

ANALYSIS

Lost in the Funhouse (1968)

John Barth

(1930-)

“What the hell, reality is a nice place to visit but you wouldn’t want to live there, and literature never did, very long... Reality is a drag.” [Barth] What seems to have happened by the time of *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) is that he can no longer get hold of any ‘reality’ at all; everything he touches turns into fictions and yet more fictions. There is no reason for his words to follow in any one direction; as a matter of fact there is no reason why he should go on writing except that there seems to be an underlying feeling that identity is conterminous with articulation. The ‘I’ is only ascertainable as that which speaks: self is voice, but voice speaking unnecessary and arbitrary and untrue words.

The torment of the book is that of a man who cannot really find any sanction for writing either in world or self, yet feels that it is his one distinguishing ability, the one activity which gives him any sense of self. In ‘Autobiography,’ intended for tape recording, voice turns on voice in a void. ‘I hope I’m a fiction without real hope. Where there’s a voice there’s a speaker... I must compose myself... I’ll mutter to the end, one word after another, string the rascals out, mad or not, heard or not, my last words will be my last words.’ (The debt to Beckett is large and obvious.) Words floating free in this way never encounter any necessity, so they can drift on in self-canceling and self-undermining recessions as long as the voice lasts. If this is what ‘identity’ is, it is surely in a precarious state. The corrosive doubt about identity and its relation to language reveals itself in Barth’s preoccupation with the relationship between self and name. Ambrose, who figures in three of the stories in the book, knows well ‘that I and my sign are neither one nor quite two.’ I think this sense of the ambiguous relation between ‘I and my sign’ is the focal point of a larger dubiety about the relationship between all names and bodies, between words and world.

One rather grotesque story called ‘Petition’ takes up the old Mark Twain ‘joke’ about incompatible Siamese twins and gives it a philosophical twist. The petitioning brother (very much the writer), is an intelligent, almost mandarin figure who is seeking ‘disjunction’ from the coarse, brutish, appetitive brother to whose back he is stuck. ‘He’s incoherent but vocal; I’m articulate but mute.’ The incoherent brother is life itself, in its headlong noisy energy constantly shrugging off the attempts of language to circumscribe it within particular definitions and renderings. Language, in the form of the articulate brother, would be happy to pursue its inclination to ponder its elegant patternings in pure detachment from the soiling contacts of reality. But they are brothers, divided yet related—neither one nor two. Like Ambrose who cannot work out the relationship between his self and his sign, so Barth seems to have reached a point where he cannot stop troubling himself with his uncertainty about the relationship between the words he invents, and the world he shares.

‘Lost in the Funhouse,’ a story which owes a lot to Beckett and to Robbe-Grillet, approaches this problem again, with Barth never allowing us to forget the foreground presence of the typing man who, lost in the freedom of his inventions, can put down any words he likes in any order. ‘This can’t go on much longer; it can go on forever.’ There is no pressure to keep the words in order, and they can start reversing their tracks and dissolving their statements as easily as they can advance new stages of the account of the family’s adventures. ‘Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a figment of the author’s imagination?... Are there other errors of face in this fiction?’ In such ways does the story destroy its own sustaining conventions. In addition Ambrose himself is not clear whether what he is experiencing at any one moment is a private fantasy or a public fact, so the uncertainty surrounding any sequence of words is multiplied, leaving us with a sense of fictions within fictions within fictions. At the same time, an anguished sense that meanwhile ‘the world was *going on!*’ just occasionally intrudes into this lexical paralysis; unvexed by reflection and possibility, in dark corners of the Funhouse, couples wordlessly copulate. One senses Barth’s own dissatisfaction with the feelings of exclusion which beset the fiction-maker.

The Funhouse itself seems to represent a variety of structures, evoking associations both of Burroughs's vaudeville and Borges's labyrinth. From one point of view the Funhouse is an analogue of life itself, in which the relatively mindless or unselfconscious merrily and energetically couple, while Ambrose is astray in the mirror-maze, vexed by endlessly receding 'reflections' and unable to disentangle dreaming from doing. But the Funhouse is also that pseudo-world which man invents for his own amusement, the edifice of the fictions with which we distract ourselves. Ambrose in the Funhouse can imagine various endings to his story. Once again one feels the close connection between the character's situation in the story and the author's position among his words. 'The climax of the story must be its protagonist's discovery of a way to get through the funhouse. But he has found none, may have ceased to search.' Both Ambrose and Barth may be destined to remain confined in their own fictions. 'He died telling stories to himself in the dark.' Thinks Ambrose about himself. Writes Barth about Ambrose. Says Barth about Barth. Unfixed in any one frame and unlocated in any one plane, the words float before us, in multiple perspective, in no perspective at all.

But the closing narrative statement about Ambrose is clearly a refracted statement about the author. 'He dreams of a funhouse vaster by far than any yet constructed... He will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—through he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.' *Giles Goat-Boy* was indeed a sort of vast funhouse, with Barth at the controls. Life itself is also a sort of funhouse, but the gift (and curse) of the writer is that he can invent alternatives. The funhouse is not everything that is the case. But what one notices in this most recent book is that it is not a funhouse, but a series of depositions about building, or not building, funhouses."

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