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Narrative Embedding and the Multilinear Text: The Case of John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*

Stories within stories are among the bedrock practices of the narrative art, extending back to the very origins of storytelling in all cultures. Traditionally known as framing, this practice, as it turns out, involves a process that occurs in two forms: if the frame serves to introduce one or more stories of greater import quantitatively, thematically, etc., then a «framing device» with its «frame story» and its «inset story» or stories is spoken of (the *Decameron*); if, on the contrary, the stories contained within the primary level are accessory to the principal narrative, an «embedding device» with its «interpolated story» or stories is at hand (the digressions in *Don Quixote*).¹ Indeed, the term «frame», a metaphor drawn from the visual arts, does not clarify the situation given that picture frames rarely form part of a pictorial representation; nor does it bring out the fact that both stories and the stories they possibly contain are couched in the same medium.² Moreover, the proposal to name inset stories «embedded stories» on the grounds that they initiate «a new narrative level» whereas interpolation «occurs during a pause or gap»³ overlooks the fact that interpolated stories also exist by virtue of the process of embedding.

1 See for example Fludernik (1996: 343).

2 Cf. Wolf (2006: 180-183); Coste, Pier (2009: 304).

3 Keen (2003: 111).

Embedding and levels

Narratological research has made it possible to sort out these matters by taking a closer look at the notion of embedding. Early on, it was proposed by Todorov (1967) that the insertion of a second-level story be likened to a syntactic form: embedding, a particular type of grammatical subordination. John Barth, in his «Tales Within Tales Within Tales», refers to this essay, pointing out the digressive nature of second-level stories and at the same time stressing the «isomorphic» relation between the *frametale* structure and syntactic embedding.⁴ However, Todorov had meanwhile revised his position by focusing on the various ways that narrative sequences can be combined into more complex forms. Thus, alongside «linking» and «alternation» of sequences he places embedding, which occurs when «an entire sequence replaces a proposition of the first sequence»: in place of syntactic subordination, the determining factors of embedding thus became (a) the narrative level of the two sequences and (b) the type of thematic relation between them (causal explanation, thematic juxtaposition, contrast, slowing down of narrative progression).⁵ Leaving aside the question of levels and embedding, Bremond, for his part, demonstrated that elementary sequences combine «end-to-end» (the end of one sequence succeeded by the beginning of another), into «enclaves» (one sequence developing within another), or by «bracketing together» (simultaneity).⁶

The appeal to linguistics as a guide to narrative embedding does not appear to be decisive.⁷ Known in traditional grammar as subordination, embedding as studied by transformational grammar occurs when, for example, the two sentences «I have not read this book» and «You gave me this book» are combined to form «I have not read the book you gave me»: the word «this» in the first or «matrix» clause is

4 Barth (1984 [1981]: 235-238).

5 Todorov (1973: 83-85); cf. Todorov (1968: 138).

6 Bremond (1973: 132).

7 The following observations on linguistic embedding are based on Dubois et al. (1994: 179, 236-237 and 344) and Fromkin et al. (2000: 130-131 and 137).

replaced by the second or «embedded» clause, resulting in a «complex» sentence by coordination rather than by subordination. There is no evidence here of the levels that come into play in narrative embedding, much less the thematic relations between them; nor is there any change of speaker between the two clauses. A sentence employing subordination such as «Hamlet knew that his father had been murdered» would appear to come closer to narrative embedding. However, in addition to the lack of change of speaker, this example shows that linguistic embedding (a) imposes certain lexical conditions (replacing «knows» by «said» is possible here, but «kisses» is ruled out) and (b) raises questions of logical modality (in this case, epistemic modality) rather than of narrative embedding.⁸ A related syntactic operation, «hypotaxis», obtains when the relation between two sentences is one of coordination («This man is capable and will succeed») or of subordination («This man will succeed because he is capable») as opposed to «parataxis», a relation of juxtaposition («This man is capable, he will succeed»). These examples, as the previous ones, suggest that the criteria of linguistic embedding, which are essentially syntactic, pertain more readily to the analysis of textual microstructure and style than they do to the features of narrative embedding.

When turning from narrative grammars to discourse-oriented narratology, embedding is seen in a different light. This is the case notably of Genette, for whom stories within stories are modeled not after syntactic embedding, but rather integrated into the textual principle of narrative levels.⁹ Every act of narration — whatever the grammatical person employed — is necessarily situated outside the narrated world it portrays and is thus «extradiegetic» in relation to the events occurring within the story, located at the «intradiegetic» level.¹⁰

8 Modality forms the basis of narrative worlds studied by narrative semantics, a phenomenon extending well beyond the problems of embedding.

9 Genette (1980 [1972]: 227-237).

10 Narrative level together with relation of person — i.e., presence or absence of the narrator in the narrated world («homodiegetic» vs. «heterodiegetic» narration) — and time of the narrating form the narrating situation. The term extradiegetic is sometimes confused with that of heterodiegetic. Note, however, that the one concerns voice (the narrative act always occurs at a level distinct

Within the intradiegetic level, a «metadiegetic» narrative (corresponding to the second intradiegetic level and possibly extending to additional levels) can occur, resulting from both a change of level (diegesis) and a shift of narrator and/or of narratee. Hence the story of Alice's adventures after she falls down the rabbit-hole does not constitute a metadiegetic narrative, since it is told by the same heterodiegetic narrator as the narrator of the introductory and concluding paragraphs.¹¹ The relations between levels, whether the principal interest lies with the story located at the primary level or at the secondary level, are thus of an order different from those that define syntactic subordination. In Genette's account, they range from the explanatory (causal relation) to the thematic (contrast, of which the strong version is the *mise en abyme*, or analogy, as in the *exemplum*) to the narratorial (emphasis on the narrative act itself, with a function of distraction or obstruction, rather than on the connections between the two diegeses, the extreme case being metalepsis). It has occasionally been noted that, as originally formulated, narrative levels (and thus metadiegetic narrative) are modeled «vertically»; but it has since become apparent that relations between narrating instances may also develop «horizontally», as when a story is told by two or more narrators without change of level¹², thus introducing a dialogical element into the notions of narrative level and metadiegetic narrative.¹³

Barth's essay on *frametales* also provides a typology of relations between levels. First is a «gratuitous» relation (the most frequent in *frametale* literature), second an «associative, thematic, or exemplary (or cautionary or prophetic)» relation, and third a «dramaturgical» relation, subdivided into (a) «low-level» (the second-level story is «distinguished from the thematic only because it portends a general

from that of the narrated events) and the other the identity or not of the narrator with one of the characters in the story.

11 The expression «hypodiegetic» is frequently employed in place of metadiegetic. However, this term introduces into Genette's system a set of misleading spatial metaphors that are not present in the term metadiegetic.

12 Nelles (1997: 127-143).

13 Cf. Coste, Pier (2009: 303-304).

course of action in the frame-story»), (b) «middle-level» («The framed stories specifically trigger the next major event in the frame-story»), and (c) «high-level» («a frame-tale so constructed that the plot of the inmost tale, far from bearing upon the plot of the next tale out, actually springs that plot, which in turn springs the next, etc., etc., etc., at the point of concentric climax to which the whole series has systematically been brought».¹⁴ Genette, noting Barth's emphasis either on the relation of causes and antecedents between the two narrative levels or on the thematic relation of contrast or similarity, assimilated this typology into his own, thus revised into six «functionally» differentiated degrees extending from narrative content to narrative act: (a) explanatory (by metadiegetic analepsis); (b) predictive (by metaleptic prolepsis); (c) purely thematic (Barth's associative, thematic or exemplary relation plus *mise en abyme*); (d) persuasive (Barth's three «dramaturgical» relations plus *exemplum*; (e) distractive (Barth's «gratuitous» relation); (f) obstructive (which, along with the distractive function, subdivides the former narratorial relation).¹⁵

Here is not the place to undertake a detailed comparative examination of these various typologies or to test them with analyses drawn from a relevant corpus. It seems worthwhile nonetheless to point out that there exists between Genette's and Barth's systems a significant divergence of emphasis. For Genette, whose typology reflects the poles between diegetic content and the narrating act, Barth is interested in «the thematic relationship between the two actions». This is true, but only in part, for Barth views stories within stories as a form of digression or postponement of narrative progression, a feature that Genette seems to reserve only to the distractive and the obstructive functions. Barth further suggests, with reference to Borges and Todorov, «that frame-tales fascinate us perhaps because their narrative structure reflects, simply or complexly, at least two formal properties not only of syntax but of much ordinary experience and activity: namely, *regression (or digression) and return, and theme and*

14 Barth (1984 [1981]: 232-234).

15 Genette (1988 [1983]: 93-94).

variation».¹⁶ Thus where Genette focuses on stories within stories explained in terms of change of narrative level and shift of voice, Barth is drawn to the digressive nature of this narrative practice, its textual features closely correlated with thematic elements: «Digression and return is a variation on the theme of theme and variation.»¹⁷

Finally, a terminological note seems in order. Narrative levels have the merit of sorting out certain difficulties encountered with the notions of framing and embedding and of laying the groundwork for clarifying the functional relations between stories and the stories within which they might be contained. To mark this departure off from the earlier concepts, Genette adopted the term metadiegetic narrative (*récit métadiégétique*) or, in abbreviated form, metanarrative (*métarécit*).¹⁸ However, metadiegetic narrative designates a story within a story, no matter how extensively that story might be developed — whether it be the second-level tales forming the primary interest of the *Decameron* or the accessory digressions introduced into *Don Quixote*. To maintain this distinction, it is thus useful to adopt the principle of narrative levels and speak of narrative embedding by dividing it into (a) the framing story vs. the framed story when the second-level narrative is the focus of interest and (b) the embedding story vs. the embedded story when it is the primary level narrative that predominates. Within each of these forms, a clear change of level results in vertical embedding as opposed to horizontal embedding, which results from a relation of contiguity.

16 Barth (1984 [1981]: 237); emphasis added.

17 *Id.*

18 Note that, unlike in French, the abbreviated English form — metanarrative — can be read, misleadingly, as an adjective or a noun, understood in the latter case as a «narrative about narrative». In its adjectival form, metanarrative occurs in expressions such as «metanarrative commentary» or «metanarrative sign»; as a noun, metanarrative is short for «metadiegetic narrative».

A heuristics for the multilinear text

John Barth, an author whose *œuvre* is inspired in large part by such pre-novelistic achievements as *The 1001 Nights*, the *Panchatantra*, *The Ocean of Story*, etc., sees in these works an important source for the «replenishment» of literature.¹⁹ Keenly attuned to the fine points of embedding and to the importance of its digressive quality for the constitution of narrative discourse, he has produced, with *Lost in the Funhouse*, a work that illustrates this interdependence to a striking degree.²⁰ What sets this work apart from traditional *frametales* literature is that where narratives employing stories within stories generally lend themselves to a linear reading, from beginning to end, Barth has designed a text that frustrates this practice and that invites and even imposes multiple trajectories. Among the many consequences of the various reshufflings of the text into different orders is the necessity of rethinking the criteria of narrative embedding in terms of the broader theoretical issues raised by a work such as *Lost in the Funhouse*.

First of all, Barth's work underscores the fact that the individual narrative rarely if ever coincides with a theoretical model, however rigorous and exhaustive that model might be. This is not to say, though, that disparities between a work and a theoretical model can be

19 Following his controversial and misunderstood essay on the «literature of exhausted possibility» in 1967, Barth published «The Literature of Replenishment» (1980) in defense of postmodernism. For him, postmodern fiction is not a mere parody or travesty of the past masters, a sort of last-ditch modernist decadence, but, in the spirit of Borges, for whom the resources of the single literary text can never be depleted, a fiction that «will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and «contentism», pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction» (Barth 1984 [1980]: 203).

20 Although Barth has not mentioned it, his reflections on the digressive nature of narrative embedding is prefigured by Šklovskij's (1925) comments regarding the «delaying» or «retardatory» effect on perception produced by the «staircase-like construction» and the system of «slowing down» produced by the «fitting together» of stories. Sternberg (1978: 168-176) studies framing and framing devices under the heading «retardatory structures» that serve to intensify and prolong suspense by impeding the natural progression of the story.

explained (or explained away) as a «deviation» in the parlance of stylisticians, or that the shortcomings of narrative theory can be remedied only through the analysis of individual narratives, possibly buttressed with recourse to narratological concepts. It has been shown by Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (2003) that there exists a long-standing and rarely addressed gulf between narratology and the theory of interpretation, the «autonomist» position of «high structuralism» arguing in favor of a radical separation between the two, «contextualist» narratology endeavoring to interpret texts in their historical and cultural contexts, and the «foundationalist» position seeking to monitor and evaluate the various interpretations of given works. Kindt and Müller's alternative to these incomplete and sometimes awkward responses is to dissociate narratology from purely descriptive procedures, on the one hand, and from the theory of interpretation, on the other, and to adopt a view of narratology as a «heuristic [*sic*] for interpretation» or a «heuristic tool». Under this conception, narratological analysis, with its roots in poetics and rhetoric, remains «neutral» with regard to the various schools of interpretation and to the practice of interpretation itself, even though it allows for a certain degree of interpretive latitude. In their contribution to the present volume, the authors link their heuristic conception of narratology both to Stanzel's call for a narrative theory that provides «discovery tools» for the analysis of concrete texts and to Genette's practice of narratology as «a procedure for discovery, and a way of describing»²¹; they also take exception to the «syncretism» of postclassical narratologies that lay claim to being both a theory of analysis and a theory of interpretation, ignoring the heuristic potential of narratology.

The analysis which will follow is also predicated on the idea that narratology does not in itself yield a theory of interpretation. It additionally endorses the principle that narratology can serve as «a procedure for discovery». Where it differs from the proposals set out by Kindt and Müller is that narratology, «a structured and coherent schemata of concepts» in their terms, can be considered to constitute a heuristics with which to back up interpretation. In the multifarious universe of stories, theory is constrained to bend to the object to which

21 Genette (1980 [1972]: 265); Stanzel (2002: 19).

it is applied: analysis of an epistolary novel will be drawn to the vectors of communication between character-authors and character-readers; analysis of stream-of-consciousness fiction cannot fail to take into consideration the fine points of intersection between character discourse and narrator discourse; analysis of anecdotes will focus on narration as a form of argumentation; etc. And the various points of interest aroused by one work or another prove to be even greater in number and type once non-literary forms of narrative are taken into account, leading us to question the heuristic value of any conceptually unified narrative theory for which, ideally, it would seem that «one size fits all».

A more supple approach to narrative heuristics than the «toolkit» method, and one that will be reflected in the analysis of *Lost in the Funhouse*, stems from the notion of «genericity». Originating with Bakhtin's «speech genres» and developed within the context of French discourse analysis, genericity, which encompasses the entire «sphere of usage of language» (Bakhtin), surpasses the more static concept of genre often adopted in literary studies.²² From the perspective of genericity, a discourse (literary or otherwise) occurs at the crossroads of several genres so that the task of the discourse analytic approach is not to categorize this discourse under a given genre and, possibly, sub-genre, but rather to determine what generic tensions and potentialities might be generated as a result of its pluri-generic status. Moreover, genericity tends to engage various levels of both textuality (e.g., what is the pertinence of prosody in the narrative poem? or of the present tense in a journalist's real-time narration of an athletic event?) and transtextuality (thus an «intergeneric dialogue» may come into play when a novel alludes to a lyric poem).

The following discussion of Barth's work comes within a heuristics of narrative, not by virtue of an analytic «neutrality» but, on the contrary, as a consequence of the choices with which reader and narrative theorist alike are confronted: which order or orders to adopt

22 The following comments are drawn from Adam, Heidmann (2004) and (2009: 7-23). For a fuller discussion of Adam's contribution to narrative theory in the framework of discourse analysis, see Pier (forthcoming 2011). Cf. Baxtin (1986 [1952-1953]).

in the reading of a multilinear narrative?; how can concurrent orderings of a text be described and analyzed? Narrative embedding is the concept most apt to resolve these questions and yet, as will be seen more fully, the features that define narrative embedding within a general theory of narrative gain in explanatory power for the individual text when they are tailored to the specifics of that text. True to the trial-and-error spirit of textual heuristics, this is not an *ad hoc* endeavor, for it involves the application and testing of a reasoned body of postulates and hypotheses. The textual tensions and potentialities brought to light by such a procedure arise not so much from genericity (not the focus of this paper) as they do from the numerous and digressive orderings of narrative levels in which the various metadiegetic narratives repeatedly shuttle between framed story (predominant interest) and embedded story (accessory interest) through either a vertical change of levels or a horizontal relation of contiguity.

Embedding through serialization

In the «Author's Note» to the 1968 edition and again in the «Foreword to the Anchor Book Edition» of 1987, Barth refers to the fourteen texts of *Lost in the Funhouse*, subtitled «Fiction for print, tape, live voice» (abbreviated hereafter *LF*), not as a novel or even as a «collection» or «selection» (xi) but as a «series»: «not simply some short stories but a *book* of short stories: a sequence or series rather than a mere assortment» (vii). Generically indeterminate, Barth's book (or «Fiction») comes nevertheless within the tradition of the «tale cycle» of Scheherazade or Boccaccio (v), and on this basis the word «series» offers a valuable clue to the overall textual organization of what many first-time readers are likely to perceive as a largely heterogeneous

assembly of short stories.²³ As a starter, the dictionary definition of «series» is helpful:

1 A number or set of material things of one kind ranged in a line, either contiguously or at more or less regular intervals; a continued spatial succession of similar objects. [...] 2a A number of things of one kind (freq. immaterial, as events, actions, conditions, periods of time) following one another in time or in logical order. [...] 3a Order of succession; sequence. b The connected sequence (of discourse, writing, thought) [...] (*The New Shorter OED*, ed. 1993).

In fact, the three facets of series identified in this definition are highly relevant to the organization of *LF* in that they can be related to: (1) the material succession of the texts as well as to the various other linear arrangements of the stories; (2) the «story» related by each text, but also the mutations in time and logical order brought about by the various orderings of the text; and (3) the multiply connected «sequences» of discourse.

The second clue to the textual organization of *LF* is provided by the «Contents» or, more precisely, by the «labyrinthine» rendering of the «Contents» that recapitulates in graphic form the multilinear design of the book (see figure 1).

23 And, judging by the number of articles and chapters devoted to individual stories or to selections of stories from *LF*, many who have read the work several times. Among the attempts to determine the relations between the stories on a larger scale, those of Morell (1976: 80-96), Fokkema (1985), and Schulz (1990: 1-16, 188-192) should be mentioned.

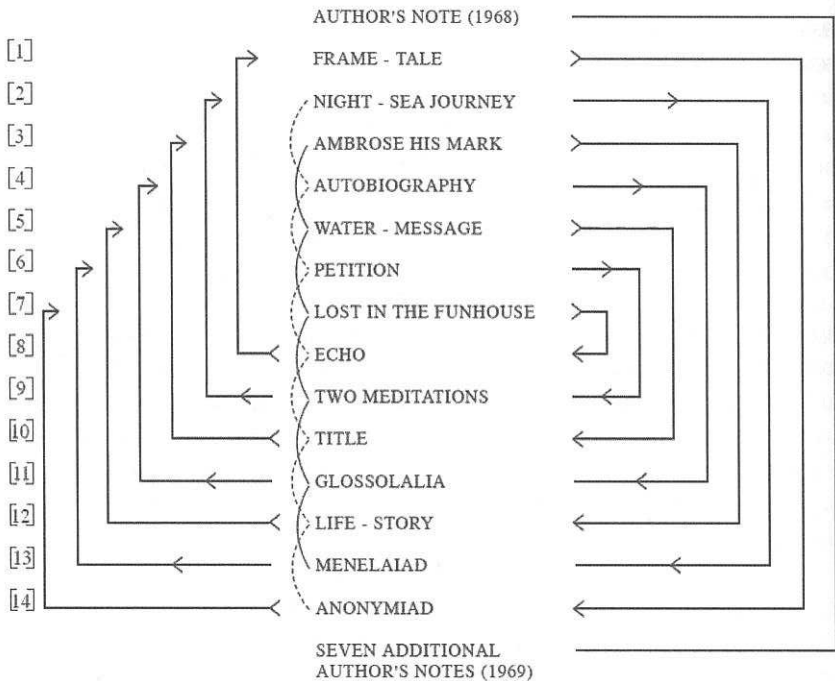


Figure 1: The multilinear design of *Lost in the Funhouse*

This figure, as will be demonstrated in the following pages, reveals that the «series» spoken of by Barth is to be understood not in the singular, but rather in two distinct yet interrelated ways.²⁴ First, each text participates in three series in the sense that the texts are ordered (a) in linear succession (1, 2, 3, etc.), (b) in a series interrupted by an intervening series (2, 4, 6, etc.), and (c) in a continuous series modeled in the fashion of a Möbius strip (e.g., 1, 14, 7, 8, 1... *in infinitum*). Second, the itineraries produced by the various orderings indicated by the lines in the figure (corroborated to varying degrees by thematic,

24 While a previous reading of *LF* would be helpful for grasping the full import of the following commentary, it is not indispensable. Figure 1 will serve as an aid to this analysis, for both actual and potential readers of Barth's work.

diegetic and other factors) constitute seven interconnected series — or fourteen, if the succession of texts in each series were to be inverted. One consequence of the multilinear design of *LF* is that the occurrence of embedding in the traditional *frametale* sense, which does not appear to be extensive, is diffuse and fluctuating and at times even indeterminate. By far the most rigorous and elaborate use of embedding — reaching seven clearly demarcated levels — is found in «Menelaiad». This text (to which we will return) in fact represents a series in its own right which is developed in an exemplary fashion within the system of seven series that span the book from beginning to end, and it enjoys a special status in that it acts as one of the work's essential *mises en abyme*.

I will begin the commentary on *LF*'s system of series with what might best be termed the «zero series». This series consists of the «Author's Note» at the beginning of the 1968 edition and the «Seven Additional Author's Notes» appended to the end of the 1969 edition. Qualified as an authorial peritext, since they are not included in the book's diegesis but consist of the author's discourse about particular aspects of the main body of the work, these Notes serve as a complement to the subtitle, «Fiction for print, tape, live voice»; at the same time, they tend to «frame» the texts of the main body of the work in the sense that they specify which texts are to be considered for print, which for recorded authorial voice, which for non-authorial voice, etc., and at some points they thus merge in part with the book's overall textual organization.

The first series is the «linear series», extending from text 1 to text 14, and it follows the normal reading order adopted by the first-time readers of virtually all narratives. A reading of the book in this linear fashion, however, quickly stumbles on the tenuous and debatable degree of continuity between many of the texts as regards the identity of characters, place, time, narrative action and voice. Leaving aside for the moment the very particular «Frame-Tale», we will look at texts 2 through 4. «Night-Sea Journey», intended, according to the various «Author's Note», «for either print or recorded authorial voice, but not for live or non-authorial voice» (xi), is a discourse «quoted from beginning to end by the authorial voice» (203). To signal the priority

of the authorial voice in this text, each paragraph begins with quotation marks. The result is a quoted monologue — the discourse, more precisely, of a sperm speaking to itself during its journey toward insemination, singing «Love!». The next tale, titled «Ambrose His Mark», a non-quoted autodiegetic narrative, recounts how the protagonist, unnamed for several months after his birth, was finally named after St Ambrose. Coming directly after «Night-Sea Journey» and beginning with a reference to «the hectic circumstances of my birth» (14), «Ambrose His Mark» can be considered the sequel of the previous tale: the sperm-protagonist is the sperm that was later to become Ambrose. As it turns out, however, the diegetic identity of the sperm and Ambrose, which is neither conclusive nor unequivocal, is hardly comforted by the use of the first-person pronoun in the two texts²⁵: if, from an enunciative perspective, Ambrose's narrative is conventionally autobiographical (fictive identity of speaker and protagonist), that of the sperm-narrator marks an implicit disparity between the authorial narrator and the intradiegetic and ostensibly autodiegetic narrator.

By its very title, the fourth text, «Autobiography», subtitled «A Self-Recorded Fiction», would seem to be the continuation of the previous two texts. Statements such as «I don't recall asking to be conceived! Neither did my parents come to think of it» (35) fall into line with «Ambrose His Mark», much as «My first words weren't my first words. I wish I had begun differently» (35) could conceivably be uttered by the speaker of «Night-Sea Journey» even though, significantly, the paragraphs of «Autobiography» do not begin with quotation marks. This fourth text, unlike the second, is written «for monophonic tape and visible but silent author» (ix), and it is further specified, in the 1969 «Author's Notes», that «the antecedent of the first-person pronoun [in «Autobiography»] is not I, but the story, speaking of itself. I am its father; its mother is the recording machine» (203). There thus appears a bifurcation in the use of the first-person

25 This is all the more so in that significant connections exist between «Night-Sea Journey» and «Menelaïad», number 13 in the linear series, which recounts the story of Menelaus's homecoming to Helen and is thus diegetically distinct from the three tales in which Ambrose is the protagonist.

pronoun which differs somewhat from that in the previous two texts. Where the voice in «Night-Sea Journey» does not speak in its own name (the sperm's monologue is «for either print or recorded authorial voice»), the voice in «Autobiography» (defined as «self-composition»; 203) does — except that the speaker's name remains unknown... unless, perhaps, it is Ambrose. This supposition can be entertained, inconclusively, by the potential diegetic continuity and somewhat more by the thematic parallel between texts 3 and 4, namely, the identity of the boy vis-à-vis his parents: «I continue the tale of my forbears. [...] In sum I'm not what either parent or I had in mind» (37). At the same time, the identity of the experiencing-I and the narrating-I is called into question, for while the speaker declares «Where there's a voice there's a speaker», it immediately goes on to qualify this statement: «I see I see [*sic*] myself as a halt narrative: first person, tiresome. Pronoun sans ante or precedent, warrant or respite. Surrogate for the substantive, contentless form, interestless principle; blind eye blinking at nothing. Who am I. A little *crise d'identité* for you» (35-36).

A full analysis of the linear series is not possible here. Even so, on the basis of the three texts examined it would appear that this series is characterized, at least in part, by a tenuous thematic unity and a largely hypothetical diegetic continuity, but also by subtle modulations in the enunciative position of voice: the «I» in text 2 is an impersonation, in text 3 the pronoun of autobiographical narration, and in text 4 tends toward decomposition of the bond between the experiencing-I and the narrating-I. There is little if any indication of change of levels, either within or between the texts, but at the same time significant variations can be found in the use of first-person narration.²⁶ On this basis it can be concluded that embedding occurs horizontally, by virtue of a relation of contiguity, rather than in the more generally acknowledged vertical fashion.

26 In his important study, *Unnatural Voices* (2006), Brian Richardson devotes a chapter to multiperson narration, which includes narratives that alternate between grammatical persons, juxtapose them, etc. The case of *LF*, which is not an isolated example, suggests that the multivalent use of each of the grammatical persons in narrative is a subject for further investigation.

As is already apparent with the discussion of these three texts, the linear series soon gives way to a new ordering: the «interwoven series». This series, indicated in the figure by the staggered succession of broken and solid curved lines, alternates between the even-numbered and the odd-numbered texts. One thing that stands out in the first half of the book is that texts 3, 5 and 7, bound together by the identity of the protagonist, Ambrose, from infancy through adolescence and by the most «realistic» trappings of the entire work, are increasingly demarcated from the intervening texts 2, 4, 6 («Petition» addressed by a Siamese twin to Prajadhipok, Descendent of Buddha) and 8 («Echo», based on the Narcissus story). The question thus arises as to how to characterize the succession of texts, and in particular whether a relation of embedding can be determined. «Petition» and «Echo» clearly represent digressions in relation to the Ambrose stories and are thus characterized by the distractive function (Genette). As in the linear series, there is no clear evidence here of change of levels (as found in the *Decameron*), but rather an abrupt change of cast and settings, apparently unwarranted on thematic grounds at this point in the development of *LF*. So the problem falls back on the relations of voice and narrator (e.g., who is speaking in «Night-Sea Journey»?) and the relations of voice and character (e.g., to what degree do speaker and character coincide in «Autobiography»?) as well as, more generally, on authorial voice. On the one hand, can the authorial voice, whose presence is marked in «Night-Sea Journey» by the use of quotation marks, be located at the same level as the extradiegetic narrator of «Ambrose His Mark», in the first person, and of «Water-Message» and «Lost in the Funhouse», both in the third person? And on the other hand, how can the interweaving of the even-numbered and the odd-numbered texts, more or less unjustified on obvious thematic or diegetic grounds, be explained in terms of voice? Once again, it is not possible to pursue this analysis to cover the entire interwoven series, but it would seem, at least provisionally, that the physical contiguity of the texts, as in the linear series, results in horizontal embedding.

Before passing on to the third series, the «echo series», mention must be made of the titular story, «Lost in the Funhouse». A third-

person account of Ambrose's visit to an amusement park funhouse (no direct relationship to the mythological labyrinth, by the way, but a building containing various devices whose purpose is to startle or amuse visitors), this text is characterized by, *inter alia*, a considerable amount of intrusive and illusion-breaking metanarrative comment such as: «Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction» (74-75); «One possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across another lost person in the dark» (87); «A long time ago we should have passed the apex of Freitag's Triangle and made brief work of the *dénouement*; the plot doesn't rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires. The climax of the story must be its protagonist's discovery of a way to get through the funhouse» (96). Such metanarrative comment and other «meta» features — the stuff of postmodern metafiction, of which Barth is one of the leading practitioners — will take on growing importance in the second half of the book.

The echo series, as the name suggests, consists of the first seven texts being «echoed» by the seven texts of the second half of the book. Thus «Echo» refers back to «Frame-Tale», «Two Meditations» back to «Night-Sea Journey», etc., it being entirely possible, moreover, to invert the order in such a way that «Frame-Tale» follows «Echo», «Night-Sea Journey» follows «Two Meditations», etc. The links between the two halves of the echo series can be explained in various ways, two of which will be described here: infinite regress and metanarrative comment.

The initial text, «Frame-Tale», is certainly one of the most original narrative incipits ever devised, for as Barth himself stated: «It happens to be, I believe, the shortest story in the English language (ten words); on the other hand, it's endless» (vii). Written vertically along the edge of the page are the words «ONCE UPON A TIME THERE» and on the overleaf the words «WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN»; the reader is instructed to cut out this strip of paper and fashion it into a Möbius strip, with the result that the frametale is modeled after the principle of

infinite regress, the end merging into the beginning *in infinitum*.²⁷ Surprisingly, but nonetheless true to the logical paradox it seeks to imitate, the Möbius-strip frametale does not in the final analysis exemplify narrative embedding in the sense set out earlier in this paper: by perpetually folding back on itself as it does, not only does «Frame-Tale» impede the telling of any story, but it also forestalls any change of level; nor is there any change of voice, since it is presumably the same voice that recounts the frametale endlessly.²⁸ Even so, «Frame-Tale», alongside «Menelaiad», stands as a fundamental *mise en abyme* of *LF*. More precisely, it acts both as a textual *mise en abyme* to the extent that it renders intelligible the method of composition of the work and as a *mise en abyme* of the code underlying that method²⁹, namely, the principle of infinite regress illustrated by the Möbius strip.

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- 27 Barth's fascination with the story within the story stems in part from Borges's allusion to a tale told on the 602nd night of *The 1001 Nights*, but that in fact is not included in that work: «a literary illustration of the *regressus in infinitum*, as are many other of Borges's principal images and motifs» and which, for Barth, «is an image of the exhaustion, or attempted exhaustion, of possibilities» (1984 [1967]: 73). And elsewhere: «I thought it would be pleasant to have a frame story that would be a literal physical image of the story that was to follow, that is a cycle with a twist, and at the same time be a story that never does begin, that's all beginning, a kind of endless beginning that reverts on itself [...] since I knew that I wanted a cycle to be a genuine cycle, something that rewound on itself, and since I knew that I didn't want to imitate Joyce's simple cycle in *Finnegan's Wake*, [hence] the idea, as the protagonist gets older the time of the stories moves back towards classical antiquity, a kind of double motion in time» (Barth 1977: 252-253).
- 28 The logical paradox of the Möbius strip can also be found in Escher's *Drawing Hands*, for example, and has been the object of philosophical and scientific reflection since time that Epimenides, a Cretan, declared: «All Cretans are liars». For an excellent transdisciplinary study of the Möbius strip and analogous phenomena, see Hofstadter (1979). Fokkema (1985) examines *LF* with reference to Hofstadter's discussion of nested recursive structures, and he also draws attention to the affinity between *LF* and Hofstadter's recursive dialogue, «Little Harmonic Labyrinth».
- 29 This distinction was made by Dällenbach (1977: 127), who observed that the *mise en abyme* of the code serves to reveal the principle of a work's

Given the paradoxical status of «Frame-Tale», how can text 8 be said to «echo» this incipit? The answer, in part, is provided most pertinently in the «Author's Notes» at the end of the book:

Inasmuch as the nymph in her ultimate condition repeats the words of others in their own voices, the words of Echo on the tape or the page may be regarded validly as hers, Narcissus's, Tiresias's, mine, or any combination or series of the four of us's. [...] Tiresias moreover can see backward and forward in time, the events recounted may be already past, foreseen for the future, or in the process of occurring as narrated (203-204).

In effect, the question broached here is that of the embedding of discourses and stories. But what is curious is that the diegetic levels at which the discourses occur can be regarded as collapsed into one since the individual voice, in the multiplicity of voices, may remain indistinguishable from the others. Secondly, Tiresias's ability to move backward and forward in time in relation to the present, thus to recount the past and foresee the future, corresponds, in Genette's terms, to metadiegetic analepsis and metadiegetic prolepsis, respectively, and thus to the explanatory and predictive functions of metadiegetic narrative. In the latter regard, the centrality of «Echo» in *LF* has been commented on by Barth himself³⁰, albeit with some hesitation, given the fact that there is no midpoint between the numbers one and fourteen. On the other hand, it may be no mere coincidence that in this fiction of 201 pages the six pages of «Echo» are located numerically at the exact center, preceded by 97 pages and followed by 97 pages.

The centrality of «Echo» as initiator of the echo series can also be argued in another way in that it «echoes» the logical paradox inherent in «Frame-Tale». This becomes evident on the final page of «Echo», as explained by Aleid Fokkema:

Whose voice is speaking now? Narcissus has perished, by now [p. 103], so he can be eliminated as well as Echo as possible owner of the voice. What remains is Tiresias' voice, which says Tiresias cannot be trusted. Whether Echo is distorting

composition «but without imitating the text which is compliant with [that principle]» (my translation).

30 Cf. Barth (1977: 265). See also Schulz (1990: 8).

the message a little or not, the statement, made by Tiresias' voice, is a paradox. Echo might even be echoing the author's voice, the one we are supposed to «hear», in which case the paradox backfires upon the whole story.³¹

As set out here, the remaining voice, that of Tiresias, is comparable to Epimenides's voice in that it undermines its own assertions. However, the paradox extends to the «authorial» voice in such a way that the paradox is inscribed within the very composition of the tale. In this way, «Echo» reduplicates the *mise en abyme* of the code embodied by «Frame-Tale».

Another prominent aspect of the echo series is its metanarrative dimension. This can be illustrated, to take only one example, with the pairing of «Life-Story» (text 12) with «Water-Message» (text 5). First of all, «Life-Story» extends the pattern established in «Echo»/«Frame-Tale» in that it is a «story about a writer writing a story» which proves to be «Another regressus in infinitum!» (117): «It's particularly disquieting to suspect not only that one is a fictional character but that the fiction one's in — the fiction one is — is quite the sort one least prefers» (118). Moreover, the text itself is highly metanarrative in that it consists largely of a writer's comments on a story he attempts to rewrite but that never gets written; in fact, the «story» turns out to be little more than the sum of these metanarrative comments. Among these comments are a number of references to the reader, including the writer as reader of himself³²: «1) his author was his sole and indefatigable reader; 2) he was in a sense his own author, telling his story to himself, in which case in which case [*sic*]; and/ or 3) his reader was not only tireless and shameless but sadistic, masochistic if he was himself» (127). Indeed, the extradiegetic reader is also caught up in this fiction: «The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else,

31 Fokkema (1985: 73).

32 «The overt narrator [...] can comment both on the content of the narration (story world) and on the narrating function itself; *the address to a narratee is a part of this meta-narrative performance*» (Fludernik 1993: 443, emphasis added).

from inside this monstrous fiction» (127).³³ On looking back to the end of «Water-Message», it will be seen that the adolescent Ambrose (later the unnamed writer in «Life-Story») finds a bottle that has been washed ashore with a message inside beginning «TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN» and ending «YOURS SINCERELY», but from which both the text and the author's name have been blotted out by the seawater. This message, whose format is evocative of «Frame-Tale» and which is in effect reduced to no more than an unidentified sender and receiver, also serves as the format for the communicative structure of «Life-Story»: the «story» corresponds to a series of reflections on the writer and the reader.

The fourth series in the multilinear design of *LF* is «Chinese box series I». It consists of linking texts 1 and 14, texts 2 and 13, etc., up to texts 7 and 8. «Chinese box series II» links the same texts but proceeds from the center to the periphery, thus forming a fifth series. Several features of these two series call for commentary.

First, the connections between the texts are of differing sorts and degrees. For example, only between «Ambrose His Mark» (text 3) and «Life-Story» (text 12) is there a clear diegetic continuity (the same protagonist); «Night-Sea Journey» (text 2) is an analepsis in relation to «Menelaïad» (text 13); and «Frame-Tale» (text 1) and «Anonymiad» (text 14) are connected as a matter of complementarity (a story without beginning or end told by an anonymous narrator).³⁴ Narratologically speaking, there appears to be no relation of embedding between any of the pairings, even though there is a sense in which texts 1 and 14 provide a conceptual framework for the intervening textual organization.

Together, the two Chinese box series configure *LF* into a chiasmus structure, the first progressing from periphery to center, the second

33 According to the «Author's Notes»: «The deuteragonist of «Life-Story», an antecedent of the second-person pronoun, is you» (204). In ancient Greek drama, a deuteragonist is a character second in importance to the protagonist.

34 It would be perfectly consistent with the logic of the multilinear design of *LF* to invert the arrows showing the Chinese box series in figure 1 so as to change the order of reading (text 14 followed by text 1, etc.), resulting in two additional series.

from center to periphery. Schulz considers that chiasmus, along with «the backward and forward infinite regression announced by the Möbius strip of «Frame-Tale», constitutes one of the two «topoi» of *LF*. Based on thematic considerations, he contends that the two strands of the first seven stories (mimetic life history of Ambrose; self-reflexive awareness and insistence of the fictional character that he is the author of his own story) unite in «Lost in the Funhouse» and then proceed «simultaneously forward and backward in time to complete the other half of the chiasmus with «Menelaiad» and «Anonymiad».³⁵

Although the succession of Chinese boxes does not correspond to a series of stories within stories, it does prefigure the seven levels of narrative embedding in «Menelaiad». Or to put it differently: the succession of boxes is a pattern that formally reduplicates the system of quotation implemented by «Menelaiad».

Finally, the two Chinese box series merge with the echo series to form series six and seven. The seven itineraries that begin with texts 1, 14, 7, 8 to start again with text 1 *in infinitum*, proceeding in the same manner up to texts 7, 8, 1, 14 to start again with text 7, constitute «Möbius strip series I». The last itinerary in this series coincides with the initial itinerary of «Möbius strip series II», going from center to periphery. The most powerful itinerary in this series is the outermost one, as the sequence of titles alone suggests: «Frame-Tale» → «Anonymiad» → «Lost in the Funhouse» → «Echo» → «Frame-Tale» → «Frame-Tale»...

For all of its elaborate patterning, it is somewhat surprising how elusive narrative embedding in *LF* actually is. After all, is it not «Frame-Tale», the textual *mise en abyme*, that projects onto the work the principle of infinite regress of levels? As it turns out, however, it is precisely this principle that causes the difficulty. «Frame-Tale», like the Möbius strip, is a manifestation of the paradox of self-reference, described by Hofstadter as «strange loopiness». The «Strange Loop», he explains, «occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find

35 Schulz (1990: 6-8).

ourselves right back where we started».³⁶ It occurs within a «Tangled Hierarchy»: «when what you presume are clean hierarchical levels take you by surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way».³⁷ In effect, «Frame-Tale», through a process analogous to that of the Strange Loop, cancels out the very levels on which it depends. To the extent, then, that the incipit, in lieu of initiating an infinite number of stories within stories, succeeds only in telling the story of its own endless beginning, its title is misleading.

In fact, the convergence of «Frame-Tale» with the Strange Loop points to one of the most pervasive aspects of *LF*: the violation of levels. Known in narrative contexts as *metalepsis*, this age-old but only recently studied phenomenon has been defined as a «deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding» resulting in «intrusions [that] disturb, to say the least, the distinction between levels».³⁸ What's more, *metalepsis* has been likened by Brian McHale to the Strange Loop.³⁹ On this basis, it can be concluded not only that «Frame-Tale» acts as one of the principal textual *mises en abyme* of *LF*, but also that it serves to introduce into the very core of the work the principle of *metalepsis*. This can be seen most strikingly in the seven itineraries of the Möbius strip series (see the description above); but at the same time the work is also studded with *metalepses* in more punctual forms.

Against the backdrop of a textual system that both asserts and annuls narrative levels, «Menelaiad», meticulously delineated into seven distinct levels, can be seen as a way of compensating for the illusory system of narrative embedding announced by «Frame-Tale». In this sense, «Menelaiad» is a textual *mise en abyme* that serves to counterbalance «Frame-Tale». Moreover, even though it forms an integral part of the seven series of *LF*, this text constitutes a series in its own right — an eighth series — and thus additionally stands as an

36 Hofstadter (1979: 10).

37 Hofstadter (1979: 691).

38 Genette (1988 [1983]: 88); the original discussion is in Genette (1980 [1972]: 234-237). For a recent overview, see Pier (2009).

39 McHale (1987: 119-121).

of embedded levels at work here has been set out by Genette as follows:

Narrator 1 (Menelaus (Menelaus (Menelaus (Menelaus (Menelaus — Helen of Troy) Eidothea) Protheus) Helen of Sparta and of Pharos) Telemachus)
 Narratee 2) Narratee 1, each narrative necessarily coming after the narrative it encompasses (narrates).⁴¹

Having the *Odyssey* as hypotext, «Menelaiad», like «Anonymiad», is diegetically independent of the other texts in *LF*, and its link with them results largely from its status as a textual *mise en abyme* rather than as a thematically motivated story within a story. Even so, it entertains subtle and significant connections with many of these other texts. For example: constructed according to a rigorously demarcated system of embedded levels, it contrasts with the Borgesian situation of fictions invaded by metanarrative content and of authors becoming characters in their own fictions (cf. «Lost in the Funhouse» and «Life-Story»); similarly to text 8, where Echo is able to speak in the voices of the other characters, it remains unclear whether the narrator is Menelaus, the multiform Proteus or the «printed voice» (xi) that reverberates throughout «Menelaiad»⁴²:

“ “ “ “ ‘Why?’ I repeated,” I repeated,’ I repeated,” I repeated,’ I repeated,” I repeat.

(152)

Or, more spectacularly:

“ “ “ “	} Why? {	” ” ” ”
“ “ “		” ” ”
“ “		” ”
“		”
“ “ “ “		

(153)

41 Genette (1997 [1982]: 342). Note, however, that the change of levels does not always correspond to the numbered transitions between sections and also that the occasional elimination of quotation marks results in metaleptic leaps between levels.

42 Cf. Fokkema (1985: 75).

Conclusion

We have seen that *LF* implements a complex system of narrative embedding but that, in this case, the defining features of narrative embedding, even when integrated into the narrative levels of a narratological textual system, call for the adoption of criteria specific to the text itself. These criteria, suggested by the authorial peritext, derive from the principle of series which, through the effect of division of the book into fourteen interdependent texts, produces the seven series identified in this analysis — seven series that appear to exhaust the possibilities set out by *LF* at the macrotextual level. The resultant serialization of the book is thus not an arbitrary invention, but a logically coherent construct generated within the textual parameters of the work itself. It is also true that the convergence of these series with narrative embedding has proved to be extensive, as evidenced most emphatically by «Menelaiad». But no matter how compelling this convergence of series and levels might appear, it remains attributable in large part to an act of heuristic discovery: since the concept of narrative embedding *per se* is not predicated on the principle of series that so permeates *LF*, the encounter between the two is born out of the necessity of choice in tracing out the various sequential orderings of the work.

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