The return of the storyteller in contemporary literature

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POSTMODERN STORY/RETELLER

John Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*

> *Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practised by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop.
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> Benjamin, *Illuminations* 98.

As discussed in the last three chapters, both Mario Vargas Llosa's self-conscious appropriation of various discourses, along with Rushdie's self-conscious questioning of the grand narrative of religion and their mutual retelling of 'old stories' and use of fabulative modes, place them in a postmodern context. In this chapter, I focus on one of the first writers on 'postmodernism', the American critic and novelist, John Barth. The chapter aims to explore the ways in which Barth's 'postmodernism' emerged directly from the idea of re-telling stories.

John Barth is regarded as one of the earliest and most significant writers of postmodernism. Like his contemporary Italo Calvino, whose impetus for writing began with an interest in folk-tales, he is a crucial figure in assembling the so-called 'postmodern' in literature. Associated initially with the sense of the belatedness of post-modernism, and seeing it as a written 'literature of exhaustion', Barth sought to 'replenish' (Western) literature through the idea of re-telling stories. This art led him back to the oral tradition and the storyteller. From this perspective, postmodernist literature actually becomes the literature of storytellers: if literary modernism exhausted the written word, postmodernism will replenish it through talk.

Although perhaps not his most popular or well-known novel, I have chosen to read *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1990)[1] for a number of reasons which again lead us to the storyteller. Firstly, the novel juxtaposes the literary tradition of 'realism' against that of the oral tradition, which leads us to question the roles of the novelist and the storyteller. Set between the worlds of medieval Baghdad and twentieth-century America, the novel sets up a storytelling competition between an anonymous storyteller called 'Somebody' and the original Sindbad of the *Nights*. Somebody is a 'Sailor' who tells of his voyages to Maryland, a place in twentieth-century America, and the life of a character called Simon Behler, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. In this sense, Somebody's stories place the *Bildungsroman* within the context of an oral story that is being listened to by an erudite audience. Barth's novel thus asks how we judge the storyteller and his stories, according to narrative conventions with which we are familiar or according to less familiar frameworks and rules.

For the medieval audience listening to the stories, Somebody's voyages are as exotic as Sindbad's appear to be to the extra-textual audience that contemporary readers of the novel represent. Somebody's story begins in a realistic mode; but as his narrative progresses, and he becomes more and more part of the fantasy world of medieval Baghdad, he is transformed into a medieval storyteller, by name and nature, and wins the competition. As the reader reflects on the transitions between realism and fantasy, between novelist and storyteller, (s)he is led to identify with and perhaps ultimately place him/herself amongst the audience listening to the tales. Barth shows us that the novel and its readers have a relation to the storyteller and his audience, a relationship that continues in contemporary 'postmodern' literature.

A second aspect foregrounded in the novel is the idea of stories-within-stories, which is taken from the construction of the *Nights* themselves. The novel is framed by a narrator who lies in a hospital bed, presumably, close to death. But death is put off by the telling of the story of Somebody who, in turn, tells the story of

[1] Barth, John Simmons. *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. For the rest of this chapter I refer to this novel using the abbreviated title *Last Voyage*. All in-text quotations will refer to this edition of the novel and will appear use *LVSS* followed by the page number.

Simon. In other words, Barth models his novel on the *Nights*, beginning with a frame story, like that of *Scheherazade* in the *Nights* who told stories to stay alive. Somebody and Sindbad are, themselves, not the only storytellers in the novel. There is not just one, but at least three fictional storytellers in *Last Voyage*: the storyteller-narrator of the frame, Somebody alias Simon Behler, Sindbad, and Scheherazade herself. Moreover, each of the storytellers' narratives reflects the idea of storytelling for survival: the end of their story will mean the end of their own existence, a narrative death that they vehemently seek to avoid. Conversely, the telling of their individual stories and each instance of their narrative appearance leads to narrative existence, and thus to life. The creation of a story and a storyteller is thus revealed as a creation of worlds: which is why perhaps Barth says that "The storyteller's trade is the manufacture of universes."[2] Storytelling with Barth becomes not only existential but explicitly ontological too.

The idea of re-telling is highlighted by the re-telling of the stories of Sindbad which come directly from the *Nights* themselves. By taking them out of the *Nights* and placing them within another fictional frame, that of a contemporary novel, Barth shows that he is following the tradition of the storytellers of the *Nights* who retold the tales, time and time again, reinterpreting and reinventing them for modern audiences. As Barth's audience are readers who are accustomed to reading novels, his fictional play between realism and fantasy, between storyteller and novelist, reveals his novel to be a 'new' and constantly replenished form.

Postmodern writer or storyteller?

In the words of John Vickery, "it is no great secret to any attentive student of John Barth's career that he is dedicated to narrativity, to the telling and retelling of stories."[3] This is frankly an understatement. Since the publication of his first book, *The Floating Opera* in 1956, Barth has not stopped or slowed down his 'telling', continuing right up to the present day[4] and well into his seventies.[5] In terms of his

[2] Barth, *Friday Book* 17.
[3] John B. Vickery, "The Functions of Myth in John Barth's *Chimera*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 38.2 (1992): 427.
[4] Barth's last published book to date is *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* (2004).
[5] John Simmons Barth was born on May 27, 1930 in Cambridge, Maryland, USA.

career, Barth has been more than successful; his acceptance of twelve literary awards is but one of the markers which point to his influence on American writing.[6] But what kind of writer is John Barth? Perhaps his description of himself as the "so-and-so, digressive postmodernist author of *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* and other fictions"[7] might give us an indication.

Postmodernism is now a well-known term not only within, but also outside of, literary studies. As Daniel Green observes, it "has come to denote a general attitude toward traditional intellectual presuppositions or, more specifically, certain related practices in philosophy, the social sciences, and all of the arts."[8] However, despite its now wide variety of applications in differing contexts within and outside of the academy, Green reminds us that "'postmodern' was originally a critical label attached to an emergent group of American fiction writers perceived to be challenging established literary convention",[9] and of which John Barth was a key figure. In fact, Barth did more than just challenge the literary conventions of his day. Not content with his novels being seen as manifestoes for an emergent postmodernism, he began to write what now amounts to a substantial body of criticism and non-fiction. Two of his essays in particular, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979),[10] with its subtitle 'Postmodernist Fiction', were treated (at the time) as seminal essays on the nature and use of the postmodern in fiction. Barth's authority, therefore, did not only arise from the fact that he was one of the most popular 'postmodern' writers of his

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[6] In 1956 Barth was nominated for the National Book Award for *The Floating Opera* (1956). From 1965-66 he received: the National Institute of Arts and Letters grant in literature, the Brandeis University creative arts award in fiction and the Rockefeller Foundation grant in fiction. In 1968 his novel *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) was nominated for the National Book Award and in 1972 he was awarded it for his novel *Chimera* (1972). In 1974 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1997 he received the F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for Outstanding Achievement in American Fiction and in 1998, the Lannan Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1998 he won the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story and in 1999, the Enoch Pratt Society's Lifetime Achievement in Letters Award.

[7] Barth, *Further Fridays* 191.

[8] Daniel Green, "Postmodern American Fiction," *The Antioch Review* 61.4 (2003): 729.

[9] Green, 729.

[10] These have been published in numerous forms, firstly separately in *The Atlantic* in 1969 and 1980 respectively, then together in 1982 by Lord John Press of Northridge, California and finally in Barth's book of collected non-fiction *The Friday Book*. C.f. 118 p.49.

generation,[11] but was also substantiated by his academic authority as a professor of Creative Writing at a number of eminent American universities.[12]

In the latter essay, "The Literature of Replenishment", Barth shows us that even at this early date in the history of postmodernism, its relation to an anterior modernism was hotly disputed. He writes:

> A principal activity of postmodernist critics (also "metacritics" and "paracritics"), writing in postmodernist journals or speaking at postmodernist symposia, consists in disagreeing about what postmodernism is or ought to be, and thus about who should be admitted to the club – clubbed into admission, depending upon the critic's view of the phenomenon and of particular writers.[13]

Barth's aim, at that time, seemed to be the creation of a simple formula for postmodern fiction, a formula which general readers, and not just professors of literature, would understand. For Barth, postmodernism is potentially a more open and democratic form than "high modernism" with its academic definitions and defences. By critiquing the world of the Academy, Barth posits the notion that books and their writers do not and are not meant to fit entirely into neatly constructed categories. Categories are for critics to create and ponder. He says:

> It goes without saying that critical categories are as more or less fishy as they are less or more useful. I happen to believe that just as an excellent teacher is likely to teach well no matter what pedagogical theory he suffers from, so a gifted writer is likely to rise above what he takes to be his aesthetic principles, not to mention what *others* take to be his aesthetic principles. [...] Actual artists, actual texts, are seldom more than more or less modernist, postmodernist, formalist, symbolist, realist, surrealist, politically committed, aesthetically "pure", "experimental", regionalist, internationalist, what have you. The particular work ought always to take primacy over contexts and categories. (200)

This to- and fro-ing over categories, as well as the ongoing debates surrounding the what, where and when of postmodernism, or the 'who-is-included-in-the-club' aspects, are still to a certain extent active some thirty years later.

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[11] By 'his generation' I refer primarily to the fifties, sixties and early seventies.

[12] Barth has served as a professor at four universities: Penn State University (1953-65), SUNY Buffalo (1965-73), Boston University (visiting professor, 1972-73), and The Johns Hopkins University (1973-95). He officially retired from academic life in 1995.

[13] Barth, *Friday Book* 194.

Although Barth himself may seem to be arguing that 'popular readership' is ultimately more important that 'critical readership', his 'postmodernist fiction', with its highly self-conscious nature, seems to prove otherwise. As Lee Lemon observes:

> Barth's assimilation of such diverse technical and thematic materials invites the kind of detective ability scholars love to display; his intricate and inventive use of the borrowings invites the kind of ingenuity that makes critical reputations. [...] The problem is that his work invites the kind of commentary that attracts the professional but often repels the general reader. Barth is often perceived as a writer's writer, one of those artists who has mastered the subtleties of the craft but forgot its heart, one of the passionless virtuosos.[14]

Although I may be falling into the very category of critics that Lemon has pointed out, I think there is much to be said about this, in the sense that anyone reading Barth's work who professes to 'know' anything about literature cannot fail to notice that he seems almost obsessively involved with the technical 'craft of fiction'. Although the thrust of Lemon's argument is a call for Barth's appeal to popular readership, one cannot help but ask: is Barth's fiction only for the academically fiction-obsessed? Is this self-consciousness at its very worst? The answer perhaps lies in Barth's constant need to explain himself. Barth reiterates these two points himself in the preface to the essay "The Literature of Replenishment" (1984):

> Not every storyteller is afflicted with the itch to understand and explain to himself and others, why he tells the stories he tells the way he tells them, rather than some other sort of stories some other way. [...] But there are those who are thus afflicted [...] I am of that number.[15]

These points lead me to question the extent to which a self-conscious writer, who is also part of an academic circle, writes merely for the sake of producing texts which require more 'academic critical writings' to explain, regurgitate or provide exegesis on that writing. Is criticism or any 'non-fiction about fiction' simply an argument for fiction and its ultimate survival in an ever-growing text-threatened world? And does this allow for a writer/storyteller's fiction(s) to be simply about fiction(s) ad infinitum?

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[14] Lemon, 43.
[15] Barth, *Friday Book* 193.

In the light of his legacy as a 'postmodern' American writer, it is interesting to investigate not only whether Barth's 'postmodernism' is still contemporary, but more importantly, to discover how his work might help us better to understand not only 'postmodernism', but also the development which contemporary fiction has taken since the sixties and seventies. Does the decline in interest in writers such as Barth point to the decline in interest in postmodernism within literary criticism? Or has Lee Lemon's prediction come true:

> As the works of Barth and his contemporaries age and critical acceptance of their exuberance is replaced by a demand for aesthetic restraint – a traditional changing of the literary avant-garde – Barth's reputation will all too likely wane, especially among ordinary readers and the semi-committed, (students and non-professionals) those who fill out the numbers of readers who keep reputations alive.[16]

Has Barth's kind of postmodernism had its day? Or has postmodernism transformed itself into something, above and beyond Barth's initial ideas on its nature? In order to answer these questions, I aim to discover why Barth writes the way he does. Or, to quote the title of one of his essays, to give the "Reasons Why [He] Tell[s] the Stories [He] Tell[s] the Way [He] Tell[s] Them Rather Than Some Other Sort of Stories Some Other Way." Where did Barth get his inspiration from? In order to elucidate this further allow me to tell you a story.

The Barthian "life-text"

Once upon a time, during the days when I was writing a thesis on the storyteller, I read a novel by John Barth entitled *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*. Almost immediately as I began reading, I was struck by how much the novel expressed my ideas about storytellers and novelists, a fact that led me to investigate these ideas further. I began to read other novels by Barth and some of his essays. I read and read and read, moving from one of Barth's novels to another and then to essays by and about him. My reading grew and grew, but then one day, I realised my reading had simply grown out of all proportion. "What was this all about? When would it stop?" I asked myself. I was not writing a thesis on Barth, I was writing a thesis on the storyteller. I thought about this for a little while and eventually realised that this

[16] Lemon, 42.

exponential growth was not simply due to an overzealousness on my part, spawned by the obvious academic need to fully understand my subject, but was also due to the fact that each text by Barth, whether fiction or non-fiction, was linked in a way that *kept you* reading, as if it was all part of one story. One day, I came across the following quotation by a critic named Charles Ernst, and this is when my story of Barth began to reach a kind of conclusion:

> For the reader who has journeyed through each of John Barth's published novels, novellas, short story collections, non-fiction publications, and autofiction, each text in sequence may be the expansion of an ever-increasing text-field, of a single Barthian discourse.[17]

What I realised, as Susan Poznar[18] also suggests, is that as Barth's texts move backwards and forwards between themselves and involve themselves in countless repetitions and replenishments, it becomes difficult to simply read one, and stay there. Soon enough readers may find themselves (which I began to do) trying to chase any one of the various thematic threads – in my case the storyteller – throughout the corpus of his fiction. For the scholar who specialises in John Barth's fiction, (s)he may eventually begin to see, as Ernst suggests, that Barth's novels are linked in a way that was "less *inter*textual than *intra*textual",[19] a fact that led Ernst to coin this phenomenon as Barth's "life-text".

There is a final conclusion to my personal story of reading Barth, which through its telling, will lead us back to the larger story of the return of the storyteller that this thesis seeks to relate. The key to unlocking the riddle of the Barthian "life-text" lies precisely in the figure of the storyteller, a label that Barth places on himself much more than any other contemporary writer that I have encountered. Barth, more-often-than not, tends to talk about 'stories' and 'storytelling' and about himself as a storyteller: "by trade I am a storyteller; I'll begin by telling a story."[20] If we see

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[17] Ernst, 45.

[18] Poznar, Susan. "Barth's 'Compulsion to Repeat: Its Hazards and Possibilities'." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.2 (1990): 64-75. As a way of illustrating this point, Poznar's essay concentrates on the Todd Andrew's story in Barth's *Letters* (1979) which first appears in *The Floating Opera* (1956).

[19] Ernst, 45.

[20] Barth, *Further Fridays* 183. In fact, a reading of both this collection of essays and of *The Friday Book* will emphasise this further. I have found over forty references to Scheherazade alone!

Barth's work as being part of a tradition that moves beyond the fictional frame, the oral tradition of storytelling, and if we see him as a 'storyteller', a curious picture begins to emerge that also leads us back to Barth's conception of 'postmodernist literature'. I want to suggest that his constant repetition of ideas, themes and tropes, not only has a very definite point, but also has a specific point of origin.

Barth's 'texts' assert themselves as being part of a continuing story – hence my label, following Ernst, the Barthian "life-text" – and their very themes and ideas are related ontologically to storytelling itself, to its continuous quest for survival. However, this idea did not originate with Barth – and this is where Barth's 'literature of replenishment' finds its 'truest' meaning – for he has modelled his "life-text" on the frame story of the *Nights* themselves. His novels are the offspring of this frame tale as much as the stories, which are included in the *Nights*, are the offspring of an age-old and constantly replenishing world of storytellers. More specifically, as a writer writing out this 'literature of replenishment', he has found his muse in one of the most famous storytellers of all time, "Scheherazade", the frame-tale narrator of *The Arabian Nights*. He says this himself:

> [...] it was never Scheherazade's stories that seduced and beguiled me, but their teller and the extraordinary circumstances of their telling: in other words, the character and situation of Scheherazade, and the narrative convention of the framing story.[21]

Barth's interest in Scheherazade began when, as a student working in a library stacking shelves, he 'first' discovered various writers and works which would eventually lead him into his own profession as a writer. Barth admits that it is Scheherazade's image that has remained with him throughout his life, to the extent that he sees her as his 'muse'. He says:

> Most of those spellbinding liars I have forgotten, but never Scheherazade. Though the tales she tells aren't my favourites, she remains my favourite teller, and it is a heady paradox that this persistence, being the figure of her literal aim, thereby generates itself, and becomes the emblem as well of my figurative aspiration. When I think of my condition and my hope, musewise, in the time between now and when I shall run out of ink or otherwise expire, it is Scheherazade who comes to mind, for many reasons – not least of

[21] Barth, *Friday Book* 220.

> which is a technical interest in the ancient device of the framing-story, used more beautifully in the Nights than anywhere else I know.[22]

Uniquely, John Barth, not only identifies with the storyteller, but actually models himself *on* a storyteller. Deriving his narrative inspiration from the *Nights*, he shows that he does not demarcate between the 'canon' of literature, or the 'literary tradition', and the oral tradition of storytelling: both are involved in the same practice of telling stories. It is here that his identification and labelling of himself 'a storyteller' finds its meaning. Barth shows us that the novelist and the storyteller are one, despite their differing media. As a result, his novels can be seen more as stories that are born from the continuing tradition of oral storytelling, which itself is a tradition of re-telling, replenishment and reinvention. In this sense, as we have seen with many of the writers in previous chapters, the oral and literate traditions are brought together which, as I will go on to explain more fully below,[23] is also reflected in the history of the *Nights* themselves.

Finally, Barth critics have approached his novels from an 'existentialist' perspective. I want to suggest that Barth's seeming 'existentialism' can again be related to the themes we find in the *Nights* and, more specifically, to the idea of storytelling for survival. Barth's fiction is not so much political as ontological in that its true purpose is to tell stories about life in order to understand what it means.

> I'm going to maintain that the first and the final question that a storywriter puts to his or her memory, [...] is not [...] "what happened?" but rather the essential question of identity – the personal, professional, cultural, even species-specific "Who am I?" [...] "Who am I?" is what ultimately motivates the reader or hearer of fiction as well as its writer/teller, and further [...] that the creation of fiction and its enjoyment are a model of and a spin-off from the great fictive enterprise of human consciousness itself: the ongoing fabrication of our selves, in which memory is always the co-author.[24]

His beliefs about the nature of telling stories and life relate back to the *Nights* as the *Nights'* main "desire [was] to highlight the importance of narrative" and that

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[22] John Barth *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Perigee Books, 1984) 57.
[23] *See*, chapter 5 on Rushdie's *Haroun*.
[24] Barth, *Further Fridays* 188.

narrative's predominant purpose was "not with regard to the book, but in relation to existence itself."[25] In this sense, even before we begin our reading of *Last Voyage*, we realise that it already exists within another story which has yet to finish.

Barth's fictions, and the frames within which he positions them, reflect Scheherazade and the *Nights* both thematically and in their very nature.[26] Moreover, Barth's interest in the *Nights*, and its deeper meaning, lies in his obvious admiration for and subsequent reference to Tzevtan Todorov's essay, "Narrative-Men",[27] and equally, in narrative embedding or stories-within-stories, which Barth writes about in an essay entitled, "Tales within Tales".[28] If narrative equals life, as Todorov claims, one can only assume that the control Barth seeks is the control over narrative and life. Seen from this perspective, Barth's entire corpus of fiction – beginning with his first book – is one vast (life)story (if narrative=life as Todorov argues), which in turn, spawns numerous other stories (his novels) within stories. However, what Barth knows about both stories and life, is that they do eventually come to an end. This link between death and storytelling, or storytelling for survival, is evident through the entire corpus (pun intended) of Barth's fiction. In other words, we could see his entire *oeuvre* or "life-story" as his attempt to 'story-tell for survival'. Here is Barth referencing Todorov on this topic:

> The Bulgarian/Parisian formalist/structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov, [...] draws a less philosophical but equally interesting parallel between the formal structure of stories within stories [...] and that of a certain syntactic form [...] *embedding*. [...]. Todorov argues (with splendid examples from *The 1001 Nights*) that narrating almost literally equals living. Here he joins Borges, but on linguistic rather than metaphysical grounds: We tell stories and listen to them because we live stories and live in them. Narrating equals language equals life: To cease to narrate, as the capital example of Scheherazade reminds us, is to die – literally for her, figuratively for the rest of us. One might add that if this is true, then not only is all fiction about

[25] Melinda M. Rosenthal, "Burton's Literary Uroburos: The Arabian Nights as Self-Reflexive Narrative," *Pacific Coast Philology* 25.1-2 (1990): 122.

[26] Lahsen Benaziza's study is the only one which makes this link between Barth and Scheherazade and the tradition of the *Nights* more specifically. *See* Benaziza, Lahsen. *Romancing Scheherazade: John Barth and the One Thousand and One Nights*. Agadir, Morocco: Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, Université Ibn Zohr, 2001.

[27] Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977.

[28] Barth, *Friday Book* 218.

> fiction, but all fiction about fiction is in fact fiction about life. Some of us understood that all along.[29]

Barth's achievement as storyteller, whose stories continue through history, is that he thereby cheats death and places himself within his own fictional frame. As Vickery states:

> Clearly, if narrativity is to become authorial salvation, it must find some means for ceasing to be a one-directional movement into an ever-receding future and become, [...] a cyclical or double-helix looping back on itself so that the author ceases to be the causative agent and becomes part of the inexhaustible process.[30]

Therefore, to follow his spiralling lead and return to the opening lines of this essay, namely to Barth's dedicated ode to narrativity and to its synonymous 'storytelling', let us examine how these ideas are played out in the novel.

Framing the Story

The first thing one notices about the structure of Barth's novel is that just like its mimicked predecessor, the *Nights*, it is also framed. From the very beginning, the reader is introduced to the novel's three major themes: time, death and storytelling, which are also the themes of the frame story of the *Nights*. It begins in a time and place that we can only vaguely discern as a hospital in the twentieth century, and moves onto two other fictional frames, which themselves also move between other times and places – Medieval Baghdad and twentieth-century Maryland – until it eventually comes back full circle. The narrator of the frame-tale remains anonymous, but again the narrative clues lead us to presume he is a middle-aged man who is lying in his death-bed waiting for "The Familiar Stranger" that the chapter is named after: death. As he is without a name, we ask: who is he? From the listener, a doctor who sits by his bed, we receive the answer: he is a "storyteller" (*LVSS* 4).

With the storyteller lying on his bed, trying to put off death, 'The Familiar Stranger', we begin in the first frame of the numerous embeddings in the novel. As Todorov explains:

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[29] Barth, *Friday Book* 236.
[30] Vickery, 427.

> [...] the appearance of a new character invariably involves the interruption of the preceding story, so that a new story, the one which explains the "now I am here" of the new character, may be told to us.[31]

Todorov explains that "a character trait is not simply the cause of an action, nor simply its effect: it is both at once, just as action is."[32] If then, the character trait of a newly appearing character is a "storyteller", then the implicit story-action that follows will always be the telling of a new story. In other words, we are moving from one storyteller and story to another, or from one action within the narrative to another, again and again. In effect, this is what creates the narrative embedding. Moreover, given that each "character is a potential story that is the story of his life", and that "every new character signifies a new plot", as is true of the *Nights*, we are also with Barth, "in the realm of narrative-men."[33]

From the outset, then, our expectation of the nameless figure arises from our perception of his function: as a storyteller, he is poised to tell a story. Our primary incentive as 'reader' is to follow the leads of the story: to discover the storyteller's identity and his story. In this sense, the relationship between the novelist and the storyteller, and the reader and the listener, is immediately brought into question. As if to further highlight the necessity of this co-dependent relationship between storyteller and audience, the novel opens with the image of the storyteller attempting to hook the listener with the telling of a story. The story he chooses to tell is already 'familiar' to his listener. His hook: "I could tell you the one about the death of Scheherazade" (*LVSS* 3), is met with the reply, "I've heard it" and then "I've heard them all" (*LVSS*3). The familiarity of the story to the listener, and the subsequent impatience that she displays – she looks at her watch – places the listener in the role of the familiar stranger. The absence of the listener signals the death of storytelling and thus the death of the storyteller. In order to save himself from narrative death, the storyteller must keep the listener there, and thus by implication, the writer must keep the reader reading.

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[31] Todorov, 70.
[32] Todorov, 68.
[33] Todorov, 70.

In this sense, the frame story mirrors the frame story of the *Nights*. Just as Scheherazade must keep King Shahryar listening in order to stave off death so, the implication is, must our own storyteller. The way Scheherazade does this is by making sure the stories never end but follow on from each other, always ending in the middle, always ending with a hook. Thus, mirroring Scheherazade's techniques, the storyteller begins his tale. However, when the storyteller finally begins with his "once upon a time" (*LVSS* 4), he checks his wristwatch, which signifies the beginning of moving into another dimension or time: in other words, into story-time, or the partly-fictional-memory of the past. The watch is one of the recurring symbols within the novel which serve to move the teller between times and stories. Again, in keeping with the meaning of the *Nights*, as Rosenthal observes, "this is a book about the telling of tales for the enlightenment and instruction of those in the present (whenever the present might be)."[34] Already, then, we have the three elements necessary for our wider theme of storytelling for survival: time, death and the storyteller.

The first story the frame-narrator tells, chapter two of the novel, is also the *last* story of the heroine of the *Nights*, Scheherazade. The reference to death in the title, gives us another clue to understanding Barth's fictional play. "The Destroyer of Delights, or The Last Story of Scheherazade as Told by the Narrator of the Foregoing" (*LVSS* 7) sets up the following story as told by Scheherazade, the second of the storytellers that are embedded in the first fictional frame. Having watched all her family die, (presumably because they, unlike her, do not appear in any stories) Scheherazade is still alive, and as it transpires, we meet her at the time of her life where she seeks death. We learn: "it finally occurred to her [...] that her current situation was just the reverse of her original one" (*LVSS* 8). Death has come to visit her and is asking her for one last story, "her ticket" out of narrative existence.

Once again, death seems familiar. This time he looks strangely like the real Barth himself, as Scheherazade's description reveals: "now that she could see him, [...] the fellow looked tired, though he is famously tireless: an elderly, gray-bearded, serious-faced chap" (*LVSS* 8). Although we must be wary of identifying the author

[34] Rosenthal, 122.

with his fictional counterpart, Barth seems to be hinting at the identification as part of his textual play. In one sense he is responsible for both her resurrection and death in this story. This is what is significant. Scheherazade's resurrection into Barth's fictional world serves a double purpose: not only does it reiterate the vision of the eternal storyteller, but the placing of her in the fictional world of the novel, her frame story, and thus the whole collection of the *Nights* themselves, become part of his. Any well-versed reader of Barth's novels would know that this is not the first time that Barth has tried to cheat his way into the Scheherazade's story and claim it as his own.[35]

Returning now to the story, Scheherazade is shocked that she has to tell another story "this late in the day" (*LVSS* 9), but when she finally decides and begins her "once upon a time" she says: "I could have offered more but that time's long past" (*LVSS* 9). Barth is hinting that the loss of her 'sexual' virginity is linked to the loss of the 'virginity' of her stories. However, if she is to save herself again from death, and destroy his delights, at his request, she must follow his narrative lead. In this sense we see again the importance of the audience in the telling of the story. Her listener tells her: "but listen: no Ali Baba and company. Your first audience wanted virgin girls and hand-me-down stories. What your last one's after is a virgin story" (*LVSS* 9). Although not a virgin, she can still offer a virgin story and so her last 'night' (implied by the number one thousand and one) and thus her last story should mirror her first night, or story, but in reverse. Her answer is thus, "then this last tale will be a virgin story in both respects, for it's about virginity too, you might say, as was my story [...] once upon a time" (*LVSS* 10).

Finally, we begin another story, what we know to be the title of the novel and we can only assume that this will be the 'key' narrative in the novel. However, we are already in our third fictional frame. Scheherazade begins her 'virgin' storytelling with the story of "The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor". We are told a last story of another character in the novel whose identity remains mysterious, and whose identity we therefore want to discover. The story does not begin with the last voyage of Somebody the Sailor at all, but with the "the *next*-to-last voyage of

[35] I am, of course, referring to Barth's novel *Chimera*.

Sindbad the fabulous Seaman" (*LVSS* 13). As we are probably familiar with the Voyages of Sindbad, and thus know there are Seven, we expect to hear voyage six. Instead we hear voyage seven, which leads us to conclude that there must be an eighth, if this is the next-to-last story. However, before we reach the elusive voyage eight, we have to listen to Sindbad's story, which is true to the version in the original *Nights*. In order to highlight the history of its numerous re-telling, the narrative is riddled with "per usuals". We assume then, that what must follow will be Sindbad's last story. But when does Somebody's last Story come in? Eventually, we are told:

> [...] (here comes *our* story) it wasn't Sindbad the Sailor who made that final voyage [...] you don't reach Serendib by plotting a course for it. You have to set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings [...] serendipitously. (*LVSS* 13)

As the word 'serendipitously' implies 'making fortunate discoveries by accident', Somebody's story should lead us to discovering who he is through the process of his storytelling. In this sense, the story is about the identity that comes about through the telling of stories. In order to discover this, we have to learn about his life, a life that will lead to his *last* story.

From this moment on, another set of narrative frames begins, narrated by the two storytellers: Somebody and the original Sindbad of the *Nights*. A storytelling competition is set up between them to see who will tell the best story. In order to stay in the competition, the storyteller must win the audience whose key member is Haroun al-Rashid himself. Somebody, who is lost in medieval Baghdad, has to find his way back to twentieth-century America and to his actual identity by telling his stories. From this point on, the novel is divided into Somebody's tellings of his story starting with "Somebody's first Voyage" through to his sixth voyage with various interludes (beginning with the seventh and counting down) which serve as a means of recounting Sindbad's narratives, as well as continuing Somebody's adventures in the Sindbad household in his "still-stranded" medieval Baghdad. Somebody's Voyages are narratives which unfold at key moments in his life, and centered on his birthday, they tell the story of a life – the life of Simon Behler, whose story is an attempt at writing an autobiography. On Somebody's sixth voyage, the two Sindbad narratives become entangled: the reader wonders whether he will finally find his

way back to real time and the discovery of the elusive Serendib – the end of the story?

When will we reach the last *last* story? Is there one? The only answer is that we have to keep reading if we want to return to the story of Somebody, who will lead us back to Scheherazade and then finally back to the original frame-narrator who is lying in the hospital bed. Consequently, when we come back to the original frame at the very end of the novel, the very last line signifies that the author is leaving this world – life – and is appraoching death. Thus, the focus of the 'last story' takes on a necessary significance: the last story of one storyteller is in fact the first or 'virgin' story of the next. As we have seen, this pattern continues throughout the novel and of course, it is the title of the novel itself.

As we are beginning to discover, Todorov's essay is a helpful aid when reading *Last Voyage* as Barth seems not only to have read the essay, but also to have put into play the very points that Todorov made about the particular features of the *Nights*. Barth again leads us to this very conclusion in an essay of his entitled "Tales within Tales"[36] in which he also refers to Todorov's essay. Barth admits investigating frame-tale literature in order "to discover something about that ancient narrative convention which might inspire a story of my own: a story which, whatever else it was about, would also be about stories within stories within stories."[37] Clearly, he has done this, and not for the first time.[38] As Kevin Brown suggests, *Last Voyage* is an example of "fifth-degree narrative", which Brown outlines as follows:

I. Simon in the hospital tells the story of
  A. Scheherazade in the hospital telling the story of
    1. The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor in which
      a. Simon tells stories, one of which is
        (1) the story of Umar [39]

[36] Barth, *Friday Book* 218-38.
[37] Barth, *Friday Book* 225.
[38] Barth has used this technique of framing in some of his other novels of which *Chimera* is the most striking example.
[39] Kevin Brown, "Structural Devices in John Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*," *CLA Journal* 41.4 (1998): 471.

This is not the only path into the labyrinthine stories which litter the stories within Barth's novel. Nevertheless, it is strikingly similar to the following one which Todorov uses as an example from the *Nights*.

> The *Arabian Nights* contain examples of embedding quite as dizzying. The record seems to be held by the narrative which offers us the story of the bloody chest. Here Scheherazade tells that
>
> Jaafer tells that
>
> the tailor tells that
>
> the barber tells that
>
> his brother (and he has six brothers)
>
> tells that [...][40]

Sindbad and Somebody are not the only characters that are having a competition to see who can tell the most entertaining stories; on an extra-textual level, Barth is competing with Scheherazade and trying to better her use of narrative frames. Todorov says that: "even if the embedded story is not directly linked to the embedding story (by identity of characters), characters can pass from one story to the other",[41] something which we see is true of Barth's novel and particularly apparent in the character of Somebody.

Returning to the larger aim of this thesis: what is the purpose of all of this embedding and what does it say about the return of the storyteller and the state of contemporary fiction? Barth has clearly structured his novel like this for a reason, making sure he is talking about storytelling within the story of the story of the story. Todorov explains:

> [...] embedding is an articulation of the most essential property of all narrative. For the embedding narrative is the *narrative of a narrative*. *By telling the story of another narrative, the first narrative achieves its fundamental theme and at the same time is reflected in this image of itself.* The embedded narrative is the image of that great abstract narrative of which all the others are merely infinitesimal parts as well as the image of the embedding narrative which directly precedes it. To be the narrative of a narrative is the fate of all narrative which realizes itself through embedding.[42] [My emphasis]

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[40] Todorov, *Poetics* 71.
[41] Todorov, 71-2.
[42] Todorov, 72-3.

Therefore, by embedding the novel with and within numerous narrative frames, Barth achieves the effect as outlined above: storytelling becomes his fundamental theme. This is important for Barth and for the character in this novel, who as the main storyteller, helps to personify the belief that, "man is merely a narrative; once the narrative is no longer necessary, he can die. It is the narrator who kills him, for he no longer has a function."[43]

We can say then that for Barth, narrative embedding serves the purpose of reinforcing the idea that it is life (life-story = narrative) and the investigation of life, through the telling of a "life-story" that serves as key to this novel. The life-story which he tells – Simon's voyages through his childhood to adulthood, from the real-past to the fictional-present and beyond – is the main story of the novel and its culmination is the story of the title of the novel: *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*. In this sense, Barth points to the fact that every life, and thus every story, is always partly fictional; revisiting it, does not necessarily provide us with a *meaning*, but only with a *story*. True to the story that he tells, and the meaning of the whole tale, from the very first pages of his novel to the end, Barth seems to perform what Todorov sees as the narrative crux in his explanation of the *Nights*: "the book that tells no story kills. The absence of narrative signifies death" (*LVSS* 74).

The Storyteller and His Audience

The tradition of the *Nights* sees its stories as 'popular entertainments' meant for a 'popular audience'. What is this novel's audience and how is it determined? Critics such as Lemon have argued the case for Barth's appeal to a non-critical 'general' readership. On the other hand, however, Barth's glaring self-consciousness shows that he is highly aware of the critical and academic readership that will read him within the frame of a postmodernism that he has helped to construct. The question is then: are Barth's novels meant for the 'popular' audience or are they meant for a more specialised, critical audience? In *Last Voyage*, Barth shows us that the storyteller's relationship to his audience is not only important but also determines his very existence and thus the existence of his fictions.

[43] Todorov, 75.

This relationship between critical and non-critical audience is mirrored in the novel itself. Initially, we meet our storyteller Somebody outside the court of Sindbad, amongst a throng of beggars, the non-critical audience of 'popular' readership. We are told he is "Somebody the Nobody (yours truly in truth), a fifty-plus foreigner in those days with not two pennies in his pocket or a name to his name" (*LVSS* 14). However, Somebody is a "Sailor" (*LVSS* 13) and a "foreigner" (*LVSS* 14), two aspects which immediately characterise him as a potential storyteller. Barth's highlighting of the storyteller's pennilessness and his description of him as a 'nobody', thus raises the question of how we judge our storytellers, and thus implicitly our novelists. Are writers who make money the 'Somebodies'? Or is it the other way around? Does he become Somebody when he appeals to the more discerning critic, when he wins prestigious prizes, or only when he enters the elusive 'Canon'?

Of course, the throng of beggars are gathered outside the court of Sindbad, who is presented as the 'great' storyteller. Sindbad is already established due to the popularity and fame of his stories and thus his audience is much more sophisticated and discerning. In contrast to the beggars, they dine on lavish food and are lounging in a circle around the courtyard, eating and drinking. They have tambourines and colourful clothes and, as the ones 'inside' as opposed to 'outside' the courtyard, they seem to represent the writer-storyteller's critical readership. The scene is set: for Somebody the Nobody to become Somebody the 'Somebody', and find his name, he must enter the courtyard. In order to do so, however, and reach this more 'sophisticated audience', he first has to get through the crowd of beggars. In other words, if he wants to compete with the likes of Sindbad (the great storyteller), he has to win the beggars over first: they are the ones who facilitate his entry into the court of Sindbad and his elite audience.

Following the true bardic tradition of oral performance, Somebody begins with a song that rhymes, which emphasises both its *telling* and thus its *oral* nature:

> The Author of our story understands his story's plot;
> We characters can't fathom who's the villain and who's not. (*LVSS* 15)

Immediately, the audience is transformed from a rowdy bunch of beggars (the pun is probably Barth's) to a quiet, attentive audience. They applaud, and respond with various calls for silence: "hear, hear" (*LVSS* 15) until in effect, the storyteller, Somebody, receives the attention he has been vying for. The audience of beggars award him with the opportunity to enter Sindbad's court and thus prove their significance. Without popular readership, there is no storyteller. For Barth, then, popular readership leads to critical readership. However, Somebody's 'second' audience is also vitally important. As he is telling stories to both, he must be able to 'talk' to both in their terms. Thus, Barth's two audiences reflect his ability to speak to both 'general' and 'critical' or 'academic' readership and in so doing, he proves that it is the audience that creates the storyteller: as we find out in the novel, it is the audience who create the storyteller Somebody into 'somebody', both by name and into existence.[44]

When Somebody enters the court having passed the initial storyteller test of popular readership, he acquires his first name: now he becomes this "*other*, self-styled Sindbad" (*LVSS* 13) and is allowed to wine and dine amongst the audience of (the true) Sindbad the Sailor. The competition that is consequently set up between Sindbad and Somebody to tell his stories – cued by Sindbad's invitation for our storyteller Somebody to speak "Your name, Brother and your song," (*LVSS* 19) – points to the two stories that are to come: the revelation of this Somebody in the discovery of his name, which he achieves through the telling of his song-story. Barth's attempts to self-consciously bring the reader into the text, and his creation of imaginary audiences and storytellers, is one way of trying to bridge the gap between the oral and written traditions. Barth's identification with the traditional storyteller also suggests that he envisages an audience, a plurality, with whom the voice of the storyteller interacts.

Thus in *Last Voyage*, from the beginning of the novel until the end, the presence of the reader as listener, whether a single entity or plural, is always

[44] Looking at Barth's own history as a struggling writer, one could construe this as a comment on his relationship with the reading public which although on the whole has been successful has had its ups and downs; particularly in his early years he struggled financially. *See*, David Morrell, *John Barth: An Introduction* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) 128-9, 36.

apparent. The numerous allusions to a listening audience are part of each frame, and also of the story within the frames: the stories within the stories. By constantly placing the reader in the midst of imagined audiences, and by (re)creating the universe of the *Nights* as a 'real' place, Barth puts the reader inside the text along with the listening audience and reinvents it. As he says:

> How does one make a universe? I can't explain how. The storyteller's trade is the manufacture of universes, which we do with great or little skill regardless of explanations and interpretations. [...] You hear it said that the novelist offers you an attitude toward life and the world. Not so [...] what he offers you is not a *Weltanschauung* but a *Welt*; not a view of the cosmos, but a cosmos itself.[45]

His placing us in the realm of the *Nights* and into the story of Scheherazade is therefore not inconsequential. In creating this 'Welt', and by placing the reader(s) in the midst of this imaginary audience, Barth places us in the oral tradition, which he juxtaposes with the literary one. This juxtaposition of traditions is particularly well reflected in a passage which comes in the voice of Sindbad, and acts as the critical reaction to the telling of Simon's first voyage. Although Somebody-Simon's narratives follow the tradition of realism which is familiar to the twentieth-century reader, for the audience of medieval Baghdad, the opposite is true: for them, realism becomes fantastical. As an unfamiliar world it seems 'new.'

> Hum. Mechanical birds and bracelets that measure time. Yet who would have believed a sleeping whale over-grown with trees and beaches if he had not himself mistaken one for an island and been carried under? And that business of your brother's drifting in a leaky vessel that must ceaselessly be bailed: that speaks to my condition! An admirable bit of realism in a sea of fantasy. (*LVSS* 60)

However, they are not all impressed with Simon's narratives, and the implication is that this is because they depart from what convention dictated. Whereas we all know that the 'real' Sinbad's or Scheherazade's stories are a far cry from the modern American novel, therefore the Somebody's medieval audience is not impressed. A merchant protests:

> The high ground of traditional realism, brothers, is where I stand! Give me familiar, substantial stuff: rocs and rhinoceri, ifrits and

[45] Barth, *Friday Book* 17.

> genies and flying carpets. [...] Let no outlander imagine that such crazed fabrications as machines that mark the hour or roll themselves down the road will ever take the place of our homely Islamic realism, the very capital of narrative. (*LVSS* 60)

In this sense, Barth shows that the conventions by which we judge our novels as 'realism' or 'fantasy' are ultimately misguided or at best provisional. All narratives, whichever conventions they employ, are essentially stories, and their telling lies in the art of the storyteller: he is the one that constantly re-creates them and makes them new. Barth thus questions:

> Is there no room at the inn of literature for the writer who sets about to create [...] either alternatives to reality or alternative realities? The millions of enjoyers of fantastic fiction – of Odysseus's and Sindbad's voyages [...] would vociferously protest.[46]

At the same time, Barth asks for our tolerance and ability to allow for the new, he is also aware that: "every teller [...] tells at his audience's pleasure" (*LVSS* 137).

Naming the Storyteller

As I have shown, the name and identity of the storytellers in the novel become problematic, a phenomenon that Al-Madani describes as "narration as predicament" (*LVSS* 10). Here, the notion of 'narration as predicament' links to Todorov's idea of characters becoming the story, thus marking our subsequent entry into "the realm of narrative men". Both the marooned and still-stranded Sindbad and Somebody as:

> [...] narrators renarrating Scheherazade's stories of their lives [...] thus become narrated characters themselves as well as narratees who attentively follow the charts of each other's narrative voyages in an attempt to discover, recover, and reaffirm their identities.[47]

Their identities as storytellers, however, lie in the realms of their own specific narrative times: Sindbad's in the realm of the *Arabian Nights'* Baghdad, and Somebody's in the realm of a realistic novel sometime in twentieth-century America.

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[46] Barth, *Further Fridays* 142.

[47] Yusur Al-Madani, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing a Narrative of the Self: John Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*," *The International Fiction Review* 26.1 (1999): 10.

Storytelling for Barth becomes more than just the subject of this particular novel; it is the place where the storyteller practises his art and makes himself known in his own frame story. This frame story, however, does not lie within the pages of the book, but exists outside it, the novel becoming one of the many stories within its unwritten pages. For the true frame-tale exists in the unwritten pages of the author's story and his own reasons for storytelling/writing. Although Barth does not have a death sentence on him, as did Rushdie and Scheherazade, time and life itself provide this all themselves. Storytelling therefore becomes ontological:

> It happened that in 1990 a number of things in my life and work came more or less to an end in rather quick succession. Through that year I wound up the final editing of a new novel – my eleventh book, tenth volume of fiction, eighth novel – with the terminal-sounding title *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*. It is a comedy whose dark muse is, in fact, that figure called by Scheherazade "the Destroyer of Delights, Severer of Societies and Desolator of Dwelling-Places": lethal Time. Near midyear I turned sixty and, per personal program, retired on that birthday from my full-time professorship at the Johns Hopkins University: "early-early phased retirement" by the university's standards and in the language of its benefits administration office; but I had been teaching for nearly forty years.[48]

Returning to Barth's idea that all fiction really begins with the question of identity, of "Who am I?", we can see this reflected in the character of his primary storyteller Somebody. The mysterious hospitalised storyteller who begins the novel, then becomes a Somebody whose names change constantly as he moves through his past-realistic-autobiographical-yet-ultimately-fictional lives. In the first voyage he is known as Simon William Behler, (Simmons incidentally being the real author Barth's middle name). In the second voyage, he is dubbed 'Simmon[49] by his first girlfriend Daisy Moore because she thinks he looks like a persimmon when he's having sex. In voyage three, he calls himself Baylor, having become a journalist and wants to differentiate himself from "S. W. Behler of the *Star*" and because the new spelling "looks more the way it sounds", a fact that again makes the reader want to pronounce the words, or in the very least try to 'hear' them. In voyage four, he procures the initial "B" by another woman, Julia Moore. Finally, from the fifth

[48] Barth, *Further Fridays* 159.
[49] This apostrophe is meant to indicate that the 'per' from persimmon is absent, hence 'Simmon.

voyage until her return "home", he is called either Sīmon or Bey el-Loor or a combination of both.

Why this obsession with names? The oral world of storytelling gives us the answer. In the oral world, the names of storytellers have been lost, although the stories themselves may have survived and changed in their retellings. Unlike modern authorship, where the name is passed on (Dickens, Boccaccio, Borges and so on), storytellers have not been remembered. Perhaps they were famous at the time, but their names were not recorded with their stories; in other words, the emphasis was on the stories and not their authorship or their tellings. The exception to this rule of course is Scheherazade who, as we know, provides the frame within which all other stories are to be contained.

One of the reasons that literature differs in comparison to the folk story, is that its authors are, for the most part, named. Barth's admiration for and competition with Scheherazade reveal that he too wants to be remembered *by name* not as Somebody–Nobody but as Somebody who is Somebody, who is John Barth and who is as excellent a storyteller as Scheherazade was.

> My genie gets these stories, needless to say, from his copy of *The 1001 Nights*. And, like bread cast upon the waters, his assisting Scheherazade solves his problem, too, which is hers and every storyteller's: What to do for yet another and yet another encore? How to save and save again one's narrative neck? The genie's story, we learn toward the end of my story will be the story of his interlude with Scheherazade.
>
> How I wish that that fantasy were a fact: that I could be that genie, and meet and speak with the talented, wise and beautiful Scheherazade.[50]

By meeting her in the story-world at the moment she is ready to die, Barth points to his desire to continue her legacy in this century and in this time and place. In this way he too becomes a storyteller in her place: a true re-teller of tales. Barth's insistence on the storyteller helps bridge the often separatist gap between the traditions of oral storytelling and the novel. Indeed, we could say that this is the true key to his idea of 'postmodernist' literature, of replenishing and reinterpreting past 'literature', which includes and insists on the idea of stories, not 'Truths'.

[50] Barth, *Friday Book* 219-20.

It is in voyage five and six when all begins to be revealed. Here, the storytellers' stories, as well as the times in which they tell them, become entangled. All subsequent stories centre around the "Tub Night" and the story of Sindbad's daughter Yasmin's "deflowering." Of course, this story suddenly acquires what seems like a thousand different tellings: by Jaydā, by Yasmīn, by Sindbad, by Somebody, by Sahīm al-Layl. Their version of this story is then investigated by none other than the famous Haroun Al-Rashīd who tries to get to the bottom of it. As Al-Madani suggests: "a tale thus told suggests that none of its narrators can lay claim to possessing the truth of experience or of the self, for truth is constructed and is as varied and self-contradictory as narrative itself."[51] This mirrors not only Barth's whole "life-story" (which we understand to be a culmination of all of his writings), but also the life of any one storyteller whose retellings of a story are bound to differ, à la Parry and Lord.[52] Re-narration, or any type of re-telling, thus inevitably leads to discrepancies and makes any particular story, or life, essentially intangible.

This shifting from Simon through to Bey el-Loor, is more than just a reflection of his search for who he really is,[53] but actually reflects the story of a life that he is trying to piece together in order to get to the end (death) with a sense of purpose. Moreover, his name change from Behler to Bey el-Loor not only highlights his own fictionality, and the shape-shifting role of the storyteller, but also reflects Barth's own views on the nature of stories and the meaning of life, which are *always* linked to the storyteller. Although we may recognise the 'real' in Simon Behler, and thus our own lives, we are constantly changing and our present, past and future are in a constant state of flux and re-imagining. In this sense, neither Behler, Barth nor our own selves are ever truly capturable and thus, neither is the writer-storyteller. Returning now to our storyteller-Sindbad-Behler, what is important is not whether we ever find out who he is, but instead that we recognise his life and ours as a series

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[51] Mahdi, 11.

[52] Milman Parry and Albert Lord investigated oral storytellers in the Balkans, and found that despite the fact the storytellers thought they were telling exactly the same stories, their words differed slightly on each telling although the meaning and story stayed essentially the same. *See* Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. 1960. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

[53] Brown, 474.

of stories told by storytellers all of which converge in the figure of Scheherazade who continues telling to save herself from death.

Scheherazade alias John Barth

Barth's obsession with Scheherazade, as we have seen, has a part to play in her role as the frame-narrator of the *Nights*. In addition, the frame story she tells and her actual predicament describes how, with each story she tells, she is literally 'storytelling for survival' and that her audience the king is her ultimate critic. However, as Barth reminds us, this is only part of Scheherazade's story which 'lives' because it (plus all the other thousand and one and those within those) have been written in a book. And in the lines of this book, they remain until eventually they are taken away by the Destroyer of Delights, literally 'robbed' from the king's treasure chest.

> Scheherazade's tales are published (in 30 volumes), and their author lives happily with her hard-earned family. But not *ever* after; only until they are taken by the Destroyer of Delights, whereafter we're specifically told, "their houses fell waste and their palaces lay in ruins...and [other] kings inherited their riches" including *The Thousand and One Nights*.[54]

In *Last Voyage*, we meet Scheherazade just before she dies and is taken away by the Destroyer of Delights. Her ticket out of the *Nights*' story is the story of Somebody the Sailor who is telling his story in order to survive and escape his death. As Heide Zeigler reveals, "the dialogic relationship between the stories told and the framing story, by which their structure becomes mutually dependent, tightens yet again to become absolute closure or death."[55] This death, we now understand in the light of Todorov, marks the end of the story of both Somebody-Behler and Scheherazade's life.

There is yet another level to the story of the *Nights* that the above quote by Barth reveals, which offers another interesting parallel with the resurrected Barthian Scheherazade. The Destroyer of Delights, death, is actually mentioned in the story of

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[54] Barth, *Friday Book* 57.

[55] Heide Ziegler, "The Tale of the Author: Or, Scheherazade's Betrayal," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.2 (1990): 87.

the book, *The Thousand and One Nights*. In this sense even though Scheherazade has died, and the delights of her story(ies) have ended, the story of the book continues. In this sense, the *book* is the ultimate frame or container of Scheherazade's story and with her story the rest of the stories in the *Nights*. As Melinda Rosenthal reminds us, even Burton's famous 1885 translation of the Nights "is not the story of the nights, but of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and Night*."[56] By placing Scheherazade into his novel *Last Voyage*, we could say that Barth actually robs the *Nights* of their storyteller and therefore its entire frame-story. In other words, he robs it of its existence by placing its origins within the frame of another story-book. On yet another level: if Scheherazade, as a character-action in the story, is the epitome of Todorov's "narrative-(wo)man," then, what is the book? Can this also be a character? Can a book live? Evidently, yes. It seems as if the book itself is also a story and therefore lives a life. The question remains, however, where does the book go after it has been robbed? When does the book die? To answer this, allow me again to digress a little.

The story of the book of *The Arabian Nights*[57] has a mysterious history. Its origins have been a matter of intense scholarship whose findings could again partly lie in fiction.[58] However, my quest does not lie in continuing this scholarship, but more in the interpretation of its (hi)story. Three things strike me as remarkable here. The first is that the stories were "collected by kings" and derived from oral sources; the second, that the fate of the kings was to be written down as part of these collections; and the third, that they came to be known as distinct from histories, religious and other such important 'writings', and thus were consequently seen as fictional and frivolous.[59] Of course, these stories came to the West from the East, and their introduction altered the face of what we have to come to call 'Western

[56] Rosenthal, 117.
[57] This is also known as *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights.*
[58] For a book on the origins of the *Nights see*, Muhsin Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* Leiden; New York: Brill, 1995.
[59] Pinault, 1-2.

Literature'.[60] In the Western world the history of the *Nights* began in 1704 with Antoine Galland.

Muhsin Mahdi tells us that although he was perhaps unaware of this at the time, Galland's procurement of the three volume Arabic manuscript that arrived at his home in Paris was perhaps "the oldest, most significant surviving copy of the *Nights*."[61] Even more "serendipitously", Galland not only failed to see this, but had actually procured the book having being led to believe it was something else. Mahdi tells how Galland "fell under the spell of the title"[62] and embraced the myth of an Arabic original containing that many nights, whiling away the years in the hope of receiving the complete copy from the Orient. When this failed to materialise and due to the success of the *Nights* in the West, Galland created his own texts making up stories to fit the number "offering innocent readers what looked like a translation of the whole Arabic original."[63]

Galland, in the tradition of the tales themselves, became a storyteller albeit a writerly one, adding his own tale-telling to the *Nights*. Galland's subsequent 'tale-telling' (in both senses of the word) marked the beginning of the story of the book which again like the stories themselves, became yet another book. Mahdi explains that "as [Galland's] volumes met with increasing success and failed to satisfy his readers, other writers began to fabricate additions, claiming he did not have the complete original."[64] In the history of the *Nights*, then, fabrication, tale-telling and lies were part and parcel of its creation. Authorship was not placed at the forefront; instead, it was the tales themselves that put a spell on the readers and listeners calling for them to be constantly retold. Thus, every storyteller that retells the tales (or versions of them – as there is arguably no original) becomes a storyteller, and his voice merges with the voices of the countless storytellers that have existed throughout the ages.

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[60] For a fascinating look at how the *Nights* have influenced numerous British writers over the centuries *see* Caracciolo, Peter L. *The Arabian Nights in English Literature*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
[61] Mahdi, 11.
[62] Mahdi, 11
[63] Mahdi, 11
[64] Mahdi, 12.

Returning now to Barth, we can see that he is not alone in his addition to the *Nights'* stories, but that his use of them is ultimately part of his times and his beliefs about life and fiction. By self-consciously using techniques such as narrative embedding to create his corpus or life-text, which includes as part of this, his novel *Last Voyage*, Barth has done nothing else than prove that he is Barth, a 'somebody' writer-storyteller, whose life like everyone else's is a story that might or might not be remembered. Of his use of tales within tales, he says:

> Why in fact have human beings in so many cultures and centuries been fascinated by tales within tales within tales etc.?... The first speculation is that of Jorge Luis Borges [who] declares that stories within stories appeal to us because they disturb us metaphysically. We are by them reminded, consciously or otherwise, of the next frame out: the fiction of our own lives, of which we are both the authors and the protagonists, and in which our reading of *The 1001 Nights*', say, is a story within our story.[65]

As I have shown, although he has been placed within the category of 'postmodernist fiction', Barth has tried to surpass categories by almost becoming a category himself:

> Although I still hold to my basic notion of what Postmodernist fiction is [...] I have happily withdrawn from the ongoing disputes over its definition and its canon [...] Postmodernism is whatever I do, together with my crewmates-this-time-around, until the critics rename the boat again.[66]

Barth's relationship with the text shows that it belongs to a dialogic space, perhaps a plural place, where much like his mirror-image the oral storyteller, he can perform and change his texts according to his audience. This he does in order to survive: by survival we can include, his story, his telling, himself, his fictions, even after his death which he knows will come one day:

> And you know, don't you, scribbler of these lines, that beyond a writer's untimely demise [...] lies the prospect of his or her not-so untimely demise [...] – if not in this decade, then in the next, at latest the one after – and that these musely recovery times are as likely to lengthen as one's other recovery times, until comes the intermission

[65] Barth, *Friday Book* 236.
[66] Barth, *Friday Book* 121.

that no next act follows. You're in robust health [...] but you're not age-proof.[67]

By creating a huge "life-text", and by crafting his novels such as *Last Voyage* so that their main themes are centred on storytelling, Barth has proved his legacy to Scheherazade and the *Nights* and to their listening-reading audience. Through Barth's ambition to 'replenish' and/ or 'exhaust' literature, he shows that he wants to be remembered as a storyteller. In John Barth then, we can say that the storyteller has returned to literary fiction:

> 'Twould be no picnic [...] to go on being and being *after* your pen hath glean'd etc. Or say you're Scheherazade – Who isn't?- and you took your maiden deep narrative breath all those nights ago, and now it's this many plots and characters and themes and situations later, foreshadowings and reprises and twists and pace-changes and even Weltanschauung-evolvements, for pity's sake, and here's yet another longish yarn, neatly denouemented if you do say so yourself, and maybe the king's wowed and maybe not (what does *he* know about storytelling?), but anyhow he's not offing your head, and so now it's time to launch your thousand-and-whatevereth before the muezzin cries from the minaret that prayer is better than sleep, and let's just see now, maybe the one about – nope, you used that on Night 602 or thereabouts, so maybe work up instead the bit you tucked away in the midst of the Sindbad series, wasn't it that bit about what *was* it now, had a sort of spin to it, charm to it color, tippy-tip of your tongue, dum deed um dum, and there *he* goes now, restless already for his next, you know well enough that little sniff and twitch of his...
>
> Scheherazade, *c'est moi*. King too. That muezzin, even, whom ever at my back I hear while with some third ear listening, listening.[68]

[67] Barth, *Further Fridays* 162
[68] Barth, *Further Fridays* 162-3.

7

STORYTELLER AS FAIRY-TALE TELLER

A. S. Byatt's "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"

> The first true storyteller, is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales.
> Benjamin, *Illuminations* 102.

My search for the storyteller in this thesis has tended to focus on male authors and their works. However, this does not mean to say that 'female' writers are not interested in the storyteller, or cannot be read through the storyteller lens. In fact, one might have expected a thesis on the storyteller to predominantly comprise readings of female writers, particularly if we consider the storyteller as a fairy-tale teller or as representative of the voices of the 'marginalised'. From this perspective, one could see the storyteller figure as implicit in both revisionist fairy-tales and in feminist literature in general. As Ivan Kreilkamp observes:

> [...] this charismatic figure has been appropriated by contemporary feminist critics as well. Indeed, much of the pioneer work of feminist literary criticism sought to recover what were persistently identified, in a metaphor that became almost invisible, as suppressed female *voices*.[1]

Of course, this is not to say that *all* authors that use the fairy-tale form are female and feminist – the previous chapter on Rushdie immediately shatters this myth – nor that female writers are *all* 'marginalised'. Neither do I mean to imply that these approaches provide the only ways of viewing literature by women. Arguably, however, there has been both a large body of work that has focused predominantly on *feminist* revisionist fairy-tales, as I brought to light in the introduction of this

[1] Kreilkamp, 15.

thesis. Since the rise of sound-wave feminism in the late sixties, particularly in Britain, there has been a tendency to see the female voice as fighting to be heard in a long-established arena of patriarchal discourses, both within literary studies and in society at large. As a result, when approaching a female author such as A.S. Byatt from the perspective of storyteller, the issue of gender does raise its head and needs to be addressed.

In this chapter, I read A.S. Byatt's feminist fairy-tale "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", approaching the text from the perspective of storyteller as fairy-tale teller. My initial question is: how does our concept of 'storyteller' change when we approach a female writer who is also feminist? As A.S. Byatt says herself: "All my books are about the woman artist – in that sense, they're terribly feminist books – and they're about what language is."[2] Is the storyteller as a fairy-tale teller necessarily female? Is this why female authors have been drawn to this genre? Indeed, this seems to be a concern of A.S. Byatt:

> In England, right from the beginning of the novel there were always great women novelists. They were always recognized to be great by both men and women. The only generation in which there are not obviously great women novelists is this generation of post-literary feminism, which has produced a wonderful crop of male novelists in England. In my gloomier moments, I think this is not an accident. The women are writing about women's themes for women in what they think are female styles. You wouldn't catch men writing about male themes in male styles, or if you did it would be seen to be a sub-form.[3]

One of the reasons I have chosen to read A.S. Byatt, and why I have focused particularly on the story of "The Djinn", is precisely because it allows me to investigate the storyteller as a fairy-tale teller. However, my choice of Byatt, (as opposed to Angela Carter or Margaret Atwood, for example) is deliberate for two main reasons. Firstly, like John Barth and even Mario Vargas Llosa, Byatt has been versed in both creative and in academic critical writing. As with the writers above,

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[2] Nicolas Tredell, *Conversations with Critics* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994) 66.
[3] Miller, Laura. "The Salon Interview: Limeade Seas and Bloody Cobblestones." 1996. *Salon*. 18 April 1996 24 November 2006. <http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960617.html>.

Byatt's later writing is highly self-conscious.[4] As a result, one of the problematics in "The Djinn" is played out in the relationship between critic/narratologist versus storyteller/writer, or further still, in that of author versus storyteller and their relationship to audience/readership. These issues I feel are crucial to our understanding of Byatt's fiction as they are also linked to her preoccupations as a critic. In addition, I would like to suggest that these positions become even more compelling if we attempt to gender them; in other words, if we see the narratologist as narratologist-ess, the storyteller as storyteller-ess, the author as authoress. Byatt's fairy-tale addresses the questions: how does gender affect the dynamic of power that centres on the role of woman in society? How does gender affect our ideas of authorship or more simply put, of a 'good' writer? Do we expect this to be a man or a woman? Do we expect her to write in a particular style, to be less cerebral, less intellectual, more concerned with women's themes, to be writing for women? Have we left these clichés behind or are we still entrapped by them? And how does all this affect Byatt's readership or audience if at all?

In the essay "Old Tales, Old Forms", Byatt talks about a resurgence of interest in 'storytelling' which she discovered almost accidentally. As a result of this, Byatt began to be interested in ideas such as tales-within-tales, and in 'old ways of telling' that were a move away from her traditional understanding of what one expected of 'novelistic discourse'.[5] It is this understanding of 'how stories work' that she has put into practice in her long short story "The Djinn". Byatt tells us this herself:

> I wrote a tale called *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* as a tale about this discovery. My heroine is an ageing narratologist, who finds a Djinn in a glass bottle in a hotel room in Istanbul. It is stories within stories again – the Djinn and the woman tell each other their lives, as lovers do on meeting, the woman tells tales at conferences as examples, and so on. I knew when I began that the Djinn himself figured both death as an invigorating force, and also the passion for

[4] We see this in particular after her novel *Possession* (1990) was published where she actually boasts that she employed these techniques to prove that she could do it. She says in an interview for New York Times Magazine, "I knew people would like it. It is the only one I've written to be liked, and I did it partly to show off." *See*, Mira Stout, "What Possessed A. S. Byatt?" *New York Times Magazine* 1991: 14.

[5] For more in-depth reasoning of this aspect, see her essay in *On Histories*.

> reading tales. Children read stories as though they themselves are immortal. The old read tales knowing that they themselves are finite, that the tales will outlive them. The Djinn is immortal, as the tales are. [...] I understood that the tales had power because they were alive everywhere. A myth derives force from its endless repeatability. 'Originality' and 'individuality, those novelistic aesthetic necessities, were neither here nor there.[6]

Byatt's highly self-conscious interest in storytelling, her use of intertextuality and her understanding of criticism, feed into her 'feminist revisionist and postmodernist fairy-tale'. A question we could ask, however, is: to what extent does Byatt succeed? Like Barth, she tends towards excessive self-consciousness in trying to weave her understanding of literature into the story itself, as if the story were specifically written for the academic critic. It seems as if Byatt is trying to control how we must read both her and her story, but again, as with Barth, do we listen to her, or read her own text again itself? If we see the author as storyteller, does this change the dynamic?

Returning to my larger argument, I hope to determine not only how the line between author-authority and story-storyteller is played out in Byatt's fiction, but also how this relationship is further altered in that the positions of a (gendered) critic/critical reader might shift the focus of all these relationships. The structure of fairy tale is not the only clue to uncovering the puzzles that lie within the textual world of "The Djinn". Just as significant is the use of a frame tale structure; the intertextual use of 'past stories'; allusions to, and uses of, Eastern and Western traditions for both frame and fairy stories (e.g. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the *Arabian Nights*); embedded literary criticism; the self-conscious play between narratologist and storyteller, critic and writer, audience and reader and the mixing of realism.

Finally, although I have been arguing that the storyteller is more of an archetypal figure that can move between different bodies and denote both male and female gender, nevertheless, it is the female as storyteller that is often associated with the telling of fairy-tales. Despite the fact that fairy-tale collections are often attributed to men (for example, Andersen, Perholt, Brothers Grimm), fairy-tales still

[6] Byatt, *On Histories* 131-2.

'belong' to women tellers, perhaps simply because historically, they were told to children (who are mainly looked after by women). Indeed, the woman as fairy-tale teller conjures up images of grandmothers by the fire who tell stories to put children to sleep. Often it is these 'older' females, these grandmothers and fairy godmothers or hags, who appear in the stories themselves. Perhaps this is partly the reason why contemporary female writers have been drawn to the fairy-tale in order to tell their stories.

Interestingly, this is precisely what A.S. Byatt's story is concerned with. It tells the story of a middle-aged woman, Gillian Perholt, whose children have grown up and left home, and who has recently been abandoned by her husband. As a character who is placed within a traditional fairy-tale, the stories available to her are few: will she be a grandmother, a fairy godmother or a hag? Is her role in the story already pre-determined or can she create it anew? However, this woman is no ordinary woman; she is a narratologist, who not only 'understands' how stories are constructed, but also understands how women's stories have traditionally been constructed. As a result, her fairy-tale-life is interpreted and reinterpreted by herself as she is moving through her story. Through the telling and interpreting of "The Stories of Women's Lives", which is the title of the conference that she attends, Gillian Perholt becomes a powerful 'storyteller-ess'. She proves that she is ultimately in charge of her own story and its telling; through it, in the end, she can attain both narrative and real-life freedom.

Telling (Fairy)Tales

"The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" is the story of a narratologist, the fifty-something Dr Gillian Perholt who travels to Ankara, Turkey, to give a paper at a conference entitled 'Stories of Women's Lives' (*DNE* 105). Unlike Barth's and Vargas Llosa's novels that are told in the first person, "The Djinn" is narrated in the third person by an omniscient narrator. Indeed, it is the telling of the story through the third person narrative that immediately echoes the traditional way of telling stories. Storytellers, and particularly fairy-tale storytellers, often begin with the

formula, "once upon a time there was a...", which is precisely how Byatt's 'fairy-tale' begins:

> Once upon a time, when men and women hurtled through the air on metal wings, when they wore webbed feet and walked on the bottom of the sea, learning the speech of whales and the songs of dolphins, when pearly-fleshed and jewelled apparitions of Texan herdsmen and houris shimmered in the dusk on Nicaraguan hillsides, when folk in Norway and Tasmania in dead winter could dream of fresh strawberries, dates, guavas, and passion fruits and find them spread next morning on their tables, there was a woman who was largely irrelevant, and therefore happy. (*DNE* 95)

Although the opening immediately places us in the realms of fairy-tale, we are also aware that the discourse is somewhat different from the expected formulas: it is a mixture of both realism and fantasy. In between our "once upon a time" and our "there was a...", we have an array of images which, although at first glance may seem fantastical and unreal, on closer inspection can be recognised as aspects of the modern world. For example, the "men and women" who "hurtled through the air on metal wings" point us to mythological time by reminding us of the story of Icarus, but then we realise that this is another way of simply describing passengers in an aeroplane. Similarly, the "webbed feet" and "walking on the bottom of the sea" immediately bring to mind visions of mermaids and underwater worlds like Atlantis, but again we recognise that this is simply another way of describing scuba-divers. Finally, the "dates, guavas and passion fruits" that are reminiscent of tropical islands and that would once have been impossible to imagine in snowy Norway, are in fact a normal part of everyday convenience shopping at a modern-day supermarket. Like Crace, Vargas Llosa, Rushdie and Barth, Byatt supports the idea of a blending of traditions: one part realism, one part storytelling.

> Fairy stories are related to dreams, which are maybe most people's first experience of un*real* narrative, and to myths. Realism is related to explanations and orderings – the tale of the man in the bar who tells you the story of his life, the historian who explains the decisions of generals and the decline of economies. Great novels, I believe, always draw on both ways of telling, both ways of seeing. But because *real*ism is agnostic and sceptical, human and reasonable, I have always felt it was what I *ought* to do. And yet my impulse to write came, and I know it, from years of reading myths and fairytales

> under the bedclothes, from the delights and freedoms and terrors of worlds and creatures that never existed.[7]

The text is littered with clues which not only place it within historical time, but which also place it between the literary worlds of realism and fantasy. On the one hand, we recognise the indefinite time and opening formulas of fairy tale – for example: "Once upon a time [...]" (*DNE* 95); "The story of Patient Griselda as told by Gillian Perholt, is this [...]" (*DNE* 108); "There was once a young marquis [...]" (*DNE* 108); "I shall tell you the story of the Ethiopian woman [...]" (*DNE* 244); "In the days when camels flew from roof to roof [...]" (*DNE* 260). On the other, we find the details of the mundane world of now, spoken in realist language where the characters' thoughts and feelings are often identified. In recognising that her audience is aware of the traditional way of telling stories, but that they no longer belong to a world where these stories are traditionally told, the omniscient narrator-storyteller thus brings the traditional fairy-tale into the modern world. In this way, Byatt's fairy-tale achieves a historicity which, although one not immediately associable with the fairy-tale form, is not against its nature. As a hybrid, oral and evolving form, the fairy-tale can encompass and has encompassed various forms and types of stories as it has travelled through history. As the feminist critic, Marina Warner, brings to light in her book on the history of the fairy-tale:

> Elements of Greek romance, Roman moralities, Arabian nights, animal fables, medieval jests, pious saints' lives jostle and unite with unbuttoned lack of inhibition in the fairy tale. The nature of the genre is promiscuous and omnivorous and anarchically heterogeneous, absorbing high and low elements, tragic and comic tones into its often simple, rondo-like structure of narrative. Motifs and plotlines are nomadic, travelling the world and the millennia, turning up on parchment in medieval Persia, in an oral form in the Pyrenees, in a ballad sung in the Highlands, in a fairy story in the Caribbean.[8]

The fairy-tale is also important in terms of how it allows itself to be told, in other words, in its *telling*. This brings us back to the idea of the storyteller and raises an interesting question about gender. In "The Djinn", it is the name of the female

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[7] Byatt, A.S. "Fairy Stories: *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*." 1995. Essay. 12 February 2005. <http://www.asbyatt.com/oh_Fairies.aspx>.

[8] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage Random House, 1994) xvii.

protagonist that gives us a clue. As other critics have observed, Gillian Perholt sounds like the name Perrault, immediately recognisable as Charles Perrault, the famous writer of French fairy-tales. As Warner points out:

> Charles Perrault (1628-1703) has become the most famous pioneer teller of fairy tales. But he was greatly outnumbered, and in some instances also preceded, by women *aficionadas* of *contes de fées* whose work has now faded from view.[9]

Byatt's choice of name is thus deliberate and, like all other literary allusions, she weaves it into her story. By the very naming of her protagonist Perholt-Perrault, she points the reader to the fact that the storyteller is a woman and, therefore, a 'storyteller-ess'. Not only is Byatt giving back women the right to be tellers of tales, from yet another literary point of view she asserts that she is following a tradition of (women) writers who have used the same technique.

> The matter of fairy tale reflects such lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of marriageable age; the telling of the stories, assuming the presence of a Mother Goose, either as a historical source, or a fantasy of origin, gains credibility as a witness's record of lives lived, of characters known, and shapes and expectations in a certain direction. Fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas.[10]

From yet another perspective, Byatt's choice of the fairy-tale form also indicates her identification with the teller as a 'Mother Goose' figure. Warner reminds us that "Charles Perrault's collection of 1697 bore the alternative title of *Contes de ma Mère L'Oye* (Mother Goose Tales)"[11] which leads us to another literary clue pointed at by the discerning Byatt. Gillian Perholt may be telling stories of women's lives at the conference, but it is with Byatt that the telling begins. It is she who records the experience of women's lives through the tales they have told. She is the true storyteller working behind the fiction, spinning her tales within tales. This perspective resonates with the idea of all the storytellers, who lay behind the tale as it shape-shifted through the ages. Consequently, this is, as Buschini also aptly

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[9] Warner, xii.
[10] Warner, xix.
[11] Warner, xii.

calls it, a "conte moderne"[12] (a "modern fable/fairy story")[13], and one for the modern woman. Gillian Perholt becomes a new kind of heroine, a heroine treading on unmarked territory.

As I mentioned, the story is told by a narrator who assumes the third-person narrative voice in the telling of her fairy tale. Although mostly omniscient, she is not entirely so, and presents herself as storyteller by occasionally reminding us of her presence by addressing the reader directly in the second-person at certain points in the telling of her story. Again, she reinforces the fact that we are in a fairy-tale, but that this fairy-tale is going *to* be different. Our main character is not the young heroine we might expect, but an older woman, whose story begins with a sense of redundancy and loss. Abandoned by her husband (who has left her for a younger woman), we are forced to imagine the continuation of her future story. As the narrator-storyteller tells us, her story is so familiar that:

> [...] there is no need for me to recount it to you, you can imagine it very well for yourself. Equally, you can imagine Emmeline Porter for yourself, she has no more to do with this story. She was twenty-six, that is all you need to know, and more or less what you supposed, probably, anyway. (*DNE* 102)

This conversational aside to the reader, of course, points to the story's *telling* by our 'selectively' omniscient storyteller, Byatt. However, in terms of storytelling, it also signifies the beginning of the story, as well as pointing to the end: it is the beginning of Gillian's story as a 'free' woman after years of marriage, and the end of the story of her life with her husband; this is also equally true of her husband's story and of the story of Emmeline. Byatt's highlighting of beginnings, middles and endings, is important in terms of storytelling in general, and of fairy-tales in particular. She says:

> I think part of the excitement of fairy tales, which increasingly people have got excited about, not only feminists, is that they have a beginning, a middle and an end, and I think people have a sort of huge hunger for this.[14]

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[12] Marie-Pascale Buschini, "Les Mille et Une Nuits d'une Narratologue: 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' d'A. S. Byatt," *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* 19 (2000): 13.

[13] My translation. All subsequent quotations from this article are my own translations from the French.

[14] Tredell, 59.

The narrative begins with a question: when a fifty-year old woman loses her children and husband, does this mean she has nothing to look forward to but old age, solitude and death? Has Gillian's story ended or has it just begun? Indeed, the fact that Gillian's profession is a narratologist is significant here. A narratologist is aware of precisely this problem. Webb explains:

> [...] the older woman is conventionally represented as godmother, or witch in tales with younger heroes[...] the crone figure may make something happen, but it happens to someone else: she is a 'redundant' figure [...] because she has no direct biological involvement in social reproduction, and according to the social structures implied in European fairytales, can have no other direct social role. She therefore participates in other people's lives as witch if her meddling is malevolent, or 'fairy godmother' if it is helpful.[15]

However, Gillian is presented neither as a fairy god-mother nor as the malevolent figure of the hag. As the heroine of a fairy-tale herself, the question then becomes one of future possibilities. Is there a fairy-tale future for an older heroine? Can this older woman, who is traditionally a hag or fairy-godmother, look forward to a different story? She is different from the women in the past, but how?

> Her ancestresses, about whom she thought increasingly often, would have been dead by the age she had reached. Dead in childbed, dead of influenza, or tuberculosis, or puerperal fever, or simple exhaustion, dead as she travelled back in time, from worn-out unavailing teeth, from cracked kneecaps, from hunger, from lions, tigers, sabre-toothed tigers, invading aliens, floods, fires, religious persecution, human sacrifice, why not? (*DNE* 104)

The answer lies in the story we are reading, the one being *told* to us by our storyteller. Within both the Eastern and Western fairy-tale traditions, a fifty-year old woman would either be a witch, hag or fairy godmother, not a heroine setting out towards a possible future. Indeed, this might be true of Gillian, as she is placed within a fairy-tale. However, although Gillian may be an unlikely female protagonist in terms of the traditional fairy tale – she is not young like Emmeline, she has long ago met her metaphorical prince, become a princess and had her children – it is *her*

[15] C. Webb, "Forming Feminism: Structure and Ideology in *Charades* and 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'." *Hecate* 29.1 (2003): 139.

story that is beginning to be told. As the heroine of a fairy story, she cannot be placed in the role of hag; like it or not, the heroine always gets the prince. In this sense, Emmeline's story, the story of youth, is thus disregarded by our storyteller. It is deemed simply not interesting as it is a story we all recognise. On the other hand, Gillian's story is new, and therefore, provides new possibilities.

Byatt's work not only borrows from literary allusion and intertextuality, but also metaphor. Often the motifs she uses to bring to light the concerns of her characters and themes employ metaphors that derive from stories with which we might be familiar. Indeed, she says:

> A characteristic of working out a story through the metaphors, and the metaphors through the story, is that you have repeated moments when you discover *precisely* and intellectually something that you always knew instinctively. (Though the story calls into question any definition of instinct.)[16]

For example, her first metaphor comes with the idea of flight and returns us, once again, to the storyteller. Gillian has not only lost her husband, but her children are also grown up and are far away in different lands. Heading off into the hazy world of the future, we see our heroine flying in "a great silver craft" (*DNE* 96) which is then described as moving "up, up, through grey curtains of English rain, a carpet of woolly iron-grey English cloud, a world of swirling vapour" (*DNE* 96-97). This image of the plane, and then the swirling vapour, brings us to the words by John Milton, "floating redundant", and thus to Byatt's first literary allusion.

Those who have read Milton's *Paradise Lost* would know that Milton's words belong to Satan who transformed into a mist (mist-vapour) and entered the snake when it was sleeping. As with Crace, Vargas Llosa and Rushdie, we return to the image of the Fall, and to Satan, the storyteller. Gillian remembers herself as a young girl (alluding to her first role as heroine of a fairy-tale?), this "golden-haired white virgin" (*DNE* 99), whose introduction to the snake and to temptation – through the reading of books – she thought was "insolent and lovely" (*DNE* 99). Significantly then, it is through storytelling that she meets Satan and through storytelling that she allows herself to be seduced. Storytelling and Satan are linked to

[16] Byatt, *On Histories* 118.

power and knowledge; however, importantly, knowledge comes through stories, through fiction. Rather than seeing the Fall as negative, Gillian sees Satan's poison, his metaphorical 'storytelling', as a gift. This is a gift that she gained before man, a fact that gives her dominion over him. Thus, with the gift of Speech and Reason, woman became a storyteller before man. In succeeding to seduce man where Satan failed, she proved her storytelling powers were more powerful than Satan's own. In this sense, through the allusion to the story of the Fall, Byatt points to a reinstatement of the female storyteller to fiction. Moreover, her memory of the past as she is moving towards the future also reinstates her role as fairy-tale teller and with it the promise of a happy ending. As Warner notes:

> Fairy tales typically use the story of something in the remote past to look towards the future, their conclusions, their 'happy endings' do not always bring about total closure, but make promises, prophecies.[17]

A return to the *Nights*

As I have been arguing, Byatt's use of the fairy-tale links her story both to the oral tradition and to the storyteller. However, the fairy-tale is not the only type of tale from which Byatt borrows. She borrows elements from both the European fairy-tale and the tradition of Eastern storytelling (which again brings us back to the *Nights*) to craft "The Djinn". As Jane Campbell notes:

> Byatt [...] is contemplating [...] the place of the woman and of female power in the fairytale tradition – western and eastern – as well as in the modern world she magically depicts.[18]

French critic, Marie-Pascal Buschini, observes that the structure of "The Djinn" is clearly inspired by that of the *Nights* primarily, due to its frame-story which allows the grafting of a whole series of digressions and inserted stories.[19] Echoing Barth's novel in its narrative embedding, this long short story is made up of an array of stories within stories of various women's lives, stories told, discovered and heard by Dr Perholt. Byatt's choice of the story within the story is very deliberate. As she says in an interview with Chevalier:

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[17] Warner, xvi.
[18] Webb, 137.
[19] Buschini, 14.

> I think the story within the story always represents a different kind of grip on the world, a different kind of reality, and it's always of course about a reading experience; it turns the writer into a reader and it turns the reader into a reader of a reading; and it somehow lines the reader up with the writer as the reader of this text within a text.[20]

This observation is one of the keys to interpreting Byatt's fiction. In fact, these stories are integral to interpreting the meaning of the fairy-tale frame, which is the story of the fairy-tale heroine, Gillian Perholt. Most of the stories that Byatt's fairy-tale alludes to are well-known to any bibliophile and are taken from various sources that have roots in both oral and written literature. Although the conference and Dr Perholt's occupation as a narratologist bring about this situation of telling, listening and interpreting stories, stories appear elsewhere. Indeed, "The Djinn" is rife with a host of literary allusion. As Annegret Maack notes:

> "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" is profoundly intertextual, alluding to the Arabian tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*, to Grimm's fairy tales, Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Euripides's *Bacchae*, Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin* and Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, to mention only some of the more clearly marked sources. Explicit quotations are made from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.[21]

In the first instance, then, we can say that, like Vargas Llosa, Rushdie and Barth, Byatt creates texts out of other texts. Not only does she grapple with literary problems, she also uses images and stories within her fiction that have appeared in others' fiction. In parodying and reusing already existing and often well-known stories, she again follows the writers above in their quest for reinvention and reinterpretation. However, there is more to this intertextuality than simple narrative 'play'. Byatt's choice of text is integral to the narrative itself and often propels the narrative forward. Moreover, her very use of stories within stories is again highly relevant. These stories not only relate to the main frame tale – that of Gillian Perholt – but, more importantly, their re-telling and reinterpretation allow her to move

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[20] J L. Chevalier, "Entretien avec A.S. Byatt," *Journal of the Short Story in English: Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle* 22 (1994): 20.

[21] Annegret Maack, "Wonder-Tales Hiding a Truth: Retelling Tales in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'," *Imagining the Real: Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt*, eds. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) 123.

through the telling of her own personal story, the fairy-tale that makes us the story of "The Djinn".

There are many ways in which the *Nights* are alluded to in the text, all of which point back to the tradition of storytelling and storytellers rather than to that of authors and writing. As the stories of the *Nights* are traditionally delivered orally, this orality is echoed in the re-telling of the stories through the lectures both by Gillian herself and other members of the conference. The fact that the audience hears the stories being told, as we saw in John Barth's *Last Voyage*, places the reader in the position of collective audience, listening to the stories being told rather than reading them. As these stories are also being interpreted and are on the theme of "The Stories of Women's Lives", the reader, like the listening audience, is probed to interpret the stories-within-stories in order to understand the story that they themselves are listening to/ reading: in other words, the story of "The Djinn". From this perspective, Buschini rightly observes that even though they are brought together in a literary text, as all the stories are delivered orally, the text proclaims itself as a transcription of oral discourse.[22]

Buschini also makes the valid claim that the narrative constantly plays on the parallelism and inversion of the *Nights*. For example, there is the infidelity of a man to a woman, as opposed to a woman to a man as in the tale of Prince Shahryar and his brother. In the original frame story, it was his wife's infidelity that led to King Shahryar's disillusionment with woman-kind, to the point that he vowed to kill a virgin every night from then on, so that he would never have to fall in love again. It was Scheherazade's self-sacrifice and her subsequent storytelling that cured the king and saved both her own life and the life of all the women who might have come after her. Opposed to the self-sacrificing and youthful Scheherazade, we have the middle-aged and grown-up Gillian Perholt, who initially cannot seek revenge on her husband, but who finally finds freedom through her capacity to imagine a better future through storytelling. In this sense, Buschini calls Perholt "a modern Scheherazade",[23] an idea that echoes both Rushdie and Barth's preoccupations.

[22] Buschini 17.
[23] Buschini, 15.

From this perspective, one could argue that the link between the narratologist and the storyteller is another of Byatt's concerns in the story. As Buschini notes, although narratologists differ from storytellers in that their main function is to tell stories heard or written by others, they still have a place in the long chain of those who transmit stories and keep them alive, inventing them in their own way through each telling.[24] In fact, although Gillian begins as a narratologist, a "being of secondary order" (*DNE*), she rightly claims her place amongst the primary order of storytellers when at the end of her story she asserts her own narrative freedom through talking about narrative death (a fact that I will return to in detail below).

Returning now to her use of both fairy-tales and the *Nights* as coming from the oral tradition, and her use of other more literary sources, Byatt shows that, as with the other writers discussed in this thesis, she recognises that the literary tradition is larger than simply the written one. In other words, it is the larger tradition of 'storytelling' that the modern-day writer looks back to and reinterprets, reinvents and redeploys. However, Byatt's use of these sources here is highly self-conscious and, I argue, relates to the fact that she is aware of the interest in storytelling that seems so pervasive in contemporary literature. In her essay entitled "Old Tales, Old Forms", Byatt highlights an interest in storytelling that she discovered, following the reading of numerous European novels, as a result of being on a panel of judges for a prestigious prize. It seems that Byatt has borrowed the ideas she 'discovered' there and has rather self-consciously followed her peers in the writing of her own fiction. She says:

> Both Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie in Britain in the 1970s said they felt their energy derived more from reading tales than from reading novels, and used tales, old, invented and reinvented, to charm, to entice and to galvanise their readers in turn.[25]

Byatt goes on to speculate that "some of the interest in storytelling is to do with doubts about the classic novel, with its interest in the construction of the Self and the relation of that Self to culture, social and political, surrounding it."[26] Perhaps

[24] Buschini, 21.
[25] Byatt, *On Histories* 124.
[26] Byatt, *On Histories* 131.

this is one of the reasons why she places her heroine, Gillian Perholt, in the frame of the traditional fairy-tale. By investigating how traditional stories, not novels, construct the Self, Gillian finds her freedom both in narrative and in life. The freedom that Gillian finds in her own story is in fact the freedom that Byatt, the novelist, has found in returning to the telling of fairy-tales.

> By the time I wrote *Possession* in the 1980s my interest in both character and narration had undergone a change – I felt a need to *feel and analyse* less, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously. The real interest of this to a writer is partly in the intricacies of the choice of words from line to line. I found myself crossing out psychological descriptions, or invitations to the reader to enter the characters' thought-process. I found myself using stories within stories, rather than shape-shifting recurrent metaphors, to make meanings. [...] The pleasure of writing [this kind of narrative] was in handling the old, worn counters of the characterless persons, the Fate of the consecutive events, including the helpless commentary of the writer on the unavoidable grip of the story, and a sense that I was myself partaking in the continuity of the tales by retelling them in a new context in a way old and new.[27]

It is clear then, that Byatt's self-conscious reworking of the fairy-tale form here is, in part, due to the fact that she has an eye on current 'trends' of literary criticism and theory, which in turn present themselves in her writing. She not only uses the fairy-tale to bring up feminist concerns but, operating on a meta-textual and inter-textual level, her self-conscious fairy-tale simultaneously addresses issues of authorship and readership which lead to a dialogue with contemporary critical theory. She is showing that to tell 'well', she must, like the oral storyteller of old, please her audience, the audience of her time. And if this audience mainly consists of critics (as well as the general reader), then her fairy-tale must talk to them directly if it is to promote a reaction. Byatt, who is writing at a time when the critic is almost one step ahead of the writer, in order to reconfirm the authority of the writer, must pre-empt or prophetically prefigure their verdicts.

It is from this perspective that I argue that Byatt has self-consciously deployed the storyteller as fairy-tale teller. In writing a 'story', rather than a 'novel', she allowed herself to investigate this interest in storytelling that she identified

[27] Byatt, *On Histories* 131.

above. However, it is precisely in her self-conscious probing of this resurgence of interest in storytelling that Byatt identifies the link between death and storytelling, a link that I have been returning to and explicating throughout this thesis. She says: "So I stumbled whilst working, across the idea that stories and tales, unlike novels were intimately to do with death."[28] Foreshadowing my thesis then, Byatt also explains:

> Whether we like it or not, our lives have beginnings, middles and ends. We narrate ourselves to each other in bars and beds. Walter Benjamin, in his essay on 'The Storyteller' points out that a man's life becomes a story at the point of death.[29]

This is precisely the reason why Byatt, like Barth, both returns to the storyteller and to the tradition of oral storytelling and the *Nights*, in order to investigate her ideas through story. Let us now turn to look at this in more detail.

Death and Storytelling

"The Djinn" not only reflects the crafting of Scheherazade's tale in its structuring and use of the frame-story, but more importantly because it echoes the frame-story of the *Nights* themselves: that telling not only equals living but is there to stave off death. As with Barth, the theme of narrative death is present in Byatt's "The Djinn" in that the hag, as the representation of death, again links the stories' theme to the *Nights*. Byatt's heroine, Dr Gillian Perholt, is also on a similar mission to Scheherazade, but unlike Scheherazade who could meet the axe with the dawning of each new day, Gillian's death is not literal but metaphorical. This metaphoric death has already happened: Gillian's youth has died, her ability to be correctly positioned within a fairy-story forces both her and the reader to expect her death not her future. Nevertheless, as the story is presented as a beginning, the possibility of reinvention is clearly apparent.

Gillian Perholt is a narratologist and thus we are told "her business was storytelling" (*DNE* 95-6). However, at the beginning of her story, despite the possibilities thrown up by her positioning the fairy-tale narrative, she does not

[28] Byatt, *On Histories* 132.
[29] Byatt, *On Histories* 132.

recognise her own power. Unlike the 'real' oral storytellers of legend, she sees herself as inferior:

> [...] she was no ingenious queen in fear of the shroud brought in with the dawn, nor was she a naquibolmalek to usher the shah through the gates of sleep, nor an ashik, lover-minstrel singing songs of Mehmet the Conqueror and the sack of Byzantium, nor yet a holy dervish in short skin trousers and skin skull-cap, brandishing axe or club and making its shadow terrible. She was no meddah, telling incredible tales in the Ottoman court of the coffee-houses by the market. She was merely a narratologist, a being of secondary order, whose days were spent hunched in great libraries scrying, interpreting, decoding, the fairy-tales of childhood and the vodka-posters of the grown-up world. (*DNE* 95-6)

Although it is clear that stories and their telling are important and, for a moment, we may hope that they might offer some solace to our anti-heroine for her lack of youth and beauty, again in this respect, we find that our heroine is deficient: instead of the prestigious role of storyteller, she is only secondary. But why is our heroine secondary? Could her story change? Can the narratologist also be storyteller? Can storytelling be her way out of her familiar story? Can the hag turn into the princess?

Death in the form of the hag, which is the end of the story, and (as we learnt from Todorov) of life, rears her ugly head a few times within the fairy story in the form of a vision. Continuing the metaphor of redundancy, Gillian becomes the redundant figure. As Maack points out:

> In the larger story that provides the frame, Gillian sees herself as "redundant." As a woman over fifty, she must come to terms with her fate, must understand that she is approaching death and overcome her fear of it. In close accord with the laws of the fairy tale, she sees an old woman appearing before her on three occasions, each an epiphany reminding her of her own mortality.[30]

In fact, it is not inconsequential that the first time she sees the hag, she is in the middle of giving her paper at the conference: the paper she chooses to give is the story of Patient Griselda, that told by the Clerk of Oxford in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This is the first instance where a retelling of a story serves as a means of reflecting on and propelling Gillian's narrative, a fact that will eventually lead her

[30] Maack, 124.

out of her own narrative death and into a possibility of future power. To understand this, let us look at the history of this tale.

Alfred K. Kellogg reminds us that:

> The Tale of Griselda came from Boccaccio, then [was] taken up by Petrarch – it is Petrarch's tale that the clerk tells, again altered by Chaucer [but] the roots of the Griselda story go back deep into pagan antiquity [...] the story seems to originate as a variant of the Cupid and Psyche myth, in which, to merit the love of the god, the mere mortal must expect to be put to superhuman temptations to break the taboo which is the binding link between immortal and mortal. [...] With the passage of time the god-lover becomes Christian husband, and the human-lover Christian wife, the relationship of erstwhile god and mortal falls inevitably within the law of man and wife established by the Old and New Testaments.[31]

Kellogg explains that the tale was originally a kind of metaphor of the soul's orientation towards God, the celestial bridegroom and it was reinterpreted by Chaucer for his life and times. Kellogg implies that the story of Patient Griselda as told by the Clerk of Oxford, acts as a verbal comeback against the Wife of Bath's Tale. Alice of Bath tells the tale of a woman's superiority over her husband who is "a Clerk of Oxford" and this superiority is symbolised by the burning of his book – a story of battling of the female against male will, which again reflects the main theme of "Djinn".

In "The Djinn", the relationship between obedience to God and to the husband is also reflected in the Islamic women whom Gillian meets just before going up to the podium to speak. Although they say they have a choice, their actions reveal that they ultimately accept male power, just as Griselda accepts and adheres to Walter's demands. When one of the women is asked why she wears the veil, her reply points to obedience and silence: "My father and my fiancé say it is right [...] and I agree" (*DNE*108). The reader might ask then: are these women also representative of the women of Turkey's Muslim community, a mirroring of the story of Patient Griselda? Or do they mirror Perholt? Griselda obeys her husband Walter's orders, being patient and not speaking, even when her children are taken

[31] Alfred L. Kellogg, *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972) 277.

away from her. Moreover, when he throws her out and brings her back into his home, it is only to prepare for his marriage to a younger bride. Is this obedience or defiance? Is this intelligence or weakness? We are not told; all we are told is "The story of Patient Griselda, as told by Gillian Perholt" (*DNE* 108).

Byatt's choice of the tale of 'Patient Griselda' and her subsequent retelling of it, point to her own contemporary, reinterpretation of the story. This links both to Gillian's position as well as to the theme of the conference, which is to tell "the stories of women's lives", and how they have been depicted in literature. Gillian's retelling is historically consistent, and does more than provide a counter-discourse to either or both the Clerk and Chaucer, as does the Wife of Bath. However, unlike The Wife of Bath and the Clerk, who are both speaking through Chaucer – a man – Gillian's voice is not ultimately the product of a male but a female author: A.S. Byatt. By retelling Griselda's story (one of the stories of woman), Gillian changes the way in which woman is represented, thus moving her from powerlessness to power, from obedience to freedom from constraints. Not only does the tradition of retelling place Gillian into the role of storyteller, but as this retelling is happening on an extra-textual level also, it returns the whole story to Todorov's model of stories-within-stories, a fact that reinforces Byatt's own storytelling prowess, as both a narratologist and a storyteller.

Byatt tells the tale of
The omni-present narrator telling the tale of
Gillian Perholt telling the tale of
Patient Griselda told by Chaucer
told by the clerk of Oxford
told by Petrach
told by Boccaccio

As Gillian tells the story, she makes a digression and brings in the story of Queen Hermione from Acts II and IV of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Here we are presented with another parallel: *The Winter's Tale* is also a story of love and deception, of shepherdesses, of infidelity and obedience. Leontes, the king, thinking he is being deceived by his wife, brings about her death. In other words, here is a death that occurs through implied 'disobedience'. Despite the fairy-tale ending of *The Winter's Tale*, where the queen is resurrected by the "witch, artist, storyteller"

(*DNE* 113) Paulina, Gillian is not appeased. She sees Hermione's resurrection as false: in reality, we do not resurrect but die. Despite the power of storytelling, in reality, death, the hag, is inescapable.

At the end of story, as told by Gillian Perholt, when she asks the audience, "what did Griselda do?", Gillian loses her voice and her explanation is stunted. It is here that the hag literally appears to her as a vision: she sees a grey woman, a shadow with withered skin, a flat-breasted ghoul with a "windy hole that was its belly and womb" (*DNE* 118). The hag stops her speaking, stops her telling her story and turns her into "a pillar of salt" where her voice lost its audience and was useless. "This is what I am afraid of, thought Gillian Perholt" (*DNE* 118). However, Gillian regains her power of speech and turns her condemnation onto Walter. She therefore overrides his version of the story with her own. In turn, she becomes a storyteller in her own right. She then explains this to her listening audience:

> [...] the peculiar horror of patient Griselda does not lie in the psychological terror of incest or even of age. It lies in the narration of the story and Walter's relation to it. The story is terrible because Walter has assumed too many positions in the narration; he is hero, villain, destiny, God and narrator – there is no *play* in this tale. (*DNE* 120)

Gillian initially loses her voice and cannot speak, but is then saved by speech (from death and the hag) by continuing with her telling. As a protagonist in a story, a narratologist, her reading points to Todorov, whose essay on narrative and death again takes on a relevance here. Gillian's, and thus Byatt's, reclaiming of this story for 'Patient Griselda' is significant, both for the role it plays in the story of Gillian's life (as this new role for woman) and the grander story of women's lives as represented through literature. They are no longer the silent, obedient women of old. They are 'wise' enough to speak. Consequently, Gillian's voice, her power to tell, is the symbol of survival and freedom. In this sense, it is through the act of storytelling that Gillian conquers the fact that "the stories of women's lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies" (*DNE*121), and that she rekindles that energy and gives it back to women.

The second occasion Gillian sees the hag is in Ephesus where (she is told) the Virgin Mary died. Here, the hag becomes more real; this hag with "shrivelled womb and empty eyes" (*DNE* 166) makes her "suddenly aware of every inch of her own slack and dying skin" (*DNE* 166). She is aware that "this old woman, this real dead old woman" (*DNE* 166) is herself. Here again, she experiences "the strange stoppage of her own life" (*DNE* 167) which came to her with the vision of Patient Griselda. This vision comes at another crucial point in the development of Gillian's story, in the way that she conquers the 'hag' and re-finds her lust for life, her metaphorical 'princessness'. Just before her second terrifying vision, Gillian is walking in the museum at Ephesus where she comes across two statues of the Artemis of Ephesus. This female deity she is presented with is admirable. She is adorned beyond belief with all manner of plants and creatures surrounding her, and, we are told, she displays a "triple row full of breasts, seven, eight, eight, fecundity in stone" (*DNE* 156). Gillian is first asked to make a wish, premeditating the three wishes that she will be given by the djinn later in the story. At this point Gillian says: "I am enough of a narratologist to know that no good ever comes of making wishes. They have a habit of twisting the wishers to their own ends" (*DNE* 160).

A narratologist, as interpreter of narratives, knows that despite wishes, the Fate of the characters is ultimately fixed. But all the same, true to her role as a fairy-tale heroine, she cannot resist asking for something: what she wishes for is to be asked to give the keynote address at a forthcoming conference in Toronto. In reality, what she is wishing for is to have her life back, to have a life. And this life she can only gain through storytelling. When the hag appears to her again, perhaps it is her wish that gives her the power to say:

> I feel more alive now that ever before. But lately I've had a sense of my fate – my death, that is – waiting for me, manifesting itself from time to time to remind me it's there. It isn't a battle. I don't fight it off. It takes charge for a moment or two, and then lets go again, and steps back. The more alive I am the more suddenly it comes. (*DNE*167-8)

Gillian's true wish is that she does not want to be a character in a fairy-tale, and would rather be free, alive, real. Not content with being part of a familiar narrative,

like a storyteller(ess), she wants to create a new one instead. The question is: will her wish come true?

The third occasion where she has a mock-encounter with the hag is when she visits the church of *Haghia Sophia* at a pillar, where for centuries pilgrims have uttered their wishes, and where she wishes not to be a woman. This curious wish to change sex is again, interesting in terms of her future empowerment. Of course, Gillian does not *really* want to be a man, but instead wants to be freed from the imposed slavery of womanhood: obedience, fertility, sex. Byatt says this herself in an interview with *Salon Magazine*:

> It's very much nicer being over 50 from that point of view because you know where you are at least. You become single-minded. Dame Rebecca West once said that it is every woman's secret that after the age of 50 she is really a man. I like that because then as far as that particular problem goes, women and men are equal.[32]

Here again, the meeting of East and West, of woman's obedience and woman's emancipation is brought to the foreground. At the magical wishing pillar her colleague Orhan – a Turkish scholar whom she had met a long time ago at university – talks to a Pakistani man who happened to be there with his wife and two daughters. While the women, "chattering like subdued birds", (*DNE* 174) make their wishes and cajole Gillian to make hers, the Pakistani man is giving a speech on 'the evil of the West' and preaching on the coming jihad. On assuming that Gillian is "a quiet Muslim wife" (*DNE* 176) who does not speak English, he is stunned into silence by Orhan, who tells him: "She *is* English. She is a visiting professor, an eminent visiting professor" (*DNE* 177).

Professors, of course, can be women, *are* women. But there is an underlying assumption at least on the part of *this* man, that women are nothing but obedient wives, wives with no voice, again reinforcing the patriarchal discourse that Gillian is trying to escape. Her wish expresses her desire to escape the traditional role of females in fairy-tales and stories, which is that of enslavement and loss of voice, highlighted in the story of Patient Griselda. However, the power that woman was given (before man) through Speech and Reason is echoed here again. Gillian's

[32] Miller, *Salon Interview*.

professorship not only thus empowers her, but when the hag appears to her in its usual terrifying guise, she destroys its power by claiming it as a story. Through speech, the power of voice, she becomes a female teller of tales, and an interpreter rather than a subject, of her own story:

> If I was a postmodernist punster [...] I would make something of Haghia Sophia. She has got old, she has turned into a Hag. But I can't, because I respect etymologies, it means holy. Hag is my word, a northern word, nothing to do with here. (*DNE* 178)

As Orhan points out: "You have said it now. Even if you repudiate it. Lots of American students think Hag is Hag. They get excited about Crones" (*DNE* 178). By saying it, by naming the 'hag', Gillian is free of her and is able to really begin her story.

It is just after this naming, this 'telling', this crushing of the 'hag' story that Gillian, accompanied by Orhan, finds the next part of her story – the genie in a bottle – in the Grand Bazaar. This image of the grand Bazaar is also mirrored in the beginning of the story, and reflects the way that Gillian's story develops her position as narratologist and female, as a teller of tales:

> The conference, like most conferences, resembled a bazaar, where stories and ideas were exchanged and changed [...] The best narratologists work by telling and retelling tales. This holds the hearer from sleep and allows the teller to insert him- or herself into the tale. (*DNE* 106)

Gillian is no longer the narratologist as secondary being, she is beginning to be more like the storyteller, who has power over the story – the very same thing she condemned Walter for doing in his tale of Patient Griselda.

It is in this sense that Jane Campbell's comment is true when she says that: "Far from being caught in a story like the helpless females in fairy tales, [Gillian] is a powerful interpreter of narrative and, indeed, ready to create a plot that will enhance her freedom."[33] However, Gillian is not altogether there yet. Although within the magic of story she can get rid of the hag, when the reality of the hotel

[33] Jane Campbell, "'Forever Possibilities. And Impossibilities, of Course': Women and Narrative in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*," *Imagining the Real: Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt*, eds. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) 140.

room hits her, she temporarily leaves the fairy-tale and falters. Despite her mocking of 'the hag' just a few hours previously, she now sees her in her bathroom mirror:

> The mirror was covered in shifting veils of steam, amongst which, vaguely, Gillian saw her death advancing towards her, its hair streaming dark and liquid, its eyeholes dark smudges, its mouth open in its liquescent face in fear of their convergence. (*DNE* 189-90)

The mirror reminds her of the glass bottle she bought and she is drawn back into the story with its opening: for out pops the genie and the magic reappears. At a point where the story may have turned back into reality, the return to the fairy-tale, in the figure of the djinn, allows Gillian another chance at ending her story 'happily'.

Typical of the fairy-tales of both East and West, the djinn grants her three wishes, which echo the theme of wishing that we have already seen previously in the story. On pronouncing his gift of three wishes, the djinn adds the line at the end: "If there is anything you desire" (*DNE* 195) which is significant in two ways. Firstly, this sentence acts as a *leitsätze* that recurs throughout the narrative, beginning with the story of Patient Griselda. As I mentioned in the chapter on *Haroun*, this repetition not only strengthens and reinforces the narrative focus, but also is a technique that oral storytellers typically employ. Secondly, the act of wishing is also relevant as it points to the function and use in oral stories. In traditional fairy-tales, it is the wish that not only allows the protagonist the ability to transform their story into a 'happy' ending, but in so doing, almost always predicts the outcome of the story. In this sense, as a narratologist, Gillian knows her wishes should come true, if she believes in her role as a fairy-tale heroine, that is. Moreover, if her fairy-tale is a 'new' type of tale, one that has not been written yet, Gillian must also recognise that her wishes are important not only for herself and her own story, but also for the stories of women in general.

Wishing is Believing

Gillian's first wish, then, is "for my body to be as it was when I last really *liked* it," (*DNE* 201). Rather than wishing her body back to its days of youth and beauty, she wishes to return to a time when she was more aware of herself. She is not merely a body that is to be used and desired by man, and does not want it to be available for

the uses of a dominant prince; she wants any relationship to be an equal partnership. The act of wishing, therefore, has to be well thought-out and shows her intelligence. She wants to leave the familiar narrative of *both* hag *and* princess: she wants her own desire. This idea of true wishing, of desire, is echoed and reflected in the wishing process. As Maack reminds us:

> When later narrative elements inserted in the tale speak of wishing and ask "what women most desire," they do so in reference to the contest between husband and wife in "Patient Griselda." In giving his own account, Chaucer's clerk had already echoed the Wife of Bath's tale, which asked and answered that very question:
>
> What thing is that women most desyren?
> .....
> Wommen desyren to have sovereyntee
> As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
> And for to been maistrie him above.[34]

Maack points out that this question plays on a chain of stories that all answer it in a similar way. She continues: "In John Gower's "Tale of Florent", in the *Confessio Amantis*, and in "the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell," the answer is always "sovereignty."[35] However, is this really what women want: sovereignty, power over man? What is this fairy-tale telling us?

As the djinn and Gillian begin to relate their stories to each other, we, as readers, try to interpret the narrative clues. Gillian Perholt presents herself as a culmination and continuation of all the women's stories that have come before hers, all of whom, in some way, have been governed by their Fates. Again, echoing the beginning of the story, where Gillian perceives herself as 'different' from the women of the past, she now confidently asserts, "My name is Gillian Perholt. [...] I am an independent woman, a scholar, I study tale-telling and narratology" (*DNE* 205). But will she, as narratologist, be able to manipulate her own fate as a character in a story? Can this fantasy become a reality? Can women really attain freedom through their storytelling, or is it just a dream? The djinn replies, "The only true independent woman I have known was the Queen of Sheba [...] What does an

[34] Maack, 127.
[35] Maack, 127.

independent woman wish for, Djil-yan Peri-han?" (*DNE* 206). Gillian's transformation slowly becomes apparent: 'djil-yan' moves her to an equal pegging with the magical wish-fulfiller, 'djinn' implying that she can grant as well wishes herself; and 'Perihan' incidentally is a woman's name in Turkish meaning Queen of the Fairies, implying that she has mastery of the fairy-tale. This transformation that we see in Gillian's name echoes the transformation of the storyteller Somebody in Barth's novel *Last Voyage*. In "The Djinn" the character's shift from one person to another is in this case, Gillian. She moves from the position of "secondary being", as a narratologist who talks in 'realism', to an oral storyteller who tells fairy-tales (following the tradition of both the storytellers of the *Nights* and of European fairy-tales). Her name Gillian Perholt becomes then, Djil-yan Perihan

Marriage, the inevitable conclusion of the princess story, is brought up by the Queen of Sheba who, of course, the djinn knew personally. She asks him, the granter of wishes:

> "How can I, a great Queen, submit to the prison house of marriage, to the invisible chains which bind me to the bed of a man?" I advised her against it. I told her her wisdom was hers and she was free as an eagle floating on the waves of the air and seeing the cities and places and mountains below her with an even eye. (*DNE* 209)

However, even Sheba, that truly independent woman, cannot resist temptation in the form of King Sulieman. The djinn remembers: "And when he came, I saw that I was lost, for she desired him" (*DNE* 210). Sheba most desired marriage and man, not the fulfilment of her wishes as independent from her Fate as a character in women's stories. Similarly, the story of the djinn's second mistress, Zefir, who the djinn describes as being "eaten up with unused power and thought she might be a witch – except, she said, if she were a man, these things she thought about would be ordinarily acceptable" (*DNE* 224), is also ultimately disappointing. The djinn taught Zefir many things – as if knowledge is a key to power – then at one point "she began to wish – to desire – that I should stay with her" (*DNE* 228). When the djinn finally asks for Gillian's history, she replies: "I am a teacher. In a university. I was married and now I am free. I travel the world in aeroplanes and talk about storytelling" (*DNE*

231). But when the djinn asks, "tell me your story," we are told, "A kind of panic overcame Dr Perholt. It seemed to her that she had no story" (*DNE* 231).

Gillian, at this point, cannot tell her life in terms of a fairy-tale, she is merely a character in it, and thus subject to a character's fate. She begins narrating the only 'reality' she knows, copying the storytelling of conventional realism. The djinn is unimpressed with Gillian's realistic narrative, complaining: "your stories are strange, glancing things. They peter out, they have no shape" (*DNE* 242). Gillian's reply, "That is where a storyteller would end it, in my country" (*DNE* 242), reinforces Byatt's belief that the literary mode of realism is not sufficient to express reality. The djinn's story points to the fact that fairy-tales and fantasy are lacking. Does this mean that the 'better' story could be a merging of the two? Gillian is not ready to tell her own fairy-tale yet and the stories she tells the djinn are also about the position of women.

> We were a generation when there was something shameful about being an unmarried woman, a spinster – though we were all clever, like Zefir, my friends and I, we all had this greed for knowledge – we were scholars –. (*DNE* 238)

Intelligence and knowledge, however, do not stop these women from being subjected to the laws of marriage and motherhood, like Sheba, Griselda and the women before them. Is this a Fate that is prescribed purely because they are women? Is this why Gillian, and in some senses Zefir, contemplated being a man? Gillian, as a character in her own fairy-tale, still follows her predestined fate. This is mirrored in her second wish, which is that the djinn loves her, and in the story she tells of an Ethiopian woman she had seen on TV talking about escaping the famine. She says: "It is because I am a woman, I cannot get out of here, I must sit here and wait for my fate, if only I were not a woman I could go out and do something" (*DNE* 248).

Can a woman escape her own story? Can her wishes come true? The answer lies in Gillian's story and this answer begins to come to light when Gillian and the djinn return to England. Gillian discovers that the wish she had made by the statute of Artemis has come true: she has been asked back to a conference in Toronto. In fact, it is her last paper, given as the keynote lecture at the conference in Toronto, and entitled, "Wish-fulfilment and Narrative Fate: some aspects of wish-fulfilment

as a narrative device" (*DNE* 257), that gives us a possible answer to all our questions (and the question that Gillian and, with her all womankind, wants answering): "what do women most desire?" As a narratologist-cum-storyteller, Gillian should be able to find her way out of the story.

Primarily, however, at the conference, the question moves from the larger "what do women most desire?" to the implied question of 'can characters in a fairy-tale escape their Fate?' In other words, can Gillian break out of her 'old hag' story and enter into another story, a story of her own wishing? What does she wish for as a character in a fairy-tale? Gillian tells us first – as we expect – that:

> Characters in fairytales are subject to Fate and enact their fates. Characteristically they attempt to change this fate by magical intervention in its workings, and characteristically too, such magical intervention only reinforces the control of the Fate which waited for them, which is perhaps simply the fact that they are mortal and return to dust. (*DNE* 258)

Does this mean that her wishes are ultimately futile? That even if she turns into a princess that ultimately, she will return to a hag? Again, we feel a pull of, on the one hand, the dream of a fairy-tale wish-fulfilment and, on the other, the idea that Gillian is over fifty and cannot turn back time.

> The emotion we feel in fairytales when the characters are granted their wishes is a strange one. We feel the possible leap of freedom – I can have what I want – and the perverse certainty that this will change nothing; that Fate is fixed. (*DNE* 259)

This dichotomy between Fate and Freedom is reflected in the story of Gillian which began when her husband left her, with her self-dubbed 'redundancy'. Is this really about power? And what power are we talking about? Power, or sovereignty over man, or over men's stories, or both? Gillian's answer comes through the telling of another story, a story which we are told was in part being manipulated by the will/wish of the djinn. This is a story of a power relationship, the story of a man and a wishing-ape. A fisherman pulls a monkey out of the sea, and the monkey must serve him and grant his wishes, but with every wish he makes the monkey shrink and come visibly closer to death.

In the lecture, the figure of death rears its ugly head once again. The question of "what do we most desire?" is brought into contemporary reality by its relation to Freud. Gillian tells us, "'the aim of all life is death', said Freud, telling his creation story in which the creation strives to return to the state before life was breathed into it" (*DNE* 268). In terms of Gillian's story and the story of the djinn, this ultimately means that they wish to be set free: outside their own stories, their link to creation. Naturally, then, as Maack also points out:

> While rephrasing the story in which the fisherman takes pity on the monkey and allows him to make a wish, Gillian finds out that this tale determines the structure of her own action. Like the fisherman, she too gives her third wish, and it is this wish that sets the djinn free.[36]

Gillian's last wish is thus as a wish-granter herself: "I wish you could have whatever you wish for – that this last wish may be your wish" (*DNE* 270). In other words, Gillian has escaped her narrative fate, at least for the moment. By giving back the wish to the djinn she allows him to become his own creation: to have his own story outside narrative expectations. At the same time, she also affords this to herself: she has broken free of both the hag story and the princess story. She wants something else. Byatt shows us that we are more than stereotyped 'characters' in a story driven by Fate – Gillian does not have to be that fifty-year old woman who, having lost her husband and her children, is now subjected to a lonely fate with nothing but death in front of her. As an individual, as a free independent woman, she still has a life to lead and within that life is the potential for story.

In conclusion, it is clear that Gillian's position as 'hag', as the redundant figure of woman with no story, is transformed. Equally, her position as a secondary order being, a narratologist, moves to the position that Scheherazade holds at the beginning of the narrative: the primary position of storyteller – and thus the creator of fictions. The storyteller's audience is wide, but the narratologist's audience is specific. By encompassing both, Byatt as storyteller and narratologist is speaking to an audience which not only encompasses that elusive 'general' reader of 'popular' fiction, but also speaks narrative theory to the 'critic' as well. Following Christien

[36] Maack, 129.

Franken, Webb reminds us that "this novella is itself literary criticism."[37] By understanding the nature of stories and their interpretations, the narratologist, Gillian, found a way out of her predestined Fate. Byatt tells us:

> My fairy stories are postmodern, in that they reflect on the nature of narrative, and of their own narrative in particular. Narration is seen as the goal as well as the medium [...] But whereas much post-modern self-reflexive narrative seems somehow designed to show that all narrations are two-dimensional and papery, that all motifs are interchangeable coinage, what I believe, and hope to have shown, is that the tale is always stronger than the teller. "Never trust the teller, trust the tale," said D.H. Lawrence.[38]

It is in the spirit of storytelling, of retelling and reinterpreting familiar narratives that Byatt offers us her fairy-tale, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye". However, we are called to remember, as Adriana Cavarero notes:

> [...] the chosen ones of this art have no reason to worry about the role of the author, or about the power to invent a story that 'constructs' or 'reveals' a character; on the contrary, they insist on the central role of a story that seems to be autonomous both from the will of the protagonist and from the one who narrates it.[39]

In spite of the storyteller's manipulation, it is the tale that gives us the clearest message; and it is the tale, not the teller, that survives.

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[37] Webb, 140.
[38] Byatt, *Fairy Stories*.
[39] Cavarero, 141.

CONCLUSION

THE STORYTELLER RETURNS

> There are many things that it is like, this storytelling business. One of them (so she says in one of the paragraphs she has not crossed out yet) is a bottle with a genie in it. When the storyteller opens the bottle, the genie is released into the world, and it costs all hell to get him back in again.
>
> J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 167.

I. Storytelling and the Internationalisation of the Contemporary Novel

At the beginning of this thesis, I opened with the question of boundaries, and talked about finding the edges of the literature frame. On the one hand we have seen a need reflected in literature (and perhaps in other disciplines) to return to origins. On the other, we have also become obsessed with classifications. Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that when boundaries are blurred, we try to find solutions in order to 'fill in the gaps'. However, one thing is sure: in this evermore globalized world, the concepts of culture, identity and community are in crisis. As a result, when trying to define what we mean by reading 'contemporary fiction in English' or the contemporary novel 'in English', we are already on a pathway that leads to confusion. To understand what we mean by these terms, inevitably we begin to grapple with more specific divisions, more precise classifications. For example, fiction 'in English' can be divided into myriad distinctions which could include: distinction by language (novels in English 'written in English' or 'in translation' etc.); distinction by continent (European, North/South American, Asian); distinction by nationality (e.g. American, British, South African, Australian); distinction by tribe or race (African American, Native American/ New Zealander/ Australian); 'contested' descriptions such as 'Commonwealth writers'; distinction by gender and/or age (post-war, feminist etc.); distinction by theoretical and/or historical

positioning (postmodernist, modernist, realist etc); and potentially distinction could be made by ideology and religion (Muslim, Christian, etc.). Furthermore, writers ascribed to any of these traditions can in turn belong to one or more of these categories at the same time and can thus be theorised under any one of the headings. Consequently, the question follows: where *exactly* do we place our boundaries if they exist at all?

Take, for example, the case of Salman Rushdie: do we describe him as a 'British' or an 'Indian' writer, or a 'British-Indian' writer? Is he a Commonwealth writer, a Muslim writer, a postcolonial or postmodernist writer or do we simply fall back on calling him a 'world' writer? And what about Kazuo Ishiguro, Zadie Smith and Doris Lessing who, by virtue of 'nationality' alone, could be seen to problematise categories? Are these distinctions 'correct'? Do they and if so, how, do they matter? If we return to the idea of the frame, we might wonder, why then do we have to classify 'literature' and put it into boxes? Is this because we somehow want to possess it? This idea of possession is once again linked to our understanding and anchoring with the novel's father, the Western construction of the 'Author'; but I have argued that the 'storyteller' has returned and rather than slavishly copying his Authority, he eludes us with truths that come from different sources, picking stories from various traditions and blending them into one. As this thesis has tried to bring to light, in storytelling these boundaries seem to dissolve. In a sense, it seems as if the world of the novel in English has been pushing open its boundaries for a while, perhaps because of the rise of the uses of the English language around the world. Rushdie reminds us of this when he says, "the English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago."[1] I propose then, that rather than putting these varying types of 'Literature in English' (Commonwealth, Post-colonial, Native American, South African etc.) into boxes, we might think of ways to bring them all together. I have argued that one way of seeing this is reflected in the figure of the storyteller.

In an age such as ours, an age where 'the media explosion' allows us to witness and listen to a multitude of competing discourses, we are faced with a

[1] Rushdie, *Homelands* 70.

bombardment of stories every day. In an age of mass culture and globalisation, the individual finds him or herself afloat in a postmodern chaos, treading water in 'a sea of stories' like Rushdie's Haroun, where more and more conflicting narratives are pouring out their versions of truth. The question is: which one(s) do we believe in? The individual, who was once the main focus of the novel and saw its rise, is now less and less sure about grand narratives, about which narrative holds the key to truth and provides the frame.[2] In a sense, the individual can belong to a number of what Benedict Anderson calls 'imaginary communities', those nations of the mind that, like stories, exist because they are believed in. It is perhaps apt then, as Salman Rushdie suggests in his book of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, that the storyteller returns to tell these worlds into existence. Worlds are created first and foremost from the imagination, but in time can become more real than the real. The novelist, or the newly-dubbed 'storyteller', is no longer posing as the stable, authoritative author of a 'secure' society, but as teller of the stories of one which is multi-layered, mutable, a world of a thousand voices:

> [...] as far as Eng. Lit is concerned, I think that if *all* English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit. has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction.[3]

Rushdie's catapulting to the global stage as a consequence of the unpleasant events which surrounded the publication of *The Satanic Verses* highlighted what was already beginning to emerge as a growing internationalisation of literature. However, it perhaps took something as drastic as this to draw together the international writing community and with it, the larger community of readers, who recognised this was not only Rushdie's individual fight but a larger fight for the freedom of speech, a freedom that had always been expressed through the medium of storytelling. Rushdie's plight showed the world that Literature (or storytelling) was essentially a discourse that has always and can always surpass cultural, political,

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[2] 'Multi-culturalism' is the name that has been given to this: the problematic aspects of the term have been explored in recent fiction from Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000).
[3] Rushdie, *Homelands* 70.

religious, national and societal boundaries, and is therefore something to be protected. At least two of the Nobel Prize winners for Literature in the last decade, J.M. Coetzee (2003) and Orhan Pamuk (2006), have had to fight political battles in their own countries, and their novels most poignantly reflect this troubled history. Censorship of the word, whether it is written or oral, was suddenly the real issue. But that plight runs all the way back to the beginning of written literature and is at the heart of Plato's *Republic*: should a 'good' society allow the word to roam, or should it keep the word in chains?

International recognition arising from the censorship issue at the heart of "The Rushdie Affair" made Rushdie world-famous, but from the beginning of his career, Rushdie's fiction in its very form, had already changed the boundaries of the novel across the globe. With the publication of *Midnight's Children* (1981), which not only won him the Booker prize in that same year, but went on to win the Booker of Bookers in 1993, Rushdie's 'hybrid' fiction was indicative of a rising trend that had begun to germinate in post-war fiction to the point where, by the sixties, writerly self-consciousness and the postmodern contestation of the traditional idea of authorship was firmly implanted in the novel. We could say then that in this context, what writers like Rushdie had begun to make visible, was not the death of the novel, but the return of storytelling and the storyteller to the tradition of the novel. Why was this? As Byatt goes on to say in her reference to the relationship between storytelling and novels mentioned in the last chapter:

> Some of the interest in storytelling is to do with doubts about the classic novel, with its interest in the construction of the Self, and the relation of that Self to the culture, social and political, surrounding it. A writer can rebel in various ways against the novel of sensibility, or the duty (often imposed by literary journalists) to report on, criticise, contemporary actuality. You can write anti-novels, like the *nouveau roman*, deconstructing narrative and psychology. Or you can look back at forms in which stories are not about *inner* psychological subtleties, and truths are not connected immediately to contemporary circumstances. There are the great compendious storytelling collections. The *Arabian Nights*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *Canterbury Tales*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The fairy-tale collections of the Brothers Grimm, and Moe and Asbjørnsen in Norway. [...] There is the wonderful collection of folk tales made by Italo Calvino, and there are the literary tales written by Hoffman, Tieck, and Hans

> Andersen. Both Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie in Britain in the 1970s said that they felt their energy derived more from reading tales than from reading novels, and used tales, old, invented and reinvented, to charm, to entice, and to galvanise their readers in turn.[4]

This interest in storytelling, I have argued throughout this thesis, is an identifiable trend in contemporary fiction, and is most significantly reflected in the figure of the storyteller: a figure who was pronounced to be dying by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay of 1936. We have seen this rise of the storyteller implicit in the various critical discourses that surround literature proper. Since the death of the author; and the rise in literary postmodernism, reflected in the increase in metafictional texts; the interest in textuality and intertextuality; and a loss of faith in the grand narratives of religion, history and philosophy, it seems that novelists have naturally returned to stories and to the storyteller in order to better reflect contemporary reality. Perhaps, then, it is not only novelists who have lost faith in what Byatt has called the 'classic' novel, but also critics. The breakdown of the 'Western Canon' and the growing internationalisation of literature is one clear indication of this. In a world whose villages are no longer localised but globalised, literature itself has broken out of its own boundaries, reveals these to be self-constructed, ephemeral and ultimately impossible to contain. This is the end of the literature frame or, at least, the beginning of the construction of new ones.

What this thesis has primarily brought to light is that there is a rising trend in contemporary literature that is best understood through the figure of the storyteller. My central aim has been to identify this trend and to investigate how the storyteller is presented within it, with the aim of showing that he has, indeed, returned to contemporary fiction as a whole. Rather than put writers into categories, I have tried to reflect this internationalisation of 'literature' by choosing writers who are both internationally acclaimed and interesting in their own right, writers who therefore represent such internationalisation and exemplify my argument for the return of the storyteller. There are many other writers that I could have included in this thesis, as well as other interesting themes and preoccupations that arose from my investigation of the storyteller. For example, Peter Carey, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, Graham

[4] Byatt *On Histories* 124.

Swift, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Leslie Marmon Silko, Patricia Grace, Ben Okri, Toni Morrison, Kazuo Ishiguro, Murray Bail and Annie Proulx are a sample of the writers whom I have read and considered for this thesis. And these are only a small percentage of writers who could be seen to reflect this trend globally, all of them writers who write in English as their first language.[5]

In the light of these comments, I would like in this conclusion, to end with a final story and one final writer (following Barth's tradition, perhaps): J.M. Coetzee. As one of the most important contemporary writers writing in English today, J.M. Coetzee is also one of the most challenging and stylistically ambiguous. Indeed, his last two novels have baffled critics, who have found them difficult to place and understand. I want to argue, however, that if we read Coetzee too through the storyteller lens, both his fictionalised novelists, and the point of his fictions, begin to make sense.

As I have argued, one of the central issues raised by the return of the storyteller is the transformation of the author into storyteller, and his subsequent return to story and fictional reality as a means to find 'truth'. As a writer who, in the tradition of Vargas Llosa, Barth and Byatt, is also very much a critic, Coetzee's work often problematises authorship to such an extent that a number of his novels make this preoccupation their central theme. I will therefore concentrate specifically here on a character that appears in his last two novels, *Elizabeth Costello* (2004)[6] and *Slow Man* (2005)[7]: the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello. What is interesting about Costello is that she is an 'old', 'fat' 'woman': three characteristics that immediately place her, once again, in the realm of the marginalised, a fact that as I have argued, again returns us to the storyteller. I reveal that through the character of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee has been able to perform one of the most indicative moves in terms of asserting his role as storyteller that we have seen of any of the

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[5] *See* Byatt's essay "Old Tales New Forms" for an indication of how this storytelling trend is reflected in European literature. Byatt, *On Histories*, 123-50.

[6] Coetzee, J. M. *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. London: Vintage, 2003. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will appear with the abbreviation *EC* followed by the page number.

[7] Coetzee, J. M. *Slow Man*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2005. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will appear with the abbreviation *SM* followed by the page number.

writers in this thesis so far: he has taken Costello both beyond and outside the fiction and into reality itself.

II. J.M. Coetzee: Problematising Authorship with Storytelling

On picking up any one of the ten novels by J.M Coetzee, it is not difficult to see why he is regarded as a writer of extraordinary merit. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, his fiction has shaken up literary criticism and theory by raising both serious and probing questions about the state of both contemporary literature and its 'authors'. Indeed, this question-raising goes to the very core of many of the paradoxical issues raised in this thesis. As one critic puts it:

> Sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, or threading antithetical propositions through the work, Coetzee's texts turn on themselves, subtract their affirmations, deny their hopes, betray their aspirations, contradict their assertions, even as they affirm, hope, aspire and assert. Mired in the medium, Coetzee is always serious. [...] Coetzee allows no escape through a mask (persona) that the reader can write off and dismiss.[8]

As I have argued throughout the thesis, the storyteller does seem to hide behind masks. As a shape-shifter, this movement is revealed through his shape-shifting from one fictional being to another. The question I want to investigate here is: does Coetzee, as storyteller, do the same or is he, as Jane states, quite 'visible' to us?

Often allegorical, a characteristic that reminds us of one of his oft-quoted literary influences, Franz Kafka, Coetzee's works do seem to evade ultimate capture. However, one way to see this allegorical aspect of Coetzee's work would be to see it as a return to 'story', a move away from the precise modes and conventions of novelistic realism. This aspect of Coetzee's work is perhaps best reflected in his 1982 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Set in an indeterminate place, in a small frontier town of a nameless empire, its rejection of both specific time and place in history could lead it to be read as a fable. It tells the story of an old magistrate in an imaginary Empire's outpost settlement who is suddenly caught up in a military offensive against supposedly treacherous barbarian nomads. In a striking show of

[8] Regina Janes, "'Writing without Authority': J. M. Coetzee and His Fictions," *Salmagundi* (1997): 105.

humanity, but also partly due to curiosity, the magistrate sets off into the wilderness to return a captive Barbarian woman to her tribe. When he finds them, however, he sees that the nomads are actually not at war with the Empire at all. The war has been fabricated so that the Empire can justify its will to power. As in Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), which re-tells the story of Robinson Crusoe, the barbarians, like Friday, do not tell their stories, but by implication *theirs* is precisely the story we are meant to hear. The tracts that the Empire publish and present as Truth and Civilisation, are but empty words when faced with the hard facts of their actions: humiliation, maiming, violence and death. The world order that dominates suppresses the voices of the peaceful, maims them so they have no tongue to speak, no legs with which to carry themselves. The magistrate who remains is also feeble and in trying to tell the barbarians' story knows that he will ultimately always fail.

If the storyteller is one whom Benjamin describes as there to "counsel", in this novel we can see storyteller wisdom. Storytelling offers us a way into this other mode of reality that Coetzee shows we have suppressed. But Coetzee's message is more than a warning. The battle seems to have already been lost. Can we really tell the stories that we have left behind? Can Friday find his tongue again? Can we really overcome our dominant discourses, which lay claim to the deep-rooted foundations of rationality and reason, and move backwards to that primitive 'other' voice that lies behind, beneath and beyond? Can storytelling really speak through literature?

Coetzee's novels speak so directly to criticism and are so full of textual play that it has led one critic, Kwame Dawes, to remark, "Coetzee, an academic himself, must understand what a useful thing he has done for us who need material for articles. He is smiling slyly now, I'm sure. The devil!"[9] In one sense, Dawes is right; if writing could wink ironically at you while you are reading, this is the closest thing to it. But Dawes's use of the word 'devil' again points us back to the storyteller. As I argued in chapter four, it is the devil that is associated with the storyteller as opposed to the author, the devil who is the unauthoritative trickster who hides behind masks and evades capture. Indeed, the storyteller-devil and author-god dichotomy is useful

[9] Kwame Dawes, "Review of the Writings of J.M. Coetzee. Special Issue of the South Atlantic Quarterly, 93:1, Winter 1994," *African Affairs* 97.386 (1998): 141.

when approaching authors such as Coetzee, whose fictional play is all about evading authorial capture. Coetzee's 'devilshness' from his earliest fiction, has been used to problematise authorship.

For example in *Foe*, even before we open the novel, the question of authorship is immediately revealed in the title of the work which echoes the name Defoe. Coetzee reclaims fictional authority by placing both Defoe's and Robinson's story in the figure of a woman: Susan Barton. Through listening to Susan's story, which presents itself as the 'true' story of the story of Robinson and that of Defoe's subsequent writing of it, Coetzee again follows the tradition of the storyteller who re-tells and re-interprets the 'well-known' and the 'familiar' for modern day readership. The fact that Coetzee chooses to tell the story through a woman again flags up the voices of the marginalised. Not only does the telling of this story show that European literature was premised on white patriarchal discourses, but her attempts to tell the story of Friday (who we learn has no tongue) again points to the untold stories of the primitive tribes that we can never again hear. Moreover, her insistence on telling the truth, and presenting De Foe as a liar, insists on the fictionality of fiction but also warns of its ability to present truths.

Similarly, in *Master of Petersburg* (1994),[10] Coetzee problematises authorship (as Dominic Head's study of Coetzee reveals).[11] This time, he picks another author, Fyodor Dostoevsky, whom he places inside another of his fictional worlds. In the novel, the fictional Dostoevsky returns to Moscow to investigate the death of his stepson who was said to have committed suicide. But, even here authorship is hinted at. As Head, following Zinovy Zinik, observes, "there is a wilful manipulation of the biographical data: the real Dostoevsky was survived by his stepson, and this significant change signals the novel's preoccupation with the dilemma of 'fathering' and 'authorship'."[12] Moreover, Coetzee's play does not stop here. As Head further observes, although there are references to characters and themes in several works of Dostoevsky, the novel becomes an extended treatment of

[10] Coetzee, J. M. *The Master of Petersburg*. London: Vintage, 1994. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will appear with the abbreviation *MP* followed by the page number.
[11] Dominic Head, *J.M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 144.
[12] Head, 144.

the chapter 'At Tikhon's', a chapter originally suppressed from his novel *Demons* (otherwise known as *The Devils* or *The Possessed*), and which often appears as an appendix in modern editions. As Head aptly describes it, the "*Ur*-text" of Coetzee's novel, therefore, is almost "a non-text, redeemed from a liminal margin of the European novel."[13]

Interestingly, a little probing into the history of this chapter again brings up another relevant point about the relationship between the author and his fictional worlds or characters, and one which, as we saw with Rushdie, can become quite dangerous. It is this need to see the author in his fictional characters that led to the real Dostoevsky's change of heart about its inclusion. In a 1966 article by Vladimir Seduro,[14] we learn that the chapter was originally censored by the editor, as it contained a confession by the main character Stavrogin telling the Bishop Tikhon of how he raped a young girl. Seduro argues that this chapter was originally conceived by Dostoevsky as the key chapter to the novel and its omission hides from the reader the ability to truly interpret Stavrogin's character.[15] Seduro notes that, despite its censorship, Dostoevsky asserted in various ways the chapter's importance, one of which was by giving readings of the omitted chapter to various friends and acquaintances. However, when rumours began to circulate that this interest in the topic was a result of Dostoevsky's repentance of having committed a similar crime in his own youth, Dostoevsky's stance changed. In other words, when the fictional character and the real Dostoevsky's confession became one, then the fiction was no longer a part of the character's life, but became one with that of the author: fiction and reality had merged. Fiction had become dangerous. As we saw with Rushdie, Coetzee is again insisting that for fiction to remain fiction, the author must be left out. If we saw the author as storyteller, then this problem would not have arisen. If we could see this, then interpretation would come from a different standpoint.

Reading *Master of Petersburg*, we see that it is intimately concerned with the question of interpretation and misinterpretation that comes about through reading, a question that seems to concern many of the writers that I have focused on in this

[13] Head, 145.
[14] Seduro, Vladimir. "The Fate of Stavrogin's Confession." *Russian Review* 25.4 (1966): 397-404.
[15] Seduro, 401.

thesis. As an absent (and dead) author, the choice of Dostoevsky in the novel reflects the distance between 'fictional reality' and 'real-world reality'. But it also reflects the distance between the oral and the written word, and brings us back to the debate that Plato first highlighted in the Platonic Dialogues. How can a writer defend his words when he is absent? Loss of presence leads inevitably to interpretation and thus to misinterpretation. When Dostoevsky and Nachev confront each other near the end of the novel, Nachev pertinently quotes Dostoevsky *at* Dostoevsky. Coetzee, the absent author, brings in another absent author and parodies the questions we might ask him. Do his books and his fictional characters lead us to understand him? Or do his character's words have their own weight outside of their author? Where is reality and where is fiction? Whose words count? Again, it seems that the one with the true control (or the delusion of control) is the reader, in this case Nachev. It is the reader, or the audience, who produce a judgement. His interpretation is one that is more important than the writer's. Nachev says:

> We are at the brink of a new age where we are free to think any thought. There is nothing we can't think! Surely, you know that. You must know it – it's what Raskolnikov said in your own book before he fell ill! (*MP* 201)

Indeed, it seems that the fictional Dostoevsky is aware of this loss of control on the part of the author.

> "You are mad, you don't know how to read," he mutters. But he has lost, and he knows it. He has lost because, in this debate, he does not believe himself. And he does not believe himself because he has lost. Everything is collapsing: logic, reason. (*MP* 201-2)

However, this loss of control comes about because as Nachev says we are free to think whatever we want. By bringing back the ghost of Dostoevsky in an embodied form, Coetzee shows that the distance between the storyteller and his 'displaced' written word, will forever remain. The only thing he can do, perhaps, is reveal to us the problem, through the fictional play itself.

In Coetzee's latest novels, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* this question of authorship again raises its head again but this time Coetzee's novelist is a fictional and ageing Australian author called Elizabeth Costello. It is in the first of these

novels, entitled *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, that Costello is introduced, and she appears as an already established novelist, who is known mainly for an early novel entitled *The House on Eccles Street* (1969), which is meant to be a retelling of story: it re-tells Joyce's novel *Ulysses* from the perspective of Leopold's wife, Molly Bloom. However, the illusion of her reality is created through textual references – the biography of a writer's life:

> Elizabeth Costello is a writer, born 1928, which makes her sixty-six years old, going on sixty-seven. She has written nine novels, two books of poems, a book on bird life, and a body of journalism. By birth she is Australian. She was born in Melbourne and still lives there, though she spent the years 1951-1963 aboard, in England and France. She has been married twice. She has two children, one by each marriage. (*EC* 1)

Here, Coetzee is parodying the biographer and reveals the writer's life as a kind of fiction. If narrative equals life and life is a story, then a writer's life is no more and no less than a story too. But it is a 'story' which is publicly authored by someone else and always in part constructed out of the stories that the writer has told. Costello's eight lessons, which return us to Benjamin's idea of "counsel", are the titles to a series of lectures that Costello is giving at various eminent universities around the world. The novel tells the story of Costello's travels to and from these lectures, whilst also giving the lectures themselves and including their responses.

What is immediately striking about Elizabeth Costello is that she reminds us of Byatt's fictional narratologist Gillian Perholt. Costello's lectures all have a point, although they are much more ambiguous than Perholt's, touching on philosophy, ethics, ecology, good and evil, and the nature of fiction. Much like Perholt, Costello is presented as an embodied 'speaking' voice, whose lectures or 'lessons' are given to live audiences around the world. In this sense, like Perholt, she becomes an embodied storyteller, telling stories to an embodied and present audience. However, Costello is not telling fairy-tales, but giving lessons. Her stories are fable-like in that both employ allegory, and they contain a moral. Described by her son who accompanies her as a "sibyl" (*EC* 30), it seems as if this ageing, frail and tired-looking woman who, significantly, is approaching the end of her life, now knows enough to shape-shift into the position of prophetess. In telling her prophecy,

Costello (like Mario Vargas Llosa's storyteller) returns to Kafka. She tells the story of Kafka's ape, which is yet another aping of her position as a lecturer in front of a discriminating audience. However, this is not the end of Coetzee's fictional play; this is where the novel and reality merge. Thus, although we are first introduced to Costello in the novel that bears her name, her story had already been told prior to publication. Let me now turn to look at this in more detail.

Elizabeth Costello first entered the world as a story told by a *very present and physical storyteller*, Coetzee himself, to a *real live audience*. In other words, although we might now recognise her as a character in the above novels, she did not first appear in the lines of a book as we might first assume. Nor did we first meet her at the book launch of the novel that bears her name. The story that Coetzee fabricates of Costello is one that moves between the real and the fictional world, from voice to text and back again. What is revealing about this for the case of Coetzee as storyteller is that Costello entered the world as a story told by an oral storyteller, and it was at least two years before we could read her story in published form.[16] In choosing to tell (rather than let people read) an unpublished story, Coetzee was thus stepping directly into the storyteller's shoes. In addition, this instance of Coetzee's 'storytelling' leads us to place him in the oral tradition as well as the written one.

In November 1996, Coetzee gave the first of these lectures at Bennington College as part of the Ben Belitt lectureship series. However, this is only the beginning of Coetzee's intriguing fictional play with authors, storytellers and fictions. What is perhaps more surprising is that this story was not one that the storyteller's audience was expecting at all. In fact, they were not even expecting to see Coetzee in the guise of 'storyteller', but rather in the guise of 'academic'. Similarly, a year later at a different venue and with an equally unexpectant audience, Coetzee did it again. On October 15 1997, Coetzee was due to give the first of two Tanner lectures on human values at Princeton University. What was curious was that the lecture itself was 'in disguise'. (We have already observed this once before, with

[16] The novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, was published in 2003.

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun*.) Derek Attridge, who was one of those present, gives this account of the event:

> Although I don't recall any audible reaction from the audience, there could be no doubt about the surprise produced by Coetzee's opening words, spoken in his quiet, grave voice: "He is waiting at the gate when her flight comes in." No preliminary explanation, no introduction to prepare us for this clearly fictional statement, couched in the third-person present tense [...] and for those of us who thought this might be the familiar lecturer's strategy of beginning with a quotation from another author, no break in the fictional tissue from henceforward to the end of the presentation. What made the event in which we were participating all the more disquieting was our gradual realization that it was being mirrored, in a distorted representation, in the fiction itself: the central character was revealed to be a novelist from the Southern Hemisphere who had been asked to give a lecture at an American college, and who had chosen to speak on the human treatment of animals. We listened to the lecture given within the fiction-itself a testing of the norms of academic debate. Coetzee's final words, spoken in his fiction by the college president, could have been spoken by the chair of the real lecture we were attending: "We look forward to tomorrow's offering".[17]

The audience began to realise that they themselves had become part of the fictional play. They were not only a mirroring of Elizabeth Costello's audience, but also a mirroring of the audience of distinguished members of the academy in Kafka's story.[18] Was Costello the ape? Was Coetzee? Had he simply learnt to talk, like the ape, in a language that we can understand and therefore forgotten his *ur*-language, the one that we presumably have also lost? Was this really the point of the lecture on 'Human Values': that our values have become 'inhuman'? The following day and with the following lecture, Attridge describes a similar scenario. He explains:

> Coetzee's second lecture, "The Poets and the Animals," did indeed follow the next day; it was a continuation of the story of Elizabeth Costello's visit to Appleton College, including a seminar led by the visiting novelist, entitled, as the audience were now primed to expect, "The Poets and the Animals."[19]

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[17] Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 193.

[18] The story by Kafka is called "A report to the Academy" and can be found online at this address: http://www.mala.bc.ca/%7Ejohnstoi/kafka/reportforacademy.htm

[19] Attridge, 193.

Indeed, although no one was to know it then – perhaps not even Coetzee himself – these lectures were only the beginning of a fictional game that moved both within and outside the realm of the book, a game disguised through 'story' that was to span nearly ten years and whose heroine was none other than the fictional writer, Elizabeth Costello.

I recently met Derek Attridge at a conference and I asked him to tell me a little more about these lectures. What came out of this discussion is that when the lectures were over, Coetzee continued to hide behind the mask of Costello. For example, when members of the audience began to ask him questions which required his opinions about specific issues raised in his story that were nevertheless pertinent to the topic, Coetzee again evaded giving a direct response. Instead of giving his own opinions, Coetzee chose to answer through the voice of Costello. In other words, his response did not begin with the words, "I agree, or I think..." but rather with words similar to "Well, Elizabeth Costello would say this... or would say that...". As the 'real' audience themselves soon realised, they were entangled in Coetzee's fictional frame and it is perhaps then no wonder that they felt uncomfortable. Aside from the questions raised in the story-lecture, what is fascinating about Coetzee's fictional play is that he chose to do this in the first place. To my mind, he was asserting his place as storyteller in the clearest way possible. As Coetzee's answers were always framed by a fiction, I would argue that this fact clearly reinforces Coetzee's insistence on his function as storyteller as opposed to academic, or the person of John Coetzee himself.

Not only did Coetzee disguise his views in a fiction, as did Rushdie with *Haroun*, but his fiction was first brought into the world by his very present and physical self: Coetzee effectively taking on the role of storyteller. Standing on the podium telling a story, Coetzee was no longer John Coetzee the writer, academic and critic, and his views were now in the mouth of another fictional being, one of his own creation, but nevertheless, no less real. He was parodying Costello parodying Kafka's ape. The question remained to be asked: where was Coetzee? What did *he* think? Perhaps the answer was in the novel itself: Coetzee avoided direct answers

but left the interpretation to the hands of the critics. This was a story after all and he was merely the storyteller.

As I have shown, albeit briefly, by the telling of the birth of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee's multiple disguises, as problematised in the figure of Elizabeth Costello, serve to question the role of the author as authority, juxtaposing this role against the role of the critic, to such a degree that another critic observes:

> Coetzee, the critic, may be said to have attempted to make his works critic-proof, or at least resistant to available parameters. His novels understand his critics better than the other way around, anticipating their readings and objections.[20]

Interestingly, in this sense, Coetzee's stance is again reminiscent of Vargas Llosa, Barth, and Byatt, whose writerly self-consciousness and awareness of critical discourses are inserted into the intricate makeup of the fictional text itself. In fact, Coetzee's fictional novelist is strangely reminiscent of A.S. Byatt who, as writer and critic, uses her multiple position(s) to comment on her fiction both inside and outside the text.[21] Moreover, Coetzee's placing of himself and Elizabeth on the podium, giving academic lectures places him in the role of storyteller as orator, which we saw implicitly in Rushdie's *Haroun* and in Byatt's "The Djinn" more directly.

Coetzee's avoidance of giving opinions which is reflected in these lectures is part of a wider reluctance about revealing anything about himself personally. In fact, despite his rising 'fame', in part fired by his winning the Nobel Prize, Coetzee has said in a rare interview, "I am sorry I do not enjoy interviews."[22] And as if to highlight this, the interviewer on this occasion does not quote anything else that Coetzee says, but rather explicates on how notoriously difficult it is to get Coetzee to actually speak. Coetzee's remark that he does not like interviews then, far from being a worthy excuse, seems simply to reveal that he is more comfortable 'telling stories' than 'telling the truth'. In fact, in another rare snippet of conversation, he is

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[20] Ian Glen, "Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and the Politics of Interpretations," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93.1 (1994): 25.

[21] In chapter one of his novel *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello is being interviewed, and is asked what she thinks of Byatt and Lessing, two writers who strangely resemble Elizabeth Costello in various ways. "We had A.S. Byatt here last fall [...] What do you think of A.S. Byatt, Ms Costello? [...] What do you think of Doris Lessing, Ms Costello?" (*EC* 6)

[22] Sampson, Lin. "Looking for the Heart of J.M. Coetzee." 2003. Web Edition: Online. The Daily Star. 16 October 2006. <http://www.thedailystar.net/2003/10/18/d31018210188.htm>.

reported to have said precisely that: that his written language "goes down very well on the page [but that] it doesn't go down so very well in ordinary conversation."[23] Although his stories more often than not reach us in written form, it is only through storytelling that he seems to say anything at all.[24]

It seems that with the birth of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee managed to achieve the disappearing-author trick and hide away forever. Unlike Byatt, whose voice seems to be constantly questioning, adding, changing and quantifying her beliefs not only about her fiction and how to read it, but also about literature in general, Coetzee rarely presents any 'voice' other than the 'fictional voice.' In this sense, his relationship to the storyteller is much more 'authentic' (if I can use this word). His insistence on 'fiction' to do the talking leaves us with an empty space for where the author is, and takes us back to the storyteller.

Returning to the novel, we find yet more of this intimate play on the relationship between the fictional voice and the real voice of the author. Even if we were not really part of the 'original' audience that Coetzee read his story-lecture to, we are still seeing the storyteller embodied in the person of Elizabeth Costello, speaking to her audience, and giving them a lecture that they were not expecting. Coetzee's novel is written in the third person and is told by an omniscient narrator. Unlike Byatt's "The Djinn", it is not a parody of a fairy-tale but a curious mix of biography and fantasy, and conventional novelistic realism, (echoed in the title of one of the first chapters and the first of Costello's lectures). The omniscient narrator shows that he is aware that the novel and its 'authors' have become self-conscious. This self-consciousness on the part of the author could be seen as the author's knowledge that his audience is aware of his presence as an 'embodied' and real speaker. Whether present or not, embodiment is thus seen as a real part of the story. The storyteller is there. As a result, his 'realism' becomes a parody of realism, and

[23] "Coetzee Says Children Shun Books for TV." 2003. Online Newspaper. The Sydney Morning Herald. 16 October 2006. <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/12/07/1070732065759.html>.

[24] In fact, I emailed Coetzee myself and asked whether it would be possible to interview Elizabeth Costello, but he replied, "Alas like her beloved Don Quixote, Elizabeth Costello would only appear to visit us between the lines of books." Coetzee, J. M. "Elizabeth Costello Interview." Ed. Areti Dragas. Email. Durham, 2006.

thus returns novelistic 'realism' to 'storytelling', and to the art of the storyteller and his performance. The narrator tells us:

> It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction. Breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion. However, unless certain scenes are skipped over we will be here all afternoon. The skips are not part of the text, they are part of the performance. (*EC* 16)

Finally, in *Slow Man* this break-up of the realist illusion or the disruption of the story comes in chapter thirteen of the novel, where Elizabeth Costello, a previously absent author and character, has up-until-then given no indication of her appearance. Indeed, critics have reacted negatively to this novel largely because of this disruptive frame-break and have not understood what Coetzee was trying to do by inserting Costello into a narrative that, in a sense, had no place for her. However, this is precisely Coetzee's point and he has left us plenty of 'clues' from which to interpret his fiction, if, indeed, interpretation will allow us to arrive at the 'truth' of his story. (This is another of Coetzee's questions.) *Slow Man* tells the story of a man whose life has been drastically changed by a bicycle accident that leaves him without a leg. Similar to Jim Crace's and Mario Vargas Llosa's novels, the novel opens with the image of the accident. Although we do not see the wound, we see the body, "flying through the air with the greatest of ease!" (*SM* 1), and then we are taken to a hospital bed (strangely reminiscent of the beginning of John Barth's novel *Last Voyage*) where we and Paul, learn the terrible news: the lost leg will be substituted by a prosthesis, which he subsequently refuses. Again, we have the image of the wounded storyteller, whose body, significantly, has become visible to him, as something 'other', a "thing" (*SM* 9), whose unfamiliarity he can only try to understand through trying to tell its story. In this sense, it is body that leads both Paul and the novelist to tell its story, not the other way round. The body is that which demands the story be told. The body demands and creates the storyteller.

The novel then continues to trace the events which followed the accident, until chapter thirteen when Costello appears. As I mentioned above, reviewers have

not really understood this intrusion of Costello in this novel, or rather, have not 'liked' it. Christopher Hope, for example, reviewing the book for *The Guardian*, says of Costello, "Extraordinary creation as she is, she is wearing thin. Perhaps Coetzee will let her go now,"[25] implying, of course, that she should not appear again in any other novel. *The Independent*'s D. J. Taylor was even more disheartened. At the beginning of the review, he says of *Slow Man*: "Never particularly eager to declare their intent, even as far back as the days of *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J. M. Coetzee's novels have lately turned horribly oblique" and finishes with the conclusion, "*Slow Man*'s code – if code it is – stays resolutely, and tantalisingly, uncrackable."[26] However, despite these reviews, I think that for the reader versed in Coetzee's writing, and equally versed in the history of the novel and its trends and conventions, Coetzee's authorial intrusion points back to earlier stories. In so doing, it returns us to the question of fictionality which surrounds the author and points us back to the storyteller.

The authorial intrusion coming in at chapter thirteen, reminds us of another contemporary novel, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969),[27] which was one of the first novels to highlight this authorial presence in a novel that was otherwise presented as written following the conventions of the Victorian novel. Fowles' authorial intrusion, in his famous chapter thirteen, significantly begins with the lines:

> I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (*FLW* 96)

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[25] Hope, Christopher. "Meeting of Lost Souls." Review. *The Guardian* Saturday September 17 2005.
[26] Taylor, D J. "Slow Man, by J.M. Coetzee: Codes for the Enigma of Survival." Book Review. *The Independent* 2 September 2005.
[27] Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. 1969. London: Jonathan Cape, 1996. Subsequent in text-quotations will be taken from this edition and will be abbreviated to *FLW*, followed by the page number.

In Coetzee's *Slow Man*, the authorial intrusion is taken one step further. Elizabeth Costello turns up at the main character's, Paul Rayement's, door. Here we see her ring the doorbell and ask to be let in. Significantly, before Paul Rayment sees her, he hears her voice through the "entryphone" (*SM* 79), speaking. Initially Paul does not understand who she is, but then recognises her vaguely by her name, as a famous novelist. She goes on to explain:

> You came to me. [...] In certain respects I am not in command of what comes to me. You came, along with the pallor and the stoop and the crutches and the flat that you hold on to so doggedly and the photograph collection and all the rest. (*SM* 81)

But Costello does not stop there. She asks her character, Paul, to tell her who he is (*SM* 80). She asks him to make "a stronger case for himself" (*SM* 82), to explain his presence in the story, to explain himself. Although in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles asserted the characters' independence from the author, it seems as if the readership still sees the characters as part of the author, as dependent on the author and his ideas and beliefs. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the authorial voice-Fowles says that the one thing that novelists share is:

> [...] *we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is*. Or was. This is why we cannot plan. We know the world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. (*FLW* 98)

In *Slow Man*, Paul not only questions Costello, but tries to assert his 'fictional' and created life as independent of her. Their separateness as well as their closeness to each other is highlighted in their subsequent conversation where Paul tells Costello, "you have no conception of who I really am" (*SM* 85) to which Costello replies ambiguously, "would that it were as simple as that" (*SM* 85). What is it that makes this relationship complicated? What is it that Paul and readers cannot understand?

In a very short essay entitled "Fictional Beings" Coetzee gives us his answer, which echoes Fowles' comments above and asserts his role as storyteller as opposed to authority-author. In this short commentary, he does not talk about 'novelists', but

about 'storytellers' and 'storytelling', which he describes as "a universal and important element of culture."[28] Coetzee explains what it means to "enter another mind", which, whether fictional or not, is still effectively something other than his own, and thus, arguably, a separate entity.[29] He says:

> Although it may be argued that stories give access to no one's mind but the storyteller's, the observable fact is that most stories present themselves as being about other people (and animals) and that most listeners gladly and eagerly give themselves over to the fiction (if fiction it be) that stories are not just about their tellers.
>
> A storyteller telling a story about a fox who thinks crafty thoughts and does crafty things knows, in some sense, that he has no access to the fox's mind, that he is merely performing an imitation of what a fox, as conventionally understood within human culture, would "think" if foxes could think. The same storyteller nevertheless finds it convenient to think to himself that he is telling his story from within the fox's mind.[30]

Coetzee then goes on to give an example using William Faulkner who, in entering the minds of his characters, knows that they are not real, but nevertheless "inhabits" them for a while in order to bring them into fictional (but also real) existence. Finally, Coetzee concludes, commenting on the position of the storyteller rather than that of the novelist:

> In the account preferred by storytellers, including Faulkner, an account that we willingly entertain when we read or listen to stories, storytellers (a) inhabit real beings and represent them from the inside, and also (b) by this process create them out of nothing and turn them into real beings. It is a paradoxical position, but it does appear to be a position of some importance to human societies, which, in a paradoxical movement of their own, both (a) entertain it, and (b) dismiss it as nonsense. [31]

In other words, Coetzee's position on the storyteller is that he creates worlds and with them fictional beings that although *not* alive, become *real*. Coetzee's masks then are a real illusion. What he tells us is a truth that may come about by an absent author-novelist, but it is still a storyteller that tells it.

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[28] J. M. Coetzee, "Fictional Beings," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 10.2 (2003): 134.
[29] This reminds us of Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and his arguments vis-à-vis Dostoevsky's characters which, as I revealed above, Coetzee also curiously used in one of his novels.
[30] Coetzee, "Fictional Beings" 134.
[31] Coetzee, "Fictional Beings" 134.

"What am I going to do without you?" (*SM* 263) Costello asks Paul at the end of the story. He replies: "That's up to you, Elizabeth. There are plenty of fish in the ocean so I hear. But as for me, as for now: goodbye" (*SM* 263). The ocean of stories has more fish in the sea for the many fishermen, or storytellers, that are prepared to catch them. It is in this spirit, the spirit of exploration and endeavour that I have pursued this project: to return the storyteller to contemporary criticism as well as to fiction.

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