Recovering from Verbal Suicide: A Genettian Reading of John Barth's *Chimera* as A Mosaic of Literary Discourse

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Abstract

Written five years after the publication of Barth's seminal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967, *Chimera* reflects upon the idea of literary and narrative exhaustion in the contemporary world. Barth has frequently noted the deficiency of realistic literature in exploring contemporary issues, and the inevitability of finding a more inclusive technique that comprises all. The novel reflects Barth's fascination with the intricacies of narrative complexity and enhances his own views concerning the relationship between the author and his text. What the reader meets in *Chimera* is a legend-myth with a multiplicity of real and supernatural beings embracing the archetype of the artist struggling for survival. The text under study has been a fertile soil for research and has been handled from multiple perspectives, primarily as a postmodernist manifestation of the contemporary world and the prevailing sense of human disillusionment. Looking from different angle, this article adopts a Genettian reading of *Chimera*, tracing Gerard Genette's concepts of transtextuality and metalepsis and their use in the novel as a means of escaping what Barth terms Narrative Exhaustion, manifesting a definite rejection for a rigid temporal position for man and constantly fluctuating among the layers of time.

Key words: Transtextuality, *Chimera,* Lohn Barth, Genette, Narrative Exhaustion.

المستخلص العربي:

التعافي من الانتحار اللفظي: قراءة جينيتية لرواية "شيميرا" لجون بارث كفسيفساء للخطاب الأدبي

بعد خمس سنوات من نشر مقاله الرائد "أدب الانهاك" عام ١٩٦٧، كتب جون بارث روايته قيد الدراسة "شيميرا" والتي تعكس فكرة الانهاك الأدبي والسردي في العالم المعاصر. ناقش بارث مرارا وتكرارا عدم كفاية الأدب الواقعي كأداة لتناول القضايا المعاصرة ونادي بحتمية إيجاد تقنيات أكثر شمولا.

تعكس الرواية افتتان بارث بالتعقيدات السردية وتعزز وجهة ظره تجاه العلاقة بين المؤلف ونصه. ما يقابله القارئ في "شيميرا" هو سرد اسطوري يجمع بين شخصيات واقعية وأخري خارقة للطبيعة بغرض احتواء فكرة كفاح الكاتب من أجل البقاء الادبي. كان النص قيد الدراسة تربة خصبة للبحث وتم التعامل معه من وجهات نظر متعددة ، في المقام الأول كمظهرمن مظاهر ما بعد الحداثة للعالم المعاصر والشعور السائد بخيبة الأمل. من منظور اخر، تتبني هذه الدراسة قراءة جينيتية لرواية "شيميرا" من خلال استخدام مفهوم "التعالي النصي" كوسيلة للنجاة مما يطلق عليه بارث "الانهاك السردي" مما يدل علي رفضه القاطع لوجود موقف زمني جامد لانسان يعيش في زمن تتقلب فيه الأزمان.

كلمات مفتاحية: جون بارث، شيميرا، التعالي النصي، أدب الانهاك، جينيت.

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Introduction

Written five years after the publication of his seminal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967, John Barth's *Chimera* reflects upon the idea of literary and narrative exhaustion in the contemporary world. Originally, the Chimera is a tripartite mythological creature who is said to be composed of cells belonging to different zygotes. A fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a snake, the Chimera was said to be the offspring of Typhon- the monster with 100 fire-breathing heads. Eventually, the term has come to refer to any impossible illusion, and its use in fiction has functioned as an expression of cultural anxieties and a means of reflecting a conflict within the hero, or rather the author himself. Barth's fiction is loaded with mythical references as a means of going back to the beginning of things and making use of them to reflect on contemporary issues. However, as a storyteller, Barth has preferred to create his unique fictional world rather than mimic the exhausted reality by reenacting and recycling the mythical past to fit into his aesthetic ideology.

The novel under study has been a fertile soil for research and has been handled from multiple perspectives. It has primarily been studied as a postmodernist manifestation of the contemporary world and the prevailing sense of human disillusionment. According to Ḧeide Ziegler, C*himera* belongs to "the genre of the Kunstlerroman, the artist's self-reflexive version of the Bildungsoman" (14); a German concept referring to "the novel of the learning hero, acquiring the education needed to become a useful member of society" (Ziegler 49). Furthermore, critics as Julius Raper emphasizes Barth's role in the employment of "convoluted phantasies and metafiction" as a vehicle to expose the contemporary reader to problems they tend to deny (17). The use of metafiction in this sense works as a catalyst for criticizing postmodern literary context that has been suffering from a dead block. Moreover, *Chimera* has also been described as "a novel which points at the postmodern hybridity in both form and content" (Delic 3). In other words, Barth's frame tale techniques, the spiral motifs and the intertwining of fiction and reality

applied in the novel conform to the postmodern context that has long reflected ontological uncertainty and hybridity.

From another perspective, Marylin Edelstein underlines the novel's self-consciousness; a novel that represents "an awareness of itself as fiction, as artifice that diminishes the role of a central human consciousness or self in the fiction" by portraying characters that are neither acting nor revealing their inner feelings and thoughts (100). The novel has also been studied investigating the 'frame-tale' technique as the novel's governing narrative structure. Moreover, there is an obvious interrelation between the process of writing and the sexual relationship in the novel which is seen as "a process that leads to healing discoveries about the roles men and women play in an age when the feminist revolution has put the underlying myth of [modern] culture into question" (Raper 18). In *Chimera* the reader encounters a change in gender roles; the female characters represented in the narrative play a major role in re-creating and re-forming the identity of the male protagonists. That is, going back to mythology is a kind of going back to matriarchal societies as a refuge from the contemporary social and sexual structures reflects Barth's call to the reformation of social identities along with individual ones.

Looking at the text from a different angle, this present article tries to bridge a gap in the literature on *Chimera* as a text reflecting its own author's ambiguous inquiries and constant attempts to reach any kind of logic in an illogic context. This is done by adopting, as tools of analysis, Gerard Genette's concepts of transtextuality and metalepsis. By doing so, the study concentrates on tracing the transtextual and metaleptic elements in the novel as Barth's means to reach ontological conformity and escape the threat of narrative exhaustion. The paper offers a survey of the development of the terms 'Transtextuality' and 'Metalepsis' underlining their narrative implications, and their application in the novel as media of transcending all limitations that pose this risk of narrative block.

Gerard Genette's Transtextuality

Barth's choice of the Chimera as the title of his inter-connected tales gets the reader to his perspective of the interconnection and interrelatedness of ontological, cultural, literal, and human perspectives. Thus, the transtextual composition of *Chimera* is definitely clear. As a term introduced by the French theorist Gerard Genette referring to "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts", transtextuality cuts across genres and refers to any kind of

textual transcendence (Genette *The Architect* 1-2). Genette "concentrates basically on the literary text in the strict sense of the word", asserting that "intertextuality is an inadequate term and proposes in its place 'transtextuality', by which he means everything, be it explicit or latent, that relates one text to others" (Alfaro 280). To fully understand Genette's transtextuality, it is essential to start by tracing the development of this line of thought in the works of major contributors to this field.

First of all, the concept of intertextuality and its descriptive term, introduced in Julia Kristeva's "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), has been meant to maintain the notion that a text must not be viewed as a closed system or a self-sufficient entity; it is rather a network of interconnections that are essential to conceive in the process of writing and reading. Intertextuality maintains that a text "cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system" (Still and Worton 1). According to Kristeva, the authors are not original and do not create anything from original minds but compile from the already existing texts; what they produce is rather "a permutation of texts" where "several utterances, taken from other texts intersect and neutralize one another" (*Desire in Language* 36). That is, intertextuality is not limited to the interrelated texts used, but rather to the interrelated texts presented. With the introduction of her concept, Kristeva has been trying to deconstruct inherited standards of interpretation and reconstruct a novel notion that links current texts with the whole literary network.

Although mainly associated with Kristeva, intertextuality has also received its spark from Bakhtin's 'heteroglosia' and 'dialogism' revolving around the multiple languages that each society embraces, which he refers to as a compilation of intertwining social dialects that interact and intersect to produce one social whole. Bakhtin's concept involves this process of intersection and engagement between the generally accepted social definitions of words and the personal interpretation of individuals. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel" (1935), Bakhtin defines the novel as a "diversity of social speech types sometimes even diversity of language and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262). According to him, the novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions.

From another perspective, in Ronald Barthes' "The Death of the Author", the text has been viewed as being constructed "from multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" (117). His focus has been on the

unmistakable role of the reader whom he considers as "the space on which all the quotations that make up the writing are inscribed without any of them being lost" (142). That is, he is not concerned with creating an original text; he admits openly that he only mixes already-existing discourse that is available in the general text producing a new creative 'creature'. According to him, the announcement of the birth of a constructing reader implies the death of the dominant author.

As far as this study is concerned, with Gerard Genette's concept of transtextuality, intertextuality as a mode of analysis has taken a different loop. According to Genette, a text is "rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions" (*Paratext*s 1). According to him, "each text is trapped in a network of relations, between the different parts that constitute it, between that text and those which precede it, or those that come after it, and even those which never were" (Alfaro 280). Genette has differentiated between five types of transtextuality, the first of which is 'Kristevan intertextuality'. The other types are paratextuality, metatextuality, archetextuality and hypertextuality. Genette also poses on the reader an important role in the process, asserting that determining the interrelationships between texts and hypertexts rests to a great extent on the reader's ability to detect these connections. Transtextuality, furthermore, gives memory an important role. In his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* Gerard Genette provides an argument concerning "the narrative dialectic between the past and the present -moving toward the future" in which he "demonstrates how memory can provide a forum for shaping narrative strategies that can demonstrate a suppressed past, resulting in a cultural recovery which, in turn, develops new relationships with the past" (O'Connell 32). In this sense, memory acts as a communal reservoir in which past experiences and cultural implications are kept safe to be recovered in contemporary settings offering new hybrid implications.

In contact with Genette's argument and the purpose of the present article, is Renate Lachmann's concept of memory. In her book *Memory and Literature (1997),* Lachmann introduces the concept of memory as a text's intertextuality. She is interested in "interpreting the intertextuality of concrete texts as a mnemonic space that unfolds between texts, and of the space of memory inside concrete texts that is constructed by the intertexts registered in them" (Lachmann xxiv). For her, literature is an act of memory that provides the memory of a culture and records it. It "inscribes itself in a memory space made out of texts, and it sketches out

a memory space into which earlier texts are gradually absorbed and transformed" (Lachmann 15). That is, memory is itself an transtextual process of compiling scattered fragmentations during which "the brain is required to deal with countless complex structures -faces with many features, quotations with many words, lists with many facts" (Lyne 116). These multiplicities demand management; which is achieved through what Daniel Schacter calls 'schema' that acts as a cognitive means connecting items in memory through creating and not only retaining, or rather reconstructing. Hence, transtextuality implies an engagement with the 'already said'; it offers an embedded dialogue between multiple layers of narrativity. In other words, the process of writing a text is a process of compiling not creating; the text is no longer viewed as a unilineal entity, but rather a set of compiled and combined texts and discourses interwoven in a new whole.

Chimera: Transtextuality, Metalepsis and Penetrating the 'Exhausted' Circle

Chimera is an example of postmodern metafiction; a type of writing that Barth masters. In a work of metafiction, all boundaries are chattered; spatial and temporal boundaries, narrative boundaries and ontological boundaries. Although the three parts of the novel are thematically independent, leaving the reader with the impression that they can be read individually, the significance of the three can be "better understood only when each of them is viewed as part of a larger story" with multiple layers (Delic 42). If we agree that Barth's major dilemma the time of constructing *Chimera* has been the exhaustion of his talent as a writer, then eventually resorting to mythology indicates the capability of literature and storytelling to survive and transcend time and space as well as the importance of narrativity in reviving and restructuring the human cultural and ontological memory in a constructive manner that leads to immortality.

For Barth, mythology is not a transcendental body of narratives that belong only to imagination; on the contrary, the mythic characters introduced by Barth in his fiction reflect his real personal concerns and human quests that cannot fail to find interpretation in the realistic form of narrative. In his works, mythology "plays an important role as a mediator of memory" (Vecchi 2). Each of the three parts of this interconnected chimeric narrative "is constructed based on two different stories blurring the line between fiction and reality"; the first one is about a hero who is suffering from decadence and the second one is a fictional representation of that hero trying to rescue himself from death and mortality (Yardani

174). Like its analogical creature, the novel is composed of three separately-connected parts, each of which mutually refer to one another. The narrative structure of *Chimera* enhances its transtextual nature; it is a novel that shatters the presence of a central voice or a consistent narrative thread to reject the anthrocentrism of fiction. The three novellas are linked intratextually and intertextually, based structurally on the motif of spirals relating scattered fragments together. The three protagonists, Duniazad, Perseus and Bellerophon "are caught up in serious and life-threatening predicaments" (Hashemi 43). Barth's characters are both real and fictional; real characters are given fictitious traits, and mythical characters are indulged in reality. They "are struggling to achieve a sense largely by telling their stories" that they fail to see as wholes except when narrating a re-viewing them (Davis 112). The author ventures freely into the past and grasps in his way back his ideal storyteller, Scheherazade, to set the basis of his cosmos. By choosing Scheherazade as his ideal storyteller, the novel goes back to the roots of storytelling adopting the notion of the facing mirrors, the doubleness of characters, the duality of narrative role in a skillfully crafted spiral structure.

This further takes us to Genette's conception of metalepsis; "a way of playing with variations in the narrative level in order to create an effect of displacement or illusion" (Guillemette 1). This narrative technique is used by Barth to transcend the ontological levels by transgressing this schism between the world of the story told and the world in which the story is told. *Chimera* is an example of metaleptic self-reflexivity exhibiting multiple narrative layers that shatter the frontiers between the seemingly-distinct universes. In it, Barth redefines the authorial position in the text thrusting himself into his own pages and throwing open all the mechanics of storytelling as someone trying to grasp all available threads to survive. In this transtextual process, the reader, the author and the text become equally important in the process of interpretation. Barth's presence in his work is an inescapable reality; he is there wherever you go. However, his voice is never dominant. The narrators of the novel are interchangeable; each section of the novel has more than one speaker or rather one writer to reflect the complexity of life, fictionality of reality and the reality of fiction. Each chosen protagonist represents the author himself in his postmodern struggle to break free from his mental and literary block and produce an immortal piece of fiction. The novel implies that nothing new can be created; but rather re-created. That is, going back through narrative origins is Barth's only way out towards creation and rebirth.

The spiral narrative pattern adopted in the novel with its three parts and the reframing motif is in itself a subtle thread of transtextuality. The structure and organized lengths of the novel form a spiral-like unity that confides to the rules of the Golden ratio of architecture and art. The spiral, unlike the circle that symbolizes futility and entrapment, represents the continuity of life with its progress and change. Barth "moves in a spiral pattern, compelling the reader to go beyond the boundaries of the printed pages of his own book and search for ideas, ideas, ideologies and epistemological and ontological concepts within the infinite body of literary texts of oriental and occidental origins" (Hashemi 50). The "cross-references within the same narrative levels in addition [to] the intrusive voices of various narrators and narratees create a rather spiriform pattern of movement that, despite making the very act of comprehension and living confusing… serves as the sole means through which [the characters] can avoid petrification and guarantees immortality represented by the blissful stellation of Perseus and Medusa" (Hashemi 45). The parallel narrative layers manifested in the novel unfold overcoming the static repetitive nature of life that Barth strives to escape.

The earliest story of the novel is entitled "Dunyazidiad" although it stems from Scheherazade's story. Barth chooses Dunyazade to be "an image of the modern storyteller" (Davis 106). The novella celebrates its triple vision of the story: Barth's re-created version, the legendary one, and the story told afterwards. In this novella, Barth bumps into his own creation as Scheherazade's savior. Both Scheherazade and the Genie, the fictionalized Barth, are "two storytellers from different ontological boundaries with the same concern that is the problem of writer's block", and both will mutually lead one another to the transcendental shore (Yardani 170). Following *The Thousand and One Nights* pattern, Barth opens his work by being part of the pattern he has chosen; he manages skillfully "to intrude his text as an author who descends in the world of Scheherazade and her eternal realm of storytelling" (Majd 65). The transtextual structure dominates the novella in which Barth's life, like Scheherazade's, is hung upon storytelling; a dilemma that is clearly sated from the very beginning:

> Little Doony ... pretend this whole situation is the plot of a story we're reading, and you and I and Daddy and the King are all fictional characters. In this story, Scheherazade finds a way to change the King's mind about women and turn him into a gentle, loving husband. It's not hard to imagine such a story, is it? Now, no matter what way she finds— whether it's a magic spell or a magic story with the answer in it or a magic anything— it comes down to

particular words in the story we're reading, right? And those words are made from the letters of our alphabet: a couple-dozen squiggles we can draw with this pen. This is the key, Doony! And the treasure, too, if we can only get our hands on it! It's as if—as if the key to the treasure is the treasure! (*Chimera* 3)

Barth appears at this moment as the Genie striving to find his way out of the writer's block he encounters. Finding that Scheherazade is facing the same issue, the Genie, the fictionalized version of Barth, provides his ideal storyteller with the treasure by which she will put an end to the king's gynocide. The word, or rather storytelling, is the key to the treasure and is the treasure itself. Through helping her, the Genie futurizes what has already taken place. For Scheherazade, Barth is a mythical creature, and for him she is a fictional character. This technique of identity mirroring is the key to understanding the novel. Barth and Scheherazade exchange their role in providing each other with the life-saving sword…narration and storytelling. In this novella, the Genie tells Scheherazade and Dunyazade that "he had set down two-thirds of a projected series of three novellas, longish tales which would take their sense from one another in several of the ways he and Sherry had discussed" (*Chimera* 18). The Genie, Barth, tells Scheherazade and Dunyazade, who share the same predicament of deathly silence, that his goal is to learn where to go, by

> discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been – where we've all been. There's a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes – perhaps I invented him – that makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows. (5)

Scheherazade represents the ideal author, while Shahrayar is denied the role of the ideal audience because of his threatening powers. Barth, on the other hand is the ideal reader "who offers himself as the inspiration of the artist, being able to transport himself back into Scherazade's times" (Ziegler 62). Her story carries the novel's message that "the artist's life-story merely frames the truth which his artistic inspiration has conjured up as if by magic" (Ziegler 63). According to Barth, this truth which cannot be found in reality, can only exist in possibility and in delving deep into the everlasting human memory by re-living both individual and collective lost narratives.

The second novella, entitled "Perseid" is the re-created story of the mythic Perseus. "Perseid" is a tale told by Perseus -who has become a star- to Medusa- a star as well. "Perseid" is the story of a hero looking back at his life wandering where all his glory has gone exposing a further predicament that Barth encounters. The character, a reflection of Barth's personal dilemma, is one that is caught between his heroic past and meaningless flat middle age symbolized by his apparent impotence with the feminine muses. The novella opens with the narrator addressing the reader saying that "stories last longer than men, stones than stories, stars than stones. But even our stars' nights are numbered, and with them will pass this patterned tale to a long-deceased earth" (*Chimera* 33). Barth, as well as his character, strives to stay alive, to cherish existence, to remain awake. In this novella, we encounter a protagonist who is caught in "the middle of the story of [his] life"; a middle way between two options: either to repeat his heroic past that is recorded in the ancient Greek myth, or revisit his past, correct his faults and build upon them (*Chimera* 34). Originally, Perseus is the son of the god Zeus and the human Danae. Perseus and his mother were put in a box and thrown into the sea by her father for fear of being dethroned by the new born child. Perseus is later sent to slay the Medusa as a way of getting rid of him by Polydectes- his mother's lover. Unexpectedly, he slays the Medusa by the aid of Athena.

This is what the myth provides; but with Barth, things take a different turn. With the passage of time, Perseus feels the approach of his end, so he seeks a means by which to become immortal. Meanwhile, Medusa is brought to life again by Athena and saves him various times leaving him later with Calyxa. When Perseus wakes up, he finds himself in a spiral chamber all around which are carved the various characteristic events of Perseus' life; not in a chronological arrangement, but rather as scattered spiral images throwing vaguely open the chapters of his life. Struggling to restore himself, Perseus retells and relives the circumstances of his past achievements. First, he attempts to repeat the same old scenario by trying to slay once more the New Medusa. The irony rests in the fact that although slaying the Medusa at first hand didn't bring him happiness, he tries to walk the same path again which leads to the same end. Waking up in Calyxa's cave, Perseus starts a new beginning in this point of middle-path. Hence, "the passive repetition of the past is not a key to progress, and…genuine transformation requires improvisation" (Delic 55). Thus, through his imaginative re-creation of his earlier life, Perseus gives his life a deeper meaning by turning eternal its temporal aspects.

With his life story being re-narrated to him by Calyxa and Medusa, together with his own memory of his past, Perseus' story begins to restructure after hearing it from various voices: "I wonder how many voices are telling my tale" (*Chimera* 86). Like Schehrazade, the Genie and Barth himself, Perseus is aware of the inevitability of revisiting and retracing his past as the only means of creating the correct path for his future. During his second reliving of the story, Perseus "has to permit things to happen to him instead of adventuring to them, in order to be able to reflect upon them" (Ziegler 57). The narrative structure in "Perseid" is vaguely constructed to the extent that the original story is almost lost. Although Barth chooses 1st person narration as his means of delivering his tale, still it is uniquely adopted. This use of first-person narration adds to the defamiliarization of the author.

On the other hand, Perseus speaks of himself in third person to "objectify his own existence in his obsessive search for its meaning" (Edelstein 106). That is, he takes the dual role of the hero-author of his story to avoid its endless repetition and "overtake with understanding [his] present paragraph as it were by examining [his] paged past, and…proceed serene to the future's sentence" (*Chimera* 46). The power of language to reveal and to conceal, to trap and to re-present, to make illusions and to shatter them gives it its dual character as presence and absence" (Edelstein 103). This duality is reflected in Perseus' words at the end of his tale:

> I'm content. So with this issue, our net estate: to have become, like the noted music of our tongue, these silent, visible signs; to be the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise you up forever and know that our story will never be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars (*Chimera* 82).

Moreover, the character of Calyxa, whose name symbolically refers to the whorl of leaves protecting the flower bud, serves as the mirror narrator for Perseus' tale. She is "paradoxically both the audience for Perseus' life story and the teller of his story as her murals help Perseus overcome his amnesia and re-live his life through exploring the reliefs" (Hashemi 45). At the end, Perseus declares that his destiny is "to be the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret" (*Chimera* 82). If we deal with this tale as the mythical root to which Barth has resorted to solve his predicament, Perseus is the ideal hero in Barth's view. He is the hero who knows well his past and knows that re-living it will lead to nothing but to the spiral repetition of an unsolved mystery.

That's why he chooses to re-visit it and live it with corrective actions that grant an immortal destiny. By the end, his heroic immortality is assured, first by being a constellation, then by having the story of his life become endlessly read and revisited.

The closing session, "Bellerophoniad", similar to its two previous counterparts, has its own polyphonic space inhabited by embedded and juxtaposed narratives. It provides the story of Bellerophon who faces a similar dilemma but who encounters a different end. It is a dis-harmonious novella in which a fictional hero imitates the life of another fictional hero. In it, Barth exposes a further human and artistic crisis warning "against excessive experimentation without meaningful artistic intentions" (Delic 50). Originally, Bellerophon is "the Corinthian hero of Greek mythology who famously battled and killed the fantastical Chimera monster" (Cartwright 1). He was the son of Poseidon and is said to have tamed the winged horse Pegasus. In his *Illiad*, Homer describes Bellerophon as being granted "beauty and all that is lovely in manhood" (6:155). According to the historian Robin Lane Fox, Bellerophon's name indicates his past and destiny, as the name Phontes' means killer. Using his winged horse, Bellerophon is said to have been able to slaughter the Chimera by thrusting a lump of lead into its mouth. He has passed a lot of quests and become heir to the kingdom. However, becoming boastful and so assured of the power of his horse, he has been unexpectedly thrown by Pegasus falling back to earth.

In this closing novella that culminates this complicated narrative spiral, John Barth appears in the form of two personae: "one of them appears in the context of the fiction and as a creation of the other" (Mackenzie 99). In this novella, Barth appears once more as the writer of a lecture delivered by Bellerophon, in which he refers to his own literary experience. Since the early lines of "Bellerophoniad", the reader experiences a multiplicity of narrative textures all unfolding the story. The narrator, who is hardly defined, opens this story as follows:

> Thus begins, so help me Muse, the tidewater tale of twin Bellerophon, mythic hero, cousin to constellated Perseus: how he flew and reflew Pegasus the winged horse; dealt double death to the three-part freak Chimera; twice loved, twice lost; twice aspired to, reached, and died to immortality -- in short, how he rode the heroic cycle and was recycled. Loosed at last from mortal speech, he turned into written words: Bellerophonic letters afloat between two worlds, forever betraying, in combinations and recombinations, the man they forever represent (*Chimera* 83).

The narrator informs the reader that Bellerophon is to re-experience, like Perseus, his bygone heroic past:

> A narrative difficulty resolved by the simple but inspired device of making the second half of my life recapitulate ironically the first half, after the manner of Perseid, but with…a circle rather than a recapitulate spiral as its geometric motif" (*Chimera* 86).

Bellerophon is speaking of himself as if he is both the narrator of the story and the protagonist of the story he is telling: "It's true that Bellerophon's aspiration to immortality was without social relevance…of benefit to no one but himself" (*Chimera* 87). Barth announces that the text is written by the fictional Polyeidus, and will be found in the future by an author from Maryland. Polyeidus is introduced as the writer of the myth who controls the narrative and its heroes; emblematic of Barth's own "alter egos who serve to address the complex nature of the writing process" (Delic 46). Polyeidus becomes Bellerophon who in turn becomes the words of his own story; the story which is told in the first person because its narrator is the myth itself. This part implies a confusion in narrative identities between art and creation: "Bellerophon's voice becomes Barth's, and his lecture turns into a gloss on Barth's novels" (Davis 109). This section presents another narrative view provided by Barth, which is reducing the significance of the tale itself and presenting the maker of the myth as its complicated image of Bellerophon, who appears to be "a failed hero [whose] heroic identity is found to be a lie when he discovers that he is not the demigod Bellerus but his human brother Deliades" (Edelstein 104). The story of Bellerophon analogues to the postmodern narrative crisis:

> What I'm experiencing cannot be called an identity-crisis. In order to experience an identity-crisis, one must first have enjoyed some sense of identity. The tradition of the mad genius in literature. The tradition of the double in literature. The tradition of the story within the story, the tradition of the mad editor of the text, the tradition of the unreliable narrator. "I come now," how beautifully all this is managed in the Perseid (*Chimera* 91).

Having no heroic past to build upon or refer to, and rather resorting to Perseus' heroism, Bellerophon doesn't reach immortality, but rather failure. He doesn't become a hero, but "a parody of one" (Waugh 72). However, although his failure refers to the failure of the traditional author, Barth makes of this unsuccessful hero a successful author by becoming himself the immortal words uttered: "He turned into written words: Bellerophonic letters afloat between two worlds, forever betraying

in combinations and re-combinations, the man they forever represent" (*Chimera* 83). He declares clearly: "I'm full of voices, all mine, none me; I can't keep straight who's speaking, as I used to. It's not my wish to be obscure or difficult; I'd hoped at least entertain, if not inspire" (*Chimera* 88). He turns "into the sound of his own story" (Hashemi 46), and as Barth puts it, "to turn into the sound of one's own voice is an occupational hazard of professional storytellers" (Barth *The Friday Book* 139).

In the brilliant dialogue constructed as the closure of the narrative between Bellerophon and Polyiedus as the words of Bellorophon's own story, all the mythic characters are referred to as being inventions. In this mirroring structure, Bellerophon declares his awareness of his own self-creation: "I hate this World! It's not at all what I had in mind for Bellerophon. It's a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longueurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor—" (*Chimera* 189). With such a spiral ending that takes us back to Scheherazade's imagining her life as a story while we as readers are watching the story of her life, Bellerophon exposes Barth's view about the fictionality of reality and reality of fiction. All voices orchestrate in one single tone reflecting this inevitable truth and echoing the human memory to transcend the exhausted present.

Conclusion

The most prominent message received through reading John Barth's *Chimera* is the importance of narration; the story told; as the savior from the postmodern dilemma. The present article has adopted Gerard Genette's concepts of transtextuality and metalepsis to unfold the multiple narrative and ontological layers exhibited in the novel and represent the threat of human decadence which has been exposed in Barth's seminal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion". *Chimera* indulges the reader in the quest of exploring its process of creation, not only as a recipient but also as a creator and interpreter; hence, providing him/her with an assisting hand in discovering his own self-creation and facing the predicament of postmodern man. In problematizing the gap between reality and pattern, Barth declares that in the postmodern era, there is hardly a pattern; but if there is a somehow basic one, it can only be attained by going back to the original sources of human experience, not with the intention of imitating and recalling, but with the purpose of re-creating and re-experiencing. Hence, resorting to mythology is not an act of mimicry, but rather re-creation and re-interpretation.

The spiral motif formulates the narrative structure of *Chimera*. The reader can hardly detect the borders of any of the stories told; instead, he

finds himself caught in a network of narrative references and exchanged voices that strive to come to the surface. The three inter-connected separate novellas take the reader into a journey towards self-construction, exposing the postmodern man's crisis and offering a hand to solve it. In the narrative, Barth as well as all his integrated narrators, including his own self, exercise supreme self-consciousness. Barth's metalyptic self-consciousness crosses the breach between fiction and reality, consciousness and consciousness, the author and his characters as well as mythic and contemporary worlds; stating clearly that in such a world of ontological uncertainty, a world that carries in its unfolds the threat of decadence and death, the word is the only key to the treasure of immortality. In other words, the novel underscores the importance of the word; it is the only key to the treasure of narrative immortality. Scheherazade saves her life through words, Perseus is presented through words, Chimera is killed by Bellerophon's pencil and Bellerophon becomes words in the pages of his own story.

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