

Reality, Imagination and Possible Worlds in American Postmodern Fiction – Barthelme’s Short Story “The Dragon”

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Abstract:

It seems it is especially postmodern literature that undermines the belief in a clear and direct relationship between the physical world and the language depicting it. Quite recently, especially the possible worlds theories and their application in literary theory have tried to explain this relationship. Analyzing the narrative techniques used by Donald Barthelme in his short story *The Dragon*, I will try to point out the way postmodern fiction and theories of possible worlds (Harsaw (Hrushovski), Doležel, Ronen) generate the aesthetic principles creating various levels of reality and their function in a postmodern literary work. In keeping with Lubomír Doležel’s, Benjamin Harsaw (Hrushovski)’s, and Ruth Ronen’s views, the literary fictional world is understood in this paper as a world different and separate from the real, physical, actual world. In this paper I show how various modes of representation (realistic, fantastic, postmodern) along with Barthelme’s depiction of the “transworld” identities of his characters (a dragon), metafictional elements and parody point to a new sensibility of the postmodern period and a difference between the past and contemporary forms of literary representation. Barthelme’s use of postmodern narrative techniques such as self-reflexiveness, metafiction and depiction of transgeneric and transworld identities of his characters not only aestheticize his short story, but also emphasize the difference between the real, actual and the literary fictional world.

Literary works are often considered to be the representations of actual, physical reality, experience, and phenomena from the real world. Literature re-presents such experience and phenomena necessarily through language, which has various functions. While in everyday, general language the communication function dominates, it is especially the aesthetic function which must dominate in a literary work so that it can fulfill its status of a literary work. The language of literature, however, is based and works on different principles from those of the real, physical world. However mimetic and realistic the literary work is, there is never a mechanical transfer of the external data from a real life to a human mind to be further literally represented by language, but this transfer is based on the interaction between the human mind’s perception of the world, the language representing it, and the socio-historical and cultural context a perceiver of a literary work is influenced by. In Benjamin Harsaw (Hrushovski)’s view:

Works of literature convey meanings and meaning complexes as well as rhetorical and aesthetic import[...]However, the experience and interpretation of literary texts are not a matter of language alone: language in literature can be understood only as imbedded in fictional constructs, no matter how partial or unstable these may be. On the other hand, the fictional constructs in literary texts are mediated through language alone [...] (Harsaw (Hrushovski) 1984:227).

Harsaw (Hrushovski) further argues that “the problem of fiction and fictional ‘worlds’ cannot be isolated from the problem of language in literature” (Harsaw (Hrushovski) 1984:229). I would argue that it is figurative meaning especially which creates the aesthetic function and the ontological status of a work of art. A literary work creates what Lubomír Doležel calls an ontological homogeneity which confirms the specificity of literature and its difference from the real, physical world. In Doležel’s view, “Ontological homogeneity epitomizes the sovereignty of fictional worlds” (Doležel 1988:483).

As he further argues, “Fictional worlds of literature have a specific character by being embodied in literary texts and by functioning as cultural artifacts” (482). This view is confirmed by Ruth Ronen who, in her work *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, argues that “A fictional world can be described as a unique system separate from, although dependent on the cultural-historical reality in which it is created and with which it holds more or less obvious affinities” (Ronen 1994:15).

Ronen comments on various views on the autonomy of the fictional world typical of literature and argues that

[...] the autonomy of fictional worlds implies that fictional worlds are ontologically and structurally distinct: facts of the actual world have no a priori ontological privilege over facts of the fictional world. The fictional world system is an independent system whatever the type of fiction constructed and the extent of its drawing on our knowledge of the actual world. Since fictional worlds are autonomous, they are not more or less fictional according to degrees of affinity between fiction and reality: facts of the actual world are not constant reference points for the facts of fiction (Ronen 1994:12).

According to these views then, the literary world is fictional, specific and different from the real physical and actual world but cannot be understood or interpreted without the interaction with and knowing of this world. The actual world creates a model for the construction of the fictional literary world (Ronen, 1994; Doležel, 1988) that requires “semiotic channels” (Doležel 1988:485) to interpret and understand the actual world. Ronen further points out the problem of the difference between the actual and the fictional, literary world,¹ the difference between possible worlds theory in philosophy and in literary theory, as well as the difference between possible and fictional worlds. In her view,

[...] literary theorists treat fictional worlds as possible worlds in the sense that fictional worlds are concrete constellations of states of affairs which, like possible worlds, are non-actualized in the world. Yet, it is obvious that possible worlds are indeed non-actualized but actualizable [...], whereas fictional worlds are non-actualized in the world but also non-actualizable, belonging to a different sphere of possibility and impossibility altogether. The possible construction of a fictional world has therefore nothing to do with abstract logical possibilities of occurrence (Ronen 1994:51).

Ronen then suggests that “it would make more sense to say that fictional states of affairs are actualized and actualizable in the fictional world, which reflects the different logico-ontological domain to which fiction belongs” (Ronen 1994:51). In her view, “Literary worlds are possible not in the sense that they can be viewed as possible alternatives to the actual state of affairs, but in the sense that they ‘actualize’ the world which is analogous with, derivative of, or contradictory to the world we live in” (Ronen 1994:50).

Doležel, Harshaw (Hrushovski) and Ronen thus emphasize the specificity, autonomy, and ontological homogeneity of the world of literature and fiction, which is an idea that is not entirely new since the Formalist critics, albeit in the field of literary theory and criticism, implied this idea as early

¹In her view, “When a text is considered to be fictional, its set of propositions are read according to ‘fictional world-constructing conventions’ and it is made to signify by observing the set of ‘fictional world-constructing conventions’[...]From the former set of conventions follows the ontological separation of fiction from actuality, and from the second set it follows that, granted this separation, the domains constituting the fictional world (characters and objects, events, time and space) obey modes of organization that are unique to fiction” (Ronen 1994:11).

as in the early 20th century, although in a different context. A fictional literary world is multiple, however, and uses various modes and forms of representation from the realistic, mimetic to fantastic. However different the modes of representation, they all form a certain ontological homogeneity typical of the world of fiction. Doležel argues that

There is no justification for a double semantics of fictionality, one for fictions of the 'realistic' type and another one for 'fantastic' fictions. The worlds of realistic literature are no less fictional than the worlds of fairy-tale or science fiction (Doležel 1988:483).

Despite their ontological homogeneity within the world of fiction, I would argue that various ontological levels, modes and styles of representation within a literary work play different roles not only in the representation of reality, but especially in the creation of meaning and the representation of the variety of human experience. Especially in postmodern fiction, the boundaries in literary fictional representation between the verifiable, actual and the fantastic, imaginary and invented, between the mimetic and the fantastic, and between truth and lie are erased deliberately and produce the aesthetics of multiplicity, plurality and uncertainty. Although all characters, settings, times and actions belong to the homogeneous and separate fictional world of a literary work, various modes of representation express the heterogeneity of this world as represented by a higher or lesser degree of semblance between the real, physical, actual world and the world of fiction. Many characters and events reminiscent of historical characters and events often acquire a transgeneric and transworld identity by oscillating among different fictional worlds in postmodern literary works.² This narrative strategy of the depiction of characters emphasizes the fictional nature of a literary work, its specificity and distance from the real world. Despite this, however, if a literary work depicts actually existing historical personalities, however mimetic, probable and believable the representation of them may be, they can never be identified with their actually existing prototypes, and they are only linguistically reconstructed versions of them. Seen in the context of the possible-world semantics and Doležel's views,

Possible-world semantics correctly insists that fictional individuals cannot be identified with actual individuals of the same name [...] Tolstoy's Napoleon or Dickens's London are not identical with the historical Napoleon or the geographical London. Fictional individuals are not dependent for their existence and properties on actual prototypes. It is irrelevant for the fictional Robin Hood whether a historical Robin Hood existed or not. To be sure, a relationship between the historical Napoleon and all the possible fictional Napoleons has to be postulated [...] The identity of fictional individuals is protected by the boundary between the actual and the possible worlds (Doležel 1988:482-483).

Since one of the basic features of fictional possible worlds is their incompleteness (Harsaw (Hrushovski), 1984; Ronen, 1994; Doležel, 1988), there is no way to claim probability or improbability or to distinguish between truth and fabrication. That is why the fictional possible world creates what Harsaw (Hrushovski) calls the internal field of reference (IFR)³ specific only for literature, and only within the ontological status of which the truth can be deduced and verified.

²In the book quoted below, Brian Mc Hale comments on the transworld identity of characters in postmodern fiction (85-86). In his view, "There is an ontological scandal when a real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters," or when "two real-world figures intreract with purely fictional characters" (Mc Hale 1987: 85).

³In Harsaw (Hrushovski)'s view, "A Field of Reference (FR) is a large universe containing a multitude of crisscrossing and interrelated 'frs' [frames of reference, note by the author of this paper] of various kinds. We may isolate such Fields as the USA, the Napoleonic Wars, Philosophy, the 'world' of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the world today, etc." (1984:231). Harsaw (Hrushovski) then specifies the notion of the Internal Field of Reference (IFR) as specific for literary texts. He also mentions several characteristics typical of it such as the idea that "The IFR is modeled upon[...] the 'real,' physical and social human world," that it is a "multidimensional semiotic object," etc. (1984:236).

As I have mentioned, postmodern literary works use various forms and modes of representation to emphasize the difference between the real, actual and fictional worlds and the semantic, linguistic and ontological self-sufficiency of this world. In Donald Barthelme's fiction, especially in his novels such as *Snow White*, *The Dead Father*, and *The King*, many characters acquire transgeneric, hybrid and trans-world identity. They cross the boundaries between the past and the present, between the real and fantastic, imaginary worlds. Fairy-tale characters from famous fairy tales live in the contemporary world in Barthelme's novel *Snow White*, medieval characters fight and cooperate with contemporary historical personalities (King Arthur and the former Polish President Walesa in *The King*), and dead characters acquire a fairy tale and fantastic status by the author's eradication of the idea of physical death and, consequently, by these characters' living after death and acting as living beings (*The Dead Father*). The same strategy of depiction of transworld and transgeneric characters is used in Barthelme's short story *The Dragon* from his book of posthumously-published short stories *Donald Barthelme: The Teaching of Don B.* (1992). In this short story, the basic narrative situation is based on the juxtaposition of the real, actual world, perhaps what could be labelled as the mimetic world, and the fairy tale world that is further extended and problematized by metafictional comments about them. These metafictional comments create a distance from the naïve belief in "semantic mimeticism" and makes readers realize the difference between the real, actual and fictional world of literature. At the very beginning of this short story, Barthelme launches a sophisticated complex of multiple worlds and universes. A dragon, a purely fairy-tale and imaginary character from an invented fantastic world, comes to the realistic, mimetic and consumerist environment of a technologically-advanced country in order to die voluntarily. This can be seen in the following extract:

One day a wan and scruffy dragon came to the city looking for a disease. He had in mind ending his life, which he felt to be tedious, unsatisfactory, tax-troubled, lacking in purpose. Looking up diseases in the Yellow Pages, and finding none, he decided to enroll himself in a hospital. At St. Valentine's, he approached a guard and asked the way to the No Hope Ward. Directed to the proper floor, he found there a bed newly made, whitewashed with sheets. He climbed in and turned on the television set [...] A nurse motored in.

'What have you got?' Asked the dragon, thinking of diseases.

'Everything,' said the nurse. 'Eclampsia to milk leg. There is nothing we do not have. Our Intensive Despair Unit is the envy of the profession' (Barthelme 1992:215).

This situation evokes a series of logical improbabilities that imply various connotations. The fairy-tale character of a dragon and fairy-tale sensibility supported by a fairy-tale formula are extracted from the fairy-tale setting of magic forests, princes, beautiful ladies and fantasy, but here they are integrated in a contemporary technological and commercial setting. As can be seen above, the dragon seems to be familiar with the nature of such a society as well as with its pragmatism and commercialism, and adopts the role of a customer, which implies absurd connotations. The boundaries between different worlds, that is the seemingly actual and realistic and the fairy-tale and fantastic, are thus eradicated by Barthelme's narrative trick. A dragon who could formerly be accepted only as a different, imaginary and non-existent being by the people from the actual world and who could be understood as working only within his fantastic and imaginary world of a fairy tale, is now accepted as real, existent, non-imagined. He is cast in the role of a customer, which both he and the nurse accept. The idea of acceptance, now of a different world sensibility by both parties (characters) implies the changing nature of contemporary culture and sensibility. The parodic dragon does not fight and produce evil, but must accept the rules of a different, that is realistic, mimetic and commercial world to execute his will and mission. Thus his acceptance of a different, pragmatic, mimetic and actual world within the fictional field of reference is presented as natural, as well as the nurse's understanding of this character. The nurse representing the actual, realistic, mimetic and pragmatic world does not express fear, anger or surprise, and does not see the dragon as a fairy-tale character but without surprise, as a customer. Thus the transgeneric and transworld criss-crossing and the difference between these characters are eradicated by both characters' acceptance of their commercial relationship, which is accepted as natural. Because the dragon is, however, still living, the nurse's

inability to recognize any difference between the realistic (mimetic) and fairy-tale worlds evokes, on the symbolic level, the idea of death of imagination and fantasy in the contemporary pragmatic and consumerist world. Although the dragon's wish to die, on the one hand, supports the idea of the symbolic death of imagination in the contemporary world, on the other hand the dragon's wish to die may also indicate his weariness and inability to cope with his fairy-tale world, the imagination it represents as well as the changing status of his role in the modern world. In addition, the dragon's wish for physical death may also represent a wish for the death of the material, the physical and the recuperation of the imagination and fantasy understood as a positive force, and the creativity which the contemporary world suffers a lack of. Despite the dragon's wish to die, the narrator argues that

The hospital refused to give him a disease. After three days, he's been offered not so much as a nip of pneumonia.

'I trusted you,' he said to his nurse.

'I thought for a while we had something worked out with the Kidney Committee,' she said. 'But when they discovered the precise nature of your undertaking... ' (Barthelme 1994:215)

What seems to be quite important about this extract is its rendering of the incompleteness of meaning expressed in the last sentence, or the motivation of the doctors in refusing to give him a disease so that he can die. Despite the health care system's commercial nature, the doctors' refusal to give the dragon a disease may indicate either ethical (a real being intending to die voluntarily) or, more symbolically, artistic meta-motivation (the rejection of the dragon's death may symbolically indicate rejection of the death of imagination and fantastic world). In the latter case the symbolic meaning is generated and supported by other metafictional elements, that is the elements that create another ontological level within the fictional world, which is the system of the purely fictional world that readers are supposed to realize. In the following extract, the dragon thinks of various ways he could die: "[...] the dragon left the hospital. Many fine diseases passed through his mind— rabies, gout, malaria, rinderpest. Or, he thought suddenly, I could get myself slain by a hero" (Barthelme 1992:215-216).

There are several implications in this extract:

1. the juxtaposition of the actual world and its imitation through mimetic representation is jolted by the reference to the fictional world (a hero), which indicates the dragon's symbolic wish to return to the fairy tale, that is to his imaginary world where he alone can be killed (by a hero) and die;
2. this extract points out the incompatibility of these two worlds and the ontological difference between them;
3. the return to the world of fairy tale and fantasy symbolically expresses not a death wish, but a recuperation of fantasy and imagination which is missing in the contemporary rational, pragmatic, commercial and consumerist world.

In contrast to the nurse and doctors, who extrapolate the dragon from his fairy-tale world by granting him the position of a customer, which makes him part of their pragmatic, rational and mimetic world, another character representing order, pragmatism and logic, that is the soldier, the Colonel of Sanitation, recognizes the dragon's status and his role as a character incompatible with the realistic, actual world. He shouts at the dragon: "You there!" he cried. 'Ho, dragon, stop and patter for a bit. Quickly, quickly—haven't got all day!" (Barthelme 1992:216). And he further tells the dragon,

"But you—you have a strange aspect. What kind of a thing are you? Are you disposable? Biodegradable? Ordinary citizen out for a stroll? Looking for work? Member of a conspiracy? Vegetable? Mineral? Two-valued? Hostile to the national interest of the Department of Sanitation? Thrill-crazed kid? Object d'art? Circus in town?" (Barthelme 1992:216).

The colonel sees the dragon's status of both real, physical and fairy-tale, imaginary character as incompatible with this world since his rational thinking and obsession with rules and classification do not allow him to justify the dragon's position of a "real being" in this universe and, identifying his imaginary character, the colonel tells the dragon that "You suffer, however, from a sort of general meaninglessness. "Since the thirteenth century"" (Barthelme 1992:217).

This statement supports the metafictional dimension of Barthelme's short story by suddenly shifting to a world extracted from both the actual and mimetic fictional worlds by the reference to the imaginary and fictional world of literature rather than to the actual world and the external field of reference (Harsaw (Hrushovski)).⁴ Thus the above extract does not point to the dragon as an actual or mimetic character, but as a fictional character, and to his role in both conventional fiction and real, actual life. In the fictional world, the dragon becomes meaningless because of the existence of other forms of representation and different sensibilities rendering them; and in the real world too because of the growing rationality, pragmatism and commercialism suppressing intuition, fantasy and imagination. Despite the Colonel's pragmatic nature and thinking, however, in dialogue with the dragon he accepts that dragons exist (Barthelme 1992:216) but, in keeping with his pragmatism and logic, he suggests a clear and identifiable place for the dragon by classifying and granting him the official status of endangered species, by which the dragon acquires an official, logical and rational position in the mimetic and pragmatic world. Thus no position of the dragon in these different worlds is satisfactory. As an old-fashioned, meaningless and weary fairy-tale character he has to cross the boundary and invade the mimetic world, its contemporary sensibility and rules to die and thus to change his status of an old-fashioned and traditional character. In this new and pragmatic world, by accepting the its rules and system of working, he does not become different, but the same and invisible, uniform, classified into a certain position, and thus unable to function as a symbol of imagination, creativity and fantasy in the pragmatic and mimetic worlds influenced by rationality and commercialism. Finally, the narrator observes that "The dragon [...] bought a two-dollar lottery ticket and decided to stop smoking" (Barthelme 1992:217).

Although the dragon does not die literally or physically but stays alive, quite paradoxically this does not mean the symbolic victory of imagination over pragmatism, but possibly its death in the pragmatic, mimetic and commercial world. The dragon's role as a different and imaginary character is eradicated by his full integration into both actual and mimetic (within the fictional world) worlds by accepting their rules and sensibility (buying the lottery ticket) which is emphasized by the pun in the last sentence above. The other, symbolic meaning of "stop smoking" means the end of one of the most typical activities of a dragon as a fairy-tale character, that is belching fire and smoke.

In his short story *The Dragon*, Donald Barthelme juxtaposes three basic modes of fictional representation of actual reality, that is the realistic (mimetic), fairy-tale (fantastic, imaginary) and metafictional, which overlap and thereby emphasize the separateness and specificity of the fictional world and literature, the aesthetic function of a literary work, and its difference from the actual world. Barthelme emphasizes the difference between actual reality and its linguistic (literary) representation by his use of self-reflexive and metafictional elements. His characters' transworld and transgeneric identities and his use of parody and irony point out not only the rationality, pragmatism, commercialism and consumerism, but also the lack of imagination in the contemporary world as well as the inability of people to value it. The Dragon's acceptance of the rules of the actual (physical) world, characteristic for its rationality, pragmatism, commercialism and consumerism, seems symbolically to mean his acceptance of this world and the mimetic representation of reality. This is supported by a character from the seemingly real, actual and physical world, that is the nurse, who accepts and treats the dragon as real (-istic), physical and rational character. On the other hand, the nurse's inability to identify the dragon as a fictional character symbolically implies a lack of imagination in the contemporary world. This meaning is further complicated by Barthelme's depiction of the dragon's wish to die in the physical and the realistic world, incompatible with his own. His wish to die by the literalization of death in the real, actual world expresses a symbolic alert to the people in the contemporary world to realize the death of imagination and fantasy in their pragmatic world. At

⁴ Harsaw (Hrushovski) understands External Fields of Reference (ExFR) as "any FRs[fields of reference, note by J. Kusnir] outside of a given text: the real world in time and space, history, a philosophy, ideologies, views of human nature, other texts" (Harsaw (Hrushovski) 1984:243).

the same time, this parodic recontextualization of death in a world different from the dragon's (that is realistic, mimetic, and pragmatic) may also imply the death of traditional literary representation of reality as generated by traditional writing (fairy tales). Barthelme's use of self-reflexive and metafictional elements (the dragon's comments on his death caused by a fairy-tale hero, for example) then points to the creation of a changed status of both the dragon and the kind of writing the contemporary period requires, that is a postmodern form of writing expressing a critical but also playful distance from any authoritarian and unitary vision of the world, as expressed in the final semantically ambiguous sentence about the dragon deciding to "stop smoking" (Barthelme 1992:217).

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