

**MASCULINE–FEMININE MEDIATION THROUGH FICTION
AND THE SEXUALITY OF STORYTELLING –
A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON *DUNYAZADIAD* BY JOHN BARTH**

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Abstract: *The study tries to demonstrate, in the theoretical frame of love studies and rewriting, that John Barth's Dunyazadiad offers a type of gender reconstruction that denies the social determination of the relationships between the sexes by means of a parody of both the patriarchal machismo in its strong Eastern version and the radical feminism of the 20th century. Barth resorts to fictionalising the idea of metaphysical sex or the natural magic of love, as well as to the representation of love as an intentional construct that prompts exclusivism and duration. The interaction between the fictional love story and the theory about the sexuality of storytelling supports the author's/characters' identity theme – that of seeking one's deeper self, a process in which the Eros and the act of narrating meet at the level of mythical androgyny.*

Keywords: *gender rewriting, identity, love studies, metalepsis, parody, the sexuality of storytelling*

1. Introduction: The (mytho)poetics of John Barth

Barth conceived *Dunyazadiad* as the final part of a trilogy of mythical rewritings entitled *Chimera*, one of his classical-postmodern works. *Chimera* is the narrative anamorphosis of a hybrid creature (lion, goat and serpent/dragon), as *Dunyazadiad*, *Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad* are models for “recycled” writing, for the protean text that is always open not only semantically, but also as a material whole. The volume has internal, Moebius-type cohesion, the novellas being, as Barth (1984: 97) confesses, “as different in appearance as a lion from a goat, et cetera, but built upon a single skeleton, warmed by the same blood, and in turn, I hope, all fueling equally the beast's internal-external combustion”.

Barth's epic manner of entitling his books draws attention to the notion of *transvaluation* (Genette 1997: 343), by which changes are made in the axiological order of the canonical work in a positive (revaluation), negative (devaluation) or complex (transvaluation in the strong sense of the term) way. Barth lays emphasis on secondary or tertiary characters, semi-heroes such as Perseus and Bellerophon, function-characters like Scheherazade's younger sister or the colourless Menelaus, as opposed to the bright Helen in *Menelaiad* (Barth 1981), thus questioning the mechanisms of the mythologisation and heroisation processes perpetuated by the authoritarian tradition. *Anonymiad* (idem) is a title that dissipates the idea of impressive epic heroes/plots, as well as the paternity of the text. The text that comes before the author – the plot is nobody's property in

particular –, the “history” of the author intertwined with that of the characters in Chinese box narratives, the recovery of literature by means of the former literature, i.e. the recirculation of plots within the plot index of the entire culture, like the nine amphorae-Muses carried by the sea currents in *Anonymiad* – all these are (meta)fictional as well as academic themes of a writer who constantly illustrates his critical theory through creation and vice versa.

In *Chimera*, the common denominator of the three novellas that make it up is not related to the themes already established by the great epics, the adventure and the *questa* – although they are present –, but to the exploitation of the (meta)fictional dimension of myth, of tradition in its broadest sense, more precisely the revelation of the transfusion from the archetypal cultural matter to the exhausted postmodern imagery that Barth deals with in *The Literature of Exhaustion* and *The Literature of Replenishment*, essays included in *The Friday Book* (Barth 1984). The determination with which Scheherazade supports *recounting* (imitation, reformulation) against *invention* highlights the palimpsestic nature of postmodern literature for which the plot in *Dunyazadiad* is an example: the stories are provided by a Genie that retells the content of *The Thousand and One Nights*; the content, we know from the frame story, is taken from “materials received from narrative antiquity” (Barth 1973: 36).

The non-assumption of the plot in postmodernism has as a correspondent the non-assumption of the traditional instance of the author. The latter becomes, as Brian McHale (2004: 213-215) shows, a metaleptic presence that short-circuits the ontological levels of the text through its double extradiegetic and intradiegetic dimension. The Genie, a character playing the part of a contemporary writer fighting a block, is Barth’s surrogate in a system of mutual mirroring: the Barth on the cover appears as the Author, a “being of paper” in the pages of his own novella, and the novella is mirrored in itself through the references made to the third novella, which becomes the first in the series on which the Genie-Writer pretends to be working: a story entitled *Dunyazadiad*, whose main character is Scheherazade’s younger sister on her future wedding night. Barth’s poetics proposes the reflection of the diegesis in the discourse and vice versa, under the emblem of this secondary, yet fictionally powerful character in which the “old” coexists with the “new”. Dunyazade is the character without a story, but with the most problematic destiny. Paradoxically, she witnessed all the bedroom stories, but she did not take part in anything; she is an *initiated virgin*, a rare combination of “heartfelt ineptitude” and “heartless skill” in both the art of storytelling and that of love. For Shah Zaman, she does not have the advantage of novelty:

‘What are you going to do to entertain *him* [emphasis in original], little sister? Make love in exciting new ways? There are none! Tell him stories, like Scheherazade? He’s heard them all! Dunyazade, Dunyazade! Who can tell your story?’ (Barth 1973: 41)

In terms of writing, Dunyazade is the metaphor for the exhausted subject, a palimpsest with countless layers still waiting to be rewritten upon. She is the answer to the question “How to do something new with something old?”. It is not a coincidence that *Dunyazadiad* opens Barth’s trilogy following the same metatextual logic as *The Tale of the Merchant and the Ifrit*, which opens Scheherazade’s cycle of stories in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* (Mardrus 2004).

It is obvious that Barth's characters – Scheherazade, Dunyazade, the Genie in the first place – are incarnations of his theoretical ideas. The leitmotif statement "The key to the treasure is the treasure" becomes a conclusion both on the metadiscourse and the fictional level: the solution to the problem of saving literature is literature itself, just as the solution to the war of the sexes is, in any social system, even the most patriarchal one, love or, as a character puts it, embracing the "Tragic View of Love". As for the exchange of services between Scheherazade and the Genie, this may be the pact of re-creation that the present makes with the past and the past with the present, casting light upon each other (Truș ă 2018: 797). The exercise of rewriting is *pla(y)giarism*, to use the term coined by Raymond Federman (1993: 51); the procedures of identification and alteration, of paying homage and undermining overlap each other, so both works have something to gain as a result. Any rewriting develops in a double sense – it reaffirms the authority of the canonical work and at the same time reveals its ideological limits, narrative gaps, intentional methods of outranking and downplaying subordinated to social, political, religious, racial stakes etc.

2. From the strategy-story to the confession-story

Dunyazadiad is not only the rewriting of the subject in the frame of the Arabian cycle, but also its unfaithful continuation. The sequel seems triggered by the artificial conclusion of *The Thousand and One Nights*, felt by the reader as a kind of *deus ex machina* for Dunyazade's fate: the little sister is given as a wife, as required by the symmetrical scheme, to Shah Zaman, Shah Riar's younger brother, the destiny of the secondary couple being the consequence of the Good that spreads concentrically and leads to a chain of happy endings. By contradicting the realemes of cultural history, Barth fills the psychological gaps of the hypotext with his own interpretations or with *motivation* procedures (Genette 1997: 372-373) that clarify the stories of the couples.

The narrative consists of two intertwining stories that are told on the very night of the two couples' wedding, followed by the all-encompassing account of the narrator-Genie. In the first story, Dunyazade tells Shah Zaman how she and her sister became, from possible victims, the brides of the two misogynistic brothers, thanks not only to the tricks devised by the two sisters, but also the stories that the writer-Genie brought to the storyteller from the future, from his fundamental book *The Thousand and One Nights*, arranged in the correct order. It is extremely important for Scheherazade to know which story is more impactful for the beginning, how to emphasize the link between the evolution of her situation and the story she tells, how to adapt the story to the king's frame of mind etc. However, the first story does not stop here: Scheherazade believes that her triumph over the Shah's dark soul is by no means forgiveness and marriage, but the perfectly symmetrical revenge for the humiliations she has endured, a project in which she also involves her sister. The two are going to castrate their own husbands on their wedding night and then commit suicide, hoping they will meet in a world "that knows nothing of *he* and *she* [emphasis in original]" (Barth 1973: 46), but not before letting their former oppressors know what fate awaits them. Dunyazade tells all this to Shah Zaman, and he, under a death threat, tells his own story: his masculine pride made him claim to be dealing with women as his brother did – deflowering and then killing them – but he actually released them secretly. In the end, the two stories meet in another version of the frame story from *The Thousand*

and *One Nights*, that of the couple formed in *one night*. The morning finds both Dunyazade and Shah Zaman – and, it is suggested, the main couple, Scheherazade and Shahryar, as well – purified by their symmetrical confessions and free of prejudices about the war of the sexes. It is a different kind of redemption, found not through the victory of the woman-spiritual guide over the brutalized man, but the triumph of the masculine and the feminine alike, the mutual acceptance of the vulnerabilities and strengths of each sex.

The story and its corollary – locutionary act, narrative art and exemplary plot – maintain the saving function established by the *Arabian Nights* or the Indo-Persian cycle *The Book of Sindibād* (Clouston 1884), that of a weapon sharper than the sword or an exchange by which one's life is redeemed (Bodiştean 2013: 74-80), except that in *Dunyazadiad* the agent of significance is no longer the strategy-story, but the truthful story, the confession. A perlocutionary shift from knowing “which words work, and when, and for what” (Barth 1973: 15) towards life stories that, as Shah Zaman says, “are too important to be lies. Fictions, maybe – but truer than fact” (idem: 61) occurs in the act of storytelling. Or, in the words of Barth, the Genie, who practises the poetics of the fluidity of ontological categories in his entire work, “Some fictions [...] were so much more valuable than fact that in rare instances their beauty made them real” (idem: 25).

The sincerity of the relationship between men and women and, consequently, the acceptance of the *interchangeability* of socially assigned roles form the core of the redistribution of textual ideology in this postmodern proposal. Between the magic (magnetism) of the sexes and the magic of genuine storytelling there is a two-way investment aiming to deconstruct the old mental structures and anachronistic ideologems. The scenario of Scheherazade's nights, consisting of sex and storytelling, in this order, is significantly recalibrated in Dunyazade's reverse scenario, storytelling and sex. Nevertheless, on the night of the narrative present (just one night instead of one thousand and one), one no longer hears Scheherazade's unidirectional monologue, which preserves the pre-assigned roles of listener and narrator, king and subject, but a story with two narrators, Dunyazade and Shah Zaman, a dialogue of two lives that advances to the point where they meet both physically and on an alchemical-spiritual level, that of the “Tragic View of Love”.

Barth's entire fictional construct retraces and preserves the strong topoi of the hypotext – misogyny, death threat, conversion to love, purification of the soul – opposing *multiplicity and duration* (involved in Scheherazade's laborious persuasion) to *uniqueness and instantaneity*. Dunyazade and Shah Zaman “pass a thousand nights in one dark night, and in the morning embrace each other” (idem: 64) because, in the end and as a result of abandoning the strategy in favour of the confession, they make a pact of reciprocity in the mythical-archetypal sense:

‘Let's end the dark night! All that passion and hate between men and women; all that confusion of inequality and difference! Let's take the truly tragic view of love! Maybe it *is* [emphasis in original] a fiction, but it's the profoundest and best of all! Treasure me, Dunyazade, as I'll treasure you!’ (Barth 1973: 61).

3. “The Tragic View of Love”

The reception of Barth's work has often been less than enthusiastic, the attention paid to the fictional artefact or its generalising irony leading to “the disregard of philosophical implications of the demythologisation of the ideal

human experience materialised in rigid traditions and systems” (Lupan 1988: 211-212). Depth hermeneutics reveals a discourse on the human condition, which in *Dunyazadiad*, especially its second part, becomes genuine erotology.

Compared to the feminist rewriting of classical myths – such as Margaret Atwood’s (2005) *The Penelopiad* or Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra* (1984) and *Medea* (1998) –, which give a unilateral presentation of the offensive launched by the “once silent party”, *Dunyazadiad* confronts the conventionalism of various socio-political and mentality systems (Eastern-patriarchal, Amazonian, contemporary) with the archetypal view of the sexes and the traditional reality of machismo and its radical and self-sabotaging aspects of feminism. In this manner, Barth denounces the mechanical realistic methods that have led to the establishment of a relational, older or more recent tradition that is a socially determined “representation”, not typical of the human being.

Barth’s Scheherazade is “updated” to resemble the present-day model: the typical successful woman, but also the parody of extremist, self-sufficient and self-destructive feminism. Appalled by the state of the nation, she gives up her studies to fight for a humanitarian cause: to stop the femicide committed by Shahryar. After exhausting all rational possibilities, she realises – and this is the irony of the rewriting! – that her only way out is to manipulate the Shah through “magic”, using sweet words and sex – solutions as “ancestral” as the subjects of her stories. Sherry is neither faithful, nor in love, nor genuine in the “Amazonism” she imposes on herself, just as she imposed her frigidity in her relationship with the Shah. Within the system of textual symmetries, her counterpart is the vizier’s daughter in Shah Zaman’s kingdom, who gives herself to him unconditionally and has the power to turn him from a cruel man with discretionary powers to a man of authentic existence. The “Tragic View of Sex and Temperament” that she embraces fine-tunes the feminist motivational discourse of self-sufficiency, pleading for respecting each woman’s nature or the “inner sex” Evola (1983: 32-35) speaks about – sex that, in the case of atypical individuals, can be asserted as completely independent from the physical conditions and the social mask and, if repressed, causes ruptures in the “organic relations with the essential being” (idem: 33). From the spiritual sex perspective, the “dependent”, Demeter-type woman is *natura innata* in the first place and social determination on the second place:

she knew herself personally be unsuited for independence, formed by her nature and upbringing to be happy only in the shadow of a man whom she admired and respected more than herself. (Barth 1973: 54)

Shah Zaman’s impotence can be a metaphor for his dismantled social role (and its implications related to power, possession, authority), impotence that ends with his schizoid existence:

‘You *are* unable to keep it,’ she told me softly: ‘not because you’re naturally impotent, but because you’re *not* [emphasis in original] naturally cruel. If you’d tell your brother that after thinking it over you’ve simply come to a conclusion different from his, you’d be cured as if by magic’. (idem: 56)

As the denouement suggests, Scheherazade’s character has the same evolution, because she is cured of her feminist ambitions at the end of the show, when Shahryar’s “mask” falls.

Barth's gender reconstruction fictionalises the idea of abyssal, metaphysical sex or natural magic of love – in line with Plato's (1994) androgyny, Ficino's (1985) universal fluid theory, Jung's (2014) *animus–anima* complementarity, and Evola's (1983) magnetic theory of love – combined with the representation of love as an intentional, volitive-intellective-affective construct (Ortega y Gasset 1971, Paz 1995). Both traditional representations imply and support the idea of exclusivist love vs. possession and multiplication (harem). The one-night woman (the virgins beheaded or freed in the morning), the favourite (for a while!) woman/wife in the harem and the woman of a lifetime represent the beginning and the end of the search for *individuation* on the sex-eroticism-love path theorised by Octavio Paz (1995) in *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism*. Eroticism or culturalized sex – the level at which the male-female game takes place in the fictional universe – illustrates the Don Juan/polygamous trap of novelty and diversity and prevents evolution. This is what Shah Zaman, the reverse of Don Juan's character, who does not experience sensuality, but the disillusionment caused by the objectification of woman, admits:

Though I took many, with their consent, I wanted none of them. Novelty lost its charm, then even its novelty. Unfamiliarity I came to loathe: the foreign body in the dark, the alien touch and voice, the endless *exposition* [emphasis in original]. All I craved was someone with whom to get on with the story of my life, which was to say, of our life together: a loving friend; a loving wife; a treasurable wife; a wife, a wife. (Barth 1973: 60)

In the Western tradition of the Don Juan-type of libertine life, one fails in love when one deliberately repudiates the idea of choice by professing a kind of eroticism whose essence lies in change. Of the entire phenomenology of love, one remembers only the stage of “pure sensuality” or “the triumph of the flesh that has forgotten about the spirit” (Liiceanu 2010: 232). On institutionalising the multiple possession of a woman, the Eastern patriarchal system assigns choice and exclusivity a relative nature and, as shown by the two shahs' experiences, the punishment for absolute liberty is boredom. No Commander comes to punish libertinage, only the outraged spirit of those involved in it. Ortega y Gasset developed an interesting theory about love as *spiritual creation* that appears “only in certain stages and forms of human culture” (1971: 180) and is unknown in cultural areas of non-attachment religions like Buddhism or Hinduism. Love, says Octavio Paz (1995: 156), is also incompatible with any totalitarian system, because such a system denies the idea of *person*, implicitly that of identity and singularity. In line with the social theories about love, the polygamous system is revealed as an objective obstacle to discovering the profound masculine identity:

Since love is the most delicate and total act of a soul, it will reflect the state and nature of the soul. [...] For this reason, we can find in love the most decisive symptom of what a person is. (Ortega y Gasset 1971: 144)

Possession, as Barth's re-imagined plot implies, leads to unfaithfulness; in reply, love means the assumption of equality in the mythical-archetypal meaning of complementarity and reciprocity. However, the ideological stake of re-fictionalising the Eastern plot is much more subtle, Barth suggesting that it is not patriarchy (or the Amazonian matriarchy) that kills love, but the patriarchal attitude

– which is, essentially, timeless – or the obedience with which each individual identifies with their social mask.

According to Evola's (1983: 35-41) theory about the manifestation of erotic attraction on the different layers of the being, in *Dunyazadiad* the couples' game takes place on the path leading from "mask" to "face". At the "mask" level, the shallowest layer of the being, any individual is unstable, adopting behaviours like libertine love or socially adequate "bourgeois" love. The profound being comprises the other two layers: the intermediate one, with a remarkable degree of determination and stability, is where the *principium individuationis* and *natura innata* of each person are found; the deepest layer, that of elementary forces preceding individuation, shelters the roots of sex, the blind impulse that pushes one towards the opposite sex only because it is the opposite sex. While this last layer arouses blind, even animal attraction or the positively de-individualized forms of the Eros such as Dionysian manifestations, the choice, the "unique love" is born at the border between the deep and the intermediate layers, where "the conditional quality of bonds belonging to the individuation or inborn nature of a given being start to act almost at once" (idem: 37).

Unlike the artificial symmetry of the Eastern hypotext (in which the secondary couple is a structurally identical "satellite" of the main couple), the denouement in *Dunyazadiad* provides *individual solutions* to the issue of gender equality and love in a couple: Shahryar marries Scheherazade (whose sexual experiences he has known all along) and agrees to giving her a kind of freedom similar to his own, considering that "the way to spare oneself the pain of infidelity is to love and not you care" (Barth 1973: 62); Shah Zaman, sensing Dunyazade's genuine chastity, chooses to reward faithfulness with faithfulness. His love story proves that the positions of power – not only between sexes, but also between individuals of the same sex – do not belong to the "mask" level, but to *principium individuationis*. Through the "experiment" set up on the wedding night, he reverses the poles of authority, giving Dunyazade the opportunity to kill him, fully confident that she will not do it: "Besides, between any two people, you know – what I mean, it's not the patriarchy that makes you take the passive role with your sister, for example" (idem: 50).

Charles B. Harris's psychoanalytic reading confirms that the salvation of the male character is achieved by assuming the female principle – creation, love, acceptance of time – as a constituent part of it:

According to Jung, a man is often incapable of truly loving a woman until he has begun to come to the terms with the feminine component in his own psyche, his anima. (Harris 1983: 134)

Barth's parody targets both the debauchery of Eastern polygamy, hidden behind opulence, and the sexual promiscuity of the modern world. For the contemporary Genie, adultery is a kind of perversion, while the marriage of the modern world, with its "dimensions of spiritual seriousness and public responsibility" (1973: 35), is the only form of expressing the exclusive choice of the other. And "the notion of a love that time would season and improve" (idem: 24), which he invokes, the image of the "two white-haired spouses who still cherished each other and their life together" (idem: 24-25) can be an intertext of the myth of Philemon and Baucis (Ovid 1955: 195-198), who ask the gods to make

them die together (in the myth) or before they stop cherishing each other (in Barth's more cautious version).

The concept of *unconditional love* that Barth (1981) discusses in *Menelaiad* implies the same opposition between *person* and *persona*, between "face" and "mask". Menelaus, tormented by the question of why Elena had chosen him, is the prisoner of the superficial and conventional layer of the Eros, unable to penetrate the depths of reality, despite the assurances of the Delphi oracle or Proteus's explanations. Due to his inability to perceive his own individuation, he appears as a dispersed, fluctuating reality that questions his own existence: "It is easy to love; to be loved, as if one were real, on the order of the others: fearsome mystery! Unbearable responsibility!" (idem: 151).

The solution to escape the war of the sexes, i.e. the degeneration of identity, seems to be to reduce the distance between the Ego and the Superego to a minimum, by projecting the inner being onto the outer one (instead of saving the appearances of patriarchy, as the two shahs did). It is a solution that literature itself (the story) provides – the philosophy of "as if" or fictionalisation, the counterfactual attitude that permanently preserves the consciousness of the mimetic game, of a system of references that exists not in the empirical reality, but the deep layers of psychism:

'Let's make love like passionate equals!'

'You mean *as if* we were equals,' Dunyazade said. 'You know we're not. What you want is impossible.'

'Despite your heart's feelings?' pressed the King. 'Let it be *as if*! Let's make a philosophy of that *as if* [emphasis in original]!' (Barth 1973: 62)

The symbolic hermeneutics involved in the recurring *night-day* binomial (converted here into the ceremonial of the "Good night" and "Good morning" greetings), associated by Durand (1999: 154-164) with the scenarios of transcendence, ascension and fall, links the exclusivist love theme to the discovery of identity. Shah Zaman, as a character who bears the textual ideology, becomes *the enlightened one*, like the Genie and Perseus, in midlife, at the age of the great initiations. He originates in the solar archetype of the hero who defeats the dragon of prejudice and overcomes the "complex of binding" (idem: 162) – a symbol of extraindividual determinations –, which is compared to his status as a sexually disadvantaged subject, a subject who, unfamiliar with reciprocity, cannot become an object. Similarly, his brother, overcoming his status as a "prisoner" of the strategy-story, the web of words that fascinates, seduces, manipulates and, eventually, "binds", comes to know insightful Scheherazade so well that he learns to cherish her. The complementary scenario, that of The Beauty and the Beast, suggested by the Genie (Barth 1973: 30), invites one to reconsider love as a way of going deeper than the superficial layer of the flesh, to where the deep self lies, and breaking the "spell", i.e. the alienating effect of the traumatic experience.

4. The sexuality of storytelling

As Barth has stated many times, Scheherazade is the personal myth of his work – "What Diotima was to Socrates in the *Symposium*, Scheherazade has always been to me" (1984: 220) – that is built, metatextually, around the archetype of the storyteller originating in the literary tradition. Nevertheless, *Dunyazadiad* occupies a special place, because its supercharacter, the *story*, literally dramatizes

the process of identifying the discourse/speech with life and the silence (of the character/narrator/text) with death. This is a major theme of postmodernist self-reflecting fiction, shows McHale (2004: 231), leading to the anamorphosis of the classical theme of creation as a way of saving oneself from death (*exegi monumentum*). “Story-persons” (Todorov 1978: 33-46) like Scheherazade exist only as discourse entities – they live as long as they talk – and the fracture occurs when this conditioning disappears. Hence the search for the never-ending story... The Genie and Scheherazade save themselves from the “inspirational crisis” through each other, which makes *the word* the antidote to *death*, in a multitude of proper or figurative meanings, including the connotation that the past is saved through the future and the future through the past. At this level, *Dunyazadiad* is about “How to save and save again one’s narrative neck?” (Barth 1984: 219).

Love, the most powerful agent of textual significance, mediates the relationship between the story and death, generating a system of mutual investments. Established works (the *Odyssey*, the *Decameron*), says the Genie, illustrate the factual collaboration between the magic of sex and the magic of storytelling, the *Thousand and One Nights* being the best example in this regard. On the other hand, in the Persian alcove, the Eros always acquires an ultimate feature, being threatened either by the Shah’s sword or Dunyazade’s blade, or it is identified with death in the so-called “Tragic View of Sex and Temperament”. The relationship between storytelling and Eros, between storytelling and sex, is exploited to such an extent that it becomes a theory of the “sexuality” of the story developed in the dialogues between the Genie and Scheherazade. From the symbolic sexual scenarios that can be identified in the physical (male) act of writing on the white, feminine page, to writing as a mechanism of seducing the reader, the Eros is involved in the act of writing/storytelling as a linking element that makes creation possible. Barth shifts symbolically from the writing instruments to the sexual ones: the Genie’s magic wand has run dry, a sign of writer’s block, so that, resurrected by the Eros, becomes “the original springs of narrative” (1973: 17); Scheherazade’s pen becomes, in moments of great concentration on the “strategy” of defeating the Shah, one of her sex toys. Even the Genie is seen as ambiguous, both as a narrative rescuer of his idol and a man who, sexually speaking, “has the key to any treasure a woman needs” (idem: 23). At last, writing/storytelling, like sexual intercourse, is technique and rhythm as well as content (“*about* something”), “refinement” as well as “intensity”, or “virtuosity” as well as “passion” (the two couples significantly representing different options on both levels).

As McHale (2004: 222) says,

Love as a principle of fiction is, in at least two of its senses, metaleptic. If authors love their characters, and if texts seduce their readers, then these relations involve violations of ontological boundaries.

The oral stories told by Barth’s Scheherazade could be an illustration of what Roland Barthes calls “the pleasure of the text”, a superior type of seduction resulting from the release of the erotic charge that language encapsulates. Any text expresses a *kāmāsutra* of language, but “writing aloud” is the supreme form of the aesthetics of textual pleasure, a pleasure derived from that “*grain* [emphasis in original] of the voice”, which reveals “the pulsional incidents”, “the language lined with flesh”, “the grain of the throat”, “a whole carnal stereophony” (Barthes 1975: 66).

As far as amorous seduction is concerned, it does not achieve its purpose only through attractiveness; it becomes complete through words, says Gabriel Liiceanu (2010: 226-227), in line with Kirkegaard (who analyses the Don Juan myth in *Alternative*). The word means plot, method, technique, premeditation, i.e. the entire arsenal with which the other is removed from oneself and taken where the seducer wants. This is where storytelling assumes the role of a convincing interaction, one that willingly submits the seduced to their seducer in a “love-relation, not a rape” (Barth 1973: 34); the author stirs and maintains the reader’s interest, while the reader represents the action by inaction, consents, cooperates. The narrator’s and listener’s pragmatic roles, be they masculine or feminine, join in creative effervescence that is valid also in the erotic code of the text, love being the symbol of any kind of fecundity:

‘The reader is likely to find herself pregnant with new images, as you hope Shahryar will become with respect to women; but the storyteller may find himself pregnant too ...’ (Barth 1973: 34)

5. Conclusion

Made up of so many masks, Barth’s characters appear before the reader’s eyes as transitory, protean realities, versions of themselves without truth value. As Raluca Nicoleta Șerban (2016: 103) shows in her book on John Barth, behind these decentralised identities one can identify, however, the stable identity of the author who appeals to autofiction, a concept that circumscribes “the author’s projection into the text, hidden behind fictional characters, to (re)create themselves as the only possibility to reconcile with reality”. In my opinion, this stable identity can be associated not only with the so-called “Author’s figure”, but also with the consistent imagery resulting, as Barth (1973: 208) confesses in *Bellerophoniad*, from addressing “the archetypes directly”, those psychic invariants with which the myth operates and which cast light on contemporary reality.

In line with these mythopoetic coordinates, *Dunyazadiad* proves that Barth’s erotic imagery and eroticised discourse converge on a representation of androgyny that, in the double register of the socially determined couple and the “exhausted story”, symbolises the path to the character’s/author’s self-discovery and the condition of Creation at the same time.

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