postmodern narrative techniques. In Moosavi Majd and Elahipanah's words, Barth's 'employment of the frame narrative and embedding structure', as 'the main devices of Scheherazade's mystifying narratives', point to basics of his writing. In fact, traditional techniques 'bridge postmodernist aesthetics to recreate and replenish the exhausted materials in writings' in Barth's hands (2015, p. 65)

5. Instability in the Fictive World

The turnings in space happen alongside the turnings in time, when the narrative flashes back from a garden to a house in another country, or from a house in the characters' city to a mythological character in ancient Greek. As such, there are instability and uncertainty foreshadowing the wavering narration of the story. As a consequence of such a 'play' with time, there exists a kind of instability in the narrative world. In other words, the modal structure of the narrative world is questioned and undermined by the temporal uncertainty induced by the narrative. Such fictional arrangements hinder the readers' understanding of the

world of the story. This difficulty in Barth's narrative could be accounted for by exploring the way the 'prefigured time,' as Ricoeur explains, 'becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time' (1984, 1: p. 54).

In more general terms, as Hoffmann says, 'the paradox inherent in the workings of space/time, position/motion, rest/flight, or however one wants to call it, is the basic paradox of experience, of the stories of our lives, of the lives in the stories and the situations in fiction' (2005, p. 101). At every moment everything is 'frozen', at rest, but "all freeze frames are in motion-spacewise, timewise" (Barth, 1996, p. 89). What 'the aesthetic matrix of postmodern fiction represents' is built by such 'paradox of experience': there are 'both sequence and simultaneity', sequence being disrupted by simultaneity and vice versa (Hoffmann, 2005, p. 101)

6. Sum Up

Barth's fiction constructs a strong record of the significant directions and deviations of contemporary fiction. As an experimental writer, Barth denies and confounds the traditional conception of temporality in mimetic narratives. Barth's replenishment is carried out by flouting the mimetic aesthetic in fiction, which brings about certain unusual or anomalous temporalities. These anomalies are actually the very subject of his short fiction.

To sum up, Barth's postmodernist short story, 'On with the Story', is mainly concerned with the playful manipulation of time and a complex maneuvering between ending and renewal rather than being concerned with a process of completion. Accordingly, he seeks to reflect upon the concern of postmodernism with the issues of narrative time and ending. As far as temporality is concerned, his narrative dominantly seeks to 'play' with time so much so that his fiction is made of different narrative temporal techniques which are recognizable from the very overall view of the story. In addition, endings seem inaccessible, that is to say, no single and definite ending is promised by Barth's poetics. In other words, the question of ending has shaped the poetics of the work in a way that the story is suffused with multiple endings and no closure is at hand. Such manipulation of ending sees narrative as a game in which readers are made aware of their roles as players who have to decide about the ending in order to be able to go on playing



for more relationship with the text. As a result, aspects of indeterminacy, confusion, and instability are created within the work. When the fictional world ending is uncertain and indefinite, it is as if the story world is suffering from the absence of clear ontological boundaries. Therefore, instability becomes the dominant element in the structure of the fictional world.

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