

RUNNING OUT OF GAS WHERE THREE ROADS MEET

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Abstract

*The article deals with one of John Barth's most recent novels, **Where Three Roads Meet**, which revolves around the symbolism of "Y", of crossroads, of trivium. Its most interesting connotation is that of indecisiveness leading to impasse – an impasse that the author would like us to read as the deadlock of literature itself, or at least of the novelistic genre. The solution that Barth explores and, its viability proven at the end of the novel, the solution that he proposes is metafiction taken to its ultimate consequences. The reader of this highly self-reflexive book is offered embodiments of the Story, dramatic vehicle, reader and Teller as the main characters of this new Barthesian story, who literally keep the ball rolling by chatting about storytelling.*

Keywords: crossroad, trivium, self-reflexiveness, Story's story

Meanings of Where Three Roads Meet

As the title of John Barth's fifteenth novel warns, there are at least *three* things to expect as a reader of *Where Three Roads Meet*: firstly, an obsession with threes and Ys, present indeed throughout the collection of novellas, which connotes indecisiveness, impossibility to choose one of three apparently identical possibilities, leading to deadlock. As open as such an intersection might seem, it is quite the opposite, rather, the end of the road, precisely because one's incapacity to opt for one single continuation, literal or metaphorical. If we relate this to the second novella "I've Been Told: A Story's Story", we can read this deadlock as some impasse of storytelling: on a first level, of that particular story and storyteller, and, on a second level, of novel writing in general in the TV era – a dead point out of which a possible way, the author suggests, might be postmodern self-reflexive writing. Secondly, as this place is the location, the scene of Oedipus's parricide, recurrent in the novel, one might expect a focus on father-son tense relationships, possibly with an autobiographic tinge. Finally, if we go back to the etymological roots of the Latin word that means intersection, we may anticipate nothing else than "idle gossip".

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All these possibilities are explored and explained by the author himself, in a text that self-reflexively comments on its meanings as well as on its writing process. Actually, self-reflexiveness and a focus on “story”, on writing, with all the prerequisite commentary, is what interconnects the three otherwise not related parts. Moreover, one cannot help noticing the author looking back, scanning the road that led him there, to the place where three roads meet: there are plenty of similarities with previous novels, from early *Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, to *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Letters*, *Chimera* and even later *Once Upon a Time* – similarities also to be surveyed in this chapter.

Going back to the title, the author is prompt to detail its possible connotations, as springing from the Latin *trivium-trivia*. In the first novella, “Tell Me”, the narrator’s tutor/mentor Alfred Baumann, “lectures” to his fiancé and protégé, Wilfred Chase:

‘And trivia, class, as you may have heard, comes from Latin trivium: literally, a place where three roads intersect – as in Sophocles? – but by extension any public square where people swap idle gossip.’ The Trivium was also (he went on) the medieval division of the seven liberal arts into Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric (Barth, 2006:7).

Clearly preoccupied with all its implications, Al demanded his students in his “freshman Lit & Phil” class to write essays on what the equiangular Y that he had drawn on the blackboard symbolizes in their opinion. Though stung by his fiancé’s ironic remark that

(...) her gynecologist’s wall chart of the Human Female Reproductive System (by her remarked on her recent annual visit to that office), with its bubblegum-pink fallopian tubes converging L&R upon the uterine cervix, was yet another pregnant analogue, so to speak, to the Place Where Three Roads Meet. (Barth, 2006:22),

he remains passionate about the subject, fascinated by countless associations that can be made “along with Siamese twins sharing a single lower body, like the mythical Melionides who fought Heracles, and the actual freaks illustrated in Aldrovandi’s sixteenth-century *Monstrorum Historia*” (ibid. 22-3), and so does Will, his protégé, who happened to mention in his mid-term essay “a number of associations that his so-savvy instructor hadn’t thought of”,

like say the confluence of sperm and egg into embryo, or for that matter of father and mother into child – or, in the other direction, the forking of headwaters into river branches or tree trunks ditto, echoing the Primordial One’s self-division, in sundry myths already mentioned in class, into Two and thence into Many; or (reversing Al’s analogue of Hegelian dialectic, wherein Thesis versus Antithesis gives rise to Synthesis) the anti-Synthetic process of Analysis... (Barth, 2006:22)

The author will oscillate till the end between his characters' serious, profound interpretation of the title and mockery: the heavily loaded symbolic equiangular Y is targeted once more by ironic comments in the third novella, "As I Was Saying...", where three sisters, in their college days muses to a controversial writer, recollect their vulgar interpretation of the "lambda upsilon" Greek letters (λY),

(...) smart-ass 'Thalia' tells him that lambda looks to her like a pair of wide-open legs, and smart-ass Yours-Truly-'Aglaia' says that if that one has her legs open, the other must have hers closed, which is no way to make a living. And then our driver [...] finally joins the fun by saying, 'That chick's legs aren't closed; she's upside down with 'em spread wide open,' and Manny says, 'Welcome to Lambda-Upsy daisy, girls'. (Barth, 2006:131)

The deadlock-connotation of the title is best illustrated by the second novella, especially if we are to relate it to the more general storytelling/novel writing threat to reach stalemate in the TV era. The main character of Part II, Fred, the "Story", in "his" own voice, though "we myths", "we stories" can't "tell ourselves", complains that:

What I got to sensing instead was... oh, I don't know: something like a fidget in the audience? As if the old shtick were losing its shine, like one of those smash-hit TV sitcoms that's dulled its edge because it's become its own adversary: its own hardest act to follow, if you follow me. So many dead Dragons, routed Pretenders, punctured Princesses and newfounded Cities – who needed yet another? It wasn't the Perseuses and Aeneases I came to feel most akin to, but the Lears and Prosperos: 'my magic all o'erthrown,' my City urban-blighted and suburban-sprawled, my Laws crusted and clotted with niggling amendments and commentaries-on-commentaries. Budget deficits, creaking infrastructure... (Barth, 2006:69)

Having lost its appeal due to intense (re)telling, thrown out of its home and City like Shakespearian heroes, disfigured by the new city entertainment pressures, the vital blood of its writing laws thickened, and under the extensive siege of metafiction, storytelling/novel writing, in one word "Story", seems doomed to disappear.

And so Fred/Story attempts, as he "packs his Narrative Bags" and "bids family and disaffected citizenry bye-bye", "hits the figurative road", "slips incognito out of town", but

(...) he gets no farther than – oh, some Place Where Three Roads Meet, shall we figuratively say? Pauses there to scratch head/arse/whatever; sits himself down (on a handy rock-seat smack in the middle of that fabled intersection) to Consider – and here I sit yet, as if at a bus stop in mid-

Nowhere, talking to myself whilst awaiting my Dramatic Vehicle. (Barth, 2006:70)

which eventually arrives, after “too many yesterdays”, driven by the Teller, but which seems not to manage to push the “story” on the right track. After an unsuccessful attempt to move on, down “the Road Not Taken”, the two characters, Fred, the “Story”, Isidore, the “Teller”, also accompanied by the Mere Reader, find themselves, once more, “back where we started in Part One, at the Place Where Three Roads Diverge, awaiting some refueled Dramatic Vehicle” (Barth, 2006:103).

Therefore, the reader is invited, indeed challenged, by the Author, to do a better job and give a hand with the writing of the story:

Reader: The above-sketches is Another Story, which you're free to shift roles and take a shot at authoring yourself, so to speak, if something like that's what you'd rather read than this. (Barth, 2006:105),

though the Author is not ready to admit that all these desperate attempts to move forth the Dramatic Vehicle look like deadlock:

Having borne with me, however, while I fetched that trio and their formerly three-wheeled whatchacallum from the Place Where Three Roads Meet or Diverge, depending, through the three episodes leading to their apparent present impasse, permit me to declare [...] that while their Dramatic Vehicle has been stalled for many a script page now, 'Fred' himself (I mean this I've-Been-Told Story's Story) has been moving right along. (Barth, 2006:106)

It is precisely their commenting on the second part (Blank's story), that keeps the ball rolling, so to say. If we generalize, we might affirm that, similarly, writing that comments on itself, meta-fiction, self-reflexive fiction is the one that might prove able to keep the ball rolling for fiction writers and readers, alike.

One more connection that could be made is between the title and a possible Oedipus complex of a writer rejected by his father, also a writer, Manfred Dickson, characters of the third novella. Interestingly, the son's complaining sounds very similar with the autobiographic “dust specks” scattered throughout *Once Upon a Time*, namely, the writer's family's “benign passivity, affectionate loyalty”. Passages like the one below display the same decrying of parental rejection, based on the father's complete lack of or, at least, inability to show his *love* for his offspring:

Of my biological parentage I have no doubts [...] But as prevailingly cordial, or at least civil, as our connection was through my boyhood, adolescence, and young manhood, I never felt loved by the father whom, per Evolution's heedless program, I loved helplessly, and whom I honor

yet [...] despite his lifelong indifference to, amounting to virtual rejection of, his only child. (Barth, 2006:161)

Manfred Dickson Jr. sees himself as an Oedipus, “put out as an infant by his father, Laius, to die lest he grow up as foretold by Apollo to become a parricide”, but a reverted Oedipus, who,

(...) upon encountering years later that road-hogging old Theban at the Place Where Three Roads Meet”, instead of killing him to clear his own path, had graciously yielded the right-of-way and then, belatedly realizing who the elderly stranger must be, had hurried after him (as I’ve done here in three long volumes), crying, like a character out of Kafka, ‘Father! Look! Your son, alive and well except for an unaccountably swollen foot! Your son, who craves only reunion, reconciliation, and the father I never had! Wait for me! I forgive you everything! Let’s go on from here together!’ But the oldster’s wagon is gone already down that westward road, with not a backward glance from its heartless driver at its heartbroken pursuer. (Barth, 2006:161)

It is the same helpless love that the semi-fictional John Barth of *Once Upon a Time* feels for his father, despite his being rejected by him and despite being terribly disappointed. Once more the author seems to struggle with his past suffering in hopes of doing away with it.

Ys and Threes – keeping the novel together

It is not only the symbolic equiangular Y that is given prominence in the novel, the figure 3 is also very well marked. *Where Three Roads Meet* is a collection of three novellas, each of which is made up of three parts (though novellas II and III are divided in four parts, the fourth is rather an appendix, not really integrated in the “story”: an author’s appendix in Part II, and an editor’s note in Part III). Each story’s focus is on three main characters – in the first novella on the three Freds, that is, Alfred Baumann, Wilfred Chase and Winifred Stark, professor, protégé and the former’s fiancé; in the second, on Fred, the Story, Isidore, the Teller, and Ms. Georgina, the Mere Reader; while in the third, again on three sisters, Grace, Agatha and Thelma, and their serving as muses for Manfred Dickson, a controversial writer of a three-part opus.

What binds these three novellas together is, on a first level of reading, “Fred”. By this I mean not only the mere naming of all characters “Fred” or the inclusion of “fred” in their names: Alfred Baumann, Wilfred Chase and Winifred Stark; “Fred” the Story, or Manfred Dickson, but also what “Fred” stands for, namely storytelling/novel writing. Wilfred Chase, the narrator of part I, is a novelist-to-be, Manfred Dickson is also a writer, author of the trilogy *The Fates*, not to mention “Fred” of Part II, *The Story* itself. Their names which all include the particle “fred”

are only the graphic visualization of their interconnectivity due to their passion for writing / storytelling.

On a second level of generalization, it is the collection's constant interest in and commenting on this novel's writing (clearer instances of *la mise-en-abyme*), more widely, on the activity of writing, on literature production techniques as well as literary history that fasten these three pieces together. In other words, it is the novel's self-reflexiveness what characterized it as a whole, moreover, what constitutes it into a coherent whole.

What's left when Story leaves the city

The most self-reflexive part of the three is undoubtedly the second one, a novella in which the "Story", Fred, speaks in its own voice about itself, about its hesitations and dead ends, about its new possibilities to move beyond deadlock – a fact anticipated by the title: "I've Been Told: A Story's Story". If "I've been told" might be ambiguous, as it reads both as "somebody told me something" and "somebody told *me*", where *me* is the object of telling, the second part of the title clarifies it: this is the story of Story itself. Story's Teller and Reader also have a voice in this novella, actually not only a voice, but a body, too, as they are, curiously, characters that accompany Story Fred in the story.

Of the three sections that "I've Been Told" is divided in, the most interesting from this point of view is "Part Three: The Third Person", an extensive comment of the three heroes on the second part, Blank's Story, or, as it is spelt in the novel, "_____'s Story". The three characters' dialogue is crammed with literary technicalities; for instance, the section opens with Fred's amazement that Blank's story ended abruptly, that it actually did not have a proper end: "*Something* has to happen next! *Something always* happens next!" (Barth, 2006: 95), followed by Georgina's specialist explanation, a distinction between reality and fiction:

May I clarify? In Real Life, as it's called, something always happens next: the unlikely pants-wetting, the Highway Patrol car, the sister alarmed that her brother's gone missing, various embarrassing and troublesome consequences for [...] Phil – whatever. In Fiction, on the other hand, that's not the case: Phil's story ends when it's finished, and its ending isn't necessarily conterminous in either direction with his imaginable lifespan. (Barth, 2006:95)

Due to her role of critical commentator, Georgina, "the Mere Reader", brings to mind similar female characters in *Chimera*, who are there in the novel for the sole reason of questioning the storytelling itself, the story's construction and of pointing out potential discrepancies. So she does, right from the beginning:

Two questions, come to think of it. First off, in the lead-in to '_____'s Story' you declared, and I quote [finds relevant page in aforementioned

sheaff: ‘ A story that’ll serve as Fred’s and mine here in Part Two of ‘A Story’s Story’ happens to be that of _____.’ But I, for one, don’t see the connection. Your Phil Blank was never capital-A Anybody: His life and career were just a series of halfhearted attempts to address the teasing imperative of his name, if I may so put it. Pathetic, maybe, but hardly heroic. [...] Fred’s career has been an unparalleled success worldwide for going on three millennia [...] No culture in sight without some version of you! (Barth, 2006:95-6)

As reader Georgina notices, Blank’s life has nothing heroic in it. Moreover, after Phil Blank’s early retirement, hardly ever does anything at all happen, except fulfilling his basic necessities. Interestingly, this “_____” extends to the story itself, as nothing happens here either, except a lot of tech talk:

We Mere Readers had expected that once your so-called Ground Situation was established and this so-called Dramatic Vehicle got under way, plot complications would promptly follow, in the form of capital-O Obstacles and capital-A Adversaries, you know? But simply barreling westward like this down a straight flat narrative road is mere Action; it gets us nowhere, capital-P Plotwise. (Barth, 2006:97)

Quite interesting for the connection that can be made with Barth’s own writing style, when the Dramatic Vehicle’s out of gas engine “balked and quit”, “Izzy-the-Teller, far from sharing Fred’s concern and Reader’s puzzlement, seemed merely amused” (Barth, 2006:97).

Remarkably, the story itself seems to react to this chitchat, for, running out of gas is nothing else but ... getting more gas, as once more Georgina notices and explains:

(...) this buggy isn’t just the Herocycle: It’s also Fred I’ve-Been-Told’s story’s Dramatic Vehicle, right? As was established back in what we’re calling retrospectively Part One, and unlike Phil Blank’s Corolla in Part Two, which was just a lowercase vehicle [...] Ergo, guys, when ours ran out of gas just as I happened to be complaining in my Second Question that this I.B.T. tale is overdue for a capital-C Complication to turn the screws on its capital-C Conflict and advance its ditto-P Plot, what that Arresting Vehicular Coincidence amounts to – what we have on our narrative/dramaturgical hands right here right now – is nothing else than dot dot dot... (Barth, 2006:99)

and as Fred himself concludes: “A bona fide, gen-you-wine Complication!” (Barth, 2006:99).

Following this logic, the story which the reader (Mere Reader Georgina) thought finished, is actually moving on, writing itself as they comment on it, in other words, the commentary itself makes the story, despite the Dramatic Vehicle having run out of gas and despite the plot having reached at least apparent stalemate. The

author helps us visualize this, or rather, Izzy-the-Teller helps Georgina visualize this by way of the ever-changing story's manuscript: when Izzy urges her to go "on with our story": "Next paragraph of this story, please, my dear?", Georgina is at first certain there is no next paragraph: "What story? What next paragraph? Last time I looked, this thing here ended with the end of ' _____ 's Story' .", at least until she is challenged to check for herself:

*Ms. Puzzled G. acknowledged, 'so now it ends with my asking you what in fact I was just about to ask you: **How can I read what hasn't been written down yet? What's going on here?**' (Barth, 2006:100)*

The three heroes comment not only on the text's structure and discrepancies, but they also self-reflexively point to more subtle elements like the (mis)use of pronoun person:

Izzy: Smiles knowingly while waiting for Third Person to continue.

F.: That's a line of dialogue?

I.: Why not? If Miz Fellow Traveler here can speak the words ' _____ 's Story', as she managed to do twice or trice a few pages back, then I reckon I can speak third-person stage directions (Barth, 2006:98);

or the distinction teller/narrator vs. author:

*(...) just as a Story is not its Teller ('Fred's not Izzy, is he?'), so also its Teller – in the sense of its Narrator, anyhow – is not its Author, their job descriptions being quite different even when, as here and there happens, Author and Narrator are two functions of the same functionary, or pretend so to be. Teller-in-the-sense-of-Author **invents** and renders into language either the story itself I its characters, setting, action, plot, and theme – or (as in present instance) some new version of a pre-existing story. Teller-in-the-sense-of-Narrator then delivers Author's invention – renders his rendition, so to speak – whether a story character himself, like Present Speaker, or as a more or less disembodied narrative voice (Barth, 2006:101-2);*

or they go into more technical aspects like the shifting point of view; by storyteller's/Izzy's choice, firstly, the point of view is Fred's, in the second part he takes the floor, while the "Part Three: The Third Person", despite being a slightly edited dialogue, gives more weight to the Third Person, namely, "Hitherto Unmentioned Female Third Person", Mere Reader Georgina. Despite the chosen point of view, Izzy kindly asks his travel-mates not to forget who the Teller is:

*(...) the pair of you seem to've forgotten our little Narrative-Point-of-View review back in Part Two. Wherein, be ye twain reminded, 'twas pointed out that while this 'I've Been Told' story both is Fred and is **about** Fred, its Teller this time around is Yours Truly – most explicitly so in Part Two, but at least arguably so in Parts One and Three as well, Teller having*

merely shifted narrative POVs between acts like a quick-change artist.
(Barth, 2006:101)

Back to Part 2 that we have been referred to, we get an entire lecture on narrative viewpoint, considered necessary at the first change of point of view: “You’re wondering why the ‘I’ in ‘1’ was Call-Me-Fred” while “here in ‘2’ it appears to be Call-Me-Izzy, the Sidekick Teller?” (Barth, 2006:77):

You may recall F. and me a-hassling each other a bit about ‘job descriptions’ back there in ‘1’? What the issue came down to was, does he do what I say, or do I merely say what he does? (Barth, 2006:77-8)

To illustrate this, Izzy-the-Teller (with the entire encyclopedia of literary theory and history which the reader may well guess is Barth’s) shows us how the author-teller/character relationship changed starting from Homer-Odysseus and Virgil-Aeneas, through Cervantes-Don Quixote, and up to Mark Twain-Huck Finn relationship:

*Things don’t get truly dizzy-making again until you get an ‘I’ who’s Mr. Mark Twain, say, and a ‘he’ who’s young Huck Finn **telling his own story first-person** – i.e., as an I! ‘You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of **The Adventures of Tom Sawyer**,’ etc. Yet even that comes down to a fairly simple division of labor, finally, between Author/Teller and Narrator, doth it not? Twain ‘records’ Huck’s report of what-Huck-did-because-Twain-imagined-and-put-into-Huck’s-words-Huck’s-doing-so, right? Or, to put it another way, Author tells Reader Narrator’s telling-to-Reader of Tale-made-up-by-Author.* (Barth, 2006:78-9)

As if racing against such literary masters as the quoted ones, the author proposes something even more “dizzying”: with Izzy-the-Teller in charge, but doing what author-Barth made him do (as seen above), what we are offered is the story told by the story itself (which is, in fact, part 1):

*But now – fasten seat belts, folks – suppose First-Person Narrator of story to be not only its principal character, but **It**: the Story itself, telling us itself itself!* (Barth, 2006:79)

Just as Part Three of this second novella is an extended reflection on “_____’s Story”, Part Two includes comments on unnumbered Part one, its first notable commentary being on the necessity of itself being labeled as “2” when the first part must remain unnumbered:

(...) inasmuch as he [Fred], for one, couldn’t’ve known there’d be a Part Two till he hit Lizzie’s pedal and landed us on this side of yonder space-break, he couldn’t’ve bloody known that where we were before was Part One of anything, could he now, mate? So just maybe it’s Symbolically Appropriate, as they say, for Part One to stand unlabeled as such (Barth, 2006:77).

Not to say that part 1 itself opens abruptly – *in medias res* – with half-serious, half-ironic considerations about starting telling a story abruptly:

If some of my plain-folks ancestors (and some not-so-plain ones who for one reason or another wore Plainness as a camouflage) began as if straightforwardly at their 'beginnings', others equally venerable thought it best to start off in the middle of things: in medias res, as Coach Horace famously put it, not ab ovo with the egg abovementioned. [...] No, recommends Doc Horace: Stories may begin at their 'beginnings', but their tellings commence where their Teller sees fit... (Barth, 2006:63-4)

and it goes on about literary originality and narrative construction:

... and since all hands know the tale already anyhow (for what kind of loser would invent a brand-new story, and so distract the house with What'll Happen Next that they miss Teller's cool new riffs on the classic tune?), better start off in the next-to-last year of the War or the Wandering, and then with your left hand remind'em of the Tale Thus Far while your right keeps the plot-pot bubbling toward full boil. (Barth, 2006:64)

Self-reflexive mirrorings of the novel

Actually, the literary tech talk is the very nature of the novel. Comments on storytelling and tellers, on writing, or on the distinction life-fiction are also there in the first and third novellas, as well as more instances of *la mise-en-abyme*. The narrator of another novella that starts *in medias res*, the first one – the writer-to-be Will Chase, assisted by his professor/tutor Al Baumann – also reflects on the writing of the story, but in a more teacher-student way: what Al advises is achieved a few lines below. For instance, when he tells Will

If this were a story and you were its narrator [...] you could stop the action right here and get some capital-E Exposition done: like who the three Freds are and what they're doing here; what the capital-C Conflict is; what's At Stake for whichever of us is the Protagonist. (Barth, 2006:4),

the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that indeed an exposition was missing thus far and that it starts immediately after the tutor's observation. Similarly, a few pages further, having been introduced to the main characters – tutor, fiancé and protégé – and the background situation, Will is scolded, in another self-reflexive paragraph, "So introduce us to the Reader already, okay? Something more than that résumé stuff a few pages ago?" (Barth, 2006:12); and again, when the exposition threaten to expand beyond reasonable limits:

Far be it from a mere bass-shaped scholar-critic to criticize, but one wonders whether Narrator's artfulness mightn't extend further to wrapping up this extended Exposition and getting on with the effing story, at least Part One thereof, dot dot dot question mark? (Barth, 2006:21)

Other paragraphs point to the whole novel, in genuine *mise-en-abyme* instances. Narrator Will Chase, in the first novella “Tell Me” locates the paragraph being written/read with utmost precision, despite this being just the beginning of the novel:

*‘On to Winnie?’ With pained pleasure, while that so-able and magnanimous rosy-cheeked lass remains freeze-framed back in academic 1948-49, telephone in hand, awaiting the end of this interrupted interruption of Section One, “The Call”, of Part One, **Tell Me**, of our novella-triad **Where Three Roads Meet**... (Barth, 2006:13)*

thus equaling “us”, i.e. Will and Al, the narrators of “Part One, *Tell Me*, of novella-triad *Where Three Roads Meet*...”, with the author of the whole text.

While some fragments pretty obviously reflect the whole, like the one above, in others a meaningfully-winking-Barth more subtly refers us back to the novel. Just like in previous novels, Barth tries to annihilate potential criticism by incorporating it in the text:

(...) so went C. Ella Mason’s Wye novella, insofar as the letter writer could follow its story line through its off-putting postmodernist narrative devices. (Barth, 2006:120)

To sum up, *Where Three Roads Meet* abounds in comments on writing *itself*, as well as on writing and story-telling in general, with illustrations from the three novellas, and from its author’s generous literary historical background alike. Here is one more example: when the news of Al’s leukemia is broken towards the end of “Tell Me”, he criticizes as usually,

In a properly constructed story [...] there’d’ve been a few strategically placed foreshadowings before now: I might’ve mentioned joint pains ten pages ago, for example, or you two could’ve remarked [...] that old Near-Boy was looking weaker and paler in Part Two of this yarn than he looked in Part One... (Barth, 2006:55)

which implies, of course, *this* is no “properly constructed story”, maybe because its author felt there was no more room for “properly constructed” stories on the literary scene. However, plenty of room may be said to be there for less properly constructed, more experimental, writing, like the present novel.

Mere similarities with previous novels or self-pastiche?

One last point ought to be made here: a careful reader cannot help noticing the numerous similarities between this and some of the earlier novels of the same author. The most obvious, for a start, are the parallels that can be established with 1972 three-novella collection, *Chimera*, but there are also elements that recall early existentialist novels *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, as well as short-

story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*, or *Letters*, and even autobiographic *Once Upon a Time*.

The most noticeable correspondences are those with *Chimera*: both novels are actually collections of 3 apparently unrelated novellas, in both there are characters/narrators who self-reflexively point to the novel itself and its making, who “criticize” it in the sense of literary criticism, hence, the multitude of reflections and technical comments on writing and story-telling, on narrative composition, hence, the numerous instances in which fragments of the novel reflect the whole (*la mise-en-abyme*). I have already mentioned Georgina, Mere Reader’s critical function, which brings to mind the Egyptian girl in “Perseid”, but we should note that virtually all the characters in both novels comment on writing and/or story-telling.

Moreover, both novels deal with the issue of open-ended texts: *Chimera*’s first novella, “Dunyazadiad”, which proposes multiple versions for the story’s end, all ultimately rejected by the text itself (as we have seen in chapter 4.2). In a similar manner, the second novella in *Where Three Roads Meet*, “I’ve Been Told: A Story’s Story” proposes two versions for the conclusion of Fred’s journey westward, after he leaves the Dramatic Vehicle, the Teller and the Reader (Georgina/Regina) behind:

*But she understands the fitness of it, does our savvy Reader, sweetly disappointed but dramaturgically fulfilled; the fitness too of her not knowing whither trudgeth her aged admiree: back homeward or farther westward, none knows where. Upon that matter, should they discuss it, she and Izzy will disagree, Regina preferring to imagine Fred’s ultimate Consummation in the bosom of his family, in the heart of their once-excellent city, Isidore inclining to a more mysterious, indeed unknown and unknowable finale somewhere out yonder – indeed, perhaps not even **down** the road after all, but **off** it: somewhere trackless, out beyond that far shoulder whence last we heard his voice. (Barth, 2006:108)*

And once more in a similar manner, “author himself refrains from tipping the scales either way”, though he introduces yet another possibility, related to “the Ur-Mythic script”, namely “the possibility of our hero’s being, at the end, not really dead, but rather transmigrated to some Elsewhere – whence, in time, he will return” (Barth, 2006:109).

The effect of the author’s refusal to “tip the scales”, while openly *asserting* that he cannot/does not want to do so, is as peculiar as in *Chimera*: the reader (us, as well as the Mere Reader character) gets to wonder who the author *really* is. Fred himself marveled at on point:

And this out-of-gas story of ours is moving right along, even though we-all aren’t. Who’s driving? (Barth, 2006:101)

accompanied by Georgina/Regina who reads from the story's script:

Reads aloud from current last lines of script: Is Izzy our Author, or isn't he? Who's writing this pedantical crapola? Is there a fourth wheel on this wagon? (Barth, 2006:102)

This does not remain a rhetorical question, as it is addressed both by the author himself, who introduces a fourth part of the novella, "The Fourth Wheel", for clarification:

Author speaking, more-than-patient Reader, in order to declare – at the risk of seeming uncooperative or coy – that it matters not a whit to "Fred"'s story who its author is, as long as the job gets done. (Barth, 2006:104)

and by Izzy, who answers the same question a few lines down-page:

*Who our Author is, who knoweth? Not we Mere Fictional Characters! All we know is that while quote **real** people in the quote **real** world may do things out of their more-or-less-free will, all we MFCs have is the semblance thereof, while in fact we do precisely what Mister/Miz Author seeth fit to write that we do. Even Ms. Reader, once she entered this tale as its Georgina-the-Mere-Reader character, checked her own volition at the door: She may **think** she can exit our script anytime she wishes, but if she does, it's because Author decided to send her packing. (Barth, 2006:103)*

- a pretty subversive paragraph, if we keep in mind the fact that throughout his literary career this very author has enjoyed playing with and mixing up distinctions author-narrator, author-character, that all of a sudden he lectures about, and more interestingly, that this author has continuously *fictionalized* himself by various means. Once more he does so in the end of the novel, where we read "Copyright © 20?? by 'Fred' ", playfully implying that the novel was written by... itself, or, as we have already seen in Part Two, "the Story itself, telling us itself itself" (Barth, 2006:79) – an illusion, indeed, as in previous novels, but a very powerful one.

Last but not least, this three-novella collection creates the same spiraling effect as that produced by *Chimera*. The end of the last novella "As I was saying..." (Barth, 2006:163) sends us back to the first page, on which we can read about the three Freds' conversation interrupted by a phone call and resumed by Will Chase with the same words "As I was saying, guys" (Barth, 2006:3).

Furthermore, one can count even more similarities with previous novels by the same author: the *ménage a trois* in Barth's first two novels, including the unwanted pregnancy to be terminated one way or the other, is here with us in Part One, where the three Freds share what they call a *ménage a deux et un peu*; reference is also made to the story ("Night-Sea Journey", *Lost in the Funhouse*) again in Part One, when Will tells his friends about a mid-term essay he planned to write, in the form of

(...) a gloss on Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" (...), more specifically, into the first-person monologue of a nonconformist spermatozoon swimming alone against the current up a different fork of some dark stream from the one that his countless ejaculation-mates have chosen, and speculating on the overall layout of wherever in the world he is and on the mystery of what it's all about. (Barth, 2006:23)

Another novel that *Where Three Roads Meet* brings to mind due to the autobiographic details incorporated in the three novellas is *Once Upon a Time*. Despite the already familiar warning we find in the *peritexte* that "The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author", autobiographic elements creep into the novel, as the author consistently projects himself in the text, hiding behind various writer-characters. Nevertheless, we do not come across a character that resembles Barth completely, like the genie in *Chimera*, but a series of characters share parts of his biography, while none of them entirely remind one of the author. For instance, Al Baumann, who at puberty had discovered a passion for the arts, "decided by his junior prep-school year that he'd be a poet, a professor of literature or maybe of art history, and on the side a jazz pianist" (Barth, 2006:5), while Will Chase "had made an avid, if noisy, hobby of jazz percussion" (Barth, 2006:8) since junior high school, that is, sixth and seventh grade, had had a "half-dozen years of piano lessons" (Barth, 2006:9), went to public school, and was born in the same Chesapeake flooded area, called by Al "Marshville" (Barth, 2006:11). Neither of the two completely resembles Barth, as Al, though being a professor, he "had since boyhood more than anything aspired, not to *teach* Lit and Phil, honorable as that profession is, but to *create* same – especially the former. Creating literature was not Al's vocation, "capital-G Gift", but Will's: "the one you wished you'd had for music but did not, and the one I wish I had for lit-making but do not" (Barth, 2006:24). In Part Two we read that Phil Blank has a "prevailingly cordial and passively affectionate" (Barth, 2006:87) relationship with his sister Marsha, which brings to mind Jack's family's "benign passivity" and "affectionate loyalty". Two of the three Mason sisters are professors, one of literature, while Grace's daughter, C. Ella Mason, is "an adjunct professor of creative writing at a branch campus of the state university on Maryland's Eastern Shore" (Barth, 2006:121) and a writer of novellas. Manny, the mysteriously vanished writer of Part Three, started his career by publishing "a handful of shall-we-say experimental short stories in obscure lit mags and an unsuccessful 'trial-run' first novel, as he called it (already out of print, and its small-press publisher out of business), and had a second one going the rounds in New York that neither he nor his agent was optimistic about" (Barth, 2006:139). Moreover, at one point Grace Mason brings up Manfred Dickson's "egomania, narcissism, whatever bad name it's called by", but which in her opinion was "not self-love at all, but a particular kind of self-*absorption* fairly common among artist types, though not a vocational prerequisite" (Barth, 2006:142); not to mention the Manny's rejection of his son, that we have already

looked into. All these details, though, send one to, as they sum up, Barth's entire social identity, as we have seen self-fictionalization requires.

We should also stress the fact that it is not due to these mere similarities or allusions to previous novels that we get the impression this novel is a pastiche of Barth's previous writing, as the author has always interconnected his novels by cross-references to one another. It is due to the copying of the structure of *Chimera* and its characters' self-reflexive commenting on, rooted in their preoccupation with writing and storytelling, that we can evaluate *Where Three Roads Meet* as such.

Conclusions

The result of Barth's weaving/rewriting effort is a novel not always enjoyable for the reader, but this is not new: literary critics protested against this type of writing much earlier: for instance, in 1972, Sanford Pinsker called him "the teller who swallowed his tale" and considered that his persistence in self-reflexiveness will bring, has brought, him to a dead end:

In short, Barth is not so much the great destroyer of Modernism - exaggerating its faults through extended parody, etc. - as he is the devourer of his own Art. The principle that 'fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity' ... might be an intriguing thesis, even the subject of an academic symposium, but, baldly stated, it is a poor narrative line on which to hang one's story. (Pinsker, 1972: 68)

while, in 1968, Beverly Gross argued that Barth's fiction leads to "the repudiation of narrative art", that each one of his novels presupposes "an anti-novelistic assault on itself", though, in the end, she refined her argument: Barth "is not quite affirming life but he is negating lifelessness. He is not quite affirming art but he is negating silence" (Gross, 1968: 109). However, as this 2005 novel is probably meant to prove, Barth's unmistakable style, far from leading him to a dead end, has always offered new possibilities for moving "on with the story".

To conclude, running out of gas at the "place where three roads meet", the central image/metaphor of Part Two, standing for and being placed literally at the heart of the novel, best summarizes all a reader could expect to find in it: potential deadlock for storytelling, and we have seen an author who, having written for decades already, "finds himself lost" and in need of revisiting some of his earlier writing, as well as a potential stalemate for novel writing in the TV era; the right place to look into one's Oedipal and other types of complexes (cf. Sophocles); and, finally, when the right amount of irony dismisses all the above, we are left with "gossiping" in the *trivium* about, what else, storytelling and novel writing. Uncannily, this idle "gossip" in the place where three roads meet is just another way of going "on with the story", for, as we have seen, running out of gas in this place is the paradoxical equivalent of refueling.

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