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Subversion of the Image of the Hard-boiled Gumshoe in Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942*

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Abstract
The present article aims to analyze Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942* (1977) in the light of the genre of Metaphysical Detective Story. As a postmodern genre, Metaphysical Detective Story alters the customary features of traditional detective stories in order to go beyond simple murder mysteries and become a literary phenomenon which examines the questions of being. The central questions of the article are: what makes Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon* a metaphysical detective story? What are the functions and implications of metaphysical elements in the novel? To answer these questions, first the characteristic features of metaphysical detective stories are introduced and then they are contextualized in the novel. Focusing on such concepts as 'parodic detective,' 'dreams,' and 'circular narrative,' the present research demonstrates that the novel subverts the standard tropes of hard-boiled detective stories and becomes a philosophical novel which portrays a bleak world and a failed hero. It also shows that as a postmodern novel, Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon* deals with life in the postmodern era and explores the questions of being and knowing in the contemporary world, characterized by uncertainty and doubt regarding existence.

Keywords
Richard Brautigan, postmodern novel, parodic detective, metaphysical detective story, uncertainty

1. Introduction
The present article traces the themes and features of metaphysical detective story in Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon*. It endeavors to answer the following research questions: Can we find the characteristic elements and features of metaphysical detective stories in *Dreaming of Babylon*? What is the significance of these elements, and to what end they have been used? To answer these questions, the researchers focus on such motifs

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and notions as the image of the protagonist as a failed parodic detective, dreaming, and the circularity of the narrative in the novel, and the absence of narrative closure are explored and examined. In the pages to come, first metaphysical detective story, as a postmodern sub-genre, is briefly defined and then several relevant facts and details concerning the composition and publication of *Dreaming of Babylon* are supplied, as is a succinct synopsis of the novel. In the literature review section, previous studies about the genre of Metaphysical Detective Stories and Richard Brautigan's novel are briefly examined and discussed. The following section, "The Image of the Parodic Detective," discusses the image of the detective/protagonist in traditional detective stories as well as the reasons that make Card, the protagonist of the novel, a pathetic anti-hero. In "The Function of Dreams in *Dreaming of Babylon*," the concept of 'dreaming' is taken into account. As we shall see, dreaming is a significant motif in the narrative; it reflects both the protagonist's desire to escape from reality and his yearnings to transform facts into fiction and to create his personalized stories and adventures. The last analytic section, titled "The Circular Narrative of the Novel," explores the lack of closure and the circularity of the plotline in the novel. Uncertainty, which is caused by the writer's aversion from solving the mystery, and circular narrativity, which posits the detective right where he started at the outset of the novel, are the key subjects of the section.

1.1 Metaphysical Detective Story

The term 'metaphysical detective story' was first used by Howard Haycraft in 1941 to describe the philosophical significance of G. K. Chesteron's book series *Father Brown*. Three decades later, William V. Spanos and Michael Holquist further developed the idea and accentuated the philosophical aspects of the genre. Holquist, for instance, wrote that metaphysical detective stories are different from traditional detective fiction in that they become complex stories which do not have 'neat' endings and no answer is provided to the questions raised by the ambiguities in the novel. He contended that unlike traditional detective stories, metaphysical detective stories raise complicated questions about the mysteries of life rather than investigate mysteries of a murder (153). Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (1991) introduced the genre of metaphysical detective story for the first time. In the preface, they define the genre by writing that "A metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing" (2). They list certain features that can be typically found in these postmodern stories:

> (1) the defeated sleuth, whether he be an armchair detective or a private eye; (2) the world, city, or text as labyrinth; (3) the purloined letter, embedded text, *mise-en-abyme*, textual constraint, or text as object; (4) the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence; (5) the missing person, the "man of the crowd," the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity; and (6) the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation. (ibid. 8)

Metaphysical detective fiction is, therefore, a relatively unexplored genre which turns the otherwise entertaining detective fiction (with its characteristic sense of finality, poetic justice, and unknotting) into a philosophical and at times perplexing narrative which poses and examines ontological questions about existence and meaning. Novels categorized under this relatively new genre often deal with something more than what appears at the surface or the revelation of the crime and the criminal, as they become explorations of the postmodern condition, the human psyche, and in most cases, depictions of the absurdity of existence.

1.2 *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942*: Composition and Publication

In the early seventies, Richard Brautigan decided to experiment with different literary genres, and he "vowed to write a novel each year, each novel of a different subgenre" (Boyer 10). Through these experiments, Brautigan explored various literary forms, often a hybrid or amalgamation of different genres, thereby pushing the boundaries of the borrowed forms and blending "existing genres in a pastiche style to map out a means by which new narrative forms could be configured" (Mason 49). *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942* is the fourth and the last genre book Brautigan wrote, as he never finished the five genre books he had originally intended to publish (Hjortsberg 509). The book was not a critical success, and many critics panned the novel. Joe Flaherty, for instance, asserts that "Brautigan delivers a litany of screwups and lame jokes" or Rob Swigart, in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, describes the novel as "a cotton candy souffle, pretty to look at but not very wholesome" (ibid. 508). However, *Dreaming of Babylon* gradually became a bit of a cult after the writer's death, especially among those who shared his interest in man's imagination as a means of liberation.

The novel tells the story of C. Card, an incompetent and good for nothing private detective who has not had a case in months. He struggles for subsistence and he keeps borrowing money from anyone he knows and anyone who is sympathetic enough to help a loser. He has not paid the rent for several months and his landlord, an old lady, hardly misses a chance to taunt him and tell him off. Card finally finds a client who insists that he must carry a loaded gun all the time. He initially tries to find bullets for his gun, but

to no avail. Finally, he manages to borrow a loaded gun from Peg-leg, a friend who works at a morgue. In the meantime, Card spends his time dreaming of Babylon; there, he is treated as a hero and he can do whatever he wants to. At long last, he meets his client – a woman whom he only calls 'the Blonde.' She is a mysterious woman who drinks beer like truckers and who is always accompanied by a bodyguard whom Card calls 'the Neck'. The Blonde asks Card to steal a corpse from the morgue and meet her at the graveyard at midnight. While Card is on his way to the morgue to make a deal with Peg-leg to get the corpse, he sees two men carrying something from the morgue to their car. He gets the corpse as the Blonde had requested, the body of a beautiful girl, and puts it in the trunk of the car. He is hampered by a group who was also trying to steal the corpse and he soon discovers that those men were also hired by the Blonde for the same purpose. He puts the corpse in his refrigerator and tries to meet the Blond to ask for an explanation and more money. There he finds Sergeant Rink and the Blonde, but the Blonde explains that Rink has got nothing against her. The Blonde, the Neck and Sergeant Rink leave the graveyard for a pub. Card finds his mother in the graveyard next to his father's gravestone. Card and his mother leave the graveyard; on the way home, Card admits that he is right where he started – only now he has a corpse in his refrigerator.

1.3 Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's edited volume *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (1991) is the most comprehensive book written on the genre of metaphysical detective story, as they define the genre for the first time, and identify certain characteristic features that are often found in these postmodern detective stories. The authors, then, proceed to offer examples of readings of both classic and modern detective stories that they now identify as metaphysical. Since the present article is a genre study, it makes use of Merivale and Sweeney's proposed keywords and ideas to analyze Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon*, and the article explores and analyzes the mentioned features of the genre in the novel. Therefore, Merivale and Sweeney's book becomes the base for the theoretical framework of the present research and helps one understand how the novel (and ultimately the genre) raises questions "about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge" (Merivale & Sweeney 1).

Apart Merivale and Sweeney's edited volume, the first lengthy study of metaphysical detective stories can be traced back to Stefano Tani's *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American & Italian Fiction* (1984), in which he examined, for the first time, the emergence of a new literary genre he called 'Anti-Detective Novel'. In what was his PhD. Dissertation, Tani argued that this newly-emerged genre seems to be the postmodern treatment of traditional detective stories, especially the

American hard-boiled novels. He believed that Anti-Detective Novel is a transgression or a mutation of the traditional detective stories (41) – a genre which subverts the features of the traditional detective stories, and the most important aspect of this postmodern genre is that it denies, nullifies or parodies the solution, or the narrative closure, which is of utmost importance in classic and standard examples (ibid. 42).

Also important is Antoine Dechêne's *Detective Fiction and the Problem of Knowledge Perspectives on the Metacognitive Mystery Tale* (2018), which studies the emergence and development of the detective fiction and examines metaphysical detective stories which, he argues, offer "a multiplicity of motifs—the overwhelming presence of chance, the unfulfilled quest for knowledge, the urban stroller lost in a labyrinthine text that generate a vast array of epistemological and ontological uncertainties explored by the genre" (3). While Dechêne's coined term for the genre, 'metacognitive mystery tale', raised many eyebrows, his study of the genre, especially his analysis of Allan Poe's stories purportedly as the first examples of metaphysical detective fiction, is ground breaking in the sense that he is the first critic to contend that metaphysical detective stories existed even before what later came to be known as postmodern literature.

Two Ph. D. dissertations, Richard Swope's *Metaphysical Detectives and Postmodern Spaces, or the Case of the Missing Boundaries* (2001) and Yuan Honggeng's *From Conventional to Experimental: The Making of Chinese Metaphysical Detective Fiction* (1999), have been dedicated to the study of the genre. While the former focuses on the concept of 'space' and postmodern elements in detective fiction, the latter offers a comprehensive overview of Chinese metaphysical detective stories. The importance of these dissertations lies in the fact that they both recognized the genre as a distinct narrative form in its early years and offered compelling and inclusive definitions and interpretations.

One of the few articles on Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon* is Mark Hedborn's "Lacan and Postmodernism in Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon*" (1994). In the article, Hedborn dubs Brautigan's novel as "schizophrenic, a parody of itself, a pastiche tenuously glued together by an ironic treatment of the detective novel genre" (102), and argues that the novel can be read as "a simple parody of the detective novel or film of the 1940s". To analyze *Dreaming of Babylon*, Hedborn focuses on Lacan's ideas, such as the 'dream stage,' and concludes that *Dreaming of Babylon* is merely a continued dream out of a series of Pulp stories in which the protagonist sees himself as the hero and makes up for his life as an out-of-luck detective.

In his article, "Stepsons of Sam: Re-Visions of the Hard-Boiled Detective Formula in Recent American Fiction" (1983), Larry E. Grimes studies the ways Richard Brautigan blends different genres and turns his novel into "the playground of the fictive self" (536). Although Grimes does not approach *Dreaming of Babylon* as a postmodern version of the genre, he asserts that in *Dreaming of Babylon* "Both form and theme in *Dreaming* stretch the formula beyond its usual shape by making it clear that there is a tension between the facts of life and the meaning of life" (ibid. 538).

In his "Depoliticization from Within: Not Taking a Fall with Richard Brautigan" (1993), James Murray Miclot writes about the importance of daydreaming and fantasy in *Dreaming of Babylon*. He believes that the dreams of the ancient Babylon actually bring about epiphanies, to such an extent that "each illumination brings a reconfiguration of Card's identity, drawn from dreams of instant celebrity status" (21). He argues that the protagonist simply needs fantasy to cope with all the failures he has experienced in his real life: "in every real world undertaking Card seems to run through the same cycle ... and each real world failure becomes the stimulus for another imaginary overcompensation" (ibid. 26). While all of these studies brilliantly examine Richard Bautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon* either as an unconventional 'genre book' or a postmodern novel, they fail to analyze it within the framework of metaphysical detective fiction in an attempt to realize how and to what end it subverts the characteristic features of hard-boiled detective stories. Also absent in these critical commentaries is the exploration of complex ontological and epistemological questions regarding existence and life in uncertainty-ridden postmodern condition.

2. Discussion

2.1 The Image of the Parodic Detective

The title of Brautigan's novel, *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942*, creates certain expectations as regards the generic conventions reserved for typical detective novels. Even the original cover of the book, featuring a tough-looking sleuth surrounded by other characters and the corpse of a beautiful woman underneath his picture, suggests that the story should not radically differ from the old '40s' hard-boiled detective narratives. However, readers will soon be disillusioned as they will realize that what they are reading is not actually "A Private Eye Novel." To begin with the plot, strange enough, it does not involve any murder or any other kind of crime being committed, ironically except the one that the detective, who is supposed to be the hero, commits. The difference between the novel and the traditional private eye novels can also be seen in the personality of Card, the detective. Here, instead of a typical tough, smart, arrogant, or resourceful private eye, we have a parodic and pathetic version of the old traditional detectives. As a coward and a loser, he is easily and constantly manipulated by people around him. He knows that he will fail, even before the story begins. His tone in the first page of the novel, where he talks about his poverty and his previous failures, is nothing like that of a triumphant and confident detective:

> I didn't have a cent to my name and my credit in San Francisco wasn't worth two bits. I had to give up my office in September, though it only cost eight bucks a month, and now I was just working out of the pay telephone in the front hall of the cheap apartment building I was living in on Nob Hill where I was two months behind in my rent. I couldn't even come up with thirty bucks a month. (Brautigan 1)

Aside from being a failure as a human being, Card is also a disappointment as a private eye. This is evident both in other people's opinion about him and in the plotline. Early in the novel, when he visits Sergeant Rink to borrow bullets or money to buy bullets, Rink explicitly tells him what he thinks of him: "What can I do for you except give you directions to the Golden Gate Bridge and a few basics on how to jump? When are you going to give up this silly notion of you being a private detective and get a paying job and out of my hair?" (19) Rink simply cannot bring himself to believe that Card is a detective (let alone a good one); nor can his mother, who shows no respect for his profession and thinks that he is wasting his life and that he is a burden for her. Card gives her mother a call every week – just as a routine – and the beginning of the conversations is almost always the same. Her mother starts telling him off and scolding him for his job: "if this is my son, then he must have given up his private-eye nonsense and now he has a decent job" (71). Card's relationship with his mother seems rather estranged even though Card never explicitly expresses his feelings toward her mother and the estrangement is only implied as in moments when Card hesitates to call her or when he remembers their earlier conversations. Card's mother blames him for killing his father by throwing his ball in the street and getting his father run after it and causing the accident (72), and this has created a void he desperately tries to fill, perhaps by striving to be successful and turn into someone she can be proud of.

Contrary to what Card dreams to be, in the real world it is only a matter of impossibility and he can materialize his wishes only in his dreams in which he sees himself as a popular hero in Babylon. Similarly, his ex-girlfriend keeps telling him that he is a no-good detective, and he can be a perfect bellboy instead (4). Another character who looks down on him and does not try to conceal his humiliation is Pegleg, Card's friend at the morgue. When Card visits him at work, to borrow some bullets for his gun, Pegleg, who plays a significant role in the novel, lets him know what he thinks about him and his job: "Why did the person choose you? They've got real detectives in San Francisco. They're in the phone book" (34). Later on, he says: "Face it, pal. You're not any good at this private detective business. If my wife was cheating I'd hire Donald Duck to find out who she was doing it with before I'd hire you, and I'm not even married" (38). To the reader and everyone who knows him, he is more of a comical version of his counterparts in traditional detective novels such as tough, clever, and violent private eyes in, say, Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett's novels.

The way Card describes himself and his life is by no means flattering. He shows no reservation in exposing his poverty or the poor conditions he lives in. As an example, early in the novel, he admits that "My apartment is so dirty that recently I replaced all the seventyfive-watt bulbs with twenty-five-watters, so I wouldn't have to see it" (4). He returns home after a short journey and he finds himself in the same dingy place. Once again, he cannot conceal his disgust and frustration: "The dank grubbiness of my apartment hadn't changed while I was gone. What a rock bottom hole … Jesus, how

could I live the way I was living? It was a little frightening" (94). Obviously, his portrayal of himself, as a penniless loser who lives in a dirty hole of an apartment, violates the reader's conception of a detective, who is characteristically represented as superior than others – in wealth, social rank, or intellect.

Card never manages to live up to our expectations as a detective; this is also observable in a few scenes in the novel. He has a poor memory, he cannot crack any mystery or ever see beneath the surface. When he visits Sergeant Rink, he finds him looking at a letter opener which is actually a murder weapon (18-19). Later in the story when he visits Peg-leg and he mentions the letter opener, Card cannot remember why a letter opener might be important: "'She was stabbed with a letter opener?' I asked. That rang a bell but I couldn't place it. Somehow it was familiar" (34). As another example for his incompetence, when he visits the morgue to get the corpse from his friend Peg-leg, he witnesses two men carrying a big bag but he simply cannot imagine what might be in the bag: "I wondered briefly what was in the bag. It was kind of late to be taking things out of the morgue" (141). Ten pages later, when it is revealed that those men were stealing a corpse, he can finally conclude that there was a body in the bag.

Card is also a man of little or no sense of morality; traditional private eyes generally take law into their own hands and reserve certain immunity for themselves in punishing criminals. They voluntarily get their hands dirty and commit crimes to round up their cases, but Card is usually bored and exasperated and he would do anything to only get out of the misery which he finds himself to be trapped in. He once acknowledges that he is willing to do anything for money (120), and when he finds out that his landlady has passed away, he is happy and excited (92-93), and his only reaction is an unsympathetic sigh of relief: "Good" (102).

The whole story is narrated by Card, our detective, and yet he fails as a narrator. There are times when he cannot "keep track of his own narrative development" (Boyer 37), remember certain details, or avoid mistakes. The most vivid example is when, early in the novel, he visits Peg-leg, and he says to the reader: "Peg-leg walked me out to the front door. He moved quickly and gracefully for a man with a peg-leg. Did I mention that before? I don't think I did. I should have. It's kind of interesting: a man with a peg-leg taking care of dead people" (40). That is why he keeps repeating himself, expressing his optimism and explaining that he always gets lost in his dreams. His memory lapses and his constant daydreaming makes him an unreliable narrator; the problem is that it is only through him that we can understand what is going on – and more often than not, we cannot because we are given false or confusing bits of information.

Sometimes Card (as the narrator) confesses that he wishes to be like the detectives in books and movies, and he keeps mentioning their names throughout the novel. A good example is when Card recalls a conversation with his mother in which she tells him what he thinks of the private eye business: "I know you're sorry, son, but why are you a private

detective? I hate those magazines and books. They're so seamy" (73). This is indicative of the self-referential nature of Brautigan's novel; furthermore, it can be taken as a critique of the fake "seamy" quality of traditional novels, in which characters and stories are often formulaic, if not predictable or simply recyclable. It seems as if everybody already knows such stories are essentially fictional. Similarly, there is a moment in the story when Card, as usual, is lost in his delusional adventures in Babylon, and he imagines himself as a character in crime magazines: "I had just finished doing a private-eye mystery in detective magazine form like a short novel in Dime Detective. As I read the novel paragraph after paragraph, page following page, I translated the words into pictures that I could see and move rapidly forward in my mind like having a dream" (60). Like Don Quixote, he is so deeply immersed in the world of fiction that he has lost his grips with reality and has become a picaresque or grotesque anti-hero. He has read so many detective stories written and published before him, and he desires to be just like those tough private eyes in stories in cheap magazines like Dime Detective.

It seems that instead of Card, Sergeant Rink should have been the protagonist of the novel. Although Card is the narrator of the novel, it is Rink who acts, at least partially, as the hero. Sergeant Rink, once Card's colleague years back when he wanted to join the forces, is a tough cop/detective who is not afraid of getting (physically or mentally) involved in action, as he confronts the men who were to steal the corpse, punching one and torturing another by putting him in the corpses' freezer. He knows how to investigate and find the criminal. We first see him early in the novel when he is inspecting a letter opener, a suspicious murder weapon. Later, he manages to figure things out and track down the body snatchers, and later on, he somehow finds out that the whole thing was set up by the mysterious Blonde and that is why he decides to turn up at the meeting by the graveyard.

Even Card himself admires Sergeant Rink for being the successful cop/detective he dreamed to be, saying: "Sergeant Rink had a reputation of being a very tough cop, and it was a reputation that he lived up to 100%. I really had to admire him" (162). Except for the ending, Sergeant Rink acts as the embodiment of the traditional hard-boiled detective. Rink fails as a hero because in the end all his toil and trouble are actually futile. This can be interpreted as yet another aspect of Brautigan's method in depicting the failure of the traditional detective in saving the world and knocking order into the society. In the bleak world of San Francisco in the early 1940s, when World War II was taking millions of lives and changing everything forever, fictional heroes seem to be stripped of heroism – at least in the traditional sense of the word. The novel, therefore, can be viewed as Brautigan's "most extreme statement of the futility of life" (Sweatt 155). It should be noted, however, that in his novel, Brautigan softens up "the futility of life" by the amusing and funny details he provides us with, as well as offering a comical version of traditional detectives.

2.2 The Function of Dreams in *Dreaming of Babylon*

In his *Historical Dictionary of Postmodernist Literature and Theatre* (2007), Fran Mason dedicates a small section of his book to Richard Brautigan, and when describing his novels (especially his late novels), he proclaims that Brautigan's novels are "inward looking and deal with characters' inability to face up to reality" (50). This is true, at least partially, in the case of *Dreaming of Babylon*. In the novel, the protagonist struggles to make sense of his existence as well as of the crime case and he fails in both. In a world, and a profession, filled with violence and mystery, he takes refuge in his dreams. Card's dreams of Babylon seem to have two functions in the novel, both of which are equally important in the thematic development of the narrative: one as an escape from reality and the other as a metaphor for the process of creation of fiction.

The first function, namely escapism, is, perhaps, easier to detect, especially if one thinks about Card's failure as a detective, his messy life, his penury, his poor memory, his clumsiness, and the humiliation he has to put up with. While reality is too harsh and overwhelming, the fictionality of Babylon guarantees a safe haven, a paradise in which he is a superstar and a sensation. The world, especially in 1942 and in the face of unprecedented and widespread violence, war, and all kinds of human deprivation, is anything but ideal, and Babylon, on the other hand is both a shelter and a means to escape from shocking and paralyzing realities of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that Card prefers fantasy to reality: "I'd much rather be in ancient Babylon than in the Twentieth Century trying to put two bits together for a hamburger" (63).

However, the relation between the dream world and Card's life is dual. It fosters his imagination and simultaneously and consequently prevents him from achieving anything significant in his real life. He is well aware of the side effects of his dreaming, but there is no way he can help it, as he needs the illusion and escapism it provides, without which he cannot survive: "Dreaming of Babylon got the best of me. I would have been a good cop, too. If only I had been able to stop dreaming of Babylon. Babylon has been such a delight to me and at the same time such a curse" (16). The so-called "curse" keeps ruining his opportunities to impress others and make a splash. The first opportunity was his chance of being a successful baseball player, which was ruined because he started daydreaming about Babylon right when he was about to swing the bat and hit the ball (44-46), and then it was the chance of becoming a cop, just like his friend Sergeant Rink, but he did not pass the final exam because he was lost in his dreams (15-16). Although dreams of Babylon work as a temporary way out of the miseries of life, they also disrupt his sense of realism and the practicality a detective needs in his profession.

In Babylon, Card can be free; he can be whoever he wants to be, any hero in any form. The freedom gives him a sense of importance and confidence which has always been absent in his real life. As he confesses to the reader, "Sometimes I played around with the form of my adventures in Babylon. They would be done as books that I could see in my mind what I was reading, but most often they were done as movies" (59). Each adventure is like a new story, and in every one of them he is the popular and famous protagonist who saves the world of Babylon from some kind of danger.

This can be linked to the second function of dreaming, namely, the possibility of creating a fictional world and becoming an author. Card's dreams of Babylon differ from time to time as he changes the plotlines of his escapades and adventures. In the first series of his adventures in Babylon, Card is a famous baseball player who displays his talents and skills to some fifty thousand spectators. Talking about the fans who rush in to see his 'home runs', he boasts: "I think they were glad to be at the ball game watching me hit home runs. It certainly was a lot better than going to war" (51). This short excerpt also shows that he cannot entirely pull away from the bitter and grisly facts of contemporary life or the reality of war – not even in his dream adventures.

Card has many names in his Babylon bravadoes; Ace Stag, Samson Ruth, and Smith Smith are only a few among many. His mind generates an array of plotlines and narratives in Babylon; in one, for instance, he runs a renowned detective agency and in another he is a cowboy who rescues his imaginary girlfriend, Nina-dirat, kidnapped by 'the bad guys' and almost marries her (58). In yet another dream, he is a military general and the girl is a nurse who cares for him. He is wounded in a battle and she keeps taking care of him and dressing his wounds throughout hot nights (58). In other fabricated tales, some similar to the literary works he had previously read, he plays the role of "a Babylonian Hamlet", and Nana-dirat plays the roles of Gertrude and Ophelia. (59). He makes up or adapts stories, modifies them, reproduces them with certain nuances, and acts as the hero; gradually, however, these imaginary stories replace reality and distance him from facts of life (similarity between him and Don Quixote has already been acknowledged). What had started as a hobby, progressively and uncontrollably becomes a necessary routine or addiction. Card admits that sometimes he adapted or translated parts of a story he had read (or watched) into a form of an adventure in Babylon:

> I had just finished doing a private-eye mystery in detective magazine form like a short novel in Dime Detective. As I read the novel paragraph after paragraph, page following page, I translated the words into pictures that I could see and move rapidly forward in my mind like having a dream. (60)

While Card is a failure as a detective and as an individual, he is a great author/translator in the world of dreams, and he spends a great amount of time making up stories and inventing names and titles. Some chapters of the novel are devoted to him finding titles or names for his adventures or his characters. His most important dream concerns the story of the perfect hard-boiled detective who strives to save the world from Dr. Abdul Forsythe, a scientist who miraculously turns homeless people into "walking shadows" to raise an army of zombies to take over the world. He spends his time making up his mind on a suitable title for the adventure: "I ran a hundred titles through my mind. The best ones I came up with were: The Horror of Dr. Abdul Forsythe. Adventures of a Private Eye in Babylon. The Shadow Robots Creep" (80). In another chapter, he tries

to find the perfect name for his detective, confessing that "Some of the names were good but so far I hadn't come up with one that was perfect and I wouldn't settle for less than a perfect Smith" (86). He does not want to settle for anything less than perfect, and it is a bit ironic that the name he eventually chooses is Smith Smith, which seems to lack the innovation or excitement he was looking for, even the character of the villain, Dr. Forsythe, is an imitation of Ming the Merciless whom he borrows from the comic book *Flash Gordon.* (62).

The title he eventually chooses for Smith Smith's adventure is 'Smith Smith Versus the Shadow Robots'. It turns out to be the last dream Card has of Babylon as it works as a perfect example for his creativity, an adventure which also tells us something about the narrative genre to which it belongs. The villain of the dream, Dr. Abdul Forsythe, is desperate to get his hands on "Mercury Crystals" (138) by which he could turn people (mostly homeless) into mindless shadows or robots that would follow his orders. He wants to dominate the whole world by his army of shadow robots. Smith Smith is the most famous private eye in Babylon and has three operatives working for him (57-58). He is hired by Dr. Francis who invented mercury crystals, to stop Dr. Forsythe from controlling the world. In Card's narrative, we can identify the stages of its creation, just like a novel or an adaptation, and interestingly enough, while this adventure seems to be a work of cross-genre, the supernatural combined with elements of hard-boiled detective fiction, the adventure works as a perfect detective story in which the standard elements of a traditional pulp story are logically and convincingly deployed. Smith Smith, no matter how fake and phony he may seem, is the tough detective Card wished to be.

The world populated by Smith Smith, Dr. Forsyth and the shadow robots, the poor souls who are stacked like newspapers in a warehouse (64), is evil and dark; nevertheless, bleakness is nothing compared to that of the war-ridden San Francisco of 1942. Only one of these worlds can be saved (by Card or his alter ego), and it is clear which one he would go for. The world of Babylon is imaginary and dream-like, and it consists of type characters and traditional genre adventure; having said that, it is in sharp contrast with the postmodern world which aborts any attempt at certainty and confidence. It explains why Card, the failed detective, cannot find answers even to the simplest questions about the case he was supposed to wrap up. Card, like many of Brautigan's characters, prefers to submerge in the world of carefully regulated fantasies (Horvath 444) and imagination as it is only there that he can feel different, important, and triumphant.

The world of Babylon, the dream world, is dual in nature. While it offers a venue to escape from failure in life, it gives him a kind of freedom, perhaps "a loser's kind of freedom" (ibid. 443), to not care about anything in real life. To escape, he needs imagination and he resorts to imagination to escape. Babylon makes him numb to the hostile outside world, ravaged by war, insecurity, and mystery, not to mention an apartment that resembles a rat hole. There is a thin line between his adventures in Babylon and San Francisco and they are always intertwined as one influences and even

interrupts the other. Card, needless to say, prefers the former, mostly because the possibilities and the scenarios in which he can win are endless; yet, he cannot help but try to keep his ties with the real life to be able to hang on to his dream world. It is a withdrawal from the world, but these dreams do not seem to give Card a Zen-like ability to look down at the difficulties of life with disdain and detachment (Hume 85). It simply allows him to sink in the world of dreams and saves him from being drifted away by gloomy and pessimistic thoughts. In other words, the heroic sagas in his dreams seem to liberate him from the shackles of bitter realities and give him a sense of purpose and orientation in an otherwise absurd world.

2.3 The Circular Narrative of the Novel

The way the novel ends, with Card having a corpse in his refrigerator and his bewilderment at the standoff between the Blonde and Sergeant Rink, indicates that the novel can be approached as a perfect example for a standard metaphysical detective story. In the circular narrative of the novel, the detective ends up almost exactly where he started; it is also reflected in the last sentence of the novel: "I was right back where I started, the only difference being that when I woke up this morning, I didn't have a dead body in my refrigerator" (220). This can be said to refer to the futility of the detective's life and the radical insecurity that has plagued his mind. It is a circle which repeats over and over again, with little to no change. In the end, no order is restored and no victory (at least for the detective/hero) is in sight. Neither the detective nor the reader can make sense of the episodes narrated in the novel, as many questions are left unanswered. At one point, even Card himself admits that he does not know anything about his client and his role (82). The novel is fragmentary; it is divided into seventy-nine short chapters with "general typographical display of wide margins, large print, and chapter beginnings in the middle of the page continue the visual impact that is identifiable as the Brautigan mode of postmodernism" (Sweatt 156).

At the close of the novel, we do not see the traditional denouement and decrypting finale typical to detective stories as there are still too many mystifying and confusing questions; for instance, who is the Blonde? Why does she want to steal a corpse from the morgue? Why does she hire three men to steal the corpse if she has already hired Card to do the job? Who is the dead prostitute? Who has killed her and to what purpose? How does Sergeant Rink find out who the Blonde is or there is a meeting near the graveyard? There is no clear answer to any of the questions and the reader can only work things out in terms of possibilities. Unlike traditional hard-boiled stories, we never find out who the victim is and we never get to know the murderer or the motif. These baffling questions, on a larger scale, imply that nothing makes sense in a world characterized by war, chaos, and darkness. The writer seems to be asking should we expect to find rhyme or reason in a narrative while the world it purportedly represents is devoid of them? In the novel, all images are bleak, except those in Card's dreams, and even then, the world of Babylon is always threatened by a criminal mastermind. There, at least, a superman – Card's many

alter egos – can fend the city against a looming crisis, but in reality, there is no champion and the so-called hero cannot even save himself, let alone the world. Brautigan does, however, offer hope in his fictional contemporary world through Card's naïve optimism, but this escapist hopefulness does not actually lead to anything concrete as it only drags Card back to where he started.

The novel, as said, is set in 1942, when the world was torn by war and violence. Brautigan's absurdist method of story-telling is presumably the perfect way to begin and end a narrative since it reflects, in black and white, the irrationality of life in a war-stricken world and the imminence of death. He seems to be decreeing that the old literary genres have died out, as have heroes and super-smart detectives. The traditional hard-boiled detective stories belong to a past that is long gone, and these stories and detectives seem to be rather outdated, stereotypical, or simply irrelevant. The central questions of traditional detective stories, like "who has done it?", has given way to more complex questions regarding human existence in a rapidly changing world. While *Dreaming of Babylon* might not seem to be a philosophical novel at first, it does point to the bleak world around us as it depicts a world marred by violence, death, and destruction as well as "disengagement from society" (Horvath 436). It explains why the individual's escape from harsh realities through daydreaming seems a plausible defense mechanism. As Farhat Mohammed Iftekharuddin points out, Brautigan "draws our attention and awakens our sensibilities to the painful world around us by means of brilliant images, subtle wit, and magically apt metaphors" (16). In the novel, it becomes more manifest when we think of Card's desire to be in Babylon rather than in the real world where everything is unbearably agonizing.

3. Conclusion

The present research attempted to identify and examine the features of Metaphysical Detective Stories in Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942*, and study their function in the thematic structure of the novel. It has argued that *Dreaming of Babylon* can be considered a metaphysical detective novel through its use of three main features of the genre: 1. A comic detective who is a failure, and who does not conjure up the hard-boiled private eyes at any rate and fails to properly grasp what is going on around him, let alone being able to investigate thoroughly and successfully or identify the criminal, as in the end, he is even more baffled and confused than the reader. 2. The image of the world as a dark place in which death prevails and everyone is inexorably miserable. Brautigan presents the reader with an absurd world in which everything goes and nothing is decrypted. In such a world, the (anti)-hero can only resort to pipe dreams and daydreaming to restore personal dignity, create fictional alternatives, and fend for himself against the ills and evils of the society.

Card is a failed detective who is tormented by diffidence, obscurity, and emptiness. He tries to spice up his otherwise dull life by creating several characters and adapting

several stories in his daydreams, and while he cannot help but live in the real and painful world, he somehow finds a way to both escape from reality and to be the author of his own adventures. 3. The lack of narrative closure and the novel's circular plotline. The plot unfolds in such a way that while none of the questions is answered, the detective in the end finds himself where he started at the outset of the narrative. The story, therefore, works like a cycle, repeating itself and representing the world as a hostile and bizarre place, characterized by a series of meaningless and inexplicable repetitions. The lack of closure gives a postmodern edge to the novel in its denial of ultimate truth and abstention from giving convincing and sensible answers. Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942*, consequently, can be viewed as a postmodern detective story which transcends the traditional genre of detective fiction and constructs a multi-layered narrative which seeks to unearth the absurdity of the contemporary world.

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