

THE NARRATIVE TURNS ON ITSELF:  
FORM AND MEANING IN BARTH'S FICTION

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An Abstract of a Thesis

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English  
University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Linda Susan Popkin  
December, 1975

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This thesis investigates John Barth's esthetic concern with literary tradition, with the manipulation and exploration of the history of fictional forms as the potential origin of new and modern humorous fiction. For this novelist value lies in the act of artistic creation along with the recognition of the possibilities inherent in the literary past.

In The Floating Opera (1955) and The End of the Road (1958) Barth begins to look for solutions to the dilemma of how to write fiction in the twentieth century. His assumption is that the forms of fiction are nearly exhausted. These early works introduce the problems of form and philosophy which lead to the manipulation of the fiction-making process in the later novels. With both The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) and Giles Goat-Boy (1966), Barth takes traditional form and turns it upon itself. The Sot-Weed Factor exposes and explores the kind of traditional novel which began with Fielding in the eighteenth century, making the form the subject of fiction. Giles Goat-Boy explores the meaning of allegory in a world which must create correspondences and meaning through rather than discover pre-existing relationships. Chimera (1972) investigates the possibilities of creating new fiction by exploring old stories from an unfamiliar point of view.

This study presents a detailed description of Barth's manipulation

of literary history and technique to create his particular kind of solution to the question of how to create an up-to-date fiction in the five works cited.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

- FO John Barth. The Floating Opera. 1956; rpt. Garden City: Doubleday, 1967.
- ER John Barth. The End of the Road. 1956; rpt. Garden City: Doubleday, 1967.
- SWF John Barth. The Sot-Weed Factor. 1960; rpt. Garden City: Doubleday, 1967.
- GGB John Barth. Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus. Garden City: Doubleday, 1966.
- C John Barth. Chimera. New York: Random House, 1972.

## I. INTRODUCTION

One problem for the writer in the twentieth century centers on the difficulty of assimilating contemporary experience. But along with this difficulty of assimilation in a world which refuses to remain orderly, there exists the parallel difficulty of finding suitable forms for fiction, especially if one is possessed by the narrative impulse. For John Barth, a writer now in his forties, who has written four novels and two collections of tales, the primary concern has repeatedly been the perfection of an appropriate form; his writing is an extended exercise in the technique of fiction making. The structure of the fiction and the act of creation become metaphors for modern experience.

All of Barth's works display self-conscious artistic control and a precise manipulation of fictional devices. In a 1964 interview Barth himself has distinguished his own approach from an esthetic based on an "up-to-date kind of psychological realism":

A different way to come to terms with the discrepancy between art and the real thing is to affirm the artificial element in art (you can't get rid of it anyhow), and make the artifice part of your point instead of working higher and higher fi with a lot of literary woofers and tweeters.<sup>1</sup>

Barth's fiction never conceals the fact of its artificiality. His works are all literary events, special and different in some respects from the world outside the novel. As a teacher at Johns Hopkins, Barth has

<sup>1</sup> John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," ConL, 6 (1965), 7.

experienced the world of the intellectual and scholar; as a writer he holds a mirror up to that world. The reflection in the glass can be a reason for laughter. In various ways each of his books reveals that the accumulation of knowledge and philosophy in the modern university has become so expansive and self-conscious that every creative act is bound by a powerful tradition and an accumulated history. For Barth, every narrative includes, as well as the story told, the history and conditions of its telling.

What Barth does, then, is exhibit his ability to create. For him a writer must be aware of the traditional systems of literary devices which have developed in fiction prior to his time. Barth has complained that some of his contemporaries write not as though the twentieth century did not exist, but as though the writers of the twentieth century had not written. In the same 1964 interview already cited, he comments that the form of their fiction is therefore "out of date." By way of analogy he explains: "At least you don't want to be a technical hick. If somebody built the Chartres Cathedral now, it would be an embarrassing piece of real estate, wouldn't it? Unless he did it ironically."<sup>2</sup> In a sense Barth has constructed his own literary Chartres Cathedral by using old fictional forms to create new forms of narrative. The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) and Giles Goat-Boy (1966) demonstrate how an ironic treatment enables the writer to manipulate literary conventions to build a modern fiction. Both novels deliberately attempt to use outdated, rigid

<sup>2</sup> Enck, 7.



structures to create new art. The Sot-Weed Factor casts twentieth-century assumptions about man and his world into an eighteenth-century novel form, thus turning the two ages upon each other until the entire fabrication convolutes into humor. Giles Goat-Boy examines the inconsistencies of modern life by adopting a Biblical quest and an allegorical form with their inherent assumptions of an orderly universe.

Chimera (1972) narrates old myths and stories from a new point of view. The humor results from the narrative manipulation of the past. Taken together, the novels represent one modern way out of the technical dilemma of how to create a fiction.

## II. THE BEGINNING OF A FICTION

An entry into the world of John Barth's writings can be carved with the aid of the Russian formalists' lexicon. The formalists sought a systematic method for discussing literature; their methodology is reflected in the descriptive terms they developed for the explication of texts. The novels of Barth, like the critical position of the formalists, dismiss any possible argument about the distinction between form and content by making the technique of writing the subject of fiction. Barth's awareness of his position in the history of literature shapes his fiction. His awareness centers on the assumption that form is content.

According to Victor Shklovsky, the purpose of literature is to force us to notice what we might otherwise take for granted. "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important."<sup>1</sup> In his 1917 essay, "Art as Technique," he establishes a vocabulary for dealing with fiction. The essay offers both a critical method and a definition of art useful in discussing literature. He notes, for example, that all art involves the process of "defamiliarization." By this he means that the familiar is made strange in a number of ways. One method avoids naming the familiar object, but

<sup>1</sup> Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12.

instead describes it as though it is being observed for the first time. Another method describes a situation from an unconventional point of view. A third method for defamiliarization utilizes the device of parallelism; as Shklovsky puts it, "The purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into a sphere of new perception--that is, to make a unique semantic modification."<sup>2</sup> "Defamiliarization" also meant to the Formalists the creative act by which a literary form (itself a "familiar object") could be "made strange" or perceived anew, as in literary parodies of novels which emphasize features left subordinate in other novels.

In a 1921 article on Tristram Shandy Shklovsky establishes important distinctions about the world of the novel. In the novel, he notes, time is displaced: "The causes follow the consequences, and the author himself prepares the ground work for erroneous assumptions."<sup>3</sup> Literary time is arbitrary, subject to the control of the novelist. This assertion leads to a distinction between "plot" and "story," the former referring to the sequence of events in a work of fiction, the latter to events in chronological order.

The technique of "laying bare" as described by the formalists is also helpful in a discussion of Barth. The term refers to any device used by an author to expose the fiction-making process. For Barth,

<sup>2</sup> Shklovsky, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Shklovsky, "Sterne's Tristram Shandy: Stylistic Commentary," in Russian Formalist Criticism, p. 29.

this means writing books which have narrators and characters who say they are the creators of the novels. His fiction about fiction involves many of the techniques noted by the formalists.

Some elements of fiction need to be clarified to aid in a discussion of Barth. His works are often constructed by way of a series of frames; that is, the narrator who claims to write the novels is a creation of Barth's "second self," an implied author of the fiction.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, that self is the result of forces outside the fictional world, education and experience, which affect Barth, the author who creates the fiction. The literary work results therefore, from a chain reaction which is always apparent in the novels and which is itself a major issue in the work.

Wayne Booth has provided one of the most useful tools for discussing the conventional novel by introducing the notion of the unreliable narrator.<sup>5</sup> Barth has expanded this notion. Traditionally the unreliability of a narrator is based on a disparity between the narrator's perception and that of the implied author of the plot. The philosophy of the implied author establishes the norms for the fiction. Ordinarily the norms of the plot are tied into, and directly a part of, the formal expression of a work of fiction. But for Barth the position for establishing meaning and judgement has been altered; he chooses not to develop an adequate philosophy but to create a

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of "second self" see Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> Booth, pp. 295-296.

fictional world which is philosophically adequate. Instead of presenting a personal vision, Barth attempts to incorporate all available stances. As a writer in an age which has apparently explored all possible philosophical positions and numerous postures with regard to history and tradition, he finds it impossible to assume that any one statement will order the universe or make it intelligible. Therefore, the world of a fiction must evoke, uphold, and dismiss all philosophies. To produce this impression the world of the fiction becomes the product of a particular point of view. That vision belongs to the characters in the particular novels; Barth's own world view is not in evidence.

What Barth does by calling attention to the fact of fiction, to the artificial in art, corresponds with assertions made by the Russian formalists about literature. However, one premise of the formalists maintains that objectivity in the world, and specifically in the study of literature, is possible. A formalist might argue that he objectively studies the techniques by which objectivity might be blurred or questioned within a fiction. Paradoxically, however, by creating fictional worlds where reality and meaning depend totally on a particular point of view, Barth questions the assumption of objectivity in regard to any activity.

Barth's literary self-consciousness and his manipulation of form begin with his first novel, The Floating Opera (1955). Central to the meaning of the novel is the character of its narrator, Todd Andrews, and particularly the nature of the information he presents. This information is of two types; part discusses literature, and the rest moves

the plot forward and backward. The narrator repeatedly wonders about the business of writing novels as he tells the story of his life.

Todd's questions about literature undercut his professed naivete and call attention to the fact that the essence of his narrative is plot rather than story. At the same time, his sophisticated comments about novelistic technique lay bare the facts of fiction, calling attention to the persona who works behind the narrator and gives him the shape he takes. When Todd begins his story, he defamiliarizes the novel by exposing the problem of selection.

I was going to comment on the significance of the viz, I used earlier, was I? Or explain my "piano-tuning" metaphor? Or my weak heart? Good heavens how does one write a novel? I mean, how can anybody stick to the story, if he's at all sensitive to the significances of things. (FO, p. 2)

Todd constantly states that literature is composed of metaphors and symbols and climaxes and anti-climaxes. The writing of a novel, he finds, involves decisions about experience. All things in the world become significant when selected for inclusion in fiction: road signs (FO, p. 110), copulating dogs (FO, p. 109), or thunder storms (FO, p. 250), for example.

Novelists must select information to include. No novel, no matter how carefully it is arranged, simply relays facts. Reality in a novel exists only at the discretion of an author who selects and judges. When Todd calls attention to himself as the selector of data, he also calls attention to Barth, who stands outside the novel, providing Todd with his particular vision. The narrator's observations defamiliarize the business of selection in fiction. Todd's narrative unfolds in a

carefully disordered fashion. What that order represents and what the nature is of the man who tells the tale are the keys to the treasure of the world of this particular fiction. Todd explains himself early in the novel:

If other people (my friend Harrison Mack, for instance, or his wife Jane) think I'm eccentric and unpredictable, it is because my actions and opinions are inconsistent with their principles, if they have any; I assure you that they're quite consistent with mine. And although my principles might change now and then--this book, remember, concerns one such change--nevertheless I always have them aplenty, more than I can handily use, and they usually hang all in a piece, so that my life is never less logical simply for its being unorthodox. (FO, p. 1)

If literature reflects the order of life in any way, that order should assert itself in the fiction, and indeed it does. Along with his reminder that the book has a definite purpose, Todd claims there is a logic, an organizing principle, although perhaps an unorthodox one, behind his life. Two parallel structures which define Todd's perception of life are found in the floating opera metaphor and in the manipulations of his legal cases. Both structures suggest a somewhat unorthodox perception and ordering of life.

The metaphor of the floating opera spelled out early in the novel sets the pattern of the work.

It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along both banks. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wait until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it . . . that's how much of life works: our friends float past; we become involved with them, they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely; they float back again, and we

either renew our friendship--catch up to date--or find that they and we don't comprehend each other any more. And that's how this book will work; I'm sure. (FO, p. 7)

As Thomas Le Clair has shown,<sup>6</sup> the novel about the events on that particular day in June when Todd decided not to commit suicide is constructed in accordance with the floating opera metaphor. The events in time alternate between the occurrences of one day and occasions or experiences which occurred earlier in the life of the master of this particular ceremony. Just as Captain Adam determines what will take place on the stage of his boat, Todd Andrews guides the reader down the stream of his consciousness, which is banked by the past and the far past.

The entire fiction is set up in terms of parallel structures; situations on one level of meaning are analogous to other situations in the novel. The parallels open several interesting concerns in the novel. There are in the structure of the novel two distinct levels of events. What Todd does as narrator is weave the thread of his personal history through the events of a day in his life--memory is woven through experience. In the resulting fiction, all of Todd's personal history becomes the motivation for his actions on the day in June 1937. Moreover, these two levels apparently need interpretation from a distance, for Todd recounts the events from the perspective of seventeen years later.

<sup>6</sup> For the discussion of the metaphor see Thomas Le Clair, "John Barth's The Floating Opera: Death and the Craft of Fiction," TSL, 14 (1973), 716/



The structure which parallels Todd's own metaphorical construction is Adam's Original and Unparalleled Floating Opera. Captain Adam, like Todd, decides what will be amusing and entertaining. The title of the river boat becomes ironic when the parallels between the boat in the fiction and the boat which is Todd's fiction become apparent. The instance of T. Wallace Whittaker's performance of speeches from Shakespeare reverberates through Todd's fiction. When the player on the riverboat tries to present the soliloquy from Hamlet, he gets a predictable response: "'Go home! 'Take 'im away!' 'Come on minstrels!'" (FO, p. 236) Yet Hamlet's very question of "to be or not to be" is at the center of Todd's extended Inquiry. The question of life or death is the reason for Todd's puzzlement at his father's suicide and is echoed by the question he asks when he peers in the mirror on that particular June morning (FO, p. 11). The question is repeated by Mr. Haecker (FO, p. 163). But the only way this particular question can be dealt with in the modern novel is ironically; otherwise it results in the kind of embarrassment that it is on the show boat (FO, p. 236).

The way that Todd fictionalizes relates quite directly to his attitude toward the law, the second of the structures he uses to define his life. The law, an order-making principle of society, becomes for Todd a wonderful, fascinating arena where he can flex his ingenuity by allowing the structure to work for him in an unconventional fashion. He keeps every scrap of paper received in a file, knowing that from these he will build his cases. He works like a novelist, collecting bits and pieces for the draft of a fiction; and he refers to his legal

cases as "works in progress" (FO, p. 76). His clever legal gymnastics enable him to break a will and make his friends, Harrison and Jane Mack, millions of dollars richer. He shows off his ability to perform again when he figures a way to win the auto accident case, Morton v. Butler. Important to the structure of the story, the attitude toward what law has become for Todd as attorney is analogous to what fiction has become for Todd as story teller. Todd reveals that he has a collection of peach baskets which contain the information necessary for the inquiry which becomes the novel. Those baskets correspond to the filing system in his law office. Thus fiction is defined in terms of "plot"--as an arrangement of data by the teller of the tale. This reveals an assumption about the underlying rules common to both fiction-making and law which asserts that what is important is the skillful manipulation of the structure to make it suit the individual occasion, rather than making the occasion fit the structure. Successful application of the law is not a question of truth or justice but of the manipulation of language. The meandering stream of Todd's fiction enables him to form reality and circumstances to his advantage.

The elements of a fiction are the central concern of the novel, particularly the element of point of view. Todd remains extremely conscious of the effect of his vision on the significance of his narrative.<sup>7</sup> Todd's perception creates the fiction but, at the same time that he shapes the story, Barth stands outside the fiction shaping

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of the point of view see Campbell Tatham, "John Barth and the Aesthetics of Artifice," ConL, 12 (1971), 64.

Todd. The implied author as artist takes a shape which reflects Barth's particular education and experience. The narration, or rather the method of narration, defamiliarizes the fiction by calling attention to the construction of the chain of creation.

Literary time in the world of Todd Andrews turns back upon itself. Todd continually walks down halls or turns corners (FO, p. 17), telling tales that refer to earlier incidents. The characteristic mixture of order and disorder which is at the center of the novel creates distance between the reader and the work.

Todd as fiction maker closely resembles another American narrator, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. The parallels between Todd and Huck indicate something of the difference in narrative distance in the two novels. For both, the boat is an important symbol, representing freedom. Half way through his book Huck encounters two fraudulent players who attempt to present scenes from Shakespeare. But the resemblances between the two novels become more important when one tries to discover where philosophical value lies in each novel. For Huck has been indoctrinated with one set of values but feels himself impelled by another. When he decides to do something according to the rules, his feelings run counter to prevailing social laws. Right action for Huckleberry Finn rests in following the dictates of his heart.

Todd's heart, however is literally diseased. He suffers from "a kind of subacute bacteriological endocarditis . . . [with a tendency] to myocardial infarction" (FO, p. 5). He says he could die at any moment. It is significant, as Thomas Le Clair has noted, that Todd's

life parodies the American experience in the early 1900's; he was born in 1900, served in World War I, lived a college life in the 1920's much like something from an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel and is now recounting a despair typical of the 1930's.<sup>8</sup> He knows all of this is true and draws attention to the fact (FO, p. 130). But where Huck can draw a distinction between knowing and feeling, Todd cannot. Twain centers the meaning of Huck Finn's narrative on the tension between the heart and the intellect, with the author clearly on the side of feeling. Todd Andrews, however, is emotionally disabled, even though he can rationalize well; but Barth's own feelings on the subject are not accessible in the novel. Todd remains a more distant and unreliable narrator than Huck Finn could ever have been, and Barth is equally protean. Part of the difficulty, then, in discovering Todd's purpose (and Barth's) results from the impossibility of determining the view of either one. The incidents related in The Floating Opera come pouring forth in an order which confuses all attempts by the reader to assign values--either to Todd or to Barth.

Modern man has discovered that in the investigation of history, whether individual or social, he cannot assume a linear, logical progression of events leading from a start to a finish. The normal psychological pattern of perceiving experience is, if not largely random, at least variable according to time and circumstance. Life can be rationalized but not understood, since the interpretation of experience

<sup>8</sup> Le Clair, 712.

always relies heavily on the interpreter's point of view. One way to relate to the random pattern of perception entails the adoption of roles of one sort or another for the purpose of keeping up with life. This strategy is important for the creation of The Floating Opera, and it becomes virtually the central focus later in The Sot-Weed Factor. These shifting roles are central to the creation of a fiction dependent on a particular point of view. One alternative to such a fiction is for Todd the decision that meaninglessness apparently dictates suicide. Another possibility is the calculated performance, with costume changes and manipulations of conventions. The string of masks which Todd Andrews adopts provides him with ways not only to show off, but also to hide the sadness and frustration resulting from a world without meaning.<sup>9</sup>

So Todd, narrator, impresario, sets the problem at the center of all of Barth's fiction: the impossibility of a consistent point of view in a world where one is faced with many alternatives for action and can rationalize any choice too well, where the intellect has nothing more to play against than a damaged heart. Knowing then becomes a question of subjective insight, which remains paradoxically debilitating when situations can be rationalized from a number of points of view.

In Todd's world and, by extension, Barth's world too, the problem of knowing too much can lead to paralysis. The way out of this paralysis (and paralysis is central to the fiction) is to keep moving, keep

<sup>9</sup> For remarks regarding the purpose of the masks see Beverly Gross, "The Anti-Novels of John Barth," ChIR, 20 (1969), 98.

fictionalizing. Todd Andrews is the first of Barth's shape-shifting story tellers who manage to survive in the world of the novel by adopting the appropriate mask for any situation. All of Barth's fiction deals with the necessity for adapting to the world through the assumption of a role.<sup>10</sup>

The companion piece to The Floating Opera is The End of the Road (1958). Although the novel makes no technical advances beyond The Floating Opera, it does point in similar ways to directions Barth's fiction can take. Jacob Horner, like Todd Andrews, relates to his situation by creating a fiction to explain what happened during a particular time of his life. Todd uses rationality to order experience; Jacob, however, is so shattered by the knowledge of the impossibility of knowing anything with certainty that he is unable to act and easily adopts the role assigned to him by practically any one. Again, the concern of the fiction is the multi-faceted nature of experience and the many possibilities for interpreting each event.<sup>11</sup>

The question of point of view in terms of novelistic structure, as well as philosophy, remains central to the novels. The tragedy at the heart of The End of the Road results from Joe Morgan's insistence on an absolute understanding of events which cannot be understood. Jacob Horner's response is different.

<sup>10</sup> Le Clair comments on the philosophical necessity of role playing in Barth's fiction, 711.

<sup>11</sup> For a parallel discussion see Grandville Hicks and Jack Alan Robbins, Literary Horizons: A Quarter Century of American Fiction (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 260.

Articulation! There, by Joe, was my absolute, if I could be said to have one. At any rate, it is the only thing I can think of about which I ever had, with any frequency at all, the feelings one usually has for one's absolutes. To turn experience into speech--that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it--is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayal can be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. (ER, p. 138)

Jacob's statement names the central problem of all of Barth's fiction. His novels are concerned with the articulation of experience, punctuated with an awareness of the impossibility of capturing truth. His fictions explore the many sided interpretations of events. In such an uncertain world, insistence on the absolute can be destructive, as the plot suggests. Both novels explore the problems of epistemology in relation to the creation of fiction.

The Floating Opera and The End of the Road mark Barth's last attempts to create characters who are realistic in the sense that they speak a twentieth-century language. As Barth states in an interview: "I didn't think after The End of the Road that I was interested in writing any more realistic fiction--fiction that deals with Characters From Our Time, who speak real dialogue."<sup>12</sup> Following these early novels, Barth shifts to a search for a different kind of fiction. The early works are important, however, for they expose major concerns of the later fictions. Barth's novels are all books about books, fictions which attempt to defamiliarize the devices of fiction making. The notion of a character in the fiction, whose point of view determines

<sup>12</sup> Enck, 11.

his ability to deal with the situations which he faces, is at the center of The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat Boy. The question of finding the formula for creating fiction is the concern of Barth's most recent work, Chimera.

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### III. THE SHIFTING SHAPE OF A TRADITION

Although fashioned in the style of an eighteenth-century novel, The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) involves, in two respects the characteristics John Barth sees as central to writing a particular kind of modern fiction. The characters are types, making the structure or movement of the plot more important than the development of personality. No central consciousness dictates meaning in the novel.

Barth's comments about The Sot-Weed Factor indicate his concern with plot. When asked whether he worried about the structure of his novels, he replied:

I worry myself sick. I take the structure pretty seriously. When I started on The Sot-Weed Factor, for instance, I had two intentions. One was to write a large book . . . The other was to see if I couldn't make up a plot that was fancier than Tom Jones . . . Nowadays, of course, you couldn't do it straight; it would have to be a formal farce.<sup>1</sup>

An understanding of exactly what Barth has manipulated to create this fiction begins with some of the principles at work in the particular kind of eighteenth-century novel written by Henry Fielding, the "comic epic-poem in prose."<sup>2</sup> In the famous preface to Joseph Andrews, Fielding discusses the legendary lost comic epic of Homer and mentions the

<sup>1</sup> John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," ConL, 6 (1965), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Fielding, The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 4.

possibility of literature which might have followed in this tradition. He then attempts to define the elements which might be found in such a narrative.

Now, a comic romance is a comic epic-poem in prose; differing from comedy, as the serious epic from tragedy: its action being more extended and comprehensive; containing a much larger circle of incidents, and introducing a greater variety of characters. It differs from the serious romance in its fable and action . . . in the one these are grave and solemn, so in the other they are light and ridiculous. . . . introducing persons of inferior rank, and consequently, of inferior manners . . . in its sentiments and diction, by preserving the ludicrous instead of the sublime. In the diction, I think, burlesque itself may be sometimes admitted . . .<sup>3</sup>

Fielding's formula, which is very much to the point of Barth's fiction, establishes a tradition for the novel. By creating The Sot-Weed Factor in the twentieth century but setting it in the eighteenth, Barth is able to call upon the history of the novel as a device for humor and a subject for fiction.

Barth's fiction is highly allusive; his novels imply through their art that this self-conscious artistry is a necessity in a world which contains libraries full of books of all sorts and volumes of literature. In "The Literature of Exhaustion" Barth has generalized about literature:

Art and its forms and techniques live in history and certainly do change . . . to be technically out of date is likely to be a genuine defect . . . A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary: Joyce and Kafka, for instance,<sup>4</sup> in their time, and in ours, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Fielding, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," The Atlantic Monthly, 220 (August 1967), 99.

If being technically up-to-date is the avowed concern of John Barth, then the fictions he creates present a definition of what literature can be in our time. The old forms of story telling may be used, but according to Barth, they must be handled ironically. For him one central demand made upon the writer, then, is an acknowledgement of the literature of the past. Various critical essays on The Sot-Weed Factor explore the relationship between the novel and its fictional ancestors, its indebtedness to Boccaccio, Rabelais, Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, Voltaire, and the mock epics of Pope and Dryden. In many respects The Sot-Weed Factor is a contemporary mock epic, as Russell H. Miller has pointed out. Miller has carefully catalogued epic references and similarities.<sup>5</sup>

As a reinforcement of his concern for the literary past Barth has created a central character, Ebenezer Cooke, who continually compares himself and his work to the writers who have come before him. But Cooke, unlike Barth, his creator, fails to understand the history from which he quotes. Cooke's use of allusion is the origin of much of the humor in the novel. He explains himself and his profession by offering the examples of the literary past to make his point. When Ebenezer goes to Lord Baltimore in hopes of obtaining a commission, the would-be poet laureate couches his argument for poetry in classical allusion.

<sup>5</sup> For a study of the epic references in the novel see Russell H. Miller, "The Sot-Weed Factor: A Contemporary Mock Epic," Crit, 8 (1965-66), 90.

"What trade is the poet's, and to what work shall he be put? For answer let me ask you sir, by'r leave--would the world at large know aught of Agamemnon, or fierce Achilles, or crafty Odysseus, or the cuckold Menelaus, or that entire circus of strutting Greeks and Trojans, had not the great Homer rendered 'em to verse . . ." Ebenezer went on, stirred by his own eloquence. "What were Greece without Homer, Rome without Virgil, to sing their glories? Heroes die, statues break, empires crumble, but your Iliad laughs at time, and a verse from Virgil still rings true as the day 'twas struck" (SWF, p. 74).

The Maryland for which Ebenezer Cooke would play poet is a very different place from the civilization presented in the pages of Virgil and Homer. By peppering the novel with allusion, Barth uses the literature of the classic past as a reminder of a particular kind of cultural experience which he contrasts with the experience of the world of this particular novel. This wealth of allusion emphasizes the fact that what a writer creates results, at least in part, from the literature of the past. This fact is, of course, true for all writers, but only emphasized by a few. Barth moves beyond a simple emphasis on literary influence, however, to a profound exploration and manipulation of it. By selecting the form of the eighteenth-century novel for The Sot-Weed Factor and loading it with allusion, Barth contends, through the form of his work, that a writer not only creates a world in the novel but recreates the actions of the writers before him. Barth's use of traditional literary data lays bare the particulars of fiction and of literary history, thus defining the novel as an artifact similar to the other works it recalls by name.

In his book John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox, Jac Tharpe identifies, besides the epic, the use of elements of the

picaresque, Hudibrastic realism, the historical romance, the historical novel, and the pastoral.<sup>6</sup> A novel which is all of these things and more, at a time after so many fictive forms have been discovered, presents problems of definition. Barth's contention is that traditional forms are exhausted, so that new fiction is only possible through the manipulation of older form. The plot of The Sot-Weed Factor, for example, neatly parallels the character of one of its central figures, Henry Burlingame, who shifts shapes, and uses available masks to exist in a world which remains chaotic and illusive. This continual shifting is appropriate because the idea of a single vision contained in a single form has been exhausted. As Barth comments in "The Literature of Exhaustion":

By "exhaustion" I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities--by no means necessarily a cause for despair.<sup>7</sup>

Those "used-up" forms become, all at once, the subject of fiction, a cause for laughter and tradition-hunting fun. Barth creates literature which is a performance of possibilities in a time which might otherwise be too smart for its own good. Such fiction must serve two purposes; it must amuse and stimulate.

The devices of fiction-making which are central in The Sot-Weed Factor indicate two levels of meaning in the novel. In one way the

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of various forms of the novel see Jac Tharpe, John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, 29.

story is a well-plotted, carefully structured tale which is entertaining to read in the same sense that tall tales have always been. In another sense the novel operates like a poem by T. S. Eliot. Both Barth and Eliot use allusion to connect their writings with a literary tradition, to send those readers who are interested back to the library to rediscover the materials standing behind a particular fiction. In Eliot there is a tension between "content" and "form"; for example, his use of allusions in "The Wasteland" points to works whose content opposes the lack of "content" implied by the form of the poem. For Barth, there are no difficulties of this nature. Barth's fiction, unlike Eliot's poetry, does not require an extensive scholarly background from its readers. An understanding of the epic quest makes The Sot-Weed Factor more interesting, but that knowledge is not necessary for an appreciation of the struggles of Ebenezer Cooke.

At one point Burlingame, who is disguised as Peter Sayer, and Cooke discuss the problem of appreciating fiction, of understanding the intellectual endeavor involved in the creation of work of the kind the young poet composes. Burlingame poses the question:

"Prithee, which gleans more pleasure from thy Hymn? The footboy who knows not Priam from Good King Wenceslas, or the don who calls the ancients by their nicknames? The savage Indian that ne'er heard tell of chastity or the Christian man who's learned to couple innocence with unpopped maiden head?"

"Marry!" Ebenezer exclaimed. "your case hath weight, my friend, but I confess it repels me to own the muse sings clearest to professors! 'Twas not of them I thought when I wrote the piece."  
(SWF, pp. 122-23)

The paradox of this exchange is apparent. Although Cooke may hope that as he speaks to every person, the audience who will glean the most from

his verse has had some kind of scholarly experience with the tradition from which he writes. Since the poet insists on creating through allusion, a familiarity with the literary referents becomes important. Ebenezer's problems parallel Barth's own. For although the writer may hope to appeal to a broad audience by telling a funny story, he has constructed a narrative so full of allusion that its appeal may be academic. But the age from which Barth writes is just that--too self-conscious, with too many libraries and available classics and handbooks of critical theory. The artist cannot create without inevitable echoes from the past.

The point of The Sot-Weed Factor is that with the possibilities for interpretation available on so many levels, it is impossible to select one appropriate form when all are as good as any particular one. The idea of the problem of choice is echoed in Ebenezer Cooke's difficulties described in a letter to his sister early in the novel:

It were an easy Matter to choose a Calling had one all Time to live in! I should be fifty Years a Barrister, fifty a Physician, fifty a Clergyman, fifty a Soldier! Aye, and fifty a Thief, and fifty a Judge! All Roads are fine Roads, beloved Sister, none more than another, so that with one Life to spend I am a Man bare-bumm'd at Taylors with Cash for but one pair of Breeches, or a Scholar at Bookstalls with Money for a single Book: to choose ten were no Trouble; to Choose one, impossible. All trades, all Crafts, all Professions are wondrous, but none is finer than the rest together. I cannot choose. (SWF, p. 10)

As all professions are fine ones, so too are all the forms of literature. The problem of choice for the character and the artist are the same. But the difficulty is an essentially modern one. The problem of a number of alternatives in any given situation results at least in part from

a loosening of the social structure, coupled with a social mobility which is a rather recent phenomenon. The contemporary writer, too, may choose from any number of forms and traditions. Barth's way of dealing with the rich tradition and all the possibilities it offers him is to attempt to incorporate as much as possible into the fiction he creates, adopting elements from various kinds of fiction.

In terms of the story The Sot-Weed Factor is a quest novel. Both of the central figures, Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame, search for something; Cooke, for his adulthood, and Burlingame, his ancestry. The central concern of the fiction is the necessity for a shift of form. Every character in the fiction must assume a mask, must lose his or her original identity before reaching a condition of stasis. Bertrand the servant, poses as Ebenezer Cooke; Joan Toast becomes Susan Warren; even Anna Cooke loses her identity completely. But, the character in the novel who most exemplifies the necessity for protean change is Henry Burlingame III, tutor to Anna and Ebenezer Cooke. Burlingame appears and reappears masked in whatever disguise he finds necessary to maintain his life and freedom and further his quest for his origins. At one point Bertrand and Ebenezer discuss Henry's disguises in an attempt to determine who he really is.

From all I've heard from yourself and others, he hath posed as Baltimore, Coode, Colonel Sayer, Tim Mitchell, Bertrand Burton, and Eben Cooke, to mention no more, and hath ne'er been found out yet! But what's the chiefest talent of John Coode, if not the same? Hath he not played priest, minister, general, and what have ye? Is't not his wont to travel always incognito, so that his own lieutenants scarce know his natural face?  
(SWF, p. 513)



Burlingame's masks enable him to move with the flux which is portrayed as reality in the novel. He appears sometimes as hero, sometimes as villain, but always as the master of his situation. Indeed, at one point, Burlingame, posing as Sayer, discusses the matter of a man's identity, much to Eben Cooke's frustration, concluding that "all assertions of thee and me, e'en to oneself, are acts of faith, impossible to verify" (SWF, p. 143).

The character who contrasts with the inconsistent Burlingame is Ebenezer Cooke, poet and laureate of Maryland. If Burlingame represents role playing in general carried to its superb conclusion, Ebenezer Cooke provides a specific case of role playing as he parodies both literary creation and its creators. He is a pastiche of the artist who announces his difference from other people and who becomes identified with a title without ever doing anything to deserve it. After Cooke decides to petition Lord Baltimore for the office of laureate, he exposes his own humorous pomposity:

He consulted his mirror and after some false starts, reflected this reflection: "Life! I must fling myself into Life, escape to't as Orestes to the temple of Apollo. Action be my sanctuary; Initiative my shield! I shall smite ere I am smitten; clutch Life by his horns! Patron of poets, thy temple be the Entire Great Real World, whereto I run with arms a-stretch: may't guard me from the Pit, and may my Erinyes sink 'neath the vertigo I flee to be transformed to mild Eumenides!" (SWF, p. 70)

Ebenezer's intensely self-conscious approach to events and his insistence on responding to situations only in the manner befitting a poet, with classical allusion and with a religious concern for literary tradition, make him a buffoon. This speaker who would fling himself into life is

the same creature repeatedly troubled by paralysis and fright when confronted with either a choice or a powerful emotion. When Joan Toast hops into his bed and invites him to follow her, he decides he cannot (SWF, p. 53).

Most importantly, his vision of the world is inverted. He mistakes reality for illusion, illusion for reality. Ebenezer's difficulty becomes apparent in an exchange with McEvoy after the poet has refused on principle to pay for the favors of Joan Toast. As McEvoy says:

There's naught o' the divine in Joan, my friend. She's mortal clay and hath her share o' failing like the rest of us. As for this vision ye speak of, 'tis the vision ye love, not the woman . . . 'tis not simply love ye know naught of, 'tis the entire great real world! Your senses fail ye; your busy fancy plays ye false and fills your head with foolish pictures. Things are not as ye see 'em friend--the world's a tangled skein, and all is knottier than ye take it for (SWF, p. 62).

An artist who, in a very real sense, has become the seer or priest in the modern world from which the novel is written, if not for the world in which the novel is set, is exposed as being dangerously naive. He is a person acutely confused about the difference between the external world and his interior vision. His art, however, must come from external experience. That Ebenezer calls himself a poet when he has written nothing points out the pretense. His posturing is just as much a mask as Burlingame's disguises.

The difference in point of view for the two characters is often a device for irony in the novel. In Chapter 26, "The Journey to Cambridge, and the Laureate's Conversation by the Way," Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame discuss poetry. The conversation which takes place

while they are searching together in Maryland for a clue to Henry's ancestry, is exemplary of the uses of irony in the novel as a whole. To begin with, the two men bring up Butler's Hudibras (1662), a famous burlesque from the period of the novel's setting. As Richard P. Bond defines the term in English Burlesque Poetry 1700-1750; "Burlesque consists in the use or imitation of serious matter or manner made amusing by the creation of an incongruity between style and subject."<sup>8</sup> The discussion between Cooke and Burlingame is an exploration of Hudibrastic verse as a form. At the same time, the chapter investigates its own inconsistencies between style and subject. There is a level of irony in the chapter which depends upon a familiarity with Butler's long poem. Often dismissed as a clever attack on the Puritans designed to gain the favor of the court, Butler's poem grew from an inventive imagination and a view which held mankind to be naive and hypocritical. The weapons of the satire, the uneven verse, slang, and jangling rhymes are used to emphasize the absurdity of the hero, knight errant, and the ideals of epic heroes in general to whom the characters can be compared.<sup>9</sup> Ebenezer misses the point of the poem entirely. Ebenezer Cooke exemplifies some Puritan principles; thus it is ironic that he should favor the verse or its related form. The conversation between Cooke and Burlingame exhibits further levels of irony. The tutor quite

<sup>8</sup> Richmond P. Bond, English Burlesque Poetry 1700-1750 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Butler, Hudibras Parts I and II and Selected Other Writings, edited by John Wilders and Hugh de Quehen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

obviously has a good deal of fun leading the poet on in the discussion of Hudibrastics.

"Hudibrastic, is it? I have heard the folk in Locket's speak well of Hudibras, but I always thought it tedious myself. What is't you mean by Hudibrastic?"

. . . "A Hudibrastic rhyme," he explained, "is a rhyme that is close, but not just harmonious . . . to wagon you must rhyme bag in, or sagging; almost you see but not quite.

The Indians call their wat'ry wagon  
Canoe, a Vessel none can brag on.

. . . "Then try this," Burlingame suggested:

"The Man and I commenc'd to quarrel  
Whose turn it was to woo the Barrel."

"Barrel! Barrel, you say?" Ebenezer's face grew red.

"What is this barrel? How would you use it?"

"'Tis a Hudibrastic," replied Burlingame with a smile.

"I'd use it to piss in." (SWF, pp. 379-381).

At this point the poet seems not to understand the relationship of form and content and the humorous function they serve when played against each other in satire. The chapter lays bare the business of versification. Cooke and Burlingame's rhyme making contest serves to expose the possibilities for couplets and the manner in which verse is written. The chapter on versification functions simultaneously on three levels. First, it lays bare the artificiality of The Sot-Weed Factor in the sense that the rhyming games played by Cooke and Burlingame underscore the artfulness of literature. Second, the discussion of Hudibrastics exposes the foolishness of the ever-pompous Ebenezer Cooke, who is a parody of the virtuous poet. Third, through the allusion in the chapter, the scholarly associations with traditional literature are called forth, as is the business of literary scholarship.

The kind of knowledge involved in literary creation as the subject for fiction receives a straightforward treatment in the novel. The

character of the protagonist, Ebenezer Cooke, in his role as poet exposes the business of artistic creation. As the novice laureate of Maryland, he reveals innocence and self-delusion; he must discover the world and the complexities of it; he must sink into the abyss before he can create. The quest for experience and for art operates on two levels: it represents a search for selfhood and for creative inspiration. Ebenezer's quest fails to follow a pattern of continuous upward movement toward a higher position. It is instead "nerve racking, painful and ambiguous." The movement of Cooke's search takes him "backward as well as forward, down as well as up."<sup>10</sup>

Ebenezer begins his journey from England to Maryland to find his home, Malden,<sup>11</sup> and his adult status, but he also goes as a poet in search of a subject for his poetry. What he ultimately learns about the world becomes the subject of his art. And that knowledge comes from an opium dream which parodies the experiences of the American Beat poets of the fifties as well as those of earlier English writers, Coleridge and De Quincy. In his dream he tries to find Parnassus, only to discover that the road is filled with obstacles and choices, but the dream results in a new perspective for the poet.

The vision rests with the problem of choice. Ebenezer lands

<sup>10</sup> The quest of Ebenezer Cooke is described by Richard Boyd Hauck, "These Fruitful Odysseys: John Barth" A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> Malden was the name of the home of the poet Cooke around whose life Barth has constructed his fiction.

"between twin mountain cones of polished alabaster" (SWF, p. 453).

Parnassus is the one on the right he learns, but he cannot tell which way right is. On one peak there are "ugly men with clubs who mash the climber's fingers" (SWF, p. 454). If not armed with clubs, they had "hachets or bodkins" (SWF, p. 454). There are also women on couches to lure the men from their task. The slopes are filled with other dangers: "treadmills," "false signposts" and a deafening applause which caused the climbers to lose their grip (SWF, p. 454). The point of the dream comes from a conversation the poet has with an old man.

"But there's naught here to climb for: you've said that yourself!"

"Aye nor aught naywhere else either. They'd as well climb as sit still and die."

"I'm going to jump!" Ebenezer declared suddenly. "I've no wish to see these things a moment more!"

"No reason why ye oughtn't, nor any why ye ought."  
(SWF, p. 455)

The struggle upward which is the center of Cooke's hallucination is ultimately pointless. In his unconscious state, he discovers that what he seeks has been blocked by various obstacles and that the result of all his struggling, like that of the other people on the mountain, remains of no consequence. There is no reason to go or to stop. Either way the situation is meaningless. In the poet's trance, he fails to discover beauty, but he has discovered a truth in the world of the novel.

The entire novel is based on reversals or shifts, on the inability of Cooke to find a solid footing or an ordering principle. The form and content work together to reflect the absence of a moral center or

a definite direction. Before the poet leaves for England, Burlingame tells him:

"The world can alter a man entirely, Eben, or he can alter himself, down to his very essence . . . Nay a man must alter willy-nilly in's flight to the grave; he is a river running seawards, that is ne'er the same from hour to hour . . . I'faith, for that matter how is't we speak of objects if not that our coarse vision fails to note their change? The world's indeed a flux, as Heraclitus declared: the very universe is naught but change and motion." (SWF, pp. 125-26).

The shifting and changing are necessities for life in a world where flux is the only constant. In the case of The Sot-Weed Factor, the structure and content work together to reflect the absence of moral center or direction. An appropriate response presented by the novel to the lack of a centering element in the world is simply to keep moving, keep shifting, keep performing.

The lack of any moral center in the novel corresponds to the absence of a voice for meaning. The rhetoric of the eighteenth-century novel generally includes a narrator who comments and judges events and characters.<sup>12</sup> With all the similarities between The Sot-Weed Factor and earlier fictional forms, one extremely crucial difference remains: there is no platform for meaning in the novel. The narrator of this novel does little more than report.<sup>13</sup> This absence of narrative voice reflects the lack of center for judgment in the modern world from which

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the function of the narrator to reveal beliefs or norms in the novel see Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 177-196.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of the narrator see Campbell Tatham, "John Barth and the Aesthetics of Artifice," ConL, 12 (1971), 66.

the novel is written. Yet, the novel is grounded in the history of Maryland, in "real historical fact." This history becomes art about art from a very modern point of view. That modernity demands an alteration in the use of a narrator.

The narrator of The Sot-Weed Factor reports on characters primarily during moments when they cannot delineate their personalities to other characters. Narration, when it is used, serves a transitional function, ending an event or a passage and moving on to something else. The passage which appears at the end of the first section exemplifies the type of objective narrative viewpoint which appears throughout the novel. The narrator details the scene from differing perspectives:

It was near midnight when Ebenezer returned at last to his rooms. He called in vain for Bertrand and tipsily commenced undressing, still very full of his success. But whether because of the silence of his room after Locket's, or the unhappy sight of his bed lying still unmade as he'd left it in the morning, the linens all rumpled and soiled from his four days' despair, or some more subtle agency, his gaiety seemed to leave him with his clothes . . .  
(SWF, p. 98)

The narrator's first concern is the relaying of factual information, the establishment of time and place. He then describes the actions of the character. But when he moves into the area of feelings and an analysis of those feelings, he comments with some uncertainty. The possibilities for Ebenezer's reaction cannot be limited to one response or to one stimulus, either that of sight or sound. The word "seemed" captures the narrator's unwillingness to commit himself to a certain knowledge of Ebenezer's feelings and thoughts. The narrator reports events. But like Henry Burlingame or any essentially modern person,



he indicates that things may seem one way, but one can never know with certainty why they appear the way they do. One may perhaps observe the time and place of an event; but when the subject is human behavior there is an unknown or variable quantity. Appearance depends on the point of view. The narrator can view a situation from more than one place at a time, but still avoids the omniscient viewpoint which would give him absolutely certain knowledge.

The apology at the end of The Sot-Weed Factor explores the relationship of art and history and serves to undercut the objectivity of the previous narrative posture:

Lest it be objected by a certain stodgy variety of squint-minded antiquarians that he has in this lengthy history played more fast and loose with Clio, the chronicler's muse, than ever Captain John Smith dared, the author here posits in advance, by way of surety, three blue-chip replies arranged in order of decreasing relevancy. In the first place be it remembered, as Burlingame himself observed, that we all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest; the happenings of former times are a clay in the present moment that will-we, nill-we, the lot of us must sculpt. Thus Being does make Positivists of us all. (SWF, p. 743)

With the final sentence Barth returns to ironic considerations of Hamlet's question as he did in his earlier novel, The Floating Opera. This intrusive address serves a multiple purpose. It is a statement about the novel, laying bare the fact of the author behind the narrative and the tradition behind the author. It exposes an awareness that the novel is an artifact, a creation of an author who has, up to this point, remained distant from the fiction. The statement underscores the defamiliarization of history as the subject for fiction, exposing the fact of invention and fictionalizing as the only certainty. The

allusion to the muse, Clio, puts this particular fiction in a tradition with all that has been written before, asserting that the only governing principles in the world are Whim and Interest. Thus, the creative act is the only dependable and authentic one.

Barth's novel results not from simple fancy. The book is a carefully constructed, well-plotted story in which the framework receives primary attention: character exploration remains secondary. Although patterned on the eighteenth-century model, The Sot-Weed Factor, as a modern fiction, contradicts some early assumptions about what a novel is, providing an example of what the form is for Barth.

Most importantly The Sot-Weed Factor parodies the myth, history, and chronicle of early America. The fiction is based on the life of an actual person named Ebenezer Cooke who did, in fact, publish a poem called "The Sot-Weed Factor." The historical figure is described in articles by Philip E. Diser, "The Historical Ebenezer Cooke,"<sup>14</sup> and Laurence C. Wroth, "The Maryland Muse by Ebenezer Cooke."<sup>15</sup> Not only does Barth base his book on an obscure historical figure; he also utilizes myth particularly the myth of American history. He plays with the view of America as a land of heroes, with the illusion that the country's history was made solely by selfless people guided by the highest ideals. In The Sot-Weed Factor the heroes become villains only

<sup>14</sup> Philip E. Diser, "The Historical Ebenezer Cooke," Crit, 10 (1968), 48-59.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence C. Wroth, "The Maryland Muse by Ebenezer Cooke," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, 44 (October 1934), pp. 267-308.

to become heroes again. Often in the world of the novel, characters change sides so frequently that the list of the various factions in Maryland changes continuously. Barth also has rewritten the story of John Smith inverting it so that the explorer becomes a man guided more by lust and guile than by heroic principles. The exploration and explosion of noble Captain Smith's myth is accomplished through the introduction of two fictional journals, which appear in pieces throughout the novel (SWF, pp. 148-155, 368-373, 556-565, 730-738). The search for the journals coalesces with Burlingame's search for the father, since the tale of the mysterious ancestry of Henry Burlingame can only be discovered through the information in the documents. The journals also reveal the personalities of figures from American history. Their manipulation of the Indians is uncovered, as John Smith uses a trick to escape death at the hand of the natives:

At this juncture, the Capt. (who afterwards confided to me, he was searching for his Africkan good-luck peece) withdrew from his coat a packet of little colour'd cards, the wch, with seeming innocence, he let fall to the grownd. The Salvages at once became arows'd, and scrabl'd one atop the other, to see who shd retrieve the most. Upon examining them, they found the cards to portray, in vivid colours, Ladies and Gentlemen mother-naked, partaking of sundrie amorousities on with another: in parties of two, three, four, and even five . . . (SWF, p. 149)

The journals, essential to the movement of the story, comment upon the American habit of mythologizing its past--its tendency to apotheosize historical figures. The mythical greatness of historical personages is hilariously undercut by the journals, which contain numerous tales of gluttony, greed, and competition. The revered figures of American

history turn out to be dirty jokes.<sup>16</sup> The novel lays bare the myth of art and the myth of history by defamiliarizing the events and characters of the past. Through the questioning of America's mythological history and the recreating of situations and characters in the journals, the novelist asserts the validity of old forms (in this case the mysterious, missing document) and old tales (Captain Smith's adventures) to create new fiction.

Robert Scholes argues that the story of Ebenezer Cooke shows the effects of structuralist thinking. Structuralism is in many respects the most recent of attempts to understand and organize reality. Although very much in the tradition of Henry Fielding, for all the protean posing and eighteenth-century costuming, The Sot-Weed Factor is a modern fiction, in the sense that the characters are types, and the structure or movement of the plot is more important than the development of character. As Scholes points out:

Structuralist thinking is having a powerful effect on the contemporary novel . . . But one aspect of the effect has naturally been the decline of fictional individuation of character and a resurgence of typification. And another aspect has been an increase in novels where structure dominates character as it did not in the best fiction of the previous century.<sup>17</sup>

The characters in The Sot-Weed Factor may be understood as modes for dealing with reality. Ebenezer Cooke is an innocent who must learn to

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of Barth's manipulation of American figures see Leslie A. Fielder, The Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), pp. 150-152.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), p. 193.

put aside all preconceived ideas on morality and order to survive in a "new world." The role playing, shape shifting Henry Burlingame III is also a type. He has no center and becomes the personality the situation demands. His lack of identity results from his ignorance of his origin. Anna Cooke is the good girl who discovers her sexual side and goes bad, only to be reclaimed to goodness in the end. Joan Toast is the whore with the heart of gold who comes to a bad end. Who the characters really are is actually less important than the movement of plot. The flow of the fiction demands that they change masks from time to time, but they never actually develop as individualized characters.

Thus the appearance of various characters in the fiction mainly serves the purposes of plot. The characters appear and disappear only to show up again in another costume at a different point in the narrative. In the beginning of the tale, Henry Burlingame tells the story of his life on a pirate ship belonging to Captain Tom Pound (SWF, p. 140). Ebenezer ends up on that same ship some pages later (SWF, p. 239). Toward the end of the novel, the two women whom Burlingame saved from the pirates (SWF, p. 43) end up on a pirate ship again (SWF, p. 683). One of the women is discovered to have been the nurse of Ebenezer and his sister (SWF, p. 679) as well as the lover of the pirate captain who held her captive toward the end (SWF, p. 698). The reappearance of the African and the Indian chief, both of whom Ebenezer saved earlier in the novel, is expected (SWF, p. 547). The story of their own problems and desires and their connection to Henry Burlingame

III is not (SWE, p. 557). The plot falls together like a giant puzzle of tales within tales, each story interesting in itself, yet fitting nicely into the whole picture at the end. But, as complicated as the stories are, they deal only with external events in the lives of the characters, not with their internal, emotional growth or development.

With his third novel, then, Barth makes statements about the kind of fiction he or any writer can create in a world which has explored the human psyche and developed an enormous critical language for dealing with history and literature. With this novel, he spins a story into a well plotted and puzzling sequence of occasions. He exercises his knowledge of literary history and tradition, keeping his own moral judgements well hidden from the world of the novel. He creates a performance in an arena where language and tradition become spectacle and humor.

#### IV. AN ALLEGORY OUT OF TIME

In Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus (1966) John Barth gives literal shape to the esthetic concerns of his earlier fiction. Like The Sot-Weed Factor, the work is difficult to pin-point in terms of form although in most respects it is allegorical. Importantly the fiction defamiliarizes Western myth, allegory in general, and the Oedipus cycle and the experience of Jesus in the New Testament in particular. It parodies the act of artistic creation while questioning the assumptions at the center of Western morality. Barth has created an allegory which works on the level of story, moral or myth, and history, while at the same time he explores the form itself. The question of point of view, usually an abstract esthetic consideration, becomes a concrete thematic concern through the manipulation of mirrors, eyes, eyesight, glasses, and scopes of various sorts. But the choice of allegory as an appropriate form for the exploration of these concerns is ironic because the modern point of view, with all its visual and philosophical aids, cannot accept the simple moral vision implied by what is traditionally a didactic structure. If this particular allegory has any point to make, it is the assertion of its own artfulness. The search of the goat-boy parallels the quest of the artist. Giles Goat-Boy, above all else concerns the problem of writing fiction, of finding a form for modern story telling. The experiences of Giles Goat-Boy expose the trials of a writer of a

certain kind in search for both a subject and an appropriate form for fiction.

Allegory has a tradition and takes its impact and meaning directly from the manner in which the form has been used in the past. Traditional allegory presupposes that all reality is a simultaneous order, with each event, and level corresponding to others in that order. Thus, such allegory sought a mimesis of the true (though not always observable) structure of reality. As mimesis, literary allegory did not claim to create such correspondences, but to discover them and often to analyze them. For example, in the medieval (and patristic) school exercises, Jerusalem was, historically, the city of the Jewish state; typologically, the Christian church, prefigured by the Jews in the temple of Solomon; morally, the good Christian life; and anagogically, the New Jerusalem. Barth is playing with the same scheme. Historically, New Tammany with all its corrupt characters is a reflection of the contemporary world. Typologically, New Tammany is academia filled with its potential and energy and confusion. Morally, it represents a place for passage from innocence to experience. Anagogically, it represents chaos out of which the artist can create an artistic order. The contemporary parallel to the medieval idea of heaven is the act of artistic creation. Rather than reveal an already existing truth, Barth's allegory builds its principles, creates its correspondences through linguistic maneuvers drawing meaning from objects which have no meaning unless examined from a particular point of view. Barth has structured his narrative in such a fashion that the idea of



correspondences and understanding is the thematic center of his fiction. Theme and structure and esthetics are all the same in this work. The artfulness of the creation results from the correspondences which the writer has invented. The inventiveness is the point of the fiction.

The artfulness of the fiction is underscored before the story actually begins. The novelist has created a purposefully deceptive introduction to a truly gigantic novel. From the first line of the "Publisher's Disclaimer," the work asserts its artificiality.

The reader must begin this book with an act of faith and end it with an act of charity. We ask him to believe in the sincerity and authenticity of this preface, affirming in return his prerogative to be skeptical of all that follows it. (GGB, p. 1)

Someone requests that the reader believe a preface and in return, grants him the right to question all that follows this strange beginning. The comment underscores the idea of the suspension of disbelief which is a necessity for entering a fictional world.

The fiction starts with a joke, a frame composed of comments by an editor-in-chief and the recommendations of four other editors, along with the "Cover Letter to the Editors and Publisher," by "J.B." Barth's general concern with creating an intricate plot evolves, in this instance, into a story about a publishing company, framing a story about a writer who receives the manuscript as a gift from a mysterious youth. The frame, explaining the doubtful origins of the story, serves to dissociate the work, with all its intricate ridiculousness and levels of interpretation, from any traditional concept of author and creation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the frame see James L. McDonald, "Barth's Syllabus: The Frame of Giles Goat-Boy," Crit, 13 (1971), 6.

Yet the device serves to expose by denial the consciousness of the creation.

∴ In terms of content, Barth spoofs the business of writing fiction in a contemporary world where people of varying levels of interest and sensitivity control the publishing industry. Barth's own career was troubled by such people who would, for example, allow publication of The Floating Opera only after the author had altered the original ending. Only after achieving some recognition for other works, was he able to return the work to its intended form. The parody of editors and their arguments becomes a different sort of business when viewed in the light of Barth's own experience.

The introductory material functions on still another level. The explanatory letter signed "J. B." (GGB, pp. xxvii-xxxi) echoes a tradition in including letters of various kinds to patrons, a practice necessary to earlier writers. For example, Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene begins with a letter to both Elizabeth and Sir Walter Raleigh, from whom the writer sought support, in much the same fashion that a modern writer seeks endorsement from editors and reviewers. The inclusion of all of the material by way of a beginning for the allegory lays bare a tradition at the same time that it announces the artificiality of what follows.

Traditionally considered didactic and intellectual, the artificial form of allegory serves a specific purpose and relies on a tradition-bound set of expectations. The particular history associated with allegory has been delineated by Scholes and Kellogg in The Nature of

Narrative. If the definition of a narrative form rests with determinations concerning the representational, esthetic or illustrative effectiveness of its imagery, then the term allegory applies to that fiction which focuses on the latter of the three. Conceptions of allegory have been shaped by the writers who have used the form. As Scholes and Kellogg have observed:

Spenser stipulates philosophical, theological, and political meanings for esthetic images which he took from a rich heritage of ancient and medieval heroic narrative; whereas Joyce stipulates esthetic meaning for the representational images of his empirical fiction . . . . Historically, however, allegory developed as a mode of thought and a mode of story-telling that were ideally suited to the purposes of narrative artists who conceived their obligation to instruct to be at least as binding as their obligation to delight.<sup>2</sup>

Barth does two important things with the allegory. He takes a form which historically presents a meaning and turns that form into meaninglessness. George the goat-boy learns nothing; there is nothing to be learned. All the fabricating, and questing leads nowhere--but the journey becomes the message. The allegorizing has no other point than the exploration of itself, as the goat-boy's journey has no point but its own process. And the irony of the universe as university, as a center of learning, rests with the impossibility of mastering anything. The university becomes a place to discover the self, but not to learn ultimate truths about the nature of reality, for there are none. Allegory becomes meaningless except as a means of exploring its own literary possibilities. The process becomes all important, because there is,

<sup>2</sup> Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 111.

ultimately, no end product.

To assert the essential nothingness at the philosophical center of all of his fiction, Barth here attacks, through both his form and content, the original source of meaning in Western Culture. That attack connects with the origins of allegory. What Barth does in Giles Goat-Boy, or The Revised New Syllabus is lay bare the nature of allegory and the beginning of a metaphorical reading of literature. By creating a narrative which functions on so many levels at once, that has so many analogous structures, Barth re-examines the old form. And by calling his work a "new syllabus," he calls for a new kind of reading and a new kind of criticism. Much of the study of literature as metaphor for Christian culture began with the examination of Biblical material. Scriptural allegory begins a kind of literary criticism. As D. W. Robertson Jr. has noted:

A taste for allegory among Christians was certainly encouraged by the prophetic books of the Old Testament as well as by the Parables of Christ in the Gospels, but it was more than encouraged by the Epistles of St. Paul which formed the source and inspiration for the tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The foundations of Western literature rest in the stories and figures from the Bible. By using the Bible as a device for parody, Barth demands a rethinking of the original document. The novel, Giles Goat-Boy defamiliarizes the Biblical quest experience and the interpretation of that experience. This new narrative, ironically a computer print-out, serves as a reminder of the nature of life in a modern world which

<sup>3</sup> D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 290.

believes more in machines and less in mystery or where machines become the mystery.

Robertson's comments on allegory provide a means of entering the labyrinth of the goat-boy's tale. Scriptural allegorical exegesis needs defining:

The word allegory here means, as it does among the grammarians "saying one thing to mean another," but the thing said in the first place is also true. The principle involves neither the analysis of figurative language nor the interpretation of a superficially false fable. The things and events described in the Old Testament remain things and events, but they are never the less significant by an allegory.<sup>4</sup>

Giles Goat-Boy inverts this principle (in the same fashion that all allegory does). The things and events of George's story have a significance in terms of an allegorical reading. But the world from which the narrative of the goat-boy's journey to the university takes shape remains so different from the world of traditional allegory that the result of the experience of the tale is different. The form, by its very nature didactic, makes any lessons to be gained from it dependent on a clear understanding of the possibility of right action. The assumptions at the center of the modern world are different. That difference creates an ironic distance between what allegory has meant and what this particular allegory does mean.

Correspondences between the fictional universe and the university, which effectively defamiliarize the elements of contemporary history expose the inventiveness of the fiction.<sup>5</sup> Max unfolds the entire

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, p. 291.

<sup>5</sup> For a full exploration of the levels of allegory see Robert Scholes, The Fabulators, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 135-173.

history, of the Western world in thinly veiled terms to George, who relates it in the narrative:

Twenty years ago, he said, a cruel herd of men called Bonifacists, in Siegfrieder College, had attacked the neighboring quads. The Siegfrieders were joined by certain other institutions, and soon every college in the university was involved in the Second Campus Riot. Untold numbers perished on both sides; the populous Moishian community in Siegfried was destroyed. Max himself, born and educated in those famous halls where, science, philosophy, and music had flowered in happier semesters, barely escaped with his life to New Tammany College, and though he was by temperament opposed to riot, he'd put his mathematical genius at the service of his new alma mater. (GGB, p. 50)

The Bonifacists obviously represent the Nazi Party in Germany which takes the name of Siegfrieder College in the allegory. The Second Campus Riot is the Second World War and the Moishians are Jewish people; Max is, furthermore, a type of Jewish intellectual who echoes Marx, Freud and Einstein. But Barth does not end his allegory with the present; instead he moves forward to a time in the future when computers run the world. The situation is described in the novel.

The whole of New Tammany College, I took it, if not the entire campus, had gradually come under WESCAC's hegemony, voluntarily or otherwise: it anticipated its own need and saw to it they were satisfied; it set its own problems and solved them. It governed every phase of student life, deciding who should marry whom, how many children they should bear, and how they should be reared; itself it taught them, as it saw fit, graded their performance and assigned them lifeworks somewhere in its vast demesne. (GGB, p. 51)

The situation reverberates with Orwellian predictions. It also echoes futuristic works like Arthur C. Clarke's The City and the Stars (1956) or his film co-authored with Stanley Kubrick, 2001: A Space Odyssey. The control of individuals, now out of their hands, belongs to the computer which makes all important decisions and controls all vital

experiences. But the control of people by WESCAC means something even broader. Max had taught the machine Electroencephalic Amplification and Transmission which enables the computer to EAT all enemies (GGB, p. 52). The attack of the machine causes "disintegration of personality, loss of identity, and inability to choose, act, or move except on impulse" for those who survive an attack (GGB, p. 53). The attack results in mental or emotional damage. The ultimate weapon in the center of the university does not attack the physical aspect of human beings, but "EATs" up their intellectual capacity. This university world, run by a computer with all its decision making powers and controls, is, nevertheless, chaotic.

The metaphor of the universe as university, with its implications of life in the world as a learning experience, points to the facts of life in the American university. The confusion found in the university world of Giles Goat-Boy corresponds to the confusion of the university in the world outside the novel, where the university is, in fact, a microcosm of the condition of mankind. Also, universities contain scholarly information about the traditions and history of culture. In this novel, as in other works by Barth, there are pieces of information and detail, and levels of meaning which are more accessible to persons with academic training. The tapestry of Barth's allegory, richly woven with allusion and the corresponding echoes of literary tradition, demands that attention be paid to scholarship, even if only to point out that intellectual activity does not bring ultimate answers.

The thread of the plot moves continually from the past to the

present and back again. Not only does the actual unfolding of the story shift as characters reveal their own histories, but along with allegorical tradition, the narrative refers to the Biblical past and to contemporary people. Enos Enoch, in whose steps George tries to follow, is a fictional referent for Jesus Christ. Barth has established an allegorical framework which functions on several levels. There is first the bildungsroman, the cycle of experience for George. But this journey to maturity also functions on the moral or mythic level. George's journey is one that every human being must make from innocence to experience. George's adventures correspond to those of other heroic figures in literature and to those of Jesus in the Bible. The division of the world of the narrative into East Campus and West Campus, peopled with various characters who have contemporary referents, signals a third for the allegory, the historical level. Furthermore, the fiction's existence in the contemporary world requires that it pay attention to literary tradition and to its own artfulness. The experiences of George in the university correspond to events in the lives of all mythic heroes as described by Lord Raglan and Joseph Campbell.<sup>6</sup> With so predictable and so highly derivative a plot, the work's purpose must lie somewhere outside any questions of new philosophical insight. The clue to the point of all of the elaborate structuring is in the

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Le Clair, "John Barth's The Floating Opera: Death and the Craft of Fiction," TSL, 15 (1973), 727. See also Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949). Fitz Roy Richard Somerset Raglan, The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama (1936; rpt. London: Watts, 1949).



modernity of the fiction.

In Structuralism in Literature, Scholes offers a description of what he sees as a trend in contemporary literature.

In the twentieth century, fiction has tended to continue moving away from realism; going beyond naturalism . . . . Here we would expect a combination of the grotesque in characterization and the arabesque in construction. Allegory would be a likely vehicle for fiction because it traditionally has offered ways of combining satire and romance. In fiction of this sort the world and its denizens would appear fragmented and distorted, and language would be tortured in an attempt to hold the satiric and romantic views of life together. Is this, in fact, the present literary situation?<sup>7</sup>

The attempt to hold the satiric and romantic impulses together through language becomes reflected in the form. The selection and examination of that form, then, becomes the subject of fiction. A discussion of narrative, of the quest for forms for story telling, is the point of the work. The idealism and personal vision which propels romantic literature becomes transformed by personal insights which create satire. The result is an allegory about itself.

Quite often in allegory, abstractions like love, fear, or innocence are made concrete for the purpose of communicating a moral. For example, Barth creates a character named Sear, who has an office filled with scopes which fail to provide him with any sort of insight, for this purpose (GGB, p. 188). Also, Croaker appears to represent the Freudian id since he is often guided by his various appetites (GGB, p. 121). But allegory does not always embody the personification of an idea of

<sup>7</sup> Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 138.

abstraction. What allegory adopts has been determined by its history. Dante, for example, used both historical and Biblical figures throughout The Divine Comedy. Barth has chosen to do the same. Also, quite often allegory derives its meaning from the implications of geography or place, as with the "Garden of Adonis" in Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene (Bk III, Canto 6). The central metaphor of university as universe adds meaning to Barth's narrative. Allegory can be defined as the use of a narrative on one level of reality to convey meaning on another level; and it rests on the assumption of correspondences. Allegory shares an important characteristic with irony, as Scholes has pointed out: "One of the primary qualities is that it [irony] divides its audience into an elite group who get the irony and a subordinate group who miss it. (Allegory, it may be pointed out, is similarly divisive)."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, this particular kind of literature depends on an understanding of correspondences, an ability to recognize that one thing stands for another.

Giles Goat-Boy, as an allegorical structure plays on the tradition of the medieval exegetes. The goat-boy's journey, which bridges the whole book, corresponds in many ways to Christ's journey to Jerusalem. To the Biblical scholar the city of Jerusalem is both a real place and a location of allegorical significance. It is the City of Heaven and a place of spiritual peace. But the place to which the goat-boy journeys inverts any idea of peace or heaven. George leaves the peace of his

<sup>8</sup> Scholes, Structuralism, p. 36.

boyhood barnyard for New Tammany where he must confront the chaos of the modern world and his own internal confusion. New Tammany probably takes its name from both Saint Tammany, humorously regarded as the patron saint of the United States, and Tammany Hall, a corrupt and powerful political organization in New York.<sup>9</sup> George finds himself in an environment composed of modern philosophical, religious, and intellectual disorder. (GGB, p. 55) But he also confronts the confusion that any young person finds in struggling for adult insight into the impulses of a human being. A ritual of passage occurs in the university for a segment of contemporary society. So there are limited echoes of a holy city of sorts. The goat-boy's journey to New Tammany and the experience he has there corresponds to a voyage into the self and into the confusion which has replaced any concept of heaven. An appreciation of George's journey rests on an understanding of the tradition from which he comes and the deliberate inversions of the Biblical quest. The entire narrative serves to defamiliarize Christian myth.

The plot structure which includes the quest for knowledge, truth and right action functions to defamiliarize not only Christian myth but Greek myth as well. Again a new point of view which uses new language transforms an old story into a modern and ironically humorous fiction. Toward the end of the first volume, Barth humorously parodies the story of Oedipus with a play called Taliped Decanus (GGB, pp. 265-312).

<sup>9</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, 1960 edition (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1960), p. 1488.

The play defamiliarizes the tragedy through a highly colloquial and bawdy handling of the story, while parodying theatre audiences and critics as well.

"A modern translation," Max remarked. "I hate it." But Dr. Sear declared that idiomatic translation of the classics was much in fashion in the College, and that while he agreed that the modernization could go too far, he approved of the general principle. I observed that the lines-ends seemed to rhyme, more or less, in pairs.

"Heroic couplets," Dr. Sear explained. "Nothing modern about them." (GGB, p. 265)

Max objects to the modernity of the translation while Dr. Sear agrees in principle with the transformation of the play. Barth exposes his own awareness of the attitudes possible with what he is doing. But he stretches his self-exposure further by writing the play in heroic couplets and then having one of the characters announce to anyone who might have neglected to notice, the use of the old form in the modern fiction.

The Oedipus myth deals with the problem of knowledge, as connected with point of view and blindness, and seems highly appropriate in its new form to an allegory concerned with finding a vision. The play deals directly with sight and insight and the lack of either (GGB, p. 277). The business of sight and blindness is central to the entire book. The situation in the play parallels the conditions which punctuate the plot. Some characters "see" what goes on; others do not. And allegory as a form concerns itself with the division of people into those who see the meaning and those who do not.

Interestingly, the allegory deals with the problem of point of

view in a very specific fashion. Robert Scholes notes that "a bizarre collection of scopes and lenses underscore the motifs of quest and perception in Giles Goat-Boy."<sup>10</sup> George gains new insight and understanding of his lady with a fluoroscope and explores the relationship of seeing and knowing along with the knowledge of another in the "Biblical sense." (GGB, p. 619) Max Speilman's proctoscopy with its connections to the "riddle of the sphincter" (GGB, p. 1) by taking a new look at an old archetype.<sup>11</sup> Barth deals with vision and the problems of perspective and the developments which occur with altered view point and added information. Oedipus becomes a scapegoat and chooses to blind himself as a penalty for his earlier lack of vision. George's point of view, and his corresponding ability to evaluate any situation shifts according to his position and knowledge in any given situation. The lack of certainty in the world of the novel prevents George from adopting a point of view and sticking with it. The problem for George mirrors the problem for the writer in the world outside the novel. The lack of certainty of a proper perspective corresponds to the impossibility of knowing the proper point of view from which to

<sup>10</sup> Scholes, Fabulators, p. 142.

<sup>11</sup> As Scholes notes in The Fabulators: "Barth is playing with archetypes here, and playing with words. It was Oedipus who solved the sphinx's riddle and became the saviour of his city. And it was Oedipus who killed his father, married his mother, and finally saved his city once again by becoming a scapegoat, suffering expulsion and blindness to atone for his lack of vision. By punning alteration of sphinx's to sphincter, Barth unites these two actions more firmly than Freud himself, and in doing so he brings the whole mansions of philosophy into the place of excrement." (p. 142)

create a fiction. The theme and the form are the same.

' The allegory is about the information explosion--about the impossibility of obtaining a consistent point of view when reality can be altered in so many ways in the world outside the novel from which the fiction takes its meaning. As Max catalogues the situation to George:

Thus the proliferation of new religions, secular and otherwise, in the last half-dozen generations: the Pre-Schoolers, with their decadent primitivism and their morbid head for emotion, dark fancy, and deep sleep; the Curricularists, with their pedagogic nostrums and naive faith in "the infinite educability of student-dom;" the Evolutionaries; the quasi-mystical Ismists; the neo-Enochians with their tender-minded retreat to the intellectual myth-worship; the Bonifacists, fanatically sublimating their libidos to the administrative level and revering their Kanzler . . . (GGB, p. 55)

The list continues, mirroring the various factions familiar to the reader of a newspaper in the world outside the fiction. George's confusion comes from his attempt to deal with a reality composed of conglomerate chaos. He tries to sort it all out, but the result is as it can only be, retreat and depression.

The character best equipped to unravel the impossibility of seeing clearly appears to be Eblis Eierkoph, whose name is translated as "egghead" from German and whom George meets after viewing the play. Eierkoph's inabilities, however, point to the problem posed by the novel, implied through the central metaphor, and stated in the difficulties faced by Taliped Decanus: the weaknesses of being too mental, too intellectual. Physically Eierkoph is a freak, white skinned, with useless legs and genitals, bloated paunch and small chest. Yet he does

have an outstanding feature: "Most remarkable was his head; an out-sized hairless browless ball that dangled forward and to one side as if too weighty for the neck. Thick round eyeglasses he wore on it, whose rimless lenses magnified thumbnail-colored eyes. He had no teeth" (GGB, p. 319). He relies on the completely physical Croaker to give him the totality necessary to function. He passes time harmlessly, he claims; "disengaged intelligences" cause no problems, amusing "themselves between prodigious intellectual feats by spying on naked sophomore girls with an infra-red telescope" (GGB, p. 323). This extremely mental, intellectual outlook refuses to take responsibility for the facts of life on campus, blaming evil on those who have emotions. Yet Eierkoph gives George mirrors and lenses to aid him in his quest, telling him what he can expect to find:

"Look all around the University," he advised me. "You'll see stars and planets you didn't know about, and girls undressing and doing things with their boyfriends. You'll see your blood cells and your crablice and your spermatozoa. Some things that look alike you'll see to be different, and some you thought were different will turn out to be the same. But you can look from now until the end of terms, and you won't see anything but the natural University. It's all there is." (GGB, p. 337)

The lenses and scopes aid in distinguishing observable phenomenon, and that concrete reality is all Eblis deals with. He remains a voyeur where other matters are concerned.

The narrative plays with all the possibilities for literalization and expansion of point of view. All the lenses and glasses and trick mirrors and various scopes are quite useless, but more than that, they are destructive, often causing deception and an accompanying pain. All

the inhabitants of the university are troubled by one-way mirrors or reflections that make them voyeurs of one sort or another. And the onlookers experience the most difficulty. Peter Greene apparently heaves a rock at his own reflection, causing the broken mirror to knock his eye out (GGB, p. 235). Dr. Sear has an office equipped with visual aids that he uses to stimulate himself and others (GGB, p. 465).

The universe cannot be perceived accurately with all these aids to vision. There is no ultimate truth at the center. All forms of truth are the same. "Passage is failure" (GGB, p. 600) and "Self knowledge . . . is always bad news" (GGB, p. 85). The way out of this philosophical dead end is the performance, the manipulation of literary forms and personal masks. The character from the allegory who manages to endure (and even to appear in a later Barth novel) is Harold Bray in all his various disguises. Barth's narrative points to this possibility. George may attempt a kind of ideal posture in any situation, but Bray the opponent, whose initials are the same as the shape shifting Henry Burlingame,<sup>12</sup> can seize the day. Bray manages throughout the narrative to control any situation by assuming the appropriate mask. He wears his own mask when George first encounters him (GGB, p. 378) and switches to an appearance like the goat boy's when that will serve his purpose. He even comes equipped with a mask for George to wear (GGB, p. 504). But George has failed to understand the nature of the world he has encountered although he himself made note of what seemed

<sup>12</sup> For the discussion of the similarities of Barth's heroes see the Le Clair article.



important early in his education:

I looked upon my life and the lives of others as a kind of theatrical impromptu, self-knowledge as a matter of improvisation, and moral injunctions, such as those of the Fables, whether high-minded or wicked, as so many stage-directions. A fact, in short, even an autobiographical fact, was not something I perceived and acknowledged . . . .Nothing for me was simply the case forever and aye, only "this case." (GGB, p. 81)

George loses the flexibility of his boyhood when he journeys to the university.

At one point in the narrative George describes his own manner of dealing with literature.

I still preferred literature to any other subject and the old stories of adventure to any other literature, but my response to them was by no means intellectual. I couldn't have cared less what light they shed upon student cultures in ancient terms, or what their place was in the history of West Campus art; though my eyes and ears were keen enough, I took no interest in stylistics, allegorical values, or questions of form; all that mattered was the hero's performance. (GGB, p. 79)

This confession on the part of the goat-boy as to his rather unsophisticated reading of literature describes the bias of his creator. The hero's performance matters the most, but the hero of a fiction of this particular kind is not a character in the narrative. The hero of the fiction is the creative imagination which manipulates "stylistics, allegorical values, or questions of form" to create an entertaining artifact which plays upon its artfulness. Heroes behave in a certain fashion, as Campbell and Raglan, Jesus and George have proved--their activities make up the story; but the plot, the unfolding of that very particular sequence of events, the shaping and telling of those incidents which separate heroes from plain people and art from reporting

is the primary function of the fiction of which the goat boy is a part.

The sort of satiric allegory with which Barth is concerned has been labeled by Northrop Frye as Menippean satire:

The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior.<sup>13</sup>

This particular kind of satire quarrels with the world's philosophical systems. By creating a parody of an esthetic form, the allegory, Barth affirms the artistic, creative experience while condemning foolish insistence on an ideological tunnel vision. For allegory is a didactic system not only for writing but also for interpreting the world. The hero may quest for Grand Tutorhood, but he discovers nothing because there are no absolutes, only different points of view. But although the affirmation may indeed be oblique, it is an affirmative statement none the less. What is affirmed is not the result of the quest but the performance, the literary event.

Through the manipulation of a didactic literary form Barth explores and exposes the problems of didacticism in contemporary culture, in a society far too sophisticated to be able to play. The experience of literature or of life outside literature suffers from the interruption of too much knowledge, too many theories, and excessive technical advances.

<sup>13</sup> Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (1957; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 309. For a discussion of Barth's satire see James T. Gresham, "Giles Goat-Boy: Satyr, Satire, and Tragedy Twined," Genre, 7 (1974), 148.

The novel lays bare its own artfulness with every allusion to the Bible or to classical myth. In a sense the allegory demands that attention be paid to the tradition of Western letters. But that tradition is sliced under the blade of parody. East and West Campus result from the world of libraries and theories; the world is one of confusion and possible annihilation. In the face of all of this chaos, Barth offers the performance.

## V. THE MAGIC OF MYTH

The thread which unifies John Barth's works is his concern with the creation of a fiction which is about the fiction making process. This interest enables the writer to synthesize high and low culture. On one level the fiction demands that attention be given to the history of literature, to the specifications and special demands of form. On another level the works are simply well told stories. Each work parodies a form of literature and the writing of serious fiction about big ideas. The literary parody and the parody of the role of the writer are expressions of the same impulse. As author, Barth lays bare the rationale behind each fictional form, that a grasp of literary history is a necessary condition for renewing the narrative tradition in the twentieth century. The latest work to date, Chimera (1972), presents an exposure of Barth as novelist and the position of writers of a certain kind--the writers of exhaustion. As Barth acknowledges in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," his books are "novels imitating the form of novels by an author who imitates the role of an author."<sup>1</sup>

In Chimera the laying bare of myth parallels the exposure of form. The work involves the re-telling of three old stories: "Dunyazadiad" is the tale of Scheherazade and The Thousand and One Nights from the

<sup>1</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," The Atlantic Monthly, 220 (August 1967), 33.

point of view of a younger sister; "Perseid" tells of the origins of the meteor shower from the point of view of Perseus; and "Bellerophoniad" recounts the troubles of Bellerophon after he discovers the previously told story, "Perseid." All three sections of Chimera deal with already familiar stories, but Barth has reinvented them by presenting the plot from an original point of view. All three novellas explore the fiction making process in general and the creation of Barth's fiction in particular.

In "Dunyazadiad" Barth makes an appearance; he is the genie in the story. Dunyazade describes him as follows:

For one thing, he wasn't frightening, though he was strange-looking enough: a light-skinned fellow of forty or so, smooth-shaven and bald as a roc's egg. His clothes were simple but outlandish; he was tall and healthy and pleasant enough in appearance, except for queer lenses that he wore in a frame over his eyes. (C, p. 8)

The description corresponds perfectly to the photograph of the writer which appears on the back of the dust jacket for the 1972 edition.

The writer of fiction assumes the role of genius and savior, for he reveals to Scheherazade the stories which will extend her life. But as Dunyazade recounts, this strange genie and her sister also discuss the business of creating fiction, of framing tales so that one story fits within another, laying bare the essential problem of fiction, which is how to tell a story. The story of Scheherazade saves the genie from his writer's "block" by giving him something to write, a behind-the-scenes account of the origins of The Arabian Nights. The subject for new fiction becomes, then, the retelling of favorite tales from a former time. The genie discovers a fantasy. He realizes what it must

have been like to create The Thousand and One Nights. The actual stories are unimportant and are given brief mention. The situation which generates a fiction is vital.

As early as 1965 Barth admitted in an interview that the story involved here is a personal favorite for what it reveals about writing:

But I think it is a useful thing for young people who are learning to write (like me) to spend a lot of time with the old tales. The element of story--just sheer extraordinary, marvelous story--is not what we value Joyce for, for example, or Hemingway or Faulkner, as a rule. I love those men very much, but it is refreshing, it seems to me, for writers to become interested in yarns--elaborate lies. The Arabian Nights may be a better mentor for many . . . .<sup>2</sup>

"Yarns, elaborate lies" are the stuff of fiction. And the old yarns and lies still have an amount of usefulness left in them. As Barth has proved, the old tales can be rediscovered from a different point of view.

The possibility of discovery and recreation solves a very special problem. The collections of works which line the shelves of libraries may create a kind of envy in a contemporary writer, as Barth has implied: "I wish I were Homer and could say 'rosy-fingered dawn.' That's a wonderful thing to say about the dawn. I'd say 'rosy-fingered dawn, rosy-fingered dawn,' and nobody would have beat me to it."<sup>3</sup> All questions of form connect to questions of language and content. Writing in the contemporary world presents the problem of what to say after all that has been written. Barth whimsically related his own jealousy

<sup>2</sup> John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," ConL, 6 (1965), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Enck, 12.

of what has been done before. That feeling can be turned to inspiration and can become the beginning of new fiction when the concern of work centers on using literary tradition and allusion.

The dilemma of Scheherazade parallels that of the writer: both must tell stories or perish. And for both the problem as presented in "Dunyazadiad" rests in finding the formula which will generate the tales. As a character in the fiction, the writer-genie confronts a dilemma: "He had added to the morass of notes he felt himself mired in, a sketch for a story about a man who comes somehow to realize that the key to the treasure he's searching for is the treasure" (C, p. 11). This is a story within a story within still another story. And the statement that "the key to the treasure is the treasure" presents a touchstone for Barth's esthetic. All the fictions and information about literature contain a generative secret which will facilitate the creation of new art.

The writer figure in the narrative goes on to describe his situation and quest exposing the concern of Barth's fiction:

"'My project,' he told us, 'is to learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been--where we've all been. There's a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes--perhaps I invented him--that makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows. That snail's pace has become my pace--but I'm going in circles, following my own trail! I've quit reading and writing; I've lost track of who I am; my name's just a jumble of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I've lost the key to.' . . ."

(C, p. 10)

The code that this writer seeks is that formula capable of generating

all fiction, the starting place for stories of all kinds. For Barth the place to discover that source is literary history, literary tradition. His own juices, his own creative capabilities cement whatever he comes across. For this writer, material comes from the literature of the past mixed with contemporary language and awareness. In Chimera Barth has defamiliarized legend through the manipulation and expansion of well-known stories. At the same time, he has laid bare his own aesthetic principles, exposing the impulse behind his art.

The primary alteration to the story of Scheherazade rests in the relationship of the creator of the fiction to the work itself. Barth has made this very much his own creation by placing his persona in the center of the tale and making himself responsible for the young woman's success. The presence of the modern writer in the fiction uncovers the fact of literary invention and control. Of course, the successes and failures of all fictional characters result from the manipulations of the authors. In this case, the writer comes to the character from the future, from a world outside the actual situation of the story. He has read the Arabian Nights, so he simply relates to Scheherazade the stories accessible to him from the shelves of his library; she repeats them to Shahryar. But even this recounting is altered, for the whole tale takes shape through the younger sister as she repeats the story to the king's brother over whom she has power of life and death. The framing of the stories which fit, one inside another, defamiliarizes the art of story telling. The shift from one narrator to another lays bare the artificiality of the fiction.



The next two sections of Chimera evolve from myth. Prototypes of the stories in Chimera appeared in Lost in the Funhouse (1968):

"Menelaiaad," for example. Commenting on Barth's use of myth in "Menelaiaad," Beverly Gray Bienstock provides an approach to myth in all Barth's work:

He does not use myth as T. S. Eliot, for instance, used it to contrast past glory with present decadence, to seek spiritual certainty in the belief and ritual of the past. Rather, for Barth as for Joyce the ancient myth is a current event because the past is the present on time's ever turning carrousal.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude toward ancient myth parallels an attitude toward literature. The stories of former times, the literary tradition in which Barth has his roots, remain part of this writer's present. The awareness of literary tradition reveals itself with every word. The concern for structure which appears in every selection parallels a preoccupation with the history of literary forms and with old familiar stories. A well-known account or form is revitalized through the alteration of circumstance or point of view.

The alteration of circumstance is central to "The Perseid." On one level this novella is the simple story of a middle-aged hero trying to make a comeback. Barth has altered and expanded the legend of Perseus to suit his purpose. The adventures of the hero retold in the book cannot be separated from those of the ancient hero; Barth has defamiliarized a legend through the manipulation and expansion of the well-known story. Again, he has altered the story by changing the

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Gray Bienstock, "Lingering on the Autognotic Verge: John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse," MFS, 19 (1973), 72.

narrator. The Perseus of "The Perseid" has passed his prime and can do little more than recount his past glories. The hero is bored and boring, an unexpected condition for those of mythic, heroic stature. But his condition parallels that of contemporary literature in general. The forms of fiction like the types of heroic action, have been exhausted. This exhaustion becomes the subject of fiction.

To liven up the legend after Perseus retells his history--the story from the standard texts on mythology--Barth goes on to create a new and expanded version of the legend, moving the familiar heroic character through the usual territory at an unfamiliar time of life. The retelling of an older tale has often been the concern of the artist. The use of a well-known subject lays bare the craft of the writer in that the outcome of plot is subordinate to the unfolding or telling of the story. By re-writing the familiar, the artist focuses on the uniqueness of his handling of material. Major writers like Chaucer (Troilus and Criseyde), Shakespeare (Anthony and Cleopatra), Milton (Samson Agonistes), or Joyce (Ulysses) illustrate the universality of such artistic reworking. The success of the result rests with the skillful manipulation of story into plot. The re-creation of the hero Perseus shows the same kind of artistic ploy.

Barth does not simply reveal the life remaining in the myth, defamiliarizing legend by taking a different approach to an old story; he expands the artfulness of his novella through the manipulation of time. When Perseus begins telling his story, he is middle-aged (C, p. 59). He tells the last event he remembers, then recounts the heroics

of Perseus to Clayxa as the story unfolds in the freizes at the foot of their couch (C, p. 61), or so it seems. Toward the end of the work, Perseus makes it clear that the entire tale is being told in retrospect (C, p. 127), that conversations which might appear to be in the present were actually being retold. Perseus's story was already completely over at the beginning of the first line, before the plot began. The recounting of Perseus's past is interrupted (C, p. 69) to allow for the conversations which reveal the story of Calyxa. This manipulation of story into plot seems common to all fiction. In the epilogue Perseus's comments show that the entire story has been recounted by the hero to Medusa, his eternal love (C, p. 131). The shifts in time expose the artificiality of the fiction by placing the emphasis on the re-ordering of events, the manipulation of sequence, and the introduction of an unexpected listener.

The third section of Chimera, "Bellerophoniad," examines a myth and defamiliarizes the heroic cycle. The plot is revealed in capsulated form before the story begins:

Thus begins, so help me muse, the tidewater tale of twin Bellerophon, mythic hero, cousin to constellated Perseus; how he flew and reflw Pegaseus the winged horse; dealt double death to the three-part freak Chimera; twice loved, twice lost; twice aspired to, reached, and died to immortality--in short, how he rode the heroic cycle and was recycled. Loosed at last from mortal speech, he turned into written words; Belleraphonic letters afloat between two worlds, forever betraying, in combinations and recombinations, the man they forever represent. (C, p. 138)

The story of a quest for fame begins with a summary. This retrospective narration makes good fun of myth, heroes, the condition of current fiction in general, and Barth's fiction in particular.

At one point there occurs an interruption of plot to reveal the terrible tale of a person named Bray whose condition, like that of the blocked author in "Dunyazadiad," echoes Barth's own situation (C, p. 247). The tale of Jerome Bray reverberates with similarites to Harold Bray in Giles Goat-Boy. During the quest for heroic action, Bellerophon discovers the story of Jerome Bray (C, p. 245). With help from the Tidewater Foundation, Bray is searching for the revolutionary novel which will make the world wonderful (C, p. 249). To find the form he programs a computer. A clear parody of Barth's own work results:

The results of his first experiments were in themselves more or less inept parodies of the plagiarist aforementioned, upon whom Bray thus cleverly revenged himself; they bore such titles as The End of the Road Continued; Sot-Weed Redivivus; Son of Giles, or, The Revised New Revised New Syllabus--in Bray's own cryptic words, "novels which mimic the form of the novel, by an author who mimics the role of Reset"; but they demonstrated satisfactorily the machine's potential. (C, pp. 249-50)

The insert on the trials of "J.B." exposes the concern of modern writers--the finding of an original form and plot for fiction. Again the emphasis rests with the reams of material available, volumes which only a computer can assimilate. The quest for a form parallels the quest for heroic action. Both searchings become the subject of fiction.

Bellerophon's story explores the lure of herohood and the problems associated with trying to adhere to the heroic pattern which is presented in the text as a wheel diagram (C, p. 261). That "pattern" is, of course, the sort that has been described by Raglan and Campbell, or by any number of other people. This information, part of the paraphernalia of the modern intellect, could serve to inhibit the creation

of a hero in a fiction. Barth makes the information part of his creation. He defamiliarizes criticism by cataloguing the people who have written about the character he is using and "the archetypal pattern of mythic adventure" (C, p. 236) before him:

But the hero of this story is no longer confident that Polyeidus is its author. Polyeidus reminds him that Polyeidus never pretended authorship; Polyeidus is the story more or less, in any case its marks and spaces: the author could be Antoninus Liberalis, for example, Hesiod, Homer, Hyginus, Ovid, Pindar, Plutarch, the Scholast on the Iliad, Tzetzes, Robert Graves, Edith Hamilton, Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, the author of the Perseid, someone imitating that author--anyone, in short, who has ever written or will write about the myth of Bellerophon and Chimera. (C, pp. 236-37)

This passage points clearly to the fact that Bellerophon is a creation, an artifact available to anyone and the composite creation of many writers. His story, with all its variations, including Barth's modernization, must be understood as the result of a tradition which is a rich and always present fact in the modern world.

John Barth takes literary tradition and critical scholarship and turns it into fun. The fact that he as creative artist exists in a world where a writer can choose to acknowledge or pay homage to the past becomes a reason for laughter and delight. If the tales of heroes have been told to the point of exhaustion, then a writer who feels so inclined can tell them again, exploring and expanding them as story becomes plot from a different point of view. If the forms of certain kinds of literary works have been exhausted, then Barth can dissect them, playing what the form has meant against what he can make it mean in the modern world. Literature becomes the experience of literariness,

of self-consciousness artfulness.

Barth has assembled his heritage, the traditional literary paraphernalia, the various forms for stories and assorted myths, and has used it to create a structure to play upon, a jungle gym on which he can perform, show off, expose, and exploit to the fullest the complicated narrative elements of the past. The detailed knowledge and familiarity of those literary facts is the condition of concern for a writer in the twentieth century. Barth's fiction, then, is by necessity about fiction, about the traditions of story telling from which a twentieth century writer can create. The over abundance of data, history, literature, and criticism becomes for the writer in the instances of The Sot-Weed Factor, Giles Goat-Boy, and Chimera the silly putty from which he can begin to shape a playful fiction. The facts of modern life--a wealth of information which refuses to take a particular shape, a literature which has, on the level of form, almost exhausted itself--can, and must be play.<sup>5</sup>

The importance and impossibility of finding a form for fictional play manifests itself in Barth's hero, the shape shifter who adopts the manner he finds necessary for any situation. The posturings of Henry Burlingame which so confound Ebenezer Cooke and the transformations of Harold Bray which almost undo George Giles are examples of actions

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of contemporary literature as performance see Richard Poirier, The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

dictated by circumstance.<sup>6</sup>

The concern of the fiction finds echoes in each case in the heroes of the works. Todd Andrews uses different postures to control his life and create his fiction, which is a carefully designed structure parodying the use of symbols in literature. Thomas Le Clair provides an incisive analysis:

As a way of denying the irrationality of their experience, Barth's heroes fictionalize their lives. They have progressively more control of the outside world--Henry Burlingame plots the history of colonial Maryland, Harold Bray controls the western hemisphere--and this control is mirrored by Barth's own progress toward baroque artificiality and extreme parody as his mode.<sup>7</sup>

The control gained by Barth's characters and by the author himself comes from the ability to adopt an appropriately powerful disguise in any situation. For the characters, it involves comical and confusing changes in identity. For Barth it involves his appearance in the fiction, from the mysterious "J.B." of Giles Goat-Boy to the genie in "Dunzyiadad." The adoption of a mask or of a form in any situation calls for the performance, the artistic creation.

The lack of certainty and value in Barth's novels and the corresponding absence of a code of behavior produces the shape shifter as ultimate hero. By virtue of the ability to adopt a form for any occasion, he can endure, if not prevail.<sup>8</sup> In a world without order,

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Le Clair, 730.

<sup>8</sup> The selection of the words "endure" and "prevail" as descriptions of positives for human beings in the twentieth century comes from William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech. See William Faulkner, "The Stockholm Address" William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism ed. by Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960), pp. 347-48.

the elaborate lie, in the terms most serviceable, becomes the most imposing or appropriate truth. The thematic concern parallels the forms of the novels. For fiction itself offers an elaborate lie created for a variety of reasons. And the fabrication must assume whatever form seems most useful. If, as is the case with Barth, that form should be on one occasion an eighteenth-century novel, on another an allegory which includes a drama, or later a novella created from myth, then that form becomes legitimate for modern fiction. Any number of elements from the history of literature, or the shelves of libraries, can take the shape of a modern fictional creation. But when the form comes from the past, it comments upon itself, upon its own history, and all the uses to which it has been put before this occasion, as well as upon the inventiveness involved in its current presentation.

By using old forms to create new fiction, Barth defamiliarizes the history of literature and the nature of fiction itself. By laying bare the artificial nature of a work of literature, using old forms and stories with all the traditions they recall, Barth focuses on the artfulness of his work. The novels present the experience of a literary performance, an exposition of technique which relies upon the skillful manipulation of tradition to create a literary event, an elaborate lie couched in grand style.



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