

PARODIC METAFICTION:
AN APPROACH TO SELF-REFLEXIVE FICTION
IN TWO WORKS BY JOHN BARTH

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Febrero de 2014

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisors, Dr. Marcos Carmignani and Mg. Alejandra Portela, for their engagement and insightful comments. Your relentless assistance made this work possible.

ABSTRACT

The present study aims at elaborating on the connection between two concepts in the field of literary studies, namely metafiction and parody, alongside other related notions, such as the function of irony as a rhetorical mechanism and the use of myths as intertexts. Among the several scholars who address these topics, Rose (1979 and 1993), Hutcheon (1980 and 1985), and Waugh (1984) specifically deal with how these concepts relate to one another. The texts proposed for this study –*Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad*, in *Chimera* (1972) by American author John Barth– share specific rhetorical and narrative elements that allow us to frame this analysis within the theoretical notions referred to before. It has been noted that those theoretical works that address these concepts, as well as the more specific critical studies reviewed, do not deal with precise analytical categories which can embrace the conceptual network that these texts present. An extensive inquiry conducted in the main academic research databases reveals that the problem as stated in this proposal has not yet been investigated and no papers that analyse Barth's texts from the theoretical perspective outlined here have been found. By constructing a model of textual analysis, this proposal aims at contributing to the study of metafiction and parody and to the critical analysis of metafictional narratives in general. In so doing, this proposal can provide working analytical tools that are likely to be applied to other research studies that incorporate a wider or different variety of literary texts.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of metafiction or narrative self-referentiality enters literary theory and criticism in the 1970s and 1980s with the publications of, mainly, Scholes (1970, 1975 and 1979), Fogel (1974), Alter (1975), Klinkowitz (1975, 1980 and 1985), Christensen (1981), Barth (1984), Waugh (1984), Hutcheon (1980 and 1985), and Sukenick (1985). Broadly speaking, metafiction is defined in these works as a genre or subgenre, a tendency and/or a style of writing that combines experimental writing with existential questioning. As for metafictional literary production, we can point out that this tendency gets initiated, in English fiction, in the eighteenth century with Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) and, in Spanish, in the early seventeenth century with Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quixote* (1604-1614), and continues to develop inconsistently from then on. However, fiction that incorporates critical considerations about itself can be really traced back to classical times in, for example, the function of the chorus in Greek tragedy. Being storytelling one of the major self-referential elements in narratives, the development of metafiction can, in fact, be also traced back to the *Arabian Nights*.

As indicated by Federman (1993), it is not until the last decades of the 1950s and, particularly, in the 1960s, however, that Anglophone writers such as Burroughs, O'Connor, Hawkes, Vonnegut, Barth, Pynchon, Fowles, Bartheleme and Coover initiate the systematic use of this mode of writing. Frequently cited to characterize metafictional writing, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) typify the tendency to self-consciously use parody and self-referentiality to de-familiarize traditional narrative structures –nineteenth century realism and historical romances in the examples just mentioned. Partly as rupture and

break with some defining narrative elements that precede it and, mostly, as continuity with the beginnings of the experimental writing of modernism, this first wave of self-reflexive writers tried to normalize the use of this narrative mode, a practice that continues, though to a lesser extent, until today. As suggested by several critics, among these Harris (1971), Wilde (1981) and Federman, metafiction is closely tied in with the themes of the absurd, the ironic and the parodic in that those who initiated this narrative practice tried to disarticulate certain narrative principles (linearity and continuity, for example) and fragment narration with the aid of imitation, paradox and humour in order to question representation in fiction and fictionality in reality.

During the 1970s, the use of metafiction seems to have turned more radically experimental and innovative in works such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) or Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), just to mention a few examples, in which the parodic elements distinctive of preceding works are now masked by and substituted for pure irony and explicit self-reflexivity. From this stage on, a second wave of metafictional productions seems to have initiated, which fractures the morality and intellectuality of the 1950s and which seems to do without manifest parody. The generation of the 1970s is characterized by a more radical and provocative use of the language and, above all, by the disbelief in and rejection of traditional narrative modes and their pretension of representation and mimesis.

Among the diverse theorists interested in this narrative tendency, Linda Hutcheon, University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto and specialist in postmodernist culture and critical theory, has developed an interesting seminal study on parody and metafiction, a development that can be traced back to her first publications in 1980 and 1985. In these, Hutcheon analyses and explores parody in its many manifestations and describes this rhetorical and narrative device as one of the many strategies used in metafictional writing. Hutcheon basically argues that the language of parodic texts points not only to the texts themselves but also to that which they designate. The author defines parody as a rhetorical tool that invokes critical self-consciousness and uses irony as a main strategy. She also points out that many metafictional productions contemporary to the publication of her works are characterized by the ironic use of parodic forms. Contrary to what we might have assumed, the use of parody in metafictional narratives in the 1980s was far from being

abandoned. Such practice is reinforced and exacerbated by the conscious use and exploitation of irony.

We understand that metafiction and parody are usually combined in that the latter is often used as a metafictional strategy that fulfils the function of a mirror in self-reflexive fiction. We also know that not every metafictional text is necessarily parodic (Waugh; Rose). Based on the ideas posited by both Russian formalism and structuralism regarding literary evolution and the concepts of de-familiarization (Shklovsky, 1990) and parodic-travesty counter-representations (Bakhtin, in Holquist, 1981), we recognize, however, that the texts that expose parody as a rhetorical device are inherently self-reflexive. The language of parodic texts refers not only to the text that is parodied but also to the texts themselves, which implies that parody invokes a critical awareness of itself, while using irony as a rhetorical strategy. Irony is one of the rhetorical elements most commonly used in parodic texts, which derives from an awareness of the power of the process of parodic re-description (Rorty, 1989) often found in narratives. While we can distinguish different types of irony, including mediated, disjunctive, suspensive and generative (following Wilde's categorization), we understand that, in general, the trope of irony, as Hayden White points out (as cited in Wilde), provides a linguistic paradigm of a way of thinking that is radically self-critical about not only a given experience of the world but also about the very effort to try to adequately capture the truth of things through language.

Three fundamental concepts have so far been succinctly described, namely metafiction, parody and irony. As will be demonstrated later, the two texts by American author John Barth¹ that have been selected for this study and which are later referenced in the empirical corpus share certain rhetorical, narrative and thematic elements that can be circumscribed to the theoretical framework loosely developed before. Given this corpus, it has been noted that there are no specific categories of analysis, as surveyed in the theoretical works mentioned before and in more specific critical studies reviewed, which can embrace the conceptual network that this corpus presents. As will be proved later, even though the studies developed by Rose, Waugh and Hutcheon deal with metafiction and parody, at times in a related manner, they in fact establish only partial

¹ For further information about the author, his life and list of fictional and non-fictional works, please refer to Appendix "A".

² From this word, a number of related meanings derive, such as to imitate, adapt or borrow, to

connections between these concepts and, thus, do not provide an integrated approach to the analysis of fictional texts that could be explored taking this theoretical framework as a basis. A related aspect that will also be addressed is the problem of the use of terminology that can successfully encapsulate the concepts which are central to this study. In this sense, it will be argued that, for the present investigation, the term 'parodic metafiction' is preferred to refer to the type of fictions herein analysed.

ANTECEDENTS

Given their specificity and pertinence, two theoretical studies –Rose (1979 and 1993)– and two critical works –Tobin (1992) and Montakhabi Bakhtvar (2011)– have been selected as the main antecedents to the present investigation.

In her work published in 1979, Rose views parody as a metafictional mechanism or strategy. She explores various definitions of this term and studies the comic effect that it may have. Rose also distinguishes parody from other related forms, such as pastiche, satire, irony, the burlesque, and literary hoax, among others. The author examines the metalinguistic functions that parody may have and introduces an early distinction between what she calls ‘general parody’ and ‘parodistic meta-fiction.’ This distinction, which is a seminal component for the present study, is only partially developed in her work. Rose argues that

[p]arody and meta-fiction are (...) alike in criticising naïve views of the representation of nature in art, and in that parody is, as meta-fiction, able to demonstrate critically the processes involved in the production and reception of fiction from within a literary text, it is also able to show how a literary work exists both within a particular social context and a literary tradition. (65-66)

Although this particular connection between parody and metafiction will not be considered in this study, what this preliminary conceptualization offers, besides the linkage between the concepts, is the opportunity to discuss that both parody and metafiction are means by which authors problematize representation through imitation. This notion also foregrounds the problem of the role of authors as parodists, in that parody, understood as a metafictional statement about the process of creating and

receiving fiction, aids authors in extending literary production, while helping receivers reconceptualise given stories from the past.

In her study published in 1993, Rose retakes some of the main concepts introduced in her previous work and approaches the study of parody from different definitions and conceptualizations that she, again, examines in light of the distinction between parody and metafiction. She devotes only a short section in one of her chapters to the development of this distinction and, instead, focuses on the multiple schools that examine parody, moving across structuralism, deconstruction, post-structuralism, and postmodernism.

In an attempt at furthering the distinction introduced in her earlier work, Rose argues that parody and metafiction ought to be differentiated. She contends that

[w]hile the term meta-fiction when used by itself may describe a reflection by an author on their activity as author, or on that of others, or on the structure of composition of another text, or on its audience, the parody of a literary work (...) can be attended not only by such meta-fiction reflections, but by other characteristics of parody such as its comic refunctioning of the work's preformed material. (92)

Rose interestingly points to the added value brought in by parody, particularly that which is related to the possible effect(s) created in a parodic work.

As regards one of the critical works that serves as an important antecedent to the present study, Tobin's publication allows us to explore Barth's works from a particular and original perspective in that she traces Barth's career by examining his works from a unified viewpoint. She takes Harold Bloom's notion of 'anxiety' and uses his 'map of misprision' (from a *Map of Misreading*, 1975), or rather some of the categories therein contained, to examine Barth's production, from his first novel –*The Floating Opera* (1956)– to, at the time, his last –*The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991). Tobin contextualizes her study around the Barthian notions of exhaustion and replenishment, which will be referred to later, and around the concept of parody, which she sees as a potent mechanism to bring the past into present actuality in the self-reflexive process of creative revisionism. Even though Tobin does not further elaborate on these notions when she examines Barth's *Chimera* in her sixth chapter, she focuses on the metaphor

of the spiral and the image of the outside and inside, which will be significant for the present study.

After indicating that parody is by no means an out-dated tool in the history of literary practices, even though it might need some devaluation, Tobin carefully explains how she intends to use Bloom's categories to chart Barth's career. Tobin's argument is fundamentally that

John Barth (...) conducts his self-inventions within the Bloomian schema of Oedipal conflict –not inventing himself, like Withman, once and for all in a miraculous conception aimed at public consumption, but rather *reinventing* himself with each new work of art, as new ephebe to his own precursor, in order that the career might go on. (9)

Tobin's case turns out to be central to this study, especially when trying to unify the main concepts so far discussed. Her notions that, in *Chimera*, the outside and the inside come together and that Barth's metaphor of the spiral understood as a symbol of life and a person's career closely coincide with some of the main ideas proposed in this study.

Concerning the other critical work reviewed, Montakhabi Bakhtvar's doctoral dissertation (2011) explores Barth's *Chimera* from a deconstructionist approach, based on the theories developed by Belgian-born literary critic Paul de Man with regards to the so-called 'allegories of reading.' Montakhabi Bakhtvar studies Barth's first novella (*Dunyazadiad*) as an allegory, in light of de Man's metaphors of reading. She also relates two important concepts for this study, namely mythology and metafictionality, on which she, in fact, does not dwell. Then, the author explores Barth's second novella (*Perseid*) as an autobiographical allegory, also given the conceptualizations elaborated by de Man. Finally, Montakhabi Bakhtvar examines Barth's third novella (*Bellerophoniad*) in light of the de Manian concept of 'ironic ethos.' In the final section of her study, in which the author introduces some suggestions for further research, Montakhabi Bakhtvar proposes that *Chimera* can be analysed in terms of extra-textual and intertextual features, which undoubtedly point to the myths or pre-texts that Barth re-elaborates.

After referring to de Man's notion of 'de-facement' (in "Autobiography as De-facement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 1984), Montakhabi Bakhtvar contends that

[d]e elaborated, de Man asserts that the author of any autobiography becomes a trope in his own text. He is no longer the determined, outer identity that imposes his extra-textual elements upon the text, but he becomes part of his own work. He is the metaphor of his real self (56).

This notion closely coincides with some of the ideas developed by Tobin in that the outer and the inner worlds come together in one textual site, which adds not only to the metafictional quality of the work itself but also to the parodic (or dialogic) relation established between a text and preceding texts or pre-texts. The notion of de-facement also demonstrates to be useful, especially in connection with that of dedoublement and irony, as explored by Montakhabi Bakhtvar: “[a]part from being a trope in de Manian perspective, irony delves deep into the crux of its subject, disrupting any systematic, defined ontological view of the self” (86), an idea that will be further elaborated for the purpose of developing one of the main arguments of the present study.

Views on metafiction, parody and irony will be recuperated along the process of constructing an analytical scheme that incorporates these essential concepts, just like observations about the empirical corpus of this study, originated by the critics mentioned before, will also be taken into consideration in order to exemplify and further the analysis of these ideas in light of specific texts selected to achieve such aims.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the antecedents previously examined, there are two framing concepts that require further elaboration, namely metafiction and parody, and two framed notions that also need additional explanation, viz. irony and myth. The following section addresses these essential concepts in a related manner.

There is one germinal study that first brought together the concepts of metafiction and parody and that is the already-mentioned work by Margaret A. Rose entitled *Parody//Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction*, published in 1979. In this study, the Australian scholar devotes her attention to the definition and conceptualization of parody, as well as to the development of what she calls a ‘theory of parody,’ where she originally relates parody to metafiction.

In the introduction to her work, Rose argues that parody should be regarded as a metafictional mirror to fiction, in general, and to the archaeology of a text, in particular. She adheres to the Foucauldian notion that parody has the power of critically transforming the episteme of an age and contends that, in order to study this puzzling element, we should direct our attention to the notion of ‘literary’ parody, in its different forms, since this type of parody has always allowed for the exploration of the multiplicity of issues inside a text, raging from the comic to the ironic and beyond.

Rose departs from a series of early definitions commonly used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and then establishes five main principles that have consistently been used to define this element, namely 1) its etymology; 2) its use as comedy; 3) the parodist’s attitude; 4) the effect produced; and 5) the structure of the parodic text. Rose refers to the Greek poet Hipponax of Ephesus as the founding father of the mock-heroic

epic, a clear antecedent to so-called epic parody. Along this line, Rose reminds us that American classicist Fred W. Householder is one of the first critics who produces a comprehensive study of parody, with a special focus on the use of the term in Classical Antiquity. Although Rose does not dwell on this, it is worth mentioning that Householder (1944) basically argues that there is a problem with how the term has been used, which is why he explores the semantic scope of parody departing from its use in Greek, *παρωδός*². After briefly dwelling on its roots in Greek poetry and based on Householder's early distinction between parody viewed as a technique and as a genre, Rose explores other forms of parody, such as the 'cento' and the 'silloi,' in order to further elaborate on Householder's division. When she refers to parody as a technique, Rose understands that parody has a particular effect, such as the pun, for instance, which she considers to be a form of parody (as a device). When parody is viewed as simulation or a form of conscious imitation, then she speaks about parody as a genre.

Irrespective of this distinction, which might be useful, Rose contends that

[a] history of parody will show (...) that parody has served to bring the concept of imitation itself into question, and that while imitation may be used as a technique in the parody it is the use of incongruity [or discrepancy, as I prefer] which distinguishes the parody from other forms of quotation and literary imitation, and shows its function to be more than imitation alone. (22)

This idea, then, brings into question one of the most common features attributed to parody, precisely that which indicates that parody is by no means simple repetition but, rather, it incorporates a great deal of possible effects and purposes, being discrepancy an essential component in its configuration. Rose expresses that, while two distinct attitudes of the parodist –mock or contempt and sympathetic imitation– have traditionally been assigned to the parodist, parodies “need not necessarily ridicule the work of its target” (33). This expanded notion of parody reminds us of the ideas developed by Hutcheon (1985): “There is nothing in *parodia* that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule, as there is, for instance, in the joke or *burla* or burlesque” (32), to which she adds:

² From this word, a number of related meanings derive, such as to imitate, adapt or borrow, to play upon words, and a parodic poem or mock-heroic, among others.

I argued that on a pragmatic level parody was not limited to producing a ridiculous effect (*para* as “counter” or “against”), but that the equally strong suggestion of complicity and accord (*para* as “beside”) allowed for an opening up of the range of parody. (53-54)

Rose also implies that, whatever its function and effect, parody always involves a refunctioning of the target text, by which she refers to the new purposes (and meanings, effects, etc.) that are gained or created by a text in a new context provided by parody.

The Australian scholar devotes a whole chapter to the distinction of parody from other related forms, such as the burlesque, persiflage, plagiarism and ‘pekoral’, the literary hoax and pastiche, satire, quotation, cross-reading, and irony. In doing so, the author continues her development of a working conceptualization of the term in question. She states that parody should be first viewed in terms of its use as a particular metalinguistic practice of performed language as a vehicle of criticism, which points to the importance assigned to both the (social, cultural, and even personal) context and the readers’ awareness about the type of fiction they are being exposed to.

When Rose refers to irony and its connection to parody, she uses the term ‘ironic parody’ to discuss the potent power that parody has of refunctionalizing other texts and argues that literary parody is an internalized form of literary criticism. This idea directly points to the close connection between this form of narrative and metafiction. Along this line, Rose contends that parody uses metalinguistic analysis, and metafiction, conversely, reflects the whole process of text reception and production. By metafiction, Rose means that “some parody provides a ‘mirror’ to fiction, in the ironic form of the imitation of art in art, as well as by more direct references to these authors, books and readers. It is not suggested, however, that all meta-fiction is parodistic.” (65) A considerable number of the parodies found are, nevertheless, highly self-reflexive.

Engaged in a relation of both criticism and identification, the parodist and the reader are brought close to each other in parodies that, one way or another, foreground the mechanisms used in a text that establish a dialogue with a preceding text. Rose, in this respect, expresses that writing is under suspicion in those parodies that criticize or, at least, problematize representation. Metafiction can then become the vehicle of parody. Rose contends that

parody, as a meta-fictional comment on the process of literary production and reception, may hold a mirror up to the literary work to reflect on both the work and

the mirror, and so too on the concept of imitation as it applies to the literary work. But in casting doubt on the veracity of the fictional world, or on the veracity of the concept of imitation, parody also extends the process of literary production, to make a new literary work from its criticism of the old, and from its questioning of the truth value of the fiction itself. (83)

The notion that parody is a self-reflexive mechanism by which literature reinvents itself points to a fundamental Barthesian theme, which, precisely, indicates that literature replenishes itself with the systematic use of new (metafictional) strategies that allow an author to refunctionalize texts or stories from the past in new contexts. In so doing, authors analytically rebuild or re-form texts within other texts, while incorporating a number of thematic issues along the way.

When she asks about the development of the novel in connection with metafiction, in her study entitled *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, first published in 1984, Patricia Waugh also takes on the Barthesian notion of exhaustion and, based on Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky's position as regards literary evolution, she argues that

metafiction represents a response to a crisis within the novel –to a need for self-conscious parodic undermining in order to 'defamiliarize' fictional conventions that have become both automatized and inauthentic, and to release new and more authentic forms. (65)

Parody, then, is seen as a metafictional strategy that, following the Barthesian conception of replenishment, is used to salvage the novel.

Metafiction focuses on issues of literariness or on those features that make a text a literary artefact, and, consequently, metafictional narratives effectively connect literary discourse-systems with other discourse-systems, such as historical, political, or mythological. In this respect, Waugh expresses that "Russian formalist theory helps to show how parody (...) can promote a very positive and long-overdue renewal of the novel, rather than its exhaustion", to which she adds that

[m]etafictional parody reveals how a particular set of contents was expressed in a particular set of conventions recognized as 'literature' by its readers, and it considers what relevance these may still have for readers situated at a different point in history (67)

or, rather, for authors, as I would like to argue. Even though parody is said to incorporate both socio-cultural preoccupations and aesthetic concerns, parodic metafiction, as will be maintained here, seems to favour the former, given that, as one of the most art-conscious practices, it deliberately and purposefully chooses to imitate art – or, rather authors do, while it discusses the very same process of literary mimicry.

Waugh claims that “[p]arody in metafiction may operate at the level of style or of structure.” (72) This idea seems rather restrictive in that it incorporates two aspects of the writing process, or of any text for that matter, which are neither exclusive nor defining to this narrative practice. Thematic concerns, for example, are excluded, which constitute an important, if not fundamental, component of a form of fiction that, precisely, seeks to retrieve past issues to discuss present ones, while merging critical considerations about the process itself. And while it may often be maintained that, in metafictional texts, criticism is *implicitly* provided by the process that generates parody, in fact parodic metafiction may very often make those critical comments *explicit*, foregrounding, thus, the artificial nature of the text and laying bare the strategies employed in such process.

Linda Hutcheon, in her study of parody, entitled *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* and first published in 1985, contends that, “[o]vertly imitating art more than life, parody self-consciously and self-critically points us to its own nature” (67), to which she adds that “the language of parodic texts (...) refers both to itself and to that which it designates or parodies” (67). These ideas speak about the dialogic and polyphonic nature of this type or mode of fiction. Parodic metafictions would then be one of the perfect concretizations of the Bakhtinian non-monologic, parodic self-reflexive narrative forms.

Hutcheon provides a comprehensive study of parody, in which she attempts to define this concept and to address the potential pragmatic scope of such figure. Hutcheon begins her discussion of this term by acknowledging that “[p]arody is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity” (2), understood as a form of imitation that goes beyond mere sentimental reproduction but, rather, incorporates a great deal of other possibilities. Parody, viewed as a mechanism of systematic ‘ironic trans-contextualization’ or ‘artistic recycling’, “can be a serious criticism, (...) it can be playful, genial mockery” (15), “[i]ts range of intent is from respectful admiration to

biting ridicule” (16). As it can be appreciated, Hutcheon immediately moves towards the suggestion that our understanding of this form should be expanded so that other possible functions and effects are incorporated in its pragmatic scope.

Hutcheon claims that a theory of parody can be developed in the context of, at least, two related trends: self-reflexivity (or metafictionality) and intertextuality. The first position is that one which has been partially referred to before, mostly in the working premises posited by Rose. The second is, among other scholars, customarily related to French literary theorist Gérard Genette in his work *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), in which, from a structuralist position, he takes parody as a template whereby authors can construct new texts. Genette’s conception, which will be later further elaborated, maintains that parody has a non-satirical function of transformational relation to other texts, in a playful mood. Hutcheon’s position is pragmatic, which also relates more to the second context mentioned earlier. When she (briefly) refers to the first one, self-referentiality, and specifically to Rose’s work, Hutcheon argues that Rose “equates parody with self-reference” (20), which is not necessarily the case since Rose, in fact, seems to suggest that parody is a form or type of metafiction, even though she does not phrase this in those terms, we have to admit. Hutcheon states that “[p]arody is certainly one mode of auto-referentiality, but it is by no means the only one” (20). Hutcheon criticizes Rose’s study because it places too much attention to the sociological aspect of parody, to which Rose does devote a section in her work, but, as has been proved earlier, this aspect is not the only one addressed by the Australian scholar. It is maintained in this study that parody is essentially self-referential, while metafiction is not exclusively parodic, an idea that will be further elaborated.

Hutcheon’s perspective is pragmatic, then, in that it focuses on the relationship established between a text and a reader, placing a strong emphasis on the reactions generated in this relationship. In other words, she focuses on the whole *énonciation* of discourse. After having established her position, the Canadian scholar moves towards defining the term and discussing its pragmatic functions. And as soon as she finds herself addressing this, Hutcheon directly refers to irony as that main “rhetorical mechanism (...) that participates in parodic discourse” (31).

Irony, and above all its functions and effects, has been unsystematically accounted for in recent literary theory. Several studies have tried to standardize this (rhetorical?) element, given that it is, in effect, a device that is frequently found and exploited. In *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1975), Wayne Booth refers to what he calls the four steps of ironic reconstruction, understood as those transformation processes experienced by words and meanings in a remarkable ironic fragment.

In a first step, according to the theorist, a reader must reject the literal meaning of words. Even though readers should acknowledge some inconsistency in what they read, the interpretation of new meaning comes from the understanding that they should not really try to find a literal sense. Although many ironic expressions are stable in themselves, a reader must rely on internal and external cues in order to be able to establish whether what they are reading is, in fact, ironic. Then, in a second stage, the reader is expected to test a number of possible interpretations or alternative explanations, which are or should be inconsistent with a literal reading of the passage analysed in order to, in a third step, arrive at a more or less well-defined decision regarding the author's position or, rather, the narrator's position towards what is expressed.

Before introducing the fourth step, Booth argues that we inevitably ask ourselves about the author's intention when we are faced with ironic comments in any text, a comment which makes sense even if, instead of trying to decipher the author's intention, we could, in any case, ask ourselves about the intention of that which is exposed or concealed in a text. A reader, the critic expresses, cannot help but notice an intention before ironic comments, even the intention to make such comments ironic. The fourth and last stage would be precisely that process by which readers attempt to find new meanings that can help them account for the decisions made about a speaker's position. Far from being a literal reading of a passage, the new meanings brought in are anchored in that which is not made explicit and which a reader has decided to attribute to an author. Emphasizing the role of reception, Booth argues that "[r]eading irony is in some ways like translating, like decoding, like deciphering, and like peering behind a mask. But these all (...) underplay the complexity of what the reader is required to do." (33)

This scheme, according to Booth, could be adapted to analyse any instance of irony, even those cases that, at a first glance, seem to be fairly simple: departing from the notion that the surface or literal meaning does not actually make sense or is incorrect, and articulating possible alternative meanings, a reader decides to assign to an author a number of intentions, thus building meaning based on that decision. Extending these notions, in his chapter “Is It Ironic?,” Booth expresses that one of the greatest difficulties in the treatment of irony is, precisely, its ambiguity and plurality. He develops, hence, another scheme that could allow readers, first, to realize that they are being exposed to an ironic comment, so that they are, then, able to identify a number of textual cues or signs by which they could successfully carry out the reconstructive process referred to before. Booth explores five main indicators of irony, which are closely tied in with a strong presence of the author and with a series of manifest conflicts found in a text.

The first one has to do with explicit warnings that an author can communicate at different moments or parts of a text, such as titles, epigraphs or other textual and paratextual elements. While these indicators can guide, just as they can mislead readers in the reconstruction process, readers cannot ignore them but take them as an initial invitation to make a particular reading of a text. The second element is related to the violation of certain agreements or conventions, among which popular expressions, historical facts and conventional values might be included. The third, which we can label ‘intratextual conflicts,’ refers to contradictions that, made explicit or not, are found in the textual frame. The fourth indicator is linked to a matter of style. A possible trace of irony could be found in those texts in which authors depart from the styles that so characterize them. Booth suggests that parody is often the indicator that becomes more important, especially in that form of parody that is built around the imitation that an author makes of another. In this sense, according to the critic, parody is understood as irony, since surface meaning is rejected against another meaning that seems to be inconsistent. Finally, Booth argues that a fifth hint of irony can be found when a reader recognizes a distinct conflict between what is said in a text and what the reader holds and suspects the author of that text believes. This cue is also connected with violations of what is usually deemed a ‘normal’ reasoning process. Ultimately, no reader seems to be able to get away with irony:

Since ironic attacks are usually directed against positions that are actually held by some possible readers (otherwise, why bother to attack?), and since authors often do actually advocate in all seriousness what the ironist is pretending to advocate, it is scarcely surprising that though irony cannot take in all readers all the time, nobody escapes troubles with it. (Booth: 76)

These ideas about irony can be furthered with some related notions developed by Paul de Man in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” (in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 1971). In this article, de Man reflects upon some rhetorical forms, such as allegory, symbol, and irony, not in a prescriptive or normative sense, but in order to expand our conceptions of the intentional possibilities of such figures. Given that some of the most common notions or definitions that we have about these elements are the result of a historical process that originated these terms and which, over time, helped consolidate and anchor more or less well-defined meanings, de Man attempts to de-historicize them in order to arrive at more plural or open notions that, stripped of their ‘sedimented’ historical weight, can function as analytical tools through which we can effectively ask about the multiple performative functions that those forms might have in a given text. That is why de Man embarks on a historical ‘tour’ of some of these figures by which he traces key points in history that helped anchor their meanings.

In the case of irony, de Man goes back to the theoretical speculations of the early Romantics, with whom, according to the critic, this figure starts receiving a more manifest attention. In order to try to define irony, de Man refers to the German poet and critic Friedrich Schlegel and takes him as one of the leading theorists of so-called Romantic irony. By evoking Schlegel, de Man necessarily connects irony with parody, in that, according to the German critic,

irony contains and inspires a sense of the unresolvable conflict between the absolute and the contingent, between the impossibility and the necessity of full and complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses because it enables one to transcend oneself, and yet it is also what one is most bound by, because it is absolutely essential. It is a very good sign when the unreflective and the uncomplicated have no idea whatsoever how they should take this continual self-parody and just go on believing and how disbelieving until they become giddy and take the joking seriously and the earnestness as a joke. (Qtd. in Muecke, 1969: 195)

De Man also goes back to Aristotle's conception of irony, which persisted until the eighteenth century. The scholar suggests that the term underwent a radical change, moving towards the complex, when it got connected with the development of the novel. Following Hungarian critic Georg Lukács, de Man argues that "[t]he tie between irony and the novel seems to be so strong that one feels tempted to follow Lukács in making the novel into the equivalent, in the history of literary genres, of irony itself." (de Man, 1971: 210) With regards to the development of the novel of the nineteenth century and a growing interest in irony as a rhetorical figure, de Man indicates that the greatest ironists of such century in general were not, in fact, novelists but, rather, writers that manifested a tendency towards the novel but that chose to produce faster or shorter narrative forms. This might suggest that irony does not seem to fit the novel, at least not the nineteenth-century one. How does irony, then, accommodate to twentieth-century narrative? A tentative answer to this question lies at the core of the present study.

As suggested earlier and continuing with Hutcheon's argument, irony is an essential rhetorical device that actively participates in parodies, in general, and, it is the argument of the present study, in parodic metafiction, in particular. The ironic dimension added to parodic self-referentiality accounts for the possibility that this mode of fiction has of distancing itself from the parodied text, while the process of reinvention or recycling is discussed. In this respect, I adhere to Hutcheon's notion that the use of irony as a weapon or, as I prefer, an instrument, is close to the use displayed in twentieth-century parodies and, more specifically, in parodic metafiction. The pragmatic function of irony is, indeed, complex and diverse. In Hutcheon's terms, "[i]rony functions (...) as both antiphrasis and as an evaluative strategy that implies an attitude of the encoding agent towards the text itself, an attitude which, in turn, allows and demands the decoder's interpretation and evaluation." (Hutcheon, 1985: 53). In other words, irony can be used in both semantic-contrasting and pragmatic-evaluative terms. In parodic metafiction, irony can be used as an instrument by which something is placed under examination. Although irony is frequently said to work intratextually, when it is used in this mode of fiction, irony necessarily works intertextually, given that it works as a mechanism to achieve differing pragmatic functions and effects by the connections established between texts.

Among the various topoi examined in parodic metafiction, the re-functioning of myths is one that has gained some prominence over the last thirty or forty years. It is very often observed that writers, especially American (such as John Barth and Tom Robbins) but also British (for example, Julian Barnes and Graham Swift) and Canadian (such as Timothy Findley and Yann Martel), engage in a critical and intertextual/parodic dialogue with myths and mythical characters from the past, and this is the case in the selected texts analysed in the present study, which is why the section that follows addresses this important component.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his article “The Structural Study of Myth” (1963), reveals that, particularly in religious anthropology, myths have been interpreted in various ways: as “collective dreams, the outcome of a kind of aesthetic play, the foundation of ritual” (428), and explains that mythical figures have also been referred to in several ways: “as personified abstractions, divinized heroes or decayed gods” (428). The French anthropologist also expresses that, regardless of the basic premises used in the analysis of myths, it seems that there is a common tendency to reduce mythology to a meaningless game or to some form of unsophisticated philosophical speculation. In his article, Lévi-Strauss questions certain commonplaces from which it is very often stated that mythology would fulfil some more or less well-established functions: to allow human societies to express feelings that are common to all humankind or to explain astronomical or meteorological phenomena that otherwise could not be understood. He even suggests that mythology has often been (mis)used to extrapolate findings from sociology and psychology that seek to account for the state of a society, as is the case with the character of the evil grandmother:

if a given mythology confers prominence to a certain character, let us say an evil grandmother, it will be claimed that in such a society grandmothers are actually evil and that mythology reflects the social structure and the social relation (429).

Lévi-Strauss claims that such analogy may not always prove accurate.

Just like Roland Barthes (1972), who defines myths as a type of speech and as a semiological system (107-110), Lévi-Strauss states that a myth is a type of language or discourse that works as a mediator between humankind and those unsolvable paradoxes in cultures and further claims that a myth is located between the sciences and the arts.

Barthes, likewise, suggests that a myth would consist of a semiological chain or “a second-order semiological system” (113) formed by the combination of a language or a linguistic system, its modes of representation (the object language) and the myth itself (the meta-language). This concept can be related to other notions developed by various intellectuals, among whom Robert Graves, Rollo May, Northrop Frye, Hugo F. Bauzá and Roland Barthes may be mentioned.

Graves, renowned British poet and translator specialized in Greek myths, in the “Introduction” to his complete edition of *The Greek Myths* (1955), points out that myths should be distinguished from other narrative types, such as philosophical allegory, the etiological explanation of myths, satire, parody, the sentimental fable, the romance, political propaganda, moralistic legend, humoristic anecdote, melodrama, the heroic saga, and realistic fiction. However, Graves explains that myths often contain elements from some of these other narratives. The British intellectual provides an interesting definition of myth: “[t]rue myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like.” (12) In other words, Graves defines a myth as the art of communicating a ritual representation in which words are not necessarily involved.

Largely based on some of the ideas posited by Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, the American psychologist and cultural theorist Rollo May (1991) argues that myths are narrative patterns that give meaning to our existence:

[w]hether the meaning of existence is only what we put into life by our own individual fortitude, as Sartre would hold, or whether there is a meaning we need to discover, as Kierkegaard would state, the result is the same: myths are our way of finding this meaning and significance. (15)

According to May, myths fulfil four essential functions: they 1) give meaning to our personal identity, 2) build our sense of community, 3) strengthen our moral values, and 4) help us understand the mysteries of our origins. The American scholar proposes that myths develop understanding through a story that holds the vital sense of an experience in a totalizing figure, an idea which brings into question the noticeable existential aspect that myths imply, in that, as May expresses, “[m]yths are our self-interpretation of our inner selves in relation to the outside world” (20).

Frye (1983) insists that the term myth should be anchored to a literary context, and, in this sense, refers to *mythos* as a “narrative sequence” or as “the sequential order of words” (31). Based on the distinction between history and story, Frye indicates that the term myth has been almost exclusively connected to the concept of story and that, as a consequence, it has been defined as not true or as fiction. Frye explains, however, that this definition of myth, understood as a narrative or verbal sequence, is somewhat ambiguous. He argues that myths are not just stories in a global sense, but rather stories that take on special significance as they express what is important to know or learn about a society, about its gods, its history, its laws or class structure. The mythical, then, would not be that which is not true. Finally, Frye distinguishes myth from other narrations, such as folk tales, from two main aspects: first, from the notion of canon, the mythical story takes place in a mythology that is part of an interconnected group of myths, while folk tales are nomadic; second, “myths outline a specific area of human culture separated from others” (34), so a “mythology helps to create [the] cultural history” (34) of a given society.

Along the same line, Bauzá (2005) suggests that “la literatura nace allí donde el mito pierde valor, éste deja de ser un relato viviente para convertirse en un relato fosilizado” (43). This conception of myth coincides with the notion of text that Barthes develops in his article “Theory of Text” (1981), in which the French literary critic and philosopher examines the relationship established between a literary and a mythical text. Barthes defines a text as the “phenomenological surface of a literary work” (34). In other words, a text would be the materialization or concretization of a literary work in which a large number of intertexts are inserted, intertexts that come from multiple sources, among which a wide variety of mythical narratives are frequently found.

As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the articulation of the ideas so far discussed constitutes the basic structure that assembles the proposed analytical scheme of the present investigation.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND EMPIRICAL CORPUS

Based on the previous notions, two main operational concepts frame the present study, namely comparatism and intertextuality.

The idea that fiction writers take on narratives from the past asks for a comparative outlook in that, at its most basic, comparative studies in literature are “an inquiry into reception and influence of texts” and are based on an “awareness of thematic analogies and variants” (Steiner, 1996: 155), which accounts for the need to frame this analysis within the scope of comparative literature. What is more, some authors, such as Ulrich Weisstein (1975), argue that comparative studies engage in the analysis of genres and how these relate to each other. The present study partly satisfies that definition in that one of the main aims pursued here is to compare the relation that is established between two text types –Barth’s parodic metafiction (tentatively defined as such) and the mythical sources these texts refer to. Another important element that validates the readiness to incorporate this study within the frame of comparative literature is related to the concepts of theme and thematization, which, as explored by Weisstein, “constituye[n] uno de los aspectos más discutidos de la literatura comparada.” (265) In this respect and as explored later, Barth thematizes mythical figures in order to explore certain issues that are, in fact, found in several of his works.

Comparative literature is, more than a discipline, a methodological approach to the study of fiction, which foregrounds the role of both readers-critics, in the reception of texts that are put together, and authors, who often signal the possible relations established between texts that are analysed in a comparative fashion. Along this line, Bassnett (2006) claims that “the proper object of study [in comparative literature] is literary history, but understood not only as the history of the moment of actual textual

production but also as the history of the reception of texts across time.” (9) This notion of comparatism gets fairly close to that of intertextuality, both understood as methods or operational concepts, in that comparative literature, deprived of its given slanted and sealed scope that confines it to the field of cultural studies, should be viewed, in general, as the study of texts in relation to other texts. In this respect, Culler (2006) contends that “[t]he intertextual nature of meaning – the fact that meaning lies in the differences between one text or one discourse and another – makes literary study essentially, fundamentally comparative.” (92) What comparatists need to do, just like any scholar who wishes to undertake research in literature, is to try to determine a number of categories of analysis, founded on methodological premises, which set the grounds for comparison, or, in Culler’s terms, “to attempt to spell out the assumptions and norms that seem to underwrite one’s comparisons, so that they do not become implicit terms” (93). It is maintained in the present investigation that the chief subject area of comparative criticism is, in fact, intertextuality.

As suggested earlier, the dialogic nature of parodic metafiction requires a methodological framework that favours the operational practice of intertextuality. As Juvan (2008) argues,

[t]he birth of the theory of intertextuality parallels chronologically the appearance of postmodernism: Kristeva’s essay, ‘Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman,’ which introduced the concept of intertextuality and John Barth’s programmatic ‘The Literature of Exhaustion,’ a promotion of postmodernist metafiction came out at almost the same time. (84)

The Slovenian critic adds to this idea that “[t]he chief feature of postmodernist poetics is a self-reflective bind between intertextuality (parody, pastiche, citation, imitation, etc.) and metafiction” (84).

In the field of intertextuality, the Latin adage *quot capita, tot sententiae* is certainly met. For the purpose of specificity, this section will attempt to refer to particular notions or applications of intertextuality in the theoretical context developed before. To achieve such purpose, then, conceptions of intertextuality in connection to parody and metafiction will be considered, in the views of mainly Pfister, Hutcheon, Rose, and Juvan, alongside Bakhtin and Kristeva whenever deemed necessary.

In “How Postmodern is Intertextuality” (1991), German scholar Manfred Pfister sets to discuss the role of intertextuality in the so-called postmodernist era, or, rather, in a context that suggests that originality can only survive by means of allusion, quotation and parody, among other devices or strategies. In other words, Pfister intends to discuss intertextuality in the context that witnessed its own birth, at least in Western academia, following the notion that texts are “enmeshed in a network of relationships and cross-references with other texts.” (209) In this sense, Pfister relates Kristeva’s position and Barth’s view, notwithstanding their evident differences towards bourgeois society, in that both seem to understand that literary production is a process by which a text is built from and around other texts. In this context, the German scholar argues that intertextuality is the essential feature and object of postmodernism. Although Pfister acknowledges that intertextuality “is a phenomenon that is not restricted to postmodernist writing” and that “practices of alluding and quoting, of paraphrasing and translating, of continuation and adaptation, of parody and travesty flourished in periods long before postmodernism” (209-210), he seeks to explore specific uses of intertextuality in the so-called postmodern moment that distinguish them from other uses.

After dwelling on structuralist and poststructuralist views about intertextuality, which for reasons mentioned before will not be referred to here, Pfister introduces his main argument, precisely that which indicates that “Postmodernist intertextuality is the intertextuality conceived and realized within the framework of a poststructuralist theory of intertextuality”, to which he adds that intertextuality regarded in such a context “is not just used as one device amongst others, but is foregrounded, displayed, thematized and theorized as a central constructional principle.” (214) This idea, which is shared by the several scholars surveyed before, indicates, then, that intertextual practices are systematically used in texts that are conceived of as metatexts, in that they thematize their own textual-artificial status and the strategies on which this thematization is based in a regular and methodical manner, thus becoming highly self-referential.

Pfister further argues that, unlike the modernist practice of retrieving normative pretexts –canonized and classical texts that are clearly privileged, the “act of granting a prerogative to the more prestigious pieces of our cultural heritage is elegantly and resolutely done away with in the postmodernist text.” (218) As it is argued here, this

does not seem to be the case in all intertextual practices, given that classical texts are indeed recuperated by so-called postmodernist authors, but, perhaps, their use of these pretexts differs greatly from what modernist authors did. And parodic metafiction seems to fit this new paradigm.

This is what Hutcheon states in her paper entitled “The Politics of Postmodern Parody” (1991): “Parody –often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or simply intertextuality– is usually considered central to postmodernism” (225), to which she adds that, “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones” (225), an idea which further consolidates the assumption that parody is, above all, an intertextual practice through which different types of texts are connected.

Even though Hutcheon, in this particular essay as well as in other works (for example, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1989), addresses the political and ideological aspects of parody when she argues that “postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations” (225), she also reveals that there are a number of other properties connected with parody that are not exclusively political. First, Hutcheon reminds us that there are a great deal of possible functions and intentions associated with parody, in order to argue, then, that “postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representations it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from the past today –by time and by the subsequent history of those representations.” (226) She, in other words, states that the critical distance established by irony necessarily implies a contesting position towards that past that is being recuperated. It is the purpose of the present study, not to disprove this, but to argue that there are other uses of parody that do not necessarily problematize (as in challenge) the past, nor how that past has been subsequently received. The understanding that parody functions as an intertextual tool that allows authors to discuss present concerns in light of past issues, themes or characters still validates the operational practice executed by parodic texts in general, and parodic metafictions, in particular.

I agree with Hutcheon when she claims that “[p]ostmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of

both the limits and the powers of representation –in any medium.” (228) But I want to insist on the notion that parody (or the use of irony in parody) is not exclusively bound to political concerns; it may be also exploited to fulfil other purposes and intentions, as Hutcheon herself suggests. Parody, especially when it gets combined with metafiction, can be used, simply, as a self-reflexive tool that points to fiction as fiction, while a number of other related issues are discussed along the way. From an operational point of view, then, what is important to have in mind is that parody implies, in Bakhtin’s terms, textual dialogism, and parodic metafiction may, at the same time, involve more individualized, private or intimate aspects that are still dependent on the intertextual or dialogic associations established between a text and another.

Going back to Rose’s study published in 1993, the author sees parody as a particular application of metafiction and understands that “[i]n making its target a part of its own structure the parody (...) will not simply break away from its preceding texts (...) but will transform them and recreate them within itself” (90), a notion of parody that accommodates to the operational concept of intertextuality surveyed here. In fact, Rose understands that both intertextuality and textual discontinuity are two fundamental principles used for the description of parody in connection with metafictionality: “[w]hile meta-fiction can be defined as a work of fiction which comments or reflects upon another text, its ‘intertextual’ element can be described as the presence in its text of the words, passages, or messages of others.” (99) Based on Shklovsky, Rose argues that the intertextual nature of parodic texts points to the notion that a literary piece of such kind is (or should be) appreciated against the contextual frame of other works, and in relation to them.

Shklovsky (1990), in fact, anticipated both the intertextual character of parody and the metafictional nature of some works that problematize the writing process. He did so in his examination of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which he labels as “the most typical novel in world literature” (170). In the seventh chapter of his book, entitled “The Novel as Parody: Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*,” Shklovsky sets to analyse selected passages from Sterne’s novel in order to prove that this work of fiction should be not only taken as one of the most typifying examples of parody but also, without him knowing so perhaps, viewed as a metafictional text. In this respect, Shklovsky contends that Sterne makes use of a number of devices in a systematic and self-conscious

manner, by which he lays bare the devices, thus “manipulating the structure of his novel, and it is the consciousness of form through its violations that constitutes the content of the novel.” (149) Shklovsky seems to be describing, in this section of his study, the perfect example of a metafictional narrative, i.e.: a work of fiction that, in this particular case, “parodies the deployment of the plot line and the intrusion of new material into it” (150) by means of the use of strategies (or devices, in Shklovsky’s terms) that, rather than the exception, are the norm. Shklovsky, then, sets the basis for the later formulations of parody (or theories of parody), which in general all conceptualize it in terms of either an intertextual form or a metafictional device.

Rose maintains that some “late-modern commentators on parodic intertextuality have reduced parody to the intertextual by denying or overlooking the comic aspect of the parody”, (1993: 180) as would be the case, according to her, of Bakhtin’s own discussion of parody and, later, Kristeva’s and Todorov’s. However, as argued before, the comic is but one aspect of parody, most probably related to not only an author’s intention but also the possible effects generated in a reader, while intertextuality is a fundamental operational aspect of parody, or the working means by which parody is conceived. While Rose is right in reminding us that parody does often incorporate a comic aspect, she seems to dismiss the possibility that parody may not always aim at producing or generating a comic effect, or, in any case, if the comic is one aspect that is indeed incorporated in a given parody, there may be other features (in the form of intentions, effects, reactions and themes) that supplement, connect with, or even subsume the comic.

I prefer to adhere to the Bakhtinian notion that parody makes texts more flexible, in that, by means of this intertextual practice, parodies allow for the incorporation of several discourse-systems, along side a wide range of rhetorical, narrative and thematic elements. Bakhtin (in Holquist, 1981), in this respect, anticipates the metafictional quality of parody, a fundamental position assumed in this study, when he states that the “ability of the novel to criticize itself [by means of parodic stylizations] is a remarkable feature of this ever-developing genre.” (6) When he asks about the salient features of this novelization of genres, Bakhtin precisely contends that so-called parodic stylizations

become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally –this is the most important thing– the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (7)

John Barth is one of the authors in the English-speaking literature of the 1960s and 1970s who has used metafiction and parody systematically and self-consciously and who has resorted to the mythical past to do so. Barth expresses his concern for these resources or modes of writing in his two seminal essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979), in which he argues that the literature brewed in the decades mentioned before is increasingly self-conscious and self-reflective. Barth suggests that, in this type of literature, traditional narrative modes are subverted and transformed to generate a new fiction and states that for him and his contemporaries "there is nothing left (...) but to parody and travesty [their] great predecessors in [their] exhausted medium" (Barth, 1984: 205).

In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth addresses three main points:

first, some old questions raised by the new 'intermedia' arts; second, some aspects of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose fiction [he] greatly admire[s]; third, some professional concerns of [his] own, related to these other matters and having to do with what [he is] calling 'the literature of exhausted possibility' -or, more chicly, 'the literature of exhaustion.' (64)

Barth deals with these three issues in a related manner, especially the last two. He takes on Borges's story "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" to prove his underlying argument, precisely that which suggests that, by taking a story from the past, Borges is able to create an extraordinary original work of literature, "the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature." (69) In fact, "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" is the textual site where Borges puts his theory of intertextuality into practice, while "Kafka y sus precursores" is the written ground where one can read his proposed theory. In "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth rounds off the initial argument introduced in his previous essay, or, rather, he explains what he actually clearly stated before. After alluding to, and laughing at, contemporary discussions about postmodernism and postmodern authors, Barth addresses the problem

of defining postmodernism, as he moves along some of its most renowned theorists and, less well-known university professors, while he compares some allegedly defined characteristics of modernism with some tentative features of so-called postmodernism. Until he reaches the last section, where he addresses that argument he initiated a few years before. Barth explains that he, by no means, meant that literature was dead. He states that he in fact argued that some of its “artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work” (205), thus opening the ground for novel narrative forms that use long-standing strategies in original ways and explore perpetual themes through new resources. Different forms or realizations of intertextuality are one of these new means by which literature replenishes itself.

According to Juvan, “intertextual references are normally veiled, signalled through unconventional indicators, and pre-texts accessible only to the initiated or artistic allies are engaged”, to which he adds that “[t]o this type of citationality belong (...) Barth, Barthelme, and Calvino’s postmodernist metafiction.” (147) Given, then, that Barth’s fictional works fit the theoretical and methodological contexts described before and based on the assumption that Barth has systematically resorted to the use of parody and metafiction to refunctionalize mythical narrations in order to achieve singular ends, two fictional works by this author have been selected as representative examples that can be used to explore the main issues so far discussed, following the analytical scheme proposed in the next section. These works are *Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad*, in *Chimera* (1972), by American writer John Barth.

Grounded on the assumption that all parodies are inherently intertextual but parodic metafiction, in particular, lay bare the devices or mechanisms by which the parodic relation between texts is established, intertextuality becomes an operational concept to enter these narratives, especially in those that problematize the process by which an author connects a text with another text by means of parody. The purpose of the following section is to outline a series of related questions that can help readers expand their understanding of the kind of parodic metafiction studied here. Departing from these questions, a tentative analytical scheme is developed, while certain sections from the empirical corpus of this study are analysed.

ANALYTICAL SCHEME AND STUDY OF THE EMPIRICAL CORPUS

The following is an attempt at constructing an analytical scheme that fits the theoretical and methodological frameworks previously outlined, in the understanding that it can be helpful to explore the empirical corpus selected for this study. This scheme is structured around a number of guiding questions that could be used to enter a fictional text ascribed to the notions of metafiction and parody, viz.:

- 1) Is the text self-referential? What makes it metafictional?
- 2) Is it intertextual? What kind of intertextual relation is established with such text? Mimetic? Parodic? Other?
- 3) Why is it parodic? Why would this text be parodic and not a form of satire?
- 4) Is there a process of trans-contextualization or re-inscription? Does the text show any form of transtextual reference?
- 5) Does it aim at ridicule? Humour? Deference? Repetition? Repetition with difference? Correspondence? Difference? Is it constructive? Destructive? Other purposes?
- 6) What is the main intertext it refers to or draws on? What discursive text does the text in question refer to or repeat?
- 7) What elements does the text take on from the parodied text? Code? Genre? Conventions? Form? Device(s)? Theme(s)? Other(s)?
- 8) Is the parodied text memorialized? Distorted? Contaminated? Problematized? Ironized? Other uses?

- 9) Does the text enjoy / portray ironic distance from the parodied text?
What is it achieved?
- 10) What new elements are born in the text that are not part of the backgrounded text?
- 11) What possible effects does the text have?
- 12) What elements make the text 'parodic metafictional' in that it is self-referential and, at the same time, draws on a parodied discursive text?

These preliminary questions, which originated from the analysis of some of the works cited in the introduction and theoretical framework developed before, help, on the one hand, to contextualize the empirical corpus of the present study, and, on the other, to initiate the construction of a scheme that could provide analytical tools to aid readers in the understanding of the texts in question and other texts that share certain essential components with the ones examined in the present investigation.

Questions (1) to (5) relate mostly to a problem of genre and generic conventions, or to those elements that can account for a particular text type and to the specific conditions that define the text in relation to other texts. Questions (6) to (8) are related to the connection between a text and a pre-text. In this particular case, reflections about classical myths are to be taken into consideration to address such issues. Then, questions (9) to (11) refer to irony and the role that irony plays in this type of fiction, as well as to its possible intentions and effects. Finally, question (12) takes us back to the generic elements that can be found in a text that integrates all the elements charted in the previous questions.

Metafiction, parody and intertextuality

In order to address the first five questions, considerations regarding the generic nature, structure and narrative processes of the empirical corpus of the present study are to be considered.

The first question precisely requires that we try to find those elements that allow us to label the texts as metafictional, based on the theoretical assumptions drawn before.

Barth is one of those authors who, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, experimented with what he thought to be, at the time, innovative strategies that could revitalize literature. Drawing on a recurrent theme explored by the author, and introduced in the first novella of *Chimera*, Barth problematizes the process of creating fiction in his own fictions as a way out of the writer's block and, also, as a means through which he can explore his own state of (personal and professional) life.

We have stated that metafictional texts are those fictions that self-consciously and systematically draw attention to themselves in order to pose questions about the very nature of fiction and of the writing process; metafiction is, more simply, fiction that talks about fiction. In *Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad*, there are several instances, in the development of the stories, which account for their metafictional quality. Quite interestingly and beginning with the end, the ways both stories close are clear indications of the generic nature of these fictions, given that both mythical characters, Perseus and Bellerophon, are, of course, embodiments of the voice of an author who discusses the process of creating fiction.

As for *Perseid*, in a dialogue between Medusa and Perseus, where, among other issues, the problem of immortality is addressed, the following exchange that closes the story takes place:

‘Are you happy, Perseus, with the way this story ends?’

Infinite pause. My love, it's an epilogue, always ending, never ended, like (I don't apologize) II-G, which winds through universal space and time. My fate is to be able only to imagine boundless beauty from my experience of boundless love – but I have a fair imagination to work with, and to work from, one priceless piece of unimagined evidence: what I hold above *Beta Persei*, Medusa: not serpents, but lovely woman's hair. I'm content. So with this issue, our net estate: to have become, like the noted music of our tongue, these silent, visible signs; to *be* the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise you up forever and know that our story will never be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars ... I'm content. Till tomorrow evening, love.

‘Good night.’

Good night. Good night. (133-134)

Barth seems to bring into question one of those aspects of fiction writing that might, most probably, puzzle every writer: the problem whether authors are satisfied with the works they have produced. The way in which the story finishes also speaks about Barth's conception of fiction writing: he equates it with life, or, rather, with the

construction of his own life story, which never ends since it is an uninterrupted work in progress.

In *Bellerophoniad*, a similar exchange is presented at the end of the story, between the hero, Bellerophon (B), and Polyeidus (P), the seer:

B.: Can you turn me into this story, Polyeidus? Let me be Bellerus's voice forever, an immortal *Bellerophoniad*.

P.: Out of the question.

B.: It's what you've tried to trick me into for half a dozen pages! I'm offering to take your place! Don't tell me it's impossible!

P.: Quite impossible –in the naïve way you mean. I can't turn anybody but myself into anything.

B.: Then I'm dead. Good night, Bellerus. Good night, all.

P.: What I *might* manage –not because I owe you any favors, but for reasons of my own– is to turn *myself* from this interview into you-in-*Bellerophoniad*-form: a certain number of printed pages in a language not untouched by Greek, to be read by a limited number of 'Americans,' not all of whom will finish or enjoy them. Regrettably, I'll have to have a certain role in the thing also –no beating Zeus out on that. But since I'll be there as an aspect of *you*, so to speak, I'll be free enough to operate in a few aspects of my own: 'Harold Bray,' perhaps, or his nonfictional counterpart, the legitimate heir to the throne of France and impresario of the Second Revolution, an utterly novel Rest No *Perseid*, I grant you, but it's the best I can do in what time we have left. That tidewater's coming up fast.

(...)

B.: I hate this, World! It's not at all what I had in mind for Bellerophon. It's a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longueurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor–

P.: Five more.

B.: It's no *Bellerophoniad*. It's a (307-308)

And the story ends. Once more, Barth problematizes the construction of fiction by taking a character, Polyeidus, and, through his power of self-transformation, making him become the work of fiction he has just produced. Not fully 'content' with how the story has been finally fashioned, the author decides to close it anyhow.

Regarding the four questions that follow in the proposed scheme, the problem of the type of connection established between Barth's texts and other texts from the past is raised. Having established that these are flawless examples of metafictional narratives, the analytical outline herein proposed leads us to consider another important related aspect. The titles selected by Barth, to start with paratextual cues, indicate that the author has decided to retrieve something from past discourse-systems for present purposes. The intertextual quality of the stories then is unquestionable. But, following

our scheme, what kind of intertextual relation is established between these discourse-systems, i.e.: between Barth's fictions and the mythical characters and stories on which he draws?

Following the conceptualizations drawn before, it is argued here that the intertextual relation established between Barth's fictions and the intertexts he draws upon is parodic in that, as will be further explored, the main rhetorical device that activates and dramatizes the intertextual relation is irony. According to Hutcheon (1985), in this sense, "[i]rony participates in parodic discourse as a strategy, (...) which allows the decoder to interpret and evaluate." (31) What is more and continuing with Hutcheon's view, it is by means of parody that authors are able to 'trans-contextualize' past texts, with the aid of that critical distance offered by irony. This allows authors to construct a form of "bitextual synthesis" (33) that requires a reader's sophisticated awareness to be able to recognise the complex relations signalled in "a structural superimposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new" (33), given that "parody involves more than just textual comparison". (34)

By establishing this kind of relation with past texts, Barth draws on some of the typical motifs and themes³ often related to those stories and, by means of inversion and ironic distance, re-inscribes them to fulfil present purposes. For example and going back to the first extract of this section, the murals in *Perseid* are a recurrent motif that allows Barth to explore several of his most, also, recurrent themes: the representation of life in art, the life-pattern cycle, the process of reviewing where we have been in order to try to understand where we are and where we are heading to, and so on. The murals that represent Perseus' life, which are located inside this temple where he finds himself at the beginning of the story, at the age of forty, dried out, displaced and tormented by his past, are the representation of his past, of his life cycle and a life-pattern that he is meant to revise. The murals allow Perseus to move across his future, a process that requires that he also moves along his past, by means of the many scenes represented in them, in order to make up his life. Contrary to a closed circle, the temple murals spiral out

³ I use the term motif to speak about any element that is used to develop a particular theme. In this respect, I also follow Barth's use of this locution. In an interview conducted on April 15, 1994, Barth alluded to the term 'motif' in this sense, specifically to refer to the process by which authors 're-orchestrate' motifs selected and recuperated from past discourses. For the full version of this interview, please refer to Appendix "B"

openly, which allows the hero to move forward in order to trace his own (hi)story. Each mural, each wall is a meaningful part, like a mirror that refracts and determines the following scene. So Barth conceives his existence, his past, present and future, just like each of his fictions allows him to experiment with new challenges (and topics) intertwined with old concerns, without falling into boring repetition or a kind of self-parody. This representation of the hero's life cycle and pattern can be related to Medusa's power of petrification. In fact, Medusa's petrification can be equated with the power of immortality: "Medusa's probationary stipulations allowed for one special circumstance in which petrification might occur as of old, and one in which not only its contrary but a kind of immortality might be accomplished." (92) The murals also have the power of petrifying, thus immortalizing, life episodes, just like novelists immortalize themselves through art in their writings.

And the same seems to pertain to *Bellerophoniad*, or to one of its characters, Polyeidus, who has the power of transforming himself into anything he wishes. According to Grimal (1996), Polyeidus, also known as Polyidus, is in Greek mythology, among other things, the seer descended from Melampus, who instructed Bellerophon to go to the spring of Pirene and get hold of and tame Pegasus. In Barth's story, Polyeidus becomes more than that; he is Bellerophon's capricious and rather unreliable tutor and purported author of his narrated life story. Once more, Barth takes hold of a character and transforms it into a motif or element through which he explores a recurrent theme of his. The last scene of the story, where Bellerophon anxiously asks Polyeidus for salvation (i.e.: immortality achieved in writing), is not the only instance where the author discusses the process of narrating his life story. Through Bellerophon and Polyeidus, he frequently ponders over the quality of his own text and the role played by the assumed author:

Bellerophon senses, not for the first time, that this picture of his late lamented, distorted for accuracy like a caricature, is being drawn with jealous pen, and wonders by whom. Why should, for example, Polyeidus the Seer be jealous of Philonoë? But the hero of this story is no longer confident that Polyeidus is its author. Polyeidus reminds him that Polyeidus never pretended authorship: Polyeidus *is* the story, more or less, in any case its marks and spaces: the author could be Antoninus Liberalis, for example, Hesiod, Homer, Hyginus, Ovid, Pindar, Plutarch, the Scholiast on the *Iliad*, Tzetzes, Robert Graves, Edith Hamilton, Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, the author of the *Perseid*, someone imitating that author –anyone, in short, who has ever written or will write about the myth of Bellerophon and Chimera. (236-237)

Barth parodies the features associated with a character, thus re-inscribing it in a new context, in order to problematize writing and, in so doing, to explore those Barthian issues often found in his narratives. This is what is understood as transtextual reference, a process of re-inscription that is parodic and not a form of satire since it addresses another discursive text. This notion of parody comes fairly close to the Bakhtinian conception of this genre, which basically states that parodies allow for the incorporation of different and original elements into the text, and Barth, by means of parody, integrates a number of his themes that he explores in a self-referential manner. Barth, in other words, establishes a critical distance from the pre-texts by means of a particular use of irony.

A concept that has been introduced before and which seems to fit what Barth does in the works analysed here is that of parody as defined by Genette (1982): a playful transformation. To arrive at this definition, Genette first draws the chart that follows, while he discusses the transtextual process of hypertextuality:

<i>function</i> <i>relation</i>	non-satirical	satirical
transformation	PARODY	TRAVESTY
imitation	PASTICHE	CARICATURE

(27)

In it, he examines the type of relation established between a given text and the intertext this text refers or talks to and the functions fulfilled in such process. The French scholar claims that “[p]arody does not actually subject the hypotext to a degrading stylistic treatment but only takes it as a model or template for the construction of a new text which, once produced, is no longer concerned with the model.” (27) Even though Barth’s (new) texts are still concerned with the templates they originated from (neither in a positive nor in a negative sense), the notion that parody is not exclusively connected with a problem of style (in that the parodist imitates someone else’s style) confirms that parodies can be more than simple imitation; they have, in fact, a vigorous transformational power.

Genette broadens this characterization with another chart, in which he examines not only the relation established between texts and intertexts but also the mood or, as I would like to argue, the attitude that an author assumes in such relation:

<i>relation</i> \ <i>mood</i>	playful	satirical	serious
transformation	PARODY <i>(Chapelain décoiffé)</i>	TRAVESTY <i>(Virgile travesti)</i>	TRANSPOSITION <i>(Doctor Faustus)</i>
imitation	PASTICHE <i>(“L’Affaire Lemoine”)</i>	CARICATURE <i>(À la manière de . . .)</i>	FORGERY <i>(Posthomerica)</i>

(28)

This classification fits Barth’s works since, as implied before, he takes on a mythical narrative from the past (the intertext) and transforms it playfully (or parodies it), a process that, such as it requires expertise on the part of an author, demands great effort and responsiveness on those readers who progressively become more and more aware of the operations at work in parodic metafiction. In this sense, Hutcheon (1980) argues that, in this type of fiction, a particular process is at work, precisely what “the formalists called ‘defamiliarization.’” In her view,

[t]he laying bare of literary devices in metafiction brings to the reader’s attention those formal elements of which, through over-familiarization, he has become unaware. Through his recognition of the backgrounded material, new demands for attention and active involvement are brought to bear on the act of reading. (24)

And this demand is heightened when metafictional strategies are used (and foregrounded) to parody texts from the past.

Granted, not all metafictional texts are necessarily parodic, but parodies, or texts that resort to the use of parody as an intertextual device, are essentially metafictional. In this respect, it is crucial to come to terms with the reasons why, in the context of this study, the locution ‘parodic metafiction’ is preferred to other terms that have been

ambiguously used. While Rose first introduced the expression ‘parodistic meta-fiction,’ which she in fact did not develop in depth, and Hutcheon and Waugh use, rather inconsistently, the term ‘metafictional parody,’ I would like to argue that the analytical scheme construed here and the texts analysed under the main categories derived from such scheme are better characterized by the term ‘parodic metafiction.’ I understand, above all, that parody operates, at different levels, in metafictional narratives and, therefore, parody is a form of self-referentiality. Bakhtin’s conception of parody surveyed before also indicates that this type of fiction is inherently self-reflexive, which is one of the main reasons to argue that to speak about ‘metafictional parody’ is, in effect, a tautology.

I concur with American Professor Robert Chambers who, in his work *Parody: The Art that Plays with Art* (2010), contends that there are, at least, five distinctive cues that may help us decide whether a work of art is reflexive, viz.:

1. The work refers to the conventions of art, particularly to its own conventions.
2. The work is about the creation of a work, especially about its own creation.
3. The work contains embedded material, such as one or more stories and frames and/or seemingly extrinsic material such as footnotes, that is contrastingly interrelated.
4. One or more characters, the narrator, or “the author” indicate that they are in a work of art or that they are reading or writing the present work.
5. One or more of the characters, the narrator, or “the author” addresses the audience or the reader directly, or the approach is indirect, through such devices as allusion. [Sic.] (41-42)

Chambers also suggests that “[a]ll parody contains elements of reflexivity, latent or actively in play” (42). Out of the five indicators of reflexivity proposed by Chambers, all of which are in fact unmistakably at play in Barth’s narratives, the third one seems to refer more precisely to the intertextual relation established by those metafictional texts that engage in a (parodic) dialogue with other texts. As indicated earlier, Barth’s fictions do engage in this type of dialogue with pre-texts, more specifically with mythological characters and the stories around their lives, which is why the following section addresses these issues.

The functions of myths as intertexts in parodic metafiction

Continuing with our proposed analytical scheme, the questions that follow require that we reflect upon the intertexts or pre-texts that the narratives in question establish a dialogue with. The main point of doing so is to discuss the type of discourse-system that fictions refer to, as well as those elements that they retake and transform and the possible outcomes of this parodying process. As implied before, Barth's texts relate back to mythical stories that focus on the lives of two mythical characters. It is, then, also the purpose of this section to ponder over the role of intertexts in parodic metafiction, as exemplified in the possible roles that myths may play in Barth's selected fictions. In the case of the myths of Perseus and Bellerophon, I follow Graves' work and Grimal's dictionary, which summarize the stories of these heroes.

Based on a variety of sources, the most important of which are Apollodorus and Pausanias, we get to know Perseus, the demi-god, son of God Zeus and earthborn Danae, who beheads Medusa and founds Mycenae. Perseus is also the hero who rescues Andromeda from the sea monster. Grandson of King Acrisius, Perseus kills his grandfather by accident (and by the will of the gods), thus fulfilling the Oracle's prediction.

Based on the myth of Acrisius and Preto –twin brothers who fight against each other since they are in their mother's womb and then struggle over the kingdom of Argos, the most widespread version tells that Acrisius, trying to prevent the oracle's prophecy that indicated that his grandson would kill him, banishes his only daughter, Danae, and his grandson, Perseus, to the sea on board a wooden ark, hoping that the sea would take care of them. But the ark sails to the island of Seriphos, and Dictys finds them both still alive and takes them to his brother, King Polydectes, who raises Perseus. Dictys is the personification of everything that is good, while Polydectes represents evil. After a few years, Perseus defends the honour of his mother against Polydectes, who has tried to marry Danae on several occasions against her will. Polydectes pretends to want to marry Hippodamia (a neighbouring princess), so Perseus offers Polydectes the head of Medusa as a wedding gift and as a reward for failing to take an interest in his mother. Aided by Athena, who helps Perseus to distinguish Medusa from her two immortal sisters and who gives him a finely polished

bronze shield to ward off Medusa's petrifying vision, and aided by Hermes (the messenger of the gods), who gives him an adamantine sickle to decapitate Medusa, a pair of winged sandals, a magic sack to carry the severed head and a helmet of invisibility that belonged to Hades, Perseus travels to the land of the Hyperboreans and, guided by Athena, beheads Medusa and manages to escape from Medusas' sisters, Euryale and Stheno. It is said that, on his return, drops of blood from Medusa's head fell into the Libyan Desert and transformed into snakes, which is why the Sahara desert has so many deadly snakes. Having already crossed the Libyan Desert and Lake Triton, flying over the land of Ethiopia, Perseus sees Andromeda, who is chained naked to a sea cliff as a sacrifice for a sea monster sent by Poseidon. Perseus uses Medusa's head to turn the monster to stone and rescues Andromeda, thereby earning the right to marry her. Before putting Medusa's head back in the bag, Perseus places it on some algae that soon harden and, thus, the first coral is created. Perseus returns with his wife to Seriphos and finds that his mother and the king's brother, Dictys, are refugees in the palace threatened by King Polydectes. Using Medusa's head, Perseus turns Polydectes and his followers into stone. Then Perseus gives the head to Athena, who places it in her war shield. Finally, Dictys takes the throne of Seriphos and Perseus, his wife, his mother and a group of Cyclops leave for Argos. At the news of the arrival of his grandson, Acrisius escapes to Pelasgian Larissa, a nearby kingdom, but Perseus has been invited by King Teutamides to attend the funeral games there. During a game, Perseus throws a disc that, diverted by the wind (and the will of the gods), reaches Acrisius' foot causing his death and fulfilling the Oracle's prophecy. Perseus buries his grandfather in the Temple of Athena and travels to Tiryns to exchange kingdoms with Megapenthes, who has succeeded Preto. Perseus has a son, who then has a daughter called Alcmene, Heracles' mother.

According to Graves, the myth of Acrisius and Preto basically narrates the founding of a paired kingdom and takes on Celtic and Palestinian myths that account for the rivalry between twin brothers who inherit the same throne. The myth of Perseus would take on Egyptian mythical tales, which account for the ritual wedding between the sun and moon. In his *Perseid*, Barth introduces a contemplative and dissatisfied Perseus, who, at the age of forty, reflects upon the passing of time and tries to trace the

travels and adventures of his years as a young hero in order to find, in maturity, signs of that lost vigour. The fact that Barth had a twin sister is purely coincidental.

At the age of forty, then, Barth's Perseus, in a dialogue with Calyxa, recalls his past. At the beginning, he says, "[s]tories last longer than men (...) But even our stars' nights are numbered, and with them will pass this patterned tale to a long-deceased earth." (59) Perseus feels "beleaguered by the serpents of the past" (60) since he recognizes that he "was a born reviser, and would die one" (60). Some time after his (physical) death, Perseus wakes up surrounded by the murals mentioned earlier in a room of what seems to be a luxurious palace:

Upon its walls curved graven scenes in low relief (...) to the number of seven where the chamber wound from view –which scenes, when I had come fully home to sense, I saw depicted alabasterly the several chapters of my youth, most pleasing to a couched eye. (61)

From this point, he starts scrolling through these images one by one:

The first, no wider than the bed from whose sinistral foot it sprang, showed Mother Danaë brazen towered by vain Acrisius my grandfather for contraceptive reasons, lest she get the son predestined to destroy et cetera; Granddad himself, with Grandmother Aganippe, stroked horses fondly in court, unaware that up behind him Zeus in golden-showerhood rained in upon their frockless daughter, jackpotting her with me. (61)

He then continues moving across the wall, which reminds us of one of the definitions provided by Graves when he talks about how myths are graphical representations recorded in temples. Slightly confused at first, Perseus soon regains clarity and finds Calyxa, a kind of interlocutor who asks questions and compels him to keep telling his story (Perseus constantly deviates from the central story of his life). In this journey, we examine several issues, such as impotence (in the sexual sense of the term,) sex with and without love (which is recurrent in Barth; he often establishes parallels between writing and love-making), and the art of storytelling (the narration of fragments of one's story/history is, in Barth's words, a post-coital act), among several others.

Following, then, some of the ideas introduced before, Barth validates May's categories that condense some of the most important functions that myths seem to fulfil.

The mythical figure that Barth takes allows him to try to make sense of his life, to try to understand where he comes from, where he is and where he is going. The myth of Perseus is largely functional to this purpose since the origins of this mythical hero determine Barth's own life.

Drawing on Montakhabi Bakhtvar's study, whose main hypothesis basically states that Barth's work reinvents the three myths –the Arabian Nights, Perseus and Bellerophon– and suggests that, through a reading based on the rhetoric developed by de Man, it is possible to demystify the reinterpretation or reinvention that Barth makes of these mythical stories, my attention is driven by a section of this study in which the Iranian author analyses Barth's *Perseid* as an autobiography. According to this researcher, Barth does not simply write an autobiography; he, on the contrary, uses a complex set of multiple elements with which he plays with temporality and chronology. In this sense, I believe that Barth *is* Perseus, of course, but the fictionalization that Barth does of himself in this mythical character is exceptional: the author's life experiences do not determine the life of Perseus, the mythical character –as certainly happens in a more traditional autobiography, but, quite the opposite, Barth's life suffers the same fate as that of the fictional character he reinvents. This coincides with what Barthes (1989) describes as the role of the author-guest:

It is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a 'guest'. If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work (...) the *I* which writes the text, it too, is never more than a *paper-I*. (61-62)

Barth, then, does not attempt to centralize the autobiographical aspect of his work. He hides behind the '*paper-I*' and tries to break with the linear or chronological conception not only of how novels or stories are written or told but also of how we understand our personal histories, our lives. To get his message across, Barth parodies a myth and he does so through commentary, that is, he uses parody as a metafictional instrument. Something similar seems to be at work in *Bellerophoniad*.

Barth begins his third novella explaining that, when he finished the second, “he was forty and too tired,” (138) which is why he once again resorts to the aid of the inspiring Muse to be able to tell the story of Bellerophon:

mythic hero, cousin to constellated Perseus: how he flew and reflew Pegasus the singed horse; dealt double death to the three-part freak Chimera; twice loved, twice lost; twice aspired to, reached, and died to immortality –in short, how he rode the heroic cycle and was recycled. (138)

At the age of forty, the mythic hero, just like Barth when he wrote this at the beginning of the 1970s, says that his life is a failure, he is no mythic hero and never will become one. However, Philonoë, his first wife, filled with hope, exclaims that most probably his yet best work may lie behind him, which does not really convince Bellerophon. The never-to-become hero and storyteller reflects:

Beginning in the middle, on the eve of my fortieth birthday, this original or best *Bellerophoniad* proceeded with unostentatious skill to carry forward the present-time drama (my quest for literal immortality) while contemplating the plenteous exposition of my earlier adventures –a narrative difficulty resolved by the simple but inspired device of making the second half of my life recapitulate ironically the first, after the manner, after the manner of the *Perseid*. (142)

The voices of the author and the narrating character are clearly, and purposefully, intertwined. Barth, once again, exteriorizes one of his recurrent themes, the anxiety of his own influence, a topic that he explores by means of imitating with ironic distance (or parodying) the second half of his life against the first, or, better, a fictionalized account of his life against an equally fictionalized account of somebody else’s life, borrowing, in the process, a few details and motifs and commenting about the process along the way.

Concerned about the effect that the fictional story he has just finished may have on the one he sets out to build, the author examines the complex process of storytelling:

Then why not attempt to alienate your children with anecdotes of your own childhood, your wife with the Anteia episode, the citizenry with boring accounts of your later adventures? Isn’t that the way you said it’s done in that mythical ‘ideal’ *Bellerophoniad*? Correlate these internal narratives ... (146)

The author brings into play two rhetorical devices, metafiction, as commentary of the process of narrating, and parody, as commentary of a myth from the past, in order to examine his own life at the moment of creation. Barth uses these fictions to “deal directly with particular manifestations of the myth of the wandering hero and address as well a number of their authors more recurrent thematic concerns: the mortal desire of immortality, for instance, and its ironically qualified fulfilment”, given that “myths themselves are among other things poetic distillations of our ordinary psychic experience and therefore point always to daily reality”. (199)

In order to explore the life of the hero, the narrator takes on Graves’ study, one of the most renowned collector of mythical stories who, based on multiple sources, reconstructs a fair amount of classical myths. After incorporating (citing, really) a fragment from Graves’ text, Barth, or perhaps his professed author Jerome B. Bray⁴, acknowledges that the myth of Bellerophon integrates several of his most typical topics and motifs: “the sibling rivalry, the hero’s naiveté, the accomplishments of labors by their transcension (here literal), and the final termination of all tasks by the extermination (here figurative) of the taskmaster; the romantic triangle; et cetera.” (201-202) He sets out to overcome the lurking fear of the writer’s block, especially in the transition from one work to the next, an obstacle that

[t]o the world (...) is a smaller matter, rightly, whether any particular artist finds his powers sustained or drained from one year to the next; to the artist himself, however minor his talent, imaginative potency is as crucial to the daily life of his spirit as sexual potency. (202)

Barth verifies, once more, that the themes and analogies that permeate his work are far from abandoning him.

In Barth’s novellas, an effect of appraisal and tribute is realized. Barth venerates the vital function that mythological narratives have in that they help construct meaning and maintain over time the life experiences of those mythical or heroic figures that partly make sense of our own existence. And that is precisely his main concern: to

⁴ Jerome Bonaparte Bray is this character who, although is mainly connected with Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), appears in several of Barth’s works, such as *LETTERS* (1979), as the alleged author whom Barth has been (also allegedly) systematically plagiarizing.

transcend not so much out of fear of dying, but in a more pagan sense, to remain in the collective memory of his readership, in his narratives.

Going back to *Perseid*, Barth's Calyxa is crucial in this enterprise. According to Graves and Grimal, under this name we find several references in the classics: 1) in Hesiod, Calyxa is a daughter of Oceanus and Tethis; 2) in Apollodorus, she is a daughter of Nereus, and 3) in Homer, she is a daughter of Atlas. The latter is the nymph who inhabits the island of Ogygia, on the coast where Odysseus appears after the wreck. Calyxa falls for the hero and promises him eternal youth and immortality if he stays with her. She is able to keep him there for seven years until she is forced (by the gods) to let him go and continue his journey home. In Barth's narrative, Calyxa is, in Perseus' eyes, equally extraordinary:

O Calyxa, this nameless girl, she had no end of insightful questions! Which I pondered and re-pondered as I've done these murals, to find if I could their meaning, where they pointed, what it was I'd lost. One question alone –whether I felt my post-Medusan years an example of or an exception to the archetypical pattern for heroic adventure– set me to years of comparative study, to learn what that pattern might be and where upon it I currently was. Thus this endless repetition of my story: as both protagonist and author, so to speak, I thought to overtake with understanding my present paragraph as it were by examining my paged past, and thus pointed, proceed serene to the future's sentence. (80-81)

This passage successfully combines all the elements examined so far: Barth resorts to parody as a metafictional tool or strategy to discuss his own narrative and examine the current state of his life by re-inscribing past characters in a new context and, thus, borrowing the thematic implications associated with those characters. A brilliant Barthian resource, the author interweaves himself with the narrator and, in so doing, gradually fictionalizes his own life, without us noticing at times. We should recall Barthes's ideas about how the novelist becomes part of his fiction: that playful inscription, which is also a tribute or homage, whereby the novelist's life becomes a fiction that contributes to the construction of his work. Barth seeks, as in many of his works, to examine his life, his existence, accounting for one of the main premises that sustains *Chimera*: storytelling is what keeps us alive; it is what allows us to know who we are in this world. This premise follows two of the functions of myths, the existential functions that let us know who we are and where we come from. And Barth is an

existentialist. As a writer he was born one⁵. Bauzá, in this respect, elaborates on the therapeutic side to myths and states that, according to German classicist Hans Blumenberg, “los mitos nos apartan transitoriamente del *horror vacui* ya que, mientras mitizamos nos distraemos de la angustia de una existencia impuesta de manera inexorable.” (29). Myths arise as projections against the anxiety or anguish caused by ignoring what is to come.

Structured around the motion of waves, in ebbs and flows, *Bellerophoniad* follows the heroic cycle, the scheme that every mythical hero must go through to be immortalized, passing the mysteries of initiation and departure, heading toward the tragedy of return, reign and death:



(261)

We follow the hero's destiny, while he retells his own life story to his second wife, Melanippe, who assiduously writes it down. In the process, the author, despite his

⁵ As seen, for example, in his first fictional work, *The Floating Opera*

attempts not to, gets blocked –from page 241 to page 258 to be more precise, during which he reflects upon the role and uses of the central mythical figures of his narratives in the history of humankind and examines the state of literature and of his own career by the beginnings of the 1970s:

fiction has become a pleasure for special tastes, like poetry, archery, churchgoing. What is wanted to restore its ancient domination is nothing less than a revolution; indeed the Revolution is waiting in the wings, the Second Revolution, and will not stay for the bicentennial of the First, than which it bids to be as more glorious as its coming, to a world impatient to be Reset Now of 'science fiction' there is a surfeit; of scientific fiction none... (246-247)

That is the reason why he sets out to build “a perfect model of a text-within-the-text, a microcosm or paradigm of the work as a whole” (256) or a parodic metafiction of a myth that serves to fulfil his own (auto-biographical? existential?) purposes.

Alongside this and other disquisitions, the story moves forward. Bellerophon, by this time, has already taken care of most of the duties required by the heroic scheme, among which the tasks ordained by Iobates –murdering the pirate Cheimarrhus, repelling the Barbarian Solimians and killing the Chimera– are the most often recalled. The hero passes all tests, Iobates gives his daughter, Philonoë, in marriage and the married couple successfully govern Licia. But, following the heroic pattern and seeking immortality, Bellerophon begs his people for exile, given that, after getting married, having children and ruling, heroes are expected to experience exile. In a virtually consensual exile in the swamps of Maryland, near Barth’s hometown, the hero finds a hard copy of *Perseid* and, following this novella’s pattern, Bellerophon and his wife decide to trace the steps of the hero’s first adventures. Bellerophon then, with the help of Melanippe, his second wife, finally decides to record the story of his life in writing. Melanippe, the hero’s alleged assiduous reader and editor, by the end of the story, reveals what she actually thinks about her husband’s attempts to achieve immortality and shocks us, as much as she shocks the hero, when she says:

If you want to know the truth, I think we’re bogged down more than immortalized: you scribble scribble scribble all day, morning noon and night, and honestly, I believe it must be the greatest thing in the world to be a mythic hero and be immortalized in the story of your life and so forth (...) But I swear, this isn’t immortality: it’s suspended animation. Which brings me back to your story: despite

all those clever things you have me say in it, the truth is I know zero about writing (...) if your immortality depends on this piece of writing, you're a dead pigeon. (292-295)

That is how Barth finishes the second chapter. In the last, the hero travels to Mount Chimera to check if the Chimera is really dead. He also reflects upon the impact that his life, his self-centred search for immortality has had on other people. The hero, we finally understand, is not really Bellerophon (or is he?) but his brother, Deliades. He tries to ascend the Olympus, but Poseidon makes him descend instead, alongside Polyeidus, his biological father, and both end up in the Maryland marshes, again close to Barth's hometown.

The myths Barth retrieves are functional to the author's purpose, but this requires a particular treatment: the writer parodies the myth not only with the aim of simply retaking it but also in order to make his present talk to (establish a dialogue with) that past. In this sense, Hutcheon (1980) argues that "[t]o claim that John Barth is prevented by parody from communicating his 'unique metaphor of experience' is to ignore the fact that, of all writers, the vehicle, if not the tenor, of Barth's metaphor is parody." (50) And I agree and would add that Barth's metaphor of experience is metafictionality, which is accomplished, activated or dramatized by means of parody.

John Vickery, in his paper entitled "The Functions of Myth in John Barth's *Chimera*" (1992), contends that we should be able to distinguish four main functions of myth in Barth's text, namely "the demystification of myth as spiritual, cultural, or historical heritage[,] (...) the defamiliarization of myth as received tale[,] (...) the radicalization of myth as self-parody (...) [and] the restoration of myth as unbounded narrativity." (429) Although I find these valuable and thought-provoking, I understand that, instead of functions, Vickery's categories are the outcomes or the results obtained after the author has processed or recycled the myths. I contend that Barth humanizes the mythic heroes and assigns contemporary meaning to past stories and characters, thus demystifying and defamiliarizing mythical narrations. Rather than radicalizing myths as self-parody, I think that Barth, in any case, if he does not parody the myths themselves, he definitely parodies mythopoeics or the process by which myths are constructed. In doing so, Barth participates in the history of myths. And rather than 'restoring' myths,

Barth in fact restores literature by means of a critical discussion of mythopetic construction.

I am more inclined to agree with Tobin's position regarding the role that myths play in Barth's works. According to her, "[i]n *Chimera* we encounter (...) an egalitarian participation in myth from the inside by present reality", in the sense that Barth "knows that myth needs the present to preserve reality" (98). Tobin expresses that, contrary to the modernist use of myth, Barth's realistic reinventions of the myths allow the author to explore his own life (the inside) in contrast to, or as I prefer to argue, alongside and in a dialogue with, exterior reality (the outside). "[I]n the *Perseid*," Tobin claims, "[Barth] commiserates with his middle-aged Perseus as an author who is himself looking at the second half of his life; and in the *Bellerophoniad*, the author becomes a guest lecturer on the pitfalls of pattern-following" (98). These ideas coincide with the notions developed by Montakhabi Bakhtvar and explored before, especially when she equates Barth's use of mythology with autobiography.

Going back to the questions of the proposed scheme that require that we ask ourselves about the nature of the intertexts that these fictions refer to, we have established that Barth's texts draw on classical myths and mythical discourse. From these, he takes on, predominantly, themes and motifs by means of characters. In other words, as will be further elaborated next, Barth establishes a dialogue with these elements from past mythology and, by means of irony, re-elaborates them to fulfil particular needs. If myths, in the theoretical lines introduced so far, are functional in helping us understand the mysteries of our origins and, departing from there, in providing some meaning to our personal identities, then authors need this type of fiction so that their present, their work as writers and their lives make sense, from the past, in the present, and into the future. This is why, in these particular fictions, parody and metafiction are operative components of a recurrent thematization process. Myths are functional to the thematic objectives of the author and Barth does fulfil these because he makes of parody the main medium for the representation of his experience, with the aid of metafiction and ironic distance.

The use of irony in parodic metafiction

Central to this study is the notion that, along the twentieth century, irony seems to be fairly linked to the novel, adopting new forms, masquerading as new resources and even mutating into new narrative styles. Taking Booth and de Man as starting points, I propose to incorporate the concept of irony to that of parodic metafiction, based on the assumption that irony acts as a rhetorical instrument in this type of fiction. Irony would produce, or help a writer create, what is known in this study as a ‘splitting of the authorial self,’ which undoubtedly leads us to consider the distinction established between author-narrator and reader-narratee, a device that the ironist recurrently employs (and manipulates). Along this line, the de Manian concept of ‘temporality’ is also integrated, given that, as the scholar claims, “[t]he act of irony (...) reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference” (de Man, 1971: 222). Irony, in this sense, “divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic.” (de Man, 1971: 222) In other words, irony, or the ironic attitude taken in these terms, would allow for the construction of self-referential narratives by means of which authors are able to distance themselves from the intertexts their narratives refer to, while, at the same time, they are able to reproduce or re-inscribe the pre-texts from both contrast and immediacy. In the process, it is argued in the present study, authors are able to split the subject of enunciation and, thus, incorporate authentic material about their lives into the fictional worlds. By splitting the self, Barth successfully explores his life, while developing the life (story) of his characters. In this respect, Barth, in an interview, once said,

the self is simply the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories we tell the others about who we are. All that the word ‘self’ comes down to finally is the stories that we make up, the stories that we fabricate. We are the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are and that we edit constantly. (Garrigós González 2000: 5)

Given Barth’s previous idea that connects narration with the exploration of an author’s life, metafiction, in general, seem to be the perfect site for the self-examination of a writer’s existence, and parodic metafiction, in particular, are these singular spaces

where authors review their lives by means of intertextual/parodic associations and with the aid of irony.

Retaking the four steps of ironic reconstruction and the five indicators of irony developed by Booth, I adopt for the present study the notion that an ironic act necessarily implies an intention, which, to a large extent, depends not only on the particular way in which a reader receives a text but also on the possible meanings that are anchored in the expressions that a writer wants to make explicit. Also, I take the idea that there are, in fact, textual traces of irony, which, on the one hand, reveal a strong presence of the author and, on the other, invite readers to experience a particular reading of the text in question. From de Man, I adopt the notion of temporality and the possible performative functions of irony, especially in relation to the particular type of self-referential fiction as underlined before.

In “The Concept of Irony,” a lecture published in de Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology* (1996), the critic argues that irony is, in fact, not a concept, and that this is precisely because of the difficulty in defining the term. According to de Man and following Schlegel’s theory, irony has been ‘defused’ in, at least, three ways: first, by reducing it to an “aesthetic practice or artistic device”; second, by reducing it to “a dialectic of the self as a reflexive structure”; and third, by “inserting ironic moments or ironic structures into a dialectic of history.” (169-170) The first point refers to the use of irony as an art-medium; in other words, irony is used to produce a wide range of effects, “achieving a distance, a playful aesthetic distance, in relation to what is being said” (169), a Hutcheonian conception that has been already explored. The second point refers to the notion that irony may be used as a means through which we can distance ourselves from our selves, in order to explore our lives by means of indirectness. Irony becomes a dialectic of the self in that it “clearly is the same distance within a self, duplications of a self, specular structures within the self, within which the self looks at itself from a certain distance.” (169) The third point refers to the idea that we can pinpoint particular dialectical patterns of history and compare/contrast them, a process that involves looking at history (or historical patterns) from within. Even though de Man’s aim, in this lecture, is to question these three options, he in fact does not prove them wrong, unproductive, or inaccurate. On the contrary, his analysis only proves that Schlegel’s classification is but an invitation to continue exploring the wide range of options given

by irony. Out of the three possibilities briefly discussed before, I take the first and second, with a special emphasis on the latter, in the understanding that irony, at play in parodic metafiction of the kinds analysed here, is predominantly used as a mechanism through which an author explores his life as a writer by means of indirectness.

Perseid, as cited at the beginning of this analysis section, closes with an interesting exchange between Medusa and Perseus. Medusa's last question to the hero asks him to reveal whether he is happy with the way his story ends, to which Perseus answers (twice), "I'm content." In light of the analytical scheme so far executed and in maintaining a firm conviction to trace intertexts, a practice that is perhaps too often excessive, we can say that the answer Perseus provides refers back to the perhaps not so well recalled scene in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1605). By the end of act IV, scene i, Shakespeare plays with a commonly used resource in tragedies, *peripeteia* or the reversal of circumstances, by which he makes Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, realize that he has not been able to conspire against Antonio, the merchant. Shylock is found guilty of conspiracy but the Duke pardons his life and Antonio forgoes the monetary penalty imposed upon him under three conditions: Shylock must let Antonio administer half of his property, he must become a Christian, and he must leave the rest of his possessions to Jessica and Lorenzo upon his death. Shylock agrees to these conditions stating, "I am content." But is he? The sequencing of events by which the character of Shylock is constructed indicates the opposite: he can never be content with such a resolution; he just has no other alternative but to accept things as they are or as they have turned out to be. In re-inscribing this line, and all the associations around it, Barth seems to be indicating the same: he is not in fact satisfied with how the story ends. The ironic statement can only be interpreted in these terms if we place it against (or alongside) Shakespeare's line. That is the distance, both in terms of difference and similarity, unfamiliarity and immediacy, that irony provides when it is used in the frame of a parodic metafictional text. And that is the distance that an author requires to review his work as a writer and his life.

The excerpt that follows, taken from *Bellerophoniad*, also helps illustrate the main concepts so far discussed. In a walk-on-role, Barth intrudes upon his fiction, as a guest-lecturer to a conference, where he is given the possibility of referring to Bellerophon's life and to the alleged inconsistencies often found in the accounts of the hero's life:

Good evening. On behalf of the mythic hero Bellerophon of Corinth, I would like to thank [supply name of university, publisher, sponsor of reading, et cetera] for this opportunity to put straight a number of discrepancies and problematical details in the standard accounts of his life and work; to lay to rest certain items of disagreeable gossip concerning both his public and his private life; and to respond to any questions you may wish to put concerning his fabulous career.

*My general interest in the wandering-hero myth dates from my thirtieth year, when reviewers of my novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) remarked that the vicissitudes of its hero –Ebenezer Cooke, Gentleman, Poet and Laureate of Maryland– follow in some detail the pattern of mythical heroic adventures as described by Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, and other comparative mythologists. The suggestion was that I had used this pattern as the basis for the novel's plot. In fact I'd been till then unaware of the pattern's existence; once appraised of it, I was struck enough by the coincidence (which I later came to regard as more inevitable than remarkable) to examine those works by which I'd allegedly been influenced (...) Several of my subsequent fictions –the long short-story *Menelaïad* and the novella *Perseid*, for example– deal directly with particular manifestations of the myth of the wandering hero and address as well a number of their author's more current thematic concerns: the mortal desire for immortality, for instance, and its ironically qualified fulfillment –especially by the mythic hero's transformation, in the latter stages of his career, into the sound of his own voice, or the story of his life, or both. I am forty. (198-199)*

The metafictional quality of the passage is evident, but what is its purpose? In order to address this question, I go back to the notion that the ironic act necessarily involves an intention, given that this act originates as a special invitation to understand (or read) a given fragment as an expression emitted by a speaker who wishes to communicate something, inverted, different, or distanced from the explicit message contained in the act itself. Now, what special qualities or characteristics does the quoted fragment have to take it as an ironic act? In the context of the development of irony previously exhibited, we can notice that there is an explicit invitation to question the literal sense of the words there communicated, despite the fact that these words, we assume, come from the author of the text, given the special use of italics and quotation marks. The author needs, as he expressly states, to unfold and split his existence and that of the mythical hero-narrator, so he resorts to that special use irony, as an instrument, and frames it in a parodic self-referential fiction. In doing so, he splits or divides the oscillation of life and writing experiences and is, therefore, able to ponder over his own life, while we writes, through the re-inscription of a mythical character. This helps him unlock his creativity, a device through which he manages to endure. Irony, then, mutates into a new literary form: parodic metafiction.

This particular manifestation of irony in new literary forms is probably not the only one. Along this line, the research project entitled “Las máscaras de la ironía en nuevas formas literarias: Estudio comparativo de obras de ficción contemporánea (1960-2012),” directed by Professor Alejandra Portela (UNC), proposes that, in addition to the already mentioned parodic metafiction, there may be other literary manifestations of irony, such as so-called ‘cynical-decadent fiction,’ ‘postironic fiction,’ and ‘poetic-contesting fiction.’ As it has been argued before, irony has manifested itself in different texts across time as a rhetorical figure, one among the wide repertoire of rhetorical devices used and exploited, and/or as a fundamental element of literary forms, such as parody, satire (Menippean, Horatian, Juvenalian, etc.), diatribe, farce, farcesatire, the picaresque novel, and pastiche, among several others. However, it is argued in the research project mentioned earlier and in the present study that, since the second half of the twentieth century, the particular use (or manifestation) of irony in some literary works has produced new forms or styles that begin to be used in a (new and) systematic manner.

Regarding the first provisional manifestation of irony mentioned before, so-called ‘cynical-decadent fiction,’ it is important to remember that one of the first intellectuals to announce that irony would turn into cynicism or decadence was Giambattista Vico, who, in 1774 (in Hayden White’s *Tropics of Discourse*, 1978) anticipated that reason would become its own worse enemy. In this sense, one of the characterizing aspects of irony is, precisely, the rational sense of superiority of the person who ironizes. From then on, studies on irony, viewed as the indicating trace of the decline of human intellect, were mostly placed in the hands of Friedrich Nietzsche and Northrop Frye. Later, Peter Sloterdijk (in, for example, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 1987) further explores the concept of irony, understood as a general sense of lack of social integration and humour, closely connected to bitterness and indignation. Concerning studies on postirony, there is, to our knowledge, one specific extensive and unpublished study by American literary critic Patricia Tobin (*The Comic War Machine: American Postironic Fiction*, 1994), in which the author basically argues that Booth (in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 1975), Wilde (in *Horizons of Assent*, 1981), Candace Lang (in *Irony/Humor*, 1988), and Richard Rorty (in *Irony, Contingency and Solidarity*, 1989) have not really been able to develop a comprehensive theory that could embrace the concept of irony as ‘war

machine' (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980) and as 'comic therapeutic action' (Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians*, 1976), which are, in Tobin's terms, understood as manifestations of the 'postironic.' As regards professed 'poetic-contesting fiction,' this manifestation of irony is closely connected to the fictional works of one particular author, Argentine-Canadian Pablo Urbanyi, from whose works the term 'urbanyismo' was coined by Lorenzin (2007) to refer to the process by which fictional characters challenge the social in search of a liberating outlet that could relieve the burden and oppression that they experiment. The term 'urbanyismo' stands as a therapeutic and playful means to solve social conflicts. It is through the use of humour and an explicit ironic attitude that 'contesting-fiction' reveals itself.

These new manifestations of irony may be associated with different effects that an author-text seems to be willing to produce. From this classification, an interesting field of study is disclosed, one which invites us to recognize that, at least in a large number of texts produced since late modernism, irony, far from having been abandoned, has acquired new shades, thus masquerading as new literary forms. And parodic metafiction is one of these forms into which irony has been transformed.

CONCLUSION

After drawing on the preliminary eleven questions introduced in the analytical scheme that structures the present study, the last question still remains unanswered: What elements make the text 'parodic metafictional' in that it is self-referential and, at the same time, draws on a parodied discursive text? In fact, the purpose of outlining a scheme that sequences questions is to prove that those elements are to be found in a number of assumptions explored along the sequential scheme proposed.

The first assumption signals that Barth's fictions are highly self-referential, no doubt, and that the intertextual process or mechanism by which the author connects his texts with other texts is parody. The second main conjecture of the present study suggests that the intertexts Barth's fictions address (and re-inscribe) are myths and that the author draws on a series of themes and motifs from the parodied texts, by way of the characters he constructs, in order to thematize some of his greatest and more recurrent concerns. The third assertion of this study relates to the (special) use of irony, more specifically to the notion that irony is the element that the author uses to be able to explore the main thematic concern that runs through his fictions. There are a number of final remarks that stem from these assumptions and, even though they have been addressed along the development of this study, they do serve some concluding commentary.

First, I retake the idea that parodic metafiction is a mode of writing that results from the on-going transformations and mutations that irony has been experiencing, especially since the development of late-modernist fiction. Parodic metafiction is this literary form that is used in a systematic manner where irony is carefully concealed, while it is consciously exploited to fulfil differing purposes. Then, I think it is important to try to come to terms with certain conceptualization of key terms and theories, even if

they are, and all should be, provisional. Based on the notion that these conceptualizations are, indeed, restricted to a specific study of a particular number of texts, what follows is an attempt at characterizing the two fictional works by Barth analysed in this study.

As suggested before, I would like to argue that these fictional works fit Genette's categorization, by which he takes parody as a template where authors can build or generate new texts. Genette claims that parody has a non-satirical function of transformational relation to other texts, in a playful mood. In his words, parody should be understood as a mode of 'playful transformation.' This classification fits Barth's works since he takes on a mythical narrative from the past and parodies it (or transforms it playfully). Now, the elements that are added to Genette's categorization are metafiction and irony, in the understanding that the author's biographical elements or authentic materials, which are difficult (and perhaps not essential) to pin down, are intertwined and masqueraded in his narratives. By means of playful transformation, Barth is able to explore his life, without resorting to the typical mechanisms and strategies used in autobiographies. Instead, he resorts to the use of irony as a tool that allows him to split the subject of enunciation. But, again, Barth seems to create another special kind of relation between generic types, in this case metafiction and parodied autobiography.

As a case in point, Barth in *Bellerophoniad* introduces a playful substitution of names in a letter addressed to a Mr. Todd Andrews⁶, Executive Secretary of the Tidewater Foundation in Maryland, and submitted by Barth's purported author, Jerome B. Bray, from New York, by which the sender requests support for the continuity of the "Second Phase of Composition of Revolutionary Novel" (246). Barth purposefully chooses to create (or, rather, to retrieve from previous fictions) two fictional characters that supersede real-life people, thus blurring the boundaries between a typical autobiographical text and a purely fictional one. J. B. Bray is the character through which Barth discusses linguistic self-consciousness and the potential signifying power that language has, conceived as an elastic system that, contrary to artless mimesis, offers creation and variety, together with a surplus of styles and forms. Barth, then,

⁶ Todd Andrews is the main character in Barth's first novel, *The Floating Opera*. Todd, in this novel, is the character through which Barth explores, among several issues, existential anxiety and suicide.

creates a type of endless *mise en abyme*, in which the mirror onto which the biographical elements are reflected is, in fact, a novel about parodied autobiography, as if the author's life, or part of his life, would be incorporated inside an endless fictional circuit.

Another significant consideration pertains to the analytical scheme proposed in this study. As a tool, this tentative scheme may prove helpful in the analysis of those fictions that share certain narrative and rhetorical elements with the empirical corpus of this study. In this respect, there are certain elements from the scheme that most probably require revision and adjustment when they are used to examine other literary works, just like some may remain widely unaltered.

The first concepts brought in by means of the initial questions of the analytical scheme proposed here are likely to remain intact when they are used in the analysis of other works. The parodic and metafictional qualities of fictional texts, alongside their possible pragmatic effects and sought purposes, are persistent considerations that can, in general, be asked of any text. In this respect, the Bakhtinian conception that parody is a seminal component of a literary work that allows for the incorporation of a large number of other elements into a text remains at the core of the notion that parodic metafiction is a particular manifestation of irony, framed in a self-reflexive text that transforms and refunctionalizes previous discourse-systems.

As for the use and function of irony, it seems that the same holds true for this rhetorical device or instrument in the understanding that irony helps authors distance themselves from the parodied texts, thus conceding the opportunity for the splitting of the subject of enunciation. This mechanism allows writers to undertake a twofold process by which they can parody texts and, at the same time, reflect upon the process of doing so. But this twofold process is by no means necessarily 'just' aesthetic or a self-absorbed means by which authors 'simply' play with language and historical or mythological references in order to explore their lives. Parodic metafiction can be a lot more than that. I would not suggest that this form of self-referential and intertextual dialogue with the past is exclusively narcissistic, but, on the contrary, self-exploration of an author's life through these processes can very well be conducive to the profound examination of human life, in general, and all that which can be there incorporated. This is one of the main reasons why Barth himself feels rather awkward with the term

‘metafiction,’ especially when it is used to categorize or label (his) texts. In his own words:

The term “metafiction” makes me a little uneasy, because it seems to suggest fiction that is just about itself, and “just” has a negative, sort of pejorative tone to it. Fiction about fiction, stories about storytelling, have an ancient history, so much so that I am convinced that if the first story ever told began with the words “Once upon a time,” probably the second short story ever told began with the words “Once upon a time there was a story that began ‘Once upon a time.’” Fiction has always been about fiction.

The tradition of art about itself or the medium about itself is an honorable and ancient one, and in the hands of a passionate and gifted artist (and that’s the huge proviso)...that fiction, that art, is still about life, which Aristotle tells us literature is supposed to be about-- human life, its happiness and its misery. But part of our experience of life, for most of us, is our experience of great art, great books, and great music. So, fiction about fiction, books that are also about writing, whatever else they are about, are not necessarily there for decadent or narcissistic self-concern, but the term “metafiction” suggests all of those unhappy things. So, I fidget a little bit in my chair under that label. (Plumley 1994: 3)⁷

And I concur with Barth’s position, a view that, in fact, reveals that parodic metafiction is exceptional texts that require a lot from readers, in the sense that it is up to the readers not only to establish some of the meaningful connections alluded or hinted but also to extrapolate the authors’ reflections to their own lives. Hutcheon (1987) also coincides with this position in that, according to her and in the context of metafictional implications,

the novel is, in fact, related to life experience in a very real way *for the reader*: that is, the novel is a continuation of that ordering, decoding, naming, fiction-making *process* that is part of the reader’s normal coming-to-terms with experience in the real world. And it is this fact that theories of novelistic reference ultimately have to take into account, given the self-conscious narrative and linguistic thematization of it in metafiction itself. (5-6)

Going back to the elements of the proposed scheme used in the present study, what seems to vary from a text to another is the type of intertexts parodic metafiction connects with, as well as the functions that these intertexts might play. In Barth’s case, the intertexts selected and refunctionalized are myths, but other authors may take up any other discourse-systems they wish to re-inscribe. A fairly common practice that seems

⁷ This quotation has been extracted from an interview conducted on April 15, 1994. For its full version, please, refer to Appendix “B”.

to characterize some of the novels written since the second half of the twentieth century is the re-inscription of a wide range of text types or genres, alongside self-reflexive comments about the process of creating fiction. Such may be the case in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and Coover's *The Public Burning*, in which the historical novel is parodied, or Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in which the conventions of the Victorian novel are parodied. A motivating case is Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973), which parodies the genre of the second-rated Romance novel, or perhaps even more perplexing is David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), which parodies more than one genre across its different chapters, moving from a chapter that parodies the epistolary novel, incorporating comments about how to write this type of fiction, to another that resembles a screenplay that parodies drama. Other examples may include Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), which parodies the fairy-tale genre, or Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), which parodies the biography of exceptional French writer Gustave Flaubert, accompanied by a sound disposition toward self-referentiality. Parodies of the detective novel seem to be widely practiced, as well, as in Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) and Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992). One intense case that incorporates, perhaps, the widest possible variety of parodic references is Pynchon's puzzling *Gravity's Rainbow*, which integrates an extensive range of fictional and non-fictional discourse types. Other examples may be retrieved from Vladimir Nabokov's career, such as *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), where the author parodies the reader's own conception of story and storytelling, or his early *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), in which the author parodies biography and constructs a new genre called 'research novels.' As Hutcheon (1980) claims, "[n]arratorial (not authorial) self-consciousness (...) often takes the form of a parodic awareness of literary conventions –of the journal (Butor's *L'Emploi du temps*), of criticism (Nabokov's *Pale Fire*), of the epic (Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*), of biography (Woolf's *Jacob's Room*), of the essay (Borges' *Labyrinths*) and, of course, of the novel." (52) What seems to remain crucial is the need to consider these parodied narratives in light of the discursive context in which they are used, a context that is provided by the texts and the complex and varied allusions they contain, so that readers can pose meaningful questions about the possible pragmatic functions that the new elements that are generated may have and how these relate to their lives.

APPENDIX A

The following is a biography of American author John Barth, prepared by biographer Victoria Townsend in Spring 2005. It was retrieved from The Pennsylvania Center for the Book, directed by Steven Herb, Ph.D.. Bibliographical information has been added in the “Works” section to rectify missing data and format has slightly been altered.

Barth, John Simmons

Born: May 27, 1930, Cambridge, Maryland

Vocations: Novelist, Short Story Writer, Professor, Public Speaker, Journalist

Keywords: *Chimera*; *The Floating Opera*; *Giles Goat-Boy*; John Hopkins University; *Lost in the Funhouse*; Metafiction; National Book Award; Pennsylvania State University; Postmodernism; Poststructural; SUNY Buffalo; Writing Seminars Program.

Abstract: John Barth was born May 27, 1930, in Cambridge, Maryland, and later attended Johns Hopkins University. He became an instructor at Pennsylvania State University in 1953. His novel *Giles Goat-Boy* was set on the Pennsylvania State University Park Campus. Barth became associate professor before he left Pennsylvania State University in 1956 to become professor of English at State University of New York at Buffalo. Since then he has written award-winning and best-selling novels and received numerous grants and awards. Barth's writing is considered compelling and

enveloping. He is now living in Maryland with his wife and teaches at Johns Hopkins University.

Biography:

“Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story.” - John Barth

John Simmons Barth was born May 27, 1930, and raised along the Eastern Shore of Maryland in Cambridge. His father was John Jacob Barth and his mother was Georgia Simmons. John Barth’s first calling was jazz. After he graduated high school in the spring of 1947, he attended the Julliard School of Music and studied elementary theory and advanced orchestration. Barth played the drums and had aspirations of becoming a musician or orchestrator but due to financial constraints, Barth transferred to Johns Hopkins University in the fall of 1947. Though he spent only a single summer semester at Julliard, music continues to influence his life and his writing.

It was at Johns Hopkins University where Barth moved in the direction of writing and began studying journalism “because it sounded easy,” he told *Town & Gown (T&G)* in 1977. During his junior year, he realized that he had become attached to writing fiction, and he graduated with a major in creative writing in 1951.

During this time he married Harriette Anne Strickland on January 11, 1950. Barth continued at Johns Hopkins, earning his M.A. in 1952. He held his first teaching position as a junior instructor at John Hopkins University while working toward his doctorate. After one year of doctoral study at Johns Hopkins University he was forced to find a better paying job to support his two children and pregnant wife.

John Barth recounted his job searching experiences to *T&G*: “The job market for English grads was nearly as tight as it is now. I wrote the customary sixty or seventy letters and Penn State happened to be the place that came through.”

When he arrived at Penn State University, Barth was astounded to find that equal importance was given to each area of study. “Imagine my surprise,” he told *T&G*, “a place with professors of ice cream!” It was because of the large campus, which he

referred to as “a huge, rough democracy,” that he used a university as a metaphor for society in his book *Giles Goat-Boy*. Before the novel was published, Barth moved from State College to Pine Grove Mills, 5.5 miles from State College, allegedly because he did not want his novels to be considered “academic” novels. He claimed that if he were identified as a college town resident then his book would not be taken seriously.

Barth would find time to play drums with Robert Frank and Philip Young of the English Department. Barth was known by few at Penn State because of crowded schedule. Philip Young told *T&G*, “The impression he gave was of a thoroughly efficient person. Very nice, but not exactly jovial.” Barth’s time was devoted to his manuscript. He admitted to using time during office hours to write, and he often went to class poorly prepared, “trusting the muse to provide me with sentences like a revivalist might trust God.” Despite his priorities, he was promoted to assistant professor in 1957 and associate professor in 1960.

While at Penn State University, Barth wrote four novels. His first, *The Floating Opera*, was written in three months in 1955 and revised in six more to satisfy his publisher. In the last three remaining months of 1955, Barth started *The End of the Road*, which he finished in 1958. In 1958, he also received a grant to conduct research in Maryland for *The Sot-Weed Factor*. In 1960, he finished *The Sot-Weed Factor* and began his fourth novel, *Giles Goat-Boy*, which became so complicated that he had to organize the book on salvaged key-sort cards from the Pattee Library.

Six years later Barth completed *Giles Goat-Boy*; it totaled a lengthy 800 pages. The book became a *New York Times* Best-Seller. It included many characteristics of the University Park Campus, including a building called Founders Hall that resembles Old Main. The university is uncannily portrayed as an entire world in the book, similar to how it may seem to many students and faculty at Penn State University. The main character, Giles, acts half-human, half-goat. It is presumed that John Barth got the idea from visiting the sheep farm in the agricultural department of Penn State University with his children. Because of his character Giles, Barth was elected an honorary life

member of the American Dairy Goat Association. “I still have the membership card,” he said, “in case I’m in a tight corner.”

In 1965, a year before *Giles Goat-Boy* was published, Barth left Penn State University to be a professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo. “If I did ‘outgrow’ [Penn State], it wasn’t quite in the way people claimed. Of course my marriage was ending, and we were trying to save it by a change of scene,” he said about leaving Penn State University, “But what I really wanted was a more urban environment. I had grown up in a small town, and I had spent twelve years here. I needed to get myself into the city for a while.” A few years after the Barths moved to New York, John and Harriette divorced. A year later, on December 27, 1970, Barth married Shelly Rosenberg, whom he met at Penn State University while she was a student there.

Barth's next book, *Chimera*, won the National Book Award after his two previous nominations for *The Floating Opera* and *Lost in the Funhouse*. He became one of the most well-known post-Vietnam-war writers. He has won multiple awards and grants, including the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, the Rockefeller Foundation grant, the National Institute of Arts and Letters grant, and an honorary literature degree from the University of Maryland. His achievements reflect his dedication to his writing and capability to address his audience, whomever they may be. E.P. Walkiewicz, author of *John Barth*, calls Barth a “novelist of the absurd,” a “fabulator,” and a “cosmic satirist.” He is known to portray rather realistic things through a fantastical perspective that envelops the reader.

Although many consider Barth to be a great writer because of his postmodern aesthetic and the philosophical quality of his writing, his intention to write a compelling story is first and foremost. According to Barth, as quoted by Walkiewicz in *John Barth* “a gifted writer is likely to rise above what he thinks to be his aesthetic principles,” and that he can be hindered by too much understanding of “what he's been up to.” Barth allows himself to be lost during the writing of his stories. He said that he conceives “of the business of plot as a rather exact equivalent of the element of melody,” in Walkiewicz’s

book, *John Barth*. Many of the settings for Barth's novels are along the shore and it is apparent that his early years are still influencing him. Barth now resides in Baltimore with his wife Shelly, and teaches at the John Hopkins University. He is still writing stories and novels, with his most recent coming out in 2011, nearly all of which he dedicates "For Shelly."

Works:

Novels

- *The Floating Opera* (1956)
- *The End of the Road* (1958)
- [*The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960)]
- *Giles Goat-Boy: or, The Revised New Syllabus* (1966)
- *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (1968)
- *Chimera* (1972)
- [*LETTERS* (1979)]
- *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982)
- [*The Tidewater Tales* (1987)]
- *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991)
- *Once upon a Time: A Floating Opera* (1994)
- *On with the Story* (1996)
- *Coming Soon!!!: A Narrative* (2001)
- *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories* (2004)]
- *Where Three Roads Meet* (2005)
- *The Development* (2008)
- *Every Third Thought: A Novel in Five Seasons* (2011)

Nonfiction

- *My Two Muses* (1961)
- [*The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (1984)]
- *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction, 1984 - 1994* (1995)
- *Final Fridays: Essays, Lectures, Tributes & Other Nonfiction, 1995- (2012)]*

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APPENDIX B

An Interview with John Barth

Like Ernest Hemingway, another ground-breaking writer of twentieth-century American fiction, John Barth writes every day, the initial drafts always in pen. He says that his inspiration does not "waft like a gentle whisper from a Greek muse," but resembles, instead, a "rumbling King Kong," a metaphor for self-reference and self-reflection. But unlike his modernist predecessors, Barth has resisted the traditions of twentieth-century realism. Instead, he has collected an eclectic montage, the past with the present, the old story formulas in a postmodern guise, displaying the elements alongside each other to produce a curious image of a worm with which we are not always immediately comfortable or familiar. But, then, neither is he, always.

Barth's twelfth book of fiction was released in May 1994 by Little, Brown. The title is classic Barth, disarming but with a cryptic punch: *Once upon a Time*. And it is the book's subtitle, *A Floating Opera*, that comes like a finger's light touch, or reminder. Through it he has returned full circle to the riff that set him in search of a new literary form in his first long fiction piece, *A Floating Opera* (1956). Barth's description of his new novel as "a memoir wrapped in a novel" echoes his generative technique of searching for and therefore redefining the narrative perspective of fiction.

Barth's version of postmodernism is less jagged at the edges than that of some writers in the mode, if it will sit still long enough to be characterized as a mode. He defined his approach in 1967 in "The Literature of Exhaustion" and refined it a little more than a

decade later in "The Literature of Replenishment." The heart of his thesis is that the modern genre had been exhausted by the close of World War II. Writers at the turn of the century had picked up the torch of the Romantics and carried it once around the track: "The great project of modernism, the idea of shaking up bourgeois notions of 'linearity, and 'consecutivity' and ordinary description of character and ordinary cause and effect, had honorably done its job."

Writers after World War II rebelled against their modernist predecessors, realizing that nothing of the human condition was left to report in a modern sense, except through retold tales--which is something like re-tasting a stale raisin cookie that has been belched. New ground had to be broken if a place for literature was to be found in a life that not only sounded a distinctly different tone but one that could not be fully apprehended (a point already made by modern existentialists). And Barth was among the vanguard writers to seek a synthesis of art and life, itself an imitation of an imitation, thus making of fiction something of a two-way mirror through which one peers murkily.

Barth makes this effort by employing repetition and by expanding the formal range available to modern fiction to include such forms as the epistolary novel (*Letters*), the eighteenth-century adventure novel (*The Sot-Weed Factor*), and the quest tale (*The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* or *Giles Goat-Boy*). A narrative voice, usually omniscient, is central to traditional fiction, but in his work there is a tension between eliminating the omniscient narrator (since "apprehended" life is at best tentative) and achieving a synthesis towards which the text is headed. Forty years after his initial effort, many of his characters wave at each other from across novels, his house rule being "that no particular reader should have to be aware of their appearance in other books."

A short piece which probably best captures Barth's effort to use fiction to grab life by the scruff of the neck is "Autobiography: A Self- Recorded Fiction," which was part of a monophonic tape series in which he participated in the 1960s. Here, fiction invents itself. As narrator, fiction is dissatisfied with the disturbing evolution of the product and

argues with its father (Barth?) and its mother (the muse?) to abort the spawn, thus admonishing the omniscient and in this context eliminating a traditional narrator. The open-ended last sentence of the story (without a period) suggests abortion, or perhaps a cue to rewind the tape--a daunting apprehension of life which predictably resists the logical confines in which modern writers attempt to contain it. At the "close" of the narrative, Barth would come on stage and, in the presence of the audience, switch off the tape recorder. Like life, maybe it would be switched on again, maybe not. So much for the modern world.

With the publication of *Once upon a Time*, Barth readers are eager to wade again into the rocking waters of this postmodernist's voyage, but he is already miles away, planning in some uncharted part of his mind a proposed book of short fiction. Reluctant to grant interviews, frankly disliking them, Barth agreed to one on April 15, 1994, two weeks prior to the official release of his most recent book.

William Plumley: Critics often refer to your work as "postmodern" or as "metafiction." Meta from the Greek means "after," that is, after fiction. How would you connect these two terms, and would you allow that they identify your writing?

John Barth: These are, mind you, labels from the critics, and I don't cynically dismiss them, because we can't talk about anything in the world without putting it in categories and giving it labels. It's important of course not to mistake the map for the thing that it is supposed to be a map of. The term "metafiction" makes me a little uneasy, because it seems to suggest fiction that is just about itself, and "just" has a negative, sort of pejorative tone to it. Fiction about fiction, stories about storytelling, have an ancient history, so much so that I am convinced that if the first story ever told began with the words "Once upon a time," probably the second short story ever told began with the words "Once upon a time there was a story that began 'Once upon a time.'" Fiction has always been about fiction. Virgil is a lot about Homer, for example, and Shakespeare likes to talk about plays within plays, etc. That's all good fun, and artists in many media... the earliest operas are about operas. They're about people singing like Orpheus and so forth.

The tradition of art about itself or the medium about itself is an honorable and ancient one, and in the hands of a passionate and gifted artist (and that's the huge proviso)...that fiction, that art, is still about life, which Aristotle tells us literature is supposed to be about-- human life, its happiness and its misery. But part of our experience of life, for most of us, is our experience of great art, great books, and great music. So, fiction about fiction, books that are also about writing, whatever else they are about, are not necessarily there for decadent or narcissistic self-concern, but the term "metafiction" suggests all of those unhappy things. So, I fidget a little bit in my chair under that label. "Postmodernism" is another story. Back when we were all being called existentialists in the decade I started publishing, in the 1950s, everybody fretted. Nobody acknowledged being an existentialist. Sartre said, "I'm not an existentialist ... I don't know what they're talking about." Then we got to be called black humorists for a while. Then we were called fabulists for a while. And more lately we have been called postmodernists, so we think we're still doing the same old thing, writing this sentence, then the next sentence, and then the one after that as best we know how, but the name of our ship seems to change as the journey continues.

That's all well and good, but the fact is that I don't deny the term postmodern. I think there is a thing roughly described by a term like postmodern. It is the thing that obviously comes after modernism, and after that, of course, depending on what newspaper you are reading or critic you are listening to, it can describe many different kinds of things, some of which remind me of what goes on in my store, some of which don't. There is a kind of postmodernism which repudiates the great moderns. Postmodernism in that sense means, let's don't do anymore the kind of stuff that Joyce and Kafka, Proust and Mann do That's not my kind, by the way When you take any clump of writers who are called by the critics "postmodernists," I am as impressed by the differences among those writers, the things that they do not share, as the things that they do.

WP: Their eclecticism? Another term critics often use to distinguish among the postmoderns.

JB: A kind of eclecticism. Let's just name names. Most writers like the late Italo Calvino and the late, alas, Jorge Luis Borges, and the late Vladimir Nabokov and the late Donald Barthelme--oh, my goodness, so many late, wonderful writers--and, thank God, the not-late Gabriel Garcia Marquez, [and the late] Samuel Beckett. These, along with Americans like Robert Coover and William Gass and myself. What a wild variety of differences exist between us, and yet, I think, consciously or not those writers just named do, or did, share a feeling that the great project of modernism, the art and literature of the first half of the century, while an honorable project, has essentially done its job. In the period after the second World War, sensibilities like mine that had cut their teeth on those great modernists were looking for not the next best thing after modernism, but the best next thing after modernism, shaking up bourgeois notions of linearity and consecutivity and ordinary, realistic description of character, ordinary psychological cause and effect. [We] favor movie techniques like "disjunction" and some admixture of "irreality" with conventional reality and so forth.

WP: So you find the end of World War II as the departure point from modernism to postmodernism?

JB: I think so. We didn't have the term for twenty or so more years after that. The term comes out of architecture and filters into art criticism and then to literary critics, and writers themselves pick it up from there. The field identification marks, roughly speaking, seem to be an ongoing concern with form as being just as important as content, but of course that characterizes many of the modernists as well My friend Jim Michener used to say that when he writes a book about the Chesapeake Bay he wants his readers to forget they're reading about Chesapeake Bay. He wants them to see Chesapeake Bay and to forget that "my" books are made of language. Well, no modernist would have gone along with that, and I don't think many of the writers called "postmodernists" would.

We begin with the assumption that, whatever we are doing, it ends up being words on the page, lines going down the page, pages that readers turn, that the story is, that art is, an artifice, that it has an element of artifice in it. And so far as wanting our reader to forget that they are reading a novel, we are more inclined (but, then, so was

Scheherazade, so was Sophocles and so was Shakespeare) to remind the reader from time to time that this is a story, not that this is only a story, but whatever else it is, it is a story. You're enthralled, you're spellbound, if we are doing our work right, by a storyteller, and do not confuse this with reality. Art ain't life.

WP: There are points in your work where the narrator appears to become the author who intrudes, speaking directly to the reader.

JB: Yes, very much so, in an old eighteenth-century way, "Dear reader."

WP: I have in mind your story "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction," in which fiction is trying to determine whether or not it is going to be born.

JB: That's right. Not an autobiography of the author, but of the narrative itself, the piece trying to get said, trying to get itself born,...has great unease about the prospect. The father, presumably being the author--this is a piece done for monophonic tape on a machine, so you have the voice of the fiction speaking itself--wondering if anybody is listening. After all, a piece of fiction doesn't know whether it is being read or not, poor thing. That's it. The author would presumably be the father and the mother would either be the medium of transmission, gestation and delivery (or the muse) Sounds decadent, doesn't it? But the trick is that these things must be done with some energy, some passion, some brio and then they're not decadent.

WP: But there is no period at the end of the narrative.

JB: There is no period at the end. The tape, in the performed version back in the 1960s when we were doing these things on the lecture circuit,...had the tape spin out and the reels keep going around. The author, myself, steps out of the wing at that point and pushes a button on the tape machine, aborts the narrative.

WP: Aborts?

JB: Or permits it to be prepared for rewind.

WP: That, then, is a whole lot like life.

JB: A whole lot like life and indeed I would hope that these formalistic devices, when we talk about them like this, might make any sensible person say, "Yuck! Just give me a plain ol' story. Why don't you just tell a story, 'Once upon a time'?"...which is the title of my new book. The fact is that all of these literary devices and the literary forms, or whatever else they are, can be and often are rather poignant metaphors for aspects of life.

My great muse, Scheherazade, of course knew this, and the image of Scheherazade "yarning" on night after night to save her life is an image not only for writers (Who cares about that eventually?), but an image of all of us. The great Bulgarian-French critic Stephane Dedorof, in an essay on Scheherazade, points out quite rightly that the great metaphor of Scheherazade is a metaphor for all of us... As long as we are alive with other people, we are saying, "How was your day? Tell me about it." Narration, in other words, is as human a thing as we do among one another. When we're tired of narration, we're tired of living, and when we're tired of living, and when we are tired of listening and hearing and of transmitting and exchanging anecdotes and stories we're dead. And so in that sense Scheherazade is a splendid image, not just for the storytellers whose professional life is always on the line, as is hers, but indeed for all of us. That narration equates somehow with life is a profound statement about how we go through human life.

WP: So if we can sustain that suspense as she does at the end of each segment of her 1,001 tales, then we go on enjoying an enriched life.

JB: Indeed, and if we can do what we now learn from the neuroscientists, it is part of the biological evolution of our minds. Apparently the human mind, the brain, has developed as essentially a scenario-making machine, so all of us are going to make stories out of our lives, or else we couldn't make sense of our lives. Now we are having a conversation... After that, we will do such. We came to this from such and such. There

was part of a story which preceded this moment, and our story will continue after each of us, of course, seeing him or herself as the main character of the story which we go on inventing all the time, just as we go on inventing, modifying, and editing ourselves. Life is a narrative process...the author, the editor, and the reader of our own life's stories. Now, that's not metafictional and that's not postmodern. It turns out that that's just good contemporary neuroscience.

I am told by my neuroscientific friends, including my son who works in the field, that the idea that there is a little author in there somewhere is of course an old, inappropriate metaphor. We don't know where consciousness comes from, but here we got into fiction. There might not be a little author inside our heads, but it seems as if there were, and the as if, of course, is at the very heart of the fictive process. It seems to us as if our lives were stories. Daniel Dennett, the neuro-philosopher, as he calls himself, [sees each of us as] a positive center of narrative gravity. Isn't that a wonderful definition? So, it is as if there were a little center there. Whether in fact there is or not, the effect seems to be the same.

WP: Henry David Thoreau once observed that the mass of men lead lives of more or less quiet desperation. If this is so, I wonder how the common Joe who is caught up in keeping a paycheck even with inflation could acknowledge the narrative perspective you have just defined.

JB: Dear me, that's a grim prospect, isn't it, if the mass of men and women lead lives more or less of quiet desperation, then surely the on-spinning narrative itself must be spinning out pretty bleak, late-existentialist narratives, I would think, at best. I love a remark that the British-Czech playwright Thomas Stoppard makes somewhere in his oeuvre that out of every thousand people there are 900 who work, ninety who do well, nine who do good, and one lucky son-of-a-gun who gets to write about the other nine-hundred and ninety-nine. That last one doesn't lead a life of quiet desperation... As most of us go through life, not us writers, but us ordinary taxpayers trying to get from one chapter of our story to the next, see how readily these things fall into terms, but what I expect is that our sense of the "Once upon a time," our sense of the first chapter, or the

opening scene of our story itself keeps getting revised retrospectively as we go through our twenties and our thirties and our forties.

In my writing workshop at Johns Hopkins, I coach some young storytellers and novelists, and nothing is more common in such a workshop than to see a first-time novelist give us chapter four after a while and to say, "Oh, by the way, I completely changed chapter one. The novel no longer starts where it used to start." I suspect that change is change, that we do that kind of radical editing with our life stories as well. "Where my life really got going," you may say at age twenty, "is when I met young Miss so-and-so on such a corner," but by age thirty-five we may say, "Where I think the story of my life really began was when I decided to go to New York City for such-and-such occasion, rather than to so-and-so, and I turned this important corner." What are the way points, and therefore the starting point in our next narrative journey, depends on our continually updating the conception of where we are and where we are going. I'm a sailor, and dead-reckoning navigation consists of plotting the next leg of your course down the road by getting a fix on where you are by reviewing the plot of where you have been. Writing goes that way, too, by the way, and even given that kind of life navigation our notion of where we have been may keep being changed from the perspective of where we have next arrived. We are not existentially free quite in the Sartrean sense, I think, but we certainly are free to reconceive and re-orchestrate the story of our life as we go along. That's the inevitable shift of perspective that new experiences give us.

WP: That sounds like one of the recurring motifs in your work, the old romantic hero on a quest, or journey, which is the oldest motif in western literature, starting with Homer, as *Odyssey* means journeyer. You use that over and over.

JB: Sometimes straightforwardly, sometimes ironically, because another field or identification mark of postmodernism is this tendency to re-orchestrate in different keys the motifs picked up from the past history of the medium in terms of our own past work.

WP: The journey motif is possible in the postmodern world?

JB: Oh, very much so. I decided a long time ago that postmodern for me is what I do next. I am postmodern. Therefore, what I do next is postmodern.

WP: Then you invent yourself at that moment?

JB: Yes, but not invent myself like Odysseus, who every time he makes a new landfall, would improvise, or like an old CIA operative who would invent a whole new cover story for himself each time. No, just reconceive one's self without being false to the facts of how one sees them, but that's a big operative there. I had begun by wanting to be a musician, but by the time I graduated [high school] and went up to Julliard to give it a try, I decided that I wanted to be not a composer, not a particular performer, but an orchestrator, back in those days of big band jazz, as we called it, an "arranger." While I found that I didn't have the talent to be that, I still think of myself as a writer, as being a kind of re-orchestrator. That's a postmodern notion, that is taking things like the old voyage motif in fiction, let's say, or a form, like the epistolary novel, or the "Once upon a time" formula of traditional tale-telling and then re-orchestrating those old materials, those old melodies let's say, to some, I hope, quite contemporary purpose. There's a grain of irony in that always, but irony does not rule out passion.

WP: Paul Bowles, who abandoned America half a century ago to live in Tangier, has written some poignant literature. He, like you, made his first professional steps as a musician, worked with Aaron Copland, traveled across Europe, met Christopher Isherwood in the early salad days of his life in Berlin. Isherwood's character Sally Bowles is named in honor of Paul. Where would you place Bowles in twentieth-century literature?

JB: Bowles is a kind of proto-postmodernist, a sort of anticipator of something, but of course, as some high-tech critics have said, you can take any device from modernism and from postmodernism and if you know enough about the literary/art history you can trace: the provenance of any aspect of what we are doing back to the beginning no doubt. Shakespeare and Sophocles and of course in Rabelais and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*--indeed you can find all kinds of echo or premonitions of the devices

we now call or recognize as postmodern. The difference is the change in the tonality of a period of cultural history. I suppose when something becomes what the critics would say is the "cultural dominant," then we look at people like Laurence Sterne or Rabelais, and some aspects of Shakespeare, or like Paul Bowles--some of Paul Bowles's devices and effects--we look at them with a new eye.

Borges used to say that every great writer invents his precursors, and in the same way of course every new period in art history or cultural history re-interprets and so to that extent re-invents its predecessors. So now, we see, let's say when Laurence Sterne and Tristram Shandy had blank pages and dialogues going nowhere and little squiggles of Uncle Toby's walking stick---this looks to us suddenly postmodern. When Virgil in Book Two of the Aeneid has Aeneas, disguised by his mother and looking at the battlements of Dido's city Carthage and seeing frescoes of the Trojan War, Aeneas is looking at his story in progress, already translated to another medium of art. The murals are unfinished, so is Virgil's poem, and there is that chilling proto-postmodern moment in this classic of Roman literature when Aeneas sees his own face in the murals, in an unfinished mural because his story is only in Book Two. To classic readers, they would just nudge each other and say, "Look this is Virgil ringing the changes on Homer. Once upon a time there was a story that began, 'Once upon a time,' and I bet I can tell a better one than the original 'Once upon a time,' or do just as good and show that Rome's a culture worthy of comparison with Classical Greece." Now we look back on it, and we say, "By God, this is postmodernism."

WP: You've identified postmodernism as having its large impetus after the close of World War II, and modernism at the turn of the twentieth century.

JB: It depends on what field you're talking about. Does modernism start with Flaubert? The French would say that postmodernism dates from 3:00 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon in 1851, or something, when Flaubert writes to his mistress Louise Colet and says, "I would really like to write a book about nothing," then we are at least anticipating modernism at that point if not postmodernism.

WP: Then we have the Danish existentialist Soren Kierkegaard and the German existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche both of them living and dying before the turn of the century.

JB: Of course we do. What happens is that modernism picks up the torch of Romanticism and carries it another lap around the track. I used to have a formula for my undergraduates, that Enlightenment plus industrialism generates Romanticism, and that Romanticism plus catastrophe or revolution generates modernism and that modernism plus the threat of apocalypse may generate postmodernism.

WP: What's the future? Where do we go from here? Is there a postmodernism?

JB: We hear about it in Europe and among high-tech critics. I attended a seminar in Germany two summers ago on the end of postmodernism, new beginnings, just when I thought I was beginning to get the hang of what the term postmodernism means. They were wondering where literature will go next. It used to take a movement like the Renaissance 150 or 200 years to run its course. Now it seems to take one Presidential term for a thing to go.

WP: The time it takes for one of your novels.

JB: By and large, or the time it takes from matriculation to a Bachelor's Degree. We hear in our American writing workshops, if they're high-tech enough, we hear things like hypertext and computer fiction and so forth. Whether this is a kind of post-postmodernism, or something new, some cloud as small as a man's hand on the horizon, I don't know. The phenomenon is all too new to access. For those of us who don't feel dead yet, who feel that we are still, among whatever else we are doing, working out the possibilities of this very loosely-defined aesthetic called postmodernism --we're not ready to think about the next thing yet. It's enough to think about one's next book.

WP: Are you thinking about your next book?

JB: I'm a one-at-a-time congenital novelist. For me, that re-assessment, reorientation, looking down the road, mapping the next leg of the voyage, typically happens once every three or four years. As it happens, I have a new book out of the shop, this half-memoir, half-novel called *Once upon a Time*. And for a change I know what's next, because it's already in the hands of the publisher, but it's just a collection of nonfiction pieces, and now in my advanced age these two books out of the house in one year, I find that for the first time in twenty-five years I'm happily writing short stories again. I haven't worked the short story form since *Lost in the Funhouse* in the high 1960s. And with great delight, probably postpartum exhaustion from having delivered these twins, I can think of nothing more agreeable day after day than to go to my desk and think up short stories. Being congenitally a book man, by the time I had written four of this new bunch of short stories I was already seeing them as a book, because magazines are ephemeral and books you can hold in your hand and have a kind of heft you can stop a door with sometimes. So, I never feel that anything's finally real in my own product until it has been bound in hard covers and can be hefted from one hand to another.

WP: When Tennessee Williams reached the end of his sixties, he observed to me that he once could write symphonies and that now he wanted to write minuets but that the critics still demanded symphonies. Does this point come in a writer's life when that writer loses the capacity to write symphonies --your long novel form, the energy necessary for the concentration, for the birth of it. Is it still there?

JB: We see that in some writers, but the actuarial profile: of fiction writers and poets and so forth is various. The profiles are as various as in any other line of work. Not all cardiovascular surgeons are alike, and not all fiction writers are alike, or all novelists. The most common pattern, I guess in twentieth-century writing, is for a writer to begin by publishing a few short stories, and as soon as she or he has an agent, says, "How about a novel?" because they conceive them to be more merchandisable. Frequently, though, they give up the short form and practice the novel for the rest of their career. My trajectory has gone otherwise. I am by temperament not only a novelist, but a maxi-novelist, for I tend to write fairly fat novels, by and large. It may be just a kind of respite from that I have found now [again] in the short story form.

WP: Short stories after such fat novels?

JB: I have three books in the bibliography now, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*, and *The Tidewater Tales* which are all in the six- to seven-hundred page range. That's an enormous imposition on civilized attention at this hour of the world when we are told reader attention spans are getting increasingly abbreviated. Though, mind you, it's not for that reason that I've turned to the short story. I have never been guilty or responsible enough--however you want to conceive it--to think about how this is gonna go down with readers and with editors and with the market, as they say, while I'm writing. The factor of return on investment in that most literal sense, for better or worse, as a kind of innocence on my part, has never sat upon my writing table. When it's finished, of course, it's nothing but a commodity, and it's always nice if somebody reads it.

WP: So, you see symphonies ahead, rather than minuets.

JB: Possible symphonies ahead. While I was writing *Once upon a Time*, I kept thinking of it as my last book, perhaps as a way of frightening myself...a little bit. I realize now what I meant then: I hoped it would be the last go-round, the last riff, the last re-orchestration, of some riffs I have been playing for forty years in my fiction, the story of Scheherazade, the sailing quest motif. The story recircles back upon itself, but maybe it won't. Who's to say? When I have finished with the riff, I have finished with it. Till I have finished with it, I want to doodle some other variations. *Once upon a Time*, the old storyteller's invocation, is a "floating opera." My first published novel was *The Floating Opera*, so I'm deliberately circling back to my beginnings as a storyteller.

WP: Do you think you have reached your summit?

JB: Summit, I don't know... I think I have had my say, thanks to happy accidents of history and of fortune. I have been fortunate enough to have my say on the three or four things that a writer has to say in his or her productive lifetime. I like the idea that, in that sense, my large book oeuvre may be said to be done with, 'cause it sets my hands free, not to do nothing, but to do whatever next thing comes down the pike. My muse, I've

said somewhere, is not one of those drapery-clad daughters of Zeus who comes and perches on your lap and whispers sweet things in your ear. My muse is more like one of those Hollywood movie monsters who makes guttural sounds that prompt the heroine to say, "I think it's trying to tell us something." And then I try to listen. I monitor my notes and I monitor my internal muttering to see what it is that I'm trying to say to myself. That kind of ongoing, low-grade suspense is among the things that may keep a writer going, not only from page to page, but from year to year and even from decade to decade, if he or she is lucky enough to persist.... Of course the process of reinventing oneself goes on....

The author wishes to thank David Cottrell for his audio services
and Holly Koile of the University of Charleston Library.

~~~~~ By WILLIAM PLUMLEY



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