Deconstructing the Artist and the Art:
Barth and Calvino at Play in the Funhouse of Language

Technique in art, as we all know, has the same sort of value that it has in love: heartless skill has its appeal, as does heartfelt ineptitude, but passionate virtuosity's what we all wish for, and aspire to.

John Barth, talking about Lost in the Funhouse
to an audience at the Library of Congress,
May 1, 1967

Barth's central figure, the funhouse, is a brilliantly suggestive one for his Lost in the Funhouse series with its reflections, distortions and repetitions on the linked themes of art and love: of creativity in letters and in life. The notion of artist as funhouse proprietor, creating and lost in a funhouse composed not of bricks and glass but of words, while specifically emphasizing the linguistic medium, emphasizes as well possibilities for play arising in the creation of texts (or funhouses of language) by writers and by readers. When, in Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore, Calvino creates the Reader as protagonist and the text as fragment, he, too, fixes attention on the point of intersection between texts and readers in the search for story. As their metatextual commentary indicates, Barth and Calvino are aware of states of play in contemporary aesthetics and Barth's artist-narrators together with Calvino's reader-narrator provide answers to, while self-consciously exploring, the problem Barth perceived as a state of exhaustion in twentieth-century letters: What does one do when all the stories are told? How does one cope

2 Barth refers to the book as 'neither a collection nor a selection, but a series,' Author's note (New York: Doubleday 1968) ix. Page references throughout are to this edition of Lost in the Funhouse.
3 See John Barth, The Literature of Exhaustion, The Atlantic 220, No. 2 (August 1967) 29-34. Barth's description of Borges as one who employs ultimacy with the
with the used-upness of forms? What may be made of the problem of awareness, of being saturated with awareness? One possibility, as *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* demonstrate, is to present narrators whose struggle with the ‘problem’ of the text constitutes its answer; another is to acknowledge old stories by returning to them to re-tell them in new and imaginative ways thereby recreating one’s precursors or their forms while inviting one’s reader into a game composed of echoes, allusions and variations on the known.⁴ Such procedures make special demands upon the reader and give a particular resonance to the view that texts are created by readers in the act of reading:⁵ a position that the two writers explore in imaginative ways in the fictions under consideration in this essay.

Pertinent to Barth’s series and to Calvino’s multiple narratives, the funhouse, with its suggestions of labyrinthine ways and boundless possibilities, is an appropriate figure too for Derrida’s concept of decentring,⁶ the reduction of traditional forms of authority, with its consequent freestyle of signifiers providing the interminable activity and joy of

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⁴ This leading preoccupation in Barth’s work receives its most direct expression in the three novellas of his sixth work, *Chimera*. With its metafictional concentration on writer and muse (and, therefore, on the artist and the art) John Fowles’s *Mantissa* (London: Jonathan Cape 1982) is an appropriate companion study. Its ludic explorations of relationships between sexuality and creativity, its intertextuality and its elaborate self-parody (like so much of Barth’s work) present another example of literature as process.

⁵ Consider ‘reader-response’ critics such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish and deconstruction as expressed by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. See note 18.

discourse. Offering the play of ‘différence,’ with its notions of infinite substitutions and endless deferral against privilege and closure, deconstruction presents a critical strategy particularly suitable for considerations of postmodernist fiction. When in the Grammatology Derrida writes: ‘One could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontology and the metaphysics of presence,’ he insists (minimally stated) upon reader participation in creating meanings and texts within the freeplay of language. Removing all notions of definitive authority and accentuating the reader’s responsibility for work, this play concept emphasizes a freedom attractive in its possibilities for discourse. With its denial of appeals to reality, truth, being, history, author (and so on) for

7 The capacity for spirited joy, for fun, in deconstruction has been neglected, most particularly by those opponents who see the movement as destructive. Derrida, however, emphasizes the ‘jeu’ and it is clearly evident in his Glas (Editions Galilée 1974) as in Barthes’s S/Z (Seuil 1970).


To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first to enter into play of différences which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences. (p. 14)

(‘Se risquer à ne-rien vouloir-dire, c’est entrer dans le jeu, et d’abord dans le jeu de la différence qui fait qu’aucun mot, aucun concept, aucun énoncé major ne viennent résumer et commander depuis la présence théologique d’un centre, le mouvement et l’espacement textuel des différences’ (Positions,’ Lettres françaises 1211 [6-12 décembre 1967] 13).

9 Although there is the paradox of Barthes’s S/Z, a deconstructionist analysis which denigrates classical realist work yet makes ‘Sarrasine’ a source of fascination. The methods may be used with any text even though much postmodernist fiction may be said to especially invite deconstruction through its internal dismantling of language.

definitive meanings, deconstruction opposes stasis and places a renewed emphasis upon the writing, the text of itself, to accentuate the endless play of signifiers. A critical perspective which deprivileges all readings privileges all and thereby compels the game; by focusing on the encounter of reader and text, licensing idiosyncratic readings, none of which can claim to be definitive, deconstruction determines that readings shall be interesting or not rather than 'right' or 'wrong.' If we are able, as Derrida invites, to 'affirm it [différence] — in the sense that Nietzsche brings affirmation into play — with a certain laughter and with a certain dance,' then play can be vital in its incertitude, in its concentration on the ambivalence of the text and its processes of reception. It is an activity that Barth's and Calvino's texts compel with their self-conscious attention to the play of signifiers, to their intertextuality, in deconstructing art and the concept of the artist.

Combinations of recent Maryland and classical Greece in *Lost in the Funhouse* support the moebius-strip message of 'Frame-Tale' that all stories may be thought of as one story, linked, repeating, and continuous, comprising in its endless possibilities the vast funhouse of literature. When Calvino presents his cosmopolitan collection of story fragments within the frame of another which, like them, is a fragment but in addition their container and funhouse, he too leads us to consider parts and wholes, links, and the common desire amongst readers for meanings which language both allows and erodes. Accordingly, 'ancient' and 'modern,' 'past' and 'present,' or 'fragment' and 'whole' are not polarities but indissolubly linked, the one creating the other in a state of eternal flux and recurrence produced by writers and by readers, all of whom come to their activity not innocent of, but influenced by, their accumulated experience. As Roland Barthes suggests, emphasizing the intertextuality central to deconstruction, This *T* which approaches the text is itself already a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite ...'

11 'Différence,' op. cit. 59. In *Théorie d'ensemble*, op. cit. 66: "affirmer [la différence], au sens où Nietzsche met l'affirmation en jeu, dans un certain rire et dans un certain pas de danse.'

12 Compare Northrop Frye's notion of literature as a vast ur-myth to which all writers contribute. However, in Frye displacement does the work of play: literary allusiveness is displayed, not played.

'Night-Sea Journey' struggles towards 'Her' with his journey and his doubts evoking ideas on conception of both life and art, so the solitary, ancient and anonymous singer of 'Anonymiad' launches his seed and his stories upon the sea. The series begins and ends therefore with notions of creativity, both inspiration and product, combining life and art with journey or quest, with the repeated associations of search, change and possibility in a world of challenging incertitude, an incertitude in which all echoes suggest possibilities rather than certainty, flux rather than stasis. Such a pattern informs those metaphors of communication and its processes which recur in the text: the sea of 'Anonymiad' recalls the water passage of 'Night-Sea Journey' and the water-message discovered by the child Ambrose in 'Water-Message'; the tunnel of 'Night-Sea Journey' links with the Tunnel of Love and the labyrinthine passages of 'Lost in the Funhouse;' the dark hut and the jungle of 'Water-Message' and the cave in 'Echo', each of which suggests sexuality, mystery and knowledge; similarly, the bottle of 'Water-Message,' Andrea's and Helen's breasts, and the amphorae of 'Anonymiad' may evoke notions of inspiration and life-force which variously link art and love. These metaphors, like Calvino's 'città invisibili,' 'destini incrociati' and the perplexed structure of Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore, emphasize equivocation: that essential condition of the funhouse of language, the condition which invites the reader as participant, as player, rather than spectator. Like Calvino's metaphors of obscurity (or the paragraph whose phrases separate as ghostly titles of discontinuous narratives) they create possibilities within uncertainty by inviting the reader into the process.

As 'Frame-Tale' wittily creates an infinite frame for the Lost in the Funhouse series, it also draws attention to the artifice that Barth's narrators parody in acts of self-consciousness which ultimately transcend that parody to 'turn ultimacy against itself' (p. 109). When, for example, the narrator of 'Life-Story' laments 'Another story about a writer writing a story. Another regressus in infinitum!' within a story which is precisely that, in a most self-conscious manner, the reader is reminded again that this Scheherazadean strategy is the main form of the pieces in

14 See Gerald Gillespie, 'Barth's Lost in the Funhouse: Short Story Text in its Cyclic Context,' Studies in Short Fiction 12 (1975) 223-30, for a consideration of linking motifs in a discussion of the cycle as a continuum within a general state of vanishing certainties.

15 Compare Barth's statement on this matter in 'The Literature of Exhaustion.' See note 3.

16 Barth's work demonstrates his lasting fascination with The 1001 Nights, a fascina-
Lost in the Funhouse. Like Calvino’s story about reading, these stories about story-telling demonstrate Barth’s view that writers at this point in the twentieth century should ‘Affirm the artificial element in art (you can’t get rid of it anyhow).’ They declare and discuss their technique, often expressing ‘heartfelt ineptitude’; whether or not they attain the passionate virtuosity for which Barth aims is a question for reader judgement. It is the case, however, that they call upon the reader’s active participation in creating texts, with acknowledgements of the extent to which, as deconstruction and reader-response criticism argue, texts acquire meanings only in each reader’s engagement with the words on the page. Apart from the direct appeal of ‘Autobiography,’ ‘You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking’ (p. 35), or the complaint of

17 John Enck, ‘John Barth. An Interview,’ *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 6 (1965) 6. Affirmations of artifice are, of course, various in fiction, and not only twentieth-century fiction (consider *Don Quijote* and *Tristram Shandy* or, as a merry forerunner in the field, Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*). Even so, self-reflexiveness is particularity common in twentieth-century fiction and Barth’s generalization receives playful support, for example, in the self-parody of Fowles’s *Mantissa*. As writer, Miles Green, explains to muse, Erato:

“The reflective novel is sixty years dead, Erato. What do you think modernism was about? Let alone postmodernism. Even the dumbest students know it’s a reflexive medium now, not a reflective one,” and, “writing about fiction has become a far more important matter than writing fiction itself. It’s one of the best ways you can tell the pure novelist nowadays. He’s not going to waste his time over the messy garage — mechanic drudge of assembling stories and characters on paper.”

For discussions of fiction about fiction see, for example, Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press 1971); Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1975); Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1979); and particularly Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictonal Paradox* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 1980). As Linda Hutcheon points out, the concentration in self-reflexive fiction on ‘process’ (the storytelling) as distinct from ‘product’ (the story told) — even though the two are inextricably interrelated — involves the reader creatively not only in writing the text but, implicitly, in analysis of relationships between art and life. Her discussion of Fowles’s Victorian parody as a process of liberation (Chapter Four: *Freedom Through Artifice: The French Lieutenant’s Woman*) is most pertinent to the arguments in this essay.

18 Compare note 5. Two very useful anthologies of writings are Jane Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1980), and Susan R. Suleiman and
'Life-Story,' 'Do they [an author's works] exist except as he or others read their words? Age except we turn their pages?' (p. 127), each of which accentuates the reader, the constant acknowledgement in *Lost in the Funhouse* of the artifice of the enterprise insists upon the necessity for reader vigilance in making connections, noting the puns and paradoxes and generally following the ontological play in this linguistic funhouse. This self-reflexive artifice is a feature of Calvino's texts too, evident in the elaborate modes of communication between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in *Le città invisibili* where the arrangement of pieces on a chessboard can convey the intricacies of imaginary cities, in the intersection of tarot images as latent narrative in *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, and in the Kafkaesque predicament of the Reader-protagonist's search for a text in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. Barthes's narrators either are, or present, story-tellers struggling with words in their efforts to 'fill in the blank'; Calvino's narrators accentuate the endless interpretations for readers in those signs that linger over the blank. Inevitably the texts create games of signs, confronting the question of where meanings reside in the extraordinarily complex relationships between signifiers and signifieds. Emphasizing the artificiality of language and epistemological uncertainty, they embody major tenets of deconstructionist criticism: Jacques Derrida, for example, The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*, or Roland Barthes, That is the pleasure of the text: value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier. In Barthes's division of texts into readerly ('lisible') and writerly ('scriptible'),

Inge Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980). Although the contributors have different emphases and argue about not only the nature and status of texts but also definitions of reader, each draws attention to the reader's role in creating meanings through active engagement with the text, whether in forms of 'implied reader,' 'ideal reader,' 'super reader' or 'interpretive communities.' The act of reading becomes the focus for attention not as the way to discover the meaning but as a process of creating meanings and texts. The differences in reading theories are important but they are not taken up here for the purposes of this paper.

19 My parenthesis.

20 Consider the line in 'Title,' p. 112, 'words are artificial to begin with.'

21 'Structure, Sign and Play,' 249; 'La Structure, le signe et le jeu,' in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Coll. 'Tel Quel,' Seuil 1967) 411: 'L'absence du signifié transcendental étend à l'insfini le champ et le jeu de la signification.'


23 S/Z. 4; Fr. p. 10
Lost in the Funhouse and Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore decidedly fit the latter category. With self-conscious narrators advancing their own deconstruction strategies and overtly inviting readerly play, there is no single authoritative position but, rather, the play and the game wherein 'différence,' or the ultimate indeterminacy of the text, is both the object and the 'jeu.' According to Derrida's and Barthes's deconstruction then, 'the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' and the game may be defined as the play of discourse which explores a text's multiplying possibilities for meanings, its ambivalence, its plurality or, as in Barthes' cryptic figure, its 'and/or'.

What images of the nature of art then, what aesthetic, may one define within this play of signifiers? Is there a composite portrait of the artist as contemporary in the Funhouse series? Does the pursuit of such answers impose conditions of closure upon texts which strenuously avoid closure? The following discussion concentrates on Barth's Lost in the Funhouse to address these related questions, with attention to deconstructionist theory and to the work of Italo Calvino, particularly Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore.

What sort of focus do the three Ambrose stories provide for a consideration of Barth's portrait of the artist? We know from Barth's post-Sot-Weed Factor comments, from Giles Goat-Boy and from the 'Seven Additional Author's Notes' to Lost in the Funhouse that he had read Raglan, Jung and Campbell. In what respects, however, does the artist figure of Lost in the Funhouse match the hero's typology, his path the hero's 'rites de passage'? While Campbell's reductive notion of the

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24 Ibid. 4: '... l'enjeu du travail littéraire (de la littérature comme travail), c'est de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte' (p. 10).
25 Ibid. 77: 'et/ou,' p. 84
26 Enck interview, see note 11, p. 12.
27 In Giles Goat-Boy Barth confronts the pattern of the heroic figure very directly. He has suggested that he tried to 'abstract the patterns, and then write a novel which would consciously, even self-consciously, follow the patterns, parody the patterns, satirize the patterns, but with good luck transcend the satire a little bit in order to say some of the serious things I had in mind to say' (Having it Both Ways. A Conversation between John Barth and Joe David Bellamy,' New American Review 15 (1972) 134-50.
28 (Bantam Books 1969) x
monomyth29 with its emphasis on separation-initiation-return is a useful framework for consideration of the heroic, the condition of awareness in postmodernist fiction leads to undecidability and, acknowledging the intertextuality of every text, the act of interpreting Barth’s artist-hero is a play between pattern and transgression. Uncertainties about the father, identity and naming may denote Ambrose’s election as much as the ambiguous ‘mark.’ Is it the devil’s mark, a sign of diabolic inspiration, or is it a bee-shape supporting notions of the golden swarm, visionary gifts and the name Ambrose? Although allusions to an heroic mythology underlie both Uncle Konrad’s prediction that Ambrose will ‘grow up to see things clear’ (p. 34) and the artist-hero’s doubts about his quest, ‘knowing well that I and my sign are neither one nor quite two’ (p. 34), uncertainty announces the very condition of the postmodernist hero who must question everything, persist in confusion and negotiate what possibilities are available. This position is specifically addressed in Calvino’s opening lines, ‘Stai per cominciare a leggere il nuovo romanzo Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore di Italo Calvino. Rilassati. Raccogliiti. Allontana da te ogni altro pensiero. Lascia che il mondo che ti circonda sfumi nell’indistinto. La porta è meglio chiuderla; di là c’è sempre la televisione accesa’ (p. 3) (‘You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room’ [p. 3]).30 So the reader as hero must discover the textual gaps and contradictions as an invited participant in the funhouse of words. In what immediately follows (an elaborate anticipation of needs for reader comfort, description of the bookshop search for a text, temptations to plunge into the reading) the narrative of reading preparation leads to a gap between expectation and discovery, to ‘trovar-ti di fronte a qualcosa che ancora non sai bene cosa’ (p. 9) (‘confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is’ [p. 9]), a contrast which the chapter evokes from the start. It deconstructs the meeting of reader with text in preparation for anxieties about the origin and the status of texts (central epistemological questions) which Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore addresses in its concentration on reading.


30 Italo Calvino, Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore (Turin: Einaudi 1979). All quotations are from this edition. Where English translations are offered they are from William Weaver’s translation If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1981).
In 'Water-Message,' Ambrose's fascination with words and sexuality advances the concentration on creativity, in art and love, central to *Lost in the Funhouse* as a whole. Separated already from his peers, a wordsmith puzzling over meanings, summoned by 'the word [which] had wandered willy-nilly to his threshold' (p. 55), will Ambrose henceforth work at filling in the blank of his own experience, in love as well as letters, the twin sources of creativity and meanings in the world Barth offers? With its play on the radical ambiguity of 'facts,' an ambiguity extended through emphases on childhood seccresies, mysteries and confused expectations, the story presents this play upon undecidability in a worldview which champions chance, probability and uncertainty over narrowly determinisitc cause-and-effect explanation. What can Ambrose learn from older brother Peter about events in the cave? What can be 'the truth of the matter' regarding feelings and actions, reports of them, or their fabrication in literature? The older Ambrose of 'Lost in the Funhouse,' at thirteen, 'that awkward age' (p. 72), may be read as the latent artist-hero at the threshold of discovery; the figure of the threshold may represent, indeed, the perpetual condition of the postmodernist hero whose task is to discover not answers but uncertainty itself. Inspired by Magda, discovering further evidence of the world's sexuality beneath the Ocean City boardwalk, sensing that this coupling 'was the whole point ... of the entire funhouse' (p. 89), Ambrose is caught in the funhouse maze which is the maze of his own confusions in the search for meaning. With Ambrose's final vision of a vast funhouse that he will construct and operate, wishing all the while that he might be a participant, a lover, rather than operator, Barth's text extends its ambiguities and, thereby, the possibilities of the funhouse metaphor. The funhouse is a construct of the imagination, a way of perceiving the world's gamesome variety, and such meanings as it shall have are the result of thought, the product of language, continually refashioned in the interactions of mind and language. Typologically similar inter-texts may be seen in the naturtheater von Oklahoma of Kafka's *Der Verschollne (Amerika)*, in the old theatre at the end of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* where 'we' wait with the screen white and silent before us, and in the grey walls and grey cells (that is, the artist's brain) which 'contain' such playful metamorphoses in Fowles's *Mantissa*. Each funhouse can offer seemingly endless possibilities by inviting the reader's imagination to collude in the processes of its construction.

31 The scene relates to the boys' discovery of Peggy Robbins and her boyfriend in their hut, in 'Water-Message.'
There is, then, in the funhouse of Barth’s text, as in the world as funhouse, sufficient variety to evoke Roland Barthes’s perception of ‘the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages’ in literary texts. Question-forms play an important part in this story, affirming the artifice of the fiction while forwarding basic epistemological uncertainties:

Had the funhouse operator – gentle, somewhat sad and tired-appearing, in expression not unlike the photographs at home of Ambrose’s late Uncle Konrad – murmured in his sleep? Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a figment of the author’s imagination? Was it Assawoman Bay or Sinepuxent? Are there other errors of fact in this fiction? (pp. 87-8)

Was Ambrose awake or dreaming? What does it mean to conceive an Ambrose character in a story, or, more hazardously, across stories? To what extent is this a construct of the reader’s imagining, albeit a construct whose possibility is prepared by the author?

Barth makes the point of undecidability quite strongly through Lady Amherst, epistolean in his seventh work, Letters, and lover in that work of a writer named Ambrose Mensch! After reading Capital-A Author John Barth’s fifth, Lost in the Funhouse, she addresses him: ‘I enjoyed the stories — in particular, of course the “Ambrose” ones. Your Ambrose, needless to say, is not my Ambrose — but then, mine isn’t either!’ Discontinuities play against continuities in elaborate games of deception and amusement for which the mirror-maze of the funhouse is a suitable figure. The image of young Ambrose wandering in the funhouse suggests the activity of both author and reader in their creation of texts and meanings, an activity which Wolfgang Iser emphasizes in the following terms in his discussion of the act of reading: ‘one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities.’ While this is largely so, the flexibility of Barth’s model suggests that the reader should attend to, rather than exclude, multiple possibilities. Either-or categorizations have little place in postmodernist fiction; as Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas


33 John Barth, Letters (London: Secker and Warburg 1980) 438

discovers, excluded middles are ‘bad shit’,\textsuperscript{35} whereas inclusiveness shall, among the confusions, offer possibilities for enrichment and awareness. It shall not privilege one reading over another but, rather, offer that free play of signifiers which is a feature of postmodernist literature. As Derrida affirms, the process of writing about writing helps to deconstruct Kantian views of language as centered and texts as closed.

Whereas Barth presents an image of the artist at the threshold discovering the fruitfulness of radical undecidability in the funhouse of language, Calvino, concentrating upon the act of reception in the literary contract, creates the real postmodernist hero, the hero as Reader. As his reader tracks a text through the tracery of ‘defective’ editions, translations, photocopies, academic disagreement and divergent interpretations, he represents the quest for meaning which only the reader can supply. Meanings shall be inherently flawed — ‘quanto la parola racchiude e nasconde’ (p. 41) (‘how much the word contains and conceals’ [p. 42]) — yielding partial mastery only because, as the figure of the defective text with its blank pages suggests: ‘Ecco che questo romanzo così fittamente intessuto di sensazioni tutta un tratto ti si presenta squarciato da voragini senza fondo, come se la pretesa di rendere la pienezza vitale rivelasse il vuoto che c’è sotto’ (p. 42) (‘And so you see this novel so tightly interwoven with sensations suddenly riven by bottomless chasms, as if the claim to portray vital fullness revealed the void beneath’ [p. 43]). The gaps are always present, looming between and beneath the words, and Calvino’s extravagant image is a Derridean reminder of the inherent freplay of language consequent upon the death of the transcendental signified, with the image of the void characterizing that state of \textit{mise en abyme} which some deconstructionists emphasize as the perpetual condition of the literary text.\textsuperscript{36} Just as words contain and conceal, authorial intention is displaced as authority by Calvino’s tactic of a \textit{regressus in infinitum} of the vanishing novel. This displacement licenses the Reader as authority and, although his search for the definitive text is rendered impossible from the start, there is joyful activity in the process of reading, in both the solitary activity of one’s private engagement with a text and in contemplation of reading as sharing:


La tua lettura non è più solitaria: pensi alla Lettrice che in questo stesso momento sta aprendo anche lei il libro, ed ecco che al romanzo da leggere si sovrappone un possibile romanzo da vivere, il seguito della tua storia con lei, o meglio: l'inizio d'una possibile storia. (p. 32)

[Your reading is no longer solitary: you think of the other Reader, who, at this same moment, is also opening the book; and there, the novel to be read is superimposed by a possible novel to be lived, the continuation of your story with her, or better still, the beginning of a possible story. (p. 32)]

Whatever sense the reader might have of an Ambrose-as-artist figure emerging from the Ambrose stories, and whatever sense of uncertainty, ambivalence and possibility that figure may evoke, Barth’s ‘portrait’ of artist and art is extended and enriched in the rest of the series. In terms of the quest-myth as life-journey, ‘Night-Sea Journey’ explores origins and possibilities in its version of universal incertitude. In the solipsistic sperm’s attempts to understand his situation, his origins, purposes and destiny, Barth rehearses the existential dilemma of the solitary individual in a post-Nietzschean world. What indeed is the correct account amongst so many of origins and destiny? Where does meaning reside in the ontological nightmare created by this swim? Is it possible that ‘our night-sea journey is without meaning?’ (p. 4). In the sperm’s decision to decline suicide, embrace the absurdity and continue swimming, the text presents in embryonic form a possible genesis of the artist-hero essentially ambivalent towards all aspects of the enterprise, but making possibility from uncertainty, just as the narrator’s chatter creates a text, filling in a blank which in turn shall evoke further texts in every reader’s response. Jung, Raglan and Campbell offer perspectives one might use to consider this journey, as Barth suggests in his author’s notes37; the narrator’s decision to postpone suicide ‘because (fatigue apart) I find it no meaningfuller to drown myself than to go on swimming’ (p. 4) recalls the absurd as proposed by Sartre and Camus and the decision made by an earlier Barth character Todd Andrews on the fateful day in 1937 when he decided not to blow up the Floating Opera and himself along with it38; speculations on the Maker, while wittily considering a mortal progenitor, revive basic religious and philosophical speculations on being as well as the myth of Oedipus both in Sophocles’ version and in Freudian adaptations. Barth has suggested, in answer to some reviewers, that the narrator is not a fish!39 But, then, who is to trust the teller? The text is decidedly intertex-

37 (New York: Bantam Books 1969) p. x
38 John Barth, The Floating Opera (New York: Bantam Books 1972)
39 Bantam edition. p. x
tual; therefore, its playfulness lies in the allusiveness of language which prevents reduction to any single viewpoint on process or meaning. As Barthes writes in 'The Death of the Author,' it ‘is language which speaks, not the author,’ and, with authorial intention decentred, multiple possibilities are freed in the linguistic play. At this point of origin the creative possibilities of art and love are one as the narrator proceeds singing 'Love! Love! Love!' (p. 13), despite his scepticism, towards mysterious Her, telling his story as he is drawn forward: sperm to ovum, knight to grail, artist to story. This act of conception preceding the birth of the artist-hero possibly, but not necessarily, creates the Ambrose-child that Andrea suckles in her hammock. Not only does the open play of signifiers permit such meanings (and continuities) but the reader collusively wishes to accord. Although Barth designs Lost in the Funhouse as a series, it is a postmodernist funhouse and while conception precedes birth the pattern is, indeed, not a linear chronology but another regressus in infinitum, an intricate dance above the void, the state of mise en abyme such as Calvino explores in the collapsing ontology of interweaving texts in Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore. The anonymous, though decidedly post-Nietzschean, post-Jungian, post-Sartrean sperm is, like the lone singer of 'Anonymiad,' a persuasively universal possibility.

As this existential anguish is taken up in the disembodied voice of 'Autobiography,' Oedipal allusions emphasize the problematic relationship between art and artist, as between child and father. Unexceptional, 'for every Oedipus, a city of feebs' (p. 37), and endangered because it develops at its progenitor's whim, the narrating voice explores the nature of art. Barth's puns (e.g., 'I must compose myself' [p. 36], Dad's persistent attempts 'to turn me off' [p. 36], 'One-track minds' [p. 38]) again affirm the medium, the fiction which exists only as the words continue, spoken or written, and as received by a listener or reader. In this taut, experimental piece for tape, the teller is the tale, the medium the message, and existence and meaning depend on a potential cooperation between the speaking voice and the hand that hovers above the tape-control, the written word and the hand that turns the pages. 'Autobiography' repeatedly emphasizes the dependent nature of art, its dependence on both maker and receiver for existence; that is, its dependence on their interactive codes for whatever meanings it may express. With its attentions to conception, birth and naming recapitulating issues from 'Night-Sea Journey' and 'Ambrose His Mark,' it presents a triumphant expression of

the problems of art and life proceeding against ending. In Calvino's work
similar procedures against closure are finely realized in Le città invisibili
and Il castello dei destinii incrociati where texts are shown to evoke texts
both in Kublai Khan's response to Marco Polo's story-telling and in the
narrative potential of the tarot pack. In either case language is trium-
phant, it is the priority of the signifiers that the Calvino texts accentuate:

Nessuno sa meglio di te, saggio Kublai, che non si deve mai confondere la città col
discorso che la descrive. Eppure tra l'una e l'altro c'è un rapporto. (p. 67)\(^{41}\)
[No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused
with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a
connection. (p. 61)]

or, as Calvino's Faust concludes

Il mondo non esiste ... non c'è un tutto data tutto in una volta: c'è un numero
finito d'elementi le cui combinazioni si moltiplicano a miliardi di miliardi, e di
queste solo poche trovano una forma e un senso e s'impongono in mezzo a un
pulviscolo senza senso e senza forma; come le settantotto carte del mazzo di
tarocchi nei cui accostamenti appaiono sequenze di storie che subito si disfano.
(p. 97)\(^{42}\)
[The world does not exist ... there is not an all, given all at once: there is a finite
number of elements whose combinations are multiplied to billions of billions, and
only a few of these find a form and a meaning and make their presence felt amid a
meaningless, shapeless dust cloud; like the seventy-eight cards of the tarot deck in
whose juxtapositions sequences of stories appear and are then immediately un-
done. (p. 97)]

Just as the possibilities for playful readings are unlimited, none may
claim permanence. Hence the reader is encouraged to take up the oppor-
tunities for play: to collude with the text.

In terms of a serial exploration of artist and art, 'Petition' may be seen
to address the relationship between body and mind, the corporeal self
and the spiritual self, id and ego. The disgusts, doubts and fears expressed
by the Siamese twins, the spiritual self, as they turn about problems of

\(^{41}\) Italo Calvino, Le città invisibili (Turin: Einaudi 1972). The English translation is
Jovanovich 1974).

\(^{42}\) Italo Calvino, Il castello dei destinii incrociati (Turin: Einaudi 1973). The English
translation is from The Castle of Crossed Destinies, trans. William Weaver (New
sexuality and therefore identity, immediately suggest warring aspects from which aesthetic achievement (in this instance 'Petition') emerges. Is this a black humour comment on all figures of fractured artistic sensibility? Will 'guileful art' (p. 115) be born from constraint and despair? Is torment productive? It is a potential which Ambrose of 'Water-Message' is at the point of discovering in his excited response to Peggy Robbins; similarly, the identity crisis announced by the petitioner, 'To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither is unspeakable' (p. 71), recalls Ambrose's sense in 'Ambrose His Mark' that 'I and my sign are neither one nor quite two' (p. 34). At all levels the stories avoid neat identifications, since these are a form of closure, to emphasize the multiple possibilities which arise from uncertainty that essential condition of decentered language. To dwell in 'a figurative Bangkok' (p. 58) is the common lot of humanity, realized or not as the case may be, although there is considerable variation, of course, in what the condition may mean for each individual just as the play in 'Petition' suggests. This exploration of the psyche continues in 'Two Meditations' each of which presents possibilities of latent, secret violence and sudden catastrophe. The experience may be apocalyptic or it may provide wisdom born of painful experience, the destruction itself or its regenerative aftermath. Shall awareness hold disaster at bay or is there, as the previous piece 'Echo' concludes, 'no future for prophets' (p. 103)? No certainty: either way the edge is fine, the possibilities vast.

With Barth's interest in 'telling the story over' (p. 98) as both an answer to the 'exhaustion' of literature and as a view of literature as one story eternally repeated, it is logical he should include Echo. As the story questions itself in the self-reflexive manner typical of the series, it not only features its artifice but it poses questions which reflect the enterprise as a whole. Is it Narcissus, Tiresias or Echo who speaks? All three in one? Does the reader trust the tale: 'Who's telling the story, and to whom? The teller's immaterial, Tiresias declares; the tale's the same, and for all one knows the speaker may be the only auditor' (pp. 101-2)? Earlier stories in the series have introduced these ideas: the identification of teller and tale, fiction as recycling, the artist as solitary singer. However, here the text provides productive variations on the themes with Tiresias as the image of the artist as visionary, Narcissus the artist as solipsist and Echo the artist as artful mimic. Created from variations on recycling, the story makes its fiction from lingering 'on the autognostic verge' (p. 103), the anguished but fertile condition which typifies not only Narcissus, Tiresias and Echo, but all of the narrators in Lost in the Funhouse who, like Echo, live for their lovely lies, as well as Calvino's Reader in search of a story in Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore. The Thespian cave is
a metaphor for re-telling and the story is another acknowledgement of the artificiality and ambiguity of language as well as a demonstration of the artist's turning 'intimacy against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new' (p. 109). Thesis and demonstration. Calvino's re-telling, on the other hand, involves adaptations of antecedent forms (mystery, social realist, adventure, thriller, romance, fantasy) contained in their inconclusiveness within a confessional frame. What does a reader accentuate, however? The playful transcendence of generic distinctions, the cosmopolitan range of fragments, considerations of power and authority with respect to 'true' texts and translations, the essential role of reader activity itself? Locating ten novels within one novel Calvino acknowledges but transcends generic and national categories, and Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore emphasizes both the unavoidable intertextuality of language acts and the manner in which the reader as adventurer must find a pathway through multiple codes at every turn. This is the play of the text, or 'the pleasure of the text' in Barthes's phrase: a ludism latent in the signifiers and activated in the intersection of text and reader, its character changing according to place, time, taste, desire, intention and so on. In the range of possibilities, Calvino's and Barth's fictions clearly favour translator Marana's preference, 'per il quale la letteratura vale quanto più consiste in congegni macchinosi, in un insieme d'ingranaggi, di trucchi, di trappole' (p. 190) ('for whom literature is more worthwhile the more it consists of elaborate devices, a complex of cogs, tricks, traps' [p. 190]) over Ludmilla's organicist model of the ideal author 'che fa i libri come una pianta di zucche fa le zucche' (p. 189) (Who produces books "as a pumpkin vine produces pumpkins" [p. 189]).

As the most explicit statement of this thesis, that for which Barth compliments Borges in The Literature of Exhaustion,' Title' directly faces the issue of an intellectual impasse to fill in the blank by talking, again, about the problem. Barth points out in his author's note that the narrator's difficulties are threefold: with his companion, the story and his culture, and the monologue proceeds against ending, implicitly answering the problem by elaborating the problem. Working against Aristotelian poetics by dismissing conventional notions of plot and theme, suspense, complication and ending, 'Title' nevertheless, by naming them, includes them as items of contemplation in the narrative. The items shift and change in this avowedly up-to-date consideration of the

43 Compare note 3.
44 Bantam edition, p. x-xi
final question 'Can nothing be made meaningful?' (p. 105), a question that reflects not only Barth's sense of narrative exhaustion but also that world view which removes the transcendental centre as the source of authority and meaning. As Derrida's deconstruction gives primacy to the freeplay of language by subverting all ontology, re-locating rather than destroying the concept of centre, 45 Barth's narrators embody discourse in the riddling play of language which defies authoritative limitations. What may the terms 'plot' and 'ending' evince in the self-regarding world of postmodernist aesthetics? Is experiment possible in story-telling? May the generic barriers themselves be thrown down? Thus Title parodies self-consciousness while flaunting it, deplores clever irony in the act of practising it and refuses to make an ending while insisting on the necessity for one. As the narrator suggests, 'to write this allegedly ultimate story is a form of artistic fill in the blank' (p. 111), proceeding immediately to disarm negative responses by including them in the hesitant progress of the story itself: 'Oh God comma I abhor selfconsciousness' (p. 113). Title has a theme, aesthetics, and the 'plot' is involvement of the reader in a game-playing re-exploration of that theme, a plot which invokes collaboration to create an open-ended and provocative fill in the blank.

The sequence of glosses in 'Glossolalia' epitomizes the inspired and 'guileful art' of which the last, the Author's, speaks in its gloss over the preceding five: The senselessest babble, could we ken it, might disclose a dark message, or prayer' (p. 115). As reminders of the complexities of language and of visionary insights, they form a refrain of commentary on the series as a whole as well as an introduction to more self-conscious riddling in 'Life-Story.' 'Life-Story' performs its own regressus in infinitum with its focus on life as fiction and the writer as leading character in a novel, a fiction for which he is responsible. Again the story is a model of that which is rebutted as it is being created, 'self-conscious, vertiginously arch, fashionably solipsistic, unoriginal — in fact a convention of twentieth-century literature' (p. 117). As a discussion of narrative technique, 'Life-Story' celebrates in renunciation the procedures Barth uses in Lost in the Funhouse; the self-consciousness that the narrator denounces is celebrated in the performance which eschews strategies of conventional realism even as they are praised in the mirror-mazes of the narrator's critique. 'Life-Story' is a cryptic exploration of the state of the art and the artist, its range extended by the complex ironies of the perfor-

45 There has been considerable misinterpretation of this issue in Derrida's work. His procedure, however, deprivileges rather than removes completely traditional notions of authority. As he has said I believe that the center is a function, not a being — a reality but a function' ('Structure, Sign and Play,' p. 271 ['Discussion']).
mance. When the narrator presents the artist-hero as fearing 'schizophrenia, impotence creative and sexual, suicide' (p. 124) the example emphasizes dilemmas typical of the narrating personae of the series; the narrative procedure mocks in its practice the bravura action, romantic heroes and grand speeches the artist-hero proclaims to admire; the manner of the performance favours Beckett and Borges not Updike, Simenon and Riboud, and so on.

Considering inspiration, as Barth well knows and the narrative implies, who can weigh for creativity the value of monogamy and middleclassness against the hectic glamour of loving the world? Nevertheless, the 'visit' of a non-existent mistress concedes the solitary artist's concern about his solitariness and its limitations for art (though it remains difficult to define the relationship between experience and art). Similarly 'avant-garde' and 'realistic' serve as labels, reductive, limited and maybe useful, but points of definition that fictions shall challenge and elude. The relativities are endless, as are the texts, particularly if one accepts the view that literature exists only in readers' receptions of it:

He [the author] writes and reads himself; don't you think he knows who gives his creatures their lives and deaths? Do they exist except as he or others read their words? Age except we turn their pages? (p. 127)

When the narrator declares that 'the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed' (p. 128), the free play of the signifiers, of which Barthes and Derrida write, and the active role of the reader in determining meanings are acknowledged. Proclaiming the death of the author, Barthes announces the birth of the reader and the reader's role to participate in the play of textual signifiers: 'a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focussed and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.' As fiction declares its fictitiousness, and proposes that single meaning as truth is untenable, it re-emphasizes the centrality of reader response; as Calvino's survey of readers in the penultimate chapter of Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore proposes, reading preferences and methods vary greatly and the possibilities for play, restrained, spirited, idiosyncratic, are boundless.

'Menelaiad' is a virtuoso performance. Returning to the Greek sources that he has not really left, Barth presents in this intricately layered story of stories within stories (a structure that has interesting parallels with the

46 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' p. 148
discontinuous fragments in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*) a recapitulation of those issues about art and the artist which sustain the series and the funhouse. 'It's all one tale,' the voice of Menelaus repeats, referring to the framing or dominant teller/tale which incorporates, and thus transcends, so many voices but which constitutes also a repetition of Frye's perception of the interrelatedness of all literature, a perception shared by Calvino's fifth reader; and as the windings lead into and out from a centre that is artificially spatial and temporal, it is the productiveness of uncertainty that stands out most. Is Menelaus, Barth's archetype of uncertainty, 'the world's chief fool and cuckold or its luckiest mortal' (p. 133)? What do 'truth' and 'fact' mean, metaphysical questions that concern not only child Ambrose, in this story of compounded ironies, evasions, disguises and linguistic play? The disguises of Odysseus, cloudy Helen and Proteus, the very figure of the shapeshifter, reflect the masks of the narrating persona, the disembodied voice of Menelaus, existing in words alone, itself masking an author at play reviewing his 'circus animals,' the sources and the condition of his art. The narrative artifice, featured as much in the language games as in the ingenious structure, simultaneously affirms the fiction and draws the reader into the play. As uncertainties accumulate within the layers of story and in the deceptions attributed to main players, they contribute to the construction and deconstruction of possibilities. When the narrative exuberantly questions the existence of Helen, Paris, and the whole Trojan wars, it poses an exploration of mythology which raises fundamental epistemological questions: 'had he ever been in Troy?' (p. 166), Menelaus' extraordinary doubt mirrors the larger questions about the nature of knowing and knowledge. Within the ambiguities of language, the funhouse itself, meanings must be tentative; there are too many signifiers for any certainties about signifieds. They reveal not Menelaus, nor the artist in outline but the state of play which contains both constructs. Within this state of play legendary Helen retains her mystery in Barth's artful recycling of classical mythology in terms of domestic comedy. As Pynchon's narrator in *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests, so we muddle on with 'our front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences,' like Barth's Menelaus, drawing our patterns, making what connections we can.

As another story which starts in an involving manner *in media res* (whereas Calvino's fragments end *in media res*), 'Anonymiad' completes Barth's series not only by leading back into 'Once upon a time' of 'Frame-Tale' but also by transporting the reader back to the figure of anonymous

Greek singer on a rocky isle, a figure suggesting the commencement of all stories. Whether creativity in love and art is one or divided, the 'trouble with us minstrels is, when all's said and done, we love our work more than our women.' (This 'minstrel' epitomizes a Freudian model of repression, projection and vicarious outpouring.) Presenting the growth of the artist from rustic innocence through courtly sophistication to solitary singing, 'Anonymiad' encapsulates the twin progress of letters and life journey explored in such variety in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Matching the progression in the series from conception and birth to an art appropriately fixed on new versions of Greek mythology is the history within 'Anonymiad' of the minstrel's passage from amphora one, and 'traditional minstrelsy,' to nine, and the problem for all artists in *Lost in the Funhouse* 'was there any new thing to say, new way to say the old?' (p. 195). The resolution is that which applies to the series as a whole ('ultimacy' is turned against itself in this re-mythologizing):

Whimsic fantasy, grub fact, pure senseless music — none in itself would do; to embody all and rise above each, in a work neither longfaced nor idiotly grinning, but adventuresome, passionately humoured, merry with the pain of insight, wise and smiling in the terror of our life — that was my calm ambition. (p. 198)

The description is self-reflexive of the guileful art of 'Anonymiad.' The artifice of its structure, clever discussion of narrative possibility, the relationship between sexuality and art identified here in the figure of the amphorae as inspiration and receiver of both, artist as solipsist, the wit of the ideas and the performance, all these reflect upon the series itself.

So the cycling story comes to its final image of nameless minstrel, alone, pouring the last of his inspiration into his last manuscript, 'Anonymiad' and therefore all literature, prior to launching it on its sea journey. It serves as an appropriate comment on the images of the artist, and the art, as they are presented in *Lost in the Funhouse*. The artist struggles with his forms of knowledge, and himself, to produce the art which must take its chance in the world. It receives its existence from those who discover it, struggle anew with it and produce their own meanings from it — a plurality of entrances, an infinity of languages.48

Barth's series in *Lost in the Funhouse*, then, like Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, avoids closure by leading back into itself; by

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48 As a modification of the Barthes-Derrida line that I have argued, consider Macherey's qualification. While acknowledging the possible indefinite multiplicities accomplished by readers, he contrasts this with 'the real complexity, necessarily finite, which is the structure of the book,' a classic view which starts from different premises about the authority of the written text. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of*
denying beginnings and endings in a structural arrangement that is supported by its thematic circularity, the twist of the series enacts the twist of the moebius strip.\textsuperscript{49} Similarly, the texts avoid closure by accentuating radical ambiguity, an ambiguity produced not only by puns, paradox and ironies in language that emphasizes its artificiality, but also by recognition of the reader's role in supplying meanings. Although Barth's work invites, it also resists the grids that a reader might place upon it: Greek mythology, artist-as-hero, Joyce's Portrait,\textsuperscript{50} existentialism, the absurd, art and love, exhaustion, self-consciousness. While the grids may offer useful perspectives, the acts of creation, parody, counter-parody and reception subvert narrowly reductive readings. The position is well described by Roland Barthes:

To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept towards other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename; so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor.\textsuperscript{51}

With its self-analyses working as its own deconstruction kit, Lost in the Funhouse deconstructs itself in the processes of its construction, creating its reader, a 'dogged, uninsuitable, print-oriented bastard' (p. 127), as one who will join in the play for the possibilities it offers, for the game itself not the end since there is none. Similarly, Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore may be said to deconstruct itself, both in its narrative organization of disappearing fragments which are interwoven with


\textsuperscript{49} Compare Jac Tharpe's comment on Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera: Form — form itself — is the content,' in John Barth, The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press 1974) 10.


\textsuperscript{51} Roland Barthes, S/Z, op. cit. 11; Fr. S/Z, 17-18: 'Lire, c'est trouver des sens, c'est les nommer, mais ces sens nommés sont emportés vers d'autres noms; les noms s'appellent, se rassemblent et leur groupement veut de nouveau se faire nommer; je nomme, je dénomme, je renomme: ainsi passe le texte: c'est une nomination en devenir, une approximation inlassable, un travail métonymique.'
metafictional analyses of reading and meaning and in its decentring of authority which emphasizes the play of *différance*.

Narrators and leading characters do not die in Barth's funhouse; voices and words fade out. 'Autobiography' 'ends' with a play against endings 'my last words will be my last words' (p. 39) and 'Petition' with 'Yours truly' (p. 71) and a comma; 'Title' leaves 'end' ever in abeyance by concluding 'How in the world will it ever' (p. 113) and with no final punctuation mark, just the blank; the narrator of 'Life-Story' comes to 'cap his pen' (p. 129), adds a full stop, and another, drawing attention both to the blank between the points and to ending by interruption not finality; 'Menelaiad' contemplates an immortality beyond tales and tellers, 'the absurd, unending possibility of love' (p. 167), a vision which picks up ironically the enigmatic 'love' at the story's centre as well as the ambiguous finale of 'Night-Sea Journey' 'Love! Love! Love!' (p. 13). Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore, with its strange story of love between readers tracking a text, finally unites the lovers in difference, their quest for meanings inconclusive: 'Ora siete marito e moglie, Lettore e Lettrice. Un grande letto matrimoniale accoglie le vostre letture parallele' (p. 263) ('Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings' [p. 260]). Consistent with the rejection of linear narrative and of fixed determinations in postmodernist fiction, this openness invites the reader. The play metaphor is useful because it denotes activity rather than passive acceptance, fun rather than stolid gravity: it allows for idiosyncratic performances from the players, personal style in texting. There are no certainties, just possibilities and, as deconstruction insists, these are endless. The figure of the funhouse so variously replicated in Barth's series recalls Borges's labyrinths, as well as Calvino's crossroads and fragments, with all their paradoxes. Each contains the promise of inexhaustible variety by presenting models against closure. As Iser says, such works 'make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links' and consequently 'the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations.' 52 Even so, deconstruction emphasizes the inevitable relativity of all links as each is caught up in the discourse; like the texts which inspire them, they carry the indeterminacies of all language acts and, in their turn, contribute to the endless play of the funhouse of language. Happily, our responses are both incomplete and transient.

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52 Wolfgang Iser, 279