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Romancing Scheherazade:
John Barth's Self-Perpetuating Narrative Machine From *The Floating Opera* Through *Chimera*.

by

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Abstract

This study explores John Barth's use of framing as a narrative-generating strategy. Barth fights literary exhaustion by spinning tales endlessly or by repeating the same tale over and over again under an infinite number of disguises. He strongly believes in the redemptive power of fabulation and is thus interested above all in keeping his story-machine rolling. For Barth narrative is a survival strategy because it is a defense against silence, a way of keeping on living. The philosophical constructs with which he juggles are all subordinate to his aim of getting on and on with the story. Ideas for the incorrigible fabulator that Barth is are valuable mostly because they supply him with material for his narrative machine.

Barth uses the frame-tale technique precisely because it is the horn of plenty that allows him to tell tales endlessly. The most essential quality of this ancient narrative convention is the perpetuation of narrative. Framed narrative is by essence self-generating, self-perpetuating, and Barth capitalizes on this property with a vengeance. Barth is aware that one can write a potentially infinite book by embedding subordinate narratives within the main narrative, just as one can expand the most basic sentence by inserting within it an infinite series of subordinate clauses. To the extent that the structure of tales within tales is an open-ended structure, it allows an infinte continuing along an infinite sequence of suspensions which can become in their turn new narrative-launching points. A frame closes the story it contains only to usher in a new one, thus enabling the narrative to perpetuate itself ad infinitum.

Of all the classics of frame-tale literature, The Arabian Nights is Barth's favourite. He has a long-standing obsession with Scheherazade, who saves her life from King Shahryar's murderous misogyny by bewitching him with a myriad of tales within tales spun ove one thousand and one nights. Barth finds Scheherazade's terrifying publish-or-perish situation emblematic of the daunting task that the artist must grapple with. For Barth, eluding the menace of artistic impotence is no less dreadful than the menace of death Scheherazade contends with for one thousand and one nights. The ontological implications of Scheherazade's situation are deeply embedded in Barth's fiction.

Finally by studying the frame-tale technique as a narrative strategy in Barth's fiction, this study links Barth with such masters of frame-tale literature as Scheherazade, Boccaccio and Chaucer, and, by doing so, it points to a critical direction that has not received the attention it deserves. Despite his obsession with convoluted forms, Barth practises an art which is positive and enduring to the extent that it harks back to the old tradition of storytelling.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents.

CHAPTER 1

JOHN BARTH'S AFFAIR WITH SCHEHERAZADE

Bomb bomb bomb us into oblivion if you're there
But each word I speak will be a shield against your savagery
Each line I utter protection from your terror.

Sir [Albert Finney] in Peter Yates' The Dresser

Once upon a time there was an old storyteller who came from nowhere to a fair held every Wednesday in Benslimane, a town near Casablanca, and beguiled the fair-goers with his tales. The fair itself, or Le Souk du Mercredi as it is still called, is by Western standards quite an unusual affair. With peasants haggling over prices of mules and camels, fortunetellers unravelling the secrets of their clients' lives, barbers occasionally turning into dentists and pulling a tooth or two, and charlatans lauding the virtues of the potion that cures all ills, the fair is a gigantic curiosity and a slice of life conjured up from the long-gone Medieval Period. There was also once a young boy who would on fair day skip school and its drudgery, rush to the Souk, arm himself with a shish kebab casse-croûte, and run to the Storytellers' Square. The boy would locate his favourite storyteller, elbow his way through the crowd to the front row, squat comfortably on the ground to follow for a few hours the melodious voice of the storyteller as it rose with the clatter of the warriors' swords and fell with the whispers of lovers who peopled the tales he recreated for his enchanted audience. The wily storyteller would lead his tale to a climax, then pause, and hat in hand, he would walk around the crowd of listeners and make pleas to their generous hearts. All too eager to see him get on with the story, the listeners would fumble for change in their pockets and toss a rain of coins in the storyteller's hat. But instead of resuming the interrupted story and

leading it to its denouement, the storyteller would surreptitiously digress, open another frame, get another story off the ground, lead it to its climax, and pause again for more money, only to digress again, open the third frame, and tell a new story, and so it went for, as it were, one thousand and one Wednesdays. The boy begrudged the storyteller for his "dishonest" tactics, but kept going, hoping against hope that one day all those unfinished stories would be brought to an end. The boy, who was many a time scolded and grounded by his parents and his teachers, ended up renouncing his Wednesday escapades. It took that boy quite a few years of academic training to realize that the old "illiterate" fabulator of his youth was by instinct a master of the art of storytelling. Necessity must have taught him that by framing he could go on telling stories ad infinitum, and by doing so, he could go on earning a living forever. In other words, he understood the connection between framing, the regressus in infinitum, and survival and capitalized on the connection with a vengeance. If that old fabulator ever unfolded that concatenation of unfinished stories at the expense of his own livelihood, what he must have achieved is what John Barth at his best achieves in his fiction.

By studying John Barth's use of the frame-tale device as a narrative strategy, I vindicate the boy of yore because the art that Barth practises is similar to the art with which the Old Storyteller once kept his audience

spellbound. Barth uses the frame-tale device to achieve the same narrative effects the Old Storyteller once achieved. The comparison between the old teller of tales and John Barth is not far-fetched. If the old storyteller received the Eastern tradition of storytelling from his forebears through word-of-mouth, Barth too discovered the same Eastern heritage at a very young age and devoured, among other classics, the seventeen volumes of Richard Burton's translation of The Thousand and One Nights:

> My love affair with Scheherazade is an old and continuing one. As an illiterate undergraduate, I worked off part of my tuition filing books in the Classics Library at Johns Hopkins, which included the stacks of the Oriental Seminary. One was tacitly permitted to get lost for hours in that splendrous labyrinth and to intoxicate, engorge oneself with story. Especially I became enamored of the great tale-cycles and collections: Somadeva's Ocean of Story in ten huge volumes, Burton's Thousand Nights and a Night in seventeen, the Panchatantra, the Gesta Romanorum, the Novellini, and the Pent-Hept-and Decameron. If anything ever makes a writer out of me, it will be the digestion of that enormous, slightly surreptitious feast of narrative.[1]

Although Barth was influenced by both Eastern and Western masterpieces of frame-tale literature, none of them had on him the impact of The Arabian Nights. As he emphatically points out, "Most of those spellbinding liars I have forgotten, but never Scheherazade" (F.B. 57). In fact, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that one cannot adequately account for

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[1] John Barth, The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction (New York: Putnam, 1984) 57. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

Barth's writing without understanding his peculiarly obsessive relationship with Scheherazade. In his essays, in public lectures, as well as in interviews, Barth rarely speaks about his literary concerns without telling the tale of his encounter and infatuation with Scheherazade, a tale that has itself become, as it were, a frame-tale to his own interest in frame-tales. Barth is surely one of the very few non-orientalists who has read The Arabian Nights in its entirety.

Barth, who has read and researched The Arabian Nights, among other classics of storytelling, is both a theorist and a practitioner of frame-tale literature. As a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo in the 1960's, he, with the help of a graduate assistant, undertook a systematic research into frame-tale literature which he would later sum up in "Tales Within Tales Within Tales," a paper he delivered at the Second International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts held at Florida Atlantic University in March, 1981. The importance that frame-tale literature represents for Barth may be measured by the scope of his research which involved a close examination of a huge corpus of literature. Barth's labour of love involved not only a careful study of masterpieces of Western frame-tale literature such as Homer's Odyssey, Plato's Symposium, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Dante's Divine Comedy, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Boccaccio's Decameron, but also monstrous narrative machines from the Eastern tradition such as The Arabian Nights and Somadeva's

Ocean of Streams of Story, which is, in Barth's words, "twice the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined" (F.B. 89). Speaking of the same research in his essay, "The Ocean of Story," Barth mentions that it was a work of "some years' standing" (F.B. 85), in the course of which he reviewed "nearly 200 specimens of frame-tale literature" (F.B. 86). In this systematic and scholarly research Barth distinguishes between what he calls "incidental or casual frames and more or less systematic frames" (F.B. 225). He also defines the different types of fictional frames and classifies them according to the degree of complexity and narrative involvement. The devotion and the patience with which Barth undertook his research and the amount of work that went into it are indicative of the privileged position that the frame-tale convention occupies in his literary sensibility.

Yet, it is Scheherazade's splendid Kitab Alf Lailah Wa Lailah that had a determining effect on Barth's writing career. The lessons Barth has learnt from his "model storyteller" (F.B. 280) are not only deeply embedded in his art and in his literary consciousness, but are, or so it seems, part of his daily life. He recapitulates the frame-story of The Nights in almost all the essays and public addresses collected in The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction (1984). Over and over again he relates how Sultan Shahryar becomes a misogynist upon discovering that his wife has been unfaithful to him, how he avows to deflower a virgin

every night only to put her to death in the morning, how the Vizier's daughter Scheherazade offers herself to the King despite her father's recriminations, and how she manages to bewitch "her deflowerer with a tale, artfully continued, involuted, compounded, and complicated through a thousand and one nocturnal installments" (F.B. 560) thus saving herself and her gender from annihilation by turning the brooding, melancholy and murderous despot into a family man. One can hardly appreciate Barth's art without fully realizing the true measure of his admiration for The Arabian Nights, for Scheherazade's virtuoso performance in the face of impending doom, and for the vertiginously embedded structure of her stories. By understanding Barth's fascination with Scheherazade, one begins to understand why framing is his pet narrative strategy.

If many of Barth's critics approach him either as a latter-day existentialist or as a radical, "extreme" formalist and rarely as a storyteller with a classical bent, it is precisely because they have not fully appreciated the extent to which Barth has been receptive to Scheherazade's instruction. What may well explain this vacuum is that The Friday Book in which Barth speaks over and over again about his admiration for Scheherazade and her narrative strategy did not appear until 1984. The Friday Book clearly reveals Barth's inexhaustible infatuation with Scheherazade and hence the kind of art he practises, for his obsession with

Scheherazade is the central motif that ties together the essays and the public addresses collected in The Friday Book. Barth, who has, in his own words, "always aspired to write Burton's version of The 1001 Nights," has, faute de mieux, written The Friday Book which is an homage to Scheherazade's genius.

Barth once told an audience in Tangier, Morocco, that, "the image of Scheherazade spinning out tales for 1001 nights to amuse the king and save her life, is surely among the top ten or a dozen on anybody's great literary-image list" (F.B. 258-9). He even went so far in his obsession with Scheherazade as to study her "narrative-sexual strategy" (F.B. 259) and determine with the help of his "pocket calculator, [and] a standard manual of gynecology, obstetrics, and pediatrics" (F.B. 270) why "there are 1001 nights' entertainment--rather than say, 101, 999, or 2002" (F.B. 259). Barth's "impolite investigations" (F.B. 278) into Scheherazade's sexuality and his description of her periods of sexual disposition and indisposition may be of no interest to anyone but the most voyeuristic reader, but it is precisely the anecdotal nature of Barth's investigations that reveals his curious and life-long obsession with the book, the storyteller, and the narrative strategy at which she excelled.

However, unlike eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers, who, in their rebellion against the strictures of the Neo-Classical Age, found a release in Scheherazade's

licentious and exotic stories, Barth's interest lies above all in the structure of The Arabian Nights, in the storyteller herself, in the narrative paradigms which emerge from her narrative, and the aesthetic and ontological implications of the narrative technique she uses so brilliantly to solve her predicament. Barth is very emphatic about this: "it was never Scheherazade's stories that seduced and beguiled me, but their teller and the extraordinary circumstances of their telling: in other words, the character and situation of Scheherazade, and the narrative convention of the framing story" (F.B. 220).

The Arabian Nights appeals to Barth more than any other classic of frame-tale literature because of the artistry with which Scheherazade sets its frames. Barth admires Canterbury Tales, but as he points out, "Chaucer's frame, for example, the pilgrimage to Canterbury, is an excellent if venerable ground-metaphor--life as a redemptive journey--but, having established it, he does nothing with it" (F.B. 57). Boccaccio's frame is for Barth more memorable because the retreat of the ten men and women to the countryside and their telling of stories to one another while the plague is wreaking havoc in the country is

> more arresting for its apocalyptic nature, for the pretty rules with which the company replaces those of their literally dying society, for the hints of growing relationships between the raconteurs and raconteuses themselves, and for the occasional relevance of the tales to the tellers and to the general situation. (F.B. 57)

It should be noted here that Barth likes the frame of The

Decameron for the same reasons that he likes the frame of The Nights. Both frames symbolize the connection between life, death, and storytelling. For Barth, however, "The story of Scheherazade excels these others in all respects" (F.B. 58), and he believes that framing as a narrative strategy is "used more beautifully in The Nights than anywhere else" (F.B. 57). Barth finds the apocalyptic nature of Scheherazade's publish-or-perish situation more arresting and is impressed by her courage and cunning, her dazzling virtuosity, her all-inclusive knowledge, and her inexhaustible creative power:

> this woman is smart: When she tells the tale of the slave-girl Tawaddud, for example--a beautiful and sexy polymath who confounds all the Sultan's experts with her mastery of syntax, poetry, jurisprudence, exegesis, philosophy, music, religious law, mathematics, scripture and scriptural commentary, geometry, geodesy, medicine, logic, rhetoric, composition, dancing, and the rules of sex--Scheherazade gives us the complete 27-night oral examination (Nights 436-462), and all that Tawaddud knows is only part of what Scheherazade knows. (F.B. 271)

Scheherazade's "native endowment," her "mastery of the tradition" (F.B. 58), and her encyclopedic erudition all reinforce her appeal for Barth. Speaking of Scheherazade's astounding narrative energy, Barth says that

> To appreciate the scale of this accomplishment, one might remember that the Homeric bards are supposed to have required a mere four evenings to sing the Odyssey. And the fabled Brihat Katha, or Great Tale--which the god Siva once told his consort Parvati in return for an especially good copulation, and which reputedly came to 700,000 distichs, and of which Somadeva's huge eleventh-century Sanskrit Katha Sarit Sagara, or Oceans of Streams of Story, is but a radical abridgement--if recited at homeric

> pace, would require by my calculation a mere 509 evenings, it being no more than 64 times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined. Scheherazade--indefatigable, inexhaustible Scheherazade--has doubled the performance of the god of destruction and creation himself. (F.B. 268-69)

Barth's interest in Scheherazade should not be dismissed as an eccentricity of an otherwise talented writer. It is a serious intellectual interest in an archetypal storyteller whose situation eloquently expresses Barth's most important fictional preoccupations. Barth clearly states his desire to emulate Scheherazade when he intimates that he wishes, "nothing better than to spin like that vizier's excellent daughter, through what nights remain to him, tales within tales within tales" (F.B. 59). For Barth, who is known for periodically falling out with the literary muse and for occasionally suffering from writer's block, the apocalyptic situation of Scheherazade is symbolic of the writer's fear of losing creative potency. Schenerazade's talent is, as Barth says, "always on the line: not enough to have satisfied the old cynic once, or twice; she's only as good as her next piece; for Scheherazade, night by night it's publish or perish." (F.B. 58). As Barth reminds us over and over again, "telling those stories over all those nights was a life-or-death matter for Scheherazade" (F.B. 259). Scheherazade is Barth's inspiration and the emblem of his "figurative aspiration" (F.B. 57), because her situation is emblematic of "both the estate of the fictioner in general and the

particular endeavors and aspirations of this one" (F.B. 59). Scheherazade's problem, as Barth sees it, is both "hers and every storyteller's: What to do for yet another and yet another encore?" (F.B. 219). Her relation with the king, her "absolute critic," also has an archetypal significance for Barth because it is "that terrifying but inspiring relation that all artists work in, with an audience whom at any time they may fatally cease to entertain; for whom it is never enough to have told one good story, or a hundred and one good stories" (F.B. 280).

Barth also admires the complexity of Scheherazade's stories and their convoluted and architectonic structure, as well as her ability to shape her narrative in a convoluted way to contend with a dangerous situation dictated by extreme circumstances. Barth, a self-proclaimed "amateur of frame-tale literature" (F.B. 225), who, as he himself claims, "could give a course on the subject,"[2] demonstrates with a vengeance his familiarity with Scheherazade's narrative web when he points out that

> Scheherazade tells by my count 169 primary tales; she moves to the second degree of narrative involvement on no fewer than nineteen occasions, to tell 87 tales within the primary tales, and to the third degree on four occasions, to tell eleven tales-within-tales-within-tales--267 complete stories in all, which by the way include about 10,000 lines of verse. (F.B. 268)

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[2] "Interview," in First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing, ed. Frank Gado (Schenectady: Union College Press, 1973) 133.

Scheherazade has taken possession of Barth's imagination and has left an indelible mark on his literary sensibility mostly with the narrative stratagem she devises and with which she holds the king spellbound for one thousand and one nights. Barth marvels at the ingenuity, the talent, the virtuosity that goes into the shaping of Scheherazade's intricate frames. When Scheherazade ventures into the King's deadly chambers the first night, she does so knowing only too well that her survival and the survival of womanhood is dependent upon her narrative performance, upon whether or not the King will be caught in the web of her storytelling on that very first ominous night. To ensure the outcome she desires, Scheherazade lays a perfect narrative trap for her dreaded auditor. She begins the first night of her narration by telling only "half of her first story, to be continued, and half of the first of three subtales narrated in turn by the characters in it" (F.B. 265). When at the break of dawn she brings her first narrative installment to a stop, she leaves, as Barth points out, "not one but two plots suspended as a kind of narrative insurance" (F.B. 265).

On that first night, Scheherazade insures her survival not only by suspending her tales but also by making sure that the plots of those tales bear upon her own situation. Both of them are about "innocent victims under imperious and imminent threat of death, the first of whom, like Scheherazade herself, is playing for time by telling his would-be executioner a

story!" (F.B. 266). Scheherazade executes the rest of her plan with perfect mastery. At dawn, Dunyazade lauds the tale, as she was told to do, and Scheherazade shrugs off the praise by telling her sister that her tale is nothing by comparison with the yarns she could spin the coming night if only the King would stay her execution. Spellbound Shahryar postpones the much-dreaded sentence, and the following night, Scheherazade completes the framed tales but leaves the frame-tale, her trump card, suspended as a narrative insurance. This strategy guarantees Scheherazade's survival for one thousand and one night. On the one thousand and first night, she winds up "The Tale of Ma'aruf the Cobbler and his Wife Fatima the Turd," which is, as Barth says,

> an exemplary tale of a cobbler's shrewish and deceitful wife who fully deserves to be killed and is, thus permitting her injured spouse, by this time a king, to marry guess whom, his vizier's excellent young daughter...." (F.B. 268)

For Barth, the choice of this last tale shows "What a canny strategist Scheherazade is" (F.B. 270).

Barth never tires of lauding Scheherazade's ingenuity and talent. Whenever he reconstructs the frame-story of The Nights, he reiterates his admiration for Scheherazade's cleverness and virtuosity and her ability to give a dramaturgical order and symmetry to a vast amount of material while at the same time shaping it to insure the continuing attention of her audience upon which her survival depends. Barth sees her framing as the key to her artistry, to her

continuing creative output, and to her survival. Framing is the process that allows Scheherazade to keep on keeping on. In short, it is the source of her passion and of her technical virtuosity, her "fire" and her "algebra," the two qualities that Barth keeps insisting are essential to every great writer. For Barth, good literature "involves and requires both the algebra and the fire; in short, passionate virtuosity" (F.B. 167).

Barth's fascination with Scheherazade is a fascination with a narrative convention which is, as he points out, "ancient, ubiquitous, and persistent; almost as old as the narrative impulse itself" (F.B. 221). He fully understands that if tellers of tales have exploited the narrative potentialities of the frame-tale since the beginning of storytelling, it is because this device is commensurate with and fundamental to the very spirit of tale-telling: "My experience and intuitions both as a professional storyteller and as an amateur of frame-tale literature lead me to suspect that if the first story ever told began 'Once upon a time,' the second story ever told began 'Once upon a time there was a story that began "Once upon a time" ' " (F.B. 224). For Barth "so many cultures and centuries [have] been fascinated by tales within tales" (F.B. 235) because such a model is loaded with aesthetic and ontological implications. In "Tales Within Tales Within Tales," he remarks that

> stories within stories appeal to us because they

> disturb us metaphysically. We are by them reminded, consciously or otherwise, of the next frame out: the fiction of our own lives, of which we are both the authors and the protagonists, and in which our reading of The 1001 Nights, say, is a story within our story. (F.B. 235)

While Barth follows Jorge Luis Borges in this line of speculation, he also draws upon Tzvetan Todorov to account for the appeal of tales within tales on linguistic grounds. Barth, who shows great familiarity with Todorov's views on framing as expressed in his excellent essay "Les Hommes-recits," says that Todorov

> draws a less philosophical but equally interesting parallel between the formal structure of stories within stories, which he calls "embedded stories," and that of a certain syntactic form, "a particular case of subordination, which in fact modern linguistics calls embedding." (F.B. 235)

The sentence that Todorov uses to illustrate his "theory" and which Barth translated word for word and discusses at some length reads, "Whoever the man who the post which on the bridge which on the road which to Worms goes, lies, stood, knocked over, identifies, gets a reward" (F.B. 235). Barth goes on to paraphrase Todorov by saying that the relationship between the structure of tales within tales and embedding in grammar is isomorphic insofar as grammatical subjects may be equated with characters and subordinate clauses with stories. Barth sums up Todorov's argument when he explains that

> Todorov asserts that this analogy is no accident; his implication is that narrative structure in general is an echo of deep linguistic structure, and that frametaling reflects, even rises out of, the syntactical property of subordination. He suggests

> further that the "internal significance' or secret appeal of frame-tales is that they articulate an essential property (Todorov says the most essential property) of all narrative: namely, that whatever else it is about, it is always also about language and about telling; about itself. All fiction, in short, even the most "primary," is "secondary fiction." (F.B. 236)

Barth uses Todorov's views on embedding because they clearly endorse his own. As Barth goes on to say:

> Todorov argues (with splendid examples from The 1001 Nights) that narrating also literally equals living. Here he joins Borges, but on linguistic rather than metaphysical grounds: We tell stories and listen to them because we live stories and live in them. Narrative equals language equals life: To cease to narrate, as the capital example of Scheherazade reminds us, is to die--literally for her, figuratively for the rest of us. One might add that if this is true, then not only is all fiction fiction about fiction, but all fiction about fiction is in fact fiction about life. Some of us understood this all along. (F.B. 236)

Todorov's view appeals to Barth, the champion of the Literature of Replenishment, because the implications of the parallel that Todorov draws are that if framed narrative is governed by the same principle governing a sentence, or at least a sentence that actualizes that "particular case of subordination," then framed narrative, like a sentence with subordinate clauses, can multiply and perpetuate itself ad infinitum.

Thus, in terms of Todorov's analogy, a narrative can potentially perpetuate itself the same way the most basic sentence can potentially develop into an infinite sentence. And what invests both the sentence and narrative with this

self-perpetuating quality is framing. One can expand the most basic sentence by inserting within it an infinite series of subordinate clauses, just as one can write an infinite book by embedding subordinate narratives within the main narrative. As the linguist Nicolas Ruwet suggests, in both a sentence and a narrative there is, at least in theory, no reason for stopping:

> ...il est impossible de fixer une limite supérieure à la longueur des phrases. Etant donné une phrase grammaticale, aussi longue qu'on voudra, il sera toujours possible--en y insérant, à des endroits appropriés un adjectif, une proposition subordonnée, etc.--d'en construire une autre, qui sera également grammaticale.[3]

Likewise, it is potentially impossible to set a limit to the length of a narrative as long as the author keeps inserting other narratives within it. By endlessly opening frames and embedding narratives, a storyteller can generate an endlessly continuing process that can potentially include all the narratives of the world. Somadeva and Scheherazade and all the ancient fabulators who wrote oceans of stories have come naturally to the frame-tale convention perhaps because of its potential for actualizing a regressus in infinitum in narrative. Barth, who understands

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[3] Nicolas Ruwet, La Grammaire générative (Paris: Plon, 1968) 45.
"it is impossible to set a limit to the length of sentences. If we take a grammatical sentence, however long it may be, it will always be possible--by inserting, where appropriate, an adjective, a subordinate clause, etc.--to construct within it another sentence equally grammatical." [My trans.]

Scheherazade's terror "to the marrow of [his] bones,"[4] must find Todorov's analogy edifying.

While Barth is indebted to Borges and Todorov for their views, he accounts for the universal appeal of tales within tales with a view of his own, a view which is simpler but of far-reaching implications. Barth explains that "frame-tales fascinate us perhaps because their narrative structure reflects, simply or complexly, at least two formal properties not only of syntax but of much ordinary experience and activity: namely, regression (or digression) and return, and theme and variation" (F.B. 237). Barth, who sees parallels between the frame-tale model and all human activities from "trampoline exercises, meal preparation, taxonomy, lovemaking" to "scientific research, argumentation, psychoanalysis, crime detection, computer programming, court trials, and [his] grandson's progress from crawling to walking unassisted" (F.B. 237), stresses that framing is the ideal pattern that enables us to continue any "activity or process... whose progression is suspended by, yet dependent upon, digression and even regression of an ultimately enabling sort" [Barth's emphasis] (F.B. 238). Barth asserts that an ordinary task such as getting your boat ready for sailing involves a "whole phenomenon of tasks within tasks" (F.B. 238) as well as a series of regressions:

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[4] "The Art of Fiction: An interview with John Barth," The Paris Review 95 (1985): 152.

> ...before we can launch for the season we must get fitted out; and fitting out includes the chore of applying new bottom-paint to the hull. But before we can bottom-paint we must wet-sand, mustn't we, and wet-sanding requires both a certain sort of sandpaper, of which we are out, and lots of water, which won't be ours until we have turned on the outside faucet for the spring and rigged up the garden hose....(F.B.237)

Framing with its fundamental properties is a way of life for Barth to the extent that it shares the pattern of almost all sustained human activity. For a writer like Barth, framing is the ideal pattern for going on telling in fiction how human beings go on living. To the extent that the structure of tales within tales is a wonderfully open-ended structure, it allows the teller to use the most disparate material to construct his tales. Insofar as it is a mobile, a moving structure, a process rather than a fixed shape, it allows an infinite continuing along an infinite sequence of suspensions which can become in their turn new starting points. Framed narrative is by essence self-generating, self-perpetuating, and Barth capitalizes on this property with a vengeance. In framing, a tale begets a tale which begets a tale ad infinitum, which solves what Barth sees as the most daunting task for the artist: "How to save and save again one's narrative neck" (F.B. 219). Also, framing is a unifying device insofar as it is the source of narrative logic and harmony, tying one framed story to an infinite series of stories, joining the single stream to the ocean of stories, and ordering the narrative outpourings characteristic of frame-tale literature. Framing is to Barth what Eliot says myth was to

Joyce, a way to give order to a chaotic experience, to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[5]

Narrative frames also appeal to Barth's architectonic imagination and enable him to indulge his fabulistic tendencies. Thus a study of framing is necessarily a study of fabulation as the two seem to be indissolubly linked. Fabulation seems to be a characteristic trait of frame-tale literature. One could even go so far as to claim that all frame-tale literature is fabulative; at any rate classics such as The Arabian Nights, The Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales do indeed indicate that frame-tale literature and fabulation go hand in hand. It is significant in this respect that Robert Scholes in his study takes as a point of departure an old fable, whose narrative structure is governed by the frame-tale device. Scholes, who draws upon "The Eighth Fable of Alfonce," a traditional tale "Englished by Caxton in 1484," points out that "from the very construction of this fable we can learn something. It is in the form of a tale (about the sheep) within a tale (about a king and fabulator) within a tale (about master and disciple)."[6] Scholes goes on to say:

> This structure tells us a number of things about fabulation. First of all, it reveals an extraordinary delight in design. With its wheels within wheels,

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[5] T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," In Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 177.

[6] Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford UP, 1967) 8.

> rhythms and counterpoints, this shape is partly to be admired for its own sake. A sense of pleasure in form is one characteristic of fabulation.[7]

Scholes explains that "Delight in design, and its concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer...distinguish the art of the fabulator from the work of the novelist or the satirist."[8] Fabulators celebrate the act of storytelling and thus seek "a return to the source of all fiction, the marvelous well-spring of pure story."[9] If one goes by Scholes' definition of fabulation, frame-tale narrative seems to be more fabulative than any other narrative mode. Whether in Barth's fiction or in the classics of frame-tale literature, the highest premium is put on storytelling and on the narrative act itself insofar as the main function of a frame-story is to introduce the story it frames, and its raison d'être is, as it were, to tell the story of another story. In Barth's fiction, as in The Arabian Nights, the most viable act is the act of storytelling. Framing celebrates storytelling and thus provides Barth with an outlet for his natural narrative energy.

The connection between frame-tale literature and orality is just as strong as the one between frame-tale literature and fabulation. In other words, if frame-tale literature is fabulative, it is also grounded in orality. Frame-tale

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[7] Scholes, 8-9.

[8] Scholes, 10.

[9] Scholes, 60.

literature is a legacy of the ancient oral past in which the storyteller was the main entertainer of his people and the sole chronicler of their lives, their defeats, and their victories. Whatever circumstances committed, say, The Iliad and The Odyssey to writing, the principle which governs their composition is an oral principle.[10] Characters in frame-tale literature do not write their tales but relate them verbally with "the give-and-take" that Ong describes as a quality of "oral expression" (Ong,132). Barth has a life-long interest in oral literature, and The Friday Book is interspersed with statements which clearly reflect his admiration for the "splendid oral tradition" (F.B.95). Barth dwells extensively on his long-standing interest in "exploring the oral narrative tradition from which printed fiction evolved" (F.B.63). Thus it is not surprising that some of the stories in the series Lost in the Funhouse are meant for oral recitation and that the subtitle of that book is Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice. The marks of orality that Barth's fiction bears are a lingering residue of his vast reading of the oral classics of frame-tale literature.

Moreover, the frame-tale device appeals to Barth's anti-realistic sensibility. Barth, the fabulator, is known for his desire and tendency to create fictional worlds of his own instead of imitating the existing one. The frame-tale device fulfils his needs because in his hands it undercuts mimesis. In other words,

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[10] Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982) 58.

Barth's fiction is generally self-mimetic because framed tales refer above all to one another or to the tale which frames them rather than referring directly to experience. Thus, this narrative convention which is as old as Homer is commensurate with Barth's aesthetic leanings. Barth is aware of his contemporaries, both American and European, and must have learnt a few lessons from Robbe-Grillet and his tribe, but it should be emphasized that the frame-tale device inherently contains the seeds of self-representation and self-consciousness that are generally thought of as the stock-in-trade of post-modernists. In fact, not only frame-tale literature, but all literature which has a fresh memory of its oral beginnings is to some extent self-conscious. Speaking of Scheherazade's strategic "authorial self-deprecation" (F.B. 266) and of her belittling of her own stories, Barth comments that "We are reminded for the 1001st time that 'self-reflexivity' is as old as the narrative imagination" (F.B. 266). Barth's asides and self-conscious intrusions with which sign-seekers have a field day are not that different from, say, Scheherazade's comments on her own tales, or Rabelais' addresses to the reader, or his tongue-in-cheek deriding of his own art.

Because framing is one of the oldest narrative conventions, it locates Barth in the larger order of literature. It allows him to be contemporary and traditional, elaborating the new out of the most ancient. It allows him to be part of a continuing, perpetual narrative line, a teller of tales begotten by tellers of tales and begetter of tale-tellers. Barth, who is commonly

referred to as one of the leading figures of postmodernism, is somewhat uncomfortable with the label. In discussing Isaac Bashevis Singer, he remarks that "Singer has been called by one critic a modernist in traditionalist's clothing: I approve equally of the disguise and of the thing disguised, and sometimes suspect my own case to be simply the reverse" (F.B. 219). Barth's "traditionalism," which has gone unnoticed by many critics, lies in his strong belief in the redemptive power of storytelling and in his use of one of the oldest narrative conventions as a narrative strategy.

Finally, this narrative convention relieves Barth of the burden of having to have a fixed "outlook" or a single philosophy. Framing allows Barth to indulge his fabulistic tendencies without having to cling to a single abstract intellectual construct to give order to his work. If Barth, who can display a dazzling erudition when he wants to, most often plays "the humble bumpkin," by insisting that he is just a story teller and not a philosopher or a thinker, it is precisely because he puts his faith in narration rather than in doctrines and philosophizing. Fabricating stories is for Barth superior to fabricating abstract systems of thought because it is a freer and a more flexible way to keep on living, to keep on acting and being acted upon, and it is thus a better way to ward off paralysis, cosmopsis, and death. In fact, the closest Barth comes to a faith or a philosophy is in his continuing faith in narration, in getting on and on and on with the story.

Critics have not paid enough attention to Barth as a storyteller and have mostly seen him as a novelist of ideas or as an extreme formalist. While the critics who have located Barth within a philosophical context have addressed his existentialist themes, the ones who have approached him in the context of the post-modernist movement have focused on his formal innovations.

For Jean Kennard "The direct influence of Existentialist ideas upon the work of John Barth is probably more clearly marked than upon that of any other contemporary American novelist."[11] Similarly Gerhard Joseph argues that Barth's heroes "try to find a philosophical justification for life, search for values and a basis for action in a relativistic cosmos."[12] Jac Tharpe also argues that all of Barth's novels are "philosophical, and as a group comprise a history of philosophy." For Tharpe, The Floating Opera and The End of the Road "present three unsatisfactory approaches to a universe that seems absurd in having produced man without giving him an intuition of his purpose." The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy "are histories of human culture and thereby also histories of philosophy." Finally Tharpe sees Lost in The Funhouse and Chimera as "studies in ontology and aesthetics which offer portraits of the artist as existentialist

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[11] Jean E. Kennard, "John Barth: Imitations of Imitations," Mosaic 3 (1970): 116.

[12] Gerhard Joseph, John Barth (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1970) 8.

intellectual becoming philosophical analyst of world culture."[13] These critics, among many others, view Barth as a disciple of Sartre and Camus and tend to take the existentialist themes with which Barth juggles more seriously than he himself does.

Like most Post-War American writers, Barth was receptive to existentialism, but he is too self-conscious to commit himself wholeheartedly to any abstract philosophical system. Charles Harris and Beverly Gross are among the few critics who have detected Barth's philosophical dilettantism. Harris rightly suggests that while Barth is "interested in all theories, [he] can subscribe to none."[14] Gross also notes that

> Barth is most immediately a humorist. For a novelist like Bellow, the comedy of life is a reflection of the emotional and moral depth of life. The comedy in Barth's novels is the mockery of emotions and moral values: what his characters feel and perceive is only further grist for hilarity. The suicide issue of The Floating Opera is an existential put-on; all issues in Barth's novels come down to some sort of game.[15]

Gross goes on to say that "The ordinary moral and psychological implications don't count here at all. What immediately counts is, on the level of plot, the entanglements; on the level of meaning,

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[13] Jac Tharpe, John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1974) 1.

[14] Charles B. Harris, "John Barth and the Critics: An Overview," Critical Essays on John Barth, 12.

[15] Beverly Gross, "The Anti-Novels of John Barth," Critical Essays on John Barth, 31-32.

the nuttiness."[16]

Some of the best arguments against thematic readings of Barth's books--especially the most innovative ones--are put forth by critics who have located Barth in the post-modernist, post-structuralist context. Christopher D. Morris contends that existentialist approaches to innovative works such as Lost in the Funhouse are inappropriate since "Selfhood...is altogether ignored, except as a farcical or sentimental entity, and the locus of the 'narrative' affliction is ultimately reduced to the purely linguistic problem of substitution." For Morris, "the Cartesian subject has been replaced at its center by meaningless, autonomous phonemes."[17] Critics with structuralist and post-structuralist leanings study Barth's novels as "fiction about the making of fictions,"[18] "metafictions telling the tale of their own telling."[19] Ben Stoltzfus places Barth among the major contemporary innovative writers, who are more interested in "the adventure of writing" than in "adventures in writing" and for whom "writing has become a generative enterprise that uses language as the material substance with which to construct a new

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[16] Gross, 32.

[17] Christopher D. Morris, " Barth and Lacan: The World of the Moebius Strip," Critique 17 (1975): 69.

[18] Robert F. Kiernan, American Writing Since 1945 (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing co., 1983) 55.

[19] Charles Caramello, Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self & Postmodern American Fiction (Tallahassee: UP of Florida, 1983) 114.

reality."[20] For these writers, "Language frequently becomes the anonymous hero or heroine of these new art forms in which objects, people, and events commingle in a reality that denies them. Language is the only reality left, or, to put it another way, language constructs the only possible reality."[21] Barth and Pynchon, as Stoltzfus explains, "no longer strive to imitate life but to rival it," and their fiction "emphasizes the sexuality of the text, the creative process, the autonomy of language, and art as a reflexive genre."[22] In the same vein Linda Hutcheon sees Barth as one of the metafictionists who "often transform the formal properties of fiction into its subject matter. Perhaps this is because they have discovered that these literary entities are as real, or unreal, as any external, empirical raw materials."[23] The critics who have approached Barth in the context of the post-modernist movement are too numerous to cite here and their views are as varied and as rich as Barth's fiction is. Yet, what these critics generally have in common is their focus on the process rather than the finished product and their insistence that the only viable reality in a Barthian text is the reality of language itself.

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[20] Ben Stoltzfus, "The Aesthetics of Nouveau Roman and Innovative Fiction," International Fiction Review 10 (1983): 108.

[21] Stoltzfus, 109.

[22] Stoltfzus, 110.

[23] Linda Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narrative: the metafictional paradox (New York: Methuen, 1980) 18.

To be sure, one can hardly consider Barth's fiction without considering its formal aspects. In fact my study of Barth's use of framing focuses on narrative patterns and designs and is therefore inscribed within the post-modern context. However, while I share many of the premises of Barth's structuralist and post-structuralist critics and use some of the concepts they bring to bear on Barth, I differ from them in the conclusions I reach about Barth's art. Most importantly, I see the self-consciousness and the self-reflexivity of his work as an inevitable consequence of his use of the ancient convention of framing and not just as the stock-in-trade of the postmodern novel. Self-consciousness and self-reflexivity have undoubtedly reached their culmination in the second half of the twentieth century, but they are by no means a new phenomenon in literature.

Some of the best critics and theorists of postmodernism concede that fiction has always been aware of its own processes. In Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre, Robert Alter points out that "The phenomenon of an artwork mirroring itself as it mirrors reality...could be traced back as far as the bard within the epic in the Odyssey and Euripides' parody of the conventions of Greek tragedy."[24] Linda Hutcheon also reminds us of "the continuity...between 'postmodernism' and Don Quixote,"[25] and that "Whatever the reason, the novel from its

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[24] Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975) x1

[25] Hutcheon, 3.

beginnings has always nurtured a self-love, a tendency toward self-obsession."[26] Linking Barth with the old masters of storytelling is in fact a continuation of rather than a divergence from the ongoing debate on post-modern fiction. Since Barth has been studied almost exclusively in conjunction with other post-modern writers and hardly ever in conjunction with the ancient storytellers, my study of Barth's use of the frame-tale device as a narrative strategy is meant to strike a balance in Barth criticism.

Barth's use of the frame-tale device has not gone entirely unnoticed. A good number of critics have in passing discussed Barth's frames in connection with Giles Goat-Boy, Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera, but nobody has traced the development of Barth's use of framing since the beginning of his career. For James McDonald the framing layers enclosing The Revised New Syllabus call attention to the novel as artifice, which Barth offers as an alternative to the disjunction of everyday life.[27] John Stark also argues that in Lost in the Funhouse Barth constructs an "intricate system of boxes" to undercut mimesis.[28] Other critics have discussed the cyclical structure of Barth's book. Edgar Knapp points out that in Lost in the

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[26] Hutcheon, 10.

[27] James L. McDonald, "Barth's Syllabus: The Frame of Giles Goat-Boy," Critique 13 (1972): 6.

[28] John Stark, The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth (Durham: Duke UP, 1974) 122.

Funhouse "every man is like his father, [and] every story bears a likeness to its archetype."[29] In a similar vein Beverly Gray Bienstock argues that the Moebius strip "can be regarded as emblematic of the larger work in several ways" and that it is "a concise statement of the eternal recurrence that Barth sees as operative in his universe."[30] A useful study of the formal design of Chimera is Cynthia Davis's "'The Key to the Treasure': Narrative Movements and Effects in Chimera." For Davis, whose study is one of the few sustained attempts at untangling the complex narrative involvement of the three novellas, the "progressive exaggerations of pattern, and narrative tensions are part of the deliberate choice of the attempt to articulate the unarticulable nature of human consciousness and existence." According to Davis, Barth's heroes as well as the reader are equally involved in a Promethean endeavour: "Barth's heroes find their 'apotheosis' and fulfilment in the quest and its articulation rather than in living 'happily ever after,'" just as the reader gets "the meat of Chimera not in the end but in working through it." Thus Chimera, as Davis goes on to say, "does not celebrate achievement; it celebrates

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[29] Edgar H. Knapp, "Found in the Barthhouse: Novelist as Saviour," In Critical Essays on John Barth, 188.

[30] Beverly Gray Bienstock, "Lingering on the Autognostic Verge: John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse," Critical Essays on John Barth, 203.

struggle."[31]

Moreover, some critics have noticed the importance of Scheherazade, especially in connection with "Dunyazadiad." For example, Charles Caramello points out that "Barth knows that one weaves stories and metafictions to stave off death as well as to increase sexual pleasure."[32] Nonetheless it remains to be demonstrated that Scheherazade is a permanent presence in Barth's literary consciousness and that she and her narrative strategy are crucial to the understanding of Barth's aesthetics. As late as 1980, Charles Harris pointed out in his "John Barth and the Critics: An Overview," that "the relationship between the framing devices of Barth's later fiction and the traditional frame-tale remains generally unexamined."[33] A decade later, this relationship still has not been examined in a sustained way.

My approach is also meant to refute Barth's detractors, who have accused him of "plotting" to bring about the demise of the novel. For example Jerome Klinkowitz claims that both Barth and Pynchon "are in fact regressive parodists, who by the literature of exhaustion theory have confused the course of American

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[31] Cynthia Davis, "'The key to the Treasure': Narrative Movements and Effects in Chimera" in Critical Essays on John Barth, 226.

[32] Caramello, 121.

[33] Charles B. Harris, "John Barth and the Critics: An Overview" in Critical Essays on John Barth, 13.

fiction"[34] and that "it is precisely because Barth has suffered an exhaustion (if not castration) of the imagination that his fiction falters."[35] Similarly, Pearl K. Bell sees Barth as "a failed Houdini; sealed inside the magic barrel, he can't remember how he'd planned to get out."[36] The critics who frown upon Barth and expect him to embrace silence might have to wait for a long time to see their prophecies fulfilled. Despite his experiments, which are not always successful, and despite his obsession with convoluted forms, Barth practises an art which is positive and enduring to the extent that it is firmly entrenched in the old tradition of storytelling.

It should be noted that even when Barth does not use the frame-tale device in the systematic manner Scheherazade used it, his modifications of the technique and the variations of it he devises serve the same purpose Scheherazade's technique serves and address the same problems, namely, how to actualize in one's narrative a regressus in infinitum that enables one to keep on with the story and thus elude the deadly consequences of silence. If the frame-tale technique per se gives way to other narrative experiments in Barth's fiction, the main properties of the technique and its artistic and ontological implications are

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[34] Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975) ix.

[35] Klinkowitz, 20.

[36] Pearl K. Bell, "American Fiction: Forgetting the Ordinary Truths," Dissent 20 (1973): 26-7.

constant in his writing and remain as a testimony to the deep impact frame-tale literature has on his artistic career. Whether Barth tells tales within a tale, repeats the same tale over and over again in different disguises, resorts to the mise en abyme to create a series of miniature replicas of the same story, or while telling one tale perpetually sows narrative seeds which later bloom into other full-blown stories, his purpose always remains the same. And Barth's purpose and overriding concern is to keep his narrative machine rolling and elude the menace of artistic impotence which is no less dreadful than the menace of death that Scheherazade contended with for one thousand one nights. Narrative for Barth perpetuates the human race as much as sexuality, and his narrators' fear of sexual emasculation is as strong as their fear of artistic emasculation. Sex and narrative go hand in hand in Barth's fiction as much as they do in The Arabian Nights.

In this study I will examine Barth's first six novels: The Floating Opera, The End of the Road, The Sot-Weed Factor, Giles Goat-Boy, Lost in the Funhouse, and Chimera. Barth does not take a new aesthetic direction in his three latest novels, Letters, Sabbatical, and Tidewater Tales: A Novel; he remains the incorrigible fabulator that he will always be. If Chimera does not mark the end of a stage in Barth's development as a writer, it does, however, mark the culmination of his experimentation with the frame-tale technique. Hence, a consideration of Barth's latest novels would not contribute a great deal to our

understanding of his use of the frame-tale convention, the narrative potentialities which he fully explores and in fact exhausts in Chimera. Chimera falls as the natural closing point of this study. The frame-tale device as well as the aesthetic and ontological implications which arise from it are developed and entrenched through Barth's fiction in an order of increasing complexity and find their consummate and most convoluted expression in Chimera. There is still a residual deposit of the frame-tale convention in Letters, Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales, but Barth is no longer in search of new ways of exploiting the convention itself, since he has pushed it to a level of complexity beyond which it would no longer be a narrative-generating mechanism, but a cryptic puzzle not worth solving.

CHAPTER 2

ORALITY VERSUS TEXTUALITY ON BOARD THE FLOATING OPERA

Give sorrow words: the grief does not speak/
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break.

Shakespeare, Macbeth

The Floating Opera has been run through the existential as well as the psychoanalytic mill. Both The Floating Opera and The End of the Road have been described by some critics as "clearly existential novels"[1] or "conventional novels in the then-popular style of Andre Malraux, Albert Camus, and other such reflective writers."[2] We are told on the other hand that "Freudianism is at the center of the novel's plan."[3] Another critic declares that Todd's "condition closely resembles Laing's description of the schizophrenic personality teetering on the verge of psychosis."[4] For Dennis Martin, the novel is "a dramatization of Todd's consciousness of his sexual impotency."[5] Poor Todd is also diagnosed as "a victim of the Oedipus complex" and as "a latent homosexual, 'a cold fish' who resorts to the 'Albertine strategy,' an affair with a man variously disguised as an affair with a woman."[6] The list could go on, but these statements are quite

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[1] Ben Satterfield, "Facing the Abyss: The Floating Opera and The End of the Road," CLA Journal, 28 (1983): 342.

[2] Jerome Klinkowitz, "John Barth Reconsidered," Partisan Review, 49 (1982): 60.

[3] Eugene Korkowski, "The Excremental Vision of Barth's Todd Andrews," Critique, 18 (1976): 51.

[4] Charles B. Harris, "Todd Andrews, Ontological Insecurity, and The Floating Opera," Critique, 17 (1976): 38.

[5] Dennis Martin, "Desire and Disease: The Psychological Pattern of The Floating Opera," Critique 17 (1976): 17.

[6] Stanley Edgar Hyman, "John Barth's First Novel," Critical Essays on John Barth. ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984) 76.

representative of the critical work which attended Barth's first novel. The Floating Opera has indeed floated for too long between psychoanalysis and existentialism and its offshoots. Critical vigilance requires that we view with a measure of suspicion what Todd, the master-equivocator, says; whereas, what Barth says in his essays and addresses ought to be taken with more seriousness. Barth has insisted that he is "the least psychological of storytellers,"[7] that he is not an expert in "philosophy, but a mere storyteller. Which is to say, a professional liar" (F.B. 16), and that "a novel is not essentially a view of the universe...but a universe itself" (F.B. 29). Thus, to lump Barth with Andre Malraux, Albert Camus, and "other such reflective writers" is to ignore Barth's refutations, miss the point and the fun as well. Whether in La Condition Humaine or in La Peste, Malraux and Camus are depressingly earnest about ideas and systems of thought. Ideas for Barth, the dilettante, are valuable mostly because they supply him with material for his narrative machine. John Hawkes is right when he makes this comment on Barth's narrative method:

> What engages the imagination in all this is, I think, the strong appeal generated by incongruence, by sense verging instantly toward no sense at all. The laws of Maryland are as senseless as the seventeen wills of Harrison Mack Senior; the legal

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[7] John Barth, The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984) 3. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

> fight between young Harrison Mack and his mother makes precisely as much sense as Jane Mack's gift of herself to Todd, or Todd's "rational" decision to kill himself.[8]

Post-modern fiction in general and Barth's novels in particular resist traditional approaches because they are governed by an economy of their own. For a post-modern novel to be dealt with adequately, it must be dealt with on its own terms. Chef-d'oeuvres of modernism such as Mrs Dalloway or The Sound and the Fury lend themselves to interpretive readings. Such novels do indeed invite critics to fathom the consciousness of characters, hunt for clues, piece symbols together to organize inordinate experience; whereas, Barth's Floating Opera hardly needs explicators. In fact, one could go so far as to say that if the thematic readings The Floating Opera has elicited are inappropriate and atrociously repetitious, it is because any thematic interpretation of it is likely to be tautological, contrived, and simply de trop. Nobody says it better than Barth himself. Barth holds nothing back, exposes his ideas with insistence, discloses the significance of his symbols and warns us against the trappings of heavy-handed interpretations. About his strange encounter with the German soldier in the First World War, Todd instructs us in a manner which foreshadows Barth's jabs at the reader in Lost in the Funhouse:

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8 John Hawkes, "The Floating Opera and Second Skin" Mosaic, 8 (1974): 20.

> Now read this paragraph with an open mind; I can't warn you too often not to make the quickest, easiest judgments of me, if you're interested in being accurate....
> If the notion of homosexuality enters your head, you're normal, I think. If you judge either the German sergeant or myself to have been homosexual, you're stupid.[9]

Here, Todd's warning is indicative of Barth's suspicion of excessive psychoanalyzing of fictional characters. Moreover, Todd, like ancient fabulators, draws for us the moral of the stories he tells, and his narrative is rife with statements such as "I tell this story because...." Todd guides us through the "meandering stream of [his] story," and lest we forget, he refers us back to details previously mentioned. More importantly, Barth often interprets his own symbols and thus undercuts our symbol-hunting habits: "Tod is German for death; perhaps the name is symbolic"(F.O. 3). Similarly, by quite explicitly drawing an analogy between the imaginary drifting showboat and the narrative structure of the novel and life itself, Barth becomes the creator and the critic of his own work. With all these "anti-novelistic" elements undercutting conventional expectations, The Floating Opera already announces the aesthetic concerns which Barth will develop in his mature work.

Most of the novelistic preoccupations which will govern Barth's mature fiction are already suggested in this first

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9 John Barth, The Floating Opera, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1967) 64. Subsequent references to this edition are noted in parentheses in the text.

novel. Barth uses framing and infuses his narrative with his fabulative spirit and with devices of the oral tradition, and, by doing so, he generates narrative which keeps his character alive when everything else has failed him. Barth is a fabulator who delights in storytelling, word-play, and linguistic virtuosity. If, as Robert Scholes points out, "delight in formal and verbal dexterity is the essence of fabulation,"[10] then Barth's first novel is an exemplary illustration of this mode of writing. To indulge his bent for verbal play, he adopts devices of oral literature, which best suit his unbridled narrative energy. Also, like oral storytellers, he improvises, establishes a continuous dialogue with the reader, and uses repetition as a mnemonic tool. Framing, fabulation, and oral devices are all part of Barth's means of keeping the story moving and are therefore part of his survival strategy. Like Scheherazade, and like most of Barth's characters, Todd tells his story to forestall death, and the structure and the style of his story reflect his need to keep the narrative going. Todd's "politics of survival" parallels Barth's own instinctive search for narrative devices to keep his narrative line running infinitely in the absence of any philosophical or moral reason for continuing to live.

Chief among these narrative devices is the frame-tale device, which will become a guiding principle in Barth's later

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[10] Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford UP, 1967) 67.

novels. The framing method which informs The Floating Opera is not the systematic one of tales literally within tales whereby characters tell stories about other characters who themselves tell further stories of their own. Although the various stories which make up The Floating Opera overlap and are completely intertwined and, in fact, have been referred to as "tales within a tale,"[11] they are framed in a simpler way than the tales within the abysmal narrative of the Arabian Nights or Barth's "Menelaiad" for that matter. The framed stories in The Floating Opera are closer to a kind of "incidental" framing that Barth describes in The Friday Book:

> Such unforgettable but incidental stories-within-stories as Pilar's story of the killing of the fascists in Chapter 10 of Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls; or Ivan's tale of the Grand Inquisitor in Book V, Chapter V of Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov; also the incidental romances with which Cervantes interrupts the adventures of Don Quixote; and, for that matter, such classical retrospective expositions as Odysseus's rehearsal to the Phaeacians of his story. (F.B. 225)

Barth establishes the frame-tale narrative structure by inserting minor stories within his major story, which revolves around the June day on which Todd decides to commit suicide. All the framed narratives are an outgrowth of the main one and enjoy a certain degree of autonomy within the general design of The Floating Opera. Although they are intertwined, they could well be untangled and anthologized as separate short

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[11] Joseph Gerhard, John Barth (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1970) 14.

stories under such titles as "Captain Adam's Floating Opera," "Colonel Morton's Tomatoes," "The Love Triangle," "The Law Suit," etc. Todd significantly refers to one of the stories as a "bump on the log of [his] story"(F.O. 170), and there are indeed many of such bumps in The Floating Opera. The quasi-autonomy of the secondary stories has led some critics to complain about the lack of "immediate structural or thematic relevance" of some of the chapters in the novel.[12] In order to frame his secondary stories within the main one, Barth resorts to wild digressions and dizzying flashbacks. He begins a story, leaves it off, picks it up again later, while in the meantime he is entrenching other stories concurrently and in the same style. The upshot is a wild concatenation of stories and a galloping narrative which are in keeping with the disorderly associative processes of casual thought. For Barth, frame-tale narrative, digressions, and daily experience are all linked. As he points out in "Tales Within Tales Within Tales":

> Frametales fascinate us perhaps because their narrative structure reflects, simply or complexly, at least two formal properties not only of syntax but of much ordinary experience and activity: namely, regression (or digression) and return, and theme and variation. (F.B. 237)

In his usual playfulness, he goes on to illustrate from his personal experience that "the launching of a new sailing

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[12] Charles Harris, "Todd Andrews, Ontological Insecurity, and The Floating Opera," Critique 17 (1976): 42.

season" involves a "whole phenomenon of tasks within tasks" which are, as he puts it

> isomorphic not only to the pattern of many mythical heroes' tasks (to marry the princess you must slay the dragon, to kill whom requires the magic weapon, to acquire which requires knowing the magic word which only a crazy-lady can tell you, to bribe whom requires etc., etc.,) but also to the structure of certain sentences, e.g., this one, and come to think of it, to a great many other things. (F.B. 237)

For Barth, framing is involved in every human activity and is therefore ubiquitous, necessary, and inescapable.

Right at the outset, Barth tells us what he will be up to in The Floating Opera when Todd confesses "I'm not naturally a reticent fellow, and the problem then will be to stick to the story" (F.O. 1). Barth creates a congenial setting for his seemingly chaotic narrative by inventing a character who is not a professional writer but a novice who has "never tried [his] hand at this sort of thing" (F.O. 1) and who is therefore seemingly free from the conventions and niceties of fiction writing. The outcome is a narrative ostensibly improvised, tentative, and overwhelming:

> Where were we? 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 does one stick to the story, if he is at all sensitive to the significance of things? As for me, I see already that storytelling isn't my cup of tea. (F.O. 3)

Todd is overwhelmed by material which is of equal importance to him and which he finds difficult to arrange. To cope with all the material that experience thrusts at his character,

Barth sets typographically the beginning of the Chapter "Calliope Music" in two separate columns, as if there were more material than a single narrative voice could handle. This experiment is significant insofar as it insinuates the necessity for framing that writing involves. To contend with the all too often synchronous eruptions of experience, Barth resorts first to the inconvenient polyphonic form which he soon abandons and then to the more befitting frame-tale device in order to organize experience without, however, imposing on it a false temporal and spatial ordering. The type of framing that Barth uses in The Floating Opera allows him to narrate many stories concurrently. Stories appear and disappear, "sail in and out of view" (F.O. 7) as they are superseded by one another, but they all race almost simultaneously towards the final denouement.

Yet, despite Barth's self-conscious intrusions, asides, and digressions, The Floating Opera is not a narrative hotchpotch. One need only follow Barth's processes to realize that there is method to his narrative madness. If Todd insists that "storytelling isn't [his] cup of tea," Barth knows well his craft; as he mentions in an interview: "I have a pretty good sense of where the book is going to go. By temperament I am an incorrigible formalist, not inclined to embark on a project without knowing where I am going."[13] To

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13 "An Interview," The Paris Review, 95 (1985): 153.

get more insight into Barth's framing method, one need only trace some of the embedded stories and see how they come into full being. Barth is au four et au moulin, as it were. While he is cultivating one story, he plants the seeds for others to be harvested in later chapters. The gradual unfolding of the story of Captain Adam's showboat is, among others, a case in point. At the outset, we make our first acquaintance with "Adam's Original and Unparalleled Opera," which happens to be "tied up at the Long Wharf on the day [Todd] changed [his] mind, in 1937" (F.O. 7). Adam's showboat leads Todd to mention the showboat of his fancy, which is metaphoric of life and of his writings as well. In Chapter VI, Todd notices a bundle of "printed handbills advertising the show in more detail" (F.O. 54) and puts one in his pocket for later use. In Chapter IX, the handbill with all its details is transcribed in The Floating Opera. In Chapter XVI, as Todd is on his way to meet his friend and client Harrison Mack, he accidentally catches sight of the same handbills plastered on, of all places, the walls of Cambridge Opera House. When in Chapter XX we hear "the raucous voice of a stream calliope...whistling in off the river" (F.O. 186), we realize that the floating opera story is approaching. The handbills, which keep popping out of Todd's pocket by accident, sustaining thus our interest in the show to come, foreshadow the reconnaissance tour of the opera which Todd eventually makes in the company of little Jeannine. Finally, all these

details converge into the story per se, which unfolds in the penultimate chapter. Barth, who has a sense of timing and an eye for narrative organization, tantalizes us all throughout the novel to finally reward us with a finale full of jest and humour. In his handling of this story, Barth suggests the regressus in infinitum that frame-tale narrative involves. The Floating Opera frames the metaphoric floating opera, which is a figment of Todd's imagination, Captain Adam's floating opera, as well as the town's Opera House, the walls of which are plastered with posters advertising the showboat. What we have here is an introduction to Barth's favourite narrative structure, that of tales-within-tales-within-tales.

While Barth is working on the story of Captain Adam's showboat, he is developing other stories as well. The story which revolves around Colonel Morton and his tomatoes achieves its fullness in the same way. Early in the novel, Todd drops a seemingly innocent detail in the course of his first description of the inquiry, the notes of which "filled a mere three baskets and one corrugated box with MORTON'S MARVELOUS TOMATOES printed on the end" F.O.9). A little later, Todd in passing swears "by all the ripe tomatoes of Dorchester." When he next mentions the Colonel's tomatoes, the detail is already insinuating itself into our consciousness, and Barth uses it to set the tone for Todd's unsavoury relationship with the colonel: "although Col. Henry Morton, who owns the biggest tomato cannery on God's earth, is a peculiar friend of mine,

the tomatoes that line his coffers upset my stomach" (F.O. 56). Here, Barth's method of building up his stories is reminiscent of the cinematographic technique of the travelling camera which picks up material not of any immediate significance in an ostensibly unselective way, stores it and then puts it to use in a later sequence. While Todd is busy apprising the much distraught Harrison of the likelihood of losing the trial, he still manages to drop a comment about the unrelated tomatoes:

> Finally he [Harrison] broke down, as we were crossing the Choptank River Bridge, pulling into Cambridge. The water was white-capped and cold-looking. Dead ahead, at the end of the boulevard that the bridge ran onto, Morton's Marvelous Tomatoes, Inc., spread its red neon banner across the sky, and I smiled. (F.O. 96)

Finally, Todd tells the whole story to the Macks: "I told them then, for the first time, the story of my adventures with Colonel Henry Morton--which story, reader, I'll pause to tell you, too, sooner or later, but not just now (F.O. 98). At this stage, our suspicions are confirmed as we realize that the details given in installments were less incidental than they appeared to be and were all leading to a full-fledged story. The story per se is finally told in the chapter entitled "Coals to New Castle," in which we hear of Todd's strange gift of $5000 to the Colonel, the latter's nervous reactions to it and his attempts to free himself from indebtedness--all of which lead to the narration of the Colonel's riotous New Year's party and Todd's unorthodox

encounter with the Colonel's wife, "Morton's Most Marvelous Tomato" (F.O. 190).

Barth proceeds in this same manner to bring to fullness his other secondary narratives. The story of Todd's mishaps with Betty June Gunter is another illustration of this narrative method. When the Macks suggest that he move in with them in the house which once belonged to his father, Todd remarks, "The mention of my old bedroom where I'd slept from age zero to age seventeen, reminded me of a certain adventure, and I laughed" (F.O. 37). Later in the same chapter, he adds: "I laughed again as I laugh everytime I remember what happened when I was seventeen (F.O. 40). De fil en aiguille, Barth goes on heightening our expectations with more and more details until the story reaches its first climax in the hilarious intercourse scene which Barth ends with a twist, "when I next saw her, it was under different circumstances" F.O.121). Before he exits, Barth prepares us with this comment for the second round, the brothel scene where Todd nearly loses his life at the murderous hands of Betty June. Barth's use of perpetual foreshadowing indicates that framing is not haphazard, but an integral part of the "algebra" of the novel. The narrative seeds which Todd sows throughout the novel are part of his survival strategy to the extent that every anticipatory detail is a promise of a story, which, for Todd, the fabulator, is something worth living for. Thus, The Floating Opera which wants to be disorderly and improvised is

in fact painstakingly executed and is the work of a true craftsman. The use of framing, which makes the design of the novel quite intricate, appeals to Barth, who insists on calling himself a storyteller "in love with stories as much as with language" (F.B. 105).

Barth is a fabulator in the sense that Robert Scholes assigns to the word. Scholes deals only with Giles Goat-Boy, but his definition of fabulation also applies to The Floating Opera. "Fabulation," Scholes tells us, "puts the highest premium on art and joy."[14] It also "means a return to a more verbal kind of fiction."[15] Fabulators, as Scholes explains

> have some faith in art but they reject all ethical absolutes. Especially, they reject the traditional satirist's faith in the efficacy of satire as a reforming instrument. They have a more subtle faith in the humanizing value of laughter.[16]

Barth's invocation to the muse to spare him from "social-historical responsibility" and his obsession with "the manufacture of universes" bespeak his fabulistic sensibility. In a recent interview, Barth recalls that "Stendhal said that once when he wanted to commit suicide, he couldn't abide to do it because he wanted to find out what would happen next in

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[14] Scholes, 10.

[15] Scholes, 12.

[16] Scholes, 41.

French politics. I have a similar curiosity."[17] This statement finds a deep echo in Barth's first novel. Todd's only misgiving about his imminent death is that he will never know whether Jane will comply with his wish by exposing her naked beauty to old captain Osborn: "when it occurred to me that I'd not be alive to find out, I experienced a small sensation of regret; the only such sensation I felt that day" (F.O. 193).

Like his creator, Todd is an incorrigible fabulator, profoundly aware of the value of storytelling and the narrative impulse which resides deeply within all of us. While edifying Mister Haecker in existentialism, Todd is led to quote Cicero:

> if a man could ascend into heaven all by himself and see the workings of the universe and so forth, the sight wouldn't give him much pleasure; but it would be the finest thing in the world if he had somebody to describe it to. (F.O. 163)

It is his pleasure in spinning out his tale, describing it all to "somebody," that keeps Todd alive rather than any hope of discovering the "workings of the universe." In the same way his philosophical opinions are secondary to his overriding need to fabulate. As one critic points out, "The Floating Opera is largely lies posing as autobiography," [18] and indeed Todd is "not interested in the truth or falsehood of

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[17] "An Interview," The Paris Review, 95 (1985): 153.

[18] Charles Harris, "Todd Andrews, Ontological Insecurity, and The Floating Opera," Critique 17 (1976): 44.

statements" (F.O. 35). When he charts out his affair with the Macks, he is little concerned with its moral implications since he "scarcely regarded [himself] as involved in it at all" (F.O. 35). Each possible denouement of the love triangle carries the potential of a story for the fabulator that Todd is. For the same reason, Todd writes letters and addresses them to himself. Even in the practice of law, he picks and chooses among his clients "not to find easy cases, but to find interesting ones" (F.O. 74), cases that are convoluted and compelling enough to fulfill his need for fabulation. In his practice of law, as in most other areas, Todd is interested in processes, not in end results, as he admits about one of his most complicated cases: "The truth is that my interest in Morton V. Butler ended with the Supreme Court's ruling, for that terminated the procedural dispute. I didn't mind missing the actual trial, which would be dull, whoever won" (F.O. 175-6).

Barth's language also reflects not only his fabulative bent but also his tendency towards elaborate rhetorical structures that could presumably go on ad infinitum. The following passage is microcosmic of Barth's narrative method:

> ...an Army doctor, Captain John Frisbee,informed me, during the course of my predischarge physical examination, that each soft beat my sick heart beat might be my sick heart's last. This fact--that having begun this sentence, I may not live to write its end; that having poured my drink, I may not live to taste it, or that it may pass a live man's tongue to burn a dead man's belly; that having slumbered, I may never wake, or having waked, may never living

> sleep--this for thirty-five years has been the condition of my existence, the great fact of my life: had been so for eighteen years already, or five hundred forty-nine million, sixty thousand, four hundred eighty heartbeats, by June 21 or 22 of 1937. This is the enormous question, in its thousand trifling forms (Having sugared, will I cream? Itching, will I scratch? Hemming, will I haw?), toward answering which all my thoughts and deeds, all my dreams and energies have been oriented. (F.O. 48-49)

Todd speaks about his sick heart in a style orgiastic and throbbing with life because no subject is immune to Barth's virtuosity and fabulistic inclinations, however serious it may be. More importantly, the passage is microcosmic of Todd's use of language as a survival strategy. The sentence structure bespeaks Todd's compulsion to stay alive by generating an endless flow of narrative. In this passage, his chasing of sentences and their implications to "their dens" (F.O. 2) is similar to what he does with stories. Like an infinite series of frame-tales, the parallel relative clauses could presumably go on forever. Similarly, the handling of the secretary's faux pas, which is reminiscent of Chaucerian or Rabelaisian ribaldries, is Barth's way of generating narrative out of a small incident:

> Oh, excuse me!" she gasped, and blushed, and fled. But ah, the fart hung heavy in the humid air, long past the lady's flight. It hung, it lolled, it wisped, it miscegenated with the smoke of my cigar, caressed the beading oil on the skin of my nose, lay obscenely on the flat of my desk, among my briefs and papers. (F.O. 101)

Here, the humour hangs on a potentially infinite elaboration of a detail, as if Todd's life depended on it. The search for

a never-ending narration is again part of Todd's unconscious survival strategy.

The insatiable appetite for story is Todd's defense against his abstract despair caused by his own formulation of self-defeating intellectual constructs. Todd's rejection of intellectual abstractions in favour of pure story is, of course, symptomatic of Barth's later protagonists' rejection of rigid systems of thought, their reliance on narrative, and their use of framing which generates narrative. The frame-tale will become the horn of plenty for them, providing the occasion and the excuse to go on telling and listening to tales forever, since, when systems fail, narrative alone, as they all discover, promises to be eternal and redeeming. Todd's obsessive delight in complex verbal jokes, his joy in pure story rather than moral applications, in continuing processes rather than final conclusions all reveal Barth's fabulistic tendencies, which have inevitably drawn him to the frame-tale. Insofar as framing actualizes an open-ended narrative, it enables Barth to give free reign to his verbal energy and thus suits his fabulistic bent. Moreover, if the narrative universe in which Todd floats is fabulistic, it is also infused with devices of oral literature, which Todd also uses as a coping strategy.

From the very start Barth's work contains a residue of his vast reading of the classics of the oral tradition. The Floating Opera reveals such characteristics of the word-of-

mouth narrative as improvisation, the copious use of repetitions, and a sense of the immediacy inherent in the spoken word.[19] Barth creates the illusion that his novel is being written in our presence and with our participation. It looks as if it were in the process of making itself while we are reading it and is therefore in a constant state of becoming. Todd intimates, "any day I may fall quickly dead, without warning--perhaps before I complete this sentence" (F.O. 5). Todd also addresses the reader much in the way an oral storyteller addresses his audience, "Listen: eleven times the muscle of my heart contracted while I was writing the four words of the last sentence" (F.O. 48). When he is trying to find a plausible reason for Betty June's murderous outburst, he asks us, "Don't you agree that this is probably how it was?" (F.O. 139). Walter Ong remarks that, "Oral performers are beset with distractions,"[20] and are thus likely to interrupt a tale to perform other pressing duties. In such spirit Todd blurts out, "are you so curious as to follow me down the hall to the men's room? If you aren't (I shall be only a minute), read while you wait the story of my resumption of the affair with Jane Mack" (F.O. 149). As in The Arabian Nights, where Scheherazade's nightly narrative installments

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[19] Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982) 31-77.

[20] Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982) 165.

are consistently sealed off with the formula "And Scheherazade perceived the dawn of day and ceased her permitted say," in a similar fashion Todd retires when he closes Chapter 17 with the phrase, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I shall sleep." Todd's various apostrophes, "reader," "friend," etc., are also redolent of the oral tradition that Barth is enamored with. Walter Ong points out that, "The nineteenth-century novelist's nervous apostrophes to the 'dear reader'... suggest that the typical reader was felt by the writer to be closer to the old-style listener than most readers commonly are felt to be today."[21] Barth's apostrophes are of course more playful than nervous, but it remains nonetheless that these apostrophes and other self-conscious and tongue-in-cheek intrusions allow him to carry the dialogue with the reader beyond the confines of the text. Orality, or at least the illusion of orality, allows Todd to confirm his ontological presence in the face of the imminent menace of death. The give-and-take involved in an open dialogue with the reader makes Todd feel alive and kicking. Beneath Todd's casual, humorous tone is a mortal urgency, "any day I may fall quickly dead, without warning--perhaps before I complete this sentence" (F.O. 5). Perhaps by creating the illusion of orality, Todd attempts to step outside the confines of textuality in order to protest against the finality of death.

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[21] Ong, 171.

Another of Barth's defenses against finality is the use of repetition as an organizing device. Repetition has long been a characteristic of oral literature. Ong points out that "sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech is an artificial creation structured by the technology of writing."[22] Hence, not only is an oral storyteller bound to indulge in digressions, but also to repeat himself here and there to remind himself of his story line and his narrative strategy. In other words, because "in an oral culture experience is intellectualized mnemonically," as Ong notes, unless the storyteller uses a set of recurring formulas, which are, "mnemonically tooled grooves,"[23] he is likely to lose the thread of his narrative. Barth uses mnemonic formulas as if he were reciting The Floating Opera. He ends the second chapter with the following phrase, "I drank Capt. Osborn's medicine myself, as was not my practice, poured him another dose, and tiptoed out"(F.O. 17). Barth does not pick up the same subject in the next chapter, as one would expect him to do. Instead, he chooses to narrate the story of his involvement with the Macks, "it's a good yarn, and Capt. Osborn can wait a chapter for his rye" (F.O. 18). The drink does not reach its destination until the fourth chapter, and the phrase used twenty pages earlier is picked up with a

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[22] Ong, 40.

[23] Ong, 36.

slight variation: "Very well: I tiptoed from my room, so as not to disturb Jane again from her slumbers, and took the old rascal his drink" (F.O. 13). Barth ends with the same idea with which he started and thus organizes his writing according to an architectonic pattern similar to that of Chinese boxes. In his study of Homer, Cedric Whitman points to examples of ring composition in The Iliad and The Odyssey and interestingly enough sees it as part and parcel of oral narrative. Whitman explains that

> This framing device, whereby an episode or digression is rounded off by the repetition at the end of the formula with which it began, had its origin undoubtedly in the oral singer's need to bind the parts of his story together for the sake of simple coherence.[24]

Barth never tires of repeating elements of his story line and has in fact been damned by some of his critics for his lack of verbal restraint. The Floating Opera is rife with rhetorical questions such as, "Have I explained this?," "Have I explained that?," "Where were we?," "Now, what was I doing?," as if there were no written text to refer to, as if Barth were sitting amidst an audience and beguiling them with evanescent words which are not committed to writing. The outcome is a narrative which enjoys a lot of latitude, which contests the restricting finality of textuality; a narrative which wants itself contingent, undecided, tentative and is even willing to

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27 Cedric H. Whitman, Homer and the Heroic Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958) 252.

cancel itself out: "when I reach the bedtime of that day, if ever, I'll come back and destroy these pages of piano-tuning, or perhaps not" (F.O. 2). Thus, if The Floating Opera, with its staccato pace and its ostensibly tentative structure, seems like the rough draft of the novel which will never be, it is because its composition is guided by an economy similar to that of oral storytelling.

Perhaps Barth is a writer only because he cannot be a storyteller in a chirographic age ruled by the necessity of writing. One certainly gets this impression from his fiction, his experiments with electronic means, his nostalgia for the oral tradition, and his enthusiasm for Scheherazade and other archetypal storytellers. If it is so, Barth is the descendant of a long-standing tradition which has since the Greeks privileged the oral utterance over the written word for the same reason that Barth invokes when he says that among the virtues of the oral tradition is "the immediacy of the human voice and the intimacy of storytelling which can only be echoed on the printed page" (F.B. 78). Barth's infusing of The Floating Opera with elements of orality may be inscribed in the phonocentric tradition which has associated the oral utterance with presence and life and the written word with absence and death. This phonocentrism permeates Western epistemology from Plato down to some of the most vigilant thinkers of the twentieth century such as Saussure and Levi-Strauss.

Plato's phonocentrism finds its most explicit expression in Phaedrus. For Plato, writing produces "forgetfulness in the souls" and "maintain[s] a solemn silence" inasmuch as it is only an imitation of an imitation, "a kind of ghost of animate discourse."[25] Levi-Strauss equates the spoken word with innocence and writing with artifice, violence, and exploitation. In Tristes Tropiques, he indicates that the intrusion of writing on a Central-American tribe named Nambikwara brought with it violence and other forms of evil and occasioned thus a fall from a linguistic grace.[26] Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, points out that, "writing assumes undeserved importance."[27] Saussure in very Platonic terms stresses that attributing more importance to the written word than to the spoken is like "thinking that more can be learned about someone by looking at his photograph than by viewing him directly."[28] The views of these thinkers are indicative of the preponderance of phonocentrism in Western culture. Through the ages, the oral utterance has been a metaphor for presence, origin, truth and authenticity

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[25] Plato, Phaedrus, trans. W.C. Helmbold and W.G. Rabinowitz, (Indianapolis: Merrill Educational Publishing, 1956) 263.

[26] Claude Levi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (Paris: Gallimard, 1955) 345.

[27] Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959) 25.

[28] Saussure, 24.

to the extent that the oral utterance is direct and therefore unadulterated; whereas, the written word has been dismissed as a mediation of a mediation, and a "kind of imitation talking" (102), as Walter Ong puts it. Even though the spoken word is by its nature ephemeral since "sound exists only when it is going out of existence" (102), it is writing which has been associated with death. Ong notes that

> It is abundantly evident in countless references to writing (and/or print) traceable in printed dictionaries of quotations, from 2 Corinthians 3:6, "the letter kills but the spirit gives life" and Horace's references to his three books of Odes as a "monument" (Odes 111.30.1), presaging his own death, on to and beyond Henry Vaughan's assurance to Sir Thomas Bodley than in the Bodleian Library at Oxford "every book is thy epitaph". In Pippa Passes, Robert Browning calls attention to the still widespread practice of pressing living flowers between the pages of printed books, "faded yellow blossoms/twixt page and page". The dead flower, once alive, is the psychic equivalent of the verbal text (81).

The spoken word is life-giving and has an ontological significance because, as Ong puts it, "the word in its natural habitat is a part of a real, existential present" (101).

Barth's "phonocentrism" too seems to have an existential significance. The Floating Opera is grounded in orality because Todd, who is constantly reminded of his mortal state by his sick heart and his clubbed fingers, needs to assert his existence by tirelessly narrating his life. "I speak therefore I am" is his version of the old Cartesian statement. Rousseau says quite pointedly, "je ne commencai de vivre que

quand je me regardai comme un homme mort."[29] Todd is most paradoxically in need of life-affirming means when his death becomes imminent, and he finds an answer to his unconscious desire in storytelling by leaving his hotel room to get a kick out of his last day by gluttonously feasting on as many stories as the street can offer. Like most of Hemingway's heroes, Todd's brush with death shocks him into a higher awareness of life. In this respect, some of the classics of storytelling are rife with examples of the natural human impulse to use narrative as a shield against death. Some of these examples are cited by Barth himself. Indeed he draws our attention to the scene in Canto XIX of Dante's Inferno where a Florentine assassin sentenced to be buried alive withholds death by confessing to his attendant crimes committed and uncommitted because, as Barth says, "respite is granted for as long as he talks" (F.B. 56). The beauties of this image, as Barth goes on to say, "are its two nice paradoxes: the more sins he has to confess, the longer retribution is delayed, and since he has nothing to lose anyhow, he may as well invent a few good ones to hold the priest's attention" (F.B. 56). Barth also mentions on numerous occasions the retreat of Boccaccio's characters to

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[29] Quoted in Jacques Derrida, De la Grammatologie (Paris: Les Editions de minuit, 1967) 161.

I never began to live, until I looked upon myself as a dead man. [Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 143.]

the country to delight in each other's stories while the plague is wreaking havoc in the land. The most compelling example of the natural impulse to use narrative as a shield against death is, of course, that of Scheherazade, who saves her life by the sheer marvellousness of her stories. Barth thinks of Scheherazade as a kindred spirit, because as a novelist of a particular sensibility, he feels and experiences her predicament. In a recent interview, Barth declared:

> About my fiction: my friend John Hawkes once said of it that it seems spun out against nothingness, simply so that there should not be silence. I understand that. It's Scheherazade's terror: the terror that comes from the literal or metaphorical equating of telling stories with living, with life itself. I understand that metaphor to the marrow of my bones. For me, there is always a sense that when this story ends maybe the whole world will end.[30]

Other writers and critics have been inflicted with the Scheherazade syndrome. Michel Butor speaks about the momentous question of life, death, and narrative with the same earnestness, "tout ecrivain est Scheherazade, tout ecrivain a en lui une menace de mort ... l'ecrivain en parlant, va lever indefiniment la menace de mort qui pese sur lui,"[31] Michel Foucault also shows a great deal of interest in this question:

> Les décisions les plus mortelles, inévitablement,

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46 Barth, "An Interview," The Paris Review, 95 (84): 152-3.

[31] Georges Charbonnier, Entretiens avec Michel Butor (Paris: Gallimard, 1967) 41-42.
"Every writer is Scheherazade. Every writer carries within himself the menace of death. By speaking he will indefinitely ward off the menace of death which weighs upon him." [my trans.]

> restent suspendues le temps d'un récit. Le discours, on le sait, a le pouvoir de retenir la flêche, déjà lancée, en un retrait du temps qui est son espace propre. Il se peut bien, comme le dit Homere, que les dieux aient envoyé les malheurs aux mortels pour qu'ils puissent les raconter, et qu'en cette possibilité la parole trouve son infinie ressource; il se peut bien que l'approche de la mort, son geste souverain, son ressaut dans la mémoire des hommes creusent dans l'être et le présent le vide à partir duquel et vers le quel on parle.[32]

Moreover, we have all too often witnessed or heard of the onrush of narrative which seizes moribunds on their deathbeds and their sudden need to dispense advice or confide in their entourage. The motives which determine this behaviour have perhaps more ontological implication than we suspect.

By creating the illusion of orality in his novel, Barth, who is fully aware of the redemptive power of storytelling and of its ontological implications, alleviates the despair Todd experiences in the process of writing an inquiry into his father's suicide. He rescues Todd from the despair caused by the inquiry, and the self-defeating attempts to account for

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[32] Michel Foucault, "Le Langage à l'infini," Tel Quel 15 (1963): 44.
The most fateful decisions are inevitably suspended during the course of a story. We know that discourse has the power to arrest the flight of an arrow in a recess of time, in the space proper to it. It is quite likely, as Homer has said, that the gods send disasters to men so that they can tell of them, and that in this possibility speech finds its infinite resourcefulness; it is quite likely that the approach of death--its sovereign gesture, its prominence within human memory--hollows out in the present and in existence the void toward which and from which we speak. ["Language to Infinity," Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, trans. Donald Bouchard [(Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) 53.]

his father's behaviour, and this he achieves by infusing The Floating Opera with elements characteristic of oral narrative, by thrusting his character onto the street and letting him convert whatever material the street offers him into yarns. By engaging in a direct dialogue with the reader, Todd appropriates the spoken word which invests him with a sense of presence and gives him the sustaining illusion of being free from the prison-house of writing. Viewed under this light, Todd's self-conscious intrusions become more than the vagaries of an eccentric. They are a desperate attempt to make a breach in the "textual icon," as it were, and by the same token in the thick and constringent texture of mortality. For Todd, freedom from textualism is a symbolic freedom from death. Little wonder that Todd is so energetic, so animated and so much in his elements when he is feeding on the street material and translating it into stories; whereas, the mood which pervades his account of his inquiry-writing is rather solemn and reflects his feelings of bewilderment and resignation. Todd does say that his inquiry-writing has its therapeutic value and that "it doesn't follow that because a goal is unattainable, one shouldn't work toward its attainment. Because...processes continued for long enough tend to become ends in themselves" (F.O. 215). He also says, "I should continue my researches simply in order to occupy pleasantly two hours after dinner." This is indeed Todd's consolation prize, but it remains however that the inquiry is

not a story, but a cerebral activity which involves logic and the psychological analysis of motives and is therefore "just more or less laborious research" (F.O. 214).

Todd's "laborious research" is a brilliant metaphor for the problematics of writing, namely the regressus in infinitum and the never-ending slippage of meaning. Todd's inquiry is an immense and infinite project. In order to understand the causes and circumstances of his father's suicide, he opens his first inquiry, the outcome of which proves unsatisfactory because, "there is no will-o'-wisp so elusive as the cause of a human act" (F.O. 214). Quite unabated by his first failure, Todd opens another inquiry into his father's life, "from the umbilicus that tied him to his mother to the belt that hanged him from the floor joist" (F.O. 216). This second inquiry is even more "colossal" than the suicide inquiry. As Todd puts it, "If one compares infinities, this task is even more endless than the other" (F.O. 216). If "the death-inquiry was but a chapter in the life-inquiry" (F.O. 216), both are only part of the initial project called, "Letter to My Father," which has itself bifurcated into various sub-projects. Each inquiry is eventually subsumed by a larger one, and Todd's baskets fluctuate as writing proliferates and procreates more and more writing. The inquiry is Penelope's web and thus will never be closed, nor will it disclose any unquestionable truth. Todd "could explain until judgment day and still not explain completely" (F.O. 29), because, as Christopher Norris

points out, "writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge."[33] It is significant that Todd's letter outlived its recipient and that it is carried over into Letters, Barth's seventh novel, where Todd the septuagenarian is still trying to understand.

Todd's difficulties with his inquiry are part and parcel of the problematics of writing. What Derrida says about Rousseau's ambivalence towards writing may shed some light on the problems that Todd has with his inquiry:

> Rousseau considére l'écriture comme un moyen dangereux, un secours menacant, la réponse critique à
> une situation de détresse. Quand la nature, comme proximité à soi, vient à être interdite ou interrompue, quand la parole échoue à protéger la présence, l'écriture devient nécessaire. Elle doit d'urgence s'ajouter au verbe.[34]

Derrida also notes earlier that

> Rousseau condamne l'écriture comme destruction de la présence et comme maladie de la parole. Il la réhabilite dans la mesure où elle permet la réappropriation de ce dont la parole s'était laissée

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[33] Christopher Norris, Deconstruction, Theory and Practice (London: Methuen, 1982) 29.

[34] Derrida, De la Gram., 207.
Rousseau considers writing as a dangerous means, a menacing aid, the critical response to a situation of distress. When nature as self-proximity comes to be forbidden or interrupted,when speech fails to protect presence, writing becomes necessary. It must be added to the verb urgently. [Of Gramm.,142]

déposseder.[35]

Writing for Todd is also a supplement to the spoken word and a "critical response to a situation of distress." He indeed resorts to writing his inquiry only when verbal communication with his father and, for that matter, with the German soldier and with Betty June completely fail. He opens his letter to his father when he can not verbally communicate with him. Also, when his father's abrupt death puts an end to all possibility of ever solving the father-son communication problem, Todd has recourse to his inquiries. Todd's inquiry then means more than "merging with, becoming his father insofar as possible,"[36] as one critic has phrased it. It is rather an attempt to conjure up his person, raising him from the dead, as it were, in order to settle scores with him--hence the impossibility of Todd's task. Todd's attempt to resuscitate his father and establish a communion of minds with him through the medium of writing becomes a self-defeating exercise in hermeneutics. If the writing becomes its own reward, it nonetheless engages Todd the latter-day Sisyphus in an impossible mission, a wild goose chase, not so much because of the open-endedness of the inquiry, but because such an

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[35] Derrida, De la Gramm. 207.
Rousseau condemns writing as destruction of presence and as disease of speech. He rehabilitates it to the extent that it promises the reappropriation of that of which speech allowed itself to be dispossessed. [Of Gram. 142.]

[36] Charles Harris, "Todd Andrews, Ontological Insecurity, and The Floating Opera," Critique 17 (76): 41.

inquiry is meant to be a rational and "scientific" study and belies the spirit of storytelling. In fact, like all Barth's characters, Todd welcomes open-endedness and seeks reassurance from finality in the knowledge that storytelling is by its very nature endless, but unlike a never-ending story, the inquiry is a never-ending drudgery.

From the perspective of Derridean theory, Todd's inquiry is not simply Todd's problem, but a microcosmic illustration of the Derridean chain of supplementarity within which writing is caught. Derrida notes that "Rousseau n'est pas le seul à être pris dans le graphique de la supplémentarité. Tout sens et par suite tout discours y est pris."[37] Derrida links this necessity where discourse dwells with man's desperate endeavour, ever since his Fall, to replenish and supplement his primordial insufficiencies. As Christopher Norris says in his reading of Derrida:

> The supplement is that which both signifies the lack of a "presence" or state of plentitude forever beyond recall, and compensates for that lack by setting in motion its own economy of difference.[38]

Man's attempt to delay and forever defer the realization of his own original deficiencies brings to mind Todd's "timeless"

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[37] Derrida, De la Gramm., 349.
"Rousseau is not alone in being caught in the graphic of supplementarity. All meaning and therefore all discourse is caught there." [Of Gramm., 246.]

[38] Christopher Norris, Deconstruction, Theory and Practice (London: Methuen, 1982) 33.

and "interminable" inquiry, which in fact Todd does not "mind spending a lifetime getting ready to begin" (F.O. 6). Since, as Vincent Leitch puts it, "man's departure from 'nature' towards 'culture' is instantaneous and interminable," there is a primordial lack in man, and all efforts to supplement what is essentially unsupplementable remain vain. Man's activities, writing included, are trapped in what Derrida calls:

> un enchainement infini, multipliant inéluctablement les médiations supplémentaires qui produisent le sens de cela même qu'elles diffèrent: le mirage de la chose même, de la présence immédiate de la perception originaire.[39]

Within Derrida's rationale, Todd's inquiry takes on a larger significance as it becomes paradigmatic of the open-endedness inherent in writing. In this respect, the lesson that Vincent Leitch draws from Derrida is quite edifying. Leitch indeed singles out from Of Grammatology a mishmash of isolated definitions of Derrida's notion of the supplement upon which he comments in the following passage which is so convincing in its concreteness:

> This dozen pieces, a baker's dozen, comments already on the supplement. It adds one layer of alteration--my cutting through ellipses. If you yourself design a form of meaning from all this, you will inevitably compensate me and heap on one or more layers. My supplement instigates yours and so on.

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49 Derrida, De la Gramm., 226.
an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perceptions. [Of Gramm., 157.]

> An infinite chain describes the structure of supplementarity. In commenting on this string of citations, which themselves bear a supplementary relation to one another, we supplement this already several times supplemented ensemble. There is no escape, obviously, from supplementarity. Thus, the pure entity, the uncontaminated thing, the immediate presence, the pristine object and the individual origin come forth necessarily as fictions.[40]

It is precisely because Todd seeks an escape from this "chain of supplementarity" and freedom from the prison-house of writing that he resorts to devices characteristic of oral literature. What he finds in his escape into the illusion of orality is a diversion from his mind-boggling inquiry, in short, a survival strategy; what he writes is a celebratory account rife with rhetorical questions, self-conscious intrusions, and other devices of oral storytelling. The combination of all these elements make up an unconventional novel which already announces the kind of fiction writer Barth wants to be.

For a novel which has been considered the conventional product of Barth's short affair with realism, The Floating Opera is quite experimental and announces the fictional concerns that Barth deals with in his later work. Right at the outset of his career, Barth chose to be a fabulator who is more concerned with coping with existence and its problematics than in sermonizing about it. In other words, he chose to be a storyteller rather than a philosopher, Scheherazade's

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[40] Vincent Leitch, Deconstructive Criticism (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 174.

disciple rather than Sartre's. Apart from The End of the Road, the narrative of which is restrained to a fault, all Barth's later work, as will be seen, is fabulistic and reflects his faith in the redeeming power of storytelling.

CHAPTER 3

THE END OF THE ROAD: THE PRICE OF NARRATIVE RESTRAINT

> Le conteur est mort de tristesse. On a trouvé son corps près d'une source d'eau tarie. Il serrait contre sa poitrine un livre.
>
> Tahar Ben Jelloun, L'Enfant de Sable

The End of the Road seems almost an accident in Barth's career. Among all his novels it is the closest to being a realistic novel and stands as "the odd one out" in his career. Its narrative is so stiff and so restrained that it belies the spirit of fabulation and deprives itself of the vitality which characterizes The Floating Opera and which is its saving grace and its liberating force. Just as it lacks the energy and the exuberance that Barth's first novel so generously offers, it contains fewer stories which "sail in and out of view" or weave in and out of one another. In short, in his second novel Barth controls his fabulistic impulse and withdraws from the use of framing as a narrative strategy. Yet, to the extent that this novel which repudiates fabulation is aesthetically less appealing than the rest of Barth's fiction, it supports my thesis by default, as it were. Because it pales by comparison with Barth's other novels, it is in itself an indication that Barth is at his best when he gives free rein to his fabulistic imagination, when he manufactures worlds of his own, and when he writes in the spirit of his ancient forbears.

Some of Barth's critics have complained about the bleakness and the despair which emanate from The End of the Road and dismissed the book for the restraint and the stiffness of its narrative. For Gerhardt Joseph The End of the Road is "structurally the tightest and technically the

least flamboyant of Barth's works."[1] In short, Barth's book is, according tc Joseph, "downright claustrophobic."[2] David Morrell also argues that the narrative has "an essay-answer quality," as if Jake were asked to account for past incidents in "100 words or less."[3] Tony Tanner calls it "a bleak and airless book,"[4] just as Jean Kennard complains about Barth's "introduction of the central ideas in rather contrived conversation."[5]

But these critics do not establish a connection between the thematic bleakness of the book and its narrative restraint. Barth's second novel is indeed "bleak and airless," and its narrative is constrained. Whether it was part of Barth's intent or not, the stiffness of the narrative is consistent with the novel's pessimism. Jake's presumably "failed" novel reflects his failed life, and his restrained narrative mirrors faithfully the gravity of the narrator's situation and appropriately illustrates his botched attempts at coping with his predicament. In short, Jake's inflexible

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[1] Gerhard Joseph, John Barth (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1970) 15.

[2] Joseph, 22.

[3] David Morrell, John Barth: An Introduction (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1976) 125.

[4] Tony Tanner, "The Joke That Hoax Bilked," Partisan Review, 34 (1967): 104.

[5] Jean Kennard, "John Barth: Imitations of Imitations," Mosaic 3 (1970): 122.

and death-ridden narrative is metaphoric of his failure to find an adequate survival strategy in a world ruled by arbitrariness. Throughout his career, Barth consistently makes his medium a reflection of his message and his narrative a metaphor for the situation of his narrator. Those narrators who deal with experience most successfully write with most ease and exuberance, while those who fail in their encounter with experience also tend to fail as artists. In this respect, Jake is Barth's earliest version of Ambrose of Lost in the Funhouse and Bellerophon of Chimera and for that matter a host of other narrators who struggle with "reality" as much as they do with their own writing. Thus, the restraint of Jake's narrative is a metaphor for his failure to grapple with both experience and art. He is an image of the narrative of The End of the Road, and the narrative of The End of the Road is an image of Jake.

Barth's second novel is different from his first in structure, mood, and subject-matter because it reflects the attitudes Jake Horner adopts in the face of a relativistic universe. These attitudes are best understood if compared to those of his counterpart in The Floating Opera. Indeed the structural differences between The Floating Opera and The End of the Road are determined by the differences between the two narrators. Todd Andrews frees himself of moral and intellectual constructs, puts his faith in the pure element of story, converts experience into yarns, and succeeds in

spinning a narrative which is expansive, freewheeling, and full of joie de vivre. In contrast, Jake Horner gets caught in a conflict of imagination and reality, freedom and necessity, art and experience, and composes a narrative which is constrained, condensed, revisionary, textual, and death-ridden. Todd escapes from rational and philosophical problems into an irrational joie de raconter in the course of telling his tale and gives us a fun-filled "minstrel show";[6] whereas, Jake falls prey to his own philosophical formulations and writes a "claustrophobic" narrative. Unlike the first novel which flaunts its "disorderliness," the second novel is ascetic in its composition. Also, if the former is imbued with orality, the latter is steeped in textuality, for just as Todd's narrative is imbued with a sense of immediacy, Jake's has been worked and reworked in the solitude of the remobilization farm where he ends up after his fiasco with the Morgans. In his therapeutic account of the traumatic events he experienced, there is no room for the tongue-in-cheek intrusions, the rhetorical questions, the give-and-take that Todd establishes with the reader to create the illusion that The Floating Opera is being written in our presence and with our participation. Jake's narrative is a clinical "remembrance of things past," a recollection, and a reconstruction of events by Jake-as-author who has distanced

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[6] John Barth, "An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 5 (1965): 7.

himself from Jake-as-participant. Because it is a clinical reconstruction of traumatic events, Jake's narrative lacks the wild digressions and the liberating "chaos" which are the trademark of Todd's narrative. In The Floating Opera, the love triangle is only one of many stories as Todd spins tales within tales and grafts "lumps on his log." Apart from Jake's escapade with Peggy Rankin, the love triangle in which he gets enmeshed is the only story in The End of the Road. Nonetheless, the story of Jake with his "forty-year-old-pickup" is a tale within the main tale, in short, a framed story. Even a novel as straight-laced as The End of the Road is not totally free of embedding. If this indicates anything at all, it is that framing is an ubiquitous phenomenon and dwells at the very heart of almost all narrative.

If Todd's narrative is celebratory while Jake's is inhibited, it is also partially because the two narrators have different outlooks on the relativistic world in which they live. In the absence of absolutes and universal values, Todd accommodates himself to relativism and finds in celebratory storytelling a reason for continuing to live. In the same relativistic universe, in which no one set of values, no one choice, is more viable than another, Jake gets "stuck between alternatives."[7] To avoid the agony of choice he refrains from

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[7] John Barth, The End of the Road, rev. ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) 79. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

exercising his freedom, restrains his creative energy, and is as a consequence occasionally struck by a physical and existential paralysis that Barth calls cosmopsis. Jake experiences these attacks of cosmopsis when he gets caught between his awareness of the infinite number of possible versions of reality and his knowledge that there is only a finite number of versions arbitrarily predetermined by existence. This paradox is worth investigating here because it is at the source of all the problems which paralyze Jake and thus determines not only the kind of life he lives but also the kind of narrative he eventually writes. In other words, Jake bungles experience and subsequently art as well when he fails in his attempts to find adequate solutions to the paradox of existence that paralyzes him.

Although Jake is dealt the final blow when he gets involved with the Morgans, he has carried the symptoms of his metaphysical sickness for some time. He had his first bout of cosmopsis two years earlier when the mysterious black doctor found him immobile on a bench at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station in Baltimore. His immobility was brought about by a task as simple as making up his mind on where to go for a short trip. An ordinary decision becomes a crippling quandary:

> There was no reason to go to Cincinnati, Ohio. There was no reason to go to Crestline, Ohio. Or Dayton, Ohio; or Lima, Ohio. There was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to

> do anything. My eyes, as Winckelmann said inaccurately of the eyes of the Greek statues, were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything-even to change the focus of one's eyes. Which is perhaps why the statues stand still. It is the malady cosmopsis, the cosmic view, that afflicted me. When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunter, and no quick hand to terminate the moment--there's only the light. (E.R. 69)

Jake's fit of catatonia at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station is the first manifestation of his inability to reconcile himself to an existence in which arbitrariness reigns supreme. What Jake finds perplexing is that while experience appears to be random, accidental, and unpredictable, it also appears in other ways to be arbitrarily fixed, unalterably determined as well as finite. Barth is no less perplexed by this paradox than his protagonist. In an interview, he intimates that "a certain kind of sensibility can be made very uncomfortable by the recognition of the arbitrariness of physical facts and the inability to accept their finality." Barth goes on with a sense of urgency indicative of the important place this paradox occupies in his life and in his art:

> Take France, for example: France is shaped like a tea pot, and Italy is shaped like a boot. Well, okay. But the idea that that's the only way it's ever going to be, that they'll never be shaped like anything else--that can get to you after a while. Robert Stevenson could never get used to the fact

> that people had two ears, funny-looking things, and eye-balls in their heads; he said it's enough to make you scream. I agree.[8]

Similarly, Jake sees that he is potentially free to make choices from a limitless number of possible courses of action, but he also sees that he has no reason to choose one action over another-hence the paradox of potential freedom which he finds so perplexing. During his first interview with his doctor, Jake cannot even settle for a sitting position because, as he puts it

> when one is faced with such a multitude of desirable choices, no one choice seems satisfactory for very long by comparison with the aggregate desirability of all the rest, though compared to any one of the others, it would not be found inferior. (E.R. 2)

Because it is "never very much of a chore for [him], at various times, to maintain with perfectly equal unenthusiasm contradictory, or at least polarized, opinions at once on a given subject "(E.R. 114), Jake cannot think of an action without thinking of a host of alternative actions, an argument without a series of counter arguments, a path to follow without gazing at "the road not taken." When, as a consequence of this predicament, Jake surrenders to the snares of immobility, or "weatherlessness," as he likes to describe his condition, he ceases to be "except in a meaningless, metabolistic sense" (E.R. 33).

If in this scheme of things Jake sees no reason for

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[8] John Barth, "An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6 (1965): 7.

action, he also sees that there is no absolute reason for assuming one single identity. The paradox is that while he is potentially free to choose from a myriad of possible identities, he has no absolute reason for choosing one identity over another. This paradox is compounded by the demand that he act with integrity and responsibility, that he assume a consistent identity with a consistent set of beliefs. To exercise his potential freedom, Jake thinks of his debates with the Morgans as if they were mere fictions to be acted out and changes scripts with perfect ease:

> My attitude toward Joe, Rennie, and all the rest of the universe changes as frequently as Laocoon's smile: some days I was a stock left-wing Democrat, other days I professed horror at the very concept of reform in any thing; some days I was ascetic, some days Rabelaisian; some days super-rational, some days anti-rational. (E.R. 61)

Jake's exercise of freedom backfires when his relationship with the Morgans leads to disaster. He realizes that while he is free to be whomever he chooses to be, he is expected to have a stable identity. Again, the paradox here is that any attempt to approach experience as fixed, determined, or finite, or to assume a fixed identity or belief, must be arbitrarily prescriptive and falsify life which remains unpredictable and indeterminate. In other words, the recognition of freedom and possibility threatens formlessness and chaos, while the recognition of necessity

threatens an arbitrary determination, a freezing up of all life.[9]

These paradoxes are so profound and Jake's response to them is so specious that he fails as a participant in the human drama. Mythotherapy, a "kind of role-assigning...done consciously or unconsciously for the purpose of aggrandizing or protecting your ego" (E.R. 83), only gets Jake in more trouble and compounds his difficulties. The self-styled and mysterious Doctor orders Jake to comply with the rules of mythotherapy in order to make him accept the finality and the arbitrariness of things. As a "superpragmatist" the Doctor endorses Wittgenstein's famous statement that Barth and Jake have so much trouble with:

> There's no reason in the long run why Italy shouldn't be shaped like a sausage instead of a boot, but that doesn't happen to be the case. The world is everything that is the case [Barth's emphasis], and what the case is is not a matter of logic. (E.R. 76)

The Doctor, who is "some combination of quack and prophet" (E.R. 80), instructs Jake to accept the sheer facts of life in all their concreteness if he is to avoid getting caught in the "on-the-one-hand/on-the-other-hand rocking of the head" (E.R. 5). Jake is to "buy a copy of the World Almanac for 1951 and

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[9] In City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1971), Tony Tanner argues that "many recent American writers are unusually aware of this quite fundamental and inescapable paradox: that to exist, a book, a vision, a system, like a person, has to have an outline--there can be no identity without contour. But contours signify arrest, they involve restraint and the acceptance of limits" (17).

begin to study it scrupulously" (E.R. 76), avoiding activities which do not involve "sequential operations" (E.R. 79) and teaching only prescriptive grammar. As the Doctor insists, "No description at all. No optional situations. Teach the rules. Teach the rules about grammar" (E.R. 5). To eliminate the agony of choice which threatens to transform Jake into a mere protoplasm, the Doctor instructs him to eliminate all alternatives:

> If alternatives are side by side, choose the one on the left; if they're consecutive in time, choose the earlier. If neither of these applies, choose the alternative whose name begins with the earlier letter of the alphabet. These are the principles of Sinistrality, Antecedence, and Alphabetical Priority--there are others, and they're arbitrary, but useful. (E.R. 80)

The Doctor also offers a formula for human identity. If indeed he has fixed rules which would allow his patient to accept the open-ended possibilities of physical facts, he also prescribes a set of rules which simplify the complexities of human interactions to protect the self against the infringement of the other. Control through simplification is the panacea that the mysterious doctor prescribes to Jake. Jake is advised to assign roles to others and to himself and assume each time the chosen role until it is exhausted out of its usefulness. According to the Doctor's precepts, in an existence where relativism reigns supreme, any role is satisfactory so long as it serves the purpose of shielding the self.

Mythotherapy, which is clearly a perversion of existentialism, will fail, as Jake is later to learn, because it involves a total disregard for all ethical considerations. If it is easy enough in its application to physical facts, it can be devastating in its application to human beings, and Rennie's death is a case in point. Because human behaviour is finally unpredictable and uncodifiable, one cannot assume a mask without running the risk of getting stuck in it, nor can one expect others to act out faithfully the roles assigned to them. Because mythotherapy is unethical and because Jake is not the "amoral animal" he likes to think he is, the outcome of his imbroglio with the Morgans proves to be more harmful than therapeutic. When he feels guilty and for a moment "crave[s] responsibility" (E.R. 184), he defeats the purpose of the Doctor's utilitarian teachings: "I hoped with all my heart that there was some way in which I could be held legally responsible"(E.R. 184). Jake has driven himself into a blind alley by casting himself in the wrong role, by turning from a cynical, self-conscious observer into a "concerned citizen" craving responsibility for his wrong-doing. "I told you to avoid complications!," the angry Doctor barks at him, "I told you specifically not to become involved with women! Did you think your therapies were just silly games?"(E.R. 171). The super-pragmatic doctor goes on to pontificate: "Even the villain's role would have been all right, if you'd been an out-and-out villain with no regrets! But you've made yourself

a penitent when it's too late to repent, and that's the best role I can think of to immobilize you "(E.R. 172). Even before Rennie's death Jake had come to the conclusion that human relations involve more than he can handle: "I didn't consistently need or want friends, but it was clear (this too I wanted to learn) that, given my own special kind of integrity, if I was to have them at all I must remain uninvolved--I must leave them alone "(E.R. 176). The lesson is clearly lost on Jake since he draws a negative conclusion from the sad turn of events by choosing to "remain uninvolved" instead of getting involved with responsibility, with a consistent identity. Jake's fleeting moment of responsibility turns out to be another mask as he does not commit himself to society but to the seclusion of the Remobilization Farm. His retreat to the Farm is a betrayal of experience.

Jake becomes in retrospect aware of the impossibility of categorizing human behaviour and understands that ready-made prescriptions falsify experience and do not account for its variety and its unpredictability--hence the inadequacy of mythotherapy. He recalls in hindsight the casual sexual transaction which degenerated into "horse manure between teachers of English" [Barth's emphasis] (E.R. 23). Indeed Jake is now aware that the complications which arose between him and Peggy Rankin stemmed from their assigning incompatible roles to one another. While he "assigned to Miss Rankin the role of Forty-Year-Old Pickup,"

she did not assign to him the role of "The Fresh But Unintelligent Young Man Whose Body One Uses For One's Pleasure Without Otherwise Taking Him Seriously" (E.R. 25). The lesson will not be lost on Jake, who puts it to use when he sets out to write his autobiographical account:

> As it was, my present feeling, though a good deal stronger, was essentially the same feeling one has when a filling-station attendant or a cab-driver launches into his life-story: as a rule, and especially when one is in a hurry or is grouchy, one wishes the man to be nothing more difficult than The Obliging Filling-Station Attendant or The Adroit Cabdriver. These are the essences you have assigned them, at least temporarily, for your own purposes, as a taleteller makes a man The Handsome Young Poet or The Jealous Old Husband; and while you know very well that no historical human being was ever just an Obliging Filling-Station Attendant or a Handsome Young Poet, you are nevertheless prepared to ignore your man's charming complexities, must ignore them, in fact, if you are to get on with the plot or get things done according to schedule. (E.R. 25)

Mythotherapy fails because Jake can neither give himself fully to his imagination and the possibility of freedom nor to experience and the acceptance of necessity or moral responsibility. He ends up betraying both imagination and experience, and like his namesake, sits in the corner. Thus Jake writes a restrained narrative because he cannot release his creative impulse; he can only see freedom as ending in a paralysis of infinite choices in polar opposition to the prescriptive and regimented life of arbitrary order. He never recognizes the possibility of a middle ground between these extremes that would allow for free and creative activity because he cannot free himself from the need for an absolute

reason for acting. The outcome of such an ontological predicament is disastrous for Jake-as-participant and Jake-as-artist and for those who must live with him as well.

When mythotherapy fails, the Doctor prescribes writing; that is, scriptotherapy, as a last resort. To the extent that mythotherapy essentially involves an unmediated interaction with the other, it is an oral activity. When Jake's interactions with the Morgans end in disaster, he has to turn, as if by necessity, to scriptotherapy. Writing is the only crutch left to Jake in his "situation of distress." As we recall, Todd also had to resort to writing as a supplement to the spoken word. When indeed his communication with his father failed, he had to open his inquiry in a futile attempt to recover the lost presence of his father. Todd, however, manages to reconcile the demands of orality with those of textuality by setting them side by side, by writing his inquiry without losing touch with the street material that he turns into yarns and by maintaining contact with the reader through apostrophes and other self-conscious devices.

Once the love triangle turns into tragedy with Rennie's death, Jake can no longer cope and goes underground, as it were, to try to sort it all out in writing, the only possibility left to him. His cold-headedness is all too evident in his retrospective narrative. By approaching experience as a fabulator, Todd frees himself from its limitations; by attempting to codify experience, Jake has to

contend with its mind-boggling complexity and suffer the consequences of his approach. When Todd decides to translate the major events of his life into narrative, he is leading the more-or-less normal life of an eccentric bon vivant, who can therefore afford to summon up past events, recreate their past rawness, and transcribe them in the immediacy and the turbulence in which they were once experienced. Jake, still suffering from a devastating chapter in his life, is seeking to heal his wounds through writing. In other words, Todd leads a relatively normal life while seeking in writing to replay the circumstances which once almost drove him to suicide; Jake is a patient seeking therapy in a psychiatric ward. His sense of urgency accounts for the stiffness of his narrative. The tight structure of his retrospective account, the scarcity of minor plots, the absence of "bumps on his log," and of tales weaving in and out of one another are all indications of Jake's overriding concern "to get on with the plot." Instead of recreating his past experience, his past debates with the Morgans in all their immediacy, he summarizes them and forces them into quite arbitrary molds: "Here's what [Rennie] told me, edited and condensed" (E.R. 52).

Jake's rage for control is clearly reflected in his stiff narrative. Unlike Todd whose problem is "how to stick to the story," Jake-as-author is caught in the only story he can tell, that of his fiasco with the Morgans, which finally drives him to the seclusion of the remobilization farm.

Abundance in storytelling is a luxury Jake can hardly afford. Jake-as-author is trapped in his text, and his text repudiates fabulation. Weary of oral communication which has caused him and others a great deal of pain and as if he has in retrospect set out to take his revenge on the treacherous oral utterance, Jake banishes all elements of orality from his writing. His motto has clearly become scribo ergo sum, as opposed to Todd's dico ergo sum. His sense of the virtues of restraint has been growing for some time. When he resorts to the Doctor as the only physician who might be willing to abort Rennie's fetus, Jake describes the audience in these terms: "I told him the story of my brief affair with Rennie, and its consequences. To my surprise it came rather easily, so long as I stuck to the actual events and made no attempt to explain anybody's motives"(E.R. 170). Again, when he recalls one of his philosophical quarrels with Joe Morgan, he says,

> Now it may well be that Joe made no such long coherent speech as this all at once; it is certainly true that during the course of the evening this was the main thing that got said, and I put it down here in the form of one uninterrupted whiz-bang for convenience's sake.(E.R. 44)

Moreover, unlike the conventional self-contained chapter headings of The Floating Opera , the headings in The End of the Road are fragments which flow right into the narrative, as if Jake were afraid of losing the thread of his thoughts. The lack of a local colour and a clearly delineated setting

also makes Jake's narrative seem ascetic and claustrophobic.[10] In his overriding concern to stick to the story and in his exclusive obsession with his personal problems, Jake remains impervious to everything that does not have an immediate bearing on his trauma, including his setting. If the quaintness of Dorchester and the idiosyncrasies of its inhabitants are brought to life by Todd, Wicomoco remains a town without physiognomy, a terra incognita dismissed in a few words as being "entirely without character" (E.R. 9). Jake after all withdraws from the physical environment in an attempt to find some measure of solace in the secluded world of his tormented mind. But even before his seclusion, Jake moves about in a stripped environment. The Progress and Advice Room in the Remobilization Farm is described as having "two straight-backed white wooden chairs, exactly alike, facing each other in the center of the floor, and no other furniture" (E.R. 1). In the Morgans' apartment there are "no rugs on the hardwood floors, no curtains or drapes on the polished windows, and not a piece of furniture above the necessary minimum" (E.R. 38). Jake's room is in fact described as if it owned him:

> Six-foot windows, three of them. Twelve-foot ceiling. Dark gray plaster walls, white woodwork. An incredible bed three feet high, seven feet long, at least seven feet wide; a black, towering,

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[10] In "The Joke That Hoax Bilked," Tony Tanner mentions that in The End of the Road "there is something approaching an absence of environment" (Partisan Review 34 (1967): 104).

> canopied monster with four posts as thick as masts, fluted and ringed, and an elaborately carved headboard extending three feet above the bolster. A most adequate bed! The other furniture was a potpourri of styles and periods--one felt as if one had wandered into the odd-pieces room of Winterthur Museum--but every piece was immensely competent. The adjective competent came at once to mind, rather than, say, efficient. This furniture had an air of almost contemptuous competence, as though it were so absurdly well able to handle its job that it would scarcely notice your puny use of it. It would require a man indeed, a man's man, to make his presence felt by this furniture. (E.R. 8)

The furniture itself is an eloquent reflection of Jake's impoverished imagination and an indication of his failure to create alternative realities to the quagmire he is caught in. His insignificance within his environment brings to mind Kundera's premonition about the fate of characters in the fiction of the future: "On publie des livres avec des caractères de plus en plus petits. J'imagine la fin de la littérature: peu à peu, sans que personne s'en aperçoive, les caractères diminueront jusqu'à devenir tout à fait invisibles."[11] Unlike characters in nineteenth-century fiction who move in a recognizable, anthropocentric environment, Jake takes up residence in the "Age of Suspicion" with a host of dangling characters who are strangers in their own land, men without qualities such as Camus's Meursault,

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[11] Milan Kundera, L'Art du Roman: Essay (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) 153.
"Characters are getting smaller and smaller in books these days. I can imagine the end of literature: gradually, and without anyone noticing it, characters will shrink until they become completely invisible." [my trans.]

Sartre's Roquentin, Kafka's K, Musil's Ulrich, to name only a few.

American fiction too has its share of "dangling men," who find it hard to accommodate themselves to the world they live in, and who, like Jake, seek a refuge in writing. It indeed seems a habit with characters in American fiction to go underground in an attempt to heal through writing the wounds inflicted by experience. When experience becomes overwhelming and the world at large too implosive, they shun the world only to try to understand it through writing. Like Jake, Bellow's Herzog too "had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends."[12] Herzog seeks refuge in Ludeyville and relative serenity and enlightenment in writing letters to the living and the dead alike. Similarly, when his foray into American experience ended in total failure, Ellison's Invisible Man literally "took to the cellar,...hibernated...got away from it all."[13] Ellison's hero tries to find solace in writing because "the very act of trying to put it all down has ... negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness" (I.M. 566). As Ellison's character realizes, "The end was in the beginning" (I.M. 558); that is, the hero's debacle, his going underground, in short, his symbolic death, is paradoxically

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[12] Saul Bellow, Herzog (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 8.

[13] Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) 560.

the birth of an artist. Less noble "heroes" also resort to writing for its redemptive power when they exhaust direct verbal appeals for understanding. People in public life in America--Richard Nixon and his cronies after the Watergate Scandal, Donald Regan after his falling out with President Reagan, among others--disappear in disgrace only to reappear with a book in their hands, presumably vindicated and absolved by the narrative they have written during their descent into Hades. Clearly, Scheherazade is not the only one to boast of owing her life to the power of her narrative.

To the extent that the risk Jake is running is the paralysis of body and will and to the extent that narrative holds the promise of a solution to his predicament, a reawakening, a reemergence, "a shaking off the old skin" (I.M. 568), Jake's predicament is analogous to that of Scheherazade. Although he does not fare as well as Scheherazade, Jake, in compliance with his doctor's stiff orders, must grapple with the publish-or-perish ultimatum, and must narrate himself out of cosmopsis. However, Jake cannot raise Rennie from the dead with a stroke of his creative pen. The damage he has done to himself and to others is too great and his trauma is too profound to be solved through writing. In other words, Jake, the failed Pygmalion, cannot shape a Galatea out of an inert body. In fact, if we follow Jake's fate in Letters, we see that he has made no progress despite his scriptotherapy, and that he still has "a vacuum for a self." Indeed, he is still

an ontological washout, and the Doctor is still barking at him in discontent: "You have made No Progress in eighteen years, Jake. You are the Same Vacuum I picked up in Baltimore in 1951."[14] But, as Barth would say, that's another story. It remains, however, that Jake's very choice of art as a calling represents an affirmation and is a momentary stay against chaos. Even if the outcome is a "claustrophobic" account, writing, at least while it is being practised, is a physical and intellectual activity which belies complete immobility.

Although Jake cuts a poor figure as a writer, his foray into art is not as damaging as his forays into experience and role-playing. In this respect, Erving Goffman makes a comment quite edifying to all of us when he says that

> All the world is not a stage--certainly the theater isn't entirely. (Whether you organize a theater or anaircraft factory, you need to find places for cars to park and coats to be checked, and these had better be real places, which, incidentally, had better carry real insurance against theft.) [15]

Jake's masks and performances lead to disaster because thinking of human affairs as merely a theatrical drama and testing reality without abiding by its rules can have very damaging consequences. Jake learns this much from his role-assigning, and Barth too learns not to mess with reality as his next novel indicates. By making death both real and

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[14] John Barth, Letters, (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1979) 99.

[15] Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) 1.

shocking, he had to fit his second novel in a tight mold commensurate with its serious intent. Beverly Gross mentions that "Rennie's butchering on the operating table is the shattering fact of The End of the Road. The ugliness is sudden, undisguised, unironic.... Rennie's hemorrhaging corpse cannot be transformed into comedy, nor does Barth try."[12] And neither can it make for expansive and fabulistic storytelling as Jake's written account of his experiences indicates. In much of the rest of Barth's fiction, his narrators parody "reality," rely on their imagination to create fictive universes which obey their own rules and in which human misery can be made to look so preposterous that it provokes laughter instead of tears. Joan Toast's endless suffering in The Sot-Weed Factor is a slapstick comic exaggeration, while Rennie's death is seen through a realist's eyes and is disconcerting. Jake is fixed in experience and is unable to make light of death or suspend its horror, as the product of his scriptotherapy indicates.

The End of the Road, because of the tragic volte-face with which it ends, is the only one of Barth's novels which may be said to take up residence in the tradition of realism. Jean Kennard goes so far as to suggest that

> It seems likely that The End of the Road was the first novel Barth wrote, even though it was

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[12] Beverly Gross, "The Anti-Novels of John Barth," The Chicago Review 20 (1968): 153. Rpt. in Critical Essays on John Barth, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984) 33.

> published after The Floating Opera. Its autobiographical content, the introduction of the central ideas in rather contrived conversation, the lack of any experiments in technique would lead to this conclusion.[13]

The publication dates of Barth's two first novels and the sequential development in the second novel of the themes raised in the first novel clearly belie Kennard's suggestion. However, Kennard's "error" of judgement is understandable for the reasons she mentions, but also because, with its ending, the novel smacks of realism. The hard facts of life such as Rennie's death negate the narrative impulse, which, at least in the type of fiction Barth writes, seems to thrive on joy, preposterousness, unbridled ribaldry as his next novel indicates. If in The End of The Road, the punctilious, nose-picking philosopher makes Jake's immobility worse by too much "dotting of the i's and crossing of the t's," in The Sot-Weed Factor, Burlingame, the "Suiter of totality, Embracer of Contradictions," will liberate his friend from immobility, set him criss-crossing the wild geography of the New World, and set the narrative impulse rolling again. And the outcome, unlike Jake's "failed" scriptotherapy, is a concatenation of tales within tales "worth a guilty conscience."

If mythotherapy proves to be a total failure and scriptotherapy not much of a success, it is not only because Jake's philosophical obtuseness makes it difficult for him to

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[13] Jean Kennard, "John Barth: Imitations of Imitations," 122.

resolve the paradoxes of existence but also because he lacks the courage to surrender to the irrational urge to create his life in the act of narrating it. Jake fails to give himself wholly and irrationally to his story by inventing alternatives to "reality," as most of Barth's characters do, by improvising it as he goes along, and by making up tales within tales, as if life were potentially infinite and without ultimate purpose beyond the pleasure and joy of the processes of making up stories. Barth says that in order to elude the discomfort, the troubling "metaphysical emotion" which comes from the paradox that existence involves, "what you really want to do is re-invent the world" or "imagine alternatives" to it.[14] His other narrators create worlds of their own by releasing their fabulistic impulses, but Jake fails because he is neither willing to comply with the moral and ethical demands of "reality," nor prepared to free himself from its entanglement and be irrational and improvisational in the practice of art.

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[14] John Barth, "An Interview," Contemporary Literature 5 (1965): 8.

CHAPTER 4

THE SOT-WEED FACTOR: BARTH'S ART OF STORYTELLING

...say to me: "O sister, tell me a story for entertainment, to shorten the waking hours of the night"--and then I shall tell you a story; thereby, if Allah the Most High wills it so, we shall be saved.

The Arabian Nights

I would not be distressed if someone were to describe my work as being, in part, a reorchestrating of old conventions....

John Barth in Conversation

The Sot-Weed Factor is a virtuoso narrative performance. It is Barth's first attempt to give free range to his love of fables and fabulation to see how far they might carry him. Barth puts his faith in fabulation and in its power to sustain itself without any scaffolding of philosophical belief, without any obligation to be socially or morally responsible, or to recreate some slice of some presumed reality. He sets out to narrate a world, an imagined alternative to the world of experience, and to make it as varied and as rich in detail, incident, and character as the world of experience. This of course was much riskier in 1960, when realism still reigned pretty much unchallenged, than it might now appear to be.

Framing and fabulation go hand in hand in Barth's novel as they do in all the classics of frame-tale literature. Framing is the source of the novel's plenitude and also provides it with its "fire," its energy, and its reason for existing as an ultimate defense against silence. It also is the basis of its "algebra," its structure and its shape, which saves it from descending into the chaos that threatens any work that refuses to be restrained by a simple plot line, a progressive line of character development, or a consistent philosophical outlook.

Critics could hardly fail to see its narrative virtuosity, and many praised it on this score. Denham Sutcliffe admires the novel's "untiring exuberance, limitless fertility of imagination," and its "breathless pace ...that

never lets the reader rest or want to rest."[1] In much the same vein Alan Holder mentions that it is "a formidable performance...which abounds in linguistic energy, and which spins an immensely sinuous plot."[2] Manfred Puetz saw Barth's narrative exuberance as a new direction, pointing out that "Barth belongs to a new school of fabulators whose inventiveness, whose unexpected fantasies and whose renewed love for old tales have dominated the fictional landscape of the past decade in America."[3] Similarly, Jac Tharpe found The Sot-Weed Factor to be the continuation of a very old tradition, describing it as "Barth's Decameron."[4]

Unlike Tharpe, however, most critics were quick to point to the eighteenth-century comic novel as the source of inspiration of Barth's third novel. In fact, comparing The Sot-Weed Factor with the eighteenth-century novel has become a commonplace. My intention is not to downplay the extent to which The Sot-Weed Factor imitates its eighteenth-century forbears, since Barth's novel bespeaks the resemblance even in its diction. However, one has to look elsewhere to gain a

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[1] Denham Sutcliffe, "Worth a Guilty Conscience." Critique 2 (1963): 77-85. Rpt. in Critical Essays on John Barth, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980) 115.

[2] Alan Holder, " 'What Marvelous Plot...Was Afoot?': John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor," Critical Essays on John Barth, 131.

[3] Manfred Puetz, "John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor: The Pitfalls of Mithopoesis," Critical Essays on John Barth, 134.

[4] Jac Tharpe, John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1974) 50.

deeper understanding of The Sot-Weed Factor. More often than not there is a satirical and didactic intent behind the eighteenth-century novel; whereas, behind Barth's novel, there is only a master-puppeteer paring his fingers and laughing at it all. When Joseph Andrews breaks out, "I have often wondered, sir, to observe so few instances of charity among mankind,"[5] we know that Fielding really means it. For Barth, human wickedness is grist for his narrative machine and provokes laughter instead of moral reflection. My point is that while Barth's novel does bear some obvious resemblance to the eighteenth-century novel it really reaches back to a much older tradition which delights in the endless spinning of stories for their own sake and without any need for a didactic justification.

Barth once said that "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," and that "The Arabian Nights may be a better mentor for many than, say, J.D. Salinger."[6] And indeed The Sot-Weed Factor has close ties with such ancient masterpieces of frame-tale literature as The Odyssey, The Nights, The Decameron, Canterbury Tales, Gargantua and Pantagruel. As in these classics, the narrative universe of

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[5] Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 171.

[6] "An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6 (1965): 4.

The Sot-Weed Factor is a fabulistic one with energy to burn, and Barth's narrators, like their counterparts in the classics of frame-tale literature, are not fully developed psychological entities but purveyors of stories, or "hommes-récits,"[7] as Todorov would have it.

Also, Barth's novel resembles the time-honored classics in the way it calls attention to its own narrative. In frame-tale narrative, as Todorov says, "l'act de raconter n'est jamais...un act transparent."[8] Barth also employs many of the recurrent motifs and narrative devices of frame-tale literature. If the connection between living and storytelling finds its source in The Nights and to some degree in The Decameron, the use of the journey as a narrative-generating mechanism is Chaucerian. In fact, Barth owes to Chaucer much more than the metaphor of the journey, as the whole tale of Harry Russecks, the Miller, is Barth's reworking of "The Miller's Tale" and "The Reeve's Tale."[9] Just as the journey recalls Chaucer, Barth's use of the narrative meal is

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[7] Tzvetan Todorov, "Les hommes-récits," Poétique de la prose (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 33-46.

[8] Todorov, "Les hommes-récits," 40.
"The narrative act is never...a transparent act." ["Narrative-Men," The Poetics of Prose (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) 73.]

[9] For studies of Chaucer's influence on Barth, see Robert P. Winston, "Chaucer's Influence on Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor," American Literature 56 (1984): 584-590; Carol F. Richer, "The Fabliau: Chaucer to Barth and Back Again," Ball State University Forum 23 (1982): 46-52.

Rabelaisian. Both the journey and the meal are of course narrative paradigms widely used in all literary modes, but in Barth's novel, journeys are usually undertaken on horseback and are reminiscent of archetypal journeys in old tales. Similarly, the type of meal used by Barth is not the sophisticated and punctilious meal of polite society, but the Gargantuan grande bouffe, which matches the narrative bounty of frame-tale literature. Moreover, the freedom with which Barth approaches his material even surpasses that of Chaucer and is equalled only by that of Rabelais. In Barth's novel, as in a number of old tales, sex and all bodily functions are exalted, drained of moral considerations, and translated into celebratory laughter. While these narrative devices and the attitude that informs them may not be absolute properties of frame-tale literature, they do seem to go hand in hand with it. Barth, who claims that he has not "read many of [his] contemporaries,"[10] has drawn his method and his images and metaphors from the ancient classics of frame-tale literature which he has read and researched with a vengeance.

Although Barth's use of the frame-tale technique in The Sot-Weed Factor has not been carefully studied, it has not gone completely unnoticed. For example Earl Rovit mentions that "Digressions and stories within stories determine the

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[10] "An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 6 (1965): 4.

structure of the novel."[11] Likewise David Morrell points out that, "there are twenty-five separate stories within the body of the novel, each self-contained yet with direct relation to the book's main action."[12] Charles Harris makes a similar statement: "The 'marvelous plot...afoot' in the novel is in reality many different plots, each contained in one or more of the separate stories told at various times by various people."[13] Alan Holder also recognizes that "one of the striking features of the book is Barth's ingenuity in weaving together plot developments that at first seem to have little to do with each other" (Holder, 127). Although these statement are left undeveloped, they point to Barth's use of the frame-tale technique as a narrative strategy in The Sot-Weed Factor. He uses framing to endow his novel with a structural shape which ensures the continuing development of stories and generates a nearly infinite sequence of tales. The Sot-Weed Factor is too long for a systematic study of all the stories which would necessitate endless paraphrasing. The tedium involved in such an endeavour would far outweigh its usefulness. To illustrate this method, I will concentrate on three representative episodes, examining the relationship

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[11] Earl Rovit, "The Novel as Parody: John Barth." Critique 2 (1963): 77-85. Rpt. in Critical Essays on John Barth, 120.

[12] David Morrell, John Barth: An Introduction (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1976) 56.

[13] Charles Harris, Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983) 65.

between the frame and the framed story in each.

Barth's novel is long because framing has the potential to realize plenitude. When a narrative frame opens in The Sot-Weed Factor it sets the stage for the story to come, creates an atmosphere conducive to expansive storytelling, and establishes a dialogue with the framed story in order to heighten its dramaturgical effect. When the story comes to an end and the frame returns to its home base, it closes the story only to usher in a new one, thus allowing the narrative to perpetuate itself, and by the same token, the characters to go on living by telling tales. The three narrative episodes I will focus on all illustrate Barth's use of framing as a narrative-perpetuating mechanism as well as a life-furthering strategy.

The first story in the novel is one Henry Burlingame tells his ex-student Ebenezer Cooke. The exchange in the frame takes place one night upon Burlingame's sudden and tumultuous appearance from nowhere, while Ebenezer is paralyzed by cosmopsis. Like his predecessor in The End of the Road, Ebenezer is unable to choose between alternatives because he too is "dizzy with the beauty of the possible."[14] Like Horner, he finally gives in to paralysis and is "unable to choose a motion at all even when, some hours later, his

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[14] John Barth, The Sot-Weed Factor (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 21. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

untutored bladder suggested one" (S.W.F. 21). With the story of his uncertain origin, his adventurous sea-faring, his peregrinations with the gypsies and mishaps with Henry More and Isaac Newton, Henry Burlingame revives Ebenezer and rescues him from his predicament. By shaking him out of his paralysis, Burlingame sets him moving and Barth's story machine rolling. The frame itself, which dramatizes Burlingame's tempestuous arrival at Cambridge and his consternation at the sight of a great historical figure such as Isaac Newton are elements which heighten the suspense and increase the value of the story to come. With this stage-setting, Ebenezer and the reader are an audience only too anxious to hear the story: "tell me at once...or watch me perish of curiosity" (S.W.F. 23). To these entreaties, Burlingame employs "narrative blackmail," so to speak. He lauds the value of his commodity by saying "'Tis a pretty story, and I'll tell it presently," only to enjoin, "you'll hear all, I swear't. But not a word till I've a spread of sack and mutton" (S.W.F. 23). Here the connection between the inner and the outer story is sustained throughout the whole narrative episode by Ebenezer's sporadic intrusions: "Grammercy!," "I am speechless," "my curiosity leaps its bank," etc. Once the story of Burlingame's past adventures is over, the narrative returns from the past, the provider of stories, and slips into the narrative present of the frame.

When the frame returns, Ebenezer comments on his friend's

story and draws a precious lesson from it: "How thy tale moves me, and shames me, that I let slip through idleness what you strove so hard in vain to reach! Would God I had another chance!" (S.W.F. 35). Like stories in ancient frame-tale literature, Burlingame's tale proves to be an exemplary one which bears directly on Ebenezer's situation. Not only does the frame fulfill one of its many functions by synthesizing the framed story into a valuable instruction, but it also turns out to be the harbinger of future stories. Ebenezer, who has risen from the dead, as it were, wants Burlingame, his saviour, to tell him more and more stories. To his plea for another tale, Burlingame responds, "that is another tale entirely, and 'twill do for another time" (S.W.F. 35). Clearly, what Barth does here, as elsewhere in The Sot-Weed Factor, is put to good use what he has learnt from Scheherazade. He borrows Scheherazade's habit of "playing for time" by telling one tale while holding back another as a guarantee of her own survival. The characters in The Sot-Weed Factor, like Scheherazade, consider their stories a precious commodity to be told in installments. The tale that Burlingame postpones is left, as Barth says of Scheherazade's dangling stories, "suspended as a kind of narrative insurance,"[15] to be used at another crucial time, that is, when Ebenezer is coping with another fit of cosmopsis.

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[15] John Barth, The Friday Book (New York: Putnam, 1984) 265.

Over and over again, Barth's characters resort to Scheherazade's strategy by stonewalling their keen and insistent listeners with formulas reminiscent of the one Scheherazade invokes every dawn. Barth's listeners "are hung astonished on the tale" (S.W.F. 626), and often beg for stories with pleas such as, "I must hear it from first to last" (S.W.F. 370), "Out on't, this is incredible!" (S.W.F. 376), "let's go on with the tale, sir" (S.W.F. 372), "'Sheart, I'd give an arm to hear the finish of that tale" (S.W.F. 394). But Barth's wily raconteurs often wind up a narrative installment with a narrative ruse such as, "No more tonight....The balance of the tale can wait till Plymouth" (S.W.F. 162), or "No time to tell ye now. I'll spin the tale for ye tomorrow morning on our way to Church Creek" (S.W.F. 622). Scheherazade's narrative strategy, and even her mannerisms, have become second nature to Barth.

The second story that I want to examine is the tale of the Indian Charley Mattassin and his undoing of the Mynheer Tick family. What makes this story one of the most brilliant and most entertaining narratives in The Sot-Weed Factor is the thundering energy of the narrator Mary Mungummory, the former-Travelling Whore of Dorset. This tale too reflects the therapeutic value of storytelling as it is told most opportunely to lift Ebenezer's spirits from a depression occasioned by a series of calamitous events. To the extent that it gives Ebenezer a momentary respite before other

demoralizing events unfold, this second tale is similar to the first one in which Burlingame arouses the would-be poet laureate from paralysis.

We see quite clearly Barth's use of this narrative strategy in the frame of the story under examination. In the frame lies the reason or narrative excuse for the framed story. Ebenezer is down on his luck and goes through a chain of disastrous events before he meets Mary Mungummory. He loses in a rhyming contest to Burlingame and has to walk behind his old mare "that ever gets the bumbreezes near mid-morning" (S.W.F. 405). Upon arriving at Cambridge, he gets involved in a burlesque law-suit and is swindled out of his estate. The same evening, he soaks his depression in alcohol, engages in a bitter quarrel with Burlingame, is thrown in a stable to sleep off his drunkenness, and wakes up in the morning to find to his dismay that "his coat, his hat, and his breeches were gone" (S.W.F. 427). Mary Mungummory, interestingly enough, steps in as our hero is about to make his descent into Hades, as it were. To cover his nakedness, he decides "to dig a sort of well, [and] lower himself into it" (S.W.F. 427).

Mary solves Ebenezer's predicament by providing him with clothes and by the same token reinvigorates the narrative:

> "Who's in there' she demanded. "And what in thunder ails ye so?...
> "Keep hence!" cried Ebenezer. "pray come no nearer till I explain! I am Ebenezer Cooke, Poet and Laureate of this province."

> "You do not tell me! well, I am Mary Mungummory, that once was called the Travelling Whore O'Dorset, but I don't boast of't. Why is't ye linger in the corncobs, Master poet? Are ye making verse or making water?"
> "God forfend I'd choose such a sanctuary to piss in," the poet replied, "and 'twould want a cleverer nigh than I to turn a corncob into art."
> The woman chuckled, "Belike thou art playing unnatural games, then?"
> "From what I've learnt of Marylanders these few days, I'm not surprised that you should think so. Howbeit, 'tis only your assistance I crave."
> "Well now, is that a fact!" Mary laughed immensely and approached the corncrib.
> "Nay, madam!" Ebenezer pleaded. "I fear you've misconstrued me: I've not a farthing to buy ought of your services."
> "De'il have your farthings," the big woman said. "I care not for farthings till the sun goes down. 'Twill be enough for me to see what a poet looks like."
> She climbed up into the corncrib, rumbling with amusement. (S.W.F. 428)

The exchange between the robust and uninhibited woman and the prim and squeamish poet goes on in this fashion to make up a hilarious frame for the story to come. Whereas a conventional female character would recoil in shock at Ebenezer's nakedness, Mary remains undaunted and "her eyes narrowed with what seemed to be anticipatory mirth" (S.W.F. 428). Yet, the humour in the frame-story is not generated simply for its own sake. To Mary's insistent advances, Ebenezer declares that had he not made an oath to remain a virgin, he would have engaged her in "her professional capacity." To this declaration, Mary responds in a manner which leads beautifully into the framed story and makes the exchange not only hilarious but functional as well, as it becomes the opening

frame for the story of the Indian Charley Mattassin:

> "Ah now, sir, such a boast doth not become ye! A man like other ye may well be, but think not thou'art a match for my professional capacity!....I once knew a salvage down the county, who had the fearsomest way with him ye ever could imagine. There was the man for my professional capacity! Belike ye've heard what happens to a man when they hang him? Well, sir, the day they hanged poor Charley for the murder of my sister--it makes the tears come yet when I recall the picture of him...." (S.W.F. 429-30)

Then, the present slips into the past, and Mary tells the story of the Indian Charley Mattassin. We notice in the frame-story not only the usual stage-setting with Ebenezer drawing up "a wooden box to sit upon" and Mary propping "her great back against the wall of the stable" (S.W.F. 430), but also a clear indication of the high premium put on storytelling. Indeed, in Barth's fictional universe, as in The Arabian Nights, characters thank each other for a good yarn. When the frame returns to close the tale, Ebenezer does not go so far as to "order the tale recorded"[16] or bestow a rich reward upon the storyteller, as Haroun Rashid would have done, but he nonetheless "accompanied [Mary] out to her wagon and helped her to her seat, thanking her once more for her generosity and for telling him the tale" (S.W.F. 446). Once again, a taleteller and her tale rescue Ebenezer from his depression and give more fuel to Barth's narrative machine.

The Scheherazade strategy is more fully developed in

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[16] The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night, trans. Sir Richard F. Burton (London: H.S. Nichols, 1894) 21.

Henrietta's "Tale of the Invulnerable Castle" in which survival and narrative are more solidly yoked together. Like Scheherazade who wards off death with narrative, or Boccaccio's characters who retreat to the country and erect narrative as a shield against the ravages of the plague, Henrietta and her company barricade themselves in a house as "the rumor of foraging privateers kept everyone indoors" (S.W.F. 712) and find solace in storytelling. The pirate scare is as real to Henrietta and her companions as the menace of death is to Scheherazade. If Scheherazade has to narrate herself out of death, Barth's characters, too, palliate their fear with narrative. And with her grace, her virtuosity, and her knack for storytelling, Henrietta is Barth's Scheherazade. Like her archetype, Henrietta assumes "the manner of a professional storyteller" (S.W.F. 722) and touches Ebenezer with "her combination of spirit, beauty, and wit" (S.W.F. 729). The framing technique here is all the more interesting because the outer story is reflected in the inner story. This mirror phenomenon creates an interplay between the inner and the outer story, heightens the dramatic tension, and plays on the listeners' expectations. Indeed, Henrietta's story is about Monsieur Edouard, who spent a fortune building an expensive mansion in the futile hope that it would be invulnerable to Indian attacks. Similarly, Ebenezer, his sister, McEvoy, Mary Mungummory, Henrietta and her mother, who are also barricaded in a safe-house against the potential

onslaughts of the pirates, are, as they all realize, no safer than Monsieur Edouard was in his bunker. Ebenezer is perceptive enough to draw from Henrietta's tale the conclusion that their barricade is no more invulnerable than Monsieur Edouard's castle, if the pirates are intent on doing them in. By mirroring the outer story, the inner story anticipates future unfoldings, thus increasing the dramatic tension and teasing both the audience and the reader's expectations. Henrietta's tale of the Invulnerable Castle bears upon her situation and the situation of her audience in the same way as Scheherazade's stories about cruel kings and victimized princesses bear upon her own story. Clearly, Barth is moving towards the complex narrative constructions of his later work in which, to use his own terms, the plot of the frame tale "far from merely bearing upon the plot of the next tale out, actually springs that plot, which in turn springs the next, etc., etc., etc." (F.B. 238).

In these episodes we can see some of the ways in which Barth handles the relationship between the frame and the framed tales. On the simplest level the frame works as a teasing preview or prologue to arouse our appetite for the tale to follow. But usually the connection is more subtly worked out. The stories have a kind of revitalizing effect on Ebenezer and are continually used to revive his interest in life or to defend him against the threat of danger and death. In fact, the narrative structure of The Sot-Weed Factor, and

that of densely-plotted fiction in general, follows a particular pattern consisting of sequences of inflations and deflations whereby moments of symbolic death alternate with moments of symbolic resurrection. For example Joseph Andrews and Invisible Man, among many others, have an episodic structure and are orchestrated by a series of crescendoes and decrescendoes. This wave-pattern works as an organizing principle in The Sot-Weed Factor. In the countless reversals of Ebenezer's fortune, moments of exhilaration occasioned by such incidents as his investment with the title of poet-laureate, his discovery of his love for Joan Toast, the writing of the opening verses of the Marylandiad are counterbalanced by his successive failures and disappointments. Moreover, on several occasions, Ebenezer is significantly stripped naked as he befouls his clothes or loses them to thieves and has to be newly outfitted. These moments of symbolic death of the self are reflected on the narrative level by a slow pace as the narrative itself comes to a near halt. Then one of the many fabulators who people The Sot-Weed Factor appears or reappears with new clothes, opens a new frame to set the stage for a new story, rescues Ebenezer from his predicament and sets Barth's self-perpetuating narrative machine rolling again.

Barth's most important reason for framing is to keep his characters alive indefinitely through perpetual narration. In these stories, Barth's narrati[illegible] is inspired by the frame of

The Nights. He draws upon Scheherazade's situation and elaborates on its rich metaphorical associations over and over again. The frame of the story that McEvoy tells Ebenezer, Bertrand, and others while they are imprisoned by the Indians and awaiting their death is unmistakably reminiscent of the frame of The Nights. While the prisoners are in a pitch-dark hut, "the very vestibule of death" (S.W.F. 573) and swimming in an "ocean of story" (S.W.F. 572), they are reminded of the imminence of death by the "sentry outside," the wild chants of the Indians, and the beating of drums. To Bertrand, who interrupts McEvoy to remind him of their predicament, one of the prisoners declares, "Let him tell on. 'Tis either a tale or the Shuddering Fearfuls in straits like these" (S.W.F. 567) [emphasis added]. McEvoy's story about his past history and the "common business of survival" (S.W.F. 567) as a pimp in London has its effect on the audience and emphasizes the salutary and redeeming power of narrative. As we are told, "the whole company, despite their position, were amused by his apostrophe; Bertrand even laughed aloud and begged McEvoy to continue in the same vein, that he might cheat the Indians' design by dying of mirth" (S.W.F. 571). Significantly, as soon as McEvoy finishes his story, the prisoners are invaded by dark thoughts and the fear of being "eunuched and burnt" sets in. From Scheherazade's situation Barth has learnt to equate narrative with life and the absence of narrative with death, and he echoes this "tell-or-perish situation" over and

over again. Whenever the mischievous Bertrand, Ebenezer's valet, accidentally meets his master, he resorts to fabulation and thus manages to narrate himself out of danger. In one of their encounters, Ebenezer menacingly says, "wretch, only let me lay hands on that craven neck, to wring it like a capon's," to which the manipulative valet responds, "I can explain all of it, every part" (S.W.F. 213). Ebenezer's anger subsides when Bertrand begins telling a story which elicits the poet's interest.

There are more examples in Barth's novel which, though not as apocalyptic as those in The Nights, still indicate the high premium put on storytelling. Todorov rightly says that, "le cri des Mille et une nuits n'est pas 'La bourse ou la vie!' mais 'Un récit ou la vie!'"[17] This statement also applies to a great extent to The Sot-Weed Factor. Barth has learnt that framing generates narrative and that narrative has a salutary effect and can provide a writer with "yet another and yet another encore." Because he is aware of the potentialities of framing, he has capitalized on them to write a mammoth of a novel. It is no wonder that he once said, "among my ambitions in writing The Sot-Weed Factor was to perpetrate a novel so thick that its title could be printed horizontally across its spine"--a feat he almost realized (F.B

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[17] Tzvetan Todorov, "Les hommes-récits," 43. "The cry of The Arabian Nights is not 'Your money or your life!' but 'Your story or your life!'" ["Narrative-Men" 75.]

63). Technically, Barth's ambition would not have been impossible to realize. Narrative is after all made up of sentences, and since sentences are potentially infinite, narrative is also potentially infinite. Speaking of The Decameron, Todorov explains that a syntactic unit such as "the King courts the marchioness" may generate a series of units to become "the King decides to travel," "the King travels," "the King arrives at the marchioness's," etc.[18] In the same vein, the basic proposition in The Sot-Weed Factor is, "Ebenezer travels to Maryland to manage his father's estate," which is decomposed into a number of propositions such as "Ebenezer is at sea," "Ebenezer meets Mary Mungummory," "Ebenezer is swindled out of his estate," etc., and there is indeed no end to the narrative that could be embedded within the main proposition. To achieve the equivalent of an immense grammatical sentence, Barth invents a huge gallery of characters who all have stories to tell. Each time a character appears he or she opens a frame, tells his or her story to another character, who in turn opens the next frame and tells a story of his or her own to a third one, and so it goes until the end of the novel.

The basic narrative unit, "Ebenezer travels to Maryland to manage his father's estate," frames a thousand and one narratives as characters pass on the narrative thread to one

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[18] Todorov, La Grammaire du Décameron (The Hague: Mouton, 1969) 19.

another, and stories proliferate with the proliferation of characters until Barth brings his novel to an end. Ebenezer crosses paths with scores of "narrative-men," to use Todorov's phrase, who are all obsessed with tales and are only too willing to share them with such a keen listener. The implication here is that Barth could have kept inventing more and more narrative-men and inserted more and more stories and that the novel could have gone on forever. In fact, the end of the novel seems more like an arbitrary ending than a necessary closure. Barth could well have stretched the last twenty or thirty years of Ebenezer's life instead of spanning them in a few pages. Or, Burlingame, who disappears never to be heard of again, could have reappeared with more stories to tell. Nonetheless, the novel, already monstrously long, illustrates Barth's point that literature, like the self-begetting "creature" that language is, "can never be exhausted" (F.B.205).

According to Todorov, the supplement has the potential for perpetuating narrative. The notion of the supplement is important because it accounts for the proliferation of narrative not from the point of view of the frame but from that of the framed tale. For Todorov the framed narrative cannot be "self-sufficient" and therefore needs to be integrated into another narrative:

> Chaque récit semble avoir quelque chose 'de trop', un excédent, un supplément, qui reste en dehors de la forme fermée produite par le développement de

> l'intrigue. En même temps, et par la même, ce quelque chose de plus, propre au récit, est aussi quelque chose de moins; le supplément est aussi un manque; pour suppléer à ce manque crée par le supplément, un autre récit est nécessaire.[19]

Todorov explains that the supplement that emerges from a story, in most cases in the form of a proverb or a cautionary statement, becomes the basis for the narrative to come. Todorov goes on to illustrate his views with examples from The Arabian Nights:

> ...le récit du roi ingrat, qui fait périr Doubane après que celui-ci lui a sauvé la vie, a quelque chose de plus que ce récit lui-même; c'est d'ailleurs pour cette raison, en vue de ce supplément, que le pêcheur le raconte; supplément qui peut se résumer en une formule: il ne faut pas avoir pitié de l'ingrat. Le supplément demande à être integré dans une autre histoire; ainsi il devient le simple argument qu'utilise le pêcheur lorsqu'il vit une aventure semblable à celle de doubane, vis-à-vis du djinn. Mais l'histoire du pêcheur et du djinn a aussi un supplément qui demande un nouveau récit; et il n'y pas de raison pour que cela s'arrête quelque part. La tentative de suppléer est donc vaine: il y aura toujours un supplément qui attend un récit à venir.[20]

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[19] Todorov, "Les hommes-récits," 44.
"Each narrative seems to have something excessive, a supplement which remains outside the closed form produced by the development of the plot. At the same time, and for this very reason, this something-more, proper to the narrative, is also something-less. The supplement is also a lack; in order to supply this lack created by the supplement, another narrative is necessary." ["Narrative-Men," 76.]

[20] Todorov, "Les hommes-récits," 44-45.
"...the narrative of the ungrateful king who puts Duban to death after the latter has saved his life has something more than this narrative itself; besides, it is for this reason, with a view to this supplement, that the fisherman tells the story, a supplement which can be summed up in a formula: never pity the ungrateful. The supplement must be integrated into another story; hence it becomes the simple argument which the fisherman employs when he

We notice that the same process is at work in The Sot-Weed Factor. If the novel were to be reconstructed, one would indeed be amazed by the extent to which this phenomenon guides its composition. Suffice it to mention only one example which clearly corroborates Todorov's argument. When at the height of his despair, Ebenezer strikes up a conversation with the lawyer, Richard Sowter, and tells him the story of his latest misfortunes: "yesterday, my whole estate; today my clothes, my horse, and my friend lost in a single stroke" (S.W.F. 449). What remains outside Ebenezer's story, according to Todorov's observations, is the conclusion that Sowter draws when he exclaims, "'Tis a wicked world, and rare ye find some good in't" (S.W.F. 450). Sowter's wisdom, "This something-more," needs another narrative to realize itself: hence, Sowter's story of the lad who sought his help against the "usuring Son o' Sodom." "Why," as Sowter goes on to say, "'twas just last month, or the one before, a young sprat came to see me...." When the story of the ungrateful lad is told, Sowter formulates yet another conclusion which needs to be integrated into another narrative context: "there is small good in men. Why, there's a redemptioner this minute in my boat." Sowter goes on to spin another yarn, despite Ebenezer's

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becomes involved in an adventure similar to Duban's, with the genie. But the story of the fisherman and the genie also has a supplement which requires another story; and there is no reason for this process to stop anywhere. The attempt to supply is therefore vain--there will always be a supplement awaiting a narrative-to-come." [Todorov, "Narrative-Men," 77.]

recriminations that he has already heard enough. Barth's narrative, like Scheherazade's, could go on indefinitely in this infinite process of supplementarity. Clearly, the narrative voice in frame-tale literature refuses to be silenced. Instead of stopping, the framed tale pauses only to receive more fuel by the commentary in the frame and is sent rolling again. Barth, who is artistically and ontologically afraid of silence and who understands Scheherazade's terror "to the marrow of [his] bones,"[21] exploits this indefinite process of supplementarity and uses it as a weapon against artistic exhaustion.

When in the apocalyptic Sixties Barth wrote his "much-misread essay" (F.B. 205) "The Literature of Exhaustion," the prophets of doom were quick to hail it as a sign of the times despite Barth's own declaration that "the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities [is] by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (F.B. 64). Barth, aware of the potentialities of the frame-tale narrative strategy, knows that if certain literary modes are subject to exhaustion, the narrative impulse itself and the element of story are inexhaustible. More importantly, in The Sot-Weed Factor as in the rest of his fiction, Barth's very use of a narrative strategy whose essential property is the procreation of an endless narrative flies in the face of the idea of

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[21] "An interview," The Paris Review 95 (1985): 152.

exhaustion. In fact, as my examination of the representative tales indicates, The Sot-Weed Factor harks back to the source of all narrative and echoes the classics of storytelling, which were innocent of the very notion of exhaustion.

To fight artistic exhaustion, Barth borrowed not only the narrative technique which governs his novel from ancient writers of frame-tale literature, but also the metaphors, the narrative paradigms, and even the incidents they used. The same techniques and themes which emerge from such classics of storytelling as The Arabian Nights, The Decameron, Canterbury Tales, and Gargantua also emerge from Barth's novel. Thus to study Barth's use of the frame-tale technique, one has to examine such narrative qualities as the temporal demarcation between the frame and the framed tale, self-conscious artificiality, flat characterization, the metaphor of the journey, and the metaphor of the meal. All these elements, which are the stock-in-trade of frame-tale literature, are used in The Sot-Weed Factor. Barth treats his material with the same preposterousness, the same freedom of imagination, and the same lack of concern for didactic mimesis as Scheherazade or Rabelais treated theirs. When he sets out to emulate "those spellbinding liars" (F.B 57) of yore, he must have decided to be as faithful to them as a twentieth-century writer can be and this by exploiting not only their frame-tale convention but also the thematic and structural paraphernalia which went with such a convention.

One of the most obvious and yet most essential characteristics of Barth's narrative and framed tales in general is the time lag between the frame and the framed story. The inner story is always temporally set off from the outer story. Whereas the inner story belongs to the narrative past, the outer story belongs to a narrative present. Frame-tale literature has a high awareness of this temporal demarcation between the story and the commentary which frames it. The narrative impulse has a historical memory; where there is no past there is no narrative. When Odysseus is sojourning with the Phaeacians, the famous retrospective exposition he makes of his adventure comes to a halt with the last adventure he had before he was stranded on their island, that is, the moment the past slips into the present. Likewise, characters in The Sot-Weed Factor have to draw upon their remote or recent past in order to tell tales. The past is the provider of stories in almost all literary modes, but it is more so in frame-tale literature. All frames open systematically with the formula "once upon a time" or variations thereof because, unlike characters in a narrative which focuses on events in the present, characters in framed narrative have to delve into the inexhaustible narrative well of the past. And without the past and its narrative wealth, fabulators in Barth's novel would have no reason for framing, and by extension, no justification for going on fabulating.

If frame-tale literature is aware of its past and its

narrative potentialities, it is also aware of its own processes. The Sot-Weed Factor, like all frame-tale narrative, calls attention to its own narrative processes. Mia Gerhardt points out that the framed narrative is self-conscious insofar as the frame-story is "determined by and centered upon the act of narrating. To put it strongly, the subject of the frame-story is storytelling."[22] Todorov also mentions that, "le réit enchâsant, c'est le réit d'un réit." Barth himself makes a similar point when he explains that stories within stories "always to some degree imply stories about stories and even stories about storytelling" (F.B. 221). Self-consciousness is concomitant with Barth's fabulistic, anti-realist approach and with his suspicion of all moral and philosophical didacticism. He'd rather speak about the processes of his own storytelling than about philosophical or moral considerations. Thus self-conscious artificiality runs through the whole novel. Characters spend as much time telling stories as they do commenting upon them, criticizing them, and evaluating their aesthetic worth. When Ebenezer interrupts Henrietta's "marvelous tale," she is quick to respond, "Marry, Eben, thou art laureate of this wretched province, and you know very well 'tis only a boor will interrupt a story" (S.W.F. 714). To his further interjections, she declares, "What matter if you've heard the

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[22] Mia Gerhardt, The Art of Storytelling: A Literary Study of The Thousand and One Nights (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963) 395.

plot already? Dido knew the tale of Troy, but she had manners enough to bear't twice from Aeneas" (S.W.F. 715). When she invents a dialogue between Monsieur Edouard and his wife "for the sake of interest" the whole company applauds her talent. When Anna, Ebenezer's twin sister, asks "is that the end," Henrietta responds, "Why of course it is! that is, the tale ends there--what would Homer add to't?" (S.W.F. 722). When the story is over, the listeners turn into critics as they "praised both the story itself and Henrietta's rendering of it" and deem it "as nicely pointed as one of Aesop's" (S.W.F. 722). Even the commoners display a literary consciousness and dabble in criticism. All their worldly concerns are superseded by their love for language. When Joan Toast's pimp, McEvoy, comes to claim his protegee's fee from Ebenezer, he happens upon the latter's poem and upon scanning it exclaims in disdain, "What is this? And Phaedra sweet Hyppolytus her Step-Son? Ye rhyme Endymion and Step-Son?" (S.W.F. 75). When Mary for a moment digresses from her story to reflect about the secret reasons which drive "ladies to raise their skirts for some great black buck of a slave, like the Queen in The Thousand and One Nights," she quickly "straightened her shoulders...and sniffed self-consciously, "But that's no tale, there, is it, Harvey?" (S.W.F. 628). Harvey severely replies, "Not a bit of't. 'Tis a great mistake for a tale-teller to philosophize and tell us what his story means; haply it doth not mean what he thinks at all, at least

to the rest of us" (S.W.F. 628). The narrative is self-conscious because Barth's characters are story-starved fabulators who live off the stories they tell and treasure them as a valuable commodity.

If Barth's narrative is aware of its processes, it is also fabulistic, and the presence of scores of fabulators is a striking feature of The Sot-Weed Factor. With their wild imagination, their unbounded curiosity and preoccupation with the process rather than the end result, the characters in The Sot-Weed Factor all speak for their creator and reflect his fabulistic tendencies. We are thrust right at the outset of the novel into Barth's fabulistic universe. Ebenezer, we are told very early in the novel, "found the sound of Mother English more fun to game with than her sense to labor over" (S.W.F. 13). As children, he and his sister Anna loved "among the classics, the Odyssey and Ovid's Metamorphoses" (S.W.F. 15) for their fabulistic potentialities. Also, the borderline between fiction and reality was a nebulous one for Ebenezer who "made little or no distinction between, say, the geography of the Atlases and that of fairy-stories" (S.W.F. 18). Although he delighted in the ancient history of Greece and Rome, he found it "preposterous, almost unthinkable, that this was the only way it happened" (S.W.F. 19). For the incorrigible fabulator that he is, "the sum of history became in his head no more than the stuff of metaphor" (S.W.F. 20), and any philosophy or any opinion was acceptable as long as it

was "poetically conceived or attractively stated" (S.W.F. 21). In Ebenezer's world fabulation touches everything, even questions as "real" and as weighty as those to do with life and death. When he is made to walk the plank, "his despair was as notional, his horror as vicarious, as if he were in his chamber in St. Giles playing the dying-game, or acting out a story in the summerhouse" (S.W.F. 288). For him, reality has to submit to fabulation, and fact has to imitate fiction. He refuses to make a safe crossing to the New World on board the Morphides for artistic reasons, "'twould yet be necessary to cross on the Poseidon: all my verses name that vessel'" (S.W.F. 205). Even when "the noble ship, from Deck to Peaks/Akin to those that Homer's Greeks/Sail'd east to Troy in days of yore," turns out to be nothing more than a "rat's nest," it is reality which is to blame for failing to "measure up to his expectations" (S.W.F. 229). Barth is of course having fun at the expense of his hero by stressing his naivete, but he is also toying with artistic concerns which find an echo in all his work.

Apart from Ebenezer, other characters show the same proclivities for fabulation. Burlingame himself admits that his reading of Don Quixote marked the "ruin of [his] nautical career," and that he "grew so entranced by the great Machegan and his faithful squire as to lose all track of time." He also goes on to say that when he was with the gypsies, who "all love to tell and hear stories," he "used to read them

tales out of Boccaccio" (S.W.F. 27). For Burlingame, "God's whole creation is his mistress, and he hath for her this self-same love and boundless curiosity" (S.W.F. 347). He is "Suitor of Totality, Embracer of Contradictions, Husband to all Creation, the Cosmic Lover" (S.W.F. 526). Even the minor characters are fabulators obsessed with storytelling and find their utmost delight in yarns. Mary Mungummory uses rich classical metaphors which elicit Ebenezer's admiration, "'Sbody, madam! First Boccaccio and now Pasiphae!" (S.W.F. 434). Mary also pays tribute to her ex-lover's unbridled imagination:

> Read him half a tale or half a chapter out o' Euclid, he could spin ye the balance from his head; and if it differed from the text, 'twas the author, like as not, that came off badly. Oft times I feel his fancy bore a clutch of worlds, all various, of which the world these books described was one.... (S.W.F. 438)

Fabulators, as we recall Scholes' definition, display "delight in design," and "fabulation puts the highest premium on art and joy."[23] Barth's characters are aware of the primacy of art over all other considerations. Father Smith, one of the minor characters, admits that "a good tale's worth a guilty conscience" (S.W.F. 376). Barth's delight in storytelling is best exemplified in this passage which is worth quoting in its entirety:

> No pleasure pleasures me as doth a well-spun tale, be't sad or merry, shallow or deep! If the

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[23] Scholes, 10.

> subject's privy business, or unpleasant, who cares a fig? The road to Heaven's beset with thistles, and methinks there's many a cow-pat on't as well. And what matter if your folk are drawn from life? 'Tis not likely; I'll ha'met 'em, or know 'em from your telling if e'er I should! Call 'em what names you will: in a tale they're less than themselves, and more. Besides which, if ye have the art to make 'em live--'sheart!--thou'rt nowise liable for what the rascals do, no more than God Almighty for the lot of us. As for length, fie on't!' He raised his horny finger. 'A bad tale's long though it want but a single eyeblink for the telling, and a good tale short though it takes from St. Swithin's to Michaelmas to have done with't. Ha! And the plot is tangled, d'ye say? Is't more knotful or bewildered than the skein o'life itself, that a good tale tangles the better to unsnarl? Nay, out with your story now, and yours as well, sir, and shame on the both o'ye thou'rt not commenced already! Spin and tangle till the dog--star set i'the Bay--nor fear I'll count ye idle gossips: a tale well wrought is the gossip o' the gods, that see the heart hidden point o' life on earth; the seamless web o' the world; the Warp and Woof...I'Christ, I do love a story sirs! Tell away!'. (S.W.F. 625)

The passage sums up Barth''s art of storytelling and points to the indissoluble link between framing and fabulation. Because Barth's characters are obsessed with storytelling and love tales which are more "tangled," "more knotful...than the skein o'life itself," they find the open-ended structure of framed narrative suitable to their fabulistic tendencies. With the scores of insatiable fabulators, the most viable reality in the novel is the reality of storytelling. Characters are important not as complex psychologies but because they have stories to tell. In short, storytelling is given precedence over characterization in Barth's novel.

Barth admits to "using stock figures, stereotype Jews and

Negroes, just for fun."[24] Speaking of the "thick crusts of type-characterization" in Barth's Giles Goat-Boy, Scholes remarks that, "Such characters are closer to pre-novelistic kinds of characterization than to the deep individuality of the realists" (160). In "Les hommes-récits" Todorov draws interesting conclusions about characterization in The Arabian Nights which shed some light on The Sot-Weed Factor. He initiates his argument by quoting Henry James' "Art of Fiction": "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character?"[25] Todorov goes on to argue that James's views do not apply to frame-tale literature:

> ...il est difficile d'ignorer l'existence de toute une tradition littéraire où les actions ne sont pas là pour servir d'"illustration" au personnage mais où, au contraire, les personnages sont soumis à l'action; ou, d'autre part, le mot "personnage" signifie tout autre chose qu'une cohérence psychologique.[26]

This tradition which, as Todorov points out, includes The Odyssey, The Decameron, and The Arabian Nights may be

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[24] "An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6 (1965): 13.

[25] Quoted in "Narrative-Men," 66.

[26] "Les hommes-récits," 33.
"...it is difficult to ignore a whole tendency in literature, in which the actions are not there to "illustrate" character but in which, on the contrary, the characters are subservient to the action; where, moreover, the word "character" signifies something altogether different from psychological coherence." ["Narrative-Men" 66.]

considered "a limit-case of literary a-psychologism"(Todorov, 67).

The Sot-Weed Factor, like these classics cited by Todorov, exemplifies the principle of "literary a-psychologism" because there is more emphasis on the action itself, or by extension on the story relating the action, than on the characters, who are agents fulfilling the function of telling the stories assigned to them by the author. The type of fiction from which The Sot-Weed Factor claims a definite parentage is usually a feast of narrative with a huge gallery of characters and a breathtaking pace. If in a psychological novel a character is placed in a stable setting and is scrutinized and psychologically dissected, in Barth's novel the crowd of movers and shakers, knaves and priests, pimps and prostitutes are always "on the go" and far too many to pin down. The Sot-Weed Factor indeed belongs to what Todorov calls a "littérature prédicative," in which "l'accent tombera toujours sur le prédicat et non sur le sujet de la proposition."[27] Likewise, in The Sot-Weed Factor, whenever Ebenezer meets a new character, he assumes the role of a listener; whereas, the new character occupies the stage as he arrives with the promise of a tale. When Ebenezer meets Mary Mungummory for the first time he is quickly overshadowed by

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[27] "Les hommes-récits," 35.
"The emphasis will always fall on the predicate and not on the subject of the proposition." ["Narrative-Men" 67.]

her loud presence. And since Mary herself is primarily the purveyor of stories, which are a precious commodity in Barth's fictional universe, her character is left relatively undeveloped. Instead of taking time to unravel the workings of her soul, she quickly glides into the safe waters of storytelling and tells us the tale of Charley Mattassin, who becomes momentarily the focus of attention.

Because Barth's novel is governed by a "causalité événementielle" as opposed to a "causalité psychologique," to use Todorov's terms, even the most sordid miseries the characters experience fail to grieve. We are neither outraged nor moved to tears by the rape of young girls by Boabdil the Moor. We are no more moved by similar incidents in the novel than we are by, say, the mass slaughter of a faceless crowd of soldiers in the movies. This method might be used as an insidious ideological weapon for shaping public opinion and controlling our sympathies and antipathies towards racial and cultural groups. The friendly hero who has a physiognomy, a personal life, a full humanity, becomes one of us; whereas, the enemy is dehumanized and remains the impersonal and faceless "Other." Similarly, the two thousand Arabian virgins raped in <u>The Sot-Weed Factor</u> remain too anonymous to elicit any response but laughter. Even Barth's treatment of individual characters does not invite the reader to identify with their suffering. We remain impervious to Joan Toast's history of victimization because it is treated in a farcical

way, but also because Toast is only one among hundreds of characters in the novel. With scores of characters who "vanish and appear... as in a Drury Lane Comedy" (S.W.F. 129)), Barth's narrative roller-coaster has no time to focus on one individual character and endow him or her with psychological depth. His characters are not quite like Sindbad the sailor, who, according to Todorov, is "l'example le plus connu de cet effacement du sujet grammatical,"[28] but they are far from being fully developed psychological entities.

If all these characters are incessantly "on the go," it is because the journey in Barth's novel is commensurate with storytelling. Often Barth goes out of his way to establish the concurrence of storytelling with journeying, as does Mary Mungummory when she ignores Ebenezer's "desperate expostulations" (S.W.F. 622) and says to Harvey Russecks, "the tales are long and mazy, and here's no place to spin'em out. Let him wait till we'are on the road" (S.W.F. 625). Barth uses the journey as a narrative device because the physical journey is open-ended, brings Ebenezer and Burlingame in contact with a potentially infinite number of characters, and provides an excuse for an infinite variety of stories that pass one into another as inevitably as the journey moves from

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[28] "Les hommes-récits," 34.
"the best known example of this effacement of the grammatical subject." ["Narrative-Men" 67.]

one place to another. In other words, the journey is an excuse for going on telling stories forever.

The use of the physical journey as a symbol for a spiritual or an ontological journey is a topos we are only too familiar with in literature. Likewise, everybody in The Sot-Weed Factor is in quest of his own Grail. If for the like of Bertrand, Ebenezer's valet, the journey is prompted by motives as mundane as economic improvement, for Burlingame it is a never-ending quest for identity, selfhood, a place in the cosmos. Similarly if the country estate that Ebenezer regains at the end of his tumultuous journey is no Chapel Perilous, it nonetheless marks the poet's passage from innocence to experience. But in Barth's novel, as in The Odyssey and Canterbury Tales, the quest for identity, spiritual redemption, or personal growth is also "a quest for stories."[29] No sooner does Burlingame return from an adventure than he sets out for further adventures, beseeching life to tell him more and more stories. More specifically, Barth, and for that matter all writers of fiction about travel and adventure, use meetings and separations as a device to generate more and more narrative. In Joseph Andrews, Joseph and Parson Adams now and again lose track of one another for the sole purpose of providing Fielding with a pretext to spin his yarns. In The Sot-Weed Factor, scores of meetings and

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[29] Tzvetan Todorov, "La Quête du récit: le Graal," in Poétique de la prose, 60-80.

separations are put to the same use. By design or by chance, Ebenezer is continually separated from his sister, from Burlingame, from his valet, and from Joan Toast only to meet them later, if not in their true identity, under various disguises. Almost every reunion is an immediate occasion for stories as the characters catch up on one another's lives.

Barth also uses the metaphor of the meal because it provides him with the same narrative possibilities as does the journey. When characters are not telling tales while on the road, they are telling tales while banqueting. The connection between food and storytelling is made very early in the novel with Burlingame's unexpected arrival at Cambridge. Burlingame erupts into his friend's room and sets out to tell his story, but not before having his "spread of sack and mutton," thus yoking storytelling to feasting and, by so doing, completing the classical paradigm which is as old as The Odyssey. At times characters in the novel go out of their way to yoke the two activities together. When at one point Ebenezer offers to tell a story to his host Captain Mitchell, the latter "pleasantly declined to hear, suggesting instead that it serve to entertain the table" (S.W.F. 332-3). Mary is cajoled into telling Ebenezer and Harvey Russecks "the Tale of the Englishing of Billy Rumbly," "but not till the birds are done" (S.W.F. 625). Eager to see her launch the story, Harvey declares that "there's partridge and duck a-plenty, and cider to drown the lot o'ye!" (S.W.F. 623). The meal is a narrative

device to the extent that it locates the narrator and his audience, puts them in a situation which invites stories, and provides a time frame for the story to fill.

James Brown points out that "food nourishes but it also signifies" and that "the meal is an excellent organizational device."[30] He also emphasizes the relationship between the act of eating and the act of speaking:

> eating and speaking share the same motivational structure; language is nothing more than the praxis of eating transposed to the semiosis of speaking; both are fundamentally communicative acts by which man appropriates and incorporates the world. (S.W.F. 13)

Brown goes on to argue that "novelists often associate orgiastic feasts with capitalism, making decadence at mealtime emblematic of the degenerating sexual mores caused by the advent of the middle class" (S.W.F. 19). In The Sot-Weed Factor, however, the meal is not transcoded into a fictional construct to reflect social and moral concerns. Nor is the semiotics of the meal in Barth's novel as intricate as that of the meal in the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel, with all its complexities and its social connotations. In The Sot-Weed Factor the meal is free of pretense and social distinctions and at best consists of "two birds...roasting over the pine logs in the fire-place" and a jug to pass around for there are "no cups to offer" (S.W.F. 623). Insofar as it is uncouth,

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[30] James Brown, Fictional Meals and Their Function in the French Novel, 1789-1848 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984) 11.

simple, and communal, Barth's meal is not Balzacian but Rabelaisian and suits best the energetic prose of the novel. For example in Captain Smith's Secret Historie of the Voiage Up the Chesapeake Bay, the eating contest between the corpulent Sir Burlingame and the Indian Attonce is derived from banqueting scenes in Rabelais' work. Though less hyperbolic than Gargantua's dinners, which often consist of sixteen oxen, three heifers, thirty two calves, etc., the burlesque menu in Barth's novel is by no means a modest one:

> "For houres thereafter, while that the rest watch'd in astonishment, the two gluttons match'd dish for dish, and herewith is the summe of what they eat:
> Of keskowghnoughmass, the yellowe-belly'd sunnefish, tenne apiece.
> Of copatone, the sturgeon, one apiece...."(S.W.F. 597)

In this endless Rabelaisian enumeration Barth releases words from meaning to relish them for their incantatory magic. Unlike the "conspiratorial meal" consisting of "cold fried chicken...and two bottles of ale" to which careless Daisy and Tom Buchanan retreat in The Great Gatsby, the banquet that lasts "all the daie" in Barth's novel is communal, celebratory, and is a source of delight and energy to everyone. The whole tribe is vicariously nourished because "the more a man can eat, the bigger he will become, and the heavier their king, the more secure will be their towne against it enemies" (S.W.F. 594). For Barth there is a symbolic link between narrating and eating: both sustain a continuing life and satisfy a continuing fundamental need

which precedes any rational or moral reason for existence. In other words, in fabulative literature in general and in Barth's fiction in particular, storytelling is as fundamental as eating.

Barth's novel is Rabelaisian not only in its treatment of the meal, but also in its treatment of scatological material. Barth's excremental vision surpasses that of the thousand and one "dirty rascals" who people Scheherazade's book, even that of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale," and is equalled only by that of Rabelais. Both Rabelais and Barth treat their material with a great freedom, and no subject lies outside the boundaries of their comic vision. Significantly enough, Barth speaks with enthusiasm about fiction in which characters exude an "animal, heathen innocence." Such fictional characters, as Barth goes on to say, "wail and guffaw, curse and sing, make love and foul their breeches; in short, they live, at a clip and with a brute joie de vivre that our modern spirits can scarcely comprehend" (F.B.39).

With its festive carnival humour and its strong scatological element, The Sot-Weed Factor, more than any other modern novel, seems to be a throwback to what Bakhtin calls in his Rabelais and his World "grotesque realism." Barth's characters eat, drink, defecate, and fornicate to excess and with what Bakhtin would call, "the popular frankness of the

market place."[31] Ebenezer fouls his breeches, the members of Captain Smith's crew "continually hang there bummies abeame" (S.W.F. 391), the captain himself "boast[s] openlie, and in lewdest terms, of his conquests and feats of love all over the continent and among the Moors, Turks and Africkans" (S.W.F. 164). Yet, all the surfeit of food, lust, and excrement is victorious and celebratory. Like Rabelais, Barth rehabilitates the "bodily lower stratum" and illustrates, as Bakhtin puts it, "the double-faced fullness of life."[32] For both Rabelais and Barth, the manifestations of the body are at the same time "blessing and humiliating."[33] Bakhtin explains that "in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, and welfare."[34] If Pantagruel's urine turns into warm medicinal springs, Burlingame's excremental concoctions also work miracles. Again, if Gargantua's good fortune increases with the increase of his eating, drinking and fornicating, Burlingame, for whom women and beasts are alike, rides with great gusto the crest of success; whereas, the squeamish Ebenezer is subjected to all kinds of indignities. Moreover, a number of events in The Sot-Weed Factor involve a dialectic

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[31] Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 21.

[32] Bakhtin, 240.

[33] Bakhtin, 115.

[34] Bakhtin, 317.

process which indicates the ambivalence of the lower stratum. Father Fitz-Maurice was forced to "enjoy the tribe's unmarried girls on the eve of his execution" and the day after "even as he roasted there were three white babies a-building in the wombs of his novitiates" (S.W.F. 382). Likewise, in Captain Smith's journal, a series of incidents illustrate the ambivalence which Bakhtin sees in Rabelais' medieval universe. While Attonce, the loser in the eating contest, "did let flie a tooling fart and dy'd upon the instant where he sat" (S.W.F. 598), the winner, Sir Burlingame, goes on the same night to sire on mighty Pocahontas the child who will be Henry Burlingame's father. Also, the phoenix rises out of its ashes again when Ebenezer's estate, for a long time a nest for pernicious trafficking, is eventually redeemed by the birth of a "healthy male child" (S.W.F. 799) to Anna and Burlingame. Over and over again we have configurations which illustrate the dialectics characteristic of the lower stratum as described by Bakhtin.

Moreover, the scatological element seems to be also linked with creativity in The Sot-Weed Factor and in Barth's fiction in general, and the connection is too consistent to be a mere coincidence. In The Floating Opera, as we recall, Todd Andrews happens upon the clue which allows him to win an important lawsuit thanks to Mrs. Lake's fart. In The Sot-Weed Factor, it is while Ebenezer is defecating that he gives "himself wholly to the muse, and rejecting quatrains for

stanzas of a length befitting the epic he wrote on" (S.W.F. 192). Here, as elsewhere in Barth's fiction, carnal freedom is an expression and a reflection of creative freedom and suits Barth's fabulistic bent. By cultivating preposterousness, Barth forsakes the realist path and writes in the spirit of Rabelais's "grotesque realism" because it is a celebratory exaggeration that thumbs its nose at dogmatic mimesis.

Barth draws on Rabelais, Scheherazade, Boccaccio, and Chaucer because his literary sensibility is akin to theirs. Although Barth has been thought of as a dernier cri formalist, his use of the Rabelaisian meal and the Chaucerian journey as narrative paradigms, his characters' lack of psychological depth, as well as his scatological humour all indicate that he is also in many ways a traditionalist. All these elements point to the presence of such classics as Gargantua, The Arabian Nights, The Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales in his craft. Barth's third novel is in fact a well-seasoned concoction of all these classics and is a synthesis of his vast reading of frame-tale literature. By using narrative-generating methods and metaphors, he spins a myriad of tales, and by burlesquing his characters and by carnivalizing his material, he discounts realism which he sees as an "aberration in the history of literature."[35]

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[35] "An Interview," in Joe David Bellamy, The New Fiction (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1974) 4.

Critics are not all delighted by Barth's fabulation. Earl Rovit sees Barth's third novel as a kind of frivolous virtuosity which lacks both moral and psychological depth and which dismisses the vital connection between fiction and experience. Rovit argues that Barth's book fails to attain "that moral seriousness which all responsible art aims at" and that Barth surrenders "his own moral opportunity to create values."[36] For Rovit, "the entire novel is a joke upon the reader"[37] and represents a direction which "can lead only to a cul de sac,"[38] because it is tiresome and ends in comic exhaustion which does not resolve anything. Rovit in fact goes so far as to declare that he does not "think that The Sot-Weed Factor is the novel that Barth intended to write."[39] Similarly Alan Holder points out that "the display of learning ending in a gag points up Barth's intellectual frivolity."[40] Holder goes on to say that "one wishes The Sot-Weed Factor conveyed more of a sense that Barth had to sculpt the past in the first place--that he did not

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[36] Earl Rovit, "The Novel as Parody: John Barth," Critical Essays on John Barth, 122.

[37] Rovit, 120.

[38] Rovit, 116.

[39] Rovit, 120.

[40] Alan Holder, "'What Marvelous Plot...Was Afoot?': John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor," Critical Essays on John Barth, 131.

stand outside it, but felt it impinge strongly on him."[41] Robert Garis also laments Barth's departure from realism and "the puerility of his thinking" and finds both The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy "about as bad as novels can be."[42]

Such negative critical reactions to Barth's novel come from expecting the fabulistic mode, as defined by Scholes and as practised by Barth, to offer what it refuses to offer. Barth's novel does not pretend to give us a realist slice of colonial American social life, and, to the extent that it does this, it does it to sustain its own comic narrative. In short, this question is subordinate to Barth's primary aim of telling us a million wonderful tales within an immense moving frame-tale. Like all fabulators, who, according to Scholes, "have some faith in art but...reject all ethical absolutes,"[43] Barth does not pretend to put forth a coherent moral vision of life or even a consistent central theme that is brought to some final resolution. If the identity quest does offer a continuing theme, it is not finally resolved, and it is to a large extent tongue-in-cheek. Along with the other themes in the novel, it is subordinate to Barth's primary purpose of fabulating.

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[41] Holder, 132.

[42] Robert Garis, "What Happened to John Barth?" Commentary 42 (1966): 89.

[43] Scholes, 41.

Barth deliberately liberates himself from the strictures of the outworn conventions of realism and is only too willing to trade the world for the word and the mot juste for the bon mot. Of course one hardly needs to explain that Barth is not an immoral or an amoral person and that, as he himself puts it, "as a private citizen one worries about politics and civil rights and all that,"[44] but in fiction he likes to invent "a clutch of worlds, all various" (S.W.F. 415), like the ones dreamt up by his fabulators in The Sot-Weed Factor. For Barth, one way of coming to terms with the difference between art and life

> is to define fiction as a kind of true representation of the distortion we all make of life. In other words, it's a representation of a distortion; not a representation of life itself, but a representation of a representation of life. If you acknowledge that premise to begin with, there's no reason in the world why you can't do all sorts of things that otherwise could be objected to on philosophical or other grounds.[45]

Barth knows that "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,"[46] and hence he dismisses all mimetic presumptions in The Sot-Weed Factor by playing fast and loose

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[44] "An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 5 (1965): 13.

[45] "An Interview," Prism 45 (1968): 54.

[46] John Barth, The End of the Road (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958) 112-113.

with colonial reality. In fact, Barth does not even consider the question of mimesis worth worrying about as he "found colonial history so fantastic that the work of the imagination consisted mainly of toning things down so they'd be believable in a farcical novel."[47] For Barth, the whole debate about realism and anti-realism is futile. "Reality," as he says, "is a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there, and literature never did, very long."[48] Barth wants to write in the spirit of The Nights where it is natural for geni to converse with men and the fabulous to walk hand in hand with the real. In her frame-story, Scheherazade, as we are reminded by Barth himself, produces a cornucopia of narrative which contains "...proverbs and parables, chronicles and pleasantries, quips and jests, stories and anecdotes, dialogues and histories and elegies and other verses..."(F.B. 279). And in The Sot-Weed Factor, Barth follows her. He has adopted the narrative convention of the frame-tale that saved Scheherazade's life and borrowed from this "Arabian sister" of his and from other ancient fabulators their material and their paradigms to spin a "moveable feast" of narrative of his own. Like those "ancient canons of storytelling," Barth's novel thumbs its nose at realism by combining fact with fiction, story with history, learned philosophical and scientific

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[47] "An Interview," Prism 45 (1968): 50-51.

[48] "An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 5 (1965): 10-11.

disquisitions with sexual lore and anecdotes. And if this perpetually moving roller-coaster does not offer a panacea to the problems of existence, with its "thousand and one framed tales," its carnivalesque atmosphere and its celebratory tone, it does offer a survival strategy that helps both Barth and the reader to cope with them.

CHAPTER 5

GILES GOAT-BOY AND THE MISE EN ABYME

Tant pis pour le lecteur paresseux: j'en veux d'autres.
Inquiéter, tel est mon rôle.

André Gide

Giles Goat-Boy has been both praised and faulted for its complexity, density, and plenitude. Webster Schott, one of the novel's harshest detractors, dismisses it as "a gluey mass of serio-comic belligerence that hardens into epoxy."[1] Denis Donoghue finds it "too long, too tedious, a dud." [2] Melvin Maddocks calls it "a cumbersomely allegorical story."[3] The more moderate Joel Shapiro thinks that "The book's themes are as variegated as life itself and while parts of it will hold any reader with compelling force, its entirety will be palatable only to those who take it as a 'project.'"[4] If for its detractors Barth's novel is tedious and cumbersome, for its champions it is "monumental and imposing."[5] Indeed Giles Goat-Boy has been praised for its "complexity and richness,"[6] and it has been described as "a literature course in itself,"[7] "a capsule history of literature,"[8] "a

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[1] Webster Schott, "A Black Comedy to Offend Everyone," Life 12 Aug. 1966: 10.

[2] Denis Donoghue, "Grand Old Opry," New York Review of Books 13 August 1966: P7.

[3] Melvin Maddocks, "Giles Goat-Boy," Christian Science Monitor, 12 August 1966: 5.

[4] Joel Shapiro, "John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy," Best Sellers 26 (October 1, 1966) 232.

[5] Marcus Klein, "Gods and Goats," The Reporter, 35 (22 September 1966): 60.

[6] Peter Mercer, "The Rhetoric of Giles Goat-Boy," Novel 4 (1971): 147.

[7] Richard Hauck, "The Comic Christ and the Modern Reader," Critical Essays on John Barth, 148.

composition designed to include all the other compositions of the world,"[9] and "an epic to end all epics."[10] Density, complexity, and plenitude, whether viewed as assets or as liabilities, are clearly the major qualities of Giles Goat-Boy. And what in my view invests Giles Goat-Boy with these qualities is Barth's use of a particular framing technique known especially in French studies as the mise en abyme.

The distinction between the mise en abyme and framing is that the mise en abyme must be a miniature replica of the narrative enclosing it. A framed tale in general does not have to be a microcosm of the narrative framing it; whereas, a mise en abyme must always be a miniature replica of the frame-tale. In other words, a framed tale qualifies as a mise en abyme only if it is a mirror of the outer tale. An examination of Giles Goat-Boy in connection with the mise en abyme is appropriate because the overall narrative contains an endless series of miniature narratives which operate as reflecting mirrors. Barth's most ambitious use of the mise en abyme is a fifty-page parody of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex that he inserts within the fable of the Goat-Boy. This play that

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[8] John Stark, The Literature of Exhaustion (Durham: Duke UP, 1974) 137.

[9] Tharpe, 10.

[10] Robert Scholes, The Fabulators, (New York: Oxford UP, 1967) 135.

Barth calls The "Tragedy of Taliped Decanus" contains its own internalized replicas, just as it is in its turn reflected throughout the novel in continual references, allusions, parallels, and analogues to Sophocles' tragedy and associated themes. The upshot is a narrative construction in which the framing story of the Goat-Boy is reflected ad infinitum in the mirrors it creates within its space. Because it is governed by the principle of repetition and recapitulation, this construction enables Barth to keep on telling by running the same story in different guises over and over again.

Also, this study is all the more appropriate because the mise en abyme is a technical analogue of the archetypal pattern of heroism and the cyclical view of the universe that Barth works with in Giles Goat-Boy. Barth has a strong interest in the cyclical view of the universe and must surely find the connection between the mise en abyme strategy and the theory of cyclology a very happy one. Very early in the novel Barth posits this law, which he attributes to Max Spielman, the Goat-Boy's mentor, and which he goes on to illustrate in his novel. The Goat-Boy recalls that his mentor used to tell him that "ontogeny recapitulates cosmogeny," that is, "our Founder on Founder's Hill and the rawest freshman on his first mons veneris are father and son," and that his "life and the

history of West campus are wheels within wheels."[11] Quite appropriately, Max Spielman and Dr. Sear discuss the universality of the law of cyclology when they are about to see the performance of "The Tragedy of Taliped Decanus," which is itself a parodic repetition of the pattern:

> Cyclological theory was founded on such correspondences as that between the celestial and psychic day, the seasons of the year, the stages of ordinary human life, the growth and decline of individual colleges, the evolution and history of studentdom as a whole, the ultimate fate of the University, and what had we. The rhythm of all these was repeated literally and emblematically in the life of the hero. (GGB. 263)

Barth's interest in the philosophical implications of the law of cyclology reinforces his interest in the mise en abyme, which is to some degree its technical equivalent. If this law appeals to him because it involves inevitably endless repetitions of the same phenomena, the mise en abyme also involves endless reflections of the same story and fulfills his fictional concerns by allowing him to build layers upon layers and by so doing enrich and deepen the narrative space of his fiction.

An appropriate place to begin a discussion of Barth's use of the mise en abyme in Giles Goat-Boy is with André Gide's much-quoted statement that has come to acquire the strength of a manifesto in French studies. In his Journal of

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[11] John Barth, Giles Goat-Boy (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 7. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

1893 Gide wrote

> J'aime assez qu'en une oeuvre d'art on retrouve ainsi transposé, à l'échelle des personnages, le sujet même de cette oeuvre. Rien ne l'éclaire mieux et n'établit plus sûrement toutes les proportions de l'ensemble. Ainsi, dans tels tableaux de Memling ou de Quentin Metzys, un petit miroir convexe et sombre refléte, à son tour, l'intérieur de la pièce où se joue la scène peinte. Ainsi, dans le tableau des Menines de Vélasquez (mais un peu différemment). Enfin, en littérature, dans Hamlet, la scène de la comédie; et ailleurs dans bien d'autres pièces. Dans Wilhelm Meister, les scènes de marionnettes ou de fête au château. Dans La Chûte de la Maison Usher, la lecture que l'on fait a Roderick,etc. Aucun de ces exemples n'est absolument juste. Ce qui le serait beaucoup plus, ce qui dirait mieux ce que j'ai voulu dans mes Cahiers, dans mon Narcisse et dans La tentative, c'est la comparaison avec ce procédé du blason qui consiste, dans le premier, a en mettre un second <<en abyme>>.[12]

From Gide's phrase "en abyme" the practitioners of the nouveau roman have coined the phrase "mise en abyme," which has acquired considerable currency in French studies. Such

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[12] André Gide, Journal 1889-1939 (Paris: Gallimard, 1948) 41.
"In a work of art, I rather like to find thus transposed, at the level of the characters, the subject of the work itself. Nothing sheds more light on the work or displays the proportions of the whole work more accurately. Thus, in paintings by Memling or Quentin Metzys, a small dark convex mirror reflects, in its turn, the interior of the room in which the action of the painting takes place. Thus, in a slightly different way, in Velasquez's Las Meninas. Finally, in literature, there is the scene in which a play is acted in Hamlet; this also happens in many other plays. In Wilhelm Meister, there are the puppet shows and the festivities in the castle. In The Fall of the House of Usher, there is the piece that is read to Roderick etc. None of these examples is absolutely accurate. What would be more accurate, and what would explain better what I'd wanted to do in my Cahiers, in Narcisse and in La Tentative, would be a comparison with the device from heraldry that involves putting a second representation of the original shield 'en abyme' within it." [Quoted in Lucien Dallenbach, The Mirror in the Text, trans. J. Whiteley and E. Hughes (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 7.

innovative writers as Jean Ricardou and Robbe-Grillet have exploited its aesthetic and structural potentialities to a degree Gide would not have dreamt of.

The mise en abyme can fulfill far more interesting functions than the merely illustrative one that Gide attributes to it. It can enrich and deepen the narrative space of a novel by endlessly replicating reflecting mirrors of the main plot. The term "abyme" is old French for "abime" (abyss), and the phrase "mise en abyme" conjures up ideas of profundity and infinitude. Michel Leiris emphasizes these same qualities of the mise en abyme by mentioning that he owes his first awareness of the "notion d'infini" to a can of Dutch cocoa decorated with the image of a girl reproduced ad infinitum.[13] Thus by multiplying reflecting mirrors of the main plot, the mise en abyme can become a narrative-generating mechanism. The writer can potentially go on writing forever by reproducing an infinite number of variations on the main narrative.

The mise en abyme is also a self-reflexive device that undercuts mimesis. In a mise en abyme construction, a narrative engages a dialogue with its own image and reflects first and foremost its own fictional reality before reflecting any other reality outside its confines. The mise en abyme can also play a subversive role in a text. It tends to undermine

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[13] Michel Leiris, L'Age d'homme (Paris: Gallimard, 1946) 38-9.

the anecdotal interest of a narrative by prematurely unveiling the secret of its plot. Because the mise en abyme can be a subversive element in a narrative, it has been described as a structural revolt of the part against the whole.[14] In fact Jean Ricardou and other critics with formalist inclinations have no qualms about the disruption that the mise en abyme causes to a narrative. Ricardou even goes so far as to assert that a novel which allows disruptive elements within its narrative space is the novel par excellence.[15]

Barth's use of the mise en abyme reflects his affinity with the French New Novelists. His comments on Robbe-Grillet and his colleages in various addresses and interviews leave no doubt as to his awareness and knowledge of the nouveau roman and the whole structuralist activity. One is struck by the similarities between Barth's fiction and that of Nathalie Sarraute, among others. In both The Floating Opera and Lost in the Funhouse, as in Sarraute's Les Fruits d'Or, the narrators are baffled by the intricacies and the demands of fiction-writing. When Todd Andrews exclaims in despair, "Good heavens, how does one write a novel?" he is as overwhelmed by fiction-writing as his counterpart in Sarraute's novel, who

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[14] Jean Ricardou, Problèmes du nouveu roman (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 181.

[15] Jean Ricardou, Problèmes du nouveau roman (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 182.

also admits, "Je n'ai jamais songé à écrire un roman, je me demande comment on s'y prend."[16] In the use of the mise en abyme Barth's interest in contemporary French literature and theory is joined with his long-standing obsession with framing.

Barth is already toying with the mise en abyme in its embryonic form in The Floating Opera and The Sot-Weed Factor. Captain Adam's floating opera is a miniature replica of The Floating Opera, insofar as it symbolizes Todd's floating between life and death and also reflects the narrative which "sail[s] in and out of view." Moreover, the handbills floating around everywhere in Cambridge graphically illustrate the mise en abyme construction. Similarly, in The Sot-Weed Factor, The Privie Journal of Sir Henry Burlingame and Captain Smith's Secret Historie mirror the overall narrative framing them. However, it is in Giles Goat-Boy that Barth fully exploits this strategy by inserting in his novel a fifty-page play which mirrors the novel that frames it.

The "Tragedy of Taliped Decanus" is an iconoclastic recasting of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Unlike their deadly serious counterparts in Sophocles'tragedy, Barth's personae are extremely self-conscious and totally lacking in heroic stature. Agenora, Barth's version of Jocasta, is a "sharp-

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[16] Nathalie Sarraute, Les Fruits d'or (Paris: Seuil, 1963) 38.
"I have never written a novel, I wonder how one does it." [my trans.]

tongued, nymphomaniac sow." In this literary artifice Taliped (Oedipus) worries about his grammar and has "some sort of complex" (GGB. 291). For Taliped, suicide is out of the question because it "would mess the symbols up" (GGB. 309). The opening of "The Tragedy of Taliped Decanus" is similar to that of Sophocles' tragedy. We are told by the committee chairman, who fulfills the function of the chorus, that "Cadmus College is on the rocks" (GGB. 267), that it "has gone to pot" and has become a cesspool of moral and social evils. Taliped, the famous Dean of Cadmus who once rid the land of the scourge of "that she-monster," is asked to "repeat that stunt" and "set the college on its feet." Like Oedipus, Taliped too summons Gynander, the "Proph-prof Emeritus," who tells him that the polluter of the land is the same person who once killed Labdakides, the former dean of the College. To live up to his reputation as "Master Sleuth: the Dean Who'll Dare Anything for Truth," Taliped sets out to find "the dirty dog" who is polluting the land. In the course of the investigation he pressures "Doctor-Know-It-All" to name the culprit. The seer tries to evade his difficult task, but incensed by Taliped's insults and threats, he declares, "You're the wretch you want. You'll see,/When Scene Four is done." Although Taliped lashes at the "blind old fag," he is nonetheless too curious to stop the investigation. Despite Quenn Agenora's advice that he renounce his "Go-to-any-length-for-answers bit" and "flunk his ID-quiz," Taliped continues

his detective work only to discover that he is the culprit he has been looking for, and that he is the "poor schlemiel" who killed his own father and married his own mother. Like Oedipus, Taliped blinds himself to "take up proph-proffing" because he gains vision by losing his sight: "The blinding light! At last I see the light!"

The analogy between "The Tragedy of Taliped Decanus" and the fable of the Goat-Boy that contains it is established very early in the novel. "Taliped Decanus" is appropriately sprung on the reader when the Goat-Boy is preparing himself for the rite of passage, the first major trial of his career, or as he himself puts it, "the first big hurdle...to get over" on his way to "the heart of the college" (GGB. 251). In this fictional universe, in which the University-as-the-universe is the metaphor that determines the whole novel, "the ritual of registration and matriculation" (GGB. 251) involves its own trials. The first trial consists in passing through the turnstile, and the ultimate deed of heroism is to reach Tower Hall and "change WESCAC'S AIM" (GGB. 258) and thus annihilate the powerful computer which presumably poses a threat to the whole University. In this allegorical context, if the Goat-Boy succeeds in his task, he will "demonstrate [his] Grand-Tutorship" (GGB. 259), but if he fails, he is "not the man." Moreover, the Goat-Boy, the would-be "Grand Tutor," appropriately sees the tragedy at a time when the situation in Tammany College is as apocalytic as it was in Thebes when

Oedipus returned to meet his fate. The headlines of the Tower Hall Times that the Goat-Boy reads while waiting for the play to begin read: "TENSION MOUNTS ALONG POWER LINE; THOUSANDS MASSACRED IN FRUMENTIAN INTRAMURAL RIOTS; FAMINE SPREADS IN T'ANG; FLOODWATERS RISE IN SIDDARTHA..." (GGB. 262). Also, while the Goat-Boy is perusing his newspaper, his companions are involved in a heated discussion about heroism and its problematics, the paradox of innocence and knowledge, and other related issues. Thus the analogy between the Goat-Boy's career and that of the Greek hero he is about to witness is hinted at before the opening of the play. The irony of course is that the Goat-Boy is unwittingly about to see in the "Tragedy of Taliped Decanus" his own life prematurely unfolding in miniature on the stage.

Like his archetypal counterpart in the play, the Goat-Boy is of a noble lineage since his presumed father is mighty WESCAC and his mother, Virginia Hector, is the daughter of the ex-chancellor of Tammany College. The Goat-Boy too survives "an extraordinary infanticide" because his "birth had been a threat or embarrassment to someone high in the hierarchy of the College" (GGB. 67). Like Taliped, he limps as a result of the "misfired infanticide." He is then saved from the belly of WESCAC by George Herrold, who is in charge of "the management of the herd" (GGB. 78), and reared by Max Spielman, who once held an eminent rank in the hierarchy of the College. Again, by returning to Tammany College to reinstate his human

identity, he, like his archetypal counterpart, journeys from innocence to knowledge.

When he arrives at the College, he too has his riddle to solve as he is issued "an assignment sheet," the solving of which will be a major test of his Messianic claim. His attempts to free the University from the scourge of WESCAC only throw the University into more chaos. There are also undertones of incest in his march to "Grand Tutorhood." In his early days, he forces his own mother, Virginia Hector, to "be" with him. Virginia Hector, or Lady Creamhair, as she is referred to early in the novel, tells her son that he "should not have been born" because of the " horrid mistake" he has made (GGB. 39). The mother never recovers from the shock of that physical onslaught and eventually dies in an asylum. The Goat-Boy, who will always feel guilty for having "driven [his] mother mad," knows that "sex is [his] undoing" (GGB. 119). His relationship with Anastasia also smacks of incest since she is Virginia Hector's step-daughter. When he tells her that they might be twins, she too is appalled and is "on the verge of swooning" (GGB. 482). Finally, the Goat-Boy fails in his attempts to redeem the University, loses favour with his followers, and is driven out of Cadmus College. His death as he foresees it will be similar to Oedipus's death:

> Naked, blind, dishonoured, I shall be coasted on a rusty bicycle from Great Mall....Three times will lightning flash at a quarter after seven, all the University respeaking my love's thunder-Terruah! Tekiah! Shebarim!-and it will be finished. The claps

> will turn me off. Passed, but not forgotten, I shall rest. (GGB. 707-708)

If the "Tragedy of Taliped Decanus" is a microcosmic reflection of the Goat-Boy's fable, it also articulates in a condensed form the themes upon which the whole fable revolves. As in the tragedy, the Goat-Boy's journey from the caprine innocence towards the University is a journey from innocence to knowledge. Both Taliped and the Goat-Boy discover that innocence involves ignorance, and knowledge involves disillusionment; yet the movement from innocence towards knowledge is as inevitable as the archetypal Fall from the Garden. In other words, human beings by nature cannot remain in a state of prelapsarian innocence, but knowledge of the self and of the world is paid for with suffering and disillusionment.

Barth dramatizes this paradox by inserting "The Tragedy of Taliped Decanus" in his novel. The Goat-Boy's troubles, like Taliped's, begin when he decides to "leave the herd forever" (GGB. 28), join the University, and live the examined life. In fact, it occurs to him while reading "hero tales" that instead of being an average human being, he can immmediately "pass the finals," become a hero, and fulfill his special calling by saving the University from the scourge of WESCAC. Thus, with the energy and innocence of youth, he sets out to be a hero before learning to be human. Max, who "knows more about herohood than anybody" (GGB. 89) and who is aware

that being an ordinary human being, let alone a hero, involves pain and disillusionment, advises his protege that learning to be a man is "hero-work enough" (GGB. 91). When Max fails to dissuade the Goat-Boy from forsaking the herd, he prays that "suffering make him smart" (GGB. 73) and grudgingly consents to be the Helper who accompanies the Hero to the Axis Mundi, which is in this case the tower hall of the University.

When the Goat-Boy receives his riddle in the form of a circular device with the cryptic message "Fail all Pass all," he, like Oedipus, rashly responds by deciding that the riddle is an injunction to separate systematically passing from failing, salvation from damnation, "Passed are the passed and flunked are the flunked, and that's that" (GGB. 418). He immediately adopts what Scholes calls, "a posture of fundamentalist righteousness"[17] and begins to implement it by insisting on the total separation of man from the goat, tick from tock, virtue from vice, East from West, mysticism from rationalism. He advises that the frontiers between Tammany College and Nikolay College (Western and Eastern Block) "ought to be kept as distinct and as far apart as possible" (GGB. 444) and that Chancellor Lucky Rexuis, who represents order, renounce his association with Maurice Stoker, the Dean O'Flunks, who embodies the forces of darkness and raw chaos. But as he proceeds to implement his views, he

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[17] Robert Scholes, The Fabulators, 163.

realizes that the University is complex and resists Manichean dichotomizing and that there are no moral absolutes to be used as criteria for making absolute distinctions. The implementation of his views causes "general panic and breakdown of the college" (GGB. 498), as Eierkopf, who is all brain, is "paralyzed from head to toe" (GGB. 498) without the physical help of Croaker, who is all body, and Croaker himself is "once again amok" without Eierkopf's brain. The conflict between Chancellor Rexuis and Maurice Stoker causes havoc because they are like "the hemispheres of a single brain" (GGB. 486). When the Goat-Boy emerges from his first disastrous descent into the Belly of WESCAC and is nearly lynched by the angry mob, he realizes that because he craved "so ardently to pass" he "failed everything, everyone, in every sense" (GGB. 530).

While imprisoned in Main Detention and reeling with disappointment at his "Spring-Term fiasco" (GGB. 579), the Goat-Boy adopts a new position, which is the inversion of the first one. He arrives at his second position by the same tortuous reasoning and the same empty rhetoric and goes on to preach it with the same confidence and glibness of youth. In this newly formulated position, failure is passage and passage is failure, and there are no distinctions between East and West, virtue and vice. This fusion of contraries creates general pandemoniuum again: "The whole durn place has gone kerflooey! Crooks and loonies running all over! It's the end

of the University" (GGB. 621). Again, the Goat-Boy is "expelled...thunderously" (GGB. 638) from the belly of the computer. Once again, the Goat-Boy is "prodded with [his] own stick" (GGB. 640) by the angry crowd, and finds himself in jail, dispirited, and wishing for death and an end to his "tiresome history" (GGB. 641).

The Goat-Boy "passes" only when he is no longer interested in passing, when he "no longer held opinions" (GGB. 668) on any University matter. He also realizes that the riddle of the Sphynx he has been grappling with in vain is a "Riddle of the Sphincters": "Indeed, my spirit was seized: it was not I concentrating, but something concentrating upon me, taking me over, like the spasms of defecation or labor-pains." As he goes on to say, "I gave myself up utterly to that which bound, possessed, and bore me. I let go, I let all go; relief went through me like a purge" (GGB. 650). After this experience, the Goat-Boy embraces all the polarities of the University (which he begins to see as the terms of paradox rather than contradiction) and affirms the possibility of love. In his third descent into the belly of WESCAC he merges through an embrace of love with his "ladyship," Anastasia, whom he used to see as a distraction from self-realization and an obstacle between him and "herohood" and finds "peace that passeth all understanding":

> In the sweet place that contained me there was no East, no West, but an entire, single , seamless campus: Turnstile, Scrapegoat Grate, the Mall, the

> barns, the awful fires of the powerhouse, the balmy heights of Founder's Hill--I saw them all; rank jungles of Frumentius, Nikolay's cold fastness, teeming T'ang--all one , and one with me. Here lay with there, tick clipped tock, all serviced nothing; I and My Ladyship, all, were one.
>
> "GILES, SON OF WESCAC"
>
> Milk of studentdom; nipple inexhaustible! I was the Founder; I was Wescac; I was not. I hung on those twin buttons I fed myself myself.
>
> "DO YOU WISH TO PASS"
>
> I the passer, she the passage, we passed together, and together cried, 'Oh, wonderful!' Yes and No. In the darkness, blinding light! The end of the University! Commencement Day! (GGB. 673)

Like Taliped, the Goat-Boy, whose head is entirely covered in Anastasia's purse, sees "In the darkness, blinding light." And what he sees is that the Riddle proposed by the Sphynx-like WESCAC has been all along a Riddle of the Sphincters, that his attempts to forsake the herd and be "strictly human" (GGB. 468) was wrong-headed, that it is an error to flunk "the 'Eierkopf' in Croaker and the 'Croaker' in Eierkopf" (GGB. 627), that his goatliness is part and parcel of his humanity, and that if "sex is [his] undoing," it is also what makes him human. The Goat-Boy, who wanted to eradicate his "goatliness" and who thought that his limp "ceased to exist when [he] reverted to all fours" (GGB. 463), realizes in the end that his limp, his "goatliness," are his curse and his failure, but he also realizes that "Passage is to be found only in the Knowledge of Failure" (GGB. 664). In short, he becomes a seer when he stops being a seeker and a Grand Tutor only by becoming "supremely human" as Max has him told all along.

As Oedipus's wit and bravado finally give way to humility, sadness, and wisdom, the Goat-Boy, who has renounced his youthful claims, also sounds sadder, wiser, and disillusioned in the Posttape closing the novel:

> Thus it is I accept without much grumble their failings and my own: the abuse of my enemies, the lapses of my friends, the growing pains in both my legs, my goatly seizures, my errors of fact and judgment, my failures of resolve--all these and more, the ineluctable shortcomings of mortal studenthood. (GGB. 699-700)

Like all tragic heroes, he too realizes the tragic paradox involved in the journey from innocence to knowledge:

> To gain this, one sacrifices that; the pans remain balanced for better and worse...
> Nay for worse, always for worse. Late or soon, we lose. Sudden or slow, we lose. The bank exacts its charge for each redistribution of our funds. (GGB. 707)

The Goat-Boy acquires both Eastern and Western knowledge, only to rehearse "the same old plot" (GGB. 641) and repeat the same old fiction. As the chorus in the parody predicts, he "must...sing this refrain again" (GGB. 305) and make the same phylogenic mistakes of his counterpart in "Taliped Decanus," and by implication, those of the whole human race.

This same refrain is sung over and over again in this novel which is governed by the principle of repetition and recapitulation imposed on it by the mise en abyme. Upon close examination of the novel, one realizes that the "Tragedy of Taliped Decanus," which is itself a miniature replica of the story of the Goat-Boy , has its own miniature replicas, and

its own satellites, as it were. "Taliped Decanus" reduplicates itself over and over again, thereby creating a spiral effect in the novel. Thus by breeding analogues, "The Tragedy" becomes a generative mechanism which revitalizes the narrative and invests it with an abysmal profundity. Because it contains an infinite number of mirrors in its narrative space, Barth's novel is multi-layered and abysmally stratified. There are many analogues of which I will mention only a few to illustrate my point. The games that the Goat-Boy plays when he is still in the barn are microcosmic of his future career and of that of Taliped for that matter, just as the narrative account relating the games is a condensed analogue of "The Tragedy" as well as the narrative enclosing it. As the Goat-Boy reminisces:

> In our play-yard were a number of barrels and boards that we used for Dean of the Hill. To entertain my admirers I would set two planks against opposite sides of a barrel-top; Redfearn's Tommy, my special friend, would scramble up from one side and I from the other, and we'd wrestle for possession of the summit.(GGB. 12)

The Goat-Boy goes on to say that when he was once playing the same game, he lost his balance, and the "tower came a-topple." When he fell at the feet of the crowd of spectators, he was pummelled and "struck a cruel one athwart the muzzle," as he will be so many times later in his career. He tried to scramble up to the summit again, but he could not because he was still "rattled by [his] fall" and "couldn't see to climb" because his "eyes had watered." This narrative episode is, as

Levi-Strauss would put it, a modéle réduit of the Goat-Boy's whole career.

With their strongly Oedipal motives such as parricide, incest, innocence, and guilt, the "heinous dreams" which beset the Goat-Boy's sleep are also micro-narratives which mirror the "Taliped Decanus" and the fable containing it. When the Goat-Boy hears Max's interpretation of one of the dreams he had, he declares with disgust, "my final wish...was that Max be castrated and rendered helpless and my human scruples forcibly put aside, so that buck-like I could mount the doe who'd mothered me!" (GGB. 82). The dream is a mise en abyme to the extent that it mirrors the "Tragedy of Taliped Decanus." It echoes Taliped's mishaps with his parents as well as the Goat-Boy's "fiasco in the hemlock" (GGB. 102) with his own mother, his sexual involvement with his half-sister, Anastasia, and his struggle with WESCAC, his own father. Also, the scene where the Goat-Boy slaughters the buck Redfearn's Tommy in order to monopolize one of his favourite does is another Oedipal layer which bears similarities with the two major narratives. Again, the story that Lady Creamhair tells the Goat-Boy about the three brothers prevented by a Troll from crossing a stream adds another layer to the metaphorical buildup of the novel. The Troll is one of the Sphynx figures in the novel, and the attempted crossing of the stream prefigures the crossing of the turnstile, of WESCAC's belly, of Scrapegoat Grate, which all symbolize the

crossing from innocence to knowledge that both the Goat-Boy and his archetypal counterpart experience.

All these short analogues, which are narratives in their own right, are small mise en abyme endlessly replicating the main story framing them. Moreover, the careers of most of the characters in the novel are replications of Oedipus Rex, of Taliped Decanus, and of the Goat-Boy. In other words, if the Goat-Boy is Taliped, almost every other character in the novel is a Goat-Boy. They all evaluate their motives and actions against the archetypal example of Oedipus, reenact the same story, and they all "sing the same refrain." Max Spielman moves in his thinking from a melioristic humanism to a tragic humanism: "I used to think if Graduation meant anything at all, it meant relieving human suffering. Not so. Suffering is Graduation" (GGB. 417). Dr. Kennard Sear, "the most knowledgeable man on campus" (GGB. 357), is a self-proclaimed disciple of Sophocles and is contemptuous of innocence and firmly committed to self-knowledge. His blindness lies in his intellectual posturing and his self-conscious aping of Taliped, and his quest for self-knowledge is limited to prurient and depraved navel-gazing. To be like Taliped, he contrives reasons for loathing himself and indulges in "a flunked deed from simple relish of its flunkedness" (GGB. 468). When he loses his sight, he finally sees that he has been "a blind dunce," and he wishes he "could only wipe the slate clean" (GGB. 608).

Chancellor Lucky Rexford's career is also a variation on the same theme. In the first part of his career, he is an optimist who believes in human beings' potential for self-improvement, and his "view is the opposite of the tragic view" (GGB. 372). Ironically, immediately after a speech in which he preaches his positivistic thinking "every light in the Assembly-hall suddenly went out" (GGB. 375). After living through the turmoil of his "Campus," he too seems to undergo a change as his naive optimism gives way to a "painful sobriety" (GGB. 682). Similarly, Peter Greene, who scoffs at "that immigrant Dean Taliped" (GGB. 425), is the embodiment of innocence and its pitfalls, and his ignorance is constantly the object of ridicule. Although he thinks he "can tell by looking" (GGB. 217), he is blind to his own motives and actions and is unable to "take a close look at [himself]" (GGB. 427). He castigates himself over and over again for having been "a blind durn fool" (GGB. 472) only to continue to make the same errors of judgment. Like most of the characters, he makes his own journey from innocence to knowledge. When he loses both his eyes in a fight with Leonid, the Russian defector, he seems to have learnt from his suffering: "Things look different to a fellow's been through what I been through. I got a long ways to go" (GGB. 652). Like Taliped, Greene "now wept freely, and his wounded eye bled a little onto his cheek" (GGB. 652). Finally, we are told in the Posttape that he has become a fervent and

efficient disseminator of "Gilesianism." Clearly, Taliped (Oedipus) has "contaminated" all the other characters, and his tragedy has completely penetrated the narrative space of the novel.

Even the paraphernalia of visual instruments with which the novel is filled serves the purpose of deepening the encroachment of the themes of the tragedy on the rest of the narrative. Barth's use of mirrors serves the double purpose of emphasizing the thesis that "self-knowledge is always bad news" (GGB. 85) and illustrating the endless reflections and replications which make up the novel. There is not, perhaps, another novel which contains as many distorting mirrors, lenses, telescopes and fluoroscopes in all American literature. The Goat-Boy can see only "the magnified reflection of [his] eye" (GGB. 361) in the mirror offered to him by Sear. Dr. Sear delights in watching his wife through his fluoroscope while she indulges in her sexual depravities. The lustless Eierkopf, another voyeur, peeps at young girls with his telescope. Mirrors and lenses are Eierkopf's "favourite thing" (GGB. 336), and his faith in his lenses is unwavering: "There aren't any mysteries; just ignorance. When something looks miraculous it's because we're using the wrong lenses" (GGB. 336). Other characters have either a fascination with mirrors or an aversion to them. Leonid's aversion is so strong that he expiates his guilt by choosing "the means painfullest to himself--a cell lined with mirrors

instead of bars" (GGB. 453). Greene also has "a thing about mirrors" (GGB. 217) and throws a rock at his own reflection in a mirror, taking it for some Peeping Tom making lewd gestures at his wife. All these visual instruments indicate that most of the characters' careers are replications of that of Taliped or parodic inversions of it and reinforce the themes of vision and blindness, knowledge and ignorance.

In fact these themes are introduced in the "Publisher's Disclaimer" and the "Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher," which also contain replications of the "Tragedy of Taliped Decanus." The critics who have addressed these frames preceding the New Revised Syllabus proper see them only as a device that serves the purpose of undercutting mimesis. John Stark points out that "the apparatus at [the] beginning and ending emphasize this novel's artificiality."[18] For Walkiewicz, the frame "undermines the authority and authenticity of the document it presents."[19] McDonald points out that, "the reader misses the thrust and spirit of the novel unless he studies the frame carefully," but he goes on to study it solely as an anti-mimetic tool: "The frame calls attention to this novel as a complicated fictional

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[18] John Stark, The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth (Durham: Duke UP, 1974) 133.

[19] E.P. Walkiewicz, John Barth (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) 70.

contrivance."[20]

These critics are of course right in suggesting that Barth uses frames in Giles Goat-Boy for the purpose of debunking realism. By criticizing "the Revised New Syllabus," by railing at its outlandishness, and by casting doubt on the authenticity of its authorship, the opening and closing frames undercut all mimetic pretense. The opening frames mention the "arduous vicissitudes" that "The Revised New Syllabus" went through before it reached its publishers, denounce its flaws, and severely criticize its composition. The text presumably based on the teachings of the Grand Tutor was, as we are told, assembled and edited by WESCAC, but got later mixed accidently with "the Seeker," the novel that J.B. was trying to write. J.B., who is no more than an agent to Stoker Giles, made "only certain emendations and rearrangments" to the text submitted to him, and so it goes. These opening frames do undercut mimesis and satisfy Barth's ludic tendencies. For Barth, the purpose of writing is not, as Hamlet says, "to hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature," but to fiction's own processes. Barth, the self-proclaimed anti- realist, undercuts the realist illusion by writing fiction which, by turning in on itself, reflects first and foremost itself before reflecting any outside reality. Yet, they underrate the importance of the opening frames by assigning to them a strictly anti-mimetic function.

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[20] James McDonald, "Barth's Syllabus: The Frame of Giles Goat-Boy," 6.

The opening frames play a more important role in the makeup of the novel. If they emphasize its artificiality, they also contribute a few layers to its metaphorical stratification, as they offer a few more replications of "Taliped Decanus" and, by implication, of the "Revised New Syllabus." In fact, Barth leads us into his vast hall of mirrors by way of the opening frames. The "Publisher's Disclaimer" and especially J.B.'s "Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher" set up the mise en abyme strategy by presenting us with the summary of the Goat-Boy's life, that is, the novel in miniature before the novel proper begins. In his explanation of the bizarre circumstances surrounding the "Revised New Syllabus," J.B. writes to the editors that when the outlandish young man, Giles Stoker (or Stoker Giles), who is presumably the Goat-Boy's own son, came to deliver the manuscript to him, he told him the Goat-Boy's life story. In other words, he sums up the Goat-Boy's career and by implication the plot of the novel. Before the novel proper begins, we already know that the Goat-Boy is "some sort of professor extraordinarius ...whose reputation rested on his success in preparing students to pass their final examination," that his "pedagogical method had been unorthodox," and that "like many radicals he had worked against vehement opposition, even actual persecution." We also learn in advance that his "tenure was revoked...while still in his early thirties" and that he reappeared for a

short time to confer with his devotees only to disappear again "for good." With this first intervention of the mise en abyme, the novel betrays itself before it has started. In these opening frames Barth also introduces us to the mise en abyme construction of his novel by immediately establishing an analogy between the career of the Goat-Boy and that of the archetypal hero. Upon hearing the story of the Goat-Boy for the first time, J.B. comments that, "the tale was like so many others one has heard, I could almost have predicted certain features." One soon realizes that the Goat-Boy, Stoker Giles, J.B., and the Seeker, who is the hero of the novel that J.B. was in the process of writing when Stoker came to see him, as well as Editor D in the "Publisher's Disclaimer," are all more or less mirroring images of the archetypal hero such as Oedipus. When J.B. reads the manuscript entrusted to him, he, like Oedipus, reevaluates his whole artistic career, turns from "a monger after beauty" into "a priest of Truth," and is "no longer a seeker but a humble finder." He is stripped of his innocence by the experience of reading the manuscript, has "caught knowledge like a love-pox," and has also developed a tragic view of life: "...everything only gets worse, gets worse; our victories are never more than moral, and always pyrrhic; in fact we know only more or less ruinous defeats." Upon his conversion to "Gilesianism," he vows to start all over again, become "a kindergartener," since up to that point in his career his "every purchase on reality-as artist,

teacher, lover, citizen, husband, friend--all were bizarre and wrong, a procession of hoaxes perhaps impressive for a time but ultimately ruinous."

In The Seeker or The Amateur, the novel J.B. will never finish, the hero is another replication, another mise en abyme, of all the other characters including his own author. Like the Goat-Boy, and like Taliped Decanus in Barth's parody of Oedipus Rex, and like Oedipus himself, the Seeker is "near-sighted," has a "birthmark incipiently cancerous," which he "would welcome and treasure" as his "admission ticket to brotherhood." He too is initially "a passionate naif...a lover not a knower," and the "fiascoes of his involvements with men and women...make him an authentic person."

Editor D also catches the disease of the mise en abyme. Before he disappears, he writes his report about the manuscript in which he vituperates, "Failed, Failed, Failed! I look about me, and everywhere see failure...none of us is Passed, we are all Failed!." Upon reading the manuscript of the Revised New Syllabus, he is affected by its tragic vision and, like the Goat-Boy, he no longer makes distinctions between passage and failure: "Publish the Revised New Syllabus or reject it....My judgment is not upon the book but upon myself. I have read it. I here resign from my position with this house." He decides that it is better to be "victimized by Knowledge than succored by Ignorance" and leaves the publishing company of which he is the sole heir, thus

rejecting the authority of his father. These characters, and by implication every other person who ever lived, are reduced and simultaneously expanded into replicas of the archetypal hero. Every story is a replication of some archetypal story, just as everyone is a replication of an archetypal hero. There are no original stories or heroes, only endless reflections.

The heroic archetype that Barth is working with in Giles Goat-Boy finds its source in the descriptions of the hero which he found in such comparative mythologists as Joseph Campbell, Lord Raglan, and Otto Rank. Otto Rank mentions that "the unanimity of the myths is a necessary sequence of the uniform disposition of the human mind and the manner of its manifestation, which within certain limits is identical at all times and in all places."[21] For Campbell the adventure of the mythic hero is a "perfect microcosmic mirror of the macrocosm."[22] Similarly, Barth echoes both Rank and Campbell when he says that "what happens to the hero in his life-time figures the daily adventures of all our psychic lives" (F.B. 46). Barth mentions that his "curiosity was provoked" when a critic said that The Sot-Weed Factor was influenced by Rank's book, which Barth had not read yet:

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[21] Otto Rank, The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings (1914; New York: Vintage Books, 1964) 4.

[22] Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968) 347.

> I borrowed that book from the Penn State Library; I peeked into it; sure enough, the critic was right. Well now, I thought, one of two things is true: Either it's very hard to invent any extravagant hero who won't at least metaphorically fit that pattern, or else, without quite knowing it, I had "got aholt of something big," as John Steinbeck's Parson says. (F.B. 43)

Barth mentions that he consciously went on to use the ritual of mythic heroism in Giles Goat-Boy. For Barth, and for the mythologists he read, the heroic pattern is cyclical and is universally reenacted over and over again to the extent that it is the atavistic product of the collective unconscious. The life-story of each individual with its trials and errors, with the passage from innocence to knowledge, is a re-enactment and reflection of the archetypal pattern of heroism.

The mise en abyme is the technical equivalent of this pattern since it involves an endless repetition and recapitulation of the same story the same way the career of each individual hero is a repetition and a recapitulation of the heroic archetype. Barth, "whose youthful ambition was to be neither a composer nor a performer, but an orchestrator...an arranger" and whose "real bond with the authors of antiquity" is the shared belief that originality is "chiefly a matter of rearrangment" (GGB. 159), finds in the mise en abyme an excuse for recycling the same tale over and over again. In other words, since all stories are at least in their broadest outlines repetitions of an archetypal story, a writer is free to endlessly run the same story to different

keys and generate an endless narrative. Thus by multiplying analogues of the same tale, this narrative strategy produces a myriad of metaphoric layers, which endow the novel with polysemic wealth and create the impression of infinite profundity.

If the mise en abyme deepens the narrative space of the novel and generates narrative by reproducing miniature replicas of the fable of the Goat-Boy, it also plays a subversive role which, for a writer like Barth, has its virtues. The use of an infinite number of mirrors undercuts the narrative flow of the overall plot and short-circuits it by revealing its denouement in advance. By depriving the fable of the Goat-Boy of its future, "Taliped Decanus" and the other mirrors become a narrative sabotage, or as Ricardou puts, a structural revolt against the overall story.[23] Barth, however, sacrifices the denouement of his novel in order to heighten irony and enrich his novel with the metaphorical layers that "Taliped Decanus" and its satellites create. Unlike traditional fiction where everything is determined by the supremacy of the denouement towards which everything must lead, Giles Goat-Boy, like the rest of Barth's novels, is open-ended and is more concerned with its own internal processes than it is with its unfolding. Thus, it is only fitting that Barth, in order to make the dramatization of

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[23] Ricardou, Problemes, 181.

the internal processes more interesting and enrich the narrative space of his novel, would insert a narrative enclave at the risk of prematurely revealing a denouement that he is hardly interested in the first place. The story of the Goat-Boy literally comes to a halt and yields the stage to the story of Oedipus, and the Goat-Boy immediately begins to interact with the play as if it were the dramatization of his own life. When Agenora (Jocasta) explains how she and her husband had Taliped's feet pegged before getting rid of him, the Goat-Boy exclaims in indignation, "That's a terrible thing to do! How could anybody do a thing like that?" (GGB. 268). The irony here is not lost on the reader who already suspects that the "terrible thing" that happened to baby Taliped might have happened to the Goat-Boy in his infancy and that his future life might also follow the same tragic course. The play also heightens irony in the novel to the extent that Taliped's botched career makes the reader immediately aware of the preposterousness of the Goat-Boy's Messianic claims and the futility of his attempts to redeem his University. By prematurely giving away the secret of the fable of the Goat-Boy, the play and its replications increase our awareness that the Goat-Boy's fate is inscribed in the tragedy of Taliped and that Taliped's curse is transferred to the Goat-Boy. We realize that Barth's hero is fighting against great odds exemplified not only in immediate obstacles and enemies such as WESCAC and Bray, but also in the archetype; that is, the

mise en abyme where his story has already been told.

The mise en abyme as it is used in Giles Goat-Boy is thus a highly ambivalent strategy. The endless replications of the main plot enlarge the scope of the novel and enrich it metaphorically, but they also deprive the plot of its anecdotal interest and hinder its narrative flow. If Barth's fourth novel palls at times and if the story of the Goat-Boy seriously tries our patience here and there, it is partly because its vertical stratification becomes an obstacle to its horizontal flow. In short, the novel benefits from the mise en abyme metaphorically but it loses metonymically. In this respect, what Roman Jakobson says about metaphor and metonymy applies to the mise en abyme and sheds some interesting light on the composition of Giles Goat-Boy:

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The METAPHORIC way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the METONYMIC way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively.[24]

Jakobson adds that:

> since on any verbal level--morphemic, lexical, syntactic, and phraseological--either of these two relations (similarity and contiguity) can appear--and each in either of two aspects, an impressive
>
> range of possible configuration is created. Either

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[24] Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," Language in Literature (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1987) 110.

of the two gravitational poles may prevail.[25] According to Jakobson's distinction between metonymy and metaphor, good fiction, if one may risk a generalization, is fiction which seeks a happy medium, metaphoric enough to have depth and metonymic enough to have fluidity. While the metonymic pole prevails, say, in The Sot-Weed Factor, it is the metaphoric pole which carries the day in Giles Goat-Boy. As I have argued in my previous chapter, what characterizes most the composition of The Sot-Weed Factor is contiguity, as the narrative thread is handed down from one character to another from the beginning of the novel until the end. In The Sot-Weed Factor, the chain of successive storytellers is the main generational device; whereas, in GilesGoat-Boy, it is the constant recasting of the same story and of the same character which generates narrative. The stories which constitute Barth's third novel are laid out horizontally and diacronically on a syntagmatic axis; the stories in Giles Goat-Boy are laid out vertically and synchronically on a paradigmatic one. Whereas a novel in which the metonymic pole dominates may flow all too easily at the risk of facile univocality, a novel with metaphoric dominance may be hampered by its own polysemic wealth. One suspects that it is this difference between the methods of composition governing the two novels that led a critic like Jac Tharpe to say quite

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[25] Jakobson, 111.

unsuspectingly that "In The Sot-Weed Factor, Barth gave up analysis for storytelling. In Giles, he combines analysis and storytelling."[26]

The ambivalent critical reaction to Giles Goat-Boy is to some extent understandable, for it is difficult to either simply "pass" the novel or "fail" it, as the Goat-Boy would put it. By using the mise en abyme Barth manages to generate endless metaphorical layers which invest the novel with density and depth, but its density and depth verge on the point of opaqueness. In other words, the metaphorical wealth of the novel reflects the prodigious power of its writer, but that same metaphorical wealth undermines its fluidity and hinders its flow. Although it is a "monumental" novel and shows the full measure of Barth's genuis, Giles suffers from the weight it carries. By letting its metaphoric pole get the better of its metonymic one, it succumbs to a narcissistic temptation and buckles under its own polysemic weight. The polysemic wealth produced by the various generative mechanisms at work in the novel becomes a ponderous burden. Barth who is, as Beverly Gross puts it, "longing to be put out of business,"[27] seems to have outclevered his own cleverness in playing "the game of mirrors." Yet, this novel is by no means to be easily shrugged off as a mere curiosity, an oddity in

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[26] Jac Tharpe, John Barth, 88-89.

[27] Beverly Gross, 57.

American literature. Giles will continue to elicit contradictory responses, will continue to intrigue, disturb, confound, and delight, but will not be simply dismissed. In short, it will always be thought of as a failed success or a triumphant failure.

CHAPTER 6

LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE AND METAPHORIC FRAMING

You say I am repeating/Something I have said
before. I shall say it again.

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

Much has been said about the cyclical structure of Lost in the Funhouse. With the one-page story, "Frame-Tale," and Barth's directions to cut and paste a portion of the page to form a Moebius strip, the cyclical structure of the book indeed stares one in the face, so much so that Barth's critics rushed to point out the significance of the frame-tale in Lost in the Funhouse. Barth the maximalist has here turned minimalist and has laid bare his devices to reveal the irreducible components of his own art. Carol Kyle sees the Moebius strip as an illustration of "the existential principle of absurdity" to the extent that it symbolizes "a journey that goes nowhere, a trip that ends at the point of departure."[1] Gerald Gillespie likewise mentions that "The opening 'Frame-Tale' of the cycle illustrates how radical is Barth's impulse to reduce phenomena to pattern."[2] Similarly Victor Vitanza argues convincingly that Barth "consciously composes fourteen stories which appear to be different, but which are in fact a repetition of the same story." [3]

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[1] Carol A. Kyle, "The Unity of Anatomy: The Structure of Barth's Lost in the Funhouse," Critique 13 (1972): 32.

[2] Gerald Gillespie, "Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse': Short Story Text in its Cyclic Context," Studies in Short Fiction 12 (1975): 225.

[3] Victor J. Vitanza, "The Novelist as Topologist: John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 19 (1977): 84. In my discussion of Lost in the Funhouse I am indebted to Vitanza's excellent essay.

Lost in the Funhouse does have a cyclical structure to the extent that "Night-Sea Journey," the first story in the series, is repeated and recapitulated over and over again and to the extent that the various protagonists are all the same protagonist appearing and reappearing over and over again under different disguises. But Lost in the Funhouse also reads as a Kunstlerroman in which Barth traces the development of his protagonist from embryo to adulthood and may well be described as being linear or horizontal in its development. Thus, the widely-held view that the structure of Barth's book is cyclical accounts for the vertical build-up of its metaphorical layers created by the repetition of the same story and the same themes while it ignores its horizontal, metonymic development.

An examination of Lost in the Funhouse in the light of Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphoric and metonymic discourse explains more accurately Barth's book because it accounts for its double movement. In other words, Jakobson's bipolarization of discourse is an appropriate way of approaching Barth's fifth novel because it accounts for its metaphorical development, and hence the vertical framing which governs its composition, as well as its metonymic or horizontal development--the two axes which intersect to make the masterpiece that Lost in the Funhouse is.

A brief summary of Jakobson's views on metaphor and metonymy as expressed in his seminal essay "Two Aspects of

Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" will provide us with a theoretical basis for the discussion of Lost in the Funhouse. Jakobson begins by describing aphasia in the following terms:

> Every form of aphasic disturbance consists in some impairment, more or less severe, of the faculty either for selection and substitution or for combination and contexture. The former affliction involves a deterioration of metalinguistic operations, while the latter damages the capacity for maintaining the hierarchy of linguistic units. The relation of similarity is suppressed in the former, the relation of contiguity in the latter type of aphasia. Metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to the contiguity disorder.[4]

Jakobson reports the case of a similarity-impaired patient who, presented with the picture of a compass, broke in a desperate babble, "yes, it's a...I know what it belongs to, but I cannot recall the technical expression...yes... direction...to show direction...a magnet points to the north" (103). On the other hand, an aphasic with "contiguity disorder," loses "the ability to propositionize or, generally speaking, to combine simpler linguistic entities into more complex units" and reduces language to "a mere word heap" (106). To use the example that Jakobson cites, a contiguity-impaired person would use, "spyglass for microscope or fire for gaslight" (107). Jakobson's distinction between the two

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[4] Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," Language in Literature (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1987) 109. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

types of aphasia is significant because it also applies to narrative discourse.

Jakobson's essay transposes the distinction between metaphor and metonymy from the level of verbal utterance to the level of narrative discourse. For a writer it is not aphasia which determines the prevalence of one pole over the other but either the writer's own predilection for one trope over the other or submission to the prevailing zeitgeist. However, the same binary relation determines narrative discourse, as Jakobson tells us:

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. (110)

Jakobson applies his classification of discourse to a variety of genres and modes. Drama and poetry are generally metaphoric, and fiction is usually metonymic. As he notes, "The principle of similarity underlies poetry"; whereas, "prose, on the contrary, is forwarded essentially by contiguity" (114). However, poetry itself may be either predominantly metaphoric or predominantly metonymic: "In Russian lyrical songs, for example, metaphoric constructions predominate, while in the heroic epics the metonymic way is preponderant" (111). In the same way some literary movements

such as Romanticism, Symbolism, and Modernism tend to be metaphoric, while realism tends to be metonymic.

In terms of Jakobson's categories, the metaphorical pull is much stronger than the metonymic in Lost in the Funhouse. The themes developed in "Ambrose His Mark" through "Anonymiad" are metaphorical variations on the same themes introduced in "Night-Sea Journey," the first full-fledged story in the series. In each story Barth crystallizes his themes in a single image which becomes a metaphor for the problems besetting his characters. Because the images which accumulate are all emblematic of the same problems Barth's narrators and protagonists contend with, they build up on a paradigmatic axis to make up a work of fiction, which is, in terms of Jakobson's typology, dominated by its metaphoric pull. Tracing out this line of development which will demonstrate the way in which the first story is endlessly repeated in different disguises necessarily involves a certain amount of repetition. Repetition is in fact inevitable in the examination of a book whose very composition is governed by the principle of reenactment.

An appropriate place to begin a discussion of the metaphorical axis of Lost in the Funhouse is with an insightful comment that David Lodge makes on King Lear:

> In the storm scene of Lear, for instance--one of the peaks of Shakespeare's dramatic achievement--there is no linear progress: Nothing happens, really, except that the characters juggle with similarities and contrasts between the weather and human life,

> between appearances and realities. And it is not only in Lear that the chain of sequentiality and causality in Shakespearean tragedy proves under scrutiny to be curiously insubstantial.[5]

In "Night-Sea Journey," the only short story in the history of literature narrated by a spermatozoan, nothing really happens either, except Barth's juggling with similarities and contrasts and his building up of metaphors upon metaphors. One need only look at the first few paragraphs to notice the densely metaphoric construction of this brilliant story. Metaphors pile up to create the false impression that something is really happening when the only movement is metaphoric, vertiginously paradigmatic, whereby a series of verbs are substituted for the two main verbs, "to swim" and "to drown," the key words which advance the story. The whole story is reducible to Barth's juggling with the notions of swimming and drowning, which are respectively metaphoric for, among other things, living and dying. In other words, to swim or not to swim is the only question around which the story revolves. By means of selection and substitution, the two activities that any construction of metaphors must by necessity involve, Barth spins quite a story. It is advanced by similarity or by contrast between the two verbs, and the constellation of verbs which constitute its semantic field are

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[5] David Lodge, Metaphor and Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Writing (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 19777) 82. Subsequent references to this edition appear between parentheses in the text.

either synonymous with "to swim" or "to drown" or variations thereof. From beginning to end, the sperm is thus either "swimming," "journeying," "floating," "churning," "thrashing," "struggling," "surging forth," "tailing along," "surviving," "splashing," "making waves," "staying afloat," "milling," "gliding," or "hurtling forth," which really all amount to the same thing. On the other hand, in his philosophical ruminations, the sperm considers the possibility of "drowning," "sinking," "going under," "expiring," "departing," "gulping his last," "perishing," "giving up," "croaking," or "terminating his puny existence." The two contrasting sets of verbs are a clear indication of the extent to which the story relies on the irreducible binary opposition of life and death. All these verbs, and in fact all the sea imagery that predominates in "Night-Sea Journey," operate on the metaphoric axis of language as they entertain with one another a relationship of similarity or contrast rather than one of contiguity, to use Jakobson's terms. Each set of verbs convey the same meanings. Because of the story's paradigmatic structure, action gives way to reflection.

Yet, strangely enough, in this static deep sea of metaphors, one senses when one reads the last lines of the story that a lot has occurred. What creates this effect is Barth's ingenious distribution of the nautical imagery, the way the same verb moves from one semantic field to another to create another layer of meaning. A verb, which in its initial

linguistic environment has a literal meaning, takes on a metaphorical meaning in another context and creates another linguistic register. Hence, the physical activity of floating in "then, I float exhausted and dispirited, brood upon the night, the sea, the journey, while the flood bears me a measure back and down"[6] later takes up residence in another semantic field: "it were a miracle if sanity stayed afloat" (L.F. 9). The literal flood becomes "a flood of joy" (L.F. 11); the sperm's physical strokes become "strokes of genius" (L.F. 5) in another context. Barth also uses puns to telescope two meanings and thereby creates new metaphorical layers in his text. The sperm's journey becomes, among other things, the writer's journey into his art and his struggle with the problematics of writing. The pun becomes obvious when the sperm questions the merit of "tailing along in conventional fashion" (L.F. 6) or skeptically wonders whether his Maker "might well be no swimmer Himself at all, but some sort of monstrosity, perhaps even tailless" (L.F. 7).

Barth's handling of metaphor is so skillful that the story of the sperm's night-sea journey, itself quite unusual, has the potential to become a series of intertwined stories, endlessly framing one another. One might initially read the story as the journey of a sperm towards the ovum, and then

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[6] John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse (New York: Putnam, 1969) 3. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

start over again and read it as the tale of a ship-wrecked sailor, a latter-day Odysseus contending with the fury of the elements and brooding upon his destiny. Another reading might take the story as an account of a lovers' quarrel or a love-hate relationship between a disgruntled crank of a lover ("Stop your hearing against her song! Hate love!") and an all too willing "Per who summons, singing...'Love! Love! Love!'" (L.F. 12). Nor would it be inappropriate to read the story as the dramatization of the metaphysical reflections of a skeptic, who in iconoclastic moments thinks that the Father, the Maker, "might be stupid, malicious, insensible, perverse, or asleep and dreaming" (L.F. 7). The story also reads as a paradigm of existence with its up and downs, the lament of a world-weary existentialist who ponders the randomness and the contingency of it all, who is aware that "the thoughtful swimmer's choices, then, they say, are two: give over thrashing and go under for good or embrace the absurdity; affirm in and for itself the night-sea journey" (L.F. 5). To appreciate the metaphorical stratification and the polysemic wealth of "Night-Sea Journey" one has to realize that almost every line hides beneath its apparent literal meaning other metaphorical layers. The beauty of this story partly lies in its combination of several linguistic registers. These registers are to be sure all familiar to us; the speculations are commonplace, but spoken by a sperm, they are revitalized,

defamiliarized, and acquire a strange and an unsettling quality.

In "Seven Additional Author's Notes," Barth points out that

> The narrator of "Night-Sea Journey," quoted from beginning to end by the authorial voice, is not, as many reviewers took him to be, a fish. If he were, their complaint that his eschatological and other speculations are trite would be entirely justified, given his actual nature, they are merely correct, and perhaps illumine certain speculations of Lord Raglan, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell. (x)

If indeed the narrator were a fish, the story would be at best clever and funny in the way a Monty Python movie is clever and funny, but Barth's unusual narrator, being the irreducible drop of existence that it is, endows the story with a much more profound significance. The talking sperm is a fitting illustration of Barth's idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny and cosmogeny. The sperm is microcosmic of the whole of existence; his voice is the voice of us all, and his journey, a biologically instantaneous one, is the journey of all humanity. To the extent that it is microcosmic, the sperm is an appropriate analogue to the structure of Lost in the Funhouse, which is determined by the repetition and recapitulation of the same story.

"Night-Sea Journey," not to mention the whole book, is an illustration of the opening one-page story, "Frame-Tale" to the extent that the reader exhausts one layer only to be sent back to the beginning to exhaust the second one, and perhaps

the third, and the fourth, etc. All cryptic, heavily metaphorical texts which require more than one reading surreptitiously force the reader to engage in an activity which potentially involves an infinite regress. Edgar Knapp's warning relates to the title piece, "Lost in the Funhouse," but it quite appropriately applies to "Night-Sea Journey" as well and, for that matter, to all the other pieces in the book: "You cannot read 'Lost in the Funhouse' simply for the fun of it. Read it three times: once, to get knocked off your feet, again to regain your balance; and then to be knocked down again. Perhaps a fourth time...for the fun of it."[7] "Night-Sea Journey" is perhaps less of a a knockout than "Lost in the Funhouse," because it is more conventional, more straightforward, at least to the extent that anything in this very experimental collection is straightforward, but it is nonetheless thickly stratified and is paradigmatic of the metaphorical, vertical framing which governs the composition of Lost in the Funhouse.

Interestingly enough, one of the "mad notions" that the sperm rehearses is that the swimmers are part of an "immortality-chain," a "cyclic process of incarnation" with "cycles within cycles" (L.F. 8). This is of course a metaphorical description of the biological fact of procreation, but it is also an apt description of the method

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[7] Edgar H. Knapp, "Found in the Barthhouse: Novelist as Saviour," Modern Fiction Studies 14 (1968-9): 183.

that governs the composition of Lost in the Funhouse. At the end of the journey, when the shore is in sight, the sperm hopes that his progeny will be avatars of himself:

> Mad as it may be, my dream is that some unimaginable embodiment of myself (or myself plus Her if that's how it must be) will come to find itself expressing, in however garbed or radical a translation, some reflection of these reflections. (L.F. 12)

The sperm's mad dream will come true as his concerns and preoccupations will find echo in the twelve pieces that follow and as the subsequent characters and narrators, made in the sperm's image, will grapple with the same problems: contending with troubled waters of their own. The same paradigms, the same motifs, the same symbols run through the whole book, with the difference that in each story, they are conveyed in a different metaphorical guise. The ovum, the shore towards which the sperm is swimming, symbolizing the sperm's phobias and uncertainties, fear and attraction, fulfilment and denial, eternity and annihilation, will become Andrea's bosom in "Ambrose His Mark." In "Water Message" it becomes the Jungle of Ambrose's boyhood; the funhouse in the title story "Lost in the Funhouse," the cave and the pool in "Echo," an island in "Anonymiad," and so on and so on. Each new metaphor adds a new layer, adds depth to the book as a whole, and the upshot is a dizzyingly vertical stratification and an abysmal structure.

"Ambrose His Mark," which is written in the best modernist mode, is a clear indication that had Barth chosen to

perpetuate the tradition of his direct forbears, he would have excelled at it. With its insidiously sardonic humour and its graceful prose, on the one hand, and with its dissolute, depraved and crazed characters on the other, the story reads as a cross between the James Joyce of Dubliners and William Faulkner.

"Ambrose His Mark" reiterates the themes dramatized in "Night-Sea Journey." The sins and signs of the fathers are visited upon their children. Indeed, the sperm's suspicion that he "may be the sole survivor of this fell journey, tale-bearer of a generation," (L.F. 9) turns out to be true, and his meeting with the mysterious Her ushers to life baby Ambrose, who inherits the sperm's "private legacy of awful recollection and negative resolve" (L.F. 11). The sperm's crise d'identite, his ontological questionings as he wonders "Do I myself exist, or is this a dream?" (L.F. 3), and his doubts about the value and purpose of his journey all come to plague Ambrose. Everything in the story casts doubt on baby Ambrose's identity and parentage. His lascivious wench of a mother is renowned for her "wanton spirit" (L.F. 20) and is all too willing to expose her physical "bounty" to neighbours and passersby. Ambrose's wily and pugnacious grandfather delights in pinching his daughter-in-law where he should not, and Uncle Karl, known as an indiscriminating bon vivant, waits hand and foot on Ambrose's mother. As for Ambrose's father, he is in "the crazy-house" for reasons not unrelated to

Ambrose's birth according to rumours. Because of the circumstances surrounding his birth into a family of eccentrics, the baby's baptism is "delayed, postponed, anon forgot" (L.F. 14). Before his family settles for the name "Ambrose," he is called for a long time "Honig," "Thomas," "Christine," and what not.

The mother's bosom is linked with the ovum in the previous story insofar as they both operate as metaphors for the narrator's ambiguous and conflicting feelings towards love and his confusion of identity. The ovum, the recipient of love, provides the sperm with an identity, the raison d'etre of his journey, but since he reaches the ovum and fulfills his destiny only to be transfigured into another entity who is not quite himself and not quite another, the ovum is also the annihilator of identity. The baby's relationship with his mother's breast is just as problematical. When the swarm of bees attacks them, Andrea's bare bosoms and Ambrose's "squalling face--all were buried in the golden swarm" (L.F. 23). Hence, the mother's bosom, which is Ambrose's "fount of...sustenance" (L.F. 29), turns into a trap that "might suffocate" him (L.F. 23) and annihilate his identity.

The question of identity in "Ambrose His Mark," as in the rest of the book, is a serious epistemological question and involves a huge irony. The baby's "namelessness" seemingly ends after the swarming incident:

"Look here," said Uncle Konrad. "Call him Ambrose."

> "Ambrose?"
> "Sure Ambrose." Quite serious now, he brushed back with his hand his straight blond hair and regarded Mother gravely. "Saint Ambrose had the same thing happen when he was a baby. All these bees swarmed on his mouth while he was asleep in his father's yard, and everybody said he'd grow up to be a great speaker." (L.F. 31)

The birthmark, the significance of which is confirmed by the swarm of bees, ostensibly suggests that Ambrose has a name that is cut out for him and that his identity is as solid as rock, but Ambrose's identity remains in fact as elusive and as insubstantial as ever. The name that seemed tailor-cut for him ironically will never become a marker of a stable identity, as his "surname was preceded by a blank" for a long time (L.F. 32). The same randomness and arbitrariness that destines the sperm for his mission as the unlucky carrier of the heritage also thrusts on Ambrose a mission that he will not fully live up to. Baby Ambrose will never be as eloquent as Saint Ambrose. He is destined to have the type of literary sensibility that needs to trade eloquence for a parole exigente. He will be a writer in a self-conscious postmodern age, an age of suspicion, as Nathalie Sarraute would have it, and will painstakingly agonize over his writing. Aware of the arbitrariness involved in his naming, and knowing that he and his sign "are neither one nor quite two," he will feel "complexly toward the name he is called by," and "will wonder at that moniker, relish and revile it" (L.F. 32).

The Saussurean view of language, particularly the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign which is the Trojan Horse of structuralists, becomes in Barth's hand an epistemological question of devastating implications. The mere name "Ambrose" will not provide the narrator with an identity and will remain "a beast, ungraspable, most queer, pricked up in [his] soul's crannies" (L.F. 32). For years Ambrose's "surname was preceded by a blank," a blank that Ambrose the-would-be artist will struggle to fill in. Barth once again points to the ontological implications of writing. Nothing, not a birthmark, not the bees which swarm around his face, will provide Ambrose with an identity; only writing mirrors the possibility of a true ontological status. If Scheherazade narrated herself out of death, Ambrose will have to narrate himself into existence.

"Water Message" provides us with further metaphorical representations of the themes dealt with in the previous stories. At this stage, as metaphors start building up, the paradigmatic structure of the book becomes more and more obvious. The sperm's shore and Andrea's bosom amidst the cluster of bees are transformed into the Jungle that fires Ambrose's imagination, provides him with so much mystery and excitement, and embodies both his hopes and fears. With its "labyrinth of intersecting footpaths," its "winding paths and secret places," and its "voluptuous fetidity," the Jungle is "the most exciting place" Ambrose knows (L.F. 46) and the

private cabalistic universe of his fertile and fabulistic imagination. Like all Barth's characters, the fourth grader has a fascination with mazes and labyrinths, which foreshadows the future writer's propensity for labyrinthine narrative constructions. Like the secret Her and the mother's bosom, the Jungle too reveals the protagonist's ambivalence towards sexual experience. As we are told, it contains the cave where Ambrose and the other boys intrude upon Peggy Robbins and the sailor Tommy James involved in activities too mysterious for the fourth grader to understand. The Jungle is also the place where Ambrose enacts his imaginary love scenes with the much-older Peggy Robbins. Not only does the scene that he imagines having with Peggy Robbins reflect the conflicting poles of Ambrose's nature, but it also indicates that the incipient fabulator is already given to imagining narrative versions, alternative ways of telling a story.

Interestingly enough, Ambrose's sexual problems are superseded by his discovery of "a perfectly amazing thing" (L.F. 52), the bottle with a message inside that the ocean brings him:

> Ambrose's heart shook. For the moment Scylla and Charybdis, the Occult Order, his brother Peter--all were forgotten. Peggy Robbins, too, though she did not vanish altogether from his mind's eye, was caught up into the greater vision, vague and splendrous, whereof the sea-wreathed bottle was an emblem. (L.F. 52)

The bottle with its message is another metaphorical variation on a theme already at work in the earlier stories. In "Night-

Sea Journey," the sperm, "both vessel and content" (L.F. 3), is the only one destined to reach the shore and deliver its message. In "Ambrose His Mark," Ambrose, with the birthmark on his temple, is, in his family's eyes at least, destined for glory, a marked man chosen by fate to be "a great speaker" or a great sage. The bottle in "Water Message" is another confirmation of his special destiny, the symbolic import of which he is fully aware. The message, "the word [that] had wandered willy-nilly to his threshold" (L.F. 52), fills him with exhilaration and provides him with a strong sense of mission. Usually wimpish, Ambrose shows exceptional determination to keep what has been meant to be his. When his boisterous friend, Perse, tries to dispossess him of his oracle, Ambrose holds it out of reach and sends "him flying onto the sand" (L.F. 53).

The message, however, contains only the heading "To Whom it May Concern" and the closing formula "Yours Truly." It contains no text and no signature; "the lines between were blank, as was the space beneath the complimentary close" (L.F. 53). Once again, the notion of blankness is used as a metaphor for the relationship between identity and narrative. Once again, Ambrose is called upon to fill in the blank, to fulfill the task that will invest him with an identity. Like his forbear, Stephen Dedalus, he sees the value of his discovery, as his "spirit bore new and subtle burdens" (L.F. 53). Also, his observation that "those shiny bits in the

paper's texture were splinters of wood pulp," already prefigures the kind of artist he will be; a self-conscious artist who will be as much interested in the medium as in the message.

In the title story, "Lost in the Funhouse," Barth further develops his central themes, thereby adding another metaphorical layer to the book, the texture of which gets thicker and thicker as we go along. Like the ovum, the mother's bosom, and the jungle in the previous stories, the funhouse operates as a metaphor for the sphere of Ambrose's difficulties with love, his ineptitude, and his ambiguous feelings towards experience. When lost in the mazes of the funhouse Ambrose draws the analogy between his condition and that of the sperm, between the ovum and the funhouse, by speculating about how spermatozoa must "grope through hot, dark windings, past Love's Tunnel's obstacles" and how "Some perhaps lose their way" (L.F. 77). Whereas the funhouse is a pleasure-dip for others, for Ambrose it is "a place of fear and confusion" (L.F. 69). With its "corners and corridors" (L.F. 76) laden with "black-thread cobwebs" (L.F. 87) and its labyrinthine and treacherous mazes, the funhouse is also appropriately the reflection of the intricate and complex workings of the mind of a hypersensitive, bespectacled, "athletically and socially inept" teenager in the throes of adolescence (L.F. 84). Like Jacob Horner's "entire dizzy circus of history," which is nothing "but a fancy mating

dance," ruled by "The Absolute Genital" (E.R. 87), the funhouse is also teeming with libidinal energy. For Ambrose "The shluppish whisper" of copulation is "the whole point" of the funhouse. Ambrose, who dreams the dream of every voyeur, intimates that

> If you had X-ray eyes and could see everything going on at that instant under the boardwalk and in all the hotel rooms and cars and alleyways, you'd realize that all that normally showed, like restaurants and dance halls and clothing and test-your-strength machines, was merely preparation and intermission. (L.F. 86)

Like Robbe-Grillet's jealous husband in La Jalousie, Ambrose can only sit back and watch himself watching Peter, his happy-go-lucky brother, who "didn't have one-tenth the imagination he had" (L.F. 80) while he is horsing around with his girl-friend Magda, whose body was, as Ambrose repeatedly observes, "exceedingly well developed for her age" (L.F. 79). Ambrose recalls playing at "Niggers and Masters" with mischievous Magda, who once "purchased clemency at a surprising price set by herself" (L.F. 74). Even then he could not allow himself to be transported by love:

> But though he had breathed heavily, groaned as if ecstatic, what he'd really felt throughout was an odd detachment, as though some one else was Master. Strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: This is what they call passion. I am experiencing it.(L.F. 81)

Barth once again reiterates an old predicament which afflicts most of his characters. In a tug-of-war between love and art, the latter always carries the day. Indeed, in this incident

Magda's attempts to ravish him meet only with "awed impersonality" (L.F. 74). While the young temptress is at work, Ambrose's attention is drawn to a label on a cigar-box in which his uncle keeps his stone-cutting paraphernalia. He stands there deciphering the words on the label and observing the minutiae of a picture of a "laureled, loose-toga'd lady," sitting beside "a five-stringed lyre" (L.F. 74). Surely, the muse that would touch the strings of Ambrose's soul is not meant to be a woman of flesh and blood, but the representation of a "loose-toga'd" one from olden times. Ambrose is divided, torn between the demands of art and the lure of experience. The funhouse, with its distorting mirrors that split one's image into an infinite number of images, provides an apt metaphor for Ambrose's split identity and the contradictory and warring claims vying for his loyalty:

> You think you're yourself, but there are other persons in you. Ambrose gets hard when Ambrose doesn't want to, and obversely. Ambrose watches them disagree; Ambrose watches him watch. In the funhouse mirror-room you can't see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see. (L.F. 81)

The funhouse turns out to be an ordeal that confirms in Ambrose's mind that mermaids sing only to the likes of Peter and the "wily little Seaman" who get "closer to Magda in thirty seconds than Ambrose had got in thirteen years" (L.F. 78). Ambrose, "smitten with self-contempt" (L.F. 87), decides

to take the labyrinth of art, which will prove no less arduous than the maze of experience:

> He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator--though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed. (L.F. 94)

The funhouse indeed operates as a double metaphor insofar as it is at the same time metaphoric for Ambrose's confusion "at that awkward age" and for his loss of direction in the maze of his narrative. Ambrose gets lost in, of all places, the scaffolding of the funhouse. Whereas everybody is happy to be enjoying the content of the funhouse, Ambrose accidently reaches the mechanism that makes it work, its "open fuse box," its "wooden levers and ropes," and its operator, "the small old man, in appearance not unlike [Barth's emphasis] the photographs at home of Ambrose's late grandfather" (L.F. 84). Barth establishes here a parallel between the situation of Ambrose the character and Ambrose the narrator. The narrator is as lost in the meanders of his story as the character is in the mechanism of the funhouse. The fictional character takes mental note of the mechanism, the scaffolding of the funhouse, much as the fictional narrator does of the processes of his story. The funhouse Ambrose visits is the very story Ambrose writes. The medium is the message all over again. The story thus involves a double process. It is about a day in the life of Ambrose at the funhouse and about the writing of a story

about a day in the life of Ambrose at the funhouse. Like the funhouse, the story too "winds around on itself like a whelk shell" (L.F. 80), alternating between narrating the drudgery of a day in Atlantic City and checking, revising, and criticizing its own processes.

Ambrose's story reads as if it were the work of a narrator on the run who, in his confusion and panic, mixes the final version of his story with his notes, jotted down when he set out in quieter times to write his story. The narrator has left his tools in the body of his story. Overwhelmed by the inexhaustible linguistic and narrative possibilities and unable to choose one version over another, he seems to have resolved his conundrum by lumping all versions together, thus postponing the final choice that is never to be made. The story is fraught with constructions such as, "At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever" (L.F. 75), or contradictory versions of events, "naturally he didn't have nerve enough to ask Magda to go through the funhouse with him. With incredible nerve and to everyone's surprise he invited Magda, quietly and politely, to go through the funhouse with him" (L.F. 86).

The different plot lines and narrative strands in "Lost in the Funhouse" would make up a novel or a collection of short stories if they were all traced to their dens. The narrator, who paradoxically suffers from the writer's block and who declares that "something has gone wrong" (L.F. 83),

peels off one narrative layer after another, mirrors one narrative possibility only to dismiss it in its incipient stage, and then mirrors another without ever settling for any one version in particular. For this "mad" narrator, one plot is as good as another. To end his story with a dramatic twist, he considers employing "A tidal wave; an enemy air raid; a monster-crab swelling like an island from the sea," and then stumbles into still further possibilities:

> One possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across another lost person in the dark. They match their wits together against the funhouse, struggle like Ulysses past obstacle after obstacle, help and encourage each other. Or a girl. By the time they found the exit they'd be closest friends, sweethearts if it were a girl; they'd know each other's inmost souls, be bound together by the cement of shared adventure [Barth's emphasis]; then they'd emerge into the light and it would turn out that his friend was a Negro. A blind girl. President Roosevelt's son. Ambrose's former archenemy. (L.F. 83)

The narrator will eventually settle for the least sensational ending of all, an anticlimactic ride back home.

The narrator displays his knowledge of the tricks and the niceties of conventional writing, but cannot help transgressing them. He is aware that a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, that the action should develop in accordance with Freitag's Triangle, and that in "a short story about Ocean City, Maryland, during World War II, the author should carefully establish the time and setting," but he will have none of this in his own story. In its self-conscious subversion of fictional conventions, "Lost in the

Funhouse" both illustrates and attempts to find a cure for literary exhaustion as Barth views it. Seeing no use in writing another conventional Bildungsroman or Kunstlerroman, Barth "confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (F.B. 69-70). And this he achieves by writing a story about the difficulty of writing in such conventional fictional modes in our age. Since there is nothing "more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents" (L.F. 88), why not cash in on this sorry state of affairs by writing a story that basically explains why it has become so tiresome to write a story about "the problems of sensitive adolescents" and by so doing convert a liability into an asset.

Insofar as it dramatizes the same problems that all Barth's narrators are confronted with, "Lost in the Funhouse" is one more tier in Barth's heavily metaphorical book. This story skilfully blends the sentimental and artistic problems of the narrator and treats them with more depth and more thoroughness than any other story in the series. Yet, if the themes Barth has been working with are entrenched more profoundly here, they remain in essence the same themes dealt with in the previous stories. Also, the metaphor of the funhouse around which the story revolves is in its intent very much akin to the metaphors of the ovum, the mother's bosom, and the jungle in the earlier stories. Barth rehearses the same themes in the remaining stories by either deepening the

import of the metaphors developed in the previous stories or by fashioning new ones which have the same intent.

Unlike most of the stories, which are "exhaustion-stricken" and overwhelmed by the crippling self-consciousness of their narrators, "Petition" is voluble and effusive. Here Barth unleashes the verbal energy that is held in check through much of Lost in the Funhouse. However, if it is different from the other stories in its outpourings, it is not in its themes. It too deals with the plague of self-consciousness, with disjointed identity and irreconcilable conflicts. If Ambrose complains that he and his "sign are neither one nor quite two," the narrator of "Petition" voices the same complaint when he blurts out "To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither is unspeakable" (L.F. 68). The two irreconcilably different Siamese twin brothers are reminiscent of Ambrose and his brother Peter. Like Ambrose, the narrator, one of the Siamese twins, who addresses his petition to the visiting king of Siam, "Possessor of the Four-and-Twenty Golden Umbrellas," is "by nature withdrawn, even solitary: an observer of life, a meditator, a taker of notes, a dreamer if you will" (L.F. 59). Like Peter, the narrator's twin brother is "ignorant but full of guile" and "indulges in hobbies; pursues ambitions and women" (L.F. 59). "Petition" is also based on the eternal triangle; the relationship between the Siamese twins and Thalia the contortionist is very much like the one between

Ambrose, Peter, and Magda. The earthly and gregarious twin brother does "all the clipping"; whereas, the introverted narrator has to resort to "surrogate gratifications" (L.F. 62). The brutish, bullying twin brother is the suffering narrator's alter ego, the Ambrose who "gets hard when Ambrose doesn't want to," the instinctual side of his nature, which is at war with the more ethereal, artistic, and Platonic side.

As Michael Hinden explains, "The next seven stories turn increasingly from a perspective on the problems of the artist as an individual to a perspective on the problems of his art."[8] In other words, in such stories as "Autobiography," "Echo," and "Life-Story," there is more emphasis on the aesthetic problems of narrators than on their sentimental difficulties. But despite this shift in emphasis, Barth's narrators and imaginary authors grapple with the same issues, suffer the same pains, and have the same story to tell as Ambrose, the neophyte author. In a way Barth is still writing the same story over and over again as if he were afraid of being struck by thunder if he were to stop speaking. The narrator of "Title" defines the metaphorical method of composition that governs Lost in the Funhouse when he says,

> Very well: to write this allegedly ultimate story is a form of artistic fill in the blank, or an artistic form of same, if you like. I don't. What I mean is, same idea in other terms. The storyteller's alternatives, as far as I can see, are

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[8] Michael Hinden, "Lost in the Funhouse: Barth's Use of the Recent Past," Critical Essays on John Barth, 196.

> a series of last words, like an aging actress making one farewell appearance after another, or actual blank. And I mean literally fill in the blank. (L.F. 108)

The infinite regress, the compulsion to end a story only to go back to its beginning to retell it "in other terms," is, as Barth suggests, a cure for self-consciousness and exhaustion and is therefore an antidote to silence and non-existence.

"Autobiography" occupies a significant position in Lost in the Funhouse. By placing a story dealing exclusively with the problems of writing between "Ambrose His Mark" and "Water Message," Barth indicates that the problems of his adolescents parallel those of his narrators. Although "Autobiography" is the story of a story in the process of self-composition and is therefore "self-consciousness pure and sour," it speaks about itself in the same way as have the spermatozoa, Ambrose, the freakish Siamese twin. Like the sperm, the story does not "recall asking to be conceived"; it was born by chance, as "the odds against [its] conception were splendid; against [its] birth excellent" (L.F. 33). It describes itself as "freakish, even monstrous," and it too suffers from "a little crise d'identité." It is beset by self-doubt and is given to self-contempt, "I doubt I am. Being me's no joke" (L.F. 35). The relationship the story entertains with its author is as strained as the relationship between the spermatozoa and its maker, Ambrose and his father, and the Siamese twins. Seeing "no point in going further," it begs its author to put an end

to its misery: "Wretched old fabricator, where's your shame? Put an end to this, for pity's sake! Now! Now!" (L.F. 36). Having failed to convince its creator, it grudgingly decides to "mutter to the end, one word after another" (L.F. 37).

"Echo" quite appropriately ends with the narrator admitting that "Our story's finished before it starts" (L.F. 100). "Echo" is indeed an apology and a rationale for the metaphorical stratification that characterizes Lost in the Funhouse. In this "disengendered tale," where "none can tell teller from told," the narrative voice insists that "the tale's the same" (L.F. 98) and instructs that "One should, if it's worthwhile repeat the tale" (L.F. 97). The myth of Echo must appeal to Barth for the same reasons the story of Scheherazade appeals to him, as it is another fictional paradigm symbolic of the art that Barth has chosen to practice. Like her counterpart Scheherazade, Echo, with her "tongue-tried tales," is another wordsmith and a victimized one at that, who did not fare as well as her sister from the Arabian Nights. She was invested with a laureateship by Zeus only to find herself divested by Zeus's wife of both the honour and the talent that earned her the honour: "Zeus unpunishable, Echo pays. Though her voice remains her own, she can't speak for herself thenceforth, only give back others' delight regardless of hers" (L.F. 97).

The story of Echo and its potential as a parable of the contemporary writer could not be lost on a fabulator like

Barth. In the present state of literary affairs, the storyteller, like his archetypal counterpart, is bound to repeat past works by parodying them with the hope that in the process he might achieve something new. As the narrator of "Echo" puts it, "a cure for self-absorption is saturation: telling the story over as though it were another's until like a much-repeated word it loses sense" (L.F. 95). Significantly enough, by repeating Narcissus's words, Echo ends up sending a different message,

> I can't go on.
> Go on.
> Is there anyone to hear here?
> Who are you?
> You.
> I?
> Aye.

Apart from being itself an illustration of the metaphorical construction of Lost in the Funhouse, "Echo" also revolves around metaphors similar to those of the previous stories. The Thespian cave which Narcissus "stumbles into one forenoon in flight from his admirers" (L.F. 95) and the spring at Donacan where he fatally discovers his lovely face belong to the same family of metaphors as do the Shore, the Jungle, and the Funhouse. Like Ambrose, who recoils on himself in the labyrinth of the funhouse, Narcissus, for whom "snares are laid," also "shivers, draws farther in, loses bearings, daresn't [sic] call, weeps" (L.F. 95) when he enters the dark cave. The spring that undoes Narcissus is also an appropriate metaphor in a collection of narcissistic fictions fraught with

self-conscious and solipsistic characters and narrators. The spring that divides Narcissus's identity is as treacherous as the distorting mirrors of the funhouse.

"Title" rehearses the same themes and contributes another metaphorical layer to Lost in the Funhouse. The narrator of "Title" declares in utter weariness of and disgust with his art, "What now. Everything's been said already, over and over; I'm as sick of this as you are; there's nothing to say. Say nothing." But like the other narrators, he goes on filling in the blank with the "Same old story" (L.F. 103). The old duality of art and experience is still a haunting concern. The narrator regrets the time when love and writing were both a pleasure-dip, "bygone days when life made a degree of sense and subject joined to complement by copula" (L.F. 105). The pun on "copula" is a clever one as it telescopes the two aspects of the problem and suggests that problems with love and those of writing are really one and the same problem. Because of his sexual problems, the narrator of "Title" has turned into a misogynist: "Every woman has a blade concealed in the neighborhood of her garters. So disarm her, so to speak, don't geld yourself" (L.F. 108). He is also battling with his narrative that refuses to be and is thus coping with the fear of both physical and artistic emasculation. Or rather, his fear of artistic emasculation is symbolic of his fear of physical emasculation, parallel forms of annihilation, non-existence, death.

"Title," more than any other story in the series, is Barth's "Literature of Exhaustion" fictionalized. Both the story and the essay were written in 1967, a time when, at least for Barth, apocalyptic social and political events contaminated artistic life. "The world," as the narrator declares, "might end before this sentence," and "Things have been kaput for sometime" (L.F. 105). What the character says in the story is similar to what Barth says in his essay: "You tell me it's self-defeating to talk about it [writing] instead of just up and doing it; but to acknowledge what I'm doing while I'm doing it is exactly the point" (L.F. 107). However, the difference between the story and the essay is that the narrator is skeptical about the very solutions to exhaustion that he posits. In other words, Barth-as-storyteller seems to be grappling with Barth the critic, by telling him that it is all nice in theory to "turn ultimacy against itself to make something new and valid," but in practice it is a difficult endeavour: "the demise of the novel and short story, he went on to declare, needn't be the end of narrative art, nor need the dissolution of a used-up blank fill in the blank. The end of one road might be the beginning of another. Much good that'll do me" (L.F. 106).

"Life-Story" brings a new element into the equation of writing--the "hypocrite lecteur, mon frere, mon semblable," as Baudelaire would have it. The reader, who has been until now spared the invectives of Barth's angry and frustrated

narrators, now becomes the object of wrath: "The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction" (L.F. 123). The relationship between "teller, tale, told" is an ontological one insofar as the existence of the one is dependent on the other the way Scheherazade's life is on King Shahryar, the most ruthless of readers. The narrator's onslaught on the reader then is a kind of plea for mercy. If in "Life-Story" the reader is dragged in explicitly for the first time, the issues dealt with have not changed, and the story is one more slice of the metaphorical construction of the book. The infinite regressus of a writer, who thinks he is a fictional character, writing about a writer, who in turn is writing about a writer, writing about a writer ad nauseam, is symbolic of the abysmal structure of the book. In this narrative configuration of fictions within fictions within fictions, all the characters duplicate and reduplicate the problems of the initial writer. They all struggle with their sentimental and their artistic complications. They all write self-conscious narratives only to discard them, start anew in an attempt to write "in the straightforwardest manner possible" (L.F. 118) in the mode of "tranche-de-vie realism" (L.F. 119), only to end up, like Sisyphus, rolling the same story over and over again. All of them wish they were characters "in a more attractive fiction," instead of being caught in "some more or less desperate tour de force" (L.F.

119). The disaffected author-narrator and the myriad of narrators embedded in one another's narrative keep filling in the blank because they fear as much as their author does, "schizophrenia, impotence creative and sexual, suicide--in short living and dying" (L.F. 121). They all know that their lives depend on their narratives, that "If Sinbad sinks it's Scheherazade who drowns" (L.F. 117). Barth is intent on repeating his story over and over again, and he does it with a vengeance.

"Two Meditations," are two minimal fictions paradigmatic of the whole design of the book. "Niagara Falls," the longer of the two, consists of propositions which are no more than different ways of expressing the idea of exhaustion and entropy menacing the narrators and their narratives in the other stories. In the first sentence of the less-than-half-page narrative, a woman "paused amid the kitchen to drink a glass of water; at that instant, losing a grip of fifty years, the next-room-ceiling-plaster crashed." The rest of the tale repeats the same idea in other terms. A man is sitting in his study, "listening to the universe rustle in his head, when suddenly the five-foot shelf let go." In subsequent situations, "ledge and railings, tourists and turbines all thunder over Niagara." Then, "A house explodes," and "all the colonies rebel." In the second Meditation, entitled "Lake Erie," "Venice subsides," "South America explodes," and "our resolve is sapped beyond the brooches." Being miniature

replicas of the longer stories in the series, "Two Meditations" reflect in a nutshell the vertical, abysmal structure of the book.

"Glossolalia" is another reduced model teasingly microcosmic of the whole book. The glossolalists are, as Barth says in "Author's Note," "Cassandra, Philomela, the fellow mentioned by Paul in the fourteenth verse of his first epistle to the Corinthians, the Queen of Sheba's talking bird, an unidentified psalmist...and the author." What the pieces modelled after the Lord's Prayer have in common is that they are misconstrued oracular and apocalyptic messages spoken in earnest or transmitted in despairing codes in defiance of imposed silence, very much like the exhortations of Barth's exhausted narrators who "are shrieking their frustration" (L.F. 112). Barth adds another metaphorical dimension to his stories by identifying himself with the five glossolalists and by comparing their plight with that of his own narrators.

"Menelaiad" adds another metaphorical slice to this multi-tiered book, but it also illustrates framing at its most involuted and reflects Barth's architectonic imagination at its best. Speaking about "Menelaiad," Barth once said, "It is a good story, I believe, though not uncomplicated" (F.B. 234). Wrapped as it is in eight layers of narrative and a plethora of punctuation marks, "Menelaiad" is a "Hard tale to hold onto," as Helen complains (L.F. 139). Yet, beneath its technical virtuosity, its "algebra," there is a strong element

of story which is a source of great pleasure. In Barth's hands, Homer's Menelaus emerges as a character so complex that Homer would hardly recognize him. He is no longer the great soldier "of the loud war cry" (L.F. 127), but the existential hero gripped by angst and tortured by self-doubt. In short, Barth's Menelaus is not the brother of great Agamemnon, but of Ambrose.

Critics have sometimes seen "Menelaiad" as the beginning of Barth's interest in tales within tales, when it is in fact a culmination of his long-standing interest in frame-tale literature, the seeds of which can be found in his first novel.[9] All the ingredients with which Barth has spiced his storytelling since the beginning of his career, all the technical ingenuity he has so far displayed, all the literary metaphors and paradigms he has tried his hand at are squeezed into a nutshell in this quintessential story. The upshot is a masterstroke.

This narrative tour de force is also a good illustration of the German phrase that Todorov uses in "Narrative-Men" to prove the similarity between framing in narrative and embedding in grammar. Todorov's sentence reads: "Der jenige,

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[9] David Morrell explains the structure of "Menelaiad" in the following sentence: "The structure of the story is like a set of Chinese boxes, a tale within a tale within a tale to the seventh degree, for the narrator, Menelaus, tells the reader how one night he told the sons of Nestor and Odysseus how he told Helen how he told Proteus how he told the daughter of Proteus how he rehearsed to Helen how he destroyed their love. (Morrell, John Barth, 94).

der den Mann, der den Pfahl, der auf der Brucke, der auf dem Weg, der nach Worms fuhrt, liegt, steht, umgeworfen hat, anzeigt, becommt eine Belohnung".[10] Barth, who is familiar with Todorov's views on embedding, points out that Richard Howard's translation of the German sentence "seems to miss Todorov's point" and that "a word-for-word translation reveals clearly the six degrees of 'embedding': "Whoever the man who the post which on the bridge which on the road which to Worms goes, lies, stood, knocked over, identifies, gets a reward" (F.B. 235).

In "Menelaiad" Barth seems to have set out to write a story that would be an accurate narrative analogue of Todorov's sentence. The same method of embedding that governs the sentence operates in "Menelaiad." The first frame opens with Menelaus giving the reader a brief overview of his personal history, of his wife's abduction by Paris, of the war that ensues, of the misery that he had to go through because of Helen; "everything's Helen's fault," we are told, "She's the death of me and my peculiar immortality" (L.F. 126). Menelaus's rude experience has earned him immortality. If Menelaus the man has long been gone and has become "the story of his life" (L.F. 128), his voice has persisted and has

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[10] Todorov, "Les Hommes-récits," Poétique de la prose," 38. "Whoever identifies the one who upset the post which was placed on the bridge which is on the road which goes to Worms will get a reward" ["Narrative-Men," The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) 71.]

become the narrative impulse that knows no stop: "this isn't the voice of Menelaus; this voice is Menelaus, all there is of him. When I'm switched on I tell my tale, the one I know, How Menelaus Became Immortal, but I don't know it" (L.F. 126). The first frame flows into the second frame in which Menelaus rehearses to himself the visit of Telemachus and Peisistratus to his palace to enquire about Odysseus, how they feasted on his food and drink, and how he feasted himself on their "sotted attention, with the tale of How Menelaus First Humped Helen in the Eighth Year After the War" (L.F. 128). Thus Barth establishes the setting for a long night of storytelling in the second frame which is for all intents and purposes the primary frame enclosing the story since it is dramatically the most functional one in the story, the home base that the narrative returns to now and again. Barth indeed establishes a setting congenial to storytelling and provides it with narrative paradigms that have at this stage in his career become familiar to us since they have adorned other settings in his previous work. Food and drink, a keen audience, and an ocean of a story that spans the whole night--the stock-in-trade of ancient oral storytellers. Menelaus the wanderer has become Menelaus the bard:

> " 'Wine's at your elbow,' I declared. 'Drink deep, boys; I'll tell you the tale.'
> " 'That's not what Prince Telemachus wants,' Helen said.
> " 'I know what Prince Telemachus wants;.'
> " 'He wants word of his father.'said she. 'If you must tell a story at this late hour, tell the one

> about Proteus on the beach at Pharos, what he said of Odysseus.'
> " 'Do,' Peisistratus said.
> " 'Hold on," I said," I say: " 'It's all one tale."
> " 'Then tell it all,' said Helen. 'But excuse yours truly.' (L.F. 135)

Helen retires because "a lady has her modesty," and Menelaus settles to tell his guests "the tale of Menelaus and his wife at sea." Menelaus--or to be accurate, the eternal voice of Menelaus--rehearses how Menelaus told his guests the story of his meeting with Helen after a long separation. The next frame out will drive the story one more remove into the narrative abyss, as the third frame ends with Helen asking Menelaus to tell her "What Proteus said and how [he] followed his advice" (L.F. 136).

The method of composition governing this involuted story is strangely enough not dissimilar to the one governing Barth's previous work and in fact goes back to The Floating Opera. As in the first novel, the seeds of a story thrown in passing in one frame blossom into a story of their own in a subsequent frame. Because Menelaus casually mentions his encounter with Proteus while he is telling the story of his encounter with Helen, Helen interrupts him as well as the story he is telling: " ' "Wait," she bade me. "First tell me what Proteus said, and how you followed his advice" (L.F. 136). The story in progress is held in mid-flight, is superseded by another one, and we are four layers-deep into narrative. But before telling Telemachus and Peisistratus how

he told Helen how he met The Old Man of the Sea, he has to tell them how he met Eidothea, who referred him to the Old Man of the Sea in the first place. At work here is the infinite regress or what Barth jocularly calls "the horseshoe-nail subspecies of multiple-delayed-climax structures" (F,B. 237). The fourth frame ends with the following exchange between Menelaus and Proteus:

> 'When will I reach my goal through its cloaks of story? How many veils to naked Helen?'
> " ' " 'I know how it is ,'said Proteus. 'Yet tell me what I wish; then I tell you what you will.' Nothing for it but rehearse the tale of me and slippery Eidothea. (L.F. 140)

In frame V, Menelaus rehearses to himself how he told his two guests how he told Helen how he told Proteus the story of his encounter with Eidothea and how before she advised him on how to catch her father she demanded, " ' " ' "But before I go on, say first how it was at the last in Troy, what passed between you and Helen as the city fell." ' " ' At this stage of narrative involvement, Menelaus is telling the story of Helen in Troy to Eidothea, the story of Eidothea to Proteus, the story of Proteus to Helen, the story of Helen's choice of Menelaus for a husband to his guests, and the story of all the stories. In frame VII, Menelaus asks the same question he had asked Helen on their wedding night:

> " ' " ' " ' "Speak!" Menelaus cried to Helen on the bridal bed,' I reminded Helen in her Trojan bedroom," I confessed to Eidothea on the beach,' I declared to Proteus in the cavemouth," I vouchsafed to Helen on the ship,' I told Peisistratus at last

> in my Spartan hall," I say to whoever and wher-I am. And Helen answered:
> " ' " ' " ' "Love!" ' " ' " ' ". (L.F. 150)

The irony is that all these "cloaks of story" should be "veils to naked Helen" (L.F. 140) and that Menelaus' obsession should not spring from Helen's betrayal, but from his inability to accept Helen's answer on its face value.

"Menelaiad" is dramaturgically an interesting story. Listeners from different removes and different times react to the story simultaneously and even interrupt one another to the confusion of the Greek storyteller and the reader. Menelaus the storyteller is as enmeshed in his story as he was in the actual events, the complexity of the story reflecting the complexity of his experience:

> " ' " ' "In the horse's bowel," ' " ' " I groan, " ' " ' "we grunt till midnight, Laocoon's spear still stuck in our gut..." ' " "Hold up," said Helen; " 'Off,' said Proteus; "On," said his web-foot daughter.' " You see what my spot was, boys! Caught between blunt Beauty's, fishy Form's, and dark-mouth Truth's imperatives, arms trembling, knees raw from rugless poop and rugged cave, I tried to hold fast to layered sense by listening as it were to Helen hearing Proteus hearing Eidothea hearing me; critic within critic, nestled in my slipping grip...'(L.F. 144-5)

The confluence of voices as they emerge from different narrative layers is uncanny and disturbing. The story that Menelaus has told on different occasions in his perplexed career triggers an avalanche of simultaneous reactions in the story as it is told to us. In section VI Menelaus's voice relates how Menelaus "felt on the nuptial night":

> " ' " ' " 'Not to die of her beauty he shut his eyes; of not beholding her embraced her [sic]. Imagine what he felt then!' " ' " '
> " 'Two questions' interjected Peisistratus--
> " 'One! One! " ' " 'There the bedstead stood; as he swooning tipped her to it his throat croaked "Why?" ' "
> " ' " ' "Why?" asked Eidothea.'
> " ' " 'Why why?' Proteus echoed." '
> " 'My own question,' Peisistratus insisted, 'had to do with mannered rhetoric and your shift of narrative viewpoint.'
> " ' " 'Ignore that fool!' Proteus ordered from the beach." ' (L.F. 149)

Barth surely had "Menelaiad" in mind when he pointed out in his "Tales within Tales" that

> ...the model [complex framing] teases us with the possibility not only of breaking the Five-Degree or Under-the-Tortoise Barrier, but of discovering or imagining a frametale so constructed that the plot of the inmost tale, far from merely bearing upon the plot of the next tale out, actually springs that plot, which in turn springs the next, etc., etc., etc., etc., at the point of concentric climax to which the whole series has systematically been brought. Indeed, I think that any gutsy writer who happens to be afflicted with a formalist imagination would, in the face of these observations, feel compelled to go the existing corpus one better, or two or three better...turning now from the number of degrees of narrative involvement to the dramaturgical potential of the model-in order to actualize an attractive possibility in the ancient art of storytelling that one's distinguished predecessors have barely suggested. (L.F. 234)

When Barth breaks "the Five-Degree or Under-the-Tortoise Barrier" in "Menelaiad," he begins to unravel the various levels of narrative involvement in a decrescendo movement. When in frame VII the story reaches a dizzyingly high level of involution beyond which it would be undecipherable, it begins to unfold progressively, resolving in each frame one strand of

the story, shucking each time one of its layers until it returns to where it all started, the primary frame with Menelaus seeing his guests off and returning to his "unfooled narrate seat" to chat with "risen Helen, sleep-gowned, replete, mulling twin cups at the new-coaxed coals" (L.F. 161). Each one of the stories that was interrupted by digressions is picked up in the movement downward and finally resolved. In frame VI, Menelaus finishes his narration of Helen's story to Eidothea; in frame V, he finishes telling Proteus about his encounter with Eidothea; in frame IV, he finishes the story of his adventure with Proteus to Helen; in frame III, he brings to a close the whole story of Helen that he is telling Telemachus and Peisistratus, and finally in frame II, he tells the reader about Telemachus and Peisistratus' return to Ithaca. But if the frame is brought to its close, technically the story is not over yet, as it traces its way back to where it began in frame I with Menelaus's disembodied voice yarning to itself as an eternal testimony of "the absurd, unending possibility of love."

If "Menelaiad," or the "round trip story" (L.F. 161) as Menelaus calls it, is one culmination of embedding that Barth has been interested in since the beginning of his career, it is also a metaphorical variation on the same themes already dealt with in the previous stories. It is significant that "Menelaiad" consists of fourteen sections

and Lost in the Funhouse of fourteen stories. Also, Barth's choice of Proteus as one of the central characters is in itself a comment on the metaphorical structure of the book and a paradigm of Barth's fictional concerns in general. Despite the various shapes that Proteus assumes, he always remains in essence Proteus, very much like the fourteen stories in the book which, though cast in different forms, remain essentially the same story. Proteus's ability to change shapes forever is equivalent to the infinite regress that the technique of embedding actualizes. In fact, Menelaus's Sisyphian endeavour to hold on to the ever-slippery Old Man of the Sea has a great deal of significance for Barth. The image of Menelaus struggling with slippery Proteus is, as Barth says in his "Literature of Exhaustion,"

> ...genuinely Baroque in the Borgesian spirit, and illustrates a positive artistic morality in the literature of exhaustion. He [Menelaus] is not there, after all, for kicks (any more than Borges and Beckett are in the fiction racket for their health): Menelaus is lost, in the larger labyrinth of the world, and has got to hold fast while the Old Man of the Sea exhausts reality's frightening guises so that he may extort direction from him when Proteus returns to his 'true self.' It's a heroic enterprise, with salvation as its object--one recalls that the aim of the Histriones is to get history done with so that Jesus may come again the sooner, and that Shakespeare's heroic metamorphoses culminate not merely in the theophany but in an apotheosis. (L.F. 75)

The image of Proteus also allows Barth to give the final turn of the screw to the question of identity. Menelaus will never be Menelaus after his experience with Proteus: "Foolish

Mortal! What gives you to think you're Menelaus holding the Old Man of the Sea? Why shouldn't Proteus turn into Menelaus, and into Menelaus holding Proteus?" (L.F. 139-140). The implications of Proteus's suggestion shake Menelaus's very being, as he can no longer tell Helen from Cloud-Helen and as he suspects that the Trojan War may have been nothing "but a dream of Zeus's conjure" (L.F. 159). Also, with the archetypal triangle involving Menelaus, Helen, and Paris, Barth gives a mythic significance to the love triangles in which are entangled Ambrose, Magda, and Peter in the Ambrose Stories, The Siamese Twins and their Thalia, the narrator, his female companion, and writing in "Life Story." Menelaus is a kin to the sperm, Ambrose, the Siamese twin, Narcissus, and the Minstrel in the closing story to the extent that he too is plagued by a diseased consciousness, excessive brooding, and introspection.

It is indeed no coincidence that the last story in the series, "Anonymiad," is a recapitulation of all the issues that haunted the previous stories. By endowing the Minstrel with the characteristics of his former characters, by afflicting him with the same shortcomings and the same obsessions, Barth insists once and for all that all the stories are part of one story cloaked in different garbs. Like all the earlier narrators, the Minstrel is "uneasy in the world and [his] own skin" (L.F. 167), complains about his "timid manner and want of experience" (L.F. 180), and is

liable to fits of "despair, self-despisal, self-pity" (L.F. 185). He too is involved in an unhappy triangle and has his nemesis in the person of Aegisthus, who alienates Merope from him with his guile and easy manner. The Minstrel, who suspects foul play between Aegisthus, Clytemnestra, and his Merope, is green with envy: "I admired his brash way with them and his gluttony for life's delights, so opposite to my poor temper" (L.F. 179). When he is marooned on a desolate island, the Minstrel is pained by the thought of Merope in the arms of Aegisthus and full of self-loathing for not being "Aegisthus enough to keep her in [his] own" (L.F. 185). The estrangement that occurs between him and Merope is his own doing. Afflicted with an over-active and feverish imagination, like Menelaus, he can not take Merope's love at face value. When Merope in better days declared her love for him, one of his various selves responded with skepticism, "wondered whether she was nymph doing penance for rebuffing Zeus or just maid with unaccountable defect of good sense" (L.F. 186). Later, when he discovers writing, nothing in the world can distract him from his new-found pleasures: "Indeed, one night I fancied I heard a Meropish voice across the water, calling the old name she called me by--and I ignored that call to finish a firelit chapter" (L.F. 187). The Minstrel too knows that it is not in the artist's makeup to reconcile the demands of art with those of love: "The trouble with us minstrels is,

when all's said and done we love our work more than our women" (L.F. 177).

Moreover, the language of "Anonymiad," with its rich sea imagery, is reminiscent of the language of "Night-Sea Journey" and the Minstrel's dark meditations redolent of those of the sperm. In fact Lost in the Funhouse opens and closes on a marine note, as it were, begins with the voice of the sperm reaching out from the depth of the sea only to end with the distressed voice of the Minstrel washed up by the sea, marooned "in the middle of nowhere" (L.F. 164). Also, in his moments of despair, the Minstrel wants "to give up language altogether and float voiceless in the wash of time like an amphora in the sea" (L.F. 192). The last stanza of the Minstrel's "Last Lay" (L.F. 164) reads thus: "Amphora's my muse:/When I finish off the booze,/ I hump the jug and fill her up with fiction." These nine "amphorae of Mycenaean red" that the Minstrel fills with his libidinal and artistic output and then sets adrift are the carriers of his "supertale," of his heritage to future generations. When in moments of tenderness the Minstrel dreams of his return to Merope, he uses a language that perfectly fits "Night-Sea Journey": "if some night your voice recalls me, by a new name, I'll commit myself to it, paddling and resting, drifting like my amphorae, to attain you or to drown" (L.F. 193).

The multiple metaphorical nature of "Night-Sea Journey," and of all the other stories in the series for that matter,

becomes obvious in "Anonymiad" with the Minstrel casting off both his seeds and his writing in amphorae. Barth puts both the vehicle and the tenor of the metaphor in the same receptacle and by so doing reminds us that all the stories in Lost in the Funhouse are about "lays and lays," that is, sexuality and textuality, loving and writing, experience and art.

By establishing a strong connection between "Anonymiad" and "Night-Sea Journey" Barth suggests that the end is in the beginning and the beginning in the end and that the stories in Lost in the Funhouse exemplify an eternal cyclical recurrence, as if they were spun out on the surface of a Moebius strip. The Moebius strip has its appeal for Barth because it is a geometrical image of the regressus in infinitum characteristic of his narrative and of the inexhaustibility of the narrative impulse. A narrative frame closes only to open again. The same story may be reenacted forever; the same hero assumes a thousand faces, and man can thus go on rehearsing ad infinitum his story, which is the story of his forbears, both mythical and historical, thus adding new metaphorical layers to the already thickly stratified story of the human race. The eschatological implications of the Moebius strip, which by its very nature involves an eternal return to the beginning, must also appeal to a writer like Barth who significantly claims that his wish is not to imitate the existing world but to invent worlds of his own. The very notion of the New

Beginning has a hold on man's imagination and is deeply embedded in the human psyche and the collective memory of the human race.

In a way, Lost in the Funhouse, like Giles Goat-Boy, is governed by the idea that ontogeny recapitulates cosmogeny, that all stories are reducible to one story, that your life and mine, with their trials and errors, are patterned on archetypes. The only "original" story in Lost in the Funhouse is the first story; the only original character is the sperm, and all the remaining stories are recapitulations of his "Night-Sea Journey." The sperm dissolves in the womb only to be recreated over and over again. Barth's book, which coincidentally begins with the formula "once upon a time," is a corroboration of Propp's conclusion about the structure of fairy tales: "The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes accorded to each), but neither actions nor functions change."[11]

To the extent that Lost in the Funhouse illustrates the myth of the eternal recurrence, it in a way continues the mythopoeic, metaphorical consciousness that dominated modernist writing. Although Barth, like his postmodernist contemporaries, cultivates indecision and indeterminacy and thrives on subversive openendedness, he, more than any other postmodernist, is linked with his modernist forbears by his

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[11] Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Fairy Tale (Bloomington: Indiana Research Center in Anthropology, 1958) 18.

interest in mythical patterns and his extensive use of myth. If the modernists layered their modern settings with myth to impose order on the confusion and chaos of modern experience, Barth instead playfully reworks and revamps myth and addresses it directly to suggest that mythical times were not immune to confusion, that they had their own chaos to contend with and that mythical heroes such as Menelaus, Echo, and Narcissus were just as confused and baffled by experience as are modern heroes like Ambrose. Barth's mythical stories mirror his non-mythical stories, and through similarity and/or contrast, Menelaus and Narcissus become Ambrose's counterparts the same way Odysseus does for Bloom and Telemachus for Stephen in Joyce's Ulysses. Also, like Joyce and Eliot, Barth fuses past and present, historical and mythical time in Lost in the Funhouse to indicate that human experience is universal. In this respect, what Ellmann says about Joyce's work applies to Lost in the Funhouse as well:

> In all his books up to Finnegans Wake Joyce sought to reveal the coincidence of the present with the past. Only in Finnegans Wake was he to carry his conviction to its furthest reaches, by implying that there is no present and no past, that there are no dates, that time--and language which is time's expression--is a series of coincidences which are general all over humanity.[12]

Like Joyce, and writers of a metaphorical inclination in general, Barth suspends chronological time in favour of a

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[12] Richard Ellmann, James Joyce (New York: Oxford UP 1959) 729.

permanent present. A cyclical, metaphorical consciousness is a timeless one insofar as it transcends both space and time and is impervious to spatial and temporal contiguous ordering. In this respect Gordon Slethaug suggests that Barth's views of history are analogous to the views which were held by medieval theologians:

> Because they saw history as a series of cycles, they could discover similarities between such apparently incongruous figures as Adam, Hercules, Christ, and contemporary man. Time itself, essential to the modern view of progress, is all but denied in the medieval Christian view; all events in history are beheld simultaneously in the mind of God; although certainly important to man, time is relative to his finite limitations and means little to God.[13]

Lost in the Funhouse is an ambitious literary work precisely because it strives to achieve an all-embracing, omniscient, all-encompassing, a-temporal vision of the world.

The metaphoric pull predominates in Lost in the Funhouse and deserves the emphasis given to it in this chapter, but the metonymic matrix is not to be entirely overlooked. However dense and hermetic they are, "Ambrose His Mark," "Water Message," and "Lost in the Funhouse" are not plotless, and they are also injected with local color, their settings containing a great deal of realistic detail. In "Ambrose His Mark," the endless commotion and the erratic goings-on in Ambrose's home are dramatized against a backdrop of economic depression. The 1929 Crash did not spare Barth's native

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[13] Gordon Slethaug, "Barth's Refutation of the Idea of Progress," Critique 12 (1972): 13.

Maryland, "the stock market had fallen, the tomato-canners were on strike, hard times were upon the nation" (L.F. 17). With its own Opera House and "the Eastern Shore Asylum" where Ambrose's father is committed, East Dorset is a recognizable place. In "Water Message" the setting gets more fully defined, as realistic detail about the city and its geography accumulates. There is "the creek where the oysterboats [are] moored" and "East Dorset School" where Ambrose is harassed by older schoolmates. There are also enough "synecdochic details," to use Jakobson's phrase, to suggest that hard times are still squeezing the nation, as the narrator describes some of the schoolboys: "Their eyes were the faintest blue, red about the rims; their hair was a pile of white curls, unwashed, unbarbered" (L.F. 39). Lost in the Funhouse also has a recognizable historical and geographical setting, as it takes place during an outing to Ocean City on Independence Day, some time between 1941 and 1945.

Such realistic details, which are scattered through Lost in the Funhouse, are of a piece with the metonymic development of the work. As I mentioned earlier, the first journey along the surface of the Moebius strip is a horizontal movement, and thus the metaphoric layers begin to build up only with the second journey along the surface of the strip. In other words, to the extent that the stories are incarnations of the same story, the book is governed by a metaphoric pull, and, to the extent that one senses a development of the artist from

preconception to old age, the book is also governed by a metonymic movement. If all the characters are one character, various incarnations of the artist, and the stories are viewed as representations of different stages in his development and growth, Lost in the Funhouse may well be read as a Kunstlerroman with essential moments in the artist's life spun on the metonymic axis. Michael Hinden describes "Night-Sea Journey" as "a portrait of the artist as a spermatozoan."[14] Likewise, "Ambrose His Mark" is a portrait of the artist as a toddler. "Water Message" dramatizes the young incipient artist at grips with the initial emergence of sexual and artistic awareness. In "Lost in the Funhouse," the teenage artist makes the painful choice of art over experience. Such stories as "Title," "Menelaiad," and "Anonymiad" dramatize the problems of the artist as an adult. One also senses a narrative movement in Lost in the Funhouse from the dialogue taking place between stories. Ambrose receives his accreditation from the ocean sent to him by the Minstrel. The amphora that the Greek artist sets afloat reaches Ambrose thousands of years later and a few stories earlier. The movement is regressive as the whole book moves from modern times to mythical time, to the very beginning of storytelling, but it is a movement nonetheless, and it counterbalances the heavily metaphoric pull of the book.

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[14] Michael Hinden, "Lost in the Funhouse: Barth's Use of the Recent Past," Critical Essays on John Barth, 193.

The metaphoric and metonymic poles are not mutually exclusive in Lost in the Funhouse. While the metaphoric pull is much stronger and does require more emphasis, the metonymic movement is not overlooked and guarantees the narrative flow of the book. Unlike Giles Goat-Boy, Barth's fifth work of fiction maintains sufficient balance between its metaphoric stratification and its metonymic flow because it combines more harmoniously "fire" and "algebra," passion and virtuosity. Barth here emphasizes the intricate design of his book, draws attention to its technical virtuosity, and creates a densely metaphorical universe without losing sight of the pure element of story and without sacrificing the passion that goes into the telling of a good story. Even in highly elaborate tales such as "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Menelaiad," the narrators' voices emerge from the intricate patterns and rise from the thick metaphorical layers to tell about their hopes and their pains in a passionate manner to which we can all relate. Thus, in Lost in the Funhouse Barth uses vertical framing skilfully by avoiding the excesses of Giles Goat-Boy. Unlike Giles Goat-Boy, which buckles under its own weight, Lost in the Funhouse combines well its metaphoric and metonymic planes.

The vertical metaphoric framing which governs the composition of Lost in the Funhouse solves the same problems with which Barth is preoccupied in the rest of his fiction. The regressus in infinitum that Barth creates by telling the

same story over and over again is a shield against artistic exhaustion and is therefore an antidote to silence and death. Barth goes on filling in the blank with the "Same old story" because he fears, as one of his narrators puts it, "impotence creative and sexual, suicide--in short living and dying" (L.F. 121). It is this ontological angst that compels Barth's narrators to "Talk, talk, talk" (L.F. 108), even at the price of tautology and redundance because the alternative is "General anesthesia. Self-extinction. Silence" (L.F. 106). For Barth, who has learnt from The Arabian Nights that "If Sindbad sinks it's Scheherazade who drowns" (L.F. 117), recasting endlessly the same tale in different disguises is essentially a survival strategy.

CHAPTER 7

CHIMERA: THE LAST LIMITS OF THE FRAME-TALE TECHNIQUE

To say a a thousand nights is to say infinite nights, countless nights, endless nights. To say a thousand and one nights is to add one to infinity.

Jorge Luis Borges, Seven Nights

Chimera is so complex that it almost defeats analysis. No amount of study, it seems, can unravel its tangled narrative and fully account for its inextricably complex structure.[1] Framing, which was at the dawn of Barth's career a simple narrative strategy, has become at this stage an extremely clustered network of intertwined narrative strands which resist unravelling. Patricia Warrick explains that "A single reading of Chimera yields more confusion than insight" and goes on to say that "Finishing it, the reader feels compelled to return to the beginning, but a second reading fails to supply the key to understanding. And he returns to the beginning once more."[2] Although it was a co-winner of the 1972 National Book Award, Chimera has not received the critical attention Lost in the Funhouse has, and it is likely that its resistance to reading partly accounts for its lack of appeal.

Feminist approaches to Chimera remain predominant, understandably so, since the dynamics between male and female characters in Barth's book are a major aspect of the book. Although Barth's treatment of the question of gender lies outside

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[1] For other studies of the structures of Barth's three novellas, see Cynthia Davis, "'The Key to the Treasure': Narrative Movements and Effects in Chimera," Critical Essays on John Barth, 217-227; Jerry Powell, "John Barth's Chimera: A Creative Response to the Literature of Exhaustion," Critical Essays on John Barth, 228-240, and Patricia Warrick, "The Circuitous Journey of Consciousness in Barth's Chimera," Critique 18 (1976): 73-85. In my study of framing in Chimera I am indebted to these critics.

[2] Patricia Warrick, "The Circuitous Journey of Consciousness in Barth's Chimera," Critique 18 (1976): 73.

the confines of this dissertation, one cannot help noticing how polarized the views are on the question. For Michael Wood, Barth is simply "a narrative chauvinistic pig."[3] The more serious Cynthia Davis suggests that "The notions of gender identity revealed in Barth's work...are traditional" inasmuch as they "reflect the assumptions inherent in a male-centered mythology."[4] Davis goes on to say that,

> Only women are consistently reduced to vegetative life in Barth's fictions. Women who do long for more are punished; they end up bitter, like Anteia, or settle for non-heroic life after all, like Melanippe. Such is Barth's interweaving of myth and aesthetic that it is hard to tell whether he uses the pattern without clearly seeing its implications or actually attacks feminism by what he thinks are its spokeswomen.[5]

On the other hand, Charles Harris, armed with Freud and Jung, demonstrates that Chimera is an enlightened treatment of gender issues insofar as the repressed male characters, Shahryar, Shah Zamane, Perseus, are fulfilled only when they come to terms with women "as individuals separate from and equal to themselves."[6] Yet, in an interview Barth says on the subject, "I suppose a simple-minded critic could say my trio of novellas is about women's lib. It is one of the themes that holds them together,

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[3] Michael Wood, "New Fall Fiction" New York Review of Books, 19, 6 (October 19, 1972): 33-37

[4] Cynthia Davis, "Heroes, Earth Mothers and Muses: Gender Identity in Barth's Fiction," The Centennial Review 24 (1980): 309.

[5] Davis, 319-20.

[6] Charles B. Harris, Passionate Virtuosity (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983) 134.

although that's not at all what it's about for me."[7] He says elsewhere that Chimera is above all "a story about storytelling."[8] Thus, insofar as the subject of Chimera is storytelling, as Barth suggests, and insofar as the narrative method the storytelling hinges on is framing, it is only appropriate to thoroughly examine the narrative processes and let the content of the book, whatever it is, emerge from the form itself.

In my approach I will consider the novellas in the order in which Barth originally meant them to be published. "Dunyazadiad" would have come last in the sequence had it not been for a publisher's intervention. As Morrell explains, both Barth's publisher and editor decided that "Dunyazadiad" was "the best piece in [Chimera], the easiest, most sentimental and agreeable, one especially suited to lead a reader into the others."[9] Morrell says that, "Barth balked at the suggestion for a time but finally agreed."[10] In the initial arrangement, with "Bellerophoniad," the longest of the three, in the middle and with "Dunyazadiad" at the end, Barth's book was much more in keeping with the metaphor of the chimera. The fire-breathing

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[7] Frank Gado, First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing (New York: Union College Press, 1973) 131.

[8] John Barth, The Friday Book (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1984) 98. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

[9] David Morrell, John Barth: An Introduction (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1976) 162.

[10] Morrell, 162.

mythical monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a snake's tail would have been emblematic of Chimera. "Bellerophoniad," which is twice the length of "Perseid," was meant in the original arrangement to correspond to the body of the mythical creature, "Dunyazadiad," the shortest of the three, to its tail and "Perseid" to its head.[11] There is also a more important reason for examining the three novellas in the original arrangement. With its narrator, who has found artistic salvation in his encounter with Scheherazade, and its final mood of serenity, "Dunyazadiad" surely comes as a resolution to the two novellas preceding it.

Speaking of his teenage days at the Juilliard School of Music and of his long-standing love for jazz, Barth once said,

> At heart I'm an arranger still, whose chiefest literary pleasure is to take a received melody--an old narrative poem, a classical myth, a shopworn literary convention, a shard of my experience, a New York Times Book Review series--and, improvising like a jazzman within its constraints, reorchestrate it to present purpose. (F.B. 7)

"Perseid," if nothing else, validates Barth's method of reorchestrating ancient narratives to create new literary material. The old myth of Perseus and Medusa acquires a new dimension and becomes in Barth's dexterous hands a complex yet brilliant narrative. "Perseid" is a story within a story within a story since Perseus, who has turned into a constellation, is forever rehearsing to his companion Medusa the story of his life as he once told it to Calyxa in the temple in which he

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[11] David Morrell, John Barth: An Introduction, 161.

mysteriously found himself while he was reenacting at the age of forty the journey that had once led to his glory. Thus Barth complicates the original tale by transforming it from a direct narrative to the narrative of a narrative. Perseus, who has partially lost his memory, tells his story to Calyxa in installments as he watches it unfold in the spiralling murals of the temple which has been erected in his honour. The narrative of "Perseid" is thus stratified to the extent that the spiralling murals represent simultaneously the story of Perseus' first journey and the story of his reenactment of that journey. In a third layer in this paradigmatic configuration, Perseus reviews and comments about both stories which he, in his confusion, can hardly remember. Finally, the outer layer is his infinite and endless nightly rehearsal of the story to his co-star Medusa.

Barth borrowed the idea of the murals from Virgil's Aeneid, which, as Barth points out, Virgil himself "took from Homer's description of the low-relief scenes on Achilles shield" (F.B. 171). When Perseus stands in front of the murals which unravel his life, he is as flabbergasted as Aeneas was when he stood in Dido's temple and "...fed his soul on those/unsubstantial figures,"[12] which chronicled the defeat of his people. Like Jake Horner, Perseus seeks therapy and redemption in the healing power of narrative. By reviewing his history, by sensing what went wrong in his life, the middle-aged Perseus hopes to regain his

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[12] Virgil, The Aeneid in The Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid of Virgil, trans. C. Day Lewis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966) 148.

heroic youth: "...somewhere along that way I'd lost something, took a wrong turn, forgot some knack, I don't know; it seemed to me that if I kept going over it carefully enough I might see the pattern, find the key" (CH. 72-3). Perhaps the image of the murals appeals to Barth because it implies a reversal of the conventional relationship between art and experience, insofar as Perseus, who remembers little about his life, has to reconstitute it from the murals. The story in this case precedes and creates its own subject.

In keeping with ancient storytelling, the "Perseid" begins in medias res or more accurately near the end of Perseus' second journey when most of his adventures are already behind him. Barth establishes the frame-story (Perseus and Calyxa in the spiralling temple), which is itself enclosed by another frame (Perseus and Medusa in the sky), as we learn later. Once the inner frame and the outer frame are established, Perseus shifts back to the beginning of both journeys, spans both of them in a double narrative in accordance with the spiralling structure of the murals up to the point where he finds himself in Calyxa's temple. Perseus' history catches up with him when his past merges into his present as he finds himself staring at the final panel, which represents him standing in Calyxa's temple staring at the murals. At that point, Perseus, who has exhausted all the panels, is spiralled out of the temple back into experience to pick up where he left off before losing consciousness in the Lybian desert. The narrative is a double exposition, not only

because Perseus tells the same story to both Calyxa and Medusa, but also because the murals represent Perseus' two journeys concurrently. As Barth explains, the murals are laid out in such a way that "if Perseus had Superman's X-ray vision, he could see behind any given episode of his original adventures the panel depicting its reorchestration in his current story--up to the point where he must leave that temple of hero-worship, address his future, and bring his story to its climax and its close" (F.B. 171).

The double exposition heightens the dramaturgical interest of the story as it creates two levels of narrative which actively bear on each other. Indeed, when Perseus wakes up in the temple, he finds himself au four et au moulin to the extent that while he is grappling with his remote and recent past as depicted in the murals, he is also grappling with his relationship with Calyxa and trying to work out its implications. Because the murals depict his life up to the point where he is reviewing the murals in Calyxa's temple, the story of his life and the story of his relationship with Calyxa climax simultaneously. In this double composition, the two levels of narrative progress concurrently, but as Perseus is still living the story of his life, as it were, the mural representing the reenactment of his earlier journey, which he and Calyxa span in a few days, catches up with him, and his past carries over into his present. The last panel that Perseus reviews with nervous anticipation provides the story of his involvement with Calyxa with a denouement. As the last panel

gives out onto the open desert, it resolves his amorous prelude with the priestess and throws him into the yet-unchronicled experience, which will eventually lead to a confrontation with Andromeda and her cohorts and to his eventual constellation.

The two layers of the spiral progress simultaneously, establishing parallels and correspondences between Perseus' two journeys. Perseus observes that "each [mural] in the second whorl echoed its counterpart in the first, behind which it stood" (CH. 97). However, the second whorl is not merely a faithful replication of the first, but a new experience with a new spiritual discovery; nonetheless, the two cycles laid out on the murals show Perseus, geographically at least, at the same stage of his adventures in both journeys. Thus the narrative flows back and forth between two different temporal spaces which continuously pour into each other. Apart from showing Barth at work, the following passage illustrates how the two levels of narrative weave in and out of each other:

> I'd been long lost, deserted, down and out in Libya; two decades past I'd overflown that country with the bloody Gorgon's head, and every drop that hit the dunes had turned to snake--so I learned later: at twenty years and twenty kilometers high, how could I have known? Now there I was, sea-levelled, forty, parched and plucked, every grain in my molted sandals raising blisters, and beleaguered by the serpents of my past. It must have been that of all the gods in heaven the two I'd never got along with put it to me. (CH. 60)

To reflect the topological design of the two whorls, Barth establishes correspondences between events from two different periods in his character's life. Perseus' stay with Calyxa reaches the same degree of tension reached during the week "spent

with Medusa on Lake Triton" (CH. 102). Afraid that her lover might leave upon reviewing the final panel, Calyxa intimates, "I'm afraid of Tomorrow, Perseus," which prompts the latter to reflect: "I was astounded, and explained that my Styx-Nymph [Medusa], toward dawn, had said quite the same thing, which I'd explain in the morning. I comforted both" (CH. 102). Perseus attempts to assuage Calyxa's apprehensions, as he once did Medusa's in similar circumstances, by trying to initiate a conversation. But, as Perseus recalls, "she'd speak no more, only clung to me most close that night as Medusa, still mantled, was shown clinging to me on the beach in the morning's mural" (CH. 102). Here, and throughout the whole novella, two different temporal spaces have come crashing into each other. The reader's delight in these intricacies of storytelling is heightened when the inner and outer frame return simultaneously. As a rule, when the frame periodically returns to home base; that is, when "the narrated world" is superseded by "the commented world" through an interruption by the auditor or by the storyteller or through a short exchange between them, the reader pauses to tell the teller from the told before plunging again in the meanders of the story. The periodic return of the frame serves the same purpose in "Perseid" as well, but because of the stratified structure of Barth's novella, when the frame returns and the exposition breaks into a dialogue, the effect is pure magic, a narrative epiphany. Perseus tells his co-star Medusa that he told Calyxa that upon learning of Medusa's "recapping," he had foolishly insisted that

he be allowed to behead her again in order to be reinstated in his long-lost youth and thus "confront Andromeda with a better Perseus" (CH. 91). Perseus' suggestion triggers through time and space, as it were, the following exchange between Perseus, disguised Medusa, and Calyxa:

> "That's really what you want?" the hooded lady asked then, and simultaneously later Calyxa: "That's really what you wanted?"
> I yessed both. (CH. 91)

The stratification of the narrative shows how much Barth's narrative universe is filled with story-starved listeners and obsessed "narrative-people" and how surfeited it is with stories which demand to be told simultaneously as they crowd the narrative space. Intent on proving that narrative possibilities are infinite because the narrative impulse in humankind is inexhaustible, Barth heaps narrative upon narrative. He has the habit of telling a story, while at the same time entrenching emblematic analogues of the story, thus spreading emblems, symbols, and icons all over the narrative space and creating narrative foyers, which become miniature narratives in their own right. When Perseus leaves the temple, retraces his way back to King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia's court in Joppa, which he had visited twenty years earlier, and finds himself standing in the banquet hall amidst the statues of the enemies he once petrified and the all-too living Cassiopeia and her belligerent cronies, he is for all intents and purposes standing on a palimpsest. When the story comes full circle with Perseus' return to Joppa and when he engages in a showdown with Andromeda, Danaus, Cassiopeia,

and her cronies in the very same court containing the frozen scene, that of "Polydectes and his court, fixed forever in their postures of insult and abuse" (CH. 83), we have a new narrative superimposed on an old one. And like a palimpsest, the old text haunts the new text with its ghostly presence. The two scenes are a graphic illustration of the construction of the overall narrative; that is, a graphic illustration of the structure of tales within tales or in this case tales upon tales.

Barth also fills the narrative space of his novella with miniature analogues of the very method he uses in the telling of his story. In Lost in the Funhouse, which interestingly enough was written in the period in which Barth was contending with the worst case of writer's block, the main metaphors are the funhouse, the jungle, the labyrinth, the womb, which are all commensurate with the creative and sentimental quicksand in which Barth's narrators are bogged down. In Chimera, and especially in "Dunyazadiad" and in "Perseid," the dominant metaphor is the spiral, which reflects the characters' success in coming to terms with their problems. In "Dunyazadiad" the Barth-like Genie explains that

> 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. (CH. 10)

Drawing a lesson from the example of the Maryland snail, the Genie "wished neither to repudiate nor to repeat his past

performance; he aspired to go beyond them toward a future they were not attuned to and, by some magic, at the same time go back to the original springs of narrative" (CH. 10). Similarly, the narrative space of "Perseid" is flooded with spiral-shaped objects and creatures. When Perseus awakes in the temple, he is struck by the unusual geometry of the temple:

> I noticed that while the mural began at my bedpost, the spiral it described did not, but curved on in and upward in a golden coil upon the ceiling to a point just above where my head would be if I moved once headswidth left; when I raise me up to watch whither hot Calyxa now, I saw the same spiral stitched in purple on the bed. And--miracle of miracles!--when the sprite sprang nimbly aspread that nether spiral and drew to her tanned taut tummy dazzled me [sic], I perceived that her very navel, rather than bilobular or quadrantic like the two others I best knew, was itself spiriferate, replicating the infinite inward wind both above and below the finite flesh on which my tongue now feast. (CH. 68)

Perseus and Calyxa also speculate that "immortality being without end, one might infer that the temple was as well, from our couch unwinding infinitely through the heavens" (CH. 103). In keeping with the image of the spiral, Perseus' second journey turns out to be "truly a second, not mere replication of [his] first" (CH. 113).

Indeed Perseus' second journey is a redeeming discovery of the self and is therefore not simply a repetition of the first journey, just as the "Perseid" is not a mere imitation of the original myth. This spiral-shaped story perfectly combines passion with virtuosity and thus bears out Barth's belief that a writer can create new material by permutating the already existing body of literature.

If the spiral symbolizes Perseus' constructive reenactment of his first journey, the circle operating as the main metaphor in "Bellerophoniad" symbolizes Bellerophon's sterile imitation of his cousin's heroic exploits. When he is planning the narration of his story, Bellerophon unwittingly resolves to have "a circle rather than a logarithmic spiral as its geometric motif" (CH. 142). Interestingly enough, Bellerophon is as befuddled as most of the narrators in Lost in the Funhouse, and "Bellerophoniad" is significantly the least successful of the triad, as if Barth, who is ever capable of such perversions, set out to write a "bad" story only to illustrate that those who do not live by "the law of the spiral" are destined to botch both their life and their art.

While writing "Perseid" Barth throws here and there hints about Bellerophon and his botched career. These narrative seeds, sown in a seemingly casual manner in "Perseid," later blossom into the full-fledged story of Bellerophon. Perseus is aware that he may borrow Pegasus "strictly on a standby basis, since Bellerophon had first priority and could call for him at any moment" (CH. 93). When the main frame returns at the end of "Perseid" with the nightly commentary Perseus and Medusa engage in every time Perseus tells his tale, Perseus asks his companion about his cousin Bellerophon. Medusa curtly responds, "That's another story" (CH. 129). That other story is "Bellerophoniad," which too is a double exposition. Like "Perseid," and for that matter, like all narratives with a strong residue of orality,

"Bellerophoniad" begins towards the end of its hero's career only to veer back to its beginning, spanning his life until it reaches the point at which the story began. The novella opens with Bellerophon telling the Amazon, Melanippe, his scribe and the "perky priestess of his passions"(CH. 141), how he, upon reading "Perseid" on the eve of his fortieth birthday, told his loving wife, Philonoe, that he had to leave family and kingdom in quest of immortality. As in "Perseid," the narrative consists of a double exposition insofar as Bellerophon has to tell the story of the journey undertaken at the age of twenty which led to the killing of the Chimera in order to tell the story of the journey undertaken twenty years later. Bellerophon recapitulates the first half of his career while he is telling the second half. The two-level narrative is itself framed by the story that Bellerophon had turned into in the nick of time when Zeus aborted his ascent to Olympus on winged Pegasus and thus pricked his hubris by sending him crashing into the muddy marshes of Dorchester County. While Bellerophon is telling Melanippe the story of the first half of his career, which was crowned by his marriage to the princess Philonoe, he is also telling us at the same time the story of his story with Melanippe, his "Lover and alleged chronicler" (CH. 146), who periodically interrupts him with comments on his storytelling or his past womanizing.

However, "Bellerophoniad" is not "Perseid," and Bellerophon, as he himself suspects, is no Perseus. In fact, "Bellerophoniad" is jealous of "Perseid" and Bellerophon of Perseus: "No, no,

love," he corrects Melanippe, "it's I was heavy, drag-hoofed as this telling of my tale. Perseid takes off like its hero" (CH. 146). He knows well that neither he nor his storytelling can measure up to his more glorious cousin and the well-wrought tale he tells from the sky where he dwells among the stars. He knows that a better story and a better man are staring him and his "ineptly narrated" (CH. 138) story down as long as stars rotate in the sky. When he reads "Perseid," which he has found "floating in the marsh near his palace" (CH. 137), he blurts out in self-deprecation, "I compare to this the rich prose of the Perseid and despair" (CH. 140). Even in his poetic flights, he realizes that he is only "echoing for a moment, if lamely, the prancing rhythms and alliterations of the Perseid" (CH. 140). When he fails to blend technique with subject-matter in his storytelling, he is green with envy at "how beautifully all this is managed in the Perseid" (CH. 150). When Melanippe reads Part One of his story which he himself calls a "farrago of misstatements" (CH. 203), she tells him she "can't believe [he] wrote this mess" (CH. 291). Like many of Barth's characters, Bellerophon admits that because storytelling is not his "cup of wine," his story "digresses, retreats, hesitates, groans from its utter et cetera, collapses, dies" (CH. 196). Even Great Zeus himself decrees that Bellerophon's story is "confusion and fiasco" (CH. 297).

Barth, the incorrigible fabulator, is of course having fun at the expense of his character, as he often does in his fiction.

Bellerophon's failed story is meant to be the reflection of his failure as a hero. In an authorial intrusion Barth explains his method thus:

> The general principle, I believe, has no name in our ordinary critical vocabulary; I think of it as the Principle of Metaphoric Means, by which I intend the investiture by the writer of as many of the elements and aspects of his fiction as possible with emblematic as well as dramatic value: not only the 'form' of the story, the narrative viewpoint, the tone, and such, but, where manageable, the particular genre, the mode and medium, the very process of narration--even the fact of the artifact itself. (CH. 203)

According to Barth's "Principle of Metaphoric Means," Bellerophon who botches his career deserves a botched narrative. Whereas Perseus is an authentic hero and tells a story whose layers interlock like perfectly crafted Chinese boxes, Bellerophon is a phony hero and thus writes a parody of the "Perseid;" that is, a "beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longueurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor" (CH. 308). Despite its intentional shortcomings, "Bellerophoniad" gains nonetheless some of its literary merit from the irony that permeates it, which arises precisely from the desperate attempts of Bellerophon and his "Bellerophoniad" to measure up to his cousin and his style. Perseus leaves home for good reasons; whereas, his foolish cousin leaves for no reason. Perseus gets out of a bad relationship with disaffected Andromeda to walk into a rewarding one with Calyxa; Bellerophon, who "was wretched because nothing was wrong" (CH. 141), deserts a loving and wise wife to end up with Melanippe, who turns out to be his own daughter. In order to become a Wandering Hero, as the pattern of heroism requires,

Bellerophon ruins a happy marriage and alienates his faithful subjects by telling them over and over again a disjointed story: "Drive me out, sirs, as you love me; exile me from the city; make me wander far from the paths of men, devouring my own soul, et cetera, till I meet my apotheosis" (CH. 204). Although he arms himself with a copy of the "Perseid" upon leaving home, Bellerophon, a bad student, fails to discern its meaning, by not realizing that while the events which prompted Perseus' journeys were thrust upon him by events, he on the other hand engineered his own events to make his destiny look as if it were preordained by a pattern.[13]

Thus, Bellerophon botches his career by unimaginatively imitating a preestablished pattern, and the muddled narrative of "Bellerophoniad" is Bellerophon's deserved retribution. Because he does not have at his disposal mnemonic tools such as the murals which guided Perseus through the maze of his life, Bellerophon must conjure up the past on his own, and thus, like any oral storyteller, he hesitates and stumbles in the telling of his tentative story and has to reconstruct it "painfully for his darling Amazon, as he once pained with it patient Philonoe" (CH. 170). While Perseus could weave his way in and out of his multi-tiered story, Bellerophon admits that "To entertain wife and mistress at the same time with the same tale is hard" (CH. 169). Even the periodic return of the frame, which in "Perseid" resolves difficulties by allowing the reader to unravel the

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[13] E.P. Walkiewicz, John Barth (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986) 118.

layers of the story, only compounds them in "Bellerophoniad," adding to the confusion:

> The eyes of Melanippe's lover are gray-green: explain. Directly. Happy birthday, dead Hippolochus; happy birthday to you. Digression won't save them, dear Bellerophon; do come to it: Your eighteenth birthday. Sibyl. Chariot-race scene. The curse of God upon you, Poleidus, snake in the grass, whom even as I bored kind Philonoe dacades after with this tale I didn't know to be its villain. (CH. 161)

Unlike "Perseid," which keeps its various narrative strands under control, "Bellerophoniad" confuses its skeins and becomes at times a "narrative chaos." In Perseus' complex but well-wrought tale, narrative voices criss-cross through time and space to engage in a coherent dialogue; whereas, in Bellerophon's muddled story, the dialogue through time and space breaks into an unintelligible dialogue des sourds, which is a reflection of the narrator's distraught mind.

To make "Bellerophoniad" more emblematic of its hero's failure, Barth intentionally turns it into a "shaggy-Chimera" story that feeds itself on all kinds of other stories. Barth's "starved monster" swallows all the books Barth has written and indiscriminately grinds everything into its own narrative. Like Ambrose, Bellerophon finds himself at the age of eighteen in a jungle with its "labyrinth of paths" and "gray rats and blackbirds decomposed, by schoolboys done to death" (CH. 161). He imagines an affair with Anteia which is similar to Jake Horner's affair with Rennie. The morning after, he is "weatherless, et cetera; remorseful," and Antea is forced by her husband to "repeat the adultery" and considers "suicide and

abortion" (CH.194). In this intertextual mix Barth talks at length about The Sot-Weed Factor, Giles Goat-Boy, and Lost in the Funhouse. Also, Polyeidus, a version of the Old Man of the Sea, turns into a letter addressed to King George of England by Napoleon, who, like Bellerophon and Perseus, is also planning to "make a Second Return" (CH.245). One of Napoleon's frigates is called "H.M.S Bellerophon" (CH.242). Also, the novella frames a letter Bray writes to Todd Andrews concerning the "Reapplication for renewal of Tidewater Foundation Grant for Reconstruction of Lilydale Computer Facility for Second Phase of Composition of Revolutionary novel Notes" (CH.246). Again in an insane hybridization, Merope, the Minstrel's nymph from "Anonymiad" is coupled with Jerome Bray from the not-yet written Letters.

By wilfully writing a "flawed" novella, Barth surely demonstrates a peculiar kind of integrity, but he also plays a dangerous game. He commands respect for being brave enough to go the whole hog in his illustration of his innovative views on fiction writing, but he can also tax the reader with his intentional excesses.

"Dunyazadiad" is aesthetically more appealing than "Bellerophoniad." In his shortest novella Barth pushes his experimentation with framing to its utmost limits without indulging in the excesses which blemish "Bellerophoniad." Although "Dunyazadiad" is shorter than the other two novellas, it exemplifies Barth's most radical use of the frame-tale

device. It is of course "a reorchestration of one of [his] favorite stories in the world: the frame-story of The Thousand and One Nights" (F,B. 135). In his forties Barth finally confronts his beloved Scheherazade, the woman he has been courting since his early twenties. "Dunyazadiad" is thus the consummation of Barth's "endless love affair...with one of the most splendid women and storytellers ever" (F.B. 98). He meets his Scheherazade on her own territory by writing himself into her own story, breaking all spatial and temporal barriers to slip into the past in the form of a bald, bespectacled, forty-year old genie to provide the distraught maiden with a solution to her deadly predicament by recounting to her her own stories which he has read in The Arabian Nights. By coming to Scheherazade's rescue, Barth repays an old debt to the storyteller who has always come to his, the muse who has been feeding his imagination since the beginning of his writing career. In "Tales Within Tales Within Tales," Barth wistfully says, "How I wish that that fantasy were a fact: that I could be that genie, and meet and speak with the talented, wise, and beautiful Scheherazade" (F.B. 220).

Barth heaps more praise on Scheherazade in the novella itself. Dunyazad explains to Shah Zamane that the Genie has told her that

> he'd contracted a passion for Scheherazade upon first reading the tales she beguiled King Shahryar with, and had sustained that passion so powerfully ever since that his love affairs with other, "real" women seemed to him by comparison unreal, his two-

> decade marriage but a prolonged infidelity to her, his own fiction mere mimicries, pallid counterfeits of the authentic treasure of her Thousand and One Nights (CH. 12).

The Genie goes on to confirm in his passionate overtures that "Should one appear to him and offer him three wishes, he'd be unable to summon more than two, inasmuch as his first--to have live converse with the storyteller he'd loved best and longest--had already been granted" (CH. 17). Barth, as a rule dry and cynical, waxes romantic in this novella whose narrative is serene, warm and relaxed, especially by comparison with "Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad."

"Dunyazadiad" recreates in a nutshell the magic of The Arabian Nights. It represents a self-mimetic fictional universe more concerned with its own narrative processes than with any reality outside its confines. The frame-tale device is then both the method of composition which governs the novella and its subject matter as well. The subject of a frame-story is storytelling, as we recall, and fictional frames in general draw attention to the supremacy of the narrative act. If even in its conventional use, framing is meant to endow the work, be it a novel, a painting, or a film, with aesthetic detachment that distances it from the "extradiegetic" world surrounding it, in "Dunyazadiad," as well as the other two novellas, framing is used in such an unconventional fashion, with serial frames and concentric tales within tales, that the only perceivable reality is the

reality of the text. The narrative, so abysmally buried under the numerous frames, is as close to the art pur in the Mallarmean sense as a text can get. Instead of being a mere "auxiliary component of narration--a vestibule where we hang a coat or leave an umbrella before entering the main hall,"[11] as Linda Dittmar says of the conventional frame, the frame in "Dunyazadiad" becomes so self-referential that it swallows what it is supposed to enclose. In other words, instead of being at the periphery, the frame sits at the privileged center of the work and becomes the work itself.

Barth realizes this narrative tour de force by framing the story "from inside." Dunyazade reports that in their sophisticated discussion of narrative techniques the Genie and Scheherazade "speculated endlessly on such questions as whether

a story might imaginably be framed from inside, as it were, so that the usual relation between container and contained would be reversed and paradoxically reversible" (CH. 24). This reversal is precisely what Barth pulls off in "Dunyazadiad," but the idea had been gestating in his mind at least since the publication of "The Literature of Exhaustion" where, speaking of Borges, he says

> One of the more frequent literary allusions is to the 602nd night in a certain edition of The 1001 Nights, when owing to a copyist error, Scheherazade

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[11] Linda Dittmar, "Fashioning and Re-fashioning: Framing Narratives in the Novel and film." Mosaic, 16 (1982): 115.

> begins to tell the king the story of the 1001 nights, from the beginning. Happily the King interrupts; if he didn't, there'd be no 603rd night ever, and while this would solve Scheherazade's problem, it would put the "outside" author in a bind. (F.B. 73)

Barth goes on to say that "Borges is interested in the 602nd night because it's an instance of the story-within-story turned back on itself" (F.B. 73). Barth is referring to a passage in Borges' "The Partial Magic of the Quixote":

> No interpolation is more disturbing than that of the six hundred and second night, most magical of all. On this night, the king hears from the queen's mouth her own story. He hears the initial story, which includes all the others, which--monstrously--includes itself.... If the queen continues, the king will sit still and listen forever to the truncated version of The Arabian Nights, henceforth infinite and circular.[12]

Borges' whimsical comment has not escaped Todorov, who in his "Hommes-récits," refers to the infolding Borges speaks of as a case of self-embedding: "Le procédé d'enchâssement arrive à son apogée avec l'auto-enchâssement, c'est-à-dire lorsque l'histoire enchâssante se trouve, à quelque cinquième ou sixième degré, enchâssée par elle même."[13] The incident Borges describes is a figment of his imagination. As Barth

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[12] Borges, "The Partial Magic of the Quixote," Labyrinths (New York: New Directions, 1964) 96.

[13] Tzvetan Todorov, Poétique de la Prose (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971) 39.
"Embedding reaches its apogee with the process of self-embedding, that is, when the embedding story happens to be, at some fifth or sixth degree, embedded by itself." (The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) 72.

points out, "Borges dreamed this whole thing up; the business he mentions isn't in any edition of The 1001 Nights I've been able to consult. Not yet anyhow" (F.B. 73). Borges' dream becomes reality in "Dunyazadiad," in which Barth realizes self-embedding by framing the story "from inside."

Barth makes this involuted configuration possible by bringing his counterpart, the Genie, from outside and seating him at the privileged center of the story from where he can provide Scheherazade "from the future with these stories from the past" (CH. 15). From this vantage point, the Genie and Scheherazade can discuss critically and make emendations to the frame-tale of The Arabian Nights in which Scheherazade is introduced by an omniscient narrator in the initial story, "The Story of King Shahryar and his Brother." Had the Genie, whose "own pen...had just about run dry" (CH. 9), set out to write a new version of The Arabian Nights or, for that matter, the 1002nd night in order to palliate creative exhaustion, the framing method would have been a conventional one. The frame-tale exposing the Genie's difficult circumstances would justify and lead to his reorchestration of The Arabian Nights the same way storytelling is justified by the pilgrimage in Canterbury Tales or by the retreat from the plague in The Decameron. Unlike these conventionally framed tales, "Dunyazadiad" has a much more complicated design. Its framing method is compounded by the Barth-like Genie's movement through time and space from the Maryland Marshes to

Scheherazade's boudoir to tell her her own stories and discuss with her the difficult enterprise she is about to embark on. Barth occupies two important positions in the book; he tells the story from outside as the author of "Dunyazadiad" and from the inside as the forty-year old bald genie from Maryland who provides Scheherazade and Dunyazade with the stories they tell.

The upshot is a story whose narrative space is two-dimensional like the surface of a Moebius strip with both l'envers et l'endroit at the open and endlessly mirroring each other. This reversal creates a new configuration with unlimited narrative possibilities that allows the telling of the frame-tale of The Arabian Nights almost one thousand and one times. Barth is obviously aware that self-embedding is "a literary illustration of the regressus in infinitum"" (F.B. 73). Thus, the truncated version of The Arabian Nights is told many times and could have been deployed ad infinitum, had Barth chosen to do so. By squatting at the nucleus of the novella, the Genie triggers numerous narratives which he sends concatenating in all directions. In the highly architectonic structure of "Dunyazadiad," one can hardly account for the framing technique, as frames frame themselves and other frames and as framed tales devour their own frames in an ever-revolving movement. At one point in the novella, when the Genie, to the two sisters' dismay, has exhausted all the stories from The Arabian Nights with which Scheherazade has

been keeping the King's murderous policy at bay, he, monstrously enough, begins to tell them about his work in progress which also happens to be the very "Dunyazadiad" we are reading, in which the two sisters are mere fictional characters. The Genie says, "The two I've finished have to do with mythic heroes;...the third I am just in the middle of" (CH. 28). What makes the image more disturbing is Dunyazade's desperate entreaty that the Genie give them that same story: "Don't desert us, friend; give Sherry that story you're working on now, and you may do anything you like" (CH. 28). Since the work is involuted to a dizzying degree, and its endless deployment of The Arabian Nights already an illustration of the regressus in infinitum, one would surely invite madness by imagining what "Dunyazadiad" would have been like had the Genie obliged Dunyazad by telling her the novella we are reading.

Everybody is telling stories to everybody else in this fictional universe. The Genie tells The Arabian Nights to Dunyazad and Scheherazade, which Scheherazade tells King Shahryar, which he tells his brother Shah Zamane, which Dunyazade tells Shah Zamane, which he in his turn tells Dunyazade. In other words, Barth's "Dunyazadiad" frames the story which Dunyazad tells Shah Zamane, which frames the story of Scheherazade, which frames the story of the Genie, which frames the story of The 1001 Nights told to the two sisters by the genie, which obliquely frames Scheherazade's telling of

the actual stories from The 1001 Nights and the story Shah Zamane tells Dunyazade as well. In this narrative "madness," the frame-tale of The 1001 Nights is incessantly curling on itself as it is told over and over again by different characters from different perspectives. Barth, who in his concern with the "usedupness" of literary modes wrote new fictional works such as The Sot-Weed Factor by parodying old fictional forms, goes one step further in Chimera (as well as in Giles and Lost in the Funhouse) by deploying the very same story over and over again. Indeed he remembers the lesson learnt from Borges, whose decadent hero Menard ends up writing an original work of literature by simply reproducing Cervantes' masterpiece. Barth says that, "The idea has considerable intellectual validity," because it suggests, "the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessity, of writing original works of literature" (F.B. 69). A story as delightful as "Dunyazadiad" surely validates Borges' view and Barth's endorsement of it, however outlandish the view may sound.

The endless telling and retelling of the same tale from different perspectives is for Barth as viable as creating "original" stories. In "Dunyazadiad," as well as in most of Barth's fiction, this use of multiple focalization operates as a narrative-generating mechanism. Ricardou says in this context that "c'est à partir de lui même que le texte

prolifére; il écrit en imitant ce qu'il lit."[14] "The Story of the Ifrit and the Maiden" is an apt illustration of the process of production du texte, as Structuralists like to name it. The story is first told by Dunyazade, who explains that Scheherazade's

> ...favorite story is about some pig of an ifrit who steals a girl away on her wedding night, puts her in a treasure-casket locked with seven steel padlocks, puts the casket in a crystal coffer, and puts the coffer on the bottom of the ocean, so that nobody except himself can have her. (CH. 5)

The story, itself a metaphor for the technique governing the novella as it is indeed a graphic analogue of its abysmally paradigmatic structure, is told again, this time obliquely by the genie as he tells the two sisters about the two kings' encounter with the Ifrit's maiden in the wilderness. Once again, in his own version of the frame-story of The Arabian Nights, Shah Zamane picks up the same story and elaborates on it by mentioning the part he and his brother played in it:

> One day as we were wandering in the marshes, far from the paths of men, devouring our own souls, we saw what we thought was a waterspout coming up the bay, and climbed a loblolly pine for safety. It turned out to be that famous ifrit of your sister's story. (CH. 43)

One is to assume of course that the Genie tells the same story at least three times in the novella he is working on back in Maryland when he is not in the company of Scheherazade and her

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[14] Jean Ricardou, Poétique 4 (1970): 128. "The text proliferates from within itself: it writes itself by imitating what it is reading." [my trans.]

sibling.

Barth's "Dunyazadiad" almost begins where The 1001 Nights ends. Dunyazade opens her narrative with the formula, "At this point I interrupted my sister as usual to say, 'You have a way with words, Scheherazade. This is the thousandth night I've sat at the foot of your bed while you and the King made love and you told him stories'" (CH. 3). Then the story doubles back to the very beginning, spans retrospectively all the events that have taken place since the first night, only to come full circle closing the frame with Dunyazad saying again, "Thus we came to the thousandth night, the thousandth morning and afternoon, the thousandth dipping of Sherry's quill and invocation of the magic key" (CH. 28). Like many narratives which are grounded in orality or at least seem to have a memory of an oral past, "Dunyazadiad" has a circular structure, which links it with such varied works as The Odyssey, Wuthering Heights, "A Rose for Emily," and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. All these works find their end in their beginning, as they start by relating events that occur at the closing of the story, circle back to their remote narrative past only to catch up with themselves and almost end where they have started.

One suspects, however, when Dunyazade's story catches up with itself and comes full circle, that the denouement of Barth's story may not be the denouement of The Arabian Nights. For one thing Barth's feminist heroine is more conscious of

the unfairness of patriarchy and thus less likely to settle for a quiet life with the King until they are overtaken by "the Destroyer of Delights" than the Scheherazade of the original work. In this new situation, all the stories which were left unfinished as they were told up to the thousandth night are brought to a disconcerting standstill by the possibility of a dramatic reversal. The story that Dunyazad tells Shah Zamane and the concentric stories within it, including the story the Genie is working on since it is not finished yet, come to a halt by the unexpected possibility of a dramatic "turning of tables." Only when an impersonal authorial voice takes over the narrative in Part III of the novella do the preceding stories explode like "a string of firecrackers," to use Barth's phrase. The last frame triggers the denouement of all the other layers which were left in suspense, and in the process reestablishes the authority of the original 1001 Nights instead of subverting it as the narrator for a moment threatened to do. What happens in "Dunyazadiad" is in keeping with a narrative strategy in which "the inner tales bear operatively upon the plot or plots of the outer ones, perhaps even precipitating their several complications, climaxes, denouements" (F.B. 232).

Barth realizes in "Dunyazadiad" what Scheherazade and the Genie speculate about when they consider the possibility of conceiving "seven concentric stories-within-stories, so arranged that the climax of the innermost would precipitate

that of the next tale out, and that of the next, et cetera, like a string of firecrackers or the chains of orgasms that Shahryar could sometimes set my sister catenating" (CH. 24). And by doing so Barth reaches a narrative depth beyond that in any other work of frame-tale literature. Certainly Barth, the frame-tale scholar, had chartered the tunneling of his predecessors:

> In the Oriental literature, we found, it is not uncommon at all for the characters in a second-degree story to tell stories of their own. Where this movement to the third degree occurs more than once--e.g., in The 1001 Nights--the second degree of narrative (Scheherazade's stories) becomes a serial frame within a single frame (the story of Scheherazade). Where the characters on the third level of narrative involvement more than once tell further stories, as in the Panchatantra, we have stories serially framed within serial frames within a single frame. (F.B. 226)

In "Dunyazadiad," where there are at least seven concentric stories, Barth has pushed even further the classical model to realize a more abysmal complexity. Dunyazad, who is a character in the primary frame which is the novella "Dunyazadiad," moves to the second frame not as a character, but as a storyteller, who narrates her own story to Shah Zamane, in the course of which story she tells the story of the Genie and the circumstances of his appearance. The Genie then moves to the next degree of narrative involvement to tell The Arabian Nights to Scheherazade. The Genie's story becomes the ground-narrative for the next frame out in which Scheherazade is promoted from her position as a mere listener

to that of a storyteller as she tells the same stories told to her by the Genie to her awesome Shahryar. Shah Zamane, who is a passive listener, a character in the stories told thus far, moves through all the layers to become a storyteller who relates to Dunyazad his story with "Samarkand's equivalent of Scheherazade" (CH. 44) while she holds his penis in one hand and a blade in another. When Dunyazad finishes her story, which includes most of the other stories, Shah Zamane, who has been all along in danger of castration at the hand of Dunyazad, picks up the narrative thread and tells his yet-untold story which brings all the stories to a climax. The stories are serially framed within serial frames within serial frames within a single frame. And these narrative enclaves are locked within one another very much like the Ifrit's girl, who lies on the bottom of the ocean in a casket locked with seven padlocks, which is itself locked in a crystal coffer. The innermost story unfolds the outer stories thus creating a ripple effect. Unlike the more conventional frames, whose main function is to introduce the stories they frame, the frames in "Dunyazadiad" are endowed with so much dramaturgical power that a story at the seventh remove can touch off a turning point in the narrated events, reversing or at least precipitating the climax and the denouement of all the stories. Once provided by the innermost tale with an avalanche of resolutions, all the outer tales are sent tumbling down like a row of dominoes. Again this construction

is equivalent to that of the German sentence which Todorov cites to establish a homological relation between the structure of frame-tale narrative and embedding in grammar. As we recall, in that construction, only after all the nouns are enumerated does the concatenation of verbs which completes them follow.

One may wonder, and rightly so, what purpose such a radical use of the frame-tale device serves and ask with Barth's Genie "What human state of affairs such an odd construction might usefully figure" (CH. 24). Barth might respond to such a question by arguing that intricate patterns and designs and complex narrative strategies are in themselves a necessary alternative in a world already surfeited with straightforward narrative and that pushing experimentation further and further is a way of rejuvenating narrative and rescuing it from possible exhaustion. Barth has surely tried what no other writer has with the frame-tale device, and it must be fulfilling for the fabulator that he is to have carried the narrative strategy of his ancient predecessors to its farthest limit. Barth points out that

> The peculiar example of the Symposium excepted, we found in our primitive explorations no frametale more involved than five degrees. No doubt there is a message here, a warning, as in Hindu cosmology: It is enough to know that (1) my hat sits securely on the head of (2) a man whose feet are more or less on the ground of (3) an earth borne securely upon the back of (4) an elephant standing securely upon (5) four tortoises. To press the inquiry further may be impious or boring. But one person's caution is another's challenge: Why stop at four or five

> degrees--tales within tales within tales within tales within tales--when, given the model, one can so readily imagine more. Why not press on, press on, like Kafka's Hunger Artist, to "a performance beyond human imagination?" (F.B. 231)

By breaking the "Under-the-Tortoise Barrier," Barth satisfies his architectonic imagination and indulges, for better or worse, his ludic proclivities which he shares with so many of his post-existentialist, post-modernist contemporaries who are all given to bricolage, interested in fiction as process, and who all emphasize the element of play in their writing. Barth, like a good number of postmodern writers, prefers self-conscious, self-mimetic, performative art. The challenging of the old doctrines of representation by Barth and others has inescapably led to the writing of new fiction and to a new rhetoric of fiction. Such a new novel sets out to demystify its own myth by subverting itself, by engaging in a game with itself, and by reflecting on its own processes. Foucault, among others, claims that the reflexive stage that the novel has reached is appropriate only since fiction is made of words and since words are themselves a representation of a representation. As Foucault explains:

> ...l'écriture alphabétique est déjà en elle-même une forme de duplication puisqu'elle représente non le signifié mais les éléments phonétiques qui le signifient; l'idéogramme au contraire représente directement le signifié, indépendamment du systeme phonétique qui est un autre mode de représentation. Ecrire, pour la culture occidentale, ce serait d'entrée de jeu se placer dans l'espace virtuel de l'auto-représentation et du rédoublement; l'écriture signifiant non la chose, mais la parole, l'oeuvre de langage ne ferait rien d'autre qu'avancer plus

> profondément dans cette impalpable épaisseur du miroir, susciter le double de ce double qu'est déjà l'écriture, découvrir ainsi un infini possible et impossible, poursuivre sans terme la parole, la maintenir au dela de la mort qui la condamne, et libérer le ruissellement d'un murmure.[15]

Framing of such complexity as one finds in Chimera also appeals to Barth because of the Borgesian view that tales within tales disturb us metaphysically, a view Barth finds "wise and unexceptionable" (F.B. 235). Indeed, fictional pirouettes, such as authors writing about authors writing about authors, are bound to, if not disturb us metaphysically, at least jolt us and shock us into the realization of the tenuousness involved in the relationship between the real and the fictive. Even the most conventional structures involving tales within tales, let alone the complex ones Barth constructs, draw attention to that magical instant of hesitation between the real and the fictive. Boris Uspensky enumerates a series of incidents to illustrate the clash

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[15] Michel Foucault, "Le Langage à L'infini," Langue, contre-mémoire, pratique, 45-6.
"...alphabetical writing is already, in itself, a form of duplication, since it represents not the signified but the phonetic elements by which it is signified; the ideogram, on the other hand, directly represents the signified, independently from a phonetic system which is another mode of representation. Writing, in Western culture, automatically dictates that we place ourselves in the virtual space of self-representation and reduplication; since writing refers not to a thing but to speech, a work of language only advances more deeply into the intangible density of the mirror, calls forth the double of this already doubled writing, discovers in this way a possible and impossible infinity, ceaselessly strives after speech, maintains it beyond the death which condemns it, and frees a murmuring stream." [Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, 55- 56.]

between reality and fiction, among which are "the well-known attack upon Repin's painting, Ivan the Terrible Killing his Son; the murder by a medieval audience of an actor who played Judas...and the famous attempt of a New Orleans audience upon the life of an actor who played the role of Othello."[16] Barth, who would chuckle at these examples, has similar anecdotes of his own:

> It goes without saying that one generation's or culture's realism is another's patent artifice--witness for example the history of what has passed for realistic dialogue and characterization in Hollywood movies from Humphrey Bogart to Robert de Niro. It likewise goes without saying that what the inexperienced find realistically convincing, the experienced may not, and vice-versa: The birds peck at Apelles's painted grapes (almost the only thing we're taught about classical Greek painting); the innocent frontiersman rises from his seat at a nineteenth-century showboat melodrama to warn the heroine against the villain's blandishments. On the other hand, zoo zebras ignore a life-size color photograph of a zebra--they don't know what it represents--and the Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells us that what we gringos take for surrealism in his fiction is everyday reality where he comes from. (F.B. 222)

Fiction always delights in teasing reality. If one looks at a minutely-trimmed Japanese garden, one hesitates before deciding whether it is an actual landscape or a framed representation of a landscape.

Barth experiments with the frame-tale device for more serious reasons. He believes, as does Todorov, since one does

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[16] Boris Uspensky, A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form, trans. Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 138.

not have to bring a grammatical sentence to an end if one chooses to keep embedding it endlessly with subordinate clauses, there is no reason why one cannot narrate the whole world over and over again by embedding stories within a frame-story. And human beings do narrate the world over and over because life and storytelling are inseparable, and framing which always makes the telling of the next story possible is commensurate with the human impulse to narrate. In Graham Swift's WaterLand (1983), which is curiously reminiscent of Barth's writing, the eccentric history teacher, Tom Crick, Swift's version of Barth's Todd Andrews, instructs his students thus:

> Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man--let me offer you a definition--is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall--or when he's about to drown--he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.[17]

Crick says later about the same subject:

> But when the world is about to end there'll be no more reality, only stories. All there'll be left to us will be stories. Stories will be our only reality. We'll sit down, in our shelter, and tell stories to some imaginary Prince Shahryar, hoping it will never....(257)

Framing, both conventional and complex, is ubiquitous

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[17] Graham Swift, WaterLand (New York: Poseidon Press, 1983) 53-54.

because it arises from the necessity to tell stories, the the narrative impulse in homo sapiens. Once the first story is over, we rush to devise a new ground-situation that becomes the frame for the next story. The narrative impulse arises perhaps from man's vague awareness of the primordial insufficiency that set in the collective memory of the human race since that original chute libre, since the Fall that left us yearning for an ever-elusive reinstatement in our long-lost perfection. Thus if the human voice refuses to be silenced, whether in writing or in day-to-day life, it may be because no sooner had we collected our thoughts from the shock of the Fall than we set out on a wild goose chase to recover the prelapsarian plenitude that lasted only long enough to become a nagging memory in our collective psyche. Thus came language to our rescue, language that we erect against silence, against mortality. Through narrative, and more narrative, man strives to recuperate the fullness he has lost. Storytelling is a recuperative activity, an act of reappropriation. In Borges' "The Secret Miracle," Hladik stays alive only as long as he is working on his project. There is a lesson to be drawn from the panic, the ontological terror, artists experience when struck by creative "drought." No less instructive are the long and ghastly confessions the serial killer, Ted Bundy, engaged in when all the legal ropes had failed him and when death was most ominous. All these human reactions spring from the fear of death, artistic or physical, and are desperate

gestures made in an attempt to cling to narrative as a possible rescue from the claws of non-being. To evade silence and mortality, humankind invents stories within stories or even tells the same story over and over again, by integrating within the same story miniature replicas of itself, as Barth does so often in his writing.

CONCLUSION

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

L'homme du Souk, c'est moi.

John Barth, Tidewater Tales

Barth may well surprise us in the future with further investigations into the narrative possibilities of the frame-tale technique, and his latest novels, Letters (1979), Sabbatical: A Romance (1982), and Tidewater Tales (1987) may only be a temporary retreat before more experimental forays into the narrative strategy of his ancient forbears. However, up to this point, "Menelaiad" and Chimera remain the peak of his experimentation with the ancient narrative of his "distinguished predecessors" (F.B.234). In "Menelaiad," "Dunyazadiad," "Perseid," and "Bellerophoniad," Barth realizes a degree of narrative involution never realized in the tradition of frame-tale literature, outdoing all his ancient ancestors, including Scheherâzade. As it is, these fictional works are so convoluted that they teeter on the verge of unintelligibility. Any attempt to go beyond the degree of complexity achieved in these pieces would make the most patient of Barth's readers balk--a risk that even a writer as daring as Barth might not want to run. Having pushed his experimentation with the frame-tale convention to a level of complexity, of which "Scheherazade herself...would approve" (F.B.234), Barth loosens the architectonic design of his craft, as his latest novels indicate.

In Letters, and especially in Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales, Barth chooses to settle for a more relaxed way of telling stories. However, these three novels do not mark

the beginning of an entirely new aesthetic direction, as some critics suggest.[1] If in Letters Barth tries his hand at the epistolary form, in Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales he returns to the frame-tale technique but uses it in its most conventional form.

With its intricate design, Letters is, to be sure, the product of the same architectonic imagination which conceived such works as Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera. But unlike these two works, which are Barth's boldest contributions to the tradition of Scheherazade, Letters is an epistolary novel and is therefore an incursion into another literary tradition, which lies outside the confines of my thesis. However, even a cursory review of the book shows that Barth uses the epistolary mode to dramatize some of his long-standing concerns.

As subtitled, Letters is "an old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls & dreamers, each of which imagines himself actual." With the exception of Lady Germaine Amherst, who is a new fictional creation, all the other correspondents are either characters from Barth's previous work or their descendents. Todd Andrews, Jacob Horner, and Ambrose Mensch have been respectively resurrected from The Floating Opera, The End of the Road,

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[1] See Charles Harris, Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983) 194; Douglas B. Johnstone, "The Healing of the Self in John Barth's Fiction," Mosaic 21 (1988): 76.

and Lost in the Funhouse. A.B.Cook is the descendent of the Cooks and the Burlingames of The Sot-Weed Factor . Jerome Bray, whose purpose is to substitute "Numerature" for Literature, is an avatar of Harold Bray, the false tutor of Giles Goat-Boy. The seventh correspondent is a Barth-like figure referred to as the Author. All these characters write to one another or to themselves. Todd, now a septuagenarian, is still writing to his dead father. Jacob, still in the Remobilization Farm and still persecuted by Joe Morgan, is writing letters to himself. Lady Amherst, a professor of literature at the mythical Marshyhope University, writes exclusively to the Author.

Among the long-standing preoccupations Barth dramatizes in this novel are the problematics of mimesis and the replenishment of "exhausted" literary modes. Barth's "muddling of the distinction between Art and Life"[2] is even more disturbing in Letters than in his previous work. The capital A-Author, who is presumably the author of Letters, disrupts the conventional mimetic assumptions by interacting with his characters on the same level of "reality." He writes to Lady Amherst and to other characters from his previous fiction, asking if they will consent to be characters in his "Ongoing Latest" (L. 192) and seeking

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[2] John Barth, Letters (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1979) 51. Subsequent references to the same edition are given between parentheses in the text.

their advice on the composition of the very novel we are reading. Some of these characters, who consider themselves "real" and their namesakes in the Author's fiction only fictional representations of their lives, complain about the unfair treatment their "fictional" extensions received in the Author's previous novels. Jerome Bray writes to his lawyer, Todd Andrews, "Requesting Counsel in an action of plagiarism against the Author" (L. 28). A.B. Cook claims having collaborated with the Author in the composition of The Sot-Weed Factor. The Author himself acknowledges that his End of the Road is a fictionalized account of Jacob Horner's autobiographical "What I Did Until the Doctor Came." Todd warns the Author that the story of his namesake in The Floating Opera "should not be categorically confused with his biography" (L. 721). The Author claims that he wrote his first novel before he had heard of Todd's "real" existence and that at times "the made-up story is a model of the world" (L. 33). These intertextual interactions complicate the status of the Author and his characters and have a disturbing effect on the reader. As Theo D'Haen puts it, "By incorporating his own person among these correspondents, Barth either reduces his own ontological status to that of a fictional character or he raises his

characters' status to that of real people."[3] Barth, to be sure, is still having at mimesis with a vengeance up to this stage in his career.

If Barth is still concerned with the problematics of mimesis, he is also still calling for new solutions to "the used-upness of certain forms" (F.B.64) and is still interested in providing himself and literature with "yet another and yet another encore" (F.B.219). Like Barth's aging correspondents, who are all obsessed with renewal and rejuvenation and who all strive to accomplish positive reenactments of the first half of their lives, literature can also replenish itself by going back to its beginnings. Lady Amherst's relationship with Ambrose Mensch is symbolic of a relationship Barth thinks literature might have with its past. Lady Amherst, the "Fair embodiment of the Great Tradition" (L. 39), a distant relative of Madame de Stael who once rubbed shoulders with the likes of James Joyce, Hermann Hesse, and Thomas Mann, has a tumultuous affair with Ambrose Mensch, "a bona fide avant gardist...a tinkerer, an experimenter" (L. 50), the Author's "alter ego and aesthetic conscience" (L. 653). Ambrose's presumably successful attempt to impregnate Lady Amherst's exhausted womb is symbolic of Barth's attempt to replenish the tradition.

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[3] Theo D'Haen, Text to Reader: Fowles, Barth, Cortazar and Boon (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983) 54.

Like Ambrose, Barth "tinkers" with the long-gone epistolary convention to create another ocean of narrative. Whether he experiments with the frame-tale technique or with the epistolary mode, Barth seeks to generate narrative by creating a dialectic between the old and the new.

In Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales Barth returns to the convention of the frame-tale, although he uses it at its most conventional. Unlike Chimera with its complex serial frames and its endless narrative removes, Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales never go beyond two or three degrees of narrative involvement. The opening frames in both novels are straightforward, simple in their design and usher in relatively uncomplicated narratives. Like most of the old frame-tale narratives, Sabbatical opens in a conventional manner with an exchange between Fenwick Turner and Susan Seckler: There was a story that began,/Said Fenwick Turner: Susie and Fenn--/Oh, tell that story! Tell it again!/Wept Susan Seckler...."[4] Similarly, in Tidewater Tales Katherine Sherritt Sagamore kicks off an ocean of stories in a way which harks back to storytelling of yore with the following request to her husband: "Tell me a story of women and men/like us: like us in love for ten/Years, lovers for seven, spouses/Two, or two point five. Their

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[4] John Barth, Sabbatical: A Romance (New York: Putnam, 1982) 9. Subsequent references to the same edition are given between parentheses in the text.

House's/Increase is the tale I wish you'd tell."[5] Because at this stage in his career Barth returns to the most conventional use of the frame-tale device, what emerges in an even more pronounced way than before is the sheer pleasure he takes in telling tales. Both Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales are Barth's affirmation and celebration of storytelling.

Sabbatical is the story of Fenwick Turner, a "bald, brown, bearded" ex-C.I.A agent "between careers" (S. 15) and his "dark-eyed muse"(S. 9), Susan Seckler. They sail the Chesapeake Bay, enjoy each other's company, trade stories, compete in their telling, and applaud each other's talent: "This is our story, that I love; it's our love-and-adventure story, that ought to speak and sing and soar and make us laugh and cry and catch our breaths et cetera" (S. 13). Fenwick and Susan, who are both the writers and the heroes of their story, tell tales and compose them as they experience them. Everything is story material for Barth's story-obsessed couple. Upon seeing a burst condom and an empty beer bottle, Fenwich exclaims: "Aha, there's a story there" (S. 49). When Susan tells her share of stories, she hands over the narrative thread to her husband and asks him to "take it for a while" (S. 179). Before "calling it a

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[5] John Barth, Tidewater Tales: A Novel (New York: Putnam, 1987) 21. Subsequent references to the same edition are given between parentheses in the text.

narrative day" (S. 124); they, like Scheherazade, introduce the story to be told the next morning and heighten its dramatic interest with such formulas as: "What the reader doesn't know yet...would fill a book" (S. 73). Sabbatical seems to be a repos du guerrier by comparison with most of Barth's previous novels. After realizing the most complex narrative patterns with the frame-tale technique, Barth, as it were, takes a sabbatical leave to relish the pleasures of untangled storytelling.

Tidewater Tales, "in which next to nothing happens beyond an interminably pregnant couple's swapping stories" (T.T. 427), is even more dedicated to the celebration of storytelling than Sabbatical. The title itself has an ancient ring to it, which reflects Barth's nostalgia for the old narratives. Like their counterparts in Sabbatical, Peter Sagamore, the "nautical Thoreau" (T.T. 318), and Katherine Sherritt, as their names indicate, enjoy "a cruise through the Ocean of Story," and tell each other and their unborn twins "a thousand and one stories in the naked Bay" (T.T. 90). The story of their "House's Increase" subdivides into a myriad of stories, as Peter and his pregnant wife "stay on the narrative pill and sail and tell stories stories stories" (T.T. 238) until Katherine is ready to give birth. Peter and Katherine, like Barth himself, are aware that "stories breed stories the way money breeds money" (T.T. 579). During their two-week cruise, which

becomes "a sort of narrative scavenger hunt" (T.T. 181), they load on board their boat, which is itself named Story, tales about the CIA shenanigans in the region, as well as tales drawn from the storehouse of ancient narrative. These two admirers of The Odyssey and The Arabian Nights pick up where Homer and Scheherazade left off by inventing epilogues to their "household gods" (T.T. 312).

If Scheherazade's narrative strategy is used in Barth's latest novels in a more or less conventional way, she herself is still a strong presence. Scheherazade and her archetypal situation, as well as the images and paradigms which emerge from her narrative, have become a second nature for Barth. His syntax has become imbued with Scheherazade's narrative strategy; his female characters are modeled after her, just as his sense of apocalypse is drawn from her archetypal terror. Even his sentences are now and again miniature frame-tale constructions. When Fenwick tells Susan about his first sabbatical trip to Spain, he calls it "the story, bogged down in self-concern, of a story bogged down in self-concern" (S. 42). Or, as he puts it again, "It's the story of the story that taught me I couldn't write stories" (S. 44). Susan uses similar constructions in her literary conversations with Fenwick. She, for example, emphasizes the ontological significance of narrative with the following convoluted sentence: "Well, the point of my story is that the point of Poe's story is that

the point of Pym's story is this: 'It is not that the end of the voyage interrupts the writing, but that the interruption of the writing ends the voyage'" (S. 365). Tidewater Tales is also rife with constructions such as "Rick believed that Doug believed that Rick did Paisley in" (T.T. 407). Even Barth's female characters are, as it were, replicas of Scheherazade. In Sabbatical, Susan is "professionally a literary woman" (S. 134), an "associate professor of American literature and creative writing" (S. 15). Fenn's description of his "dark-eyed muse" is reminiscent of Barth's description of Scheherazade in his essays: "You are resourceful, canny, and wise...educated, sexual, dainty, tough, morally earnest, and three-quarters Jewish, an advantage even Scheherazade lacked" (S. 125). In Tidewater Tales, Katherine is a self-proclaimed storyteller with a keen interest in oral narrative. She is the "Director of Folklore and Oral History at the Enock Pratt Free Library" (T.T. 23) and co-founder of "The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling" (T.T. 334). Her husband proudly refers to her as a "green-belt raconteuse" (T.T. 29) who can recite The Arabian Nights, their "favorite book in the world," from her "boundless memory" (T.T. 89). In short, Peter's "fount of eloquence" (T.T. 233) is very much like Barth's Scheherazade.

Tidewater Tales is even more imbued with the spirit of The Arabian Nights than Sabbatical. The myriad of stories

which "enter in Story's log" (T.T. 345) almost all open with the phrase, "Once upon a time." Barth also echoes Scheherazade by borrowing the formula with which she consistently closes her tales, "and on this wise they continued till there took them the Destroyer of Delights and the Severer of Societies, the Desolator of Dwelling Places..." (T.T. 89). Peter and Kathy, who know The Arabian Nights "backward and forward" (T.T. 530), tell "A story a night" because "a rule's a rule" (T.T. 227). Peter's "Quixotic aspiration" (T.T. 472) as a writer is "to conjure an image larger and richer than any books-worth of sentences that sets it forth," such as the image of "Scheherazade yarning through the night to save her neck" (T.T. 317). With "so many stories floating all around" the couple's yet unborn twins "get Scheherazaded till dawn's early light" (T.T. 404).

In Tidewater Tales Barth devotes over a hundred pages to Scheherazade and her book. The Sagamores invite friends and relatives on board Story to talk about Scheherazade and pay tribute "to Arab formalism" (T.T. 536). May Jump, one of the guests, tells her listeners "THE UNFINISHED TELLALONG STORY OF SCHEHERAZADE'S UNFINISHED STORY" (T.T. 572), which relates the tale of Scheherazade's inadvertent transmigration to Maryland and her sojourn with a Maryland author and his wife. The author and his wife, we are told, treat their honored guest, "the absolute boss of Islamic

storytelling" to "a piece composed in her honor and bearing her name, the work of some Tatar" (T.T. 601). When Scheherazade questions her own achievement, her admiring host reassures her that she "embodied the storyteller's condition in such a way as to become a symbol...of something hopeful, of positive value" (T.T. 595).

The apocalyptic circumstances under which Scheherazade tells stories have also become Barth's stock-in-trade. In both novels, the feast of stories with which the two couples entertain themselves takes place against a backcloth of modern apocalypse. If Scheherazade told stories under King Shahryar's menace of death, Barth's characters too narrate in a precarious environment and under apocalyptic circumstances. In Sabbatical Fenwick and Susan sail dangerous waters. A storm "nearly turned [their story] into a one-liner" (S. 12). When they don't "disappear into blinding rain and detonating bolts of lightning" (S. 52), they are "almost bisected by the U.S. Coast Guard" (S. 72). They wince at the sight of an oil tanker nearby which is "a floating thermonuclear bomb which could clear this stretch of Bay from western to eastern shore" (S. 162). They are sailing in the same area where John Paisley, an ex-C.I.A agent, was found dead, and they are also constantly reminded of the murky world of the C.I.A by the mysterious disappearance of friends and relatives. Kudove, the book that Fenn wrote about the Agency's clandestine activities,

got him "into hot water" (S. 175). Fenn suspects that his "minor seizure" may have been induced by "natural toxins" and that the Agency may have "serious reasons for wanting [him] dead" (S. 116). Susan is afraid that her husband might "disappear altogether like his twin and Gus and Captain Shadrin" (S. 134).

In Tidewater Tales, Peter and Kathy, who compare themselves to "chickens on the python's back," tell tales and "strut and cluck" (T.T. 136) in the face of apocalypse. Peter, who "worries that the world may end before his next sentence" (T.T. 406), points out that "Of the state of writers in general...we are all Scheherazades, finally: only as good as our next piece" (T.T. 400). Like Fenn and Susan, Peter and Kathy enumerate all the elements of modern apocalypse concentrated in their beloved Chesapeake Bay. They are troubled by the concentration of such establishments of modern warfare as "THE BLOODWORTH ISLAND NAVAL BOMBING TARGET, THE NORFOLK NAVY YARD, LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE," not to mention "THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE CIA, THE DIA, AND THE NRO." Yet, despite all the arsenal in the area, "STORY SLIDES SEAWARD," and Peter Sagamore "CLEARS HIS THROAT AND BEGINS FOR HIS WIFE'S ENTERTAINMENT AND HIS POSSIBLE OWN SALVATION 'THE ORDINARY POINT DELIVERY STORY'"(T.T. 73).

Like all Barth's characters, the two couples in Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales are aware of the redemptive

power of storytelling. Knowing that they live only as long as they are telling stories, that "the interruption of writing ends the voyage," Fenwick and Susan decide to perpetuate storytelling by endowing their tale with a Moebius-like structure. The novel significantly ends with Susan saying to her husband: "if that's going to be our story, then let's begin it at the end and end at the beginning, so we can go on forever" (S. 365). Peter, who was afflicted by a severe case of minimalism, finds redemption in his two-week cruise in "the Ocean of Story." Before the salutary cruise, he "painted himself into a corner with the Less Is More thing" (T.T. 397) by writing a short story that he kept editing until he was left with nothing but a title. By indulging in storytelling for two weeks, Peter regains his narrative potency, since he, with the help of his wife, ends up composing Tidewater Tales, a novel so big that "you can stand on top of it to change the bulb,"[6] as a reviewer puts it.

Barth may well have given up on experimenting with the frame-tale technique, but all the images and all the narrative paradigms gleaned from his early reading of The Arabian Nights and other classics of frame-tale literature are still part and parcel of his writing. Barth has not withdrawn from the use of the frame-tale technique as a

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[6] Sven Birkerts, rev. of Tidewater Tales, by John Barth, The New Republic 10 August 1987: 35.

narrative strategy and has not changed directions in his latest fiction, as some of his critics claim. Charles Harris points out that "in Letters the reader senses the end of a stage in Barth's developing asthetic."[7] For Douglas Johnstone Letters "represents the end of an old cycle for Barth," and Sabbatical "the first in a new." Sabbatical, as Johnstone insists is "most certain testimony of a new beginning for John Barth."[8]

Barth's latest novels are less involuted than most of his previous ones, but they by no means represent a new direction in his artistic career. It is this unfettering of the device in Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales that makes critics speak of "new beginnings for John Barth." This mistaken assumption stems from two decades of criticism during which Barth has been dealt with above all as a formalist innovator and rarely as a storyteller with a profound interest in the ancient tradition of storytelling. To be sure, Barth's art is technically up-to-date and reflects his preoccupations with new theories of language, but it also bespeaks his enduring fascination with the old fabulators. What has been overlooked by many critics is that the innovator and the traditionalist both coexist in Barth's art. Yet, Barth himself insists that he "keeps one

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[7] Charles Harris, Passionate Virtuosity, 194.

[8] Douglas B. Johnstone, "The Healing of the Self in John Barth's Fiction," 76.

foot always in the narrative past...and one foot in, one might say, the Parisian structuralist present" (F.B.204). Even his definition of postmodernism is determined by his fascination with ancient storytelling:

> In my view, the proper program for postmodernism is neither a mere extension of the modernist program...nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism, nor on the contrary a wholesale subversion or repudiation of either modernism or what I'm calling premodernism. (F.B.201)

As Barth goes on to say, "A worthy program for postmodernism fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing" (F.B. 203). And interestingly enough, Barth's "ideal postmodernist" is not Robbe-Grillet, Claude Ollier, Phillipe Sollers, or one of his American contemporaries such as Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, or Donald Barthelme, but Garcia Marquez, a writer who, like Barth, combines the new with the old, "the synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror"(F.B. 204). In short, "an exemplary postmodernist" is, for Barth, " a master of the storyteller's art" (F.B. 205). Even as late as 1987, he still insists that postmodernism means for him "returning to an emphasis on story-telling"[9]

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[9] John Barth, "The Scheherazade Factor," U.S. News & World Report 31 August 1987: 55.

By demonstrating that Barth is a fabulator in the way the unknown authors of The Arabian Nights were and that like these ancient fabulators Barth uses the same frame-tale device that governs so many classics of ancient storytelling, I have attempted to provide a corrective to two decades of criticism which has recognized Barth the innovative postmodernist but neglected Barth the traditionalist. In other words, Barth is as much of a storyteller in the ancient sense of the word as a writer can afford to be in a post-existential, post-modern age ruled by black humour and self-consciousness. He is steeped in the tradition of ancient storytelling and remains up to this stage in his career steadfast in his loyalty to his ancient mentors. Even the new, state-of-the-art narrative theories with which he experiments remain subservient to paradigms of ancient storytelling.

Taking stock of his literary career up to 1987, Barth declares: "I've realized more and more that at the core of what I do is a deep fascination with the process of storytelling."[10] And this fascination derives from his early encounter with The Arabian Nights, among other classics of frame-tale literature. Barth shows his admiration for Scheherazade by conversing with her, by conjuring her up in his own fiction, by experimenting with

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[10] John Barth, "The Scheherazade Factor"

her narrative strategy, by dwelling on the implications of her situation, and by dramatizing over and over the symbol that she has come to be. The Arabian raconteuse still represents what she represented for him two decades ago:

> Scheherazade speaks to me mainly as an image of the story teller's condition: Every one of us in this bus only as good as our next story. And there is a sense in whichnarrating equals living. We really are alive as human beings only as long as we're still interested in telling anecdotes to one another.[11]

Barth mentions in the same year (1987) that he has been so fascinated by Scheherazade all his life and that he has used her so often as "a compass point" in his writing that "his wife--his most valued critic--may roll her eyes and say playfully, 'Not Scheherazade again.'" But as he explains, such a fascination is a question of "personal chemistry": "People probably said of Winslow Homer, 'Can't he paint anything but seascapes? or of Cezanne, 'Why is he painting fruit again?' It's like music, Who's to say whether three choruses of 'Melancholy Baby' are enough, or if you need more?"[12]

Barth is thus still interested in storytelling, in Scheherazade, and what she has come to represent for him. If the frame-tale device is used at its most conventional in his latest fiction, all the paradigms concomitant with such

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[11] Barth, "The Scheherazade Factor"

[12] John Barth, "'An Antifan of Spy Novels,'" The New York Times Book Review 28 June 1987: 7.

a narrative strategy are still present in his writing. The degree of complexity that this ancient narrative strategy has reached at Barth's hand in "Menelaiad" and Chimera is so dizzying that one can hardly imagine him pushing his experimentation with it any further. Yet, after Giles Goat-Boy, who could have predicted that Barth had up his sleeve the labyrinthine constructions of "Menelaiad" and Chimera?

At any rate I do not exclude the possibility of further experimental forays into the narrative strategy of his forbears. After all, there were times when, to my disappointment, the storyteller of my youth, or "l'homme du Souk," as Barth would put it, would not come to the fair for weeks or even months. Just as rumours about his retirement or his death would start spreading around, he would appear again, occupy his usual spot in the Souk, wait for his faithful admirers to gather around, then roll up his sleeves, clear his voice and begin: "Once upon a time, there was..."

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