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John Barth:  
The Humanising Power of Narrative

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research,  
University of Ottawa  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

January 4, 1988



Linda Cooke, Ottawa, Canada, 1988.

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ISBN 0 315 46735-5



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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Ina Ferris for her untiring efforts as editor and advisor as I worked on this thesis. Thanks to Professor Ferris, too, for her encouragement and her persistent belief that the thesis could be written. My thanks go as well to Professor George Thomson for his helpful comments. I am also grateful to Karen Germundson for her assistance in the preparation of the manuscript.

## ABSTRACT

John Barth's fiction has been described by some critics and reviewers as precious and self-absorbed. They reject his work as meaningless because it seems to them to be empty, self-referential, and self-enclosed. This study argues that the self-reflexiveness of Barth's fiction does not prevent it from being meaningful. Barth's fiction uses self-reflexiveness to explore the value of narrative to the postmodern novelist and reader, and he has announced his belief in the importance of printed narrative as a means of structuring meaning in two influential essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment." The values and principles he expresses in these essays provide a context for this discussion of Barth's fiction.

In his use of self-reflexive first-person narrators and a method he calls "The Principle of Metaphoric Means" (making each aspect of a particular narrative carry an emblematic charge), Barth reveals an essentially humanist approach to narrative. This study looks primarily at Barth's use of first-person narrators, who fall into three groups. The first group--the "Scriptotherapists"--consists of those narrators who tell their life-stories to achieve some measure of self-knowledge and self-control. Through these "Scriptotherapists," Barth demonstrates

that narrative structures are fundamental to structures of meaning and to traditional, humanist structures of the self. A second group--the "first-person, tiresome" group--is formed by narrators who sense that they have no authority over their lives because an unknown Author has given them life by writing them in a narrative. Through his "first-person, tiresome" narrators Barth explores questions of the autonomy of the narrated self, of referentiality, of language, and of authority in narrative. A final group--the "constellated" narrators--consists of narrators who think of themselves as Authors writing narratives which will be of value to their readers. Even as they write their own life-stories, the "constellated" narrators tend to be more interested in narrative as an act of communication rather than self-definition or self-preservation, and theirs is the most affirmative view of the powers of narrative.

Barth's program for revitalising postmodern narrative, announced in "The Literature of Replenishment," demands a synthesis of premodern and modern narrative strategies. In his own canon, he strives for this synthesis by reworking mythic material and by writing "imitations" of eighteenth-century English novels. The study concludes with an analysis of Barth's reworking of the epistolary novel in LETTERS as a way of investigating the kind of synthesis that Barth seeks for the postmodern novelist.

Chapter 1

"working in the first person"

The narrator of John Barth's short story "Title" complains to his mistress that "Everything's finished." When asked to name eight examples, he responds: "Story, novel, literature, art, humanism, humanity, the self itself. Wait: the story's not finished" (Lost in the Funhouse 104). Many of Barth's readers have seen in his self-reflexive fiction his own fear that literature and the humanist tradition which it supports are "finished." But Barth's fiction, like the narrator of "Title," insists that the end of the story has not yet been reached. When he published his influential essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967, Barth admittedly asserted the "used-upness" of the novel, apparently concurring with those critics who were complaining that the novel was no longer a viable narrative form. That essay does not, however, announce either the death of the novel or the death of narrative; it simply observes that the novel as shaped by modern writers is no longer expressive of contemporary experience. What it does announce is Barth's conviction that in the 1960s the novel was in a stage of transition, perhaps even a state of crisis. The casual tone of the essay, however, assures readers that this situation is nothing about which to be alarmed. In the wake of speculations and theories which had called into question accepted notions of self and literature, the novelist's act also had at the very least to be examined. In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth

urges that the questions and problems of postmodern narrative can be examined most fruitfully in narrative itself, and he argues that by writing about the feeling of ultimacy, writers can produce new work and employ the perceived dead end against itself. Barth himself went on to demonstrate this process in his own next work of fiction, Lost in the Funhouse, a series of short, self-reflexive narratives in which author-characters explore their options and question their authority as narrators.

Both the essay and the fiction demonstrate Barth's sense of himself as working within the continuing tradition of the novel. In 1980, he published a follow-up essay, "The Literature of Replenishment," in which he concludes that in his 1967 essay he was documenting, not the used-upness of the novel form itself, but the end of modernism and the beginning of what has come to be known as postmodernism. Barth has frequently referred to his literary apprenticeship, learning to write by reading not only the modernists, Joyce and Kafka, but also the works of second generation modernists Beckett and Borges. Joyce's influence is most obvious in the self-reflexiveness of Barth's fiction and in its foregrounding of language. The parallels are most clear in Lost in the Funhouse, as Barth presents his portrait of the artist as a young man, Ambrose Mensch, sharing many of the preoccupations of Stephen Dedalus. Barth acknowledges his admiration of Borges in "The Literature of Exhaustion." While Barth's works do not structurally or stylistically resemble those of Borges, he shares with Borges an awareness of the power of

narrative to create alternate realities and to reflect upon itself. Barth's indebtedness to these precursors has been the subject of much of the early Barth criticism. In 1967, however, he seems to have felt that the obscure, self-conscious, and elitist modern novel was no longer writable.

In the 1980 essay, however, he acknowledges that while the modern novel may now be somewhat obsolete, the novel itself is not an exhausted form. Citing the works of Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, he draws attention to the revitalization of the novel which has occurred since he wrote his earlier essay. He now examines the genre using a model comprising three stages: premodern, modern, postmodern. The postmodern writer must, he insists, write with an awareness of both modern and premodern practices and try to produce fiction which is a "synthesis or transcension of these antitheses" (70). At the same time, the novelist must be aesthetically up-to-date, responsive to changes in the "modes," "materials," and "concerns" of his genre because these are "doubtless as significant as changes in a culture's general attitudes, which its arts may both inspire and reflect" (69). Unlike the narrator of "Title," who feels that his narrative is possibly outmoded (possibly also unread), the Barth of the second essay clearly sees himself playing a role in his culture, speaking to it about itself. In order to do so, he feels that he must be aware of the tradition of narrative out of which he is working because it has helped to define the cultural sensibility to which he gives shape in his fiction.

This is the conviction which inspired Barth to explore the

traditions of oral narrative, Greek myth, and the early English novel in the works of fiction he published between the two essays. The narratives published in these thirteen years are the most complexly self-reflexive of Barth's canon. In them, he is attempting to discover which kinds of narrative and which qualities of narrative can be made available to postmodern fiction. His attempt met with a great deal of criticism. Influenced by the apparent pessimism of the 1967 essay and uneasy with self-reflexive fiction, many critics and reviewers declared that Barth had given up trying to write meaningful or accessible narratives. <sup>4</sup> Certainly, beginning with Lost in the Funhouse, Barth became more and more interested in the act of narration and apparently less interested in the finished narrative itself, but even in his first, widely acclaimed novel, The Floating Opera, Barth presented a narrator, Todd Andrews, who drew to his reader's attention the artifice of his narrative. A careful reading of Barth's work to date reveals that his goal as a novelist has always been to define his responsibility as a writer and that he has done so by presenting narrators who discover that narrative provides them with a structure for defining themselves. Their discovery reflects his own discovery that narrative as a mode of understanding and defining the human condition is invaluable in a postmodern culture. In an overlooked passage of "The Literature of Exhaustion," he confirms his allegiance to both his humanist heritage and the contemporary concerns of the novelist. The most admirable writer, he asserts,

is one "whose artistic thinking is as hip as any French new-novelist's, but who manage[s] nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done" (269-70).

With this as his stated aim, Barth places himself firmly in the humanist tradition of story-tellers and novelists. But, writing as he does with a sense of crisis and change, he cannot simply repeat the tradition. He cannot, for instance, write realistic novels in the style of, say, George Eliot or modernist ones like those of James Joyce. Instead, he feels that he must determine what avenues remain open to the writer committed to both a humanist purpose and a contemporary awareness of the opaqueness of language. Barth experiments in his fiction with various kinds of narrative in order to arrive at an understanding of the roles that narrative can play in a culture which recognizes that "linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naive illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral conventions are not the whole story" ("Replenishment" 70). In The Sot-Weed Factor and LETTERS, he self-consciously employs the picaresque and the epistolary conventions of the eighteenth-century novel; in Giles, Goat-Boy, Lost in the Funhouse, and Chimera, he explores the use of myth and archetypal story elements in contemporary fiction; and in Sabbatical, he exploits the patterns of romance.

While each work is a new departure, a testing of the various alternatives open to the contemporary writer of narrative, Barth always remains committed to the development of character and

plot. Certainly, Barth often manipulates character and plot to draw attention to their fictiveness, but they remain central to his work because upon them depends the "dramaturgy" which for Barth is crucial to entertaining narrative. "I think that dramaturgy is my strong suit," he has said (Reilly 19). By dramaturgy, he means "that business of creating a 'whole' action in the Aristotelian sense, the awareness that literary works really do have beginning, middle, and end." This element, for Barth, defines the novel: "Indeed the ability or disinclination to come to terms with dramaturgy sometimes sorts out fiction writers from the people whose gifts essentially lie with the lyric" (Reilly 19-20). Even as Barth's works become increasingly self-reflexive, they continue to depict characters whose actions are central to the narrative. The complexity of a work like "Menelaiad" (Lost in the Funhouse) with its seven layers of framed narrative, for example, does not obscure or eclipse the central action: Menelaus' journey and his discovery that Helen loves him.

Barth's position, ultimately, is much like that announced by the narrator of "~~Title~~"

The fact is, you're driving me to it, the fact is that people still lead lives, mean and bleak and brief as they are, briefer than you think, and people have characters and motives that we divine more or less inaccurately from their appearance, speech, behavior, and the rest, you aren't listening, go on then, what do you think I'm doing, people

still fall in love, and out, yes in and out, and out and in, and they please each other, and hurt each other, isn't that the truth, and they do these things in more or less conventionally dramatic fashion, unfashionable or not, go on, I'm going, and what goes on between them is still not only the most interesting but the most important thing in the bloody, murderous world, pardon the adjectives. And that my dear is what writers have got to find ways to write about . . . . (109)

People, the narrator suggests, still lead conventional lives, much like those of characters in realistic fiction, but writers can no longer write conventional novels. Therein lies the postmodern novelist's problem: how to write meaningfully about human experience when the whole idea of fiction as representation has been called into question. At a time when texts are read as systems of signs rather than as reflections of experience, the would-be humanist must rethink his tactics. He can no longer assume that he is the authority in his text, nor that he and the reader share an understanding of what is involved in the acts of writing and reading a narrative.

Barth's solution is to retain the dramaturgy of the conventional novel but to present it self-consciously. A focus on the relationship of character to language and narrative replaces the traditional focus on the relationship of character to world. As Barth told Joe Bellamy in 1972, he is attempting to "have it both ways" (4). Because he uses first-person narrators, he claims, he can retain the plotting and characterization of the

premodern novel and still follow the modernists in formal experimentation and self-consciousness, thus synthesizing the two traditions. He explains:

Now, if you write a novel with an "I" narrator, none of these things that Robbe-Grillet objects to as being obsolete [plot, character, omniscience] can be charged against the author, because they only reflect the anachronistic presuppositions of a first-person narrator, who is no more responsible for them than the rest of us are as we go through our lives. So, such a simple device as working in the first person . . . it seems to me, unties you, sets you free from some of these objections--which otherwise are quite compelling. (Bellamy 16)

In this discussion of his choice of narrative voice, Barth shows how the synthesis of premodern and modern conventions can be achieved. The narrators write as premodernists, more or less, while Barth as author brings to bear a contemporary awareness of the discrediting of plot, character, and omniscience. This tactic of using traditional techniques self-consciously is a development described by Jerome Klinkowitz as typical of much postmodern fiction. He observes that, having discarded realist assumptions about the transparency of language, postmodernists now use "the materials of a formerly naive realism . . . for themselves rather than for the presumed reactions they trigger in an unimaginative readership" (Subversions xxiii). The reader no longer looks through but at

the narrative conventions, and the novelist uses conventional materials and techniques to draw attention to their linguistic properties, to their functions, and to the implications of their manipulation. Their use by postmodern novelists is perforce a self-conscious act, making these conventions the focus, rather than simply the vehicle, of the narrative.

Barth's fiction typically sets up a contrast between the awareness of the Author (either Barth or an author-character) that narrative is composed of linguistic and structural conventions and the belief of the narrating character that narrative is mimetic, transparent. Through this contrast, Barth draws the reader's attention to the complexity of the act of narration. His characters soon discover that narrative does not simply record their life-stories but in fact shapes and determines the structures they perceive in their lives. In each work, the "dramaturgy" of the narrative depends upon the effect that narrating has upon the narrator. And, to make his work even more self-reflexive, Barth then goes on to insist that these characters are themselves only the products of his narrating pen. As a result, Barth's reader is forced to consider, along with the character and at the prompting of the Author, the implications of the act of narration.

When Barth does choose to use the conventions of the pre-modern novel, he writes, as does Borges' Pierre Menard, with a profound awareness that he is using conventions whose meanings today cannot be the same as they were for their original users. The awareness may take the form of an almost obsessive re-

enactment, as it does in the Fieldingesque The Sot-Weed Factor where Barth refuses to use any word not current at the time in which the novel is set. This blatantly meticulous attention to detail indicates a parodic, rather than a straightforward, use of eighteenth-century modes. He achieves a similar critically distancing effect in Sabbatical by introducing two modes which comment on one another. In the midst of the realistic narrative of the mid-life crisis of a typical American couple, Barth introduces a sea-monster and dreams which come literally true, justifying his subtitle, "A Romance." The juxtaposition of the two conventions--realism and romance--draws attention away from the action and towards the conventions which allow a writer to introduce specific kinds of action in specific contexts. Such self-reflexive use of meticulously re-enacted premodern conventions gives Barth's work its peculiarly postmodern flavour. <sup>5</sup>

Through his exploration of various forms of narrative, Barth suggests that both the act of narration and the finished narrative provide the contemporary narrator and reader with structures with which to construct meaning. Barth would agree with Jerome Klinkowitz (who is himself critical of the early Barth) that in times of change and disaster, "reading and writing as epistemological acts are essential to man because they restore dignity and place him at the center from which all sense of reality issues" (Subversions xviii). This is what Barth's narrators discover as they question themselves and their own realities by writing, reading, or telling life-stories.

Narrative (usually written narrative) is, they realize, the model which they use to structure their personal histories. Whether they are professional writers or simply keepers of journals, these narrators reflect upon the act of narration and find that it is in the act of telling, and not in the final product, that they most fully discover the meanings revealed by their lives. The final product is valuable, too--but to others. In "The Literature of Exhaustion" and Lost in the Funhouse, Barth questions the value of printed narrative in a multi-media age, but in LETTERS and Sabbatical he is ready to insist that literary narratives (written works whose readers are usually distant in space and time from their writers) play a part in providing models for the construction of meaning by readers. He depicts several narrators who are inspired by their reading of narratives to act in certain ways and to narrate according to certain conventions. Narrative has a humanising power both for the teller, who discovers self and the world in which the self lives, and for the reader, who finds in literature not only paradigms of human behavior and models of narrative structure but also a sense of communication with the writer.

Barth's canon provides a varied collection of narrators, who fall into three general categories: some, like Todd Andrews of The Floating Opera, write to understand and vindicate themselves; others, like Bellerophon of Chimera, speak to ward off silence and death; and still others, like Sue and Fenn of Sabbatical, move beyond enclosed, private narration to make their stories

public. With his narrators and through them, Barth both questions and affirms the value of narrative, particularly of narrative as it has become enshrined in "literature." In all of his stories, Barth insists that narrating is not an escape from reality into an illusory world of fiction but a productive exploration of reality achieved by examining and acknowledging the structuring power of narrative.

Ambrose Mensch, one of the few professional writers to appear in Barth's fiction, originally thinks that because he is a writer, he must divorce himself from life, remain distanced and uninvolved. In "Lost in the Funhouse," he distinguishes between the designers of funhouses (writers) and the lovers (readers) for whom funhouses are designed, wishing that he could be in the latter rather than in the former category. When he reappears in LETTERS, he still thinks of himself, in the early epistles, as an amateur of life because he is a professional writer. But as he re-evaluates his artistic credo, he discovers that his fiction in fact confirms his commitment to the world of day-to-day life:

5. If one imagines an artist less enamored of the world than of the language we signify it with, and less enamored of the language than of the signifying narration, and yet less enamored of the narration than of its formal arrangement, one need not necessarily imagine that artist therefore forsaking the world for language, language for the processes of narration, and those processes for the abstract possibilities of form.

6. Might he/she not as readily, at least as possibly, be

imagined as thereby (if only thereby) enabled to love the narrative through the form, the language through the narrative, even the world through the language? Which, like narratives and their forms, is after all among the contents of the world.

7. And, thus imagined, might not such an artist, such an amateur of the world, aspire at least to expert amateurship?

To an honorary degree of humanity? (LETTERS 650-51)

Barth's narrators, even such resolute formalists as Ambrose, aspire to "humanity" and a fiction which establishes a relationship between the writer and his or her world. Ambrose is just one of many Barth narrators who discover that it is through the structuring of narrative that knowledge of both self and others is (however tenuously) achieved. All of Barth's narrators at some point examine their own acts of narration, but not necessarily in a narrow or narcissistic way. Especially in his later works, Barth insists that narrative is not only a form for self-definition but also a means of communicating with and perhaps even of loving the world, that world which inspires narratives. By the time he writes Sabbatical, Barth believes that he has found a way to write about what the narrator of "Title" calls "the most important thing." Sue and Fenn display a broad knowledge of narrative forms and explore the usefulness of each in the narration of their own life-stories and, in the process, discover how to cope with the knowledge that narrating the story of their year's sabbatical has given them about them-

selves and the times in which they live.

Through these narrators, Barth goes on to explore how traditional and valued narratives, such as myths and canonical novels, influence the narratives that we use to make sense of personal experience. Most of his narrators have spent considerable time reading fiction; some even model their lives on those of the characters in the books which they have read. The most confident of Barth's narrators--George of Giles Goat-Boy, Perseus of Chimera, and Sue and Fenn of Sabbatical--believe that their own life-stories can in turn provide models for their readers. Believing that their stories might be read gives the narrators the solace of knowing that they can communicate through narrative with other isolated human beings.


Such a belief may be difficult to sustain, as Barth demonstrates in "Anonymiad" (Lost in the Funhouse), which is narrated by the inventor of fiction. Stranded alone on an island for more years than he can count, this narrator eventually tires of story-telling, scoffing at the limited immortality stories can grant. But one day a jug, just like the ones he has filled with his stories (scribbled on goat skins with home-made ink), floats to his shore and inspires him to take up his pen once again to write the story the reader now reads:

I had thought myself the only stranded spirit, and had survived by sending messages to whom they might concern; now I began to imagine that the world contained another like myself. Indeed, it might be astrew with isled souls, become minstrels perforce, and the sea a-clink with

literature! . . . I never ceased to allow the likelihood that the indecipherable ciphers were my own; that the sea had fertilized me as it were with my own seed. No matter, the principle was the same: that I could be thus messaged, even by that stranger my former self, whether or not the fact tied me to the world, inspired me to address it once again. (189-90)

In Barth's fiction, all souls are indeed isolated, uncertain about their existence or their essence, two problems Barth's narrators characteristically raise. They become narrators "perforce" and, using one of Barth's favorite formulae, discover who they are by looking at who they have been, at their "former selves." When the narrator of "Anonymiad" considers that he may be able to communicate through his fiction, he sees a new value in his invented art form. Whereas he had originally valued it for its promises of personal immortality, he now values it as a means of establishing a relationship with his world. Like Ambrose, he is even able to love the world again through his writing. Language, used to structure narrative, provides the only meaning available to this (literally stranded) narrator and to the other (figuratively stranded) ones.

Stories about oneself, as Lady Amherst of LETTERS discovers, can be useful in self-analysis, but their greater value lies in their ability to connect teller and world, teller and audience. Barth's exploration of oral narrative in The Sot-Weed Factor, Funhouse, and Chimera shows his interest in telling as an



activity which heightens the sense of community by including the listener in the situation in which the narrative act is performed. The strength of this relationship is demonstrated by Barth's narrating couples: Scheherazade and Shahryar, Doony and Shah Zaman, Perseus and Medusa, Sue and Fenn, Peter and Katherine Sagamore. These tellers and listeners are also lovers, and their love is sometimes affirmed, sometimes forged, in the act of narrating and listening.

Inevitably, they reflect upon their activity and the role which telling stories has played in their relationships. But these self-reflexive narrating couples lead Barth to a point he will stress in "The Literature of Replenishment" where he argues that the novel must become more "democratic" in its appeal by becoming more accessible and more entertaining--more conducive to establishing a link between the narrative and the audience with which it communicates. His analogy for the reading of a novel, he says, "would be with good jazz or classical music: one finds much on successive listenings or close examination of the score that one didn't catch the first time through; but the first time through should be so ravishing--and not just to specialists--that one delights in the replay" (70). This power to "ravish" the reader is depicted by Barth in the narratives which present as their central action the telling of stories. King Shahryar enjoys Sherry's stories as intensely as he enjoys her sexual favours; Bellerophon reads the "Perseid" from cover to cover without once stopping. Lady Amherst of LETTERS, who is emblematic of (among other things) the tradition of the novel,

becomes its embodiment by allowing herself to be literally seduced by some of the major novelists of the early twentieth century: Wells, Maeterlinck, Sinclair Lewis, Hesse, Huxley, and Mann. Narratives provide Barth's characters not only with knowledge of themselves and the world but, equally important, with pleasure.

Barth himself seems to share the goal of the Genie in "Dunyazadiad," who bears his initials and resembles him physically. The Genie tells Scheherazade that if he could be granted three wishes, one would be that "he would not die without adding some artful trinket or two, however small, to the general treasury of civilized delights" (25). He goes on to explain that he means "the treasure of art, which if it could not redeem the barbarities of history or spare us the horrors of living and dying, at least sustained, refreshed, expanded, ennobled, and enriched our spirits along the way" (25). The role of literature, as described in this passage, is clearly humanist: the readers are to be educated and sensitized through their reading of narrative. But in a post-humanist age, this humanistic goal must be examined and the feasibility of achieving it assessed by the novelist. Barth tries to explore the relevance of humanism within the narrative itself by drawing attention to the assumptions his traditionally humanist narrators make when they put pen to paper or voice to tape.

The kinds of assumptions Barth explores in most depth are those made about the relationship of narrator to narrative and

narrative to reality. They include assumptions about the self and the authority of the self over the shape of the finished narrative; about the nature and role of printed and oral narrative in a postmodern culture; and about the role of the reader in determining the meaning of the text. As a result, the relationship of character to character takes second place in Barth's fiction to the relationship of narrator to narrative. Robert Alter comments in Partial Magic, his influential study of self-conscious fiction, that many postmodern novelists have become "less interested in the immediacy of consciousness than in the art that creates consciousness and that, conversely, consciousness creates" (190-91).

The stories that Barth's characters read and the tales that they narrate tend to illuminate this interdependence of art and consciousness described by Alter. Jacob Horner, for example, representative of the "Scriptotherapists" among Barth's narrators, discovers in The End of the Road that until he casts himself in a role provided him by myth, he cannot recognize who he is. And only as he provides a narrative account of himself does he recognize the qualities (or essence) his self possesses. Creating a self in narrative is a process fraught with danger, however, as Barth well knows. Aware of the limitations of narratives and of their precarious link to the world to which they give shape, Barth depicts several narrators, those whose narratives are best described as written in the "first-person, tiresome," who feel that their narratives have either slipped beyond their control or distorted their very selves. But these

narrators are out-numbered by narrators, such as the "constellated" Perseus, who discover that even if their own life-stories do not meet their expectations, narratives of life-stories do have an intersubjective value.

Barth's narrators generally adopt what Todd Andrews of LETTERS would call the "Tragic View" of story-telling: even if novels, like everything else man-made, ultimately are destroyed or forgotten, we must still treasure them for what value they do have. We must treat them "as if" they matter. Narrative theorists, of course, have argued that stories do matter a great deal.<sup>7</sup> Hayden White, for instance, observes in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" that narrative is not simply one cultural code among others but a "metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted." This sense of narrative allows White to assert that the "absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself" (6). In his fiction, Barth illuminates the two key points made by White: narrative is a universal structure that makes communication possible, and narrative is fundamental to the structuring and recognition of meaning. Barth's narratives allow his reader both to recognize and to enjoy the orderliness of a dramaturgically effective novel and to determine the ways in which narrative makes understanding possible.

Barth tends to favour a particular narrative form--the life-

story. Peter Brooks comments specifically on such narratives in Reading for the Plot. Most tellers of their life stories, Brooks notes, implicitly claim that intelligibility and meaning depend on the completion of a "fully predicated narrative sentence" or "narrative totality." This completion cannot be realized, but the failure to achieve "narrative totality" does not invalidate narrative. As Brooks notes, "the performance of the narrative act is in itself transformatory, predicating the material of the life story in a changed context--subordinating all its verbs to the verb 'I tell'--and thus most importantly soliciting the entry of a listener into relation with the story" (60). Barth's complex narratives, often objected to as defiantly unintelligible or claustrophobically self-enclosed, confirm the importance of narrating as a "transformatory" act validated, as in "Anonymiad," by communication with a reader or listener. Even such a deformed narrator as the audio tape which speaks in "Autobiography" desperately asserts, "I tell" (rather than simply "I am"), in the hope of establishing some relationship with a listener who may all too easily be repulsed. The narrator's awareness of his dependence on a listener for his very existence illustrates that even apparently self-obsessed narratives recognize themselves, however minimally, to be intersubjective acts.

Because he has chosen to write works of fiction which deal with the problems of writing fiction, Barth has been attacked from all quarters. For John Gardner, Barth has failed as an engaging story-teller. In On Moral Fiction, he comments: "Barth

can tell stories, but most of the time he doesn't, preferring artistic self-consciousness" (96). The assumption behind Gardner's judgement is that self-consciousness precludes storytelling, that a story can be powerful only if its telling is unproblematic. This is precisely the point that Barth's fiction challenges, but it is a point that persists in criticism of Barth's work. Jerry Bryant, for instance, concludes his review of Chimera with an attack similar to Gardner's:

People are still reading fiction. That it's too often second-rate only proves that few of our artful novelists are gratifying the thirst of a large reading public for stories about itself--a thirst that is insatiable. I don't blame the public for preferring to read, say, The Godfather, with its egregious stereotypes, its shameful romanticizing of cruelty and violence, its sentimentalized emotions constructed according to the theory of stock response; at least the novel shows people engaged in exciting actions. Chimera is infinitely better written and displays an incomparably sharper intelligence. But who wants to read a novel that is ultimately concerned with nothing so much as the nature of the novel? (216)

Bryant and Barth agree on the subject and goal of the novelist: a moving, entertaining representation of human experience (which, for Barth, includes the experience of narrative). But they clearly disagree on how such a representation is to be achieved and on how human experience is to be defined. The narrators of the three novellas which comprise Chimera lead lives as

suspenseful and exciting as those of the characters of The Godfather, struggling with failed marriages, mid-life crises, political turmoil, betrayal, and the nature of heroism. But Barth, aware that his characters can make sense of these lives only by narrating them, makes the circumstances of their storytelling as important and compelling as the events they describe. Dunyazade tells her story as a stalling device while she plans to castrate her newly-wed husband; Perseus tells his tale to explain how he chose to spend eternity; and Bellerophon is falling to certain death in the marshes of Maryland as he narrates his life-story. The dramatic emphasis has shifted in Barth's fiction from the narrating of action to the act of narrating, but this does not entail a rejection of plot or character--or human experience.

From a different perspective, Jerome Klinkowitz also condemns Barth, blaming Barth and Thomas Pynchon for "confusing" the course of American fiction by refusing to abandon Aristotelian notions of the mimetic properties of fiction. (Bryant and Gardner, on the other hand, would assert that Barth had long since abandoned them.) Unlike Gardner and Bryant, Klinkowitz recognizes the validity of the postmodern impulse to examine the act of narration, but he does not think that Barth has yet mastered the art of writing self-reflexive stories:

John Barth has at times explored the deeply ethical significance of facing one's art honestly, of continuing to tell stories when one's narrative materials were exhausted. But Barth's considerations have yet to be

integrated with his stories themselves--and in his recent works he has told no stories, only speculated on the possibilities and despaired of them. (Literary Disruptions 18)

In his reading of the despair in Chimera and Funhouse, Klinkowitz seems to have overlooked their ironic characterization and their comedic genre. In these works, Barth presents narrators who may well despair of their power to achieve authority over their life-stories (Bellerophon, for example), but he presents them as comic characters, sadly and obviously mistaken about themselves and about the properties of narrative. The narrator of "Title," working out a strategy to deal with the fact that "Everything's finished," has to face the possibility of silence: "Silence. General anesthesia. Self-extinction. Silence" (106). Rather than lapse into silence, however, he goes on to finish the story, affirming the importance of speaking even when the validity of doing so is being questioned. Like this narrator, Barth refuses to "despair" over the possibilities of telling stories.

Moreover, he is well aware of the problem of integrating "considerations" with stories, striving to do so through what he calls 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. ("Bellerophoniad" 212)

This principle allows for a multiplicity of suggestion, for levels of concreteness, and for layer upon layer of significance. LETTERS is the richest example to date of the fusion of dramatic and emblematic that Barth describes here. In this novel, described by Charles Harris as "at once a recapitulation and summa" (157), Barth engages the reader with characters who "believe themselves actual" while exposing their emblematic qualities throughout the novel.

Barth has repeatedly insisted that art can be meaningful only if it draws attention to its artifice. If it is presented as a simple mirror of the world (rather than as a tool with which we construct the world), it is inaccurate, outdated, and dishonest. Only by illustrating in his fiction how first-person narrators can come to terms with the relationship between narrating and living can Barth reflect upon the reality of which humanist literature is a part. The presentation of a narrator who bravely carries on writing or speaking, even when he or she (or they) may be speaking only into a void produces an image which may work profoundly on the imagination of the readers at the same time that it forces them to acknowledge the artifice which produced the image. By examining how we use narrative to discover or make meanings, Barth's fiction helps to define what possibilities for meaning remain in the wake of modernism.

In The Exploded Form, James Mellard describes the process through which a writer can arrive at Barth's position. He notes

that if it seems meaningless to simply imitate a social world, "novelists might turn to mythic or archetypal or verbal worlds whose authority exists outside the individual, either in a , 'tradition,' in a collective unconscious, or in language itself" (138). If these alternatives have in turn been "subverted," Mellard suggests that "the novelist may then turn for subject and authority or validation to the act of writing itself" (138). Believing that a simple imitation of the social world would be a return to naive premodernism (but never denying the importance of that world), Barth considers each of Mellard's possibilities in his fiction. In Giles Goat-Boy, Funhouse, and Chimera, Barth explores myth and archetype in order to determine whether they can once again be given the "mythopoeic voltage" (Reilly 23) they had before modernism; in The Sot-Weed Factor and LETTERS, he tries out two of the time-honoured forms of the novel tradition, the picaresque and the epistolary. He is, in addition, always engaged with the question of language, particularly of language as writing. Myth and tradition are significant for their role in enabling the act of writing, and literary history is central for an exploration of the nature of the act of narration and of the kinds of authority that this act can confer on the narrator.

With the exception of a few of the Funhouse stories and The Sot-Weed Factor (which nevertheless includes many first-person narratives), all of Barth's fiction has been written from a first-person point of view. These narrators are the subject of this study. Most critical discussions of Barth have looked 9 either at only one text or at his chronological development.

By focusing on his narrators, it is possible to identify persistent concerns in Barth's fiction and to define more precisely his narrative commitment. His novels and stories present an impressive range of narrators, including a sperm cell, a tape-recording, a married couple, a middle-aged woman, a middle-aged Greek demi-god, Scheherazade's younger sister, a Maryland lawyer, and a computer. Varied as they are, these narrators tend to fall into one of three distinct groups, each representing a different relationship between narrator and narrative.

In the body of this study, each group will be discussed in some detail. The "scripto-therapists," the most conventional autobiographical narrators--Todd Andrews of The Floating Opera, Jacob Horner of The End of the Road, and Lady Amherst of LETTERS--write private, journal-like narratives to achieve a degree of self-knowledge. Their experience of the act of narration is a therapeutic one; they discover that through autobiographical narrative they can analyse and define themselves. They are confident narrators and rarely question their authority over their texts. Through them, Barth shows how fundamental and natural to most narrators is the ability to use narrative as a structure of meaning.

The power to shape and define identity through narrative profoundly disturbs the next group of narrators, who confront much more directly the power of narrative to control, perhaps to pre-determine, the structures that narrators give to selves in the act of narrating. Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera present

several narrators who discover that the narrative can overpower the narrator and that the narrator cannot know whether he or she is communicating with a reader or not. The tellers of "Autobiography," "Life-Story," "Echo," "Menelaiad," and "Bel-lerophoniad" begin their life-stories with a conventional and naive belief in the power of narrative to mirror their world, the same belief with which the "scripto-therapists" began. But these narrators soon realize with terror that their tales are not subordinate to the tellers. The conventions and properties of narrative dictate the beginnings, middles, and ends of their lives. As they realize that they do not have final authority over their life-stories, they self-consciously begin to explore the nature of a narrative text and the relationships between author, narrative, and reader. As a result, their stories seem to be written in the "first-person, tiresome."

The reader figures even more prominently in the speculations of the final group of narrators. This group celebrates the powers of narrative to make meaningful (even if distorted) patterns out of their life-stories. Readers themselves, they realize that their completed narratives can confer on them a qualified immortality, something valued by the narrators of "Dunyazadiad," "Perseid," Giles, Goat-Boy, and Sabbatical. These narrators, who think of their stories as achieving a value as paradigms (and as having a power to last as great as that of the "constellations"), concerns itself more with narrative as a cultural record and as an intersubjective act. They are willing, as the other two groups are not entirely willing, to complete

their narratives and then to surrender them to others, to the tradition of literature. Like the scripto-therapists, they affirm the value of fiction, but like the "tiresome" narrators, they also question closely the properties and powers of narrative.

The discussion of these three groups is framed by discussions of two individual novels. The study begins with a brief overview of the uses to which narrative is put by the early Maryland colonists of The Sot-Weed Factor. In the many first-person accounts of action which complicate the plot of Barth's picaresque novel, the power of narrative to communicate, to inform, and even to save lives is clearly established. This chapter raises some of the concerns dealt with more fully by the other groups of narrators. The study ends with a fuller discussion of LETTERS, a novel in which narrators representative of each of these groups jostle together, along with the character of the Author, who exposes to us their fictitiousness. Because LETTERS is a re-orchestration of his earlier works, and because it best illustrates Barth's sense of the importance of working within the humanist tradition and yet exposing the artifice upon which the humanist novel is built, discussion of it provides a fitting close to this study of Barth's narrative.

## Chapter 2

"a potent life enough"

The Sot-Weed Factor

Faced with the possible exhaustion of the novel in the sixties and early seventies, Barth's response was to try to revive the form by looking to its roots in the works of Fielding and Richardson and by looking back beyond them to the oral traditions which inspire many of the stories in Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera. By the time that he writes LETTERS and "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth has determined that, if it is to survive, the postmodern novel must show itself to be aware of its roots in premodern, entertaining and democratic fiction. The process through which he reaches this understanding begins to be apparent in The Sot-Weed Factor (1960).

The Sot-Weed Factor is unique in Barth's canon because of its use of a third-person narrator: virtually all of his other works are written in the first person. While impersonal narrators introduce Giles Goat-Boy and provide the frame for LETTERS, first-person narrators take over from them to narrate the bulk of those novels. Characteristically, however, the Author's tale in The Sot-Weed Factor frames many first-person narratives, and the telling of stories occupies much of the characters' time. David Morell has counted twenty-five separate tales within the novel (126-27). Because story-telling and reading absorb the characters to such an extent, these activities

become crucial to the plot of the novel and make the novel a typically self-reflexive Barthian text. More particularly, in its concern with the value and meaning of the narrative impulse, The Sot-Weed Factor sets up the major concerns of Barth's fiction.

As Barth demonstrates, in the late seventeenth century stories and documents had an observable effect in the world. In a time of widespread illiteracy and no mass media, telling or listening to a tale pleasantly passed the moments of leisure at the end of the day. In the rough Maryland of Barth's novel, tale telling joins drinking and whoring as one of the most popular pastimes. But tales provide more than mere amusement: they introduce one character to a character he or she has not met; they transfer news in a country with no newspaper; they preserve the province's brief but vitally important history; they link seemingly disparate events into meaningful patterns. But Barth is writing about this idyllic time in an era when the proliferation of mass media and the birth of the "pop culture" have diminished the apparent value of both oral and written narrative. When Marshall McLuhan announced later in the decade that print had been superseded by audio and video art forms, Barth began to look more closely at oral fiction, presenting stories for tape and live voice in Lost in the Funhouse.<sup>1</sup> But in The Sot-Weed Factor, he shows the important role played by both written narratives (journals and diaries) and spoken narratives (tales told to pass time or to inform) in the society of seventeenth-century Maryland.

Barth's first two novels, The Floating Opera and The End of the Road, while they present characters who self-consciously observe themselves narrating their life-stories, fit much more tidily into the conventions of realism than does The Sot-Weed Factor, which is the first of his works to fit into the category of "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of the Author" ("Exhaustion" 275). This the the kind of work Barth claimed to have written in Sot-Weed and Giles Goat-Boy in an attempt to overcome the novel's apparent dead end. He indicates that he is not simply trying to write a premodern novel; he is self-consciously re-working and re-thinking the early novel. This particular novel imitates the early English picaresque novels, and the Author of Sot-Weed imitates Fielding, to the point of using eighteenth-century diction and blatantly excluding twentieth-century diction. Such pretence, as Barth is eager to point out, is a traditionally sanctioned activity for the novelist:

We have such a long history, in the history of fiction, of novels that pretend to be anything but novels. The novel starts that way. Don Quixote pretends to be an historical record translated by the Cid Hamete Benengeli, and Richardson's novels pretend to be the letters of Pamela or Clarissa. Fielding's novels pretend to be this, that, or the other thing--anything except that it be a piece of fiction! And in the modern tradition we have novels masking as everything: novels masking as diaries; novels, like that.

beautiful one of Nabokov's, Pale Fire, pretending to be a poem with pedantic footnotes, and so on.

I thought it might be interesting to write a novel which simply imitates the form of the novel, rather than imitating all these other kinds of documents. In other words, it pretends to be a piece of fiction. (Bellamy 18)

As this comment suggests, Barth sees self-reflexiveness as being generically definitive of the novel, an aspect of the novel privileged in some eras and stressed less in others. Rather than write an historical novel, which would mean underplaying this self-reflexiveness, Barth chooses to imitate an old novel form, drawing the mimetic tradition to his reader's attention by choosing to imitate a realistic novel rather than the documents--journals, letters--that the realistic novel has traditionally imitated. Robert Con Davis comments that, by doing so, Barth hopes "to clear, finally, a crucial bit of turning room for new fiction, for [his] own work. Here Barth attempts, as do many of his contemporaries, and as have many modernist writers, to dislodge, to a degree, the mythos of realism" (304).

In Sot-Weed Barth is synthesising the premodern picaresque and the modern tendency to parody the traditional novel, but he is also displaying his consistent interest in the relationship between literature and the documents which it has imitated. This interest is most fully explored in LETTERS, but it also figures in Giles Goat-Boy when George eats "The Founder's Scroll"; in "Bellerophoniad," when Polyeidus the seer finds himself turning, not into other people, but into documents from various future

eras; and in Sabbatical, with its fifteen pages of direct quotation from the Baltimore Sun. Barth explores the relationship between documents and narrative as a way of raising questions about the relationship of fact and fiction, life and life-stories, documents and literature. In Sot-Weed the narrative is at three removes from reality: it is a narrative which imitates, not life itself, but the eighteenth-century novel, which, in its turn, imitates the documents used to record life. The relationship between narrative and life thus seems tenuous, but Barth proves it to be an essential relationship, no matter how fragile it becomes.

One quality which separates fiction from the documents which it imitates is the dramaturgy so important to Barth. The Fieldingesque novel appeals to Barth as a subject for imitation because of its complex, highly artificial plotting. A postmodern novel built around a comparably complex plot is perforce a self-reflexive one, pointing to its artifice (given the heritage of experimentation with formlessness passed down from the modernists). In his attempt to outdo the plot of Tom Jones, Barth goes against much modernist and nouveau roman thinking about the novel and the obsolescence of plot. He explained to Joe Bellamy that there are "ways to be quite contemporary and yet go at the art in a fashion that would allow you to tell complicated stories simply for the aesthetic pleasure of complexity, of complication and unravelment, suspense, . . . you would almost have to be parodying the genre in some respect to bring it off" (7).

Barth's use of plot in Sot-Weed is an example of "having it both ways": he maintains the entertainment value of fiction through suspense and elaborate plotting but does so self-consciously, drawing attention to the fact that plot is an element of any linear narrative and particularly vital to most tellings of a life-story.

In "The Novel as Parody: John Barth," Earl Rovit objects to Sot-Weed as empty, a "shallow parody, an intellectual gymnastic, a mechanical puzzle in which Barth can flex the muscles of his extraordinary dexterity" (122). Rovit's comment suggests that Barth has emphasized parody or imitation at the expense of substance or meaning in his fiction, but Barth shows repeatedly the importance of narrative in the lives of his characters, making his elaborate plotting an example of his use of the "principle of metaphoric means." Frank McConnell, on the other hand, sees Barth's parody as having quite the opposite effect, as reviving the novel form itself, "blending and cross-pollinating historical concepts, sensibilities, and world views" (136). This is certainly Barth's goal in The Sot-Weed Factor, and the energy of the plotting and the detailed development of the characters point to the success of the cross-pollination. Looking at the history of the novel, Robert Alter reaches the same conclusion as Barth does: "there is ample enough evidence in literary history that parody often marks a beginning as well as an end" (Partial Magic 177).

Having examined the tradition of the novel, Barth affirms that plot is one aspect of narrative which narrators can ill

afford to ignore. The complex plot of Sot-Weed is based upon the discovery of two important documents: the "Secret Historie of the Voiage Up the Bay of Chesapeake" by Captain John Smith (whose adventure with Pocahontas is shown to be much more lewd than the published version allows), and "The Privie Journall" of Sir Henry Burlingame, one of the men in Smith's crew. Making each element of the novel rich with "emblematic as well as dramatic value" (Chimera 212), Barth uses these documents to remind the reader that the early novel usually presented itself as a "found" document and that all such imitations involve the same artifice that he is using when he presents Sot-Weed as a typical picaresque novel. The plot is also advanced by several interpolated tales narrated orally by various characters, the interpolated tale being another common device of the early novel. At various points, the action of the novel seems to be interrupted for the telling of a tale, but it turns out that all of these oral narratives are actually advancing the action by revealing unexpected relationships between characters and events and by providing information which characters can act upon in the future. In Sot-Weed framed stories begin to take the place of action narrated by the Author, a process which is pursued to its limits by Barth in his next three works, Giles Goat-Boy, Lost in the Funhouse, and Chimera.

Barth's use of framed tales has its precedents in the work of Fielding, of course, but he uses inset life-stories much more integrally than did his eighteenth-century ancestor. The stories

of the Man of the Hill in Tom Jones and of Leonora in Joseph Andrews, for example, are simply digressions from the action. Although they may help to develop the main characters or convey a moral lesson, they are not necessary to the plot, and they have little emblematic value. But in The Sot-Weed Factor, every interpolated tale contributes to the progress of the plot and demonstrates that people tend to see their lives as a series of inter-locking stories.

Through the various narratives the reader discovers, for instance, the obscure parentage of Henry Burlingame III and of Henrietta Russecks; and through the narratives related in the "Journall" and the "Secret Historie" the lives of Ebenezer Cooke, John McEvoy, Bertrand Burton, and Captain Cairn--perhaps of everyone in the province of Maryland--are saved. Identity and even life itself are shown to be dependent upon narrative. Although Barth parodies previous narrative traditions, the actions he depicts affirm that he is not parodying to devalue but to discover which aspects of the tradition still have value. In Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction, Patricia Waugh suggests that self-reflexive fiction, such as Barth's, typically "does not abandon 'the real world' for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover--through its own self-reflection--a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers" (18).

While Barth's decision to make the plot of Sot-Weed more

complex than that of Tom Jones may have been an almost purely formal one, the completed novel becomes a study of plots and coincidences as they shape both life and narratives. Plot forms the basis of the meta-structure used to shape any character's life-story; events take on meaning for these characters only when they are seen to inter-relate. Actions make more sense to them when they are perceived to be connected in patterns than they do when perceived simply as occurring one after the other. Henry Burlingame III, Ebenezer Cooke's tutor and friend, asserts along with the Author that history lacks the dramatic shape of a story. But the characters then go on to experience such incredible coincidences that they perceive life to be comparable to a drama, complete with the god on wires. The relationships which are revealed between Henrietta and Roxanna Russecks and the other characters, who are thrown together with them by chance, provide a good example of how Barth makes the plots of life seem to reflect the plots of literature. Long Ben Avery, a pirate who takes several of the characters (including Eben and Roxanna) captive, turns out to be Benjamin Long, Roxanna's first love, and he sets all of the captives free. Burlingame tells Eben the tale of his rescue of two ladies from yet another pirate ship and of his cavorting with them upon the beach; it becomes clear later that the two ladies were none other than Roxanna and her daughter Henrietta. Finally, piecing together information he has gleaned from several tales, Eben discovers that Roxanna was his wet-nurse, that Henrietta is his half-sister, and that, furthermore,

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they just happen to live in the village in which his missing sister Anna has appeared.

When he discovers that Henrietta is his sister, Eben is led to comment: "What a shameless, marvelous dramatist is Life, that daily plots coincidences e'en Chaucer would not dare, and ventures complications too knotty for Boccacce!" (690) The characters are shown coming to believe that life is much like stories, but the reader is aware that Barth has invented these plots, that he is, finally, more daring than Chaucer. But his point about experience is nonetheless a valid one: average people use narrative to explain, to define patterns in the events they perceive. Narrative is used by gossips, historians, and by anyone who explains how something came to happen. For the listener, too, the fascination of stories lies in how the plots are tangled and untangled, a fascination Barth pushes to the limit in this novel as characters are shown sitting and listening to tale after tale.

Writing an historical novel, Barth is led into speculations about the relationship between historical documents, official history, and fiction. "Plot," in the sense of a scheme to realign political affiliations in Maryland, collapses into "plot," the action of a narrative. Barth the historian incorporates much detailed knowledge of Maryland's past in Sot-Weed,<sup>2</sup> but Barth the novelist plays fast and loose with it, inventing new, fictional characters and secret documents. The net result of his inventions is that he shows actual histories to be as

suspiciously artful as is his fiction. John Smith's published history, the action of Sot-Weed suggests, has foisted deceptions and inaccuracies upon readers for more than a century. In this novel, as in all of his novels, Barth indicates that he shares the view of many prominent historians that history and fiction have more in common than historians once liked to believe.<sup>3</sup>

The value of historical documents is clearly demonstrated by the importance of Burlingame I's "Journall" and Smith's "Secret Historie." One of the ways that Barth emphasizes the value of documents is by pointing out the scarcity and consequent value of paper in the colonies. As agents of Lord Baltimore, Ebenezer and Burlingame III are supposed to be tracking down the Assembly Record, divided up by Lord Baltimore and distributed among several agents with the last name "Smith" to prevent its falling into the hands of his opponent, John Coode. This current document is of great political importance, but Eben and Henry are really more interested in what is written on the other side, the "Secret Historie." The link between past and present is made tangible with this double usage of the paper for narratives of two kinds.

When they discover bits of either document, Eben and Henry read them aloud to one another. They read avidly while they have Father Smith tied to his chair. They read the last segment of the "Journall" aloud to the court assembled at Malden in the last few pages of the novel, making those waiting for the judgement highly impatient. Eben reads it aloud in Chicamec's tent while

his companions, unaware that the "Historie" will be the instrument of their escape, face death. All action in the novel and in the lives the novel depicts is held up for the telling of this story of Smith's expedition. The narrative, originally of interest only to Burlingame and written on the "wrong" side of the document that is believed to be vital to politicians, turns out to be by far the most important document for the citizens of Maryland (who are spared a war with the Blacks and Indians), for Eben (who has traded his by now technical innocence for the last pages of the document), and for the reader (who has been intrigued by the Eggplant Mystery and by how Barth will neatly tie up the plot).

The material written on the back of the Assembly Record is more interesting than the Record because it is written as a diary or narrative. Searching for this valuable document, Eben and Henry visit a Father Smith, who tells them the story of an early missionary, Father Fitzmaurice, piecing it together from the accounts of the Jesuits who set out on a mission with him and from an account given by Charley Mattasin of a stranger's attempts to convert his tribe, the Ahatchwhoops, to Christianity. Burlingame, impatient with the tale (although the story has, unknown to him, direct bearing on his own ancestry), objects that Smith is making up many details which his sources just could not supply. In fact, Smith's reconstruction agrees in all details with the report given by Chicamec, the Ahatchwhoop chief who witnessed the whole event. The congruence of the two narratives

proves to Eben, and probably to Barth's reader, that the imagination and the capacity to use plot as an ordering structure are powerful tools with which all characters come to know the world and their place in it.

Both history and the novel, as R.G. Collingwood points out, are constructs. Both the novelist and the historian, he states, make "it his business to construct a picture, which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters." Furthermore, "the novel and the history must both of them make sense; nothing is admissible in either except what is necessary, and the judge of this necessity is in both cases the imagination" (245). Collingwood here shows the importance to narrative structure of plot in an Aristotelian sense. As a narrative structure, history must follow the rules of the classic literary plot, and both genres, he argues, are the products of a common human faculty--the imagination--which calls upon narrative models for its structuring patterns. The work of Collingwood and other historians who have studied narrative supports Barth's conclusion that each narrator shapes the meaning of an event by giving it a narrative structure.

Father Smith's justification for "inventing" facts and speaking as if from Fitzmaurice's point of view is that "it will make a better tale than otherwise, and do no violence to what scanty facts we have" (387). His comment draws attention to the important balance narrative must achieve between artfulness and truth to reality: it must create a sense of a whole but "do no

violence" to the facts available. The storyteller is responsible both to the facts of reality and to the idea of a good story. Because the shaping of the narrator is so crucial to the value of the narrative, tellers become very important in Sot-Weed and in all of Barth's works. All of the action in any story, whether it be a fantasy or an historical narrative, is filtered through the mind of the narrator and shaped by the narrator into patterns determined by his or her experience of the world and of narrative. Because the narrator is so crucial to the shape of the tale and because the narrator may have hidden motives, interpreting written and "passed down" history becomes problematic for those wishing to sort out the political plots of Maryland's past and present. The two key figures in the current plotting, Lord Baltimore and John Coode, remain puzzles to Ebenezer and Burlingame. Looking at the facts they have about the two men, Eben and Henry decide that they simply cannot categorize the one as good and the other as evil. Since all accounts they have heard of the two men are narratives told to create a certain effect, they can only conclude that they have heard interpretations shaped by the lines of plots familiar to the tellers. Henry suggests that "it may be they are all that rumor swears: devils and demigods, whichever's which; or it may be they're simple clotpolls like ourselves, that have been legend'd out of reasonable dimension; or it may be they're naught but the rumors and tales themselves" (763-64). Typically, Henry sees the value of the complexity and power of stories: legends

create heroes upon which we clotpolls can model ourselves.

In "'What Marvelous Plot Was Afoot': History in Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor," Alan Holder objects to this suggestion that Coode and Baltimore might be fictions as an "arbitrary turn of the screw and a piece of obscurantism, mystification rather than earned mystery" (128), but this is the point to which the novel has been bringing Eben and Henry all along; that is, to a recognition that the power of stories is as great as or greater than the power of facts in determining meaning. As Eben struggles with this discovery, Barth indicates that we can never know the world, only the narratives we tell about the world; we can never know the past except as we shape it into stories which must be patterned largely by our own selection and elaboration.

Consequently, narratives, both oral and written, assume great importance for the characters of Sot-Weed. Most of the characters enjoy both telling and listening to personal histories. Father Smith, the Jesuit, shows how highly valued stories are when he comments, "a good tale's worth a guilty conscience" (385), worth sinning for, perhaps. Harvey Russecks speaks for all of the characters (and for Barth, too, it would seem) when he explains the role that a narrative plays in teaching and delighting its audience:

No pleasure pleasures me as doth a well-spun tale, be't sad or merry, shallow or deep! If the 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 for length, fie, fie! . . . A bad tale's

long though it want but an eyeblink for the telling, and a good tale short though it take from St. Swin'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, that a good tale tangles the better to un-snarl? . . . Spin and tangle till the Dogstar sets i' the Bay; a tale well wrought is the gossip o' the gods, that see the heart and point o' life on earth; the web o' the world; the Warp and the Woof . . . [sic] I'Christ, I do love a story, sirs! (636-37)

Harvey here makes clear the link between the plots of life and the plots of narrative: narrative plots help us to sort out the plots of life. They help us to understand, with a vision comparable to that of the gods, the structures of life here on earth. They allow us to grasp meaning by imposing order on events. As Harvey (and Barth) insists, the story-teller can be as shameless as he wishes in his plotting if he achieves this end. Complexity in narrative only serves to illuminate the apparent complexities of life. But, as Harvey cautions, the tale must never lose the audience: its primary function is to entertain. Throughout the works which follow Sot-Weed, Barth explores this relation of teller-tale-listener further, and he pushes the formal complexity of his work as far as he dares to see how "shameless" he can become before he loses a postmodern audience.

Each of the listeners in The Sot-Weed Factor fancies him or herself a literary critic and, like Harvey, comments on the

delivery of the tale. Mary Mungommery, the Travelling Whore of Dorset, is much given to making astute comments on the import of her tales but insists nevertheless, "'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" (639). The tale must speak for itself, and it may well mean different things for each listener. The teller's role, like that of the listener, is to respect the integrity of the tale itself and to forego interruptions and analysis. This is a process possible in a time when listeners are adepts in the interpretation and use of tales--as they seem to be in seventeenth-century Maryland. But Barth, himself, does not always follow Mary's advice. Writing a novel which imitates the eighteenth-century novel, Barth insists that we must attend to how the narrative is presented even as we attend to the content of the narrative. The almost excruciating self-consciousness of some of the short narratives in Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera develops from this insistence. He is testing the limits of frame-stories and plotting there as well as in Sot-Weed. Throughout his canon, he insists that we may read the newspaper to find out what has happened in the world, but we tell and read narratives to observe the process of constructing meaning, to discover patterns which make sense of events.

In Sot-Weed, then, stories entertain, inform, and explain. Just after Eben has mistakenly given away Malden, his father's tobacco plantation, the man beside him at the bar of the pub (in which Eben is drowning his sorrows) begins to tell him an amusing tale about a man he has left behind on a boat docked in the

river. Quite uncharacteristically, the Poet Laureate of Maryland snarls, "No more! . . . What use have I for farther tales? The pistol now is all I crave, to end my pain" (462). To a poet in despair, tales provide no diversion, and they do not have the power to make him value his life. He rightly points out that tales have little practical use: they do not feed the hungry, clothe the poor, or change the fact that he has been a fool. They cannot undo the deed which has been done, although an artful telling of the tale of his giving away of Malden can put him in a good or bad light, depending on the point of view chosen. While the tale that the redemptioner is about to tell him may seem to be of little "use" to a man in Eben's condition, it turns out to be one of great value because when it is eventually told, it shows Eben that John McEvoy is in Maryland, and it leads him to Malden itself.

Eben is usually willing, even eager, to hear a tale, even though the stories he hears help to strip him of that innocence which, as "Poet and Virgin" he prizes so highly. After hearing Mary Mungommery describe her lover Charley Matassin (who is, unknown to anyone as yet, Henry's brother), Ebenezer finally understands the essence of Burlingame's character:

Your Charley and my friend, each in his way, came rootless to the world we know; each hath a wondrous gift for grasping it, e'en a lust for't, and manipulates its folk like puppeteers. My friend hath not yet laughed after Charley's fashion, and God grant he never shall, but the potential

for't is there; I see it plainly from your tale. A certain shrug he hath, and a particular mirthless smile. (456-57)


Before hearing the tale of Charley, Eben had not seen his former tutor and current spiritual guide clearly. Mary's narrative, however, makes him see and understand his friend in a new way, and each tale he hears similarly expands his knowledge of people and of himself. When he hears of Burlingame's harsh past and his desire to acquire knowledge by studying at Cambridge, Eben reflects: "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!" (27) In a similar fashion, Joan Toast's tale of her prostitution in Maryland and of her near rape by Eben on the Cyprian makes Eben even more acutely aware of his shortcomings and of his inability to live up to his own expectations.

It is, however, probably Henry Burlingame III who gains most from the various narratives told and read in The Sot-Weed Factor. He travels throughout Maryland trying to find the "Privie Journall" of the man who turns out to be his grandfather and the "Secret Historie" of Captain John Smith, hoping to find in them the source of his name and his parentage. Burlingame is introduced to the reader when he wakes Eben from a paralytic state into which he has fallen in his Cambridge lodgings. He shocks Eben out of his reverie and proceeds to tell his life-story, or what he knows of it. The next time that the reader encounters Burlingame, he has become obsessed with finding his father, if only so that he can repudiate and spurn him in the manner of a

rebellious son. At this encounter with Eben, he once again turns tale-teller, regaling Eben with stories of Maryland and his adventures there as he searched for evidence of his ancestors. He laments: "what a burden and despair to be a stranger to the world at large, and have no link with history!" (143) Throughout the rest of the novel, Eben and Henry continue to search for evidence of Henry's parentage, and they find it in the pages of the two narratives, the verso sides of which have been used for vital and incriminating political records. The recto-verso link proves Henry's link to the past, for the political events of the Maryland of his day are directly linked to the details recorded in the diaries on which the Assembly Record has been written. Henry himself is proven by these narratives to be the only man in Maryland who can reconcile Chicamec to the rule of the white settlers. Linking Henry's identity directly to these documents and the documents to the political future of Maryland, Barth plays up their value to the society which reads them. Even though they may be factually suspect, documents are nevertheless the means of preserving history and, through history, identity.

On many levels in The Sot-Weed Factor Barth is testing his medium, stretching the novel through complex plotting, elaborate framing, and self-reflexiveness. When he returns to the first-person life-story after Sot-Weed, it is with an enriched and sophisticated sense of literary and narrative tradition. It is also with a sense of the power and significance of story that he first works through clearly in the depiction of the many

first works through clearly in the depiction of the many narrating situations of Sot-Weed. When Burlingame suggests to Eben that Baltimore and Coode may be entirely fictitious, Eben responds that that is surely a sufficient existence: "If that last is so [if the plotters are mere tales] . . . Heav'n knows 'twere a potent life enough! When I reflect on the weight and power of such fictions beside my own poor shade of a self, that hath been so much disguised and counterfeited, methinks they have tenfold my substance" (764). Fictional characters, Eben discovers, have much more influence in the province of Maryland than he does. Coode and Baltimore, whom no one has ever seen (or who may both be Burlingame himself), inspire fear and admiration amongst a whole populace whereas Eben himself, factually real, inspires only ridicule. He unquestioningly values this power of fiction to give characters being, but Eben takes a position opposite to that of some of Barth's later narrators, who chafe at the constrictions of existing only as stories and who feel that, since printed fiction is no longer widely read, it no longer has power and cannot grant "a potent life enough." For Eben, though, and eventually for most of these suspicious narrators, his own life lacks substance until he makes a narrative of it and gives himself an identity as Poet and Virgin.



## Chapter 3

## "scriptotherapy"

The Floating Opera, Lady Amherst, The End of the Road

The characters in The Sot-Weed Factor unquestionably enjoy telling and listening to or reading narratives. They find that the anecdotes, histories, and tales they share with one another help them to understand themselves and their relationships with their world. Barth's first-person narrators tend to explore the value of life-stories even further and tend to realise, as does Ambrose Mensch in LETTERS, that they can in fact establish a relationship with the world in the act of narrating. Barth's narrators test narrative to see what they can gain or lose by giving in to the autobiographical impulse, reaching varying conclusions. As they narrate, they often comment on the act of narration, on the limits that the finished narrative can impose upon the narrating self, and on the insight that can be gained into the self in the constructing of a life-story.

One type of narrator common in Barth's novels writes of him or herself primarily to achieve self-knowledge, and these narrators tend to begin with quite conventional, premodern notions of the representative powers of narrative, notions which they question, and sometimes reject, as they tell their life-stories. This group is best represented by Todd Andrews in The Floating Opera (1956; revised 1967), Lady Amherst in LETTERS (1979)<sup>2</sup> and Jacob Horner in The End of the Road (1958; revised 1967). All

three use narrative as a tool for self-reflection, and, although Barth increasingly depicts narrators with different concerns after Sot-Weed, he continues to create the self-expressive type he turned to in the late 1950s. Lady Amherst in the recent LETTERS (not to mention the re-introduction of Todd Andrews in the same novel) and Peter and Katherine Sagamore in the even more recent Tidewater Tales suggest that, for Barth, this use of narration for self-expression and self-discovery remains a valid one.

Todd Andrews, Jacob Horner, and Lady Amherst think of themselves as writing diary-like narratives, private documents written to achieve some measure of self-understanding or self-justification, documents certainly not meant for the public to read. The narrative acts of all three can be characterized as examples of what Horner's Doctor calls "Scriptotherapy," a treatment which has the patient write about him or herself to enhance psychological (in Horner's case, even ontological) health. Todd Andrews edits seven peach baskets full of notes into a novel that explains why he changed his mind on one day in 1937, an explanation involving a history of his emotional development up until that day. Lady Amherst begins writing her life story at the request of the Author, but when he does not reply, her letters become a journal written in an attempt to understand from a study of her past what her future should be. Narrating her life story forces her to recognize patterns of behavior and to admit that her life has a certain order. In contrast to Andrews and Lady Amherst, who begin to write their narratives with a

fairly firm sense of self, Jacob Horner achieves such selfhood as he is capable of only through narrating the story of his involvement with the Morgans. In each case, the act of narration gives the narrator power over the shape and characteristics of his or her self. Each narrator also finds that the act of narration, once completed, enables him or her to act confidently in the world. Discussing autobiographical narrative in The Story-Shaped World, Brian Wicker comments: "The autobiographer's deliberate recollection of his memories is more than a search for a subjective inner reality, the self: it is also a search for the world that the self inhabits. And the commerce of the self and the world is a story that the autobiographer has to tell" (46). ~~What~~ Wicker suggests of actual autobiographies is true of Barth's fictional ones as well: his narrators find themselves recognizing that they think of their lives in terms of stories, of shaped narratives rather than as factual records, and that they cannot depict themselves without establishing a context for the self to inhabit. The stories they tell forge a link with the worlds they inhabit.

I

Todd Andrews, for example, presents his autobiography as though it were a novel written by an amateur novelist. Throughout The Floating Opera he addresses his imagined reader, apologising for his blunders, pleading for understanding, com-

menting on his own metaphors, making his novel self-conscious in the simplest sense of the term. Unlike Barth's later author figures, Andrews does not explain why he has chosen the novel form or explore its implications for his life-story. He seems to choose it simply because it is a familiar, entertaining, and spacious narrative model, but more significant reasons for his choice of narrative form become apparent to the reader as the work progresses.

Andrews does inform his reader that the novel is a product of sixteen years of study of himself and that it has been edited from the seven peach baskets full of notes accumulated in that time. The reader quickly realises that this 'novel' is a part of Andrews' larger project, An Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Self-Destruction of Thomas T. Andrews, of Cambridge, Maryland, on Ground-Hog Day, 1930 (More Especially into the Causes Therefor). This work, in turn, is really an attempt to understand the "imperfect communication" between father and son. It is subdivided into three lesser inquiries: the "life-inquiry," the "death-inquiry," and the "self-inquiry" (214), the last of which results in The Floating Opera. The point of the novel, according to Andrews, is to explain to his father why Andrews changed his mind about committing suicide himself on that important day. By writing the novel, Andrews hopes to understand, in turn, why his father did commit suicide. Because he cannot explain himself to his father, he explains himself to himself and to the imagined reader of his novel. As he does so, he learns much more about himself than he learns about his

father. Arnold Weinstein's description of Moll Flanders as a narrative in which the narrator narrates in order to gain self-understanding applies equally to The Floating Opera: "The fiction itself serves the cardinal function of making known the protagonist. The process of coming to know is therefore central, both in the text and by means of the text, and it enlists all resources, those of the self and those of narration" (84-85). As he tells the tale of his philosophical progress, Andrews makes discoveries about himself. As he shapes his various notes into a coherent narrative, he makes use of narrative to "come to know" himself, despite his intention to simply, and often condescendingly, explain himself to the reader. The process of "coming to know" himself involves structuring his actions so that they have a meaning; the meanings he imposes upon his life-story are meanings that only narrative can impose.

Throughout the narrative, Andrews presents himself as the intellectual superior of the other characters who figure in his autobiography, a stance which allows him to exude self-confidence. But at the same time he is defensive, fearing that his actions will seem irrational, that his life-story will seem incoherent, that his change of mind will be perceived as a weakness. Moreover, he is uncomfortable with the exposure which an autobiography entails; he is telling, for the first time, about his non-public, "secret" self and suffers some anxiety about admitting to facts and feelings about which he has never spoken. The pretence that he is writing a novel, rather than an auto-

biography, allows Andrews the distance that he needs to be able to reveal himself: first, it allows him to assume a certain distance from this exposed self which becomes, after all, simply a character in a work of fiction; and, second, it imposes an aesthetic order on the events of his life, ensuring that it is not a chaotic jumble of contradictions.

Explaining why he changed his mind one day becomes a very complex task for Andrews because it involves explaining so many other events and thoughts. In Four Post-War American Novelists, Frank D. McConnell describes the paradigmatic situation of Barth's narrators, a situation which is exemplified by Andrews' attempt to narrate his life-story:

a young man sets out to find the answer to a simple question and discovers that in order to answer even the simplest of questions, to assimilate even the most minimal of 'facts,' he has first to assimilate the immense intellectual history underlying the question and then to solve the even more complicated problem of his own relationship to that history.

(110)

In Andrews' case, the question of why his father committed suicide is the starting point for an extensive reading of philosophy, history, and fiction. In the portion of the Inquiry which the novel comprises, he tries to come to terms with his own relationship to the question and to the ideas he has discovered in the course of his research. A narrative will, he hopes, make the explanation seem simple and straight-forward.

One problem he has encountered as a 'novelist' is that of

explaining the cause of an event. He finds that he cannot explain the cause of his father's suicide and admits: "it became apparent to me after a mere two years of questioning, searching, reading, and staring, that there is no will-o'-the-wisp so elusive as the cause of any human act" (214). Admittedly, he has gathered his peach baskets full of notes, yet he comments:

But it is another thing to examine this information and see in it, so clearly that to question is out of the question, the cause of a ~~human~~ act.

In fact, it's impossible, for as Hume pointed out, causation is never more than an inference; and any inference involves at some point the leap from what we see to what we can't see. (214)

For a rational lawyer who likes to see events in a clear pattern, this is an unsettling discovery, and Andrews writes the story of his own decision not to commit suicide because it involves shorter and fewer leaps than would the story of his father's suicide. As a narrator, he values narrative primarily for the permanance which it seems to impose on the events it presents.

In fact, Andrews makes a decision to omit much of the intellectual history he has assimilated because it is not crucial to the narrative line of his novel. He explains to the reader that he will just present a record of that memorable day, "simply stick to the facts. That way I know I'll still digress a great deal . . . but at least I have some hope of reaching the end" (6). The digressions usually take the form of flashbacks to

events which occurred before the fateful day and which seem to have shaped his character. Andrews wants to avoid digressions where possible because he likes to do things in an orderly way. His methodical building of a boat in his good clothes is but one example of the orderliness of his life. He also files every letter he receives on the off chance that it may be valuable evidence in an as yet unplanned law case. He has kept track of the number of times he and Jane Mack have made love (673 times in five years); he has noted the number of times that he has felt intense emotion (five); and he expresses his decision to commit suicide (and later not to commit suicide) in a series of numbered premises:

- I. Nothing has intrinsic value.
- II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational.
- III. There is, therefore, no ultimate "reason" for valuing anything. . . .
- IV. Living is action. There's no final reason for action.
- V. There's no final reason for living. (218; 223)

As this passage suggests, Andrews likes to believe that he can justify his actions with the use of reason, the principle of order he most values. The Floating Opera is, in effect, an extended justification of one action, presented in a rational and orderly fashion.

Repeatedly, he asserts his firm belief in the value of acting in accordance with reasoned principles. "Don't think I'm an indiscriminating promoter of suicides," he remarks at one

point. "I merely hold that those who would live reasonably should have reasons for remaining alive" (169). In his novel, Andrews can prove that he has always acted reasonably despite the appearance he has given of living eccentrically, capriciously, even inconsistently. The tone is set on the first page of his novel:

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

To prove that his life is logical, Andrews must reveal the inner side of himself which he has never revealed either to his father or to his good friends the Macks. Addressing an unknown reader, he finds that he can so reveal himself, but even then he wants to make the right impression: he must not be mistaken for an irrational or thoughtless man, and he explains every deviation from a straightforward narrative in order to reinforce the reader's awareness of his rationality. He is taking risks in sharing his life-story, but he believes that he can successfully manipulate the reader's response to his novel and control the reader's interpretation of his character.

Andrews treats ideas with great solemnity and, he says, allows them to dictate his behavior. The various "masks" he assumes throughout his life all emerge from his adherence to whatever form his latest philosophical breakthrough takes. <sup>1</sup> Although he likes to think that his actions stem from his ideas, he comes to realize in the course of narrating his life-story that, in fact, he rationalizes his actions only after they have occurred: "I know for certain that all the major mind changes in my life have been the result not of deliberate, creative thinking on my part, but rather of pure accidents--events outside myself impinging forcibly upon my attention--which I afterwards rationalized into new masks" (21). In Andrews' hands, the novel, the act of narrating, is itself an extended example of such rationalization after the fact. It is a form of self-deception, but he has at least come to recognize that he practises self-deception and that self-deception is probably inescapable.

The events which have impinged upon his attention include his encounter with the German soldier in the trench, his near death at the hands of Betty June Gunter, and his father's suicide, events for which his reason had not prepared him but with which it was ready to deal afterwards. When he has reflected on these events, he changes his behavior to accord with his new insight into himself and into humanity. As he tells his story, he can use his penchant for reason and order to select these events as the ones which made him the rational man he understands himself to be. His presenting his life in a linear

narrative makes him admit, however, that the self, no matter how diligent at reasoning, is shaped at least in part by events external to itself.

As he describes these significant events, Andrews often includes an aside explaining what effect they have had on his subsequent behavior. He breaks Mary Mungomery's cardinal rule of story-telling, that the narrator must never interpret, because he is so concerned with his image. Since he is revealing his innermost self, taking the risk of exposure, he does not wish us to laugh at or misunderstand him, and he offers interpretation to protect himself. Towards the end of the novel, Andrews admits, "But now you must know my last secret. In my life I have experienced emotion intensely on only five occasions, each time a different emotion" (220). If he wants to use narrative to justify--to prove--the logical coherence of his life, then Andrews must tell us his secrets, allow us to see behind his masks to his secret, long-protected, and perhaps paltry self.

Andrews repeatedly refers to the three consecutive stances he has assumed in life--the rake, the saint, and the cynic. These are masks assumed, so he thought, in response to logical progressions in thought, but he comes to see that they were actually assumed to hide from himself and others the central fact of his life. Although the number of his emotions is the last secret he shares with his reader, it is not the most important secret that he has kept from the important people in his life. The secret which prompts each of his actions, including the

telling of his life-story, is that he has a rare heart condition which could kill him at any moment but which also might never cause him any problems. The awareness of this condition has been with him since the end of the war when he was quite a young man. But he has kept it hidden from his father and his friends, the Macks. Throughout the novel he insists that his heart is the key to his life-story, a revelation he experienced the night before the day on which he changed his mind:

Here is what I saw: that all my masks were half-conscious attempts to master the fact with which I had to live; that none had made me master of that fact; that where cynicism had failed, no future mask could succeed; that, in short, my heart was the master of all the rest of me, even of my will. It was my heart that had made my masks, not my will. The conclusion that swallowed me was this: There is no way to master the fact with which I live. (222)

The motivation (perhaps even the cause) of all of his actions is his mortality, the basic fact with which we all have to live, although the imminence of death in his case heightens his awareness. Even the impulse to narrate his story (Andrews teases the reader that he may die before the end of any sentence) arises from his awareness that death may bring an end to his life before he has reached any conclusions about its shape, before he has been able to explain himself and his apparent inconsistency to another person. He even has to admit that he is ruled not by reason but by his essential humanity, his awareness of the approach of death.

Andrews is famous in his small town for an apparently eccentric habit: every day he pays the bill at the hotel where he has lived for years. He has never explained this habit to anyone, but it is a reasoned response to his heart condition and proof of his rationally ordered approach to living, rather than of eccentricity. He explains:

I pay my buck-fifty every morning to remind myself--should I ever forget!--that I'm renting another day from eternity, remitting the interest on borrowed time, leasing my bed on the chance I may live to sleep on it once more. . . . It helps me maintain a correct perspective, reminds me that long-range plans, even short-range plans, have, for me at least, no value. (49)

Now that he is writing his "novel," the rationale behind this habit can be made apparent. But recording this habitual action in his narrative also makes Andrews evaluate the success of this program instituted to make himself face his likely destiny. Despite this gesture which makes him conscious of his mortality, Andrews was unable until he felt despair (one of his five intense emotions) to see that he had been masking the importance of his heart condition. As he relives this experience and articulates it for the reader, he is forced to examine more closely his own assumptions about the extent to which he has lived by idea or by emotion.

The Inquiry, of which The Floating Opera is a part, is an attempt on Andrews' part to achieve a kind of immortality, to

overcome the psychological effect of his heart condition. The novel about his life will give his life a permanence and a pattern which the threat of sudden death has denied him. While he lives from day to day, he balances that short-term existence with a long-term study plan. He thinks of his Inquiry as being timeless and works at it "as though I had eternity to inquire in. And, because processes persisted in long enough tend to become ends in themselves, it is enough for me to do an hour's work, or two hours' work, on my Inquiry every night after supper, to make me feel just a little bit outside of time and heartbeats" (50). Writing his own life-story achieves the same sense of escape from time for Andrews, and the telling of the story becomes a more profound victory over his death than are the more trivial events of his day-to-day life. He does complete the story without dying, thus justifying and preserving his personal history, should he die soon thereafter. When Andrews has learned to live with his heart, his story comes to an end. It has been a narrative not just about his personal decisions and the idiosyncracies of his personality, but, finally, about the fundamental humanity he shares with all other human beings--including his father. Although his story-telling only temporarily defeats his heart condition, it has allowed him to understand and explain his decision, as his father was never able to do. It proves that he has a coherent, recognizable self, and leaves few unanswered questions.

Andrews calls his novel The Floating Opera in part because he attempts suicide on a boat so named, in part because the image

appeals to him as an image of life:

It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along both banks. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wait until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it. . . . Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't. Lots of times they'd be able to see the actors, but not hear them. I needn't explain that that's how much of life works. (7)

Andrews clearly sees life as being something like an on-going drama, but he chooses to present the story of his life as a novel rather than as an opera. The problem with the drama is that the spectator can never have all of the necessary information, and, extending the image, the conclusion he would reach is that we can only ever understand bits and pieces of life because much information is missing.

When he tells his life-story, he gives it a much more definitive shape and coherence than the incomplete floating opera would ever allow. He does not wish to mirror the chaos and fragmentation of life, being a creature who desires order in all things. He therefore chooses written; essentially chronological narrative, which allows him to order, to explain and to defeat

chaos. The novels with which he is familiar conventionally have beginnings, middles and ends, a patterning power which he values, given that he wants to justify the apparent disorder of his life. In the end, he clearly values narrative as an instrument which gives him knowledge of and power over his life.

II

Like Andrews, Lady Amherst (the principal but not the only narrator of LETTERS) also overcomes anxiety through setting the story of her life down on paper. But whereas Andrews stresses and values the ordering power of the novel, Lady Amherst stresses its fictionality and is more suspicious of it as a result. She presents her narrative, not as a novelist, but as a correspondent, in a series of letters. As the consort of novelists and as a failed novelist herself, she is more aware of the complexities of story-telling than Andrews seems to be, distinguishing between her diary-like letters and literary "writing." Having been the model for characters in the works of Huxley, Hesse, Waugh, Mann, and others, she is aware of the distortions which can creep into fiction. Nevertheless, like Andrews, she values the distance which writing about one's own life as if it were a fiction can provide. Her act of narration frees her to see herself. It allows her a perspective that simple day-to-day living does not allow.

Stymied as a writer of fiction, Lady Amherst finds that she is loquacious when composing the letters she sends to the silent

Author. As is the case for Andrews, the idea of a sympathetic reader to whom she can explain herself allows her to compose the narrative of her life. Aware of this new sense of freedom she experiences when writing, she reflects:

I remember, wryly, how in the years when I aspired to fiction I would sit for hours blocked before the inkless page. And my editorial, my critical and historical writing, has never come easily, nor shall I ever be a ready dictator of sentences to Shirley Stickles [her secretary]. Even my personal correspondence is usually brief. But this genre of epistolary confession evidently strikes some deep chord in me: come Saturday's Dear J. . . . I feel I could write on, write on to the end of time. (251)

She writes this as a postscript to one of her letters, aptly labelling her genre "epistolary confession." Whereas Andrews shapes, interprets, and delineates a self with great deliberation, fancying himself a novelist, Lady Amherst writes freely, exploring rather than defending herself. In her recapitulation of the events of both her past and her present life, she finds an outlet for her emotions, an outlet which she had not realised that she needed. Not until she begins to narrate does she discover that she has "much to tell, no one to tell it to" (59). Her narrative act indicates to her how very alone she is and provides her with an essential link to her world. Writing becomes an act of communication and a source of consolation--rather than justification--for her.

Freed from the rigors and responsibilities of the novelist's

deliberate shaping of narrative and writing to an addressee who never responds, she discovers her natural story-telling abilities. Like Andrews, she intends to simply report the facts. In the simple narration of what has occurred to her she finds that she can both analyse herself and feel that she has a confidant all at the same time. Lady Amherst begins to write her series of narrative letters at the request of the Author, who is planning to write an epistolary novel featuring a character very much like her. Intrigued by his offer, and pleased to be consulted for once, she agrees to write to him about her past. Reluctant at first, she soon becomes dependent on her Saturday-morning letter sessions. Because she receives no replies--and expects none--her letters assume something of the quality of a personal journal, as she acknowledges by beginning one of them, "My dear B. (or, Dear Diary)" (197). In Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form, Janet Altman observes that "if there is no desire for exchange [of letters], the writing does not differ significantly from a journal" (89). Lady Amherst's letters do differ significantly from a journal, however, because she is writing to an unknown Author who may well use her in his next novel. When Richardson's Pamela writes letters to her parents which she has no hope of sending, she is writing a journal. Lady Amherst's letters, however, while they may be written primarily for the purpose of self-analysis, are shaped by the awareness that, even if there is no response to them, the Author is reading them. She is, therefore, occasionally drawn into explaining and

justifying her actions to protect herself from the mistaken interpretations her reader may make. Because she is writing to another as well as for herself, Lady Amherst must provide background, highlight patterns, offer excuses that she would not have to in an actual diary.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Lady Amherst sends her letters by certified mail so that she has confirmation that they have been received is proof of her strong desire to believe that she has a real reader, an actual confidant.

It is the idea of a reader, rather than the reader's response, that allows her to narrate her life-story. Although at times she complains of the Author's failure to reply to her epistles, she is in fact inspired by his silence to write. Any response would inhibit her, prevent her from relating the most intimate experiences of her life. The Author's silence frees her from the crippling degree of self-consciousness which a true correspondence would provoke. She begins by demanding his silence as a condition of her confession: "perhaps it will be as well--and fit--if, like fictions, these confessional installments go unreplied to: scribbled in silence, into silence sent, silently received" (69). Well into the novel, after toying with (and rejecting) the idea of delivering rather than posting her letters, she writes to the Author, "Your silence has drawn so many words from this pen." And she goes on to note her reluctance to alter this situation by making any personal contact: "'twere pity to break it with conversation" (449). Her comment indicates her recognition that to confront her confidant in person would be to converse rather than to confess. Here she

points to her awareness of a peculiar quality of letters that Arnold Weinstein has described. He points out that the letter writer substitutes the exchange of written words for conversation: "the letter is dispossessed, bereft of the incredibly rich, tangible, more or less reliable, context which surrounds all human exchange; it is, instead, language alone, bodiless, unmoored. It is written in solitude and read in solitude, hence providing an awesome freedom of fabrication and interpretation" (190). Weinstein's comment helps to demonstrate the kind of security and freedom Lady Amherst feels when she chooses to tell her story in letters rather than in conversation with the Author. She can shape her experience into language which, no longer herself, becomes her emissary, and she can invent herself if she pleases. She is even more free than most letter-writers because she expects no reply at all, no checks on her veracity, and as a result she has no reservations about continuing her tale.

Eventually, she writes not only in response to the Author's silence but also to preserve her sense of self: if "I speak at all," she tells him, it is "to drown out your thundering silence, to delay my going mad" (348). Narrative structure at this point provides the only structure in her life and, she fears, in herself. The second motivation soon becomes the dominant one as she tries to understand and cope with her world. She needs to write to explain her love for Ambrose, her subservience to him in matters of dress and birth control, her fear of losing him, her confusion at the reappearance of Andre Castine in various guises,

and her loss of financial and emotional security with the loss of her job at Marshyhope U. Telling "the story of her life thus far" forces her to evaluate it, and she finds that she is dissatisfied with it. Unlike Andrews, she is not a confident, assertive narrator, justifying and explaining to prove her superiority, but a frightened one, hoping to find in the outlet of confession some relief from a past which has left her adrift and alone.

At the age of fifty, she feels that her life has been neither productive nor praiseworthy. On her first visit to the Lighthouse to meet Ambrose's family, she expects to be asked the story of her life, and, with her new-found story-telling capacity, she composes a mental table of contents: "How I was Deflowered With a Capped Fountain Pen; My Several Abortions and Miscarriages; The Amherst Phallic Index to Major British and Continental Novelists of the Early 20th Century, With Commentary" (247-48). Her bitter irony is a direct result of the self-evaluation into which autobiography has forced her. Taking an overview of her life, she comes to this conclusion:

I seem to myself afflicted with at least three separate compulsions: to fall in love with (and more often than not conceive by) elderly novelists; to fall in love with and conceive (and be dismissed) by Andre Castine; and, like Freud's patient (who has a "destiny compulsion"), to wait upon the terminal agonies of lovers who do not fit those categories. (208-09)

In the act of narrating her life-story, she has discovered this

pattern, and she now tries to fit Ambrose into it. She identifies her behavior as negative, as the result of compulsions which place her secondary to, and at the mercy of, the men in her life. Narrating these events, she recognizes their repetitive nature, and she vows to free herself from her compulsions: narrative allows her both to see herself clearly, and to act upon that vision. Later in the same letter she comments: "My whole romantic life, I am trying to persuade myself, has, like the body of this letter, been digression and recapitulation; it is time to rearrive at the present, to move into a future unsullied by the past" (224). As she confesses her past, she frees herself from it. The epistolary confession becomes more than consolation; it is a productive form of (scripto-) therapy.

Unlike Andrews' narrative, which was composed with deliberation sixteen years after the events which it depicts, Lady Amherst's story is told as she lives it, with no known and safe end in sight. As she writes, she does not know what will happen in the next chapter nor if the ending will be a happy one. This gives her narrative a less confident tone and makes her self-image a weaker one than that of Todd Andrews. He used narrative to perfect and polish his life-story; she uses hers to come to terms with what is happening around her. At times, she thinks of her Saturday morning letter-writing as an act of escapism, but while writing about Ambrose's infidelities may help her to cope with them, it does not make them go away. "Reporting the news" may show one's life for what it is, but narration is

for Lady Amherst no substitute for action. On one occasion, when she is once again suffering from Ambrose's infidelities, she complains: "30 pages have not assuaged my misery, only lengthily recorded it!" (390). While her lengthy letter may help her to identify her complex emotions, it also sharpens and prolongs them, and because this event is all too current, her narration does not remove her from it. At this point, even the illusion of writing fiction does not remove her from herself, and she runs the risk of remaining immersed in her emotions.

But for the most part, she does find that the stratagem of writing as though she were a novelist does help her to sort out her present chaos, if not to relieve her of it. She announces: "I even imagined myself ready to kick this habit, my Saturday epistolary 'fix,' whatever the withdrawal pains. Then came last night's dreamlike adventure, which, though I was its victim, I am still far from understanding" (450). Narrative has clearly become the tool she uses for grasping the meaning of her experiences. Thinking her story-telling a weakness, an indulgence, she had decided to abandon it but finds that she needs to use her new-found abilities as a narrator to come to terms as a woman with the rape in the rose garden, which followed from her encounter with "her" Andre. The strangeness of the experience can and must be dealt with through the exploratory and ordering qualities of narration. With no outlet for narrative confession, she would not be able to understand, perhaps even to survive, this incident.

Early on in her experience of "epistolary confession," Lady

Amherst acknowledges the power of story-telling to transform the teller:

Thus has chronicling transformed the chronicler. . . .  
 Take warning, sir: to put things into words works changes,  
 not only upon the events narrated, but upon their narrator.  
 She who saluted you pages past is not the same who closes  
 now, though the name we share remains,

As ever,

Germaine (80)

Forced to contemplate events in a new way, forced to re-live the past, forced to select and describe experiences, the narrator's experience of narrating alters her perceptions of the past and of her present self. When it is successful, narrating clarifies and frees her; when it is not, it intensifies her bitterness. Her experience of the narrative act is thus more complex and more problematic than that of Andrews, although not nearly so problematic as that of some of the narrators of the stories in Lost in the Funhouse.

Ultimately, Lady Amherst thinks of her dependence on letter writing as a weakness, but she is happy to have found the stability which it offers to her in an otherwise chaotic world, a world in which people are not who they represent themselves to be nor yet anyone else either, in which a whole family seems to be dying of cancer, in which a lover has no qualms about making his beloved re-enact his former love affairs. She begins to realize that even if the Author was not receiving her letters or ful-

filling the role of confidant, she would still write in order to make sense of her confusing experiences. She tells the Author: "And I understand, better than formerly, Ambrose's letters to the outgoing tide; anybody's epistles to the empty air. . . . and I need once more to write to you, not only whether you reply or not, but whether or not you even read my words" (362). She now understands Ambrose's motives for writing to an imaginary recipient--a fiction necessary to the construction of a narrative about oneself--as she had not been able to do before. Even an invented reader would allow her to shape her life into narrative. But, like Andrews, she is virtually writing for herself at this point, writing not so much to justify, defend, or prove her sanity as to preserve it, to re-locate it in a seemingly mad world. In her letters she asserts herself as she does not seem to be able to do in her relations with Ambrose, with Andre, even with Marshyhope U.

In The Life of the Novel, David Goldknopf suggests that writing comes to replace living for the characters of epistolary fiction: "The characters project their thoughts, deeds, life, not into or against an existential reality--presumably the ideal of the realist novel--but upon paper. And the excitement in their lives is to a significant degree generated by their writing. Underlying all other passions is the passion to translate life into words" (67). This is certainly the condition Barth ascribes to his Author figures, but Lady Amherst shares this passion only insofar as she finds herself dependent on her Saturday morning letter-writing fix. Narration helps her to understand, but does

not replace, living. On the other six days of the week, she is living rather than writing. Eventually, she breaks out of even this temporary authorhood and abandons her letter writing to live entirely in an "existential reality."

A product of a literary world, she is aware, as are other of Barth's narrators, that events and people are changed in their transmutation to fiction. She acknowledges, as Andrews does not, the fluidity of the boundary between life and art. While she likes to assume the stance of the writer, she still wishes to be able to distinguish her life from fiction:

It [typing her weekly letter with an incriminating carbon copy] gave my weekly confession at once a more official and (what have I to lose now?) a more fictitious aspect: as if I were a writer writing first-person fiction, an epistolary novelist composing . . . instead of a stateless 50-year-old widow, failed mother, failed writer, and scholar of no consequence, tyrannised and humiliated by a younger "lover" as she enters her menopause with little to look back upon except abortive liaisons with a number of prominent novelists, and nothing to look forward to. (378)

Pretending that she is writing fiction rather than autobiography, she can escape herself, treat the events of her life as an invented plot and so not have to live with them as the sum total of herself. Goldknopf has further observed that most fictional letter-writers write in an "attempt to relieve the banality of their inner life, to shape its confusions into a

coherent image, and to project that image as an esthetically processed wish-fulfillment against the moral chaos of the outer world--all through the instrument of literacy" (78). When she writes, Lady Amherst does hope to shape her confusion into coherence, but she is usually ruthlessly honest about her life, and her letters, except for their structure, do not really process her life into wish-fulfillment. Rather, they help her escape her banality by making it other than herself--by making it a story about a banal character.

Nevertheless, she wants to maintain her awareness of a self existing apart from the narrative, as well. Just after commenting on her pretense of composing a novel, she reflects: "The crowning irony now occurs to me: that perhaps you too believe, at least suspect, that I'm making all this up! Fantasizing! Writing fiction!" (378). Despite its usefulness, the authorial stance is and must be only an illusion if she is to find scriptotherapy a successful treatment. She needs a reader who will recognize that her situation is unpleasant because it is real and not an invented fiction. She fears for her actuality throughout her letters, describing the world as a baroque fiction, dreaming that she is only a product of Ambrose's pen who imagines herself real. Her letter-writing helps her to keep her grasp on the real and the self because she is aware that her letters only resemble a novel and because she knows that the story is not yet finished. Barth shows that self-consciousness as a writer is vital to her sanity. Writing as though her life were a story, but knowing that it is not, helps her to keep a grasp on the fine line

between life and story.

Suspicious of fiction and narrative, she yet comes to value autobiographical narrative. Speaking of her letters, she remarks: "They do spell out something of a story, don't they, with a sort of shape to it? Wanting perhaps in climax and denouement, but fetching its principals withal at least to this present gravely tranquil plateau" (560). She conveys here a sense of pride that her life has been so arranged as to make a pleasing narrative pattern. Confident at this stage of Ambrose's love for her, she sees her letters as coming to completion, as having a shape rather than simply reflecting the chaos of her present-tense existence. She sees the narrative's shaping once again as a virtue, as proving the meaningfulness of her life and, what's more, entertaining her reader. In this letter she even gives the Author permission to show her letters to Ambrose: they are no longer the private, frightened confessions of Lady Amherst, but a document apart from herself and one from which she now feels quite independent.

If her letters do tell a story, it is a love story. She declares her story begun when she finally gets around to admitting to the Author that she and Ambrose have become lovers (61). She ends her story with an account of their marriage and the likelihood of her pregnancy. The fears that have made her dependent upon her epistolary fixes disappear when her future with Ambrose seems sure. She warns the Author that should their mutual love persist "and should its persistence (as it may) come

to make these weekly communiques as unnecessary for me as Ambrose's bottled epistles have become for him--why then, we shall be at our story's end, you and I" (545). The security of love--of real life--is preferable to the security of story-telling, and will replace it. Writing her narrative has at times helped her to live with despair, but it never becomes more important than life itself.

On her wedding night, Lady Amherst experiences a vision which she does not describe, except for its effect: it gives her peace within herself and with the world. Even the news of the presumed deaths of Andre and her son Henri Burlingame VII does not ruffle her new-found serenity, nor, she claims, does the thought that Ambrose may one day leave her for another woman. Having achieved this peacefulness and self-acceptance, having overcome her fears--of failure, of loneliness, of madness--she informs the Author that he will not hear from her again. The end of their correspondence is appropriately signalled by a response from the Author, a letter of congratulation on her marriage.

Like that of Andrews, her story-telling has been a mode of scriptotherapy, a process of self-analysis which has allowed her to see herself clearly and to establish, after some grim moments, a sense of self-acceptance. Having come to terms with herself through narrating the story of her life, she can now come to terms with her new husband and once again assume a position at the University. Her letters have allowed her to establish a clear sense of who she is and of how she fits into her world.

Todd Andrews and Lady Amherst both affirm the existence of a recognizable and consistent self in their autobiographical narratives. Telling his story in The Floating Opera, Andrews recognizes that one fact influences and thus unites all of his actions, while Lady Amherst discovers consistent patterns of behavior which help her to identify herself. In contrast to both, Jacob Horner, the narrator of The End of the Road, questions the very idea of the self and of its articulation in the language of narrative. Unlike Andrews and Amherst, he has no one self but a myriad of selves, some deliberately assumed, some which assume, temporarily, control over him. As he tells the story of his relationship with Joe and Rennie Morgan, he doubts that he can ever truly describe a personality, whether his or any one else's, because character is not a fixed entity. Lacking the assertiveness of Andrews and the desperation of Lady Amherst, he is coolly distanced from himself as he composes his narrative, hidden from the world in the dormitory of the Doctor's treatment centre.

Whereas Andrews begins his narrative to meet a personal goal and Lady Amherst hers to comply with the Author's request, Horner is presumably writing because the Doctor, in whose establishment he is a patient, has prescribed writing his story as a "mobilisation therapy." Horner suffers from periods of paralysis, which result from his inability to make choices when he realizes that no one choice is ultimately preferable to any

other one, a malady which Barth identifies (in both Horner's and Ebenezer Cooke's cases) as "cosmopsis." Horner cannot be said to have chosen to write his autobiography, as Andrews and Lady Amherst have chosen; he simply follows the Doctor's instructions. Telling his story, reviewing his past, he does not interpret it for us or tell us what it means; he comes closer to Andrews' goal of simply presenting the facts than does Andrews himself. He does not narrate to delineate a distinct, coherent self but to recognize his many selves and his fundamental emptiness. Paradoxically, however, he does present a nearly complete record of who he is by describing how he acted and which moods dictated his actions throughout his involvement with the Morgans.

The first line of The End of the Road is probably more frequently quoted than any Barth has written: "In a sense, I am Jacob Horner." He is so only "in a sense" because Jacob Horner is not one identifiable personality. His difficulty as a narrator is not that he must prove his behavior to be logically coherent nor that it is too outrageous to be believed as fact. His problem is that "the same life lends itself to any number of stories--parallel, concentric, mutually habitant, or what you will" (5), but as narrator he is forced to choose one story. He seems much more aware than Andrews and Lady Amherst of the acts of selection involved in the process of narrating. Because he is not writing to prove himself to be anyone in particular, he is all but paralysed by the choices forced upon him in his role as narrator. Even an autobiography, his narrative insists, involves

making some arbitrary choices. If we understand our lives by seeing them as stories, then the choice of plot and genre becomes crucial to how we define ourselves, and the story begins to shape our lives rather than our lives our stories. <sup>5</sup> Although this power of narrative frightens some of Barth's later narrators, it is a power that someone like Horner, with no sure sense of self, values highly.

Horner's awareness of the power of narrative to shape a self is reinforced by the Doctor's prescription of "Mythotherapy." The Doctor explains that every individual plays the role of hero in his own life-story, casting everyone else into the roles of minor characters. Since our lives seldom have coherent plots, we constantly reconceive our ideas of just what kind of heroes we are and which roles others will play. Trouble arises when the heroic role we have assumed no longer fits the situation, and we lack the imagination to adapt ourselves to the new situation or the situation to our vision of ourselves. This is where our familiarity with basic narrative structures comes into play in defining our sense of self. The Doctor warns Horner: "you're too unstable to play any one part all the time--you're also too unimaginative--so for you these crises had better be met by changing scripts as often as necessary. . . . the important thing for you is to realize what you're doing so you won't get caught without a script, or with the wrong script" (90). Here the Doctor advocates self-awareness through analysis of the story line one is constructing, so that so tenuous a self as that of Jacob Horner does not lose itself entirely by becoming entangled

in inappropriate narrative constructs. Because he has no firm sense of self, he has to be self-conscious or risk having either no script or the wrong one. As long as he can still treat the mask he assumes with some seriousness, his mythotherapy can help him, as it has helped Andrews and Lady Amherst, to act and to take a place in the world of the other characters.<sup>6</sup>

The Doctor (and with him Barth) insists that the practice of living our lives as stories and seeing ourselves as characters in them is quite natural, and, through Horner, Barth shows that without this natural narrative capacity, the self begins to disintegrate. Horner needs to learn how to prepare scripts because, unlike Andrews and Lady Amherst who quite readily assume the role of protagonist in their life-stories, he assumes no role at all. The Doctor explains his situation to him:

This kind of role-assigning is myth-making, and when it's done consciously or unconsciously for the purpose of aggrandizing or protecting your ego--and it's probably done for this purpose all the time--it becomes Mythotherapy. Here's the point: an immobility such as you experienced that time in Penn Station is possible only to a person who for some reason or other has ceased to participate in Mythotherapy. At that time on the bench you were neither a major nor a minor character: you were no character at all. It's because this has happened once that it's necessary for me to explain to you something that comes quite naturally to everyone else. (89)

Once he understands the principle of Mythotherapy, Jake can see how others--the Morgans and the staff of Wicomico Teachers College, for instance--are casting him, and he can deliberately place other characters in specific roles so that he will be able to act. Self-less and unconnected to the world until he learns to do this, he is one of Barth's clearest examples of how narrative establishes a link with the world. Without it, Horner cannot act at all.

Horner's discovery that he can tell stories or imagine scripts helps him to overcome some of his indecision and his inability to act. Even before it is prescribed by the Doctor, Jake recognizes that Scriptotherapy, writing his autobiography in a coherent, linear narrative, has a positive value like that of Mythotherapy. Horner's changing moods and his assumption of different roles make it impossible for him consistently to believe in any one principle, as Andrews, for example, consistently believes in the value of reason. But after one of his confrontations with Joe Morgan, he does identify something like a consistent belief--in the centrality of articulation:

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

with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful mythmaking, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. When my mythoplastic razors were sharply honed, it was unparalleled sport to lay about with them, to have at reality.

In other senses, of course, I don't believe this at all. (119)

Horner here shows both more awareness of the distortion which occurs in the narration of a life-story and more ease with that distortion than does either Andrews or Lady Amherst. He is aware that the value of articulation, the kind of articulation in which he is engaged as he writes the report we are reading, is that it makes him feel alive, a rare experience for him. Presenting his life as though it were a story allows him to see that it has a plot or pattern, even if it is only one which he has imposed--the act of imposing itself proves that he exists. Only through language, he discovers, can he use his myth-making powers to ascribe a meaning that has any permanence to his life.

Jake's activities and interests as an articulator are, to an extent, parallel to those that Charles Harris identifies in Passionate Virtuosity as typical of Barth the articulator: "In Barth's fictions the passionate desire to construct meaning-- --not meaning itself--assumes the status of a universal value. If anything is sacred, it is not a particular form of human

'reality' but that which forms human 'reality'" (8). Jake cannot accept one interpretation of his life to be any more valid than another, but he values his ability to generate and impose meaning through "articulation" or narration. He remains insistent that the practice of mythotherapy, however, always involves some distortion. When Rennie unconsciously applies mythotherapy to her situation and casts Horner in a role which suits her view of the drama which is unfolding, Jake is uneasy: "anybody who starts talking in terms of keys to people's characters is making myths, because the mystery of people is not to be explained by keys" (131). Mythotherapy necessarily simplifies complex situations, but Jake distrusts Rennie because she seems unaware that she is simplifying, and thus distorting, Jake's multifaceted character. If they are to use it wisely, the practitioners of Mythotherapy must always be aware that they impose an interpretation, that a distortion, albeit a necessary one, occurs. At the root of the increasing self-reflexiveness of Barth's fiction is this insistence that we be aware of how we are using narrative.

Jake finds Rennie's use of mythotherapy unsettling because it is so restrictive. He, himself, has no trouble holding contradictory opinions about people, particularly people he knows well. Because no one of these opinions seems superior to the others, he cannot impose a character or role on a person unconsciously or automatically. He explains that it seemed to him "that the Doctor was insane, and that he was profound; that Joe was brilliant and also absurd; that Rennie was strong and weak;

and that Jacob Horner--owl, peacock, chameleon, donkey, and popinjay, fugitive from a medieval bestiary--was at the same time giant and dwarf, plenum and vacuum, and admirable and contemptible" (120). Such awareness of multiple possibilities could make Horner's task as a narrator difficult: his narrative will have no heroes--certainly not his vacuum/plenum self, and not Joe Morgan, either--and no villains, since no one is worse than anyone else. He chooses to try to present the record of his varying impressions of the central actors' complexity rather than to attempt to show consistency in their behavior. The tension in his narrative arises from the conflict which occurs between Jacob Horner, who is consistently no one in particular, and Joe Morgan, who believes passionately that people can and do act coherently.

Horner and the Morgans disagree fundamentally on the definition of the self. Horner explains early in the novel (so that the reader will understand the position he assumes during the Morgan crisis) that he does not think of himself in terms of a coherent personality--a core of self--but rather as a sequence of dominating moods. Moreover, he experiences periods of what he calls "weatherlessness" during which he is unaware of having a character altogether:

I tell it [a dream of day with no weather] now to illustrate a difference between moods and the weather, their usual analogy: a day without weather is unthinkable, but for me at least there were frequently days without any mood

at all. On these days Jacob Horner, except in a meaningless metabolic sense, ceased to exist, for I was without a personality. Like those microscopic specimens that biologists must dye in order to make them visible at all, I had to be colored with some mood or other if there was to be a recognizable self to me. (36)

Given that he is a victim of the mood which overtakes him and not the agent of a mind which wills his behavior, he cannot be said to act coherently in accordance with either his desires or his values (as Joe Morgan insists upon seeing him) because there is no consistency in his desires or values. Biologically, he exists with some continuity and coherence, but psychologically he defies any attempt to define his essence. In his discussion of The End of the Road, David Kerner comments: "In contrast to Morgan, Horner denies fundamental human identity--'Nobody's authentic:' every choice of action is a piece of acting--the assumption of a role, a mask, an arbitrary pretense of identity; under the mask is no 'true self'--nobody. Horner is this Nobody" (92). Horner's task as a narrator is, as a result, a difficult one: he must depict himself as a character who has no clearly defined character.

Because there is no principle underlying his behavior, Horner can simply record the events as they happened and the moods which he experienced in succession. His recollections are not clouded as are Lady Amherst's, with self-evaluation, nor is he concerned to justify his past behavior. Thinking about Joe Morgan's stance, he is led to reflect: "judging from my clearest

picture of myself, the individual is not individual after all, any more than the atom is atomistic: he can be divided further, and subjectivism doesn't really become intelligible until one finally locates the subject" (142). Horner's experience of a multitude of selves has prevented him from locating a subject within himself, and his self-conscious experience of objectively observing his changing moods prevents him from identifying strongly with any one of them. He is not one personality, but a host of successive personalities bearing no essential relationship to one another: the Horner who reflects on his actions seems to feel no identity with the Horner who performed them.

Consequently, his narrative is not the history of the development or growth of a self. He arrives at no new understandings, unlike Andrews and Lady Amherst. Horner makes no references to childhood, parents, or past experiences to explain who he is because he does not think of personality as being continuous. He sees no patterns in his actions, except the pattern of changeability. Because he is influenced by changing moods rather than by reason, he does not explain his--or any one else's--actions in terms of motivation and denies the idea of cause altogether. He thinks that, for most people, "there'll always be a few things in their autobiography that they can't account for" (116), and he refuses to make rationalisations after the fact to explain what he has done. When he made love to Rennie, he was aware, he insists, of no conscious motives and, furthermore, could rationalise none after the fact. As far as he

is concerned, the action is inexplicable, and Morgan is obtuse in believing so ardently that a careful analysis of the event will explain it. When he depicts the event in his narrative record, Horner simply describes it, and does not feel any need to analyse or interpret: he does follow Mary Mungommery's rules by letting the actions speak for themselves. He does not even demand that they form a reasonable pattern.

The problem for Horner as a person is that, overwhelmed by polarised possibilities of equal merit, he usually becomes paralysed. The Doctor points out to him that the problem does not lie in the situation (the number of equally valid alternatives) but in the absence of a chooser. "Choosing," he explains, "is existence: to the extent that you don't choose, you don't exist. Now, everything we do must be oriented toward choice and action" (83). The Doctor advises Horner not to worry about choosing wisely or acting nobly; for a paralytic, the important thing is to act at all, and in doing so to provide himself with a personality. The choice must be made arbitrarily or it will never be made.

Horner describes his most debilitating attempt to make a choice as coming after Rennie's death. He could not decide whether to call the police (in order to confess to his role in procuring the abortion), to marry Peggy Rankin, or to write to Joe. He finds that weighing the alternatives typically defeats his desire to act:

I could not remain sufficiently simple-minded long enough to lay blame--on the Doctor, myself, or anyone--or to decide

what was the right course of action. . . . The terrific incompleteness made me volatile; my muscles screamed to act; but my limbs were bound like Laocoon's--by the serpents Knowledge and Imagination, which, grown great in the fullness of time, no longer tempt but annihilate. (196)

For Horner, knowledge and imagination do not solve problems but exacerbate them and make it impossible for him to act. The Doctor's advice that he employ the principles of Sinistrality, Antecedence, and Alphabetical Priority (that he choose the left if alternatives are side by side, the first if they are consecutive in time, and the one which begins with the earlier letter of the alphabet when neither of the other rules applies) does not seem to help him when he is trying to assume responsibility, to identify himself with the man who took Rennie for the abortion. Rennie's accidental death throws him into his final quandary. Finding that he is unable to respond to it with an assertive casting of roles, he gives up and goes off to join the Doctor at the new Immobilisation Farm.

Unable to choose, biologically alive but with no recognisable self, defeated by the necessity of making choices, Horner seems to have become a total vacuum at the end of his narrative. The Horner who goes off to join the Doctor clearly has not learned, as Andrews and Lady Amherst have, how to cope in the world. But the Horner who imposes a role on himself (that of the shape-shifter, who figures prominently in Barth's fiction) by narrating his story in The End of the Road may well be able to

do so. He has managed to write himself a script, even if after the fact, and he has articulated himself a role as both hero and villain. Through narration, he has managed to invent and define a self, not just to recognize or defend one.

In "Barth and the Representation of Life," David Majdiak identifies Horner the writer as a critic rather than as a novelist, a stance which makes his characteristic objectivity an asset rather than a drawback. As a critic, Majdiak argues, "Horner criticizes not only the actors but the script, yet he recognizes the problematical in each and tries to inform his narrative with that recognition. It is only in the role of critic that articulation becomes truly precise because it is only in this role that one can recognize language itself as a falsification" (108). Living mythotherapy does not allow Horner the opportunity to acknowledge the complexity of any given situation: he must arbitrarily assign roles if he is to act in the script. But when he writes his narrative, he can both show complexity (because he has total control over the story) and comment on the distortion which is occurring as a result of his selection and articulation. As critic he is free to draw attention to the process of narration more deliberately and speculatively than many novelists do, and he can examine the properties of his narrative with his characteristically objective stance. Barth adeptly exploits the potential for self-reflexiveness in written narrative to show that it is an ideal vehicle for Jacob Horner's structuring of a self.

The act of writing his autobiography is finally more

therapeutic for Horner than for Andrews or Lady Amherst because his need for self-definition is the greatest. His narrative, written two years after the events it describes, is proof of his "mobility" and of his ability to understand and even, at times, to assume responsibility for his behavior. Despite his hesitations, the fact that he writes is itself an affirmation of his living in the world. It is also proof of his ability to make choices as he selects events for inclusion and details to use for characterization. If Horner can choose, according to the Doctor, then he exists. The story is, of course, a distortion, the imposition of an order on the events, but Horner has reached the point where he is willing to accept distortion: "it is a necessary distortion if one would get on with the plot" (142). Presumably, now that he has dealt with the affair with the Morgans in his Scriptotherapy, Jake is ready to get on with the plot of his own life. His act of narration has enabled him to act.

Todd Andrews, Lady Amherst, and Jacob Horner are all enabled to act by narrating stories about their lives. Andrews writes in the face of his possibly imminent death and achieves a temporary defeat over it by completing the novel. Lady Amherst writes out of chaotic experience and discovers order and serenity. Horner writes out of his emptiness to impose a sense of self on his actions. Through his depiction of this group of narrators, Barth suggests the importance of mythotherapy, or narrative, to any

life: we are all story-tellers, daily narrating the stories of our lives so that we know how to act in the next chapter. His narrators suggest further that the impulse to write out a life-story is a strong and natural one: a lengthy, coherent narrative allows the writer a certain objectivity in the analysis, of his or her own subjectivity. It allows the writer to look at his or her life as a whole, to move beyond the constant present of daily life and see the structure of the self as a pattern including both past and present. The act of narration itself provides the vantage point from which to assess, analyse, defend, even to define the self.

From his earliest to his most recent fiction, Barth shows that he values the autobiographical impulse, presenting numerous narrators who find that telling the story of their lives affirms their ability to live in the world. In a way, these narrators are consistent with much of postmodern fiction. As Alfred Hornung notes, The End of the Road resembles Sophie's Choice, My Life as a Man, and Jailbird in depicting "the therapeutic recovery of the recollected self in the text" (62). The number of novels which, like Barth's, stress the importance of narrative to the structure of the self, suggests that narrative is particularly valuable in the contemporary world as a form of "scriptotherapy." The point of such "scriptotherapy," at least in Barth's works, is to restore the individual to his or her world. Writing about themselves eventually leads these narrators out of themselves and into relationship with persons rather than with words.

The narrators who engage in Scriptotherapy are not concerned with determining whether they control their stories or, whether their stories control them, despite their acknowledgment that the act of narration is a complex one. But Barth's interest in narrative goes further, and his fiction also presents narrators who think of themselves as "writers" rather than as amateurs, to use Lady Amherst's distinction. Such narrators feel even more acutely the power of narrative and of language over the self, and, in his depiction of them Barth suggests more emphatically that the structures of narrative to a great extent determine the structures of selves. Whereas Andrews, Lady Amherst and Horner manage to maintain the (perhaps illusory) distinction between living and telling, the narrators of "Life-Story" and "Menelaid" find it an increasingly hard line to draw. Battling with their tales for authority over their own characters, they end up even more helpless than Horner to shape their own personalities. The narrators who successfully practice scriptotherapy, however, regain authority over themselves upon the completion of their narratives.

## Chapter Four

## "first person, tiresome"

Lost in the Funhouse and "Bellerophoniad"

Whereas Andrews, Lady Amherst, and Horner may well be authors, subjects, and sole readers of their tales, thereby maintaining total power over their life-stories, the narrators of many of the Funhouse and Chimera stories feel that they have become victims, subject to the whims of their Authors, the deficiencies of their readers, and the problematics of narrative. They draw the reader's attention to the unsatisfactory structures of their life-stories and complain of the ineptness of the Authors. Aware of their status as fictional characters, they make their narratives self-reflexive in various senses: the reader must acknowledge that these characters are just characters, linguistic creations; that an Author has written these stories, not in imitation of a real event, but in imitation of other fictions; and that the Author is using these narratives to make several points about narrative itself. Scrutinizing their own processes, they force the reader to evaluate his or her own assumptions about narrative.

In "Anti-Fiction in American Humor," William Harmon observes that self-conscious fictions present the narrator "typically finding himself a first-person participant whose status as a discouraged victim is reflected by his status as an unstable storyteller. Needless to say, the projection of such a fiction

requires extreme aptitude in the storyteller's art; otherwise, the fictions would be unbearably boring" (378). By choosing to publish two volumes of stories featuring such victimised narrators, Barth has challenged himself not to alienate the reader through tedium or complexity. While his talent as a story-teller prevents these works from becoming boring, they have been criticized as empty, self-referential, and self-indulgent. Such criticism misses the degree to which metafiction like these do refer outward to the world and consider how we use narrative to allow us to live in the world. As David Majdiak explains, "Barth's way is to comment on reality by dealing with the problems of fiction." In this way, he can keep us "aware of the illusion as well as the truth of art" (108). The narrators of "Autobiography," "Life-Story," "Echo," "Menelaiad," and "Bellerophoniad" discover that the relationship between life and life-story is much more complex than Lady Amherst and Horner ever suspected. But a relationship, they discover, does exist; their insight is that we must use our narratives wisely, or be used by them.

Barth's narratives in these two volumes (and to a lesser extent in LETTERS and Sabbatical) are in part a response to structuralist and post-structuralist definitions of the self as a linguistic code. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. sums up the cultural context in which Barth is writing: "as Derrida and Foucault and Julia Kristeva and Algirdas Greimas and Gerard Genette and various others lay it down, the transcendental subject of

traditional humanism is in point of fact an invented fiction quite without any substantial nonlinguistic reality"

("Rediscovery" 149). Barth presents as narrators a series of humanists, who cherish notions of themselves as integral, unique, and "real." But they prove to be constructed of words and narrative structures. These narrators find that they have no selves which transcend or exist apart from the text--as Lady Amherst, by contrast, believes that she does. Their response is to critique the structures and definitions of self imposed by the narratives in which they appear.

In the end, Barth rejects notions of the empty self and the empty text, claiming in Chimera that fiction must still be "passionately about" something. His self-reflexive fictions are "passionately about" the existential crisis experienced by characters reduced to mere linguistic constructs.<sup>2</sup> The excruciating self-consciousness of their existence and of their fictions is illustrated best by the narrator of "Title" as he tries to end his story:

Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness. I despise what we have come to; I loathe our loathesome [sic] loathing, our place our time our situation, our loathsome art, this ditto necessary story. The blank of our lives. (110)

This narrator, unable to escape his self-consciousness, can still recognize and loathe it. His point is Barth's: this self-reflexiveness can be tiresome, but it is a necessary step for narrative in a period of crisis. Whereas this narrator, along with many others in Funhouse and Chimera, feels victimised by his

narrative situation, Barth uses humour and parody to show that he is not advocating despair for the writer of narratives.

In Reading for the Plot, Peter Brooks suggests that the goal of "all storytelling" since the decline of the oral tradition "has in the 'privatized' genre of the novel come to be defined exclusively as the meaning of an individual life" (246). Barth's narrators certainly believe this to be true, and they hope to find meaning and identity for themselves in the narratives of their life-stories. But the narrators discussed below discover that they have no power over their own life-stories and fear that their lives have no meaning. The narratives themselves have assumed the authority that the teller claims in The Floating Opera, The End of the Road, and Lady Amherst's letters. These short fictions explore the relationship of teller to tale from the perspective of the character imprisoned in the narrative.

## I

The most thoroughly victimised of this group of narrators, the one most helpless to shape the narrative which is its only life, is the tape-recorded story that speaks of itself in "Autobiography." As the title suggests, this is a life-story told in the first person, but, unlike Barth's other storytellers, this narrator is unaware of any self which transcends the text. Born of the momentary passion felt by its father, the Author, for its mother, the tape recorder, the narrator of "Autobiography" cannot even claim to be the author of its own

autobiography or to be responsible for its characteristics--it is simply the medium, the taped story. In "Autobiography," the story is the only reality; the narrator is not even a personage "in" the story (let alone a character who believes in his or her real-life existence outside of the story) but the story itself, shaped by minds and conventions not its own.

Lady Amherst provides a helpful contrast here. The Author to whom she sends her letters knows of her only through them and perhaps doubts that she has any existence beyond the one she may (for all he knows) be fabricating in them, but Lady Amherst does not for a moment (except in a dream) doubt that she possesses a reality distinct from that she gives herself as she writes. The voice which speaks in "Autobiography," on the other hand, is aware only of its existence in the text of its life-story and lacks the self-consciousness to distinguish between an actual and a narrated self. The narrator observes, "I speak in a curious, detached manner, and don't necessarily hear myself" (33). The story is aware of itself as a story, but not as a person; it is only the finished product, the tape-recorded narrative, and not the mind and voice which compose or respond to the story.

As it tells the story, the narrator becomes even more fully aware that its status is simply that of a story and not that of a person. Near the end of its narrative, it comments: "Unhappily, things get clearer as we go along. I perceive that I have no body. What's less, I've been speaking of myself without delight or alternative as self-consciousness pure and sour; I declare now

that even that isn't true. I'm not aware of myself at all, as far as I know. I don't think . . . [sic] I know what I'm talking about" (35). Because it has no self apart from the story, it cannot be self-conscious; it can only be a self-reflexive story. And, ultimately, it is not responsible for what it has become-- the Author is. The narrator still 'reads' the narrative to make discoveries about itself, however, because it is the only vehicle of expression and self-knowledge available to it. Recognizing the mishapenness of its life-story, it deduces that this grotesqueness has resulted from its inability to take responsibility for itself. It has become a victim of the conventions of self-reflexive, exhausted narrative and of the Author's failed attempt at a mixed-media narrative. The narrator, clearly distinct from the Author, becomes powerless to control the narrative and, because it is powerless, it thinks the story is meaningless. The narrative act does not console this narrator, as it consoled Todd Andrews, for example, because it does not allow the self the opportunity to construct its own meaning.

This narrator's life depends not only on the Author but on the listener (or reader) as well. "Autobiography," in fact, begins with an acknowledgement of the role of the listener in giving life to narrative:

You who           listen           give me life           in a  
manner of speaking.

I won't hold you responsible. (33)

Those who listen give the story life because they provide the

consciousness, the awareness of the story's self, which the story itself cannot have. Without them, its existence would not be confirmed, and the story would address only the void, would be virtually silent. Responding to it as a life-story, the listener gives the narrator life, in the same way that the reader gives typical unself-conscious narrators life by imagining them persons. The practitioners of Scriptotherapy all felt the need or at least an imaginary reader, and the reader's constructive role becomes more clear in Lost in the Funhouse. Without the reader, the text is incomplete, lifeless. Thus, Barth reaches his conclusion that the postmodern novel must concern itself with the reader in a way that the modern novel did not. He acknowledges this discovery in "The Literature of Replenishment" when he insists that the postmodern novel must "ravish" the reader. But in affirming the novel as an act of communication between author and audience, Barth equally affirms that the reader, too, must be self-aware and take responsibility for the state of postmodern fiction.

Being merely a voice, the story discovers that it has no power even to end its own monstrous existence. It cannot choose, as Lady Amherst did, to stop narrating, and it begs the listener to help it cut short its brief life: "Then if anyone hears me, speaking from here inside like a sunk submariner, and has the means to my end, I pray him do us both a kindness" (36). Unaware of a narrating self (aware only of a narrated self), the story is nevertheless aware of the conventions of narrative and feels that

it is running the risk of offending and boring the reader with its speculations about itself. But the story cannot know whether or not the listener has stopped listening and is forced to "mutter to the end, one word after another, string the rascals out, mad or not, heard or not" (37). The listener, then, is crucial to the story, but the listener has only secondary control over its shape. The Author ultimately dictates the duration of the narrative and the persona of the narrator. The appeals to the listener only serve to reinforce awareness of this authority behind the text.

But this Author, whose careless dalliance with the tape-recorder brought the story into being, apparently will take no credit for his work. Addressed as "Dad" by the narrator, he has presumably considered this experimental narrative a failure and has had second thoughts:

From my conception to the present moment Dad's tried to turn me off; not ardently, not consistently, not successfully so far; but persistently, persistently, with at least half a heart. How do I know. I'm his bloody mirror!

Which is to say, upon reflection I reverse and distort him. (34)

The story now exists apart from the Author (and from the reader), presumably pleasing him as little as it pleases the reader or itself, even though it is his reflection. The story presumes that the choice of medium was a mistake, making of the story a freak, a hybrid of two genres: the spoken and the written tale.

The passage also draws attention to the distortion of narrative: the text, as a mirror, reverses and distorts when it attempts to represent. This text presumably reflects and distorts not only the Author but also the actual author, John Barth, who chose to publish this convoluted story. As the layers of implication unfold, the reader's sense of complexity increases and, with it, decreases any confidence that he or she has reached the final layer of meaning. In this way, the "ir-reality" which Barth insists is fundamental to the narrated self is dramatised in the process of reading, and the Author's final authority is shown to be equally unsatisfactory.

Fed up with the kind of self which the Author has imposed upon it, the narrator taunts the Author to destroy the tape when the listener, if there is one, fails to do so: "Father, have mercy, I dare you! Wretched old fabricator, where's your shame? Put an end to this, for pity's sake! Now! Now!" (36). Like the listener, Dad turns (or has long ago turned) a deaf ear to the narrator's pleas, forcing the story to continue to its last words, to broadcast the foolishness of an "old fabricator." Barth here echoes Stephen Dedalus' cry to his artistic father, but Stephen calls Dedalus an "old artificer"; Barth's term, "fabricator," suggests a lesser and a more subversive mind at work, making up plots and presenting them in fiction to dupe others, and it calls into question the traditional privileging of

the author. The result in these "first person, tiresome" narratives is to draw attention away from the author and the narrator to the properties of the narrative itself. With the *Scriptotherapists*, Barth explored the production of narrative; with these narrators, he explores more thoroughly the product itself.

Not only, then, does the narrator lack power over its own life; it also lacks the power to influence those who do have power over the shape and continuation of its life. With no response from the listener and none from the Author, the story must assume that it exists in a void, unacknowledged by anyone. This assumption is disheartening because the story has realised that only when narrative is understood to link author, tale, and reader does it acquire any positive value. This narrator seems constrained by an external structure (the kind of situation dramatised by Tom Stoppard in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead) to exist in a pre-determined world which allows it no choice and no self-definition.

The narrator is made even more aware of its "literary" existence when it examines the conventions the author has decided to employ in the telling of the story. These, in turn, determine the personality of the character depicted in the narrative. Barth is making the point that, as we cast ourselves in our daily dramas, we determine what we can be and do by imposing the conventions of various genres on our behavior. The conventions

of stories enter into the conventions of some characters' lives, as Bellerophon will discover. The particular conventions of "Autobiography" fill the narrator with nothing but disgust:

Beneath self-contempt, I particularly scorn my fondness for paradox. I despise pessimism, narcissism, solipsism, truculence, word-play, and pusillanimity, my chief inclinations; loathe self-loathers ergo me; have no pity for self-pity and so am free of that sweet baseness. I doubt I am. Being me's no joke. (35)

Aware that these are the features of its "first person, tiresome" narrative (33), features imposed by the author, the medium, and the listener, the story finds itself to be monstrous. Barth is not simply drawing self-protective attention here to his own awareness of possible responses to this type of self-reflexive fiction; he is also suggesting, through this negative example, that the author must take responsibility for his narratives. He must make appropriate choices if he is to use his narrative to construct meaning for himself and for the reader. By presenting the story of the story, Barth shows the power of narrative to shape and limit the life it was once supposed to represent, and he makes the cultural observation that as we become more self-conscious, we will tend to cast ourselves in increasingly monstrous narratives.

If it cannot be beautiful, the story wants to be annihilated, but it has no power even to commit suicide. When Lady Amherst stopped writing, she continued to live; when this narrator stops talking, it stops living, until the next listener

narrator stops talking, it stops living, until the next listener comes along and turns on the tape. The death wish is overcome only when both Author and listener refuse to give up on the story, and it accepts that it must go on talking until the end of the tape. To a certain extent, "Autobiography," like The Floating Opera, demonstrates the ability of narrative to postpone death: through its very obsession with that theme, the narrator manages to fill up a number of pages (or reels) until it reaches its "last word." Self-reflexiveness at least prolongs existence itself. But the despair which the narrator experiences upon being forced into a mode of fiction which he despises and his utter inability to alter the text dominate the story. Rather than prove the value of narrative to the self who narrates, "Autobiography" proves that narrative is potentially dangerous when its authors act irresponsibly and when its forms deny both escape from self and meaningful self-discovery.

## II

Barth continues to pursue the problem of fictitiousness and inauthenticity in Lost in the Funhouse by depicting other narrators who exist only as characters constructed by narratives. In "Life-Story" he presents a writer who is writing a story about a writer who is writing a story (and so on) about a writer who comes to suspect (what is, of course, the case) that he is only a character in a work of fiction. Like the narrator of "Autobiography," these writer-characters feel that they are victimized

by their Authors, by narrative conventions, and by readers. Like it, they find that they must assume styles of thought and behavior inconsistent with their humanist ideas of themselves and narrative. These characters, too, contemplate ending it all by demanding that the reader shut the book in which their stories appear.

If "Autobiography" is written in the "first person, tiresome," then "Life-Story" is written in the third person, tiresome. In this story, identifying the narrator has become much more difficult, and the whole is more complexly self-reflexive because of the regressus ad infinitum it employs. The author of this story, John Barth, has written a story in third person about an author who is trying to write a story of his own but who cannot, of course, because he is restricted to writing what his author makes him write. The fictional narrator's story would be about a writer writing about a writer writing about a writer, and so on, each story reflecting the one in which it is contained. The result that Authors "B," "C," and "D" hope to achieve with this process would be to heighten the reader's awareness of the artificiality of the frame story itself (as Barth has done) by showing that it is very difficult to determine where the stories stop and life begins. Even though each framed story is written by Barth, whose story frames them all, their stories reflect his own, and his own sense of his own, ir-reality. By extension he (Author "A") at times feels that his life is dictated by the

conventions of a narrative he has not chosen to live in. Discussing this sense of living in someone else's dream that some of Borges' stories convey so effectively, Barth comments: "Borges makes the remark that those moments in literature when the characters within a work begin to comment on, or be aware of, the fiction that they're in disturb us because such moments remind us of the fiction that we're in" (Bellamy 10). That is, they remind us of the narratives that we construct or allow our culture to construct as we make sense of our own experience. In her study of metafiction, Patricia Waugh concludes that this heightened awareness of fictionality is the characteristic feature of the genre: "In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction," she argues, "they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2).

In the first paragraph of "Life-Story," an ambiguous use of "these" suggests that the narrator is telling his own story but using the third person as a distancing device: "He being by vocation an author of novels and stories it was perhaps inevitable that one afternoon the possibility would occur to the writer of these lines that his own life might be a fiction" (112). It soon becomes clear, however, that this sentence is part of an introduction to a story which is spurned by its author, "C," and that "these lines" are presumably his, but they are also those of author "B," who is writing the story about "C,"

and those of the presumed actual author "A" (Barth). The reader's confusion at the beginning of the story makes him or her question where one story ends and the next begins, and which is the final frame story. Barth uses this confusion to propose a model of the relationship between life and narrative. As his later, well-read narrators demonstrate, we tend to think of ourselves in terms of the stories we have read, casting ourselves in the role of protagonist and understanding our lives only by thinking of them as dramatic narratives.

As the story progresses, the narrators recede until there is just "B" (presumably the product of the unmentioned "A"'s pen), who speculates that "he was in a sense his own author, telling his story to himself" (124). If this were so, he would be like the practitioners of Scriptotherapy, taking authority over his life by narrating it more or less in private for private ends. Having speculated about the nature and uses of narrative, "B" concludes that we assume authority over our lives by becoming the authors of our life-stories. But he suspects that his story is told by someone else. He cannot be sure, as a result, of his own authenticity and suspects that he is simply a character with no self which transcends the work of fiction. Barth sees this sense of inauthenticity as typical of postmodern culture, and he uses the frame-story structure as a narrative device well suited to dramatizing this sense of loss of control over one's life.

This story falls into the category of fiction defined by Stephen Kellman in The Self-Begetting Novel, a genre which usually presents a first-person account of a character up to the

point at which he begins to write the work which we are now reading. Kellman stresses that "this device of a narrative which is in effect a record of its own genesis is a happy fusion of form and content. We are at once confronted with both process and product, quest and goal, parent and child" (3). The fundamental identity of narrator and narrative is thus underscored, and the reader of "Life-Story" is forced to imagine the "A" beyond the text and his act of narration. Ideally, readers then question their own authority over their own life stories and explore the cultural assumptions which determine their "frame story."

Just as the character of the narrator of "Autobiography" is pre-determined by its medium to be self-conscious, self-pitying, and narcissistic, so "B"'s qualities are determined by the medium which he believes gives him life: printed narrative. When he speculates about why he is so sure that it is not a film or play that gives him life, he reaches this conclusion:

while he certainly felt that he was merely acting his own role or roles he had no idea who the actor was, whereas even the most Stanislavsky-methodist would when questioned closely recollect his offstage identity even on stage in mid-act. . . . everything suggested that the medium of his life was prose fiction--moreover a fiction narrated from either the first-person or the third-person omniscient point of view. (117)

The character shares the reader's uncertainty about whether he is

narrating or simply appearing in his life-story," but he is sufficiently aware of the context in which he appears to deduce that it is prose fiction. The self he is aware of is completely circumscribed by the narrative itself. His existential condition is thus more uncertain than the condition of the narrator of "Autobiography" that at least knows it has no control over its own life-story. This character's anguish arises from his confusion, his inability to know whether or not he is an authentic person or just a character constructed in the narrative. The reader soon begins to understand quite clearly that "B" has no more existence apart from this story than "B"'s own characters have apart from theirs. As a result, the reader thinks of "B" quite differently than he or she would think of, for example, Todd Andrews, who seems "life-like." Because his life consists of what he is and does in this story, "B"'s past has no value as he tries to determine who he is; it is simply background colour for the story. His act of narration, unlike that of Andrews, is not an act of recollection. For all he knows (since he has no power over the narrative), he may well be only a minor character in someone else's story.

The character's only way to come to know himself and discover himself as subject is to examine the kind of narrative in which he appears. He speculates about the genre of his fiction:

Was the novel of his life for example a roman à clef? Of that genre he was as contemptuous as of the others . . . it seemed obvious to him that he didn't "stand for" anyone

else, any more than he was an actor playing the role of himself, . . . [but] he had to admit that the question was unanswerable, since the "real" man to whom he'd correspond in a roman à clef would not be also in the roman à clef and the characters in such works were not themselves aware of their irritating correspondences. (122)

The distinction "B" draws here between the narrating self and the self represented in the narrative is not important to characters who assume all of the pre-modern conventions: the integrity of the self, linear time, life-stories as accurate representations of life. Todd Andrews used narrative to create a picture of himself, but this narrator is used by narrative, by the Author, and by the reader.. Barth presents "B"'s status as being quite different from that of the scriptotherapists, who believe themselves to be real people with lives outside of and beyond their narratives. "B" discovers that even a self-conscious self within the narrative can have no commerce with the self which may or may not exist outside of it. Narrative does not empower him any more than it did the narrator of "Autobiography" because he feels he has no power to choose what happens to him. As a result, the focus of this story is on narrative itself, the product rather than the process.

"B" thinks that prose fiction is "moribund if not already dead" (118). But it would be a mistake to identify this attitude with Barth's own. In "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth insists that he never believed that the end of fiction or of

culture was imminent. He wrote about a "felt ultimacy" he perceived in the intellectual and artistic climate of the late sixties without necessarily sharing the feeling that literature was exhausted. But the idea that printed narrative had become outmoded was one that Barth had to consider seriously because it implied the collapse of the humanistic tradition of fiction in which he worked. In "Life-Story," Barth hopes to address, rather than to prolong or affirm, the feeling of exhaustion. If he writes about the perceived state of decay (so the argument goes in "The Literature of Exhaustion"), he may discover a mode of narrative which will help to replenish the novel--and perhaps his culture.

To do this, he must develop alternatives to the modern and the premodern novels. In the story, "B" presents the options left for the writer (options Barth also presents in his own voice in "The Literature of Exhaustion):

inasmuch as the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed, unless deliberately as a false analogy, certain things follow: 1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question or deny its relevance or 3) establish some other, acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader. (125)

Because the fiction produced by adopting (2) would be of little value to contemporary society, Barth eliminates that option. While (3) is the best choice, number one must be pursued before

(3) can be arrived at. So in this fiction, Barth explores the idea of author as God, controlling and seeing into all of the actions of the characters (but looking at this "God" through the eyes of this character). The implication of his exploration is that the Author is himself controlled by linguistic and narrative models outside of his individual will. As a result, he is not the all-powerful Joycean author. Nor is the world of his fiction as confidently a reflection of the world of reality as was that of the premodern novel. The characters are shown to be only characters, and they do not really act as if they believe in their power to represent real people in a world outside of that of the narrative. They are disembodied consciousnesses, aware that they exist only in the language of narrative. In the story, reference may be made to a world beyond that of the narrative, but the narrative is not to be confused with any external "reality."

In "The Vault of Language," Charles Russell asserts that "as long as we continue to exist in language, literature must acknowledge the illusory nature of meaning--the art work which strives for transparency is first and foremost opaque" (357). Barth affirms this viewpoint by undercutting the reader's expectations: each time we think that we have penetrated to the final frame, it is exposed as yet another fiction, a construct of language and narrative convention. Barth is not denying meaning, or even supporting the idea that the text is "empty"; rather he is asserting that the meanings narrative helps us to discover are only provisional ones. This position is not always under-

stood. In After the Wake, Christopher Butler complains of many of the stories in Lost in the Funhouse:

The game-playing aspects of literature all too frequently reflect a turning away from those deeper responsibilities which have traditionally been seen in moral terms. The concentration upon the second-order matters of mode of discourse and of theoretical analysable linguistic structures has diminished commitment to mimesis and hence to content. Any materials will do. (139-31)

Barth still sees his responsibilities as a writer in moral terms, and he would disagree with Butler that matters of mode and discourse are "second-order." Commitment to mimesis, especially in the form of the realist novel, has its moral dangers as well. Fiction is made of language and its narratives are not fixed and simple reflections of the world but constructs whose significance depends largely upon the indeterminate context of reading.<sup>4</sup> At one point, "B" declares: "If his life was a fictional narrative it consisted of three terms--teller, tale, told--each dependent on the other two but not in the same ways. . . . His own life depended absolutely on a particular author's original persistence, thereafter upon some reader's" (118-19). "B" makes those relationships the subject and plot of the story he is writing, dealing immediately with the author and saving his confrontation with the reader for his climax.

The Author and "B" both depend upon the reader for their livelihood. For the writer of dreary avant-garde fictions, the

reader is a distinct problem: those few who read today, "B" claims, "read fiction, when at all for entertainment. Their kind of story (his too, finally) would begin if not once upon a time at least with arresting circumstance, bold character, trenchant action" (115). It would emphatically not begin with a series of concentric authors and stories. While "B" recognizes that his story is "of so sophisticated a character [that it is] more likely to annoy than to engage" the reader (123), he feels that he must persist in writing in this mode if he is ever to rescue fiction from obsolescence.

To engage the reader's interest, he decides to dramatise the reader's distaste as part of the story itself. Aware that he must have alienated the reader through his self-reflexiveness, "B" sees his relationship with the reader as one of conflict, and when he finally addresses the reader, it is to abuse him or her:

You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it that you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? (123)

Although "B" will admit that the reader gives him life by reading his life-story, he aggravates the reader here in an attempt to provide drama in the narrative, and to make the reader examine his or her own attitudes toward the act of reading. He draws

attention to the reader's complicity in perpetuating the outdated form of printed fiction, recalling Marshall McLuhan's warning that audio-video modes are replacing it for popular entertainment. And yet printed narrative is still popular and the reader--for whatever reason--has read this far, proving his or her belief in the value of narrative, even of self-reflexive narrative.

"B," however, has another, hidden reason for insulting the reader. He wishes to prove that he exists by communicating with a reader. Without the reader and the act of recognition he or she uses to validate the narrative act, "B"'s existence is entirely solipsistic. Even pleading for death at the hands of the reader is a futile act since he can never experience two-way communication with the reader, as he well knows:

Those petitions aforementioned, even his silly plea for death --don't you think he understands their sophistry, having authored their like for the wretches he's authored? Read him fast or slow, intermittently, continuously, repeatedly, backward, not at all, he won't know it; he only guesses someone's reading or composing his sentences, such as this one, because he's reading or composing sentences such as this one. (124-25)

This character's situation is the one Barth's narrators typically want to escape: he is alone, unconnected to the world, not sure that he exists. "B" can only surmise that the Author and reader exist; imprisoned in the world of the text, he can never know

that they do. For him, they remain as fictional as he is to us. If his sense of inauthenticity is a typical postmodern experience, our status, Barth implies, may be rather like "B"'s.

"B" chooses not to come to terms with his author; he recognizes in the passage above that he cannot come to terms with his reader. He can understand the concept of teller, tale, and told only by acknowledging that he may well be his own author, tale, and reader, giving himself life by writing and reading his autobiography, by talking to himself. Deborah Woolley observes that "even while Barth disintegrates the tale, the teller, and the medium--superficially denying human concerns--he portrays the efforts to make language signify, the desire to speak and be heard, to display oneself and call forth a response" (480). Barth thus manages to write about what matters to people by writing about narrative. "B"'s impulse to tell and assume that someone is listening is in the end not different from Horner's desire to assert himself and reach out to other people by narrating.

"B" may ask the reader to put him out of his misery, but like Andrews, he really uses his narrative to prolong his existence. Putting sentences together, even sentences which may go unread, gives "B" hope and a sense of purpose:

he reached for the sleeping pills cached conveniently in his writing desk and was restrained from their administration only by his being in the process of completing a sentence, which he cravenly strung out at some sacrifice of rhetorical effect upon realizing that he was et cetera. (120)

Though at times it seems futile, "B" has to admit that writing gives him life, creates an interest in the future. Peter Sagamore, one of the narrators of Tidewater Tales, suggests much the same response to a world threatened by environmental and political dangers. Stories, he claims, provide hope and help to shore us up against the disintegration of our world. For "B" writing may not ensure the best existence, but it ensures some sort of existence.

At the end of the story, "B" proves to himself with a specious syllogism that he is in fact an actual person and not just a character in a novel. He knows of no other character in literature who has been convinced, as "B" is convinced, that he is a character in a work of fiction. Since there is no traditional precedent for his feelings of inauthenticity, he becomes convinced that his conviction that he is a character in a work of fiction is false. But the reader of "Life-Story" recognizes that "B" is sadly mistaken on this point since he is clearly a fictional character in a work written by John Barth. This is the final bit of cleverness in a story which borders on being overly ingenious. Barth includes it to reinforce his point that the old analogy no longer holds true: the world of the story is not the world we live in day to day but one shaped by an author and narrative conventions.

Nevertheless, the reader is engaged in "B"'s situation partly because "B" is given the trappings of a character from

realistic fiction. His is, to some extent, a conventional life-story at the same time that it is an exploration through self-reflexiveness of the "felt ultimacies" of the time. Barth's characters, though they face dilemmas not unlike those faced by Beckett's characters, also share some of the traits of the characters of the fiction of the nineteenth century. "B" is presented as a happily domestic man, eating an apple pastry in his den, being wished "Happy Birthday" by his wife, and experiencing mid-life crisis. He even wonders whether his mundane, middle-class life prevents him from writing truly dramatic fiction. The balance in "Life-Story" is heavily weighted towards modern self-consciousness, but there is some synthesis of premodern elements as well. Ultimately, Barth writes this story about a story not just to be consistent with twentieth-century tradition but to assess that tradition's usefulness in postmodern times.

### III

In "Autobiography" and "Life-Story" the characters recognize their own fictitiousness and their dependence upon the reader, the author, and the narrative to give them the questionable existence that they experience. They may long for real lives, but they do not feel that the narratives distort them because they have no sense of self apart from the selfhood the stories give them. In two other Funhouse stories, however, Barth depicts the mythic characters Narcissus and Menelaus, whose life-stories have become

the subject of communal myths rather than of private journals. No matter how problematically, these characters do retain some sense of a self prior to and apart from the narrative. But as the subjects of myths, they are also public property, available as narrative material to anyone and everyone. And each teller who creates a tale out of the mythic source shapes and controls the character he retells.

As Barth tries to face the possibility of the exhaustion of the novel as a narrative mode, he chooses to retell mythic, "received" stories, to make something new by taking a new approach to traditional materials. Peter Brooks observes that the postmodernist's "need" to rework familiar stories "places the primary emphasis of the tale on the plane of narration itself" (262). The act of telling is problematic in "Echo" and "Menelaiad," then, simply by virtue of Barth's choosing this material. But it becomes even more central an issue because, for the characters whose life-stories are being presented, distinguishing between who is narrating and who is the subject of narration becomes more and more difficult.

"Echo," for the most part, is the story of Narcissus as he encounters Echo and Tiresias, but there is some confusion--among the characters and for the reader--as to who is telling it and for what purposes. About half-way through this brief narrative, the narrator asks, "Who's telling the story, and to whom? The teller's immaterial, Tiresias declares; the tale's the same, and

for all one knows the speaker may be the only auditor" (98). Like "Autobiography," "Echo" is meant to be a tape-recorded narrative, existing only as a voice. It is thus the perfect medium for the story of Echo who speaks only the words of others and cannot speak her own life-story. Narcissus, killed by self-reflection, is also obviously a perfect subject for a self-reflexive fiction. In this passage, the fear typically expressed in the self-reflexive fictions of Lost in the Funhouse surfaces again: that the Author (or speaker) may be the only audience because no one listens to stories anymore. But even Tiresias comes to recognize before the end of the story that the teller is not immaterial, that, while the basic outline of the Narcissus story may stay constant, each telling is an act of interpretation which may give Narcissus a new character. Each re-telling suits the needs of the teller and listener, and through time the sense of the importance of the Narcissus myth changes, although the elements of the plot do not.

The story is introduced as though Narcissus is telling his own tale for reasons not unlike those of Jacob Horner, as a kind of Scriptotherapy. For Narcissus, however, the act of telling his life story is an attempt to divorce himself from self, not an attempt to find a self. He, too, finds the first person tiresome. He hopes to become free of his disastrous self-awareness in the act of narration:

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. There's a cathartic Tiresias

himself employs in the interest of objectivity and to rid himself of others' histories--Oedipus's, Echo's--which distract him fore and aft by reason of his entire knowledge.

Narcissus replies that the prescription is unpalatable, but he's too weary of himself not to attempt it. (95)

Tiresias shares Lady Amherst's view that to tell of oneself is to distance one's self from the self being narrated. Whereas this process allows her to see herself more clearly, when practised to excess, it may (as Tiresias suggests here) separate oneself from the narrated self altogether. The story the reader encounters may, then, be told by Narcissus in the third person as he makes an attempt to distance himself from himself.

But the title of the story and the speculations of the characters soon make it seem more likely that the story is narrated by Echo using Narcissus' words. Echo's powers, however, are not fully defined until late in the story. She began, the narrator explains, as an author who told "lovely lies" to the gods, but she is now reduced to being a medium, a voice with seemingly limited power over what she tells: "Though her voice remains her own, she can't speak for herself thenceforth, only give back others' delight regardless of hers" (97). She, too, is subject to the pattern of the story, which is determined by Narcissus. As an author, she no longer has authority. Echo is the quintessential Author figure of Lost in the Funhouse because she is a figure whose powers have diminished through time; she is a metaphor for the contemporary novelist whose authority is

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 similarly eroding. In a sense, Echo is the most impotent of the impotent Author figures depicted in Funhouse, but Barth stresses that even she retains the authorial privilege: "Echo never, as popularly held, repeats all, like gossip or mirror. She edits, heightens, mutes, turns others' words to her end" (97). In short, as she narrates the story of Narcissus, she cannot simply represent or mirror his life; in the act of narration, she uses her selective imagination and provides an order which she sees in the material. No author, not even the apparently self-less Echo, can simply record. She must impose as she narrates, even if it is not her own life-story that she narrates.

Surprisingly, the story does not end when it reaches the death of Narcissus in the pool of his own reflection, and this makes the characters and the narrator wonder who is telling the story:

Well. One supposes that's the end of the story. How is it this voice persists, whoever it is? Needless to say, Tiresias knows. It doesn't sound nymphish; she must have lost hers. Echo says Tiresias is not to be trusted in this matter. A prophet blind or dead, a blossom, eyeless, a disengendered tale--none can tell teller from told. (99)

The story ends with this assertion that the narrative and narrator collapse into one. The narrative depicts a power struggle between the three characters and in the end seems to be narrated by the three of them, and it alerts the reader to their mutual suspicion. Like the narrators of "Autobiography" and

"Life-Story," they can be aware only of their existence within the text, and cannot ever commune with the teller or listener. In The Mind of the Novel, Bruce Kavin discusses the effect achieved through such collapsing of narrative and narrator: "In a story like 'Borges and I,' . . . the identity of the narrator is rendered paradoxical by the story's inner movement, and not even the narrator can be sure 'who has written this page.' At that point, the only consciousness left for the reader to imagine is a mind of the text" (32). The characters in "Echo" share the confusion of the two Borges, the narrator/writer of fictions and the private man, over whether they are responsible for the narrative of their life-stories or whether their life-stories are responsible for them, and they conclude that something like the "mind of the text" determines their characters and their life-stories.

In an "Additional Author's Note" added to the 1969 Bantam edition of Lost in the Funhouse, Barth explains: "Inasmuch as the nymph in her ultimate condition repeats the words of others in their own voices, -the words of "Echo" on the tape or the page may be regarded validly as hers, Narcissus's, Tiresias's, mine, or any combination or series of the four of us's" (vii). With this comment, Barth suggests that in this case many narrators are vying for control of the narrative, that the author, the Author, and the subjects all contribute to the shape of the life-story. As a result, Narcissus, like "B," becomes a victim of the tellers of his tale.

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 But he is also immortalised by his life-story, as each re-telling gives him a kind of life. If a narrator chooses to re-tell the story, then Narcissus' life continues past his death in the pool, as Barth's version insists when it presents the characters speculating as to why the story has not yet ended. At the same time, in becoming the material of myth, Narcissus, along with Tiresias and Echo, is imprisoned in story. And when the story is told over and over again, all three become very tired of their story and of their self-awareness. Echo, Tiresias, and Narcissus share the tiredness of the other characters in Funhouse. They want to break free of this repetition and their imprisonment in narrative--but the point of the story is that it is narrative which gives them the only significance and meaning they have.

Menelaus, another of Barth's characters is even more aware of the seemingly endless re-telling of his story. Narcissus thinks that he once lived; for most of his life, Menelaus has told his own life-story over and over to various audiences, choosing telling over acting in the world. "Menelaiad" is one of Barth's first experiments with a story told through the use of several framing narratives: each telling of Menelaus's story frames and dramatises his previous tellings of it. Menelaus shares "B"'s suspicion that he may well be a minor character in a larger tale, that he may be woven into Penelope's web as a part of the story of the Trojan War. He does not assume, any more than Horner does, that he is the hero of his own life-story. He goes over and over his past to try to find in it the answer to

the question which plagues him: why did Helen choose to marry him? When he gets the answer--from the oracle, from Helen herself--he cannot accept it, and he hopes that his repeated narrations will clarify the puzzle of his life for him. Whereas telling their life-stories enabled Andrews, Lady Amherst, and Horner to act, Menelaus cannot stop telling his story and begin acting. At each stage in his recovery of Helen, he must stop to tell his story to the person who can help him. Narrative thus has a value and achieves something for him, but it also stands between him and his goal. As he nears the end of his quest, the recovery of "his" Helen (who, it turns out, has been safe and chaste in Egypt for the whole of the Trojan War while a Helen made of clouds consorted with Paris in Troy), he confronts Proteus, who, as a seer, should know Menelaus's tale but claims he does not. Proteus demands that Menelaus tell him what he is doing on the beach: "When shifty Proteus vowed he had all time to listen in, from a leaden heart I cried: 'When will I reach my goal through its cloaks of story? How many veils to naked Helen?'" (140). Menelaus at this point is impatient with having to repeat the story of his life, but the outermost frame makes it clear that once he has Helen back, he still prefers telling his story to conversing with her.

Because he spends his time telling his story and because he is a mythic figure, Menelaus begins to suspect that he has become his story: "One thing's certain: somewhere Menelaus lost course and steersman, went off track, never got back on, lost hold of himself, became a record merely, the record of his loosening

grasp. He's the story of his life, with which he ambushes the unwary unawares" (128). Unlike Lady Amherst, who is free to live more fully because she has narrated her life-story, Menelaus becomes trapped in his repetitious narrations. Typical of Barth's Funhouse narrators, he sees his story as one of failure, as one of a gradual loss of identity. With each telling of his story, he becomes less of a man, more of a story. Like the narrator of "Autobiography," he becomes the voice which speaks, rather than a person telling his life-story. In the outer frame of the story, the one in which he is telling his tale to himself and to the reader/listener should there be one, he explains the nature of his self-awareness: "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" (127). Like the taped story, he doesn't "know" anything because his voice simply goes on repeating his tale, with no consciousness any longer attached to it.

The self that Menelaus was aware of before he became his story was particularly well-suited to becoming a story or voice because it lacked a strong sense of self. Like such Barthian heroes as Ebenezer Cooke of The Sot-Weed Factor and Ambrose Mensch of "Lost in the Funhouse," Menelaus suffers from a feeling of irreality, an awareness that he is unlike other people; more particularly, he does not recognize an integral self which would give him a claim to reality: "Helen he could hold; how hold Menelaus? To love is easy; to be loved, as if one were real, on



story as the heart of Menelaus's life story. Barth first complicates the story in sections numbered I through VII and then reveals the denouement in sections numbered VII through I. This revelation of Menelaus's essential selflessness occurs in the innermost story, the first section VII. Once he has penetrated through the layers of story to find himself, he finds nothing. Narrative has not so much helped him to define a self as it has confirmed his sense of inauthenticity.

His struggle with Proteus on the beach allows him to validate his sense of selflessness:

When I understood that Proteus somewhere on the beach became Menelaus holding the Old Man of the Sea, Menelaus ceased. Then I understood further how Proteus thus also was as such no more, being as possibly Menelaus's attempt to hold him, the tale of that vain attempt, the voice that tells it. (161)

As Menelaus grapples with Proteus on the beach, determined to hold him until he tells Menelaus how to recover his wife's love, he may lose his self-hood entirely. Proteus, in his changes of shape, may well change at some point into Menelaus holding Proteus, cancelling out Menelaus's original existence. But if Proteus has done so, he has not, it seems, altered the story as Echo may have altered that of Narcissus; instead, he must suffer Menelaus's fate, turning into a story and finally a voice. Like "B," Menelaus has become a fiction, but not necessarily one under whose constraints he chafes. Only as a story does Menelaus have

any identity, any significant being, and he values even that limited an existence.

Menelaus's new fate is that he must become a story-teller, bound to tell his story endlessly, rather like the Ancient Mariner. The story the reader reads is the story of how he has spent his life telling his life-story in his attempt to find Helen. In the outermost frame (I) the voice which is Menelaus speaks to himself and to the reader of how he has told his story; in the inner frames, he tells his story to Telemachus (Odysseus's son), to Helen (whom he has regained), to Proteus, and to Proteus's daughter, Eldothea. Each telling narrates the act of the previous telling, making it part of the plot of the story. Barth's use of quotation marks and dialogue tags keeps the framing structure in the forefront of the story. In the inner frames, passages such as this one are frequent:

" "" "" "In the horse's bowel, "" "" " I groan, "" "" "" we grunt till midnight. Laocoon's spear still stuck in our gut . . . [sic] "" "" "Hold up," said Helen; "" "" "Off," said Proteus; "" "" "on," said his web-foot daughter." " You see what my spot was boys! (144)

Here and elsewhere, Barth and Menelaus try to make the order of the tellings and the various responses to parts of the tale clear by identifying the listeners in their proper order. Through this framing, Barth reinforces the idea that Menelaus's life (perhaps any life) is a series of retellings of the life-story. By including the varied responses of the listeners, he shows the use to which narrative is put by the audience, the varieties of

motives and interpretations possible in listening, and he draws the reader into the interplay of teller and told. Like the regressus ad infinitum Barth employs in "Life-Story," this complexity can become confusing and annoying for the reader. But the technique is so tongue in cheek, with Telemachus' companion Peisistratus (Nestor's son) checking Menelaus up on any lapses in the framework (thus becoming the reader's advocate in the text), that its self-enclosedness is playful rather than oppressive.

The central issue in Menelaus's life, the one that makes him discover his non-identity, is the issue of love. The voice which has become the story insists that love is eternal and will last even longer than the myth which has given Menelaus his extended life:

Menelaus was lost on the beach at Pharos: he is no longer, and may be in no poor case as teller of his gripping history. For when the voice goes he'll turn tale, story of his life, to which he clings yet, whenever, how-, by whom-recounted. Then when as must at last every tale, all tellers, all told, Menelaus's story itself in ten or ten thousand years expires, yet I'll survive it, I, in Proteus's terrifying last disguise, Beauty's spouse's odd Elysium: the absurd, unending possibility of love. (161-62)

With these words, the penultimate story of Lost in the Funhouse ends, closing on an affirmative note and suggesting that Menelaus's story has become love itself. The absence of self that Menelaus experiences is compensated for by the story of love

in which he figures so prominently. He has achieved a kind of immortality as the subject of a myth about love; love will outlast even the tale which we still re-read and re-tell thousands of years after it began. Barth's focus on the telling of Menelaus's story is in the end a focus on the reasons why people tell stories: in Menelaus's case, he speaks because he cannot overcome his disbelief that the unbelievably beautiful Helen loves him.

Robert Alter, while exonerating self-reflexive fiction from charges of decadence, qualifies his defence with the demand that the world of the self-reflexive novel be substantial and interesting. As he points out, novels which are only criticism are only criticism (Partial Magic 190). In "Menelaiad," Barth's commitment to the "absurd, unending possibility of love" keeps him out of the trap of writing a narrative which is only a comment on the state of contemporary fiction. Increasingly, Barth suggests that the acts of writing and reading are analogous to love-making. In "John Barth's Tenuous Affirmation," Harold Farwell has pointed out that Barth "increasingly identifies the dilemmas of lovers with those of artists. Apparently that kind of love which represents a creative attempt to be free, from the prison of the self has become for him at least as noble an affirmation as is the artist's incomparable attempt to transcend his limitations in his art" (55). If Menelaus cannot quite come to terms with Helen's love for him, preferring to tell his story to Telemachus rather than to go to bed with Helen, he does eventually accept and acknowledge that love. At the centre of

the story, the reader may find Menelaus's essential emptiness, but he or she also finds Helen's reason for marrying him:

"... "Love"..." (150).

#### IV

In "Bellerophoniad," the third and last novella of Chimera, Barth re-orchestrates all of the concerns about "teller, tale, and told" that he introduces in Lost in the Funhouse. While suffering from some of the problems experienced by "Autobiography" and "B," Bellerophon has more energy, and his life-story is more playful than either of these stories. Like all of the narrators discussed in this chapter, Bellerophon complains of the narrative which gives him life. Each of Bellerophon's complaints--that he has become his story, that the story is ungainly, that he has lost full control and doesn't know who is telling it--stems from his dissatisfaction with the shaping (perceived by him as distortion) that occurs when life is depicted in a printed narrative or canonized in myth. He has lived his life so that it will make a good story, but he is disappointed with the form his immortality takes: "Loosed at last from mortal speech, he turned into written words: Bellerophon's letters afloat between two worlds, forever betraying, in combinations and recombinations, the man they forever represent" (145-46). Bellerophon may assert the betrayal of life by narrative, but the "Bellerophoniad" does not necessarily do so.

The juxtaposition of this story with that of Perseus (on whose autobiography Bellerophon had hoped to model his own) proves that Bellerophon betrayed himself before he became a story and makes the reader sceptical about his criticisms of the narrative.

Bellerophon had hoped to provide in his story a model of behavior and of narrative for mythic heroes to follow and to make himself an immortal mythic figure. He lives in and for his mythic immortality and is disappointed when his story fails to preserve a record of him as a hero. Because he is himself a failure in his "actual" life and an impostor, his story does in fact represent him accurately and ironically affirms the validity of narrative even as Bellerophon's voice tries to undercut it.

In a final attempt to achieve immortality, Bellerophon gives the aging Pegasus an overdose of the herb hippomanes and heads for Mount Olympus. When they are almost there, a gadfly (Polyeidos in a non-document transformation) bites the horse. The horse shakes off its rider and flies on to Olympia while Bellerophon and Polyeidos fall to the marshes of twentieth-century Maryland. As they fall, Polyeidos, a seer and shape-shifter who specializes in turning into documents, offers to turn himself into Bellerophon as the "Bellerophoniad" and thereby guarantee some measure of immortality to Bellerophon.

Bellerophon accepts and becomes Polyeidos as document, much as Menelaus became himself holding Proteus, who eventually became Menelaus's voice. The resulting document is informed by the consciousness of Bellerophon and, in part, by that of Polyeidos. In the introduction to the tale, the presence of multiple and

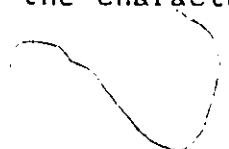
conflicting voices narrating the story becomes evident:

Had I understood, when I consented at the end of this novella to be transformed by the seer Polyeidus into a version of Bellerophon's life, that I might be imperfectly, even ineptly narrated, I'd have cleaved to my original program. . . . And if Polyeidus the seer had realized that this final and trickiest effort in the literary-metamorphosis way would be freckled and soiled with as it were self-criticism, he'd've let Bellerophon smack into the muck and bubble there forever, like Dante's Wrathful in the marshes of the Styx. (146)

Because Bellerophon as "Bellerophoniad" documents the deceptions and deviousness of Polyeidus who (it turns out) is his father-- his Author in more senses than one--Polyeidus is dissatisfied and feels powerless; because Polyeidus is still influential to some extent in the interpretation of and presentation of Bellerophon, Bellerophon is dissatisfied and feels powerless over his life-story. With this merging of tellers, Bellerophon and the reader experience difficulty in determining just who is speaking as the tale progresses. Bellerophon, trading questions with Polyeidus at the end of the novella, uses up his last few words to describe the result of this unique literary collaboration: "It's a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longuers, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor-- . . . [sic] It's no Bellerophoniad" (319-20). The irony here is at Bellerophon's expense: this is the end of the one and only "Bellerophoniad,"

which is characterised by all of those features (features of the chimera, the beast associated with Bellerophon in mythology). We have the actual text to read; he envisions an ideal which this narrative does not embody. His final comment is his last admission of the failure that has characterised his life. The fable of Bellerophon, McConnell states, is "a fable of failure; life wanes, desires depart, and we discover, sooner or later, that we are indeed the victims of the very fictions we had hoped would immortalize us." But, McConnell adds, "the story also asserts the power of story itself to express and grant, if only a fictive, at the same time even a fictive value to our inchoate ideas of passion and greatness" (158). The "Bellerophoniad" is better than silence, although Bellerophon himself is slow to recognize this.

Throughout the narrative, he makes references to the "real Bellerophoniad," the ideal document which he had hoped would preserve and immortalise Bellerophon the mythic hero. He had made an attempt during his idyll with the second Melanippe to write this document, but his is not the text the reader reads. Bellerophon describes what "this original or best Bellerophoniad" would have been like (150-52). It would have been a polished work of art, pleasant to read, full of dramatic action, and not a confused, self-reflexive, precious text. His dismay over the actual text he appears in is reminiscent of "Autobiography"'s and "B"'s dismay, but whereas they evoke some pathos because of their powerlessness, Bellerophon is only a comically pathetic figure. Like the characters themselves, the reader has no sense of the



first two narrators beyond their existence in narrative. In "Bellerophoniad," however, Barth depicts a character who is well-suited to this kind of treatment--an inauthentic, failed hero.

With the loss of control over his narrative comes an inability to distinguish who really is fashioning the narrative of which he is aware. With great weariness, Bellerophon complains: "I'm full of voices, all mine, none me; I can't keep straight who's speaking, as I used to. It's not my wish to be obscure or difficult; I'd hoped at least to entertain, if not inspire" (154). The voices are all his because he has become his story, but none of them correspond to the voice he was aware of having before he was transformed into his story. Like "B," he had hoped to entertain rather than alienate the reader, to tell his story as an adventure tale rather than as a self-reflexive fiction. But the voices which tell the tale take control over it, and pass down a myth about Bellerophon which he would not sanction. The result of his self-reflexive observations is that the act of narration and the identity of the narrator become as problematic as they are in "Echo." The myth proves more powerful than either the subject or any given narrator.

Bellerophon complains at one point that all of the characters in this telling of his story, even he himself, tend to become Polyeidus, since the seer's consciousness informs the narrative to some extent. Later, however, he questions that assumption:

But the hero of this story is no longer confident that

Polyeidus is its author. Polyeidus reminds him that Polyeidus never pretended authorship: Polyeidus is the story, more or less, in any case its marks and spaces: the author could be Antonius Liberalis, for example, Hesiod, Homer, Hyginus, Ovid, Pindar, Plutarch, the Scholiast on the Iliad, Tzetzes, Robert Graves, Edith Hamilton, Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, the author of the Perseid, someone imitating that author--anyone, in short, who has ever written or will write about the myth of Bellerophon and Chimera. (246)

This version of his life could be anybody's version: Polyeidus has no control over which "Bellerophoniad" he will turn into. Once the man has become the subject of myth, Bellerophon discovers, he no longer has any power over his life-story: it is public property and will be used to suit the needs of the teller. He cannot control the story once he is dead. Like "B" he does not know and cannot bargain with the author. In the list of possible authors Barth includes, he traces the history of Bellerophon's myth (and his own sources), showing how it has lasted through time, granting Bellerophon that immortality Polyeidus promised him. Each author works with the same basic story-outline but each will impose a different meaning on the myth. Other of Barth's narrators--George, Sue and Fenn, Perseus--are willing to let their stories go, to let them become the property of the tellers and listeners, but Bellerophon, like Todd Andrews, wants to preserve a specific, determined, unalterable depiction of himself. He is not willing to divorce

himself from his story.

Becoming a mythic figure, then, allows "at best a sorely qualified immortality" (149), but immortality is what Bellerophon has long aspired to in order to prove that he is indeed a demigod and a mythic hero. His apparent motive when he narrated his story was to achieve self-glorification, to present himself as something he was not. He planned to use narrative, it seems, to deceive rather than to discover himself. He agrees to become Polyeidus as Bellerophon as the "Bellerophoniad" because all other attempts to have himself canonized in the traditions of myth have failed, and the immortality conveyed by his embodiment in the document, though far from perfect, is preferable. He finally realizes, to total oblivion. He had hoped to be immortalised after the fashion of Perseus in "Perseid," which he reads on his fortieth birthday and on which he models his "Second Ebb." Perseus became an immortal constellation, forever telling his story to his now beloved Medusa. But when Bellerophon sees how badly his own story is written and realizes that all of his loved ones have died as he has lived on, he comes to think himself cursed in his immortality. He seems to have purchased it at the expense of all he should have valued: his family, his integrity, his people. He has been so caught up in following the pattern of the mythic hero that he has overlooked common human values, and he suffers the consequences of having chosen fiction over life as the realm of his existence. He becomes a warning of the dangers both of self-absorption and of living to narrate

rather than narrating to live.

He tries to justify this attempt to be immortalised and his dismay at the form of the narrative by claiming that he has no personal interest in the fate of the myth of Bellerophon, that in fact he is being quite self-less. He hints to Polyeidus:

For while it's true that Bellerophon's aspiration to immortality was without social relevance, for example, and thoroughly elitist--in fact of benefit to no one but himself --it should be observed that it didn't glorify "him," either, since the name he's called by is not his actual name, but a fictitious one. His fame, then, such as it was, is, and might have been, is as it were anonymous. (316-17)

Throughout the novella, there are hints that Bellerophon is indeed the "phony" suggested by the title of his narrative.

Early in the novella, the reader suspects that he is an impostor because he refuses to explain the colour of his eyes.

Eventually, he claims that he has been trying to glorify his twin brother, Bellerus, and not himself, Deliades. The implications of his name are a matter of contention throughout his life-story.

Some of the characters he encounters insist that Bellerophon means "killer of Bellerus" while Bellerophon himself claims that it means "Bellerus the killer" and, finally, "the voice of Bellerus." Bellerophon's inauthenticity is more disturbing than that of Menelaus because he has denied the self he once had so that he can enact the role of Bellerus. And because his whole life has been a carefully constructed fiction, he cannot bear to have it distorted in the narrative of his life-story. The ungainly

"Bellerophoniad" makes all of his efforts at imposture seem futile and reinforces his sense of failure. He had assumed that if he simply followed in his life the patterns of the typical myth of the hero, he would become a mythic hero. He became, instead, an imitation of a hero. His confusion of life and narrative results in a failed life as well as a failed narrative.

In the final pages of the novella, as Bellerophon and Polyeidus reveal their secrets to one another while falling into the marshes of Maryland, Bellerophon claims that he "became" his brother out of a sense of guilt and duty: "I was his mortal killer; therefore I became his immortal voice: Deliades I buried in Bellerophon, to live out in selfless counterfeit, from that hour to this, my brother's demigoddish life. It's not my story: never was" (318). All of his adult life, he has lived someone else's story--the most dramatic use of mythotherapy in Barth's canon. But his claim that he usurped his brother's life in order to glorify him is suspect. He seems to have taken advantage of his brother's death to achieve the fame he could not have achieved as plain Deliades. To achieve this fame, he must turn himself into a fiction, not just in the sense that he becomes the text of the "Bellerophoniad," but also in the sense that he lives his life as though it were a story, closely following the pattern of the mythic hero given to him by Polyeidus. When the characters of "Life-Story" complain that they have no life except that shaped by the conventions of literature, they have grounds for complaint, since the only life they have is that of fictional

characters. But Bellerophon, in contrast, willingly undergoes the transformation from a free-willed self to a character long before he becomes a version of his story. Manfred Puetz points out the dangers of Bellerophon's condition: "the problem of fictionalizing life turns into the problem of living fictionalizations" (143). Even before he becomes the subject of a specific narrative, Bellerophon loses all sense of a self free to choose its own actions because he insists upon seeing himself as a character who must conform to certain literary conventions.

He totally misunderstands the nature of myth and follows the pattern to no avail. He does not realize that the power of myth is its ability to convey imaginatively felt truths; instead he thinks that it presents an agenda to be enacted. By making Bellerophon fail in his attempt to be another Perseus, Barth shows the danger of taking literature literally when it should be understood emblematically. Until he becomes the text of his story, Bellerophon does not realize that narrative is a structure and not a transparent reflection of the actual world.

Bellerophon has had ample opportunity to discover the nature and properties of myth. He is, after all, married to a mythology major, who offers him insights. When she explains to him that "The very concept of objective truth, especially as regards the historical past, is problematical; also that narrative art, particularly of the mythopoeic or at least mythographic variety, has structures and rhythms, values and demands, not the same as those of reportage or historiography" (203), the lesson Bellerophon learns is that he can lie about what he has done.

misinterpreting Philonoe's point. If he is unsuccessful in several of his heroic tasks, he need not let on, since the rhythm, the pattern is what matters, not the facts. With this limited awareness, he uses myth as yet another betrayal of his actual self and, despite the failure and tedium which characterise his actual life, plans to write an action-packed, ideal "Bellerophoniad." In it he would record, not a factual record of his life, but the history he would like to have associated with Bellerophon:

I never killed Chimarrhus or Chimera, or rode the winged horse, or slept with Philonoe, or laid my head between Melanippe's thighs: the voice that spoke to them all those nights was Bellerus's voice. And the story it tells isn't a lie, but something larger than fact . . . [sic]

P: In a word, a myth. (318)

Here Bellerophon uses the properties of his narrative to excuse himself and his behavior. He suggests that providing his story with "mythic truth" justifies his various dishonest acts, even ennobles him.

Only as he reads the "Perseid" does he learn to distinguish between factual and mythic truth and to realize that he has made a mistake in slavishly following the pattern explained by Polyeidus. The price he has to pay to really become a mythic hero finally becomes clear: "I couldn't speak to explain the difference between lies and myth, which I was but beginning to comprehend myself; how the latter could be so much realer and

more important than particular men that perhaps I must cease to be the hero of my own, cease even to exist, cease somehow even to have existed" (305-06). He has finally realized that the story will replace the self, that the self depicted in narrative is apart from and other than the original self, a model, a construct. His factual life will soon matter not at all: the narrative version is finally not only most important but also separate from his actual, willed self. At this point he is willing to allow the narrative to shape the character of Bellerophon--but he still wishes to determine some of the properties of that narrative. As a result, the properties of "Bellerophoniad" still anger and dismay him, and they become the primary focus of the novella.

Discussing recent fiction in "The Function of Self-Consciousness in John Barth's Chimera," Marilyn Edelstein observes that the "fictional process is in the foreground of much contemporary fiction where the narrative human presence once was." The narrators and characters discussed in this chapter lack a sense of presence, for the most part, and are aware only of the narrative process which gives them being. Edelstein goes on to point out that "both fictional process and human presence serve similar structural functions with the text, which suggests that the creation of a fiction resembles the creation of a human self, real or imaginary." It becomes obvious to the reader of "Bellerophoniad" that "the provisional reality of self-conscious fiction is like the provisional reality of the 'post-modern'

self, prone to self-questioning, constituted by process rather than substance, multiple, changeable, perhaps even illusory" (99). As Edelstein shows, self-reflexive texts are explorations both of narrative and of selfhood. Bellerophon's confusion of narrative and life is understandable if the structures of selves and the structures of narratives are so similar. In the short fictions discussed in this chapter, Barth's primary concerns--what his stories are "passionately about"--are the postmodern self and its relation to the kinds of selves constructed in narrative. He dramatises the lives of characters who are aware of their fictitiousness in order to question the integrity of the self assumed in traditional first-person narratives. Barth acknowledges that the self may have only a provisional, perhaps an illusory, being--like that of characters developed in narratives--but at the same time his narrators dramatise the difficulty experienced by most people (who persist in thinking of themselves in terms of integrated, real selves) in living with this view of the self.

In The Exploded Form, James Mellard discusses the need for a breakthrough in fiction, using terms Barth would find congenial. He argues that "a truly adequate new realism" would "acknowledge two conditions of our contemporary existence." Those conditions, he goes on to explain, are "that consciousness and its governing structures are inextricable aspects of any human 'reality,' and that any 'reality' we therefore define is provisional and, finally, indeterminate" (xiii). Mellard's point

is that fiction must begin with the assumption that human consciousness imposes orders, rather than discovers the order of a determinate world outside of its own structures. One of the "governing structures" of consciousness, Barth insists, is narrative, the patterns of action and meaning we learn primarily from our experience of traditional, premodern, realistic, and modern fiction and which we impose on our own lives in the practice of Mythotherapy.

His narrator-characters, however, inevitably long to appear in a fiction which makes sense according to the patterns with which they are familiar rather than in fictions constructed in terms of the self-reflexive "new realism" of which Mellard speaks. A character who is depicted in one of the inner frames of "Life-Story," for example, complains:

If I'm going to be a fictional character . . . I want to be in a rousing good yarn as they say, not some piece of avant-garde preciousness. I want passion and bravura action in my plot, heroes I can admire, heroines I can love, memorable speeches, colorful accessory characters, poetical language. It doesn't matter to me how naively linear the anecdote is; never mind modernity! (116)

His desire is shared by the narrators of the stories in Funhouse and Chimera who question the value of the self-reflexive fictions in which they appear. The mythic heroes, in particular, who think of their lives in terms of adventure stories, wonder whether the mode of presentation is suitable. Barth's response to the desires of such characters as the one quoted above would

be to point out that modern fiction cannot be overlooked or denied; it must be incorporated into the postmodern sensibility. The "new realism" privileges consciousness rather than action, and self-reflexive fiction best suits the needs of the writer concerned to show how we use narrative to impose meanings.

As he deals with the re-telling of received myths, he shows the importance of the context of the narrative act. Each narrator and each reader will use and present the materials of the myth differently. The "first person, tiresome" narrators, self-absorbed as they are in the solipsistic world of the narrative itself, cannot know their readers, and are concerned only with their self-images. They do not use narrative to enhance their lives or the lives of others; narrative is their only life. They are obsessed with the qualities of their narratives because they feel they have little control over them and because they cannot be sure that they are communicating to a reader. They contrast sharply with other of Barth's "mythic" narrators, particularly with Perseus, George, and Dunyazade, who tell their stories primarily so that readers may benefit. Through these narrators, discussed in the next chapter, Barth shows more emphatically the importance of the reader in the narrative act.

## Chapter 5

## CONSTELLATED:

"Perseid," Giles, Goat-Boy, "Dunyazadiad," Sabbatical

Bellerophon finally comes to accept that, if his life-story is to become a myth, he must let it assume the changing shapes each new teller gives it, that myth is not autobiography, but narrative structured by patterns recognized as significant. It becomes the property of its readers. Reluctantly, he comes to accept what a group of Barth's narrators has known all along: that the immortality granted by literature is qualified and even suspect, but, if accepted gracefully, will not only allow an extension of the teller's life but also allow the teller to give something of value to the readers with whom the narrative communicates. Rather than speculate about their authors or myopically examine themselves, these tellers tend to think of their life-stories as literary works and of their readers as their motivation for narrating. They write or tell their stories so that they may be read or heard, and they allow their life-stories to assume an existence as texts or tales independent of themselves, provided for the education of their audiences. For the "constellated" narrators, narration is an act of communication, albeit at times a problematic one.

Perseus's story, "Perseid," for instance, inspires Bellerophon to re-enact his earlier life and becomes for the chimera-slayer one example of the pattern followed by a mythic hero. Like many of Barth's narrators, Perseus begins to write

his life-story to understand himself, but he ends immortalised as a constellation, fixed and brilliant in the sky, a point of reference for those who come after him. Like Bellerophon, George, the goat of Giles, Goat-Boy, tries to follow the pattern of the mythic hero by imitating the heroes of literature. By the time that he is recording the story of his own life, however, he is no longer proud to be the Grand Tutor and the subject matter of a sacred text (The Revised New Syllabus). Despite this disillusionment, he lets his life-story be recorded and distributed as a sacred text while he himself is free of his story. Dunyazade, far from worrying about the image of the self presented in her story, tells the story of her sister's stories in an effort to save her own and her husband's lives, proving that there are meaningful stories to tell even when all of the stories seem to have been told.<sup>1</sup> But the most positive affirmation of narrative as a still meaningful genre is that of Susan and Fenwick Turner, the dual narrators of Sabbatical, who announce that the story is their child, the life which originates in their lives but which exists apart from them.

The issues which Barth explores in Funhouse and "Bellerophoniad"--the creation of a self in language and narrative, the authority of the author over his or her text, and the world perceived as structures of narrative and language--are persistent concerns in his fiction.<sup>2</sup> But these issues are not so dominant in the narratives of Perseus, George, Dunyazade, and Sue and Fenn. While these works remain typically self-reflexive,

with narrators who cannot refrain from commenting on the act of narration and the properties of narrative, the narrators are much more confident than those discussed in "first person, tiresome" that their narratives do have meaning not only for themselves but also for their readers. They remain convinced that their works will be read and used by their readers as they attempt to understand their own life-stories. Underlying each of these narrative acts is the assumption that narrator and reader are linked through the act of narration. Considering the role played by their audiences, these narrators seem to escape the painful self-awareness that inhibits the first-person narrators of the Funhouse stories. Ironically, they achieve an awareness of self and of the self's ability to structure a world through narrative, an awareness which the Funhouse narrators would think unattainable. Through his depiction of these narrators, Barth suggests that, although self-reflexive narrators can become despairingly self-absorbed, they can also be freed from the limitations of self-absorption if they recognize that their act of narration is an act of communication.

Perseus, the narrator of "Perseid," the second of the Chimera novellas, begins the narrative of his life hoping only to discover who he is but ends by creating another work in the "exploits of heroes" genre. In the end, Perseus's narrative becomes the property of the reader (Bellerophon, for example, reads it) and Perseus himself is

petrified forever as a diamond shining brightly from the sky. Barth's image of the myth as a constellation is a suggestive one. A constellation is only recognized as such when viewers read significance and order into an otherwise meaningless pattern of stars, using their knowledge of patterns and of other constellations in their interpretation of the night sky. Similarly, the reader of a narrative must be familiar with narrative patterns and plots and must be skilled in the determining of meaning from narrative. The reader must be actively engaged as he or she reads if the narrative is to establish a link between writer and reader. The image of the constellation also suggests the relative permanence of myth preserved as narrative. Stars, as Barth's narrators admit, may not last forever, but they do last a long time and confer something very close to immortality on the characters whose life-stories they preserve.

Perseus begins his narrative, much as Andrews, Horner, and Lady Amherst do, hoping to find some vital part of himself by examining his autobiography very carefully: "somewhere along the 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" (80). He hopes that the nightly narratives which his wife finds so tiresome will help him to recover the pattern or thread of his life. His becomes, initially, another story of a hero, told from the perspective of middle age and faded glory. Perseus fears that he

is petrifying slowly, as his enemies had been petrified immediately by the Gorgon head he carried. By continuously telling his story, he hopes to rejuvenate himself, but, instead, he alienates his wife when he becomes apparently self-absorbed.

Towards the end of his narrative, however, he discovers that narrative itself fixes him forever, much as petrifying has fixed his victims. At times, instead of feeling relieved by the patterns he discovers in his life, Perseus feels the restraints of existing in one fixed plot and narrative rather than in another narrative or in many narratives. Like Bellerophon, he occasionally complains of the qualities given to him by his life-story. But unlike Bellerophon, he comes to recognize that the narrative is a thing distinct from his actual life. At the conclusion of his recital of his life-story, he begs his nightly companion, Medusa, to tell him what became of their mortal (as opposed to their immortal, constellated) selves. She replies:

No use; those parts are private, like Andromeda's and Phineus's; not for publication. . . . Down there our mortal lives are living themselves out, or've long since done-- together or apart, comic tragic, beautiful ugly. That's another story, another story; it can't be told to the characters in this. (141)

She teaches Perseus that life is irrevocably separated from the narrative of a life; art and immortality are irrevocably separated from the mortal, which she significantly describes as another "story": even an autobiography becomes a text, a closed

system which is interpreted by the reader but which cannot interact with the life the story depicts. "Perseid" is merely one of many possible records of his life, Medusa acknowledges, but the characters who figure in it are fixed by its narrative conventions. Like "B" they can know nothing about possible selves beyond the text. As Medusa points out, the life story is transformed as they move from the private to the public realm. When the life-story becomes literature, its qualities and dimensions must conform to the conventions of the tale of the mythic hero regardless of Perseus's personal and private idiosyncracies. Her comment emphasizes the selectivity and patterning which give narrative its shape and make it accessible and interesting to the reader.

Perseus, then, undergoes a change from self to story--if not to the printed page like Bellerophon or the spoken word like Menelaus, at least to mythic hero. But Perseus is willing, even happy, to have become his story because the transformation allows him a kind of immortality:

I'm content. So with this issue, our net estate: to have become, like the noted music of our tongue, these silent, visible signs; to be the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise you up forever and know that our story will never be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars . . .

[sic] I'm content. (142)

Perseus recognizes in his transformation from mortal hero to

immortal constellation a valuable extension of his life, granted only by his "readers." He qualifies the concept of the readers somewhat by suggesting that they must be trained in the perception of the stars. The particular training needed to read his tale seems to be the experience of romantic love. Unlike all of the narrators discussed to this point, Perseus sees "Perseid" not as his story but as "our" story, his and Medusa's. To the reader who has eyes to see, his is a tale not of heroism but of love, and it can best be read by lovers who are gazing at the sky.

The significance of the reader's ability is stressed at several points in the narrative. A comment made by Cepheus, Perseus's father-in-law, is typical: "I can start the story anywhere; it goes right along, you'll see, hangs together like a constellation if you know the stars, how to read them" (123). The characters of Cepheus's court all become stars at the end of "Perseid," and Cepheus feels that his is a story anyone familiar with the principles of constellations can read. The reader of a narrative, the analogy suggests, must be trained in the patterns of narrative if he or she is to understand a given life-story. Narratives "hang together" as constellations do in that their qualities and elements are fixed but take on meaning only as a reader looks at them. The tale, once separated from the author, is shapeless until a reader gives it meaning by recognizing its significant patterns. This is a discovery Perseus himself makes in the shrine built for him by Calyxa, the walls of which depict his own life story in a spiral-shaped mural.

Perseus, in the middle of his life, 40 years old, re-

enacting his heroic exploits in an effort to find himself, wakes up in the temple, unsure as to whether he is in heaven or still alive. With the discovery that he is still alive and that his life has become a myth already (the subject of temple murals visited by Greek tourists) and with the new-found knowledge that he has been the subject of Calyxa's thesis on mythic heroes, Perseus realizes that his story is more important than his mere self. With that realization, he becomes the Author of his actions and spends his time narrating his life-story to Calyxa.

From this point on, he adopts the figures and terminology of narrative to describe, even to plan his life.<sup>3</sup> When he begins to re-enact the events of his youth, a cowed Medusa tells him that he must use different approaches and tactics this time. Perseus agrees: "I told myself it was just as well: let my second tale be truly a second, not mere replication of my first; let a spell of monologue precede new dialogue" (121). As do all of Barth's narrators, Perseus self-consciously comments on his own stylistic and structural ploys. But he makes a significant departure from the pattern established by Menelaus and Bellerophon here: he sees his narrative as "dialogue" rather than as "monologue" both because it is the story of Perseus and Medusa and because he perceives narrative to be an act of communication between author and reader. His endless monologue both bored and alienated his wife Andromeda; his new narrative, begun after instruction by Calyxa in the ways of art, will allow for his audience's participation in the narrative.

Once he becomes a narrator and tells his story nightly to Medusa as they shine in the night sky, Perseus has distanced himself as teller from himself as hero and deliberately shapes his narrative into a pattern which will be pleasing to the reader. In the midst of narrating the concluding sequence of his mortal drama--the scuffle at Cepheus's palace, his desertion of Andromeda, and his unveiling of Medusa--Perseus interrupts the exposition to ask, "Two more pages?" and then compresses his story to fit within the given limitations, showing his desire to complete the narrative to the reader's satisfaction.

In the epilogue to this tale, Perseus and Medusa trade questions. Medusa uses up one of her questions to ask Perseus if "that business just before the climax [of his life-story] where Andromeda flings herself between you and Danaus" is not melodramatic. Perseus replies in the affirmative: "Heavens yes. In fact, from this perspective, a clumping klitsch. As is the whole story nowadays, I daresay. But that's how it was, and at the time we were archetypes, not stereotypes; reality, not myth" (137). Perseus carefully distinguishes here between life and myth. His life-story has become a myth, just as Medusa's stonework--no sculpture but simply a freezing of an actual moment--would be regarded as stylized art. As a living man, he was an archetype, the actual thing, the prototype of the mythic hero. Only as readers interpreted his life did he become a model, a stereotype. When several other heroes followed in his footsteps, his life-story began to seem a melodramatic stereotype--but that is a condition imposed upon his narrative by the

reader, or in this case by the listener, Medusa.

In his inclusion of Medusa in the epilogue to the narrative proper, Barth introduces the first of his narrating couples. This is a situation explored in more detail and at much greater length in Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales, but Barth begins to dramatise here his belief that the act of reading is much like the act of making love: the reader must be actively involved with the text, and the text must be as ravishing as a Lover. Medusa complains about some of the qualities Perseus ascribes to her in his narrative, but she is easily placated when Perseus reminds her that he has chosen her over Andromeda and Calyxa as his immortal partner. The novella ends with the affirmation of their love, confirmed in the act of narration, as Perseus nightly tells his tale to Medusa, and in the act of the readers of the stars, who see in the constellation a model of love.

Perseus remains content with his story--and to be a story. He experiences neither the desperation of Bellerophon nor the resigned sadness expressed by George in Giles Goat-Boy. Perseus has been a mythic hero; his life will be preserved by readers who find meaning in his story; he is granted near immortality in his existence as a constellation. Perseus recognizes that this immortality is limited, that narratives, too, have a lifespan and will eventually be replaced by newer stories as readers read different patterns into the stars and lose their awareness of the old myths. In fact, he begins "Perseid" with a statement of his acceptance of this fact: "Stories last longer than men, stones

than stories, stars than stones. But even our stars' nights are numbered, and with them will pass this patterned tale to a long-deceased earth" (67). Because he has been "constellated," Perseus will endure, perhaps even longer than the earth itself will endure, but his mythic status will not guarantee him absolute immortality. Without readers to recognize his existence, that existence is meaningless.

"Perseid" begins with a "Good evening" but it ends with the "Good night" to which, according to the Genie of "Dunyasadiad," all stories must come since in the final analysis all stories are life-stories and every story's end a kind of death. But as the Genie tells Dunyazade, what matters is the acknowledgement of this property that stories and life share and the acceptance of stories as an admittedly temporary solace:

The Arab storytellers understood this; they ended their stories not "happily ever after," but specifically "until there took them the Destroyer of Delights and Desolator of Dwelling-places, and they were translated to the ruth of Almighty Allah, and their houses fell waste and their palaces lay in ruins, and the kings inherited their riches." . . .

To be joyous in the full acceptance of this denouement is surely to possess a treasure . . . (64)

Immediately preceding Perseus's opening statement about the mortality of stories, this comment helps us to identify the source of Perseus's contentment. He has come to fully accept that all stories come to this conclusion, although he was happy

to grasp at the limited immortality extended to him by virtue of his having become a mythic hero of interest to readers for thousands of years. "Perseid" concludes, not with the heroic moment--the slaying of enemies and lovers in Cepheus's palace-- but with an epilogue about the narrative which draws attention to the distance between the deliberately shaped and patterned narrative and the life whose story it narrates. For Perseus, this distance is not so problematic as it is for Menelaus and Bellerophon because he recognizes that the narrative exists for the reader's satisfaction as much as it exists to prove a point about himself.

## II

In Funhouse and Chimera Barth develops the framing of narratives to a complex degree. In Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus, Barth's first "framed" narrative, the framing is not so intricate, but it plays a crucial role both in determining the actual reader's experience of the novel and in establishing the act of reading as an aspect of narrative worthy of consideration by the novelist. In this case, the frame draws attention to the distance between the narrator and his narrative, which may not be authentically the work of the purported narrator at all. While the bulk of the text consists of the apparently autobiographical account of the life of yet another hero-figure, the documents which introduce and comment on it question the authenticity of the text. The "Author," J.B., believes that the

Revised New Syllabus was written by Stoker Giles (who insists he is George's son); Stoker Giles claims that it was written by a computer which collated several tapes, including those recorded by George himself; some of the editors of the publishing house believe that J.B. wrote it himself. With these elaborate frames, Barth once again draws attention to the question of the narrator's authority over his own life-story. But the point is that it does not matter: once finished, the narrative serves the reader's rather than the writer's needs.

Like the "tiresome" narrators, George clearly does not have the final word on his story--the Editor-in-Chief, J.B., and Stoker Giles all admit to having made "corrections to the text." As readers, they have altered the text to meet their needs and to make the narrative fulfill their expectations of a myth of a hero. Experienced readers all, they assume that they can identify structural and stylistic elements appropriate to the given genre. Representative of actual readers, they make the text fulfill their own desires, regardless of the intentions or desires of the narrator. These characters figure only in the frame of the novel, but they provide Barth's actual reader with a perspective on the narrative that follows, making him or her question the veracity of the text and remain dubious about the authenticity of the document. This is a ploy Barth explores further in LETTERS, making his reader question the authenticity of a work which the reader clearly recognizes as a novel. But the self-reflexiveness serves to make the reader examine closely

the act of reading and the use to which readers put narrative.

The framing sections of Giles Goat-Boy draw attention to the movement of George's life-story from the realm of autobiography to that of myth or "received" narrative. The frames introduce some doubt as to whether the text ought to be read as a novel (as something "made up"), as an autobiography (a factually true narrative of an important life), or as a sacred text, a Third Testament or Revised New Syllabus. The novel begins with a "Publisher's Disclaimer," the first words of which, "The reader," draw attention to the distance the text has travelled from simple autobiography (the statement of an individual) to canonized text. The letters of assessment written by the editors of the publishing company, aside from commenting cleverly on the text to follow, demonstrate that George's life-story has become public property, a publicly received work of literature rather than a private journal. The cover letter from J.B. further emphasizes George's loss of control over his own story: the typescript is presented to J.B. by Stoker Giles, who claims to be George's son and who has assumed responsibility for spreading the Curriculum established by his father. George's narration of his life-story can no longer be treated as an instance of scriptotherapy, a narrative begun to achieve self-knowledge, nor as an attempt to achieve self-hood through the language of story. It has become a narrative of a mythic hero, which will be read by some as fiction and by some as inspired truth, regardless of the narrator's aims. When Barth's reader encounters the narrative, it exists only for the readers, and

George's authority has been usurped by the readers who have already altered the text.

That George can no longer influence the response to or publication of his life-story becomes even more apparent in the closing frames of the novel. In a "Postscript to the 'Posttape,'" J.B. expresses his doubts that the "Posttape" is authentic, citing textual and ideological discrepancies, and concluding: "Some imposter and antigiles composed the 'Posttape,' to gainsay and weaken faith in Giles's Way. Even the type of those flunked pages is different!" (766) J.B. consequently assumes the right--as a gifted reader of the narrative--to edit and comment on the text, to re-shape the life-story so that it conforms to his version of the "true" story of George. But even his opinion expressed in this "Postscript" is suspect since, as the Editor's "Footnote to the 'Postscript to the 'Posttape'" tells us, the type of the "Postscript to the 'Posttape'" is not the same as that of the cover letter written by J.B.. As a reader, possibly the most powerful reader, the Editor, too, feels that he can now determine what is authentic in the text. George has lost all authority over his own story, the inevitable result of becoming the subject of a narrative. All of the references to the type-faces used and the fact that the narrative exists as an artifact, a book, a thing to be picked up and read by anyone who happens upon it, reinforce the actual reader's sense that The Revised New Syllabus is a document set adrift from its original author, on its own now in the sea of readers. Following the "Principle of

Metaphoric Means," Barth dramatises the act of reading and determining meaning in his novel, drawing attention in this case not so much to the act of self-expression in narrative as to the act of discovering meaning by reading narratives.

Unlike the Funhouse and Chimera narrators, however, George is quite willing to have his life-story altered to suit the needs of the readers. If we can assume that the "Posttape" is indeed composed by him and not a spurious addition to the document, then we realize that George has decided that factual truth is not so useful as the mythic truth of a sacred text. He explains that he has composed The Revised New Syllabus during his final detention (prison term). But he has not done so for personal reasons: simply to please Anastasia:

Her great nagging faith has alone sustained me, for better or worse, through the monstrous work--this "Revised New Syllabus," as she calls it, which she has convinced me will supersede the Founder's Scroll. . . . Supposing even that the Scroll were replaced by these endless tapes, one day to feed Him who will come after me, as I fed once on that old sheepskin--what then? Cycles on cycles, ever unwinding. (755)

Even with his recognition that his narrative is monstrous, George does not fret about the image of self his narrative will preserve. He feels that he is distinct from the narrative and that, although his work may well be a sacred text and he a Grand Tutor, Grand Tutors--and their stories--come and go. He acknowledges that his life-story may have some value as an inspiration to the next Grand

Tutor, and he is willing to record it in the hope that it will inspire his readers, but he is not particularly concerned that it accurately represent him. As he narrates, he is not self-absorbed but concerned with communicating some of his discoveries to the one to follow in his footsteps.

While this makes him somewhat unique in Barth's canon of narrators, he is typically Barthian in other ways. George, like Bellerophon and Perseus, aspired in his youth to become a mythic hero. Like Perseus, he succeeds in actually becoming one (whereas Bellerophon becomes a pale imitation of a hero) and does not narrate his life-story simply to provide himself with that status. The narrative may be all that remains of George after his death, but unlike Perseus he has not become his story--it is simply an extension of a confident self which exists beyond or outside of the narrative. Taking what he calls the "Tragic View" of things, George acknowledges that he will be forgotten: "They will not remember who ordered their schedules out of chaos and put right their college; who routed the false Grand Tutor, showed the Way to Commencement Gate, and set down this single hope of studentdom, The Revised New Syllabus" (763). He has no false hopes that his narrative will grant him immortality, and hence he is willing to divorce himself and his personal fate from the fate of the document itself.

Nevertheless, George at times believes that his Revised New Syllabus will replace the Founder's Scroll and become the most important and public of documents, a bible to be carried--

according to Stoker Giles--in every briefcase on campus. When and if this happens, however, Gilesianism will be taken over by the believers in their various factions who will lose sight of the narrator who composed their text. Working from this assumption, George is not distressed to think that his narrative, and with it his life-story, will be distorted. He has a strong enough belief in the integrity of his self to relinquish that tight control needed by Todd Andrews and Bellerophon over their life-stories.

George is willing to allow his readers to re-shape his life story because he has been an active and avid reader himself. He has found in the canonized works of literature the role-models and inspiration for his own life. His first inkling that he might be a boy rather than a goat occurs with his first introduction to "Lady Creamhair," his mother. At that meeting, she reads him the story of the Brother's Gruff and the Troll. Inspired by this story to become a hero (but like the first goat Gruff, who used his brains rather than his brawn to achieve safety), he also realizes the power of narrative over the imagination and ultimately over the actions of the reader. He agrees to Anastasia's request to record his own life-story presumably because he hopes that his successor will read it and be inspired, as he was inspired, to become a hero.

In George's childish response to the story of the Brother's Gruff and to the "Tales of the Trustees," and "The Founder-Saga," Barth depicts the most primitive and basic human response to narrative. George is enraptured and uses the models of behavior

provided in narrative to make sense of his own experience:

One day I would see myself as Great William Gruff, and Max and Lady C. as Trolls bent on keeping me, each in his fashion, from the Cabbage of a glorious destiny. . . .

another day I felt me no hero at all, not prince nor black-shagged Pyrenean, but a troll myself: a miserable freak resolved in the spite of monstership to destroy whatever decent came near my bridge. (57)

Using the mythic figures to identify and to fix the qualities of the people who figure in his life, George, who has been raised as a goat, learns of the complexity of human nature. He soon discovers that narratives tend to simplify things, that he is both Great William Gruff and Troll, because he is human. Being a mythic hero proves much more difficult than it seems in the myths he has become familiar with. George learns to become a better reader as he learns to recognize the differences between the narrative and the experience which narrative depicts. He continues to learn this lesson until he finally announces that he has learned it in his "Posttape." As an educated reader, he now narrates his life-story in such a way that it will educate other readers.

The stories of deans-errant and heroes leave an indelible mark on George: he prefers literature to all other intellectual pursuits, and he is encouraged by the endless possibilities in the world of story to believe that all is possible in life, as well. Like Jacob Horner, he believes that character does not exist

until you invent it, as you would invent a character if you were writing a story. He admits that he took no interest in the cultural or historical aspects of old stories nor in their style and form: "all that mattered was the hero's performance" (79-80). Whether his subject was history, physics, or moral philosophy, George cared not for what had been, but for what should have been, treating even the materials of the *Encyclopedia Tammanica* as though the entries began "once upon a time." His attitude towards his studies helps to explain his attitude towards his own finished narrative:

I looked upon my life and the lives of others as a kind of theatrical impromptu, self-knowledge as a matter of improvisation, and moral injunctions, such as those of the Fables, whether high-minded or wicked, as so many stage-directions. A fact, in short, even an autobiographical fact, was not something I perceived and acknowledged, but a detail of the general Conceit, to be accepted or rejected.

(117)

He assumes that his reader will share his attitude towards facts. Preserving a particular record of the facts of his life is not important to George because it is the "general Conceit," the over-all pattern of the narrative, that matters to the reader. He cannot revere facts because for him truth or meaning resides in the effect of the whole, in how the hero performs. He would accept the editorial revisions of his Syllabus without complaint because they are made in an attempt to give his work a more effective "general conceit."

But George ignores the facts, the "political necessities" and "historical contexts" Max discusses, at his own peril when he goes off to become the new Grand Tutor. Naively disregarding these realities, he causes havoc in both the West and East Campuses with his improvisations. On both his first attempt to complete his assignment (when he believes that Good can be irrevocably separated from Bad) and on his second attempt (when he denies that distinctions can be drawn at all) he profoundly disrupts the social system of the Campuses. He imposes on life itself the simplicity which he has discovered in myths. But as he becomes more experienced, he reaches the conclusion that complexity and complementarity must be acknowledged, and he successfully completes his assignment.

Admiring the heroes of the literature he has read, George thinks that it should be easy to become a hero. Early on, Max tries to warn him that the experience of the hero is not as pleasant as is reading about a hero: "Do you know what a Grand Tutor's life is like? I mean a real one like Enos Enoch or Maios the Lykeionian, not the storybook kind. Do you know what has to happen to them in the end? When did you ever hear of a happy hero? They always suffer--it's almost what they're for" (130). Max wisely distinguishes here between the storybook and the real heroes. Once he has suffered himself, George, too, can distinguish between the experience and the narrative. When he writes, he tries to convey the sense of suffering that the actual hero must endure. When he narrates the "Posttape," he is ready

to accept his fate as a hero and to add it to the narrative of his tale of mythic heroism.

Twelve years after his last heroic deed, he has arrived at the "Tragic View" of heroism, and predicts the end to which he will come:

it will want but a nod from the Chancellor to set my 'advisees' on me in a pack. . . . Those same hands that lovingly one term put off my rags, sponged me in dip--will they not flip a penny for the golden fleece they dressed me in? My humble rank and tenure will be stripped from me, as were Max's; my proteges . . . will curse the hour I named them beneficiaries of my poor policy. (763-64)

George may not share Bellerophon's desire to determine the nature of the self presented in his life-story, but he does go so far as secretly to record this "Posttape" and add it to the ones he has recorded in Anastasia's presence. He does not want his story to end with the apparently triumphant rout of Bray but with the outcome of that rout--his belief that "Sudden or slow, we lose" (707). He feels it necessary to provide his reader--the potential next Grand Tutor--with the warning that the heroic path to Commencement Gate is a tortuous and painful one. He gives in to this impulse to set the record straight only in the "Posttape," however. In his inclusion of the "Tragic View" of heroism, he comments on the literature which inspired him to become a hero. He is intent on showing in the coda to his narrative what it has felt like to be a hero whereas his storybooks had only shown what heroes seemed to be.

While George may not be able to restrain himself from indulging in this commentary upon his tale, he is wise enough to know that this end is not one which will be pleasing to his followers and admirers. One of his readers especially influences the tone and shape of his narrative. As he records the several reels of tapes which, transcribed, make up the Syllabus, Anastasia listens. To keep her happy, he presents his life-story as a model for a potential hero to follow, and makes it conform to her religious views. As a result, the tone of the "Posttape," which he tapes in her absence, differs significantly from that of the rest of the narrative, as J.B. notes. George has not been free in the body of his narrative to comment on himself and his behavior, as Andrews, Amherst, and Horner do, because he is constrained by the desires of the reader. With the presence of Anastasia, Barth dramatises the author's awareness of the audience and George's deliberate disregard of his own narrative concerns.

Bolstered by the belief that life is an impromptu script in which facts are a mere whim of the author, George lives his life so that its record will read as does a traditional heroic romance. He narrates his life-story following the conventions of that genre, regardless of the factual details of his life. Using narratives, he has invented a self which he then transcribes in his life-story for other readers to use as he has used the myths of his society. As far as he is concerned, narrative is the property of the reader rather than of the narrator. Once he has

finished recording his life-story, it is no longer representative of him so much as of the reader's aspirations.

Like Perseus, George is pleased to think that his Syllabus will provide him a kind of immortality, but he, too, knows that even stories do not last forever. His particular genre, that of the sacred text, is particularly vulnerable to the changing concerns of the reader. Just as his text has usurped the place of that written by Enos Enoch, so his narrative will one day be replaced by the teachings of the next Grand Tutor. This knowledge does not undermine George's sense of self-hood because, for him, the act of narration is not primarily an opportunity for self-examination or self-creation but a gesture of communication of himself to others. He sees his Syllabus, if it is successful, as providing a bridge between himself and his world. And the usefulness of this text for its readers is affirmed in the elaborate framing devices.

III

On the first page of her tale, Dunyazade is identified as "the ideal audience" and her sister Scheherazade as the ideal storyteller. Scheherazade is a figure who has worked profoundly on Barth's imagination because of her virtuosity as a storyteller and because of the life or death situation in which she tells her stories. He feels that his life as an Author depends upon his ability to tell stories, too. Scheherazade proves

better than any other literary figure that stories can have real effects on their audiences and real results in the world of the listeners. She also demonstrates the importance of the author's awareness of the needs of the reader.

But in "Dunyazadiad" Barth focusses equally on her younger sister, Dunyazade, who has listened to Scheherazade's tales for the 1,001 nights. In his depiction of her, Barth shows how one narrative generates another as Dunyazade herself, the ideal audience, turns narrator, mimicking her sister's use of stories to delay unpleasant events. Her story is not drawn from the wealth of tales supplied by the Genie to Scheherazade (who in Barth's retelling invents no stories--instead she repeats those provided to her) because that supply has run out when Dunyazade turns narrator. She would have trouble "inventing" a story since there are surely none left to tell after 1,001 nights of tales. Much like the postmodern novelist, she overcomes this sense of exhaustion by choosing to tell the story of Scheherazade's stories and of her role as interrupter of them. Her stratagem allows Barth to demonstrate how self-reflexive narratives arise naturally from the habit of telling and listening to stories. Eventually, a narrator like Dunyazade will invent a frame-tale to explain how the old stories happened to be told in the first place and to examine the act of narration itself.

Dunyazade's narrative is further framed by that of the Genie who suspiciously resembles Barth himself. The interest of "Dunyazadiad" lies in Barth's success in treating her as the

material for the Genie's story of how he overcame his writing block. The Genie finds Dunyazade's position particularly appropriate for consideration in his postmodern world because her life provides a metaphor for the situation of the author facing up to the apparent exhaustion of narrative as a viable art form. Dunyazade mimics her sister in choosing to put off death at the hands of her husband (or his death at her hands) by narrating a story; unfortunately, Shah Zaman has heard all of Sherry's stories in his brother's account of the 1,001 nights. At this point, the Genie addresses Dunyazade:

There's no story, you haven't heard; there's no way of making love you haven't seen again and again . . . . And now it's your turn: Sharyar has told young Shah Zaman about his wonderful mistress, how he loves her as much for herself as for her stories--which he also passes on; the two brothers marry the two sisters; it's your wedding night, Dunyazade . . . [sic] But wait! Look here! Shahryar deflowered and killed a virgin a night for a thousand nights before he met Scheherazade; Shah Zaman has been doing the same thing, but it's only now, a thousand nights and a night later that he learns about Scheherazade--that means he's had two thousand and two young women at the least since he killed his wife, and not one has pleased him enough to move him to spend a second night with her, much less spare her life! What are you going to do to entertain him, little sister? Make love in exciting new ways? There

are none! Tell him stories, like Scheherazade? He's heard them all! Dunyazade, Dunyazade! Who can tell your story?

(40-41)

In this long interpolation, the Genie (frame narrator) conveys the pathos and interest of the main narrator's narrative situation. But from a problem of life-threatening circumstances for Dunyazade, the Genie creates a puzzle for a later author: he asks not "what can Doony do?" so much as "who can tell her life-story?" The novella itself suggests that the questions in essence are one and the same: Doony herself will tell her story to solve her problem, and the Genie will write a narrative about her act of narration, ostensibly basing his version on a note handed to him by Scheherazade and transported with him to the future.

In "Dunyazadiad," Barth's vehicle for the exploration of the relationships between narrative and life, author and reader is the Genie. He is magically transported back to the time of the 1,001 Nights when he and Scheherazade simultaneously write and say, "The key to the treasure is the treasure." The Genie, who has read and greatly admires the Arabian Nights, tells Scheherazade the stories, which she then tells to the king each night, hoping to distract him and to change his opinion and treatment of women. With this plot, Barth suggests that readers play an important role not only in preserving specific narratives but also in perpetuating the tradition of using narrative to educate and to beguile.

For the Genie, Dunyazade and Scheherazade are themselves

just characters in the frame story of the work he so admires, and he often aggravates Dunyazade by treating them as if they were characters rather than real, living beings. Because the 1,001 Nights has become a canonized literary text--like "Perseid" or "The Revised New Syllabus"--the Genie thinks of Sherry and Doony as stereotypes rather than as unique beings, or, as Perseus would have it, "archetypes." He dramatises the response of a well-trained reader to the materials of literature in his treatment of the sisters, seeing them as models or constructs rather than as convincingly "real" or "life-like" characters. The Genie's presence in the text helps to reinforce the reader's awareness that, whether Doony acknowledges it or not, she is, like "B," simply the product of an Author's pen. Because of the elaborate framing of Doony's tale, Barth's readers are always aware that they are reading the Genie's story, which we have been warned is "pure fiction" (41). But, Dunyazade's life-story is presented "as if it were" her own rendition, and the two professional narrators, Sherry and the Genie, have counselled readers to take that "as if it were" very seriously.

Whereas for Sherry and Doony the nightly narratives are vitally important because they save the lives of the virgins of the country, for the Genie they merely serve a "plot function," as the material for the central section of his framed tale. When the Genie shows up on the 1,001st night to announce that he has no more stories and that the frame story must therefore come to a conclusion, Dunyazade is understandably fearful for her life and

for her sister's life. When the Genie describes the way the frame story ends in the book back on his desk, praising "the nice formal symmetry," Dunyazade chastises him: "'Never mind the symmetry! Does it work or not?'" (39). She has no patience with the Genie and Sherry when they treat life as if it were a work of literature, preferring real-life solutions to calculated artfulness. Her response keeps the postmodern reader aware that, as the narrator insists, writers must write about what matters to the readers as human beings.

Unlike George and Bellerophon, Dunyazade never thinks of her life as the material for a narrative that would be of interest to a reader. Having spent her time as the listener and interrupter (thereby guaranteeing that both life and the story will go on), she thinks of herself as being of secondary importance, a mere shadow of her more talented sister. Her primary concerns are the care of her sister's children and the survival of the young women of her country. Only when the Genie suggests that he is writing her story does she think of her life as being narrative material, and she is then inspired to tell her story to Shah Zaman.

Barth's rendering of her story also shows that she, the listener, was as crucial to the success of Sherry's narrative ploy as was the narrator herself.

While the Genie and Sherry seem to be interested in technique and the metaphoric value of stories, discussing them in conversations which Doony duly reports in her narrative, Doony herself is interested--naively, it is suggested--only in content. She comments that the relationship between frame stories and the

stories they frame interested Sherry and the Genie "no end, just as Sherry and Shahryar were fascinated by the pacing of their nightly pleasures or the refinement of their various positions, instead of the degree and quality of their love" (31). Doony, inexperienced both in narrating and in making love, sees technique and performance as merely conveying content whereas the more experienced characters understand that the virtuosity with which one narrates or makes love enhances the content.

Concerned with life rather than with art, Doony's preference when it comes to hearing a tale is for dramatic suspense rather than for sophisticated technique. The Genie's, on the other hand, is for "passionate virtuosity," a melding of the two aspects.<sup>5</sup> Like "B"'s wife and daughters, Doony's interest is in what happens. Suddenly thrown into the position of story-teller herself, however, she tells a story about stories and about their value in her world, demonstrating a skilful manipulation of the narrative form. Doony has to admit that, for all her interest in the formal qualities of narrative, Sherry has enlightened Shahryar and saved lives, perhaps even the kingdom. Like the "Privie Journall" and "Secret Historie" of The Sot-Weed Factor, her stories have political as well as personal importance. When she tells her story to Shah Zaman, Doony similarly hopes to save his kingdom of Samarkand from a continuation of the Shah's reign of terror. Suddenly, Doony sees what stories can do and why they have wooed Shahryar away from his violence. For her and for Sherry, they literally postpone death as they beguile, intrigue,

and inform the audience.

Before the Genie appears and suggests that the sisters try living the frame story of the 1,001 Nights, Scheherazade has been seeking a solution to the crisis facing the nation as the Shah carries out his program of deflowering and murdering a virgin a night. Eventually, as Doony reports, her sister turns "to her first love, unlikely as it seemed, mythology and folklore, and studied all the riddle/puzzle/secret motifs she could dig up." But she discovers that a miracle is hard to produce, concluding, "the only genies I've ever met were in stories, not in Moormen's-rings and Jews' lamps" (15). Like Bellerophon and George, Scheherazade turns to literature to learn about life. But the knowledge has limits when it comes to practical applications: narratives seem to be self-enclosed and operate on principles that do not transfer even to other stories, let alone to real life; the magic which is possible in stories is a feature of stories and not of reality. But when Sherry looks beyond the simple content of the stories to the fact of narrative itself, she finds all the magic that she needs to save her kingdom and even conjures up a Genie, who reinforces her belief that through suspending the end of one tale to the next night, she can prolong her relationship with Shahryar.

Dunyazade makes a similar complaint about the gap between fiction and life towards the end of "Dunyazadiad." When the Genie runs out of stories for Sherry to tell, Dunyazade tearfully wishes herself "out of a world where the only happy endings were in stories" (38). In effect, she wishes that the

conventions of stories governed the conventions of life itself. Once the Genie has explained that in the text he has on his desk back home the frame tale does end happily, Dunyazade is momentarily relieved. Her spirits are dampened, however, when Sherry indicates that she intends to change the ending. Like Bellerophon, Doony assumes that she and her sister must slavishly follow the pattern of the received text, "Doesn't she have to, if it's in the book?" (39). At one moment, then, Dunyazade demonstrates her awareness of the distance between the canonized text and life itself, but at the next moment she wishes to collapse the distinction. Sherry, wiser in the ways of narrative than either Bellerophon or Doony, does not feel compelled to do everything 'by the book.' She uses stories as they serve the needs of her situation and her audience, but she is not used by them.

Doony is further alarmed when the Genie has to admit that "not everything he'd seen of our situation in these visions or dreams of his corresponded exactly to the story as it came to him through the centuries, lands, and languages that separated us in waking hours" (39). With each retelling by an appreciative listener, the factual details have been altered to suit the needs of the audience. The conventions which make narratives into good tales insist that the two couples marry and live happily until they are vanquished by the Destroyer of Delights, but Sherry is free to ignore those conventions in her actions.

Doony finally acknowledges that the imagination of the author and the needs of the reader determine the content of

narratives. On their wedding night, she has bound her husband with silken cords so that, in compliance with Sherry's plan, she may castrate him. He puts off that fearful moment by using Scheherazade's own tactics: he tells the story of his 2,002 nights. He did not, he claims, kill a virgin a night but sent them off to form an Amazonian society. Following his tale, this exchange takes place:

"I can't imagine what you're talking about. Am I expected to believe that preposterous business of Breastless Pilgrims and Tragic Views?"

"Yes!" cried Shah Zaman, then let his head fall back to the pillow. "They're too important to be lies. Fictions, maybe--but truer than fact." (61)

Shah Zaman is more concerned with the power of his narrative to move his audience than with its factual truth. Like George, he prefers to present a narrative which will be helpful and meaningful to the audience than one which, while maintaining a degree of factuality, bores or alienates the audience.

The newlywed couple spend their first night together exchanging stories, suggesting that the act of narration will forge a bond of mutual respect and love. When Barth depicts the immediate audience of the tale in the frame-stories, he emphasizes that narratives can be an effective vehicle for communication. This exchange of narratives is a strong force in binding the partners, as strong a force, Barth suggests, as sexual intercourse. Doony's decision to tell her story suggests that she would prefer not to castrate her husband, that in fact

she wishes to establish a loving bond with him just as Sherry has with Shah Zaman. Early in the story, Sherry and the Genie, point out that narrative itself is a "love-relation." The Genie explains the metaphor:

its success depended upon the reader's consent and cooperation, which she could withhold or at any moment withdraw; also upon her own combination of experience and talent for enterprise, and the author's ability to arouse, sustain, and satisfy her interest. (34)

As in "Perseid," the importance of the reader's skill--as well as that of the author--is stressed. To listen or to read requires engagement, desire, and some experience in the conventions and the tradition of narrative. The metaphor of the love-relation makes explicit that a narrative is not simply the product of the author nor a text isolated and self-enclosed, but an intersubjective act, a communication between author and reader.

When the Genie and Scheherazade are discussing stories, they agree that the best time to tell a story or to hear one is after a hard day's work, a battle, or making love--when the body is exhausted and the mind is trying to assimilate the events of the day. They ask, "what better time for tales . . . to express and heighten the community between the lovers, comrades, co-workers?" (33). Doony's story does have the effect of heightening her sense of closeness to her new husband. The Genie's frame-story and his observations throughout the narrative suggest that this is the primary function of narrative. A life-story is told, not

(as Andrews and Bellerophon insist) to preserve a carefully lived life, but to bring the reader and teller together in their contemplation of patterns of human behavior and the narrative representation of them.

The reader of Barth's "Dunyazadiad" encounters a version of Doony's life-story which is no longer hers at all. Like George and Perseus, however, she would not complain. Having learned that narrative conveys a kind of truth different from that of day to day life, she is content to become the subject of the Genie's next tale without fearing that she herself has been violated.

#### IV

In Sabbatical Barth rigorously employs the Principle of Metaphoric Means, using the point of view, structure and very fact of the narrative itself to convey his insights into the process and results of narration. This novel presents the life-story, not of one, but of two characters and is therefore narrated by the two of them together--in the first person, plural. Because it is a story of their love and marriage, the shared authorship of their story reinforces the reader's awareness of ~~their~~ unity as a couple. <sup>6</sup> As they solidify their marriage in the act of narrating their life-story, they demonstrate once again that narration is an act which brings isolated people together. The fact of the narrative itself takes on significance because it is the proof of

and lasting testimony to Sue's and Fenn's at times shaky relationship.

Although it is the story of their lives, particularly of their lives since they have been married to one another, they think of their story as being impersonal, as being distinct from the minds which shape it and from the lives whose details it now records. They are one thing; their story is another and the more important thing. Fenn cites Homer's "wars are fought so that poets will have something to sing about" in order to explain to Susan that the actions of their lives have existed so that their story can exist:

Just as he often wonders, with her, how it is he ever lived with anyone else--What were those years for? Who was he?--and yet knows there's an answer, so he wonders what he was doing in the Company [the C.I.A.], and farting around with free-lance journalism before that, and teaching before that? What was it for? What has even his life with Susan been for? What are we about? . . .

I see now what we're about. It's the story! (356)

Whereas Bellerophon and even George, to some extent, have consciously lived their lives so that their life-stories will make good telling, Fenn only now discovers that he has lived so that he would have a history, a life-story for others to read. Suddenly, all of his actions, regardless of their consequences in his life, take on meaning because they make up the story of his life, especially of his life with Susan.

This realization, however, does not inspire in the couple a

desire to lead their lives from now on so that they will make a good narrative. Sue and Fenn manage both to understand the relationship between life and story more clearly than Bellerophon does and to value their existence outside of the story more than George does his. Discussing Edgar Allan Poe's "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket," in which the interruption of the writing ends the voyage, they realize that the terms of their lives and stories are the opposite of his:

The interruption of our voyage begins our writing.

Oh my! Where's my pencil?

Under here. Which comes first?

They both come first! How could either come before the other, except as one twin happens to get delivered earlier? The doing and the telling, our writing and our loving-- they're twins. That's our story. (365)

In many ways, Sabbatical is Barth's most affirmative novel, figuring the importance of narrative with two suggestive metaphors: twin and child. Narrative is the twin of life, developed from the same data but distinctly independent and other. And for Sue and Fenn, narrative is like a child, the product of their love. Although Sue and Fenn--each one of a set of twin siblings--discover that their actions may have been for their story, they realize that living is as important as telling, and the two become parallel endeavors for the couple. Their story is not just the story of their relationship, however, but of how it becomes a story.

Given the sexual intimacy of the narrators, Sabbatical becomes an emblematic indication that, as Sherry and the Genie insist, narrative is like a love relationship. Sue and Fenn become even more intimate by telling one another their own story. When the Genie discusses the similarity between the act of narration and a sexual relationship, he insists that the reader assume the passive female role while the narrator assume the aggressive, active role of the male (34).<sup>9</sup> In Sabbatical, Barth dramatises this idea, making of Sue a "professional reader" (346), a critic and scholar of American Literature (and particularly of twins and doubles in American Literature), and of Fenn a professional writer. The result is that their relationship as creator of and audience for literature parallels and is informed by their relationship as man and woman, husband and wife. Their life-story, as a result, is a work both of love and of artistry, and in them Barth presents the ideal image of the narrator: spinning tales out of a feeling of love but doing so with professional skill--or with the Genie's "passionate virtuosity."

Because they see the story as an extension of themselves and their love, they do not fear that it will distort their lives, and, because they share the task of narrating, they can correct, revise or add to what their co-narrator has written. They feel that they have total control over the shape that their story gives to their lives and presents to those who read about them in the "happily after" (366). Their freedom from the fears expressed by, for example, the narrator of "Autobiography," can

also be explained by their belief that their story, (although it may be about them, is something greater than the sum of the parts. As Fenn tells his wife, "The story's our house, Suse. That's the thing that's both of us and neither of us" (358). The story becomes the children that they will never have, an extension of their lives but with a life of its own. Throughout the novel, Susan expresses a desire to have children so that there will something left of her when she is dead and gone, something that will preserve the fact that she has lived. Fenn, in the vision he has near the end of the novel, understands that their story will achieve this end of preserving and immortalising them. But, like Perseus and George, they include in their story their awareness that "not even a story is ever after" (366), although narrating their story has helped them at least to postpone that end to which all stories and all lives must come. As the fruit of their union as man and wife, their story preserves a record of their existence and leaves material proof of their lives. It is, however, to be freely read and interpreted by others once they have written it, just as a child eventually becomes independent of his or her parents.

As critic and writer, Sue and Fenn have, like all of the "constellated narrators," read other narratives in an attempt to understand their own lives, and they have cast themselves in traditional roles to impose some order on their lives. In the depths of her despair over the abortion, Susan sees herself as Dido to Fenn's Aeneas: "Never mind Poe; it's Virgil we're in!

You're between lives with me, like Aeneas in Carthage, only you've hung around for seven years instead of just one winter" (336). Both Susan and Fenwick tend to think in these terms throughout the narrative; they see themselves through the filter of literature and cast themselves into standard plots both Classical and American. As Fenn gains strength with his vision and his recovered boina, he too is described with references to the Classics as a Titon, and as Odysseus (348, 350). With these allusions, the narrators effectively share their understanding of themselves with their educated readers, who in turn can call upon their own familiarity with the characters and plots of the narrative tradition to read Sabbatical.

But Sue and Fenn take this use of literature even further, to an extent that the Genie and Sherry presumably would approve but which most of Barth's narrators would not consider. They see in the very forms of literature the patterns of life, and they call on Aristotle and his rules to determine, not just the patterns of their life-story, but also the plot or progress of their voyage itself (12). And even in Eastwood Ho's Vietnamese luc-bats, Susan sees a parallel to their sabbatical year:

luc-bat ("six-eight") is the standard couplet of Vietnamese oral poetry: a six-syllable line followed by an eight-syllable line whose sixth syllable . . . rhymes with the sixth of the earlier line\* . . . and whose eighth syllable . . . must be rhymed at the end of the first line of the next couplet, if there is one. . . . Thus she also understands, in part, how our voyage might be compared to a luc-

bat: we have sailed back to our starting-place and on a bit farther, from where we may or may not proceed. (270)

The import of Sue's discovery is this: life is like a story or a poem, not simply in that people act like the characters with whom they identify, but also in that the very rhythms and forms of our literature grow out of or can be made to reflect the rhythms and patterns of our lives. Thus one narrative genre can better express a given life-story than another. For the narrative of Sue and Fenn's sabbatical year, the choice, as indicated by the subtitle of the novel, is "A Romance."

Acknowledging that these literary structures inform the rhythms of their lives, Sue and Fenn make their "Romance" incorporate several traditional patterns. They make use of some elements of the pattern of the mythic hero, beginning with a night-sea voyage and including a sea-monster at the end. They also make their life-story parallel the narrative structure of the movies Susan's father showed her when she was a child, using the flashback (in their case to the Big Bang with which the world began) when the principals have their first kiss. But the most dominant informing pattern is that of a dream sequence which Susan has read about. In their use of it to structure their story, Barth shows how the patterns of experience sometimes become indistinguishable from the patterns of fiction, even for experienced readers like Sue. The article she read stated that "a typical night's dreams follow a sequence like the movements of a symphony." She explains the five-part sequence:

The first dream is a kind of overture, usually short and set in the present. It has to do with some problem that was on our minds before we fell asleep, and sounds the themes for the four dreams which follow. The next two usually deal with situations from the past, but they incorporate our present feelings. The fourth projects the future and concerns a wish-fulfillment, like not having the problem that occasioned the first dream. The fifth and last one, set in the present again, reorchestrates all the earlier dreams into a grand finale. (77)

When Sue and Fenn choose to make use of this sequence in the dreams which they narrate, ending with Fenn's vision, they suggest that the sequence has an aesthetic as well as a scientific validity. The fact that we dream this way shows as well our innate sense of narrative form, and as narrators they wisely use a narrative pattern with which we as readers are familiar, even if only sub-consciously. As typically self-reflexive narrators, they invite the reader to assess the merits of this theory of dreams and narrative.

Intrigued by the possibilities for fiction, Fenn is inspired to write their own story and discusses with Susan the options open to the narrator. He is trying to determine how accurately he must record the events of their sabbatical cruise. Having been an investigative journalist, he wants to learn how factual their life-story ought to be. Susan, in an unusual outburst, expresses her desire to have an affair. Fenn comments that he can't see how she could have one in real life, but offers to give

her one in his narrative. He then asks her whether her outburst and the discussion which ensued should go into the story. She replies: "Oh, in. Sure, in. Give me a dynamite house in there, dynamite kids named Drew and Lexie, and a dynamite clandestine adulterous passionate affair. All the stuff I'll never have, plus loads of money. Plus you, that I would never in this world be unfaithful to" (219). For a moment, both Fenn and Sue toy with the idea of using narrative as wish-fulfillment, as a miracle which can transform their lives into a fantasy of satisfaction. But their story does not become the tale of what Susan desires, although it includes this indication of what those desires are. As Fenn insists, "Our business is fiction, not lies" (126). Like Shah Zaman, he draws a distinction between the two categories: fiction is a meaningful shaping of materials selected from their life-story; lies would be trivial inventions which would distort the overall pattern, making it false to the experience of both narrators and readers.

Early on in the tale, Fenn establishes the principle for their use of story-motifs in the telling of their story. He is, he tells Sue, "not displeased to find our story following, in a general way, the famous tradition: summons, departure, threshold-crossing, initiatory trials." But he does not feel restricted by these patterns, any more than Sherry did: "He declares it our authorial prerogative, however, to bend the pattern to fit our story, so long as we don't bend the story to fit the pattern" (71). While they use references to the

characters of literature to explain themselves and while they recognize in their own actions some of the patterns of literary forms, Fenn still insists that their story be allowed to preserve its own integrity: it shall present no lies either in form or in content. In the actions of their lives and in their roles as narrators, Sue and Fenn remain free of the slavishness to received patterns that so hindered Bellerophon. Sue and Fenn are much more confident writers because they have been much better readers, recognizing conventions as conventions rather than as prescriptions for behavior or for narrative.

Fenn seems very concerned, then, with maintaining the integrity of their life-story. But he does not advocate a tiresome naturalism in their treatment of their materials:

I won't have our story be unadulterated realism. Reality is wonderful; reality is dreadful; reality is what it is. But realism is a fucking bore.

. . . The literally marvelous is what we want, with a healthy dose of realism to keep it ballasted. But at this hour of the world I guess we'll take whatever kind of marvelous we can manage.

. . . Realism is your keel and ballast of your effing Ship of Story, and a good plot is your mast and sails. But magic is your wind, Suse. (136-37)

Looking at the great stories and story-tellers--Odysseus, Sheherazade, and Dante--they acknowledge that they do not have magic to bring to their aid as the greats did. Their "literally marvelous" is not forgotten, however, as "Chessie" the sea-

monster floats through their narrative later on, causing what Fenn calls "an ontological warp" in the story. Sue's mother Carmen is also somewhat marvelous, having dream encounters with Fenn's now dead twin brother, Manfred, and physical encounters with his ghost. These elements ensure that their life-story will not be perceived as the "unadulterated realism" which so bores Fenn. His desire to use realism as the ballast of his narrative shows his understanding of the gap that separates life and art--that makes them twins rather than simply mirror images. In stories, possibility is unlimited--anything can happen--whereas in life the laws of physics and nature determine what is and is not possible. The "as if" element of fiction is what gives narrative its power over the imagination. Realism would limit Fenn's story to the mundane and possible and obscure the shaping that has made of their sabbatical voyage a novel rather than a factual account. Susan, in her turn, recognizes that the fantastic is an element found in much postmodern fiction and tells Fenn that he is being typical of his era in wishing to draw attention to the artifice of fiction.

Once he has decided that his story should include the "literally marvelous," which is distinct from the "pure fiction" of magic in its being literal, Fenn discovers that his life is in fact riddled with the sort of improbabilities usually found in stories. He has a co-incidental meeting with Dugald (who dies shortly afterwards), spots a sea-monster, and recovers his boina from the waters of the Chesapeake. Eventually, Fenn discovers

the idea of twinship as the best explanation of the relationship between narrative and life. Life is, if not a story, very much like one. Together, as the "Author," Sue and Fenn caution that "If life is like a voyage, reader, a voyage may be like life. If good stories partake of dreams, some dreams may be like stories" (200). The narrators present a by now familiar Barthian idea of narrative: in order to make sense of the surprises and day-to-day experiences of life, we shape them into stories. As the professional reader, Sue is well aware of how this process works. She reads "an amusing story by Donald Barthelme, another by Grace Paley, and wishes she were a writer, to make life art if not sense" (295). She finds the order, the fixedness, the patterning of narrative deeply satisfying, as the flux of life itself is not.

The result of these explorations of the relationship between life and art is a narrative which combines sea-monsters with newspaper accounts of unusual deaths, prophetic dreams with footnotes giving the reader references to actual texts where the data of the novel may be checked. Sabbatical's boat carries a heavy ballast of fact--minutely detailed dinners, a wealth of nautical terminology, carefully recorded accounts of dress and day to day behavior--as well as fantasy, and the novel emerges as a text existing as something of a diary, a fictional narrative, and a scholarly text.

The narrative is also a typically self-reflexive one. Throughout Sabbatical, Sue and Fenn display their concern over the point of view and the structural devices that they will be

able to use in their narration of their story. Susan points out that exposition is going to be a problem, because they cannot tell one another of their pasts without awkwardness, since they presumably know one another by now. To overcome difficulties of this sort, they rely on the idea of the "Author," who has the ability to do anything he pleases, who traditionally has power over the text. In this case, this power is seen as a positive, enabling feature, rather than as a limiting, constricting feature (as it was in "Autobiography" and "Life-Story"). The Author can do flashbacks and exposition when they are sleeping, for instance. Fenn observes, "And what we can't do as Fenn and Susan, we can do as Author" (135). Becoming the "Author," they free themselves from the limitations which have hampered other of Barth's first-person narrators and get beyond their problems and themselves in their attempt to meet the needs of the reader of their narrative. Because of these deliberations over the mechanics of the narration, the reader of Sabbatical cannot but be aware that this is a contrived, planned work, a published document rather than a private journal which records the phases of a private relationship.

To drive this point home to his readers, Barth presents, not the story of Sue and Fenn on sabbatical, but the story of their story. Sabbatical encompasses numerous discussions of narrative technique because it is the account of two people who became authors. As they tell their story, they bicker over, among other things, its diction, point of view, exposition, and freedom to

stray from fact. They think of this narrative as something of a first draft which will be revised according to the principles established in these discussions. As they discuss forced exposition and author intrusion, Fenn complains: "It's always something. Tell you what, Teach: here in the planning stage, let's settle for efficiently; never mind adroitly. Later on, we'll adroit it all up" (85). Barth's reader, of course, never sees the "adroit-ed-up" version of the narrative, so he or she must focus once again on the act of narration rather than on the product.

Observing Sue and Fenn, the reader discovers that storytelling is a fundamental part of their relationship. They often tell one another stories, pointing out to the reader that "On a reasonably stiff sailboat in a good steady breeze, one spends much time sitting still at a five- to ten-degree angle of heel, and is naturally inclined to tell, hear, and discuss stories" (105). In the house of their story, Susan and Fenwick confirm their devotion to one another by planning and telling their life-story together. A loving couple, they (along with Katherine and Peter Sagamore of Tidewater Tales) demonstrate that narrating is a way of loving and that the narrative is a means of perpetuating and preserving their love for one another. From the near-hostile relationship of George and Anastasia, Barth moves to the couples of Chimera--Sheherazade and Shahryar, Dunyazade and Shah Zaman, Perseus and Medusa--and finally to a couple who have resolved their differences by narrating their life-story. Scheherazade wins Shahryar to love by telling the old stories;

Dunyasade uses her life-story as a means of postponing violence and as a prelude to love; Perseus tells his story to Medusa to fill up the time of eternity. But Sue and Fenn tell their story to one another and together tell it to the reader, making of their mutuality an affirmation of narrative, of what Menelaus called the "absurd unending possibility of love."<sup>10</sup>

All of these narrators believe that they exist apart from their narratives, that they are their narrative's twins. Telling their life-stories frees them to go beyond the boundaries of the selves presented in the narratives. Their narratives are still important, however, because they can play an important role in the lives of their readers. Although narratives about oneself clearly lead to discoveries about that self, their greater value seems to lie in their ability to connect teller and audience. Barth's return to the conventions of oral narrative in Funhouse and Chimera shows his interest in telling as an activity which heightens the sense of community between narrator and audience. This sense of community is affirmed in The Sot-Weed Factor, of course, but the narrating couples--one person telling, one listening, or both taking turns in these roles--demonstrate this power of narrative even more effectively.

The Genie who is conjured up by Scheherazade best describes the effect a narrator can have on his reader. If he could have three wishes granted, he tells her, one would be that he could add to that treasure of art which "sustained, refreshed, ex-

panded, ennobled, and enriched our spirits" (25). George, Perseus, and Sue and Fenn all realize that their narratives might be able to achieve this goal. They do not believe that narratives will prevent either their miseries or those of their readers, but they think they might help to make living with those miseries slightly more bearable. More than any of Barth's other narrators, these "constellated" tellers think of the needs of their readers as they shape and tell their life-stories.

In an interview conducted shortly after the publication of LETTERS, Barth echoes the Genie as he describes his own aims as a novelist:

There are images in fiction that haunt my imagination, so much so that I even keep a little list of them. Foremost among them are: Odysseus trying to get home; Scheherazade telling her stories; Don Quixote riding with Sancho across LaMancha; and Huckleberry Finn floating down that river. I would love one day, without aspiring to include myself in that biggest of leagues, to come up with a similar image, one that was much larger than the book in which it appeared as those images are larger than the stories in which they appear. (Reilly 23)

In his image of the story-telling couples, Barth perhaps comes closest to creating such an image, leaving the reader with an image of love as the product of shared stories. Barth goes on in this interview to discuss the "mythopoetic voltage" of certain images, using the metaphor of electricity to suggest the power the experience should have for the reader of narrative and

showing his understanding of the role the reader must play in his own composition of narratives.

That Barth is clearly aware of the limitations of narratives and of their precarious position in the postmodern world is confirmed by the hesitations of the narrators in Funhouse and the observations he makes in "The Literature of Exhaustion." But he also assumes, along with the narrators discussed here, that stories can be meaningful to the receptive readers and so should be treated "as if" they matter.

## Chapter 6

## "texts-within-texts"

LETTERS

In the mid-sixties, with two 800-page novels behind him (and half believing Marshall McLuhan's claim that print is an obsolete medium), Barth explored in a series of short narratives the oral story-telling traditions out of which printed narrative emerged. His flirtation with short fictions for voice and tape ended, however, with the completion of Chimera, and in LETTERS Barth returned with a vengeance to lengthy, printed narratives, specifically to the traditional English novel. A discussion of LETTERS is the logical conclusion to this study of Barth because in this novel he incorporates both the realistic elements of a pre-modern novel and the formal complexity of a modern one, as well as his characteristically postmodern self-reflexiveness. The synthesis of premodern and postmodern elements Barth calls for in "The Literature of Replenishment" (published shortly after LETTERS) is achieved in this work. Barth manages to "have it both ways" in LETTERS by choosing to imitate the formal realism of the epistolary novel which, as he points out in "The Literature of Exhaustion," imitates not life itself but documents which imitate life.

Characteristically, Barth intensifies the emphasis the genre places on the act of writing and thereby draws attention to his return to and reaffirmation of the novel. He devises a plot

which pits printed narrative against filmed narrative and thus manages to emphasize the qualities of written narrative, qualities which no other medium can duplicate. He makes the inherently self-reflexive epistolary novel even more self-reflexive by introducing as the letter-writers characters who, though each "imagines himself actual," are (with the exception of Lady Amherst) in fact characters from Barth's previous works re-enacting and rewriting their life-stories in LETTERS. Their fictitiousness is further highlighted with the inclusion among them of an Author-character who solicits and orchestrates their letters and who frames these epistles with an introductory and a concluding "Letter to the Reader."

In LETTERS, Barth runs his greatest risk yet of discouraging his reader. The reader might well be repelled by the apparent narcissism involved in Barth's re-enactment of his personal literary past; by the complex plotting and complicated allusions, by the introduction of an Author who, perhaps unnecessarily, explains that self-reflexive fictions are tedious. But the elaborate structure is more playful than heavy-handed in LETTERS as Barth demonstrates both his virtuosity as a writer of novels and his belief in the importance of his task. The novel also retains the compelling elements of narrative: a triumph of characterization in Lady Amherst, Todd Andrews, and Ambrose Mensch; a suspenseful plot, complete with a traditional ending, involving a marriage and several deaths; and a serious concern with the human problems the characters face: despair, loneliness, illness, aging. The novel achieves a precarious balance

between its playful emphasis on artifice and its serious dramatization of human experience by presenting narrators who believe themselves to be real: they do not, as the narrators of Funhouse and Chimera do, give any indication that they are aware that their lives are granted to them only by stories. Barth presents them, in fact, denying that the previous novels in which the Author used their names were accurate versions of their life-stories. But the Author is writing letters, too, which remind us that these characters are, after all, only characters. As a result, the reader, unlike the letter-writers, can never forget that these engaging characters, throwbacks to the characters of classic realism, exist only by virtue of their having been written in a novel.

As the Author explains to Ambrose, and as Barth has explained to interviewers,<sup>1</sup> the title of the novel LETTERS refers to letters in three senses: the epistles~~s~~ handled by the post office, the letters which make up the alphabet and all of our words, and belles lettres or literature. The novel, says the Author, will

preoccupy itself with, among other things, the role of epistles--real letters, forged and doctored letters--in the history of History. It will also be concerned with, and of course constituted of, alphabetical letters: the atoms of which the written universe is made. Finally, to a small extent, the book is addressed to the phenomenon of

literature itself, the third main sense of our word letters.

(654)

The first of these preoccupations is explored through the effects the letters written by the characters have on the action of the novel--some do and some do not have an influence on private and public history. The possibly forged, or even deliberately deceitful, letters of A.B. Cook IV hark back to the concerns of The Sot-Weed Factor and allow Barth to pursue his interest in doctored letters and their effects. Through his pursuit of the other two preoccupations, Barth draws attention to the status of the novel as a printed narrative, dependent on the written word. In the plot of the novel, both literature and the alphabet itself are threatened by other media, film and "numerature." As Ambrose Mensch and the Author wage war for their chosen narrative form against Reg Prinz and Jerome Bray, they make the reader assess along with them the merits of the novel form itself. Barth further explores these definitions of letters through metaphors; Lady Amherst, for instance, is made to personify The Great Tradition of the Novel. Barth foregrounds these various connotations even further through a proliferation of references to pens, paper, typewriters, and books. This furor over the possible obsolescence of printed narrative is explained by the setting of the novel, a university campus in the troubled days of 1969 when any institution--including that of literature--was under attack and when the novel had been pronounced dead by many critics.

The most radical attack on letters is made by Jerome Bray, the mysterious descendent, of the mysterious Harold Bray of Giles Goat-Boy. He has a personal grudge against the Author who, according to Bray, has stolen the goat-boy novel from him, and this personal grudge develops into a dissatisfaction with literature itself. He is a comic, minor character, part man, part insect, who wishes to undermine the whole of contemporary literature by replacing it with "numerature," a form of narrative utilising numbers in the place of letters and produced, not by the human imagination, but by a partially organic computer called Lillyvac. The first product of this genre will be a counter-text to that of the Author and will be called NUMBERS. Bray expresses doubts about its intelligibility but not about its value as a radical attack on literature and sham Authors. Since we read the text of the Author, who believes in the value of the traditional novel, and not Bray's proposed text, we cannot judge the effectiveness of his new medium. Our bias must be that of the Author, who shows us that letters are fundamental to intelligibility, that they allow us to communicate and to construct meaningful narratives. By contrasting this lettered text to Bray's counter-text, Barth does show that letters are only one medium for constructing meaning, but he also emphasizes that this one medium is validated and conditioned by its dependence on

language, the most fundamental of our media, the first-developed narrative medium, and the one still most widely used and understood.<sup>2</sup> Barth suggests in LETTERS that to undermine language at the level of letters and words would be to undermine meaning, order, political structures, knowledge, and culture--all of which Bray would be happy to overthrow. Although print could become obsolete, for Barth written narrative is still our most potent and flexible means of communicating our understanding of human experience.

Bray may be a foolish character, but he does manage, through a supply of a drug called "Honeydust" produced by the computer, to control and to impregnate most of the women in the novel (perhaps even Lady Amherst) at one time or another. His most pronounced characteristic is his virile fertility. Given that Barth has identified him as a "great big bug mimicking a post-modern writer" (Friday 175), his fertility is significant in determining the course of the novel. His efforts to re-order society by re-ordering its structures of meaning are made to be representative of the efforts of postmodern artists. Bray's attempts to invent a new medium recall in particular the conceptual art Barth deplores in "The Literature of Exhaustion." The multi-media attempts, Barth claims, are clever but for the most part meaningless. Through the characterization of Bray as a rather dense, pesky, insect-man, Barth ridicules the posturing inventiveness of the pop-art craze of the period of the novel, and even perhaps his own mixed media attempts in Lost in the

Funhouse. The Author does not feel threatened by Bray; in fact he benefits from an exchange of letters with him, just as the novel has become more fruitful as a result of its encounters with experimental mixed media events. After reading Bray's epistle about numerature, the secure Author notes "that the word letters is a 7-letter word with properties of its own," properties which the Author exploits in his new novel: his seventh novel has seven writers; the relationship between Ambrose and Lady Amherst culminates in a seventh stage; the Author is fascinated by the phi-point which occurs 5/7's of the way through the text; the text is divided into seven sections, each corresponding to one of the letters of the word "letters" (and, incidentally, Barth took seven years to write the novel). In short, he discovers that numbers can be made emblematic of his concern with letters. With its inclusion of both a hesitant traditionalist, the Author, and the radical Bray, Barth's novel dramatises the developments of postmodern fiction. In the final analysis, LETTERS affirms the value of literature as a printed medium and of traditional narrative patterns as the basis for structuring meaning.

The greatest threat to literature in LETTERS, however, is not Bray's attack on language itself, an attack which no one takes very seriously, but Reg Prinz's silent assertion of the primacy of film and the visual image. Reg Prinz is the director of a movie which begins as a screen treatment of the Author's latest work, Lost in the Funhouse, but which ends as a filmed version, not only of stories the author has written, but of anything he might go on to write as well, "a visual orchestration

of the author's Weltanschauung" (224). Generically named, like Bray's NUMBERS and the Author's LETTERS, FRAMES, the movie-in-progress, is yet another wordless countercontext.

Prinz's most memorable character trait is his habitual silence: he gives his directorial instructions with nods, grunts, and gestures as he attempts to prove the redundancy of the words with which his rival, Ambrose Mensch, constructs the screenplay. Ambrose asserts to Lady Amherst that the filmed sequences depicting the firing of historic cities are merely emblems of Prinz's real concern: "what Prinz truly wants to record the destruction of is not any historical city, but the venerable metropolis of letters" (233). This opinion is shared by the Author, who, though fascinated by the surprising persuasiveness of a wordless man, believes Prinz to be "an enemy of the written word." The Author trusts Prinz to film his works, but only "as a condemned man must trust his executioner" (192). In short, he feels that his works will be murdered in their transposition to a visual medium.

Prinz's threat to literature is stronger than Bray's because his product is intelligible and powerful, but, as Ambrose demonstrates, it is intelligible and powerful in ways different from those in which literature is meaningful. Reg Prinz's character and the plot of LETTERS are clearly inspired, at least in part, by Marshall McLuhan's assertion that print is an obsolete medium. In 1969, Ambrose is battling to disprove this notion, taking Prinz's threat seriously because a film and a

novel share some basic elements that numerature does not. Both a novel and a film, for instance, can tell stories, can be primarily narrative in structure. But the kinds of stories they can tell are really quite different, as Prinz and Ambrose discover. Even Lady Amherst can discourse upon the "noncinematic properties of written fiction":

Composed in private, to be read in private, at least in silence and virtual immobility, the author and reader one to one like lovers--his letter [one Ambrose writes in the un-filmable sequence of the movie] would ideally have been a sort of story, told instead of shown, exploiting such anti-cinematic characteristics as, say, authorial omniscience and interpretation, perhaps some built-in ironic "discount" in the narrative viewpoint, interior monologue, reflexion. Its language would be its sine qua non: heightened, strange, highly figurative--and speculative, analytical, as often abstract as concrete. It would summarise, consider, adjudicate; it would interrupt, contradict itself, refer its Dear Reader to before and behind the sentence in progress. It would say the unseeable, declare the impossible. . . . the words It is raining are as essentially different from motion pictures of falling rain as are either from the actual experience of precipitation. . . (393)

The unique features of written narrative here isolated by Lady Amherst are the ones Barth has always foregrounded in his fiction: certain qualities possible only in narratives constructed of words, such as omniscience and explanation or

summary; the solitariness of the experience of the printed text written and read alone, unlike films which are usually viewed by groups and produced by groups of people; and, most important, language itself, which has a capacity for metaphor and abstraction that the visual image lacks. To give up these qualities, Barth seems to suggest, would be to give up narrative complexity, to deny the enactment of thought and the fullness of characterization possible in the novel. Barth's novels typically present interior thought being recorded by the narrator, a process difficult to convey in film. But both narrative media, as Lady Amherst points out, are constructed by artists: neither can be mistaken for the experience of life itself.

In their ceaseless battle, Ambrose and Prinz prove Lady Amherst's observations true. Ambrose, an old friend of the Author, was originally hired to write the screenplay for FRAMES but soon assumes an active role in the movie by playing the part of the Author. Their battle is both physical and psychological and becomes the subject of the film itself. In one scene, Prinz, armed with a statuette of a palm representing Fame, takes on Ambrose, who is equipped with a statuette of a quill pen. The end result is that Prinz is cut and has his glasses--necessary for the production of his film--broken, while Ambrose has his wrist--necessary for his writing--fractured. Barth's use of symbol is heavy-handed here as he attempts to show how clumsily film must use symbols. They have none of the subtlety and richness they can have in written narrative. By directing

attention to Prinz's eyes, Barth points to yet another difference between the two media: film can appeal directly to the senses whereas literature cannot. Literature is produced with the mind and hand, not with the eye, and it can be experienced only by the active mind of the reader.

This physical battle began in the early stages of the filming of FRAMES. Ambrose and Lady Amherst, re-enacting the Zeus and Danae myth in the belfry of the Tower of Truth, are captured on film by Prinz. The irate Ambrose attacks Prinz with (what else?) the four volumes of Clarissa which he and Lady Amherst have brought along. Realizing that Prinz cares more for the camera than for his own head, Ambrose exposes the film and wins the first round. But he loses the next match as Prinz attacks him with the tools of his trade, bopping Ambrose on the head with the mike boom and causing a slight concussion. Because the combatants are waging a war for their respective media, the symbolism of their battles is not lost on them, is perhaps even planned by them, as well as by Barth. They, too, recognize the value of the "Principle of Metaphoric Means." They are urbane and sometimes good-natured combatants, but the battle is nonetheless real--each man lives in and for his work..

On less physical days, they fight their battle through the shooting of the film itself. Prinz strikes the first blow here, filming an "unwritable scene," a wordless episode featuring him and Bea Golden as they put Ambrose's screenplay into a bottle and send it out to sea where the ink is washed away (234-35). Ambrose responds by writing an "unfilmable sequence" in which he

writes pages of letters and hands them to Bea Golden who reads them in silence (390-92). Their communication is mute and non-visual, as is all written communication. Through this rivalry the reader recognizes the validity of Lady Amherst's claim that the two media, although both narrative, are distinctly different. Neither, it seems, will ultimately oust the other. Ambrose has nothing to fear for the novel, but he proves that it cannot easily be transposed into another medium. Film cannot create the same experience as the written word, but neither can a written text produce the same experience as a film.

The battle between Author and Director is cooling down when Prinz is suddenly killed in an "accidental" explosion, leaving Ambrose and the Author in an apparently superior position. But Ambrose, too, may die in an explosion, the one that Todd Andrews uses to commit suicide, an explosion planned by the radical Drew Mack who wants to destroy the Tower of Truth. The novel ends with the success of that plan unknown and with Ambrose in the Tower. So neither side has "won" the battle, but each artist has discovered something about his medium, as has Barth's reader. Because the reader learns of Prinz and his film only in a novel made of words, however, Ambrose and printed fiction have a clear edge in the contest. Film may seem to be a medium sanctioned by contemporary society to a degree that printed fiction is not-- Ambrose after all depends on the film for his income, and the Tidewater Foundation supports the film industry, but not the Author. But Prinz, because he is wordless and writes no letters,

is a shadowy figure, important only as a counterpoint for Ambrose, who is central to the text as the lover and then the husband of the primary narrator and who writes letters and stories which the text incorporates for the reader's edification.

Ambrose is an engaging and memorable character because his thoughts and motivations are recorded in his and in Lady Amherst's letters whereas Prinz's thoughts, presumably wordless ones, cannot be recorded in print. Film may be the more commercially successful medium, but without Lady Amherst's record of the shooting of it, the reader would never know anything about the film, most of which is destroyed in the explosion which also kills Prinz. Through language Lady Amherst makes a narrative of the filming, puts it in a context, and gives it qualities that only language can give; a visual record of the filming of FRAMES would differ significantly from Lady Amherst's letters. In them we get, not images of the filming, but a record of and commentary on Ambrose's spoken record of the daily events on the set. The narrator interprets and comments, explains emotions and relations as a purely visual image could not, using language's capacity for metaphor and abstraction and telling us what it all means to and feels like for her. The reader cannot help but be aware of the medium of the work he or she is experiencing because of this "recording," past-tense, quality of her letters; the reader is always reading about a filming instead of witnessing the event itself.

Barth exploits the filming of FRAMES for all its symbolic value. As a counter narrative to LETTERS, it mirrors

the novel's concerns with re-enactment and self-reflexiveness, making the "preoccupations" of the Author even more apparent and making the novel itself even more intensely self-reflexive. Ambrose and Prinz stage re-enactments of each of the early scenes of the film, just as the Author re-works his previous fictions and just as each of the characters re-enacts his or her previous life-story. In many of the scenes, Prinz, camera in hand, is filmed filming the action so that the viewer of FRAMES, like the reader of LETTERS, will be aware that he is viewing, not reality, but an artistic, filmed record of staged events planned and choreographed by the Director. In many scenes, the battle between Writer and Director becomes the subject of the film, just as writing novels has become the subject--at least one of the subjects--of LETTERS.

The filming of FRAMES has further importance as the basis of the plot of LETTERS. Because it becomes an orchestration of all that the Author has written, it involves all of Barth's former characters and provides a ground situation for the Author, who wishes to bring together his previous characters in a dramatically plausible fashion. Each former character has a role in the filming of the movie, from Todd Andrews, who supplies the money through the Tidewater Foundation, to Jerome Bray, who sweeps unexpectedly into many of the shoots.

In short, FRAMES is the perfect example of Barth's employment of the Principle of Metaphoric Means. It provides the plot for his novel and, in its development as a self-conscious media event, it

reflects upon the Author's--and the author's--concerns: printed fiction and its role in contemporary society, specifically the role of the modernist/formalist novel as it is challenged by other media. LETTERS itself tries to define this role by showing that writing and reading play significant roles in contemporary life. Barth's recourse to an old, time-worn epistolary format points the way for formalists whose works--like Ambrose's--have become empty of significance. Re-enacting, or imitating, a traditionally sanctioned form can become formally intriguing, but, as the Author discovers, it also forces the writer to examine the problems and interests of classic realism and its human concerns.

II

The traditionalism and the "literariness" of this undertaking are further drawn to the reader's attention by Barth's depiction of Lady Amherst as the embodiment of the Great Tradition of the Novel. Acquainted with many of the great modern novelists (Huxley, Hesse, Joyce, Stein, Maeterlink, Wells), loved by some, impregnated by a few of them, Lady Amherst is apparently pregnant once again as LETTERS closes, whether with Ambrose's or Bray's child, however, the novel fails to say. But the Tradition has clearly been made to bear fruit in its encounter with the modern and postmodern representatives of the novel. With a literary ancestry including links to Germaine de Stael and Lord Byron, Amherst is a failed novelist herself and was deflowered with a capped fountain pen. Throughout her epistles to the

Author, she shows that she is acutely aware of the relationships between pens, phalluses, and novels, drawing to the reader's attention the physical activity of writing. This awareness is shared by most characters in and readers of epistolary fiction. Samuel Richardson's heroines, for example, often comment on their supplies of pens and paper and the hiding places in which they keep them.

Lady Amherst often sees herself as Clarissa's soul mate. Hurt by Ambrose's infidelity, she attacks him with a letter opener (in a novel called LETTERS it is difficult to miss the symbolism) and nicks his writing hand, attacking him where it hurts most. She refers to it, not as his "right hand" or simply as his "hand," but as the one with which he performs his most important activity, writing. Once Ambrose has left, Lady Amherst complains to the Author about her remaining weapon: "Thus I am reduced to this one, Clarissa Harlowe's: a decidedly poor substitute for the sword, in this author's opinion" (448). The pen is no weapon; it charges little in the real world, Lady Amherst fears. Certainly, Clarissa's letters failed to save either her chastity or her life in Richardson's novel. Nevertheless, Richardson's pen was clearly a powerful tool, his character still a valid point of reference for Lady Amherst two hundred years after his novel was published.

Barth's exposition of the power of writing and printed narrative is facilitated by this introduction of characters who are themselves concerned with the properties and the fate of the

printed word. But the Author, too, is interested in the qualities of traditional printed narrative and particularly in the properties of the epistolary novel because it will allow him to self-reflexively examine classic realism. He explains his work-in-progress to Lady Amherst:

With the help of a research assistant I recently reviewed the corpus of frame-tale literature to see what I could learn from it, and started making notes toward a frame-tale novel. By 1968 I'd decided to use documents instead of told stories: texts-within-texts instead of tales-within-tales. Rereading the early English novelists, I was impressed with their characteristic awareness that they're writing--that their fictions exist in the form, not of sound in the ear, but of signs on the page, imitative not of life "directly," but of its documents--and I considered marrying one venerable narrative tradition to another: the frame-tale and the "documentary" novel. (52-53)

Barth is clearly speaking through his Author here,<sup>3</sup> echoing ideas he also expresses in "The Literature of Exhaustion." He draws attention to an aspect of the early novel discussed by Robert Alter (Partial Magic) and many other critics of self-conscious fiction: the novel began in self-consciousness with Don Quixote, and the early realist novelists, including Richardson, wrote novels as self-reflexively aware of their status as printed fiction as is Barth's LETTERS. Barth's move from stories-within-stories to texts-within-texts highlights this aspect of the premodern novel

and is foreshadowed in Bellerophon's turning into the document which records the story of his life. The signs that record Pamela's or Clarissa's life, Barth points out, are no closer to life itself than are the signs with which Barth's "documents" construct his narrative.

The epistolary novel, in fact, places a special emphasis on writing, a feature noted by the Author and observed by David Goldknopf in his study of the novel in letters: "The basic activity, one might almost say theme, of the epistolary novel is literacy. The characters project their thoughts, deeds, life, not into or against an existential reality--presumably the ideal of the realistic novel--but upon paper." This literary activity affects the quality of the character's life, as Goldknopf goes on to explain: "the excitement of their lives is to a significant degree generated by their writing. Underlying all other passions is the passion to translate life into words" (67). In choosing the "documentary" novel as the vehicle of his return to written narrative (after his experimentation with oral narrative in Chimera and Funhouse), Barth is making the form and fact of the epistolary novel reflect his truce with the traditional printed novel, a truce confessed to by an embarrassed, formally irrealist Author.

In his use of the novel in letters, Barth makes the concerns always implicit in the genre explicit, forcefully demonstrating that self-reflexiveness is a quality inherent in all printed fiction. But if Goldknopf is accurate in his description of the

genre, then the epistolary novel is doubly interesting for Barth because he has always depicted first-person narrators who share this "passion to translate life into words." This passion has even been the theme of many of their narratives--from that of Todd Andrews through to those of Bellerophon and Sue and Fenn. In the epistolary novel, two of Barth's most pressing interests as a novelist find the perfect meeting ground: life-stories (a medium for the structuring of the perception of reality) are presented within the frame of the Author's fiction (printed narrative constructed to provide entertainment for readers).

In her study of the epistolary novel, Janet Altman suggests that this form is congenial to Barth and his contemporaries--writers who question the validity of realism--because the epistolary novel has always questioned the representational status of writing (212). As the Author, Barth claims that he wishes to incorporate a premodern realism in LETTERS in order to rescue his work from the obscure austerity of modern fiction and because reality, it turns out, is stranger and more interesting than he had once thought.<sup>4</sup> The epistolary novel, exposing as it does the problems of realistic fiction, allows him to introduce the conventions of realism in a self-conscious, almost parodic way. According to Altman, the epistolary novel "intensifies awareness of the gaps and traps that are built into the narrative representation of inter-subjective and temporal experience" (212). By referring to the characters as if they had both an actual and a fictional status, Barth once again grapples with this question of representation. The gap between life itself and

the written accounts troubles, not just the Author, but also the other characters, who have been written about in the Author's previous novels. As they themselves compose the events of their 'real' lives into letters for others to read, they discover the "traps" Altman describes: they find that they cannot simply record but must shape, interpret, and construct as they narrate.

Barth's point throughout his canon has been that narrating life is in fact a basic human activity, and the epistolary novel gives him a forum to show how diverse characters use narrative for private and public ends. Along with their secret or well-publicized aspirations toward the state of authorhood, Barth's characters are all given plausible contexts for the writing of their lengthy and numerous letters: Lady Amherst devotes only every Saturday morning to writing letters composed at the Author's request; Andrews is writing a journal which helps him to see meaning in his life and death; Horner writes at Morgan's violent insistence; A.B. Cook VI writes to communicate with his otherwise unreachable son; Bray writes to draw attention to his claims; Ambrose writes because he, too, is a professional author; and the Author writes letters to solicit the materials of his novel. The frequent references to the letters as documents which the characters have composed, while it may in one sense lend the novel a certain verisimilitude, at the same time has the quite opposite effect of making the reader realize that he or she is reading a printed text and not the letters themselves. In short, these references to the letters as letters make the reader aware

that he or she is reading printed imitations and, further, that these are fictitious and not actual documents in the first place. In her discussion of Clarissa, Terry Castle observes that Lovelace's much-commented upon cipher is invisible to the reader, replaced as it is with standardized type (154-59). When Lady Amherst refers to her letters as being written either in longhand or in typescript, we similarly become aware that we are reading a printed book and not a sheaf of papers. When Ambrose sends the Author a tape-recording because his writing arm has been broken, we cannot listen to it and must become aware that we encounter, not the tape, but a transcript of it. We are also unable to judge for ourselves the authenticity of the A.B. Cook IV letters because they look the same as all of the letters from the other characters. The result is that we remain constantly aware that in the "documentary" novel we are reading, not documents which record life, but imitations of documents.

Throughout his fiction, but especially from the time of Funhouse, Barth has presented characters who are aware that they exist only in their life-stories, which, in turn, are fictions composed by some Author they cannot know. In LETTERS, adhering to the practices of the early epistolary novels, Barth presents characters who do not share this awareness. But the epistolary form itself makes the point of constructedness for Barth's reader.

which make up LETTERS is further enhanced by Barth's introduction of the Author as a character in the novel. As he pursues the project he has outlined to Lady Amherst, the Author realizes that his use of the documentary novel involves him in a return, not only to a form which congenially foregrounds the act of writing, but also to "that hoariest of early realist creatures, an epistolary novel--set, moreover and by God, in "Cambridge, Maryland," among other more or less actual places, and involving (Muse forgive me) those most equivocal of ghosts: Characters from the Author's Earlier Fictions" (190). In this letter to Todd Andrews, the Author mentions the tension characteristic of the journal and letter novels of which he is so enamoured. Eighteenth-century novelists, although they presented characters who were conscious that they were writing, set their stories in actual, convincingly realistic settings in order to maintain the illusion that the text was simply a printed version of actual documents. <sup>5</sup> According to Lennard Davis, their readers were conditioned to expect an "insistence on recentness as well as factuality (despite the fact that the works might well be neither new nor true), and a decreasing perceptual gap between reader and text" (67).

Although the Author suggests that he, too, wishes to decrease the gap between reader and text by rooting his narrative in factual places, when he goes on to point out--in his novel--that his characters are ghosts (and not even of real people but of fictional characters), he immediately undermines the intended effect. It becomes clear that Barth is writing yet another self-

reflexive "imitation of a novel," which will not have the same effect on the reader as a less self-aware epistolary novel. Barth will re-enact the conventions, but he will make the self-reflexiveness much more apparent and will deliberately stress that the text the reader holds is a work of fiction. Compare his use of the epistolary format to Alice Walker's recent use of it in The Color Purple. Walker, too, uses the conventions of the epistolary novel--letters intercepted and found, for example--and uses the writing of letters to stress the level of literacy achieved by the heroine. But her novel is nevertheless what Fenn would call "pure unadulterated realism": it does not attempt to make the reader aware of the distance between life and narrative but, like Davis's "factual fictions," attempts to decrease awareness of that gap. Whereas LETTERS foregrounds its use of epistles, The Color Purple soon makes the reader forget that the story is told through letters.

If, to cite Davis once more, the typical early English "factual fiction . . . denied its fictionality and produced in its readers a characteristic uncertainty or ambivalence as to whether they were reading something true or false" (36), Barth deliberately draws attention to the fictitiousness of the letters in his postmodern novel. He at the same time maintains the conventional novelistic stance of truth-telling by introducing an Author character who believes in the actuality of his characters and in the authenticity of their letters. The lists of current events--references, for example, to Apollo 10, Mariner 6,

hurricane Anna, and the Sharon Tate murders--lend the novel the "documentary" realism of a Defoe novel, but the Author's presence as he conceives of and researches his project undermines what Barth has called the "naive illusionism" characteristic of the novel of documents.<sup>6</sup> The Author is presented collating a novel of letters from his "real life" experience, but the novel the reader reads is clearly one more in the series of Barth's inventive fictions.

When early novelists presented their fictions in the guise of factual records, they were trusting to their reader's faith in the authority of the printed word, an authority now called into question.<sup>7</sup> Authors presented themselves as "editors," much as Barth does himself in the framing letters of Giles Goat-Boy, and testified to the actual existence of the correspondents in an attempt to deny their own role in the invention of a fictitious--and therefore highly suspect--story. For Barth, who wishes to draw attention to the fictionality of all stories and even of historical documents, this stance can only be parodically assumed. To make this evident, his "editor" has become the "Author." It has become a commonplace since the emergence of the New Journalism in the sixties that the news reported by journalists is as artfully shaped, interpreted, and distorted as the representations of reality presented by authors of fiction. Barth capitalizes on this shift in attitude toward documents by presenting his Author as both participant and witness, editor and inventive source of the letters. In other words, he both uses and undermines the tradition of the editor.

In his study of the new documentary novels produced by Capote, Wolfe, and other writers of the sixties and seventies, John Hellman draws the following distinction between the New Journalism and fabulist fiction, the two responses to the collapse of faith in the ability of language to represent experience: "The fabulist need only convince on the basis of the internal cohesion of his purely imaginary works. He says, All this could never happen, so do not blame me if it does not seem real." Hellman adds: "The new journalist, on the other hand, need only convince on the basis of verifiable sources and his personal integrity: All this actually did happen, so do not blame me if it does not seem real" (11). With his Author figure, Barth seems to be playing with both of these stances. His Author presents these characters, on whom he has based his earlier fiction, simply writing him letters: if it seems fabulous, it is not his fault, because it is the "reality" which the people on whom he based his earlier works inhabit. Barth's reader cannot but be aware, however, that the Author who assumes this stance is in fact just another character in a highly imaginative novel in which people who are part bug are present at real events which are historically verifiable. Barth openly acknowledges the fabulism of all fiction, however realistic.

The introduction of the character of the Author is fundamental to Barth's success in highlighting the self-reflexiveness of the traditional epistolary novel. Because he addresses us in a voice very much like that of John Barth (and

shares his first name, last initial, and canon), we think of the Author as being an actual person, comparable to ourselves and distinct from the other, clearly invented characters. Throughout the novel, the Author's presence and his repeated references to his novels (which are also Barth's novels) draw attention to Barth, the actual author, and make us aware of the dependence of the characters of this fiction on those of his previous works. His presence in the novel ought to prevent the success of the illusionism. As Wayne C. Booth points out: "Any kind of praise of one's work for its artistry implies, it might seem, a lack of reality in the world with which one's artistry deals. And certainly any direct self-praise by the author, however wittily described, is likely to suggest that he can do as he will with his characters" (205). Barth's Author, whether he indulges in self-praise or not, is deliberately introduced to create just this effect: he can, like any author, do as he will with his characters, and he thus exposes their fictionality. But when he addresses them as though they were as "real" as he is, we recognize that the Author is as much a fictional invention as they are, as much a product of the actual author's pen. When the Author addresses the other characters in this way, Barth is pointing out that the illusion created in any novel of texts-within-texts (that the reader is reading a collation of actual documents) is just that, an illusion, and that any printed narrative about himself (as is the case of Borges in "Borges and I") or his concerns is as fictitious as any narrative involving invented characters.

L

LETTERS is complex and doubly interesting in its treatment of the editor figure because the collation of the letters takes the form of a novel-in-progress. That is, it is presented, not as a collection of documents which the Author just discovered somewhere, but as the "as it happens" record of how the documents were solicited, received, and organized by an Author who had quite specific plans for his next novel. As he solicits the letters, he oversteps his role as editor by influencing and, to some extent, inventing the letters written by the other characters. The result of this process will be the novel LETTERS: as with Sabbatical, the reader supposedly reads the first draft, the initial stages of the novel. Because he does not physically interact with the characters, we see the Author as a distant editor-figure and forget about him for large portions of the novel, but because we know that he is writing a novel that bears the same title as the one we are reading, we also see him as the figure who manipulates the action of the novel.

Barth's introduction of the Author also allows him to circumvent one of the restrictions of the epistolary novel. Terry Castle points out that in the novel in letters the characters must define themselves, as Barth's seem to do, because the author has no voice with which to define them:

the multiple correspondent epistolary novelist must forfeit the story-teller persona and abdicate overt responsibility for the fiction. He or she retains no power of utterance, no means of self-presentation. . . . The epistolary writer

makes no personal contact with the reader; his or her identity, like that of the playwright, is displaced, hidden behind multiple personae. . . . Our access to the "implied author" (in Booth's famous term) is blocked by the form itself. (167)

Barth overcomes this limitation by achieving self-representation through a character who is the Author. In other words, he manages, as usual, to "have it both ways." The characters do present and define themselves--the Author comments less on them than on himself, devoting his letters to defining his aims as a novelist and to outlining certain personal problems. But in the character of the Author, the actual and implied authors merge with the conventional editor figure. The Author's framing letters "to the Reader" remind us of the story-teller who, like an author and like an editor, put the work together. Furthermore, the Author's repeated references to his novels, which share the titles of Barth's novels, draw attention to Barth the actual author and make us aware of the dependence of this novel on his earlier, fictional narratives.

The early novel, appealing to an audience hungry for journalism, denied its obvious fictionality by introducing itself as a "true account" or "history." The title page of LETTERS reverses this strategy by announcing in its subtitle that the text is "A Novel"--as though the unsuspecting contemporary reader might mistake its contents for actual epistles. (The subtitle also emphasizes, of course, Barth's return to a genre whose death bell he had been accused of tolling in "The Literature of

Exhaustion.") The title page of LETTERS, far from asserting the authenticity of the documents as found texts, exposes their artificiality by announcing that they have been written by "seven fictitious drolls and dreamers each of which imagines himself actual." Here Barth points to the tension peculiar to the novel made of documents. The characters believe themselves to be actual, and the reader is persuaded to think of them, briefly, as real people because he or she reads the documents as though they were written by the characters. But these letters are framed by both the title page and the Author's letters to "the Reader" in which he discusses how much time has passed as he has written these letters. The reader must begin and end the novel with an abrupt return to the reality of its fictionality. But the abruptness of the return testifies to the power of the novel's stories as moving narratives. The Author's framing letters, in turn, are further framed by the context of Barth's published novel. So the Author's fictitiousness is also abruptly exposed.

The Author fills yet another of the conventional roles of the eighteenth-century novel: that of the nearly silent, distant letter recipient or confidant, who serves as a convenient and plausible object of the exposition involved in letter-writing. Pamela's parents and the Reverend Mr. Villars in Fanny Burney's Evelina perform this function, for instance, and play minor roles in their respective novels. In LETTERS the Author is distant, never sees, and only once speaks with the characters. He is not engaged in the film which brings them all together, although he is

its inspiration and author, having written the novels upon which it is loosely based. His distance allows him to become Lady Amherst's confidant figure. His introduction as a character and his request that she write to him make possible the disclosure of details and the recounting of the events which constitute the novel. In the traditional epistolary novel, this confidant figure is often a lover; in this case, the Author is in love with the tradition Lady Amherst represents. But it is language and narrative--not the woman--that the Author loves, and his presence throughout the novel makes us as readers come to value printed narrative as well.

## IV

The peculiar strength of LETTERS is that although Barth insistently, and even at times annoyingly, draws attention to himself and to the artifice of the novel to show that he has authored the characters who believe themselves actual, the characters remain as autonomous and vivid as do Clarissa and Pamela. As Barth depicts his characters in the act of writing, they demonstrate such a firm belief in their actuality (a belief comparable to that of the heroines of the early realistic novel) that they construct a completely-rendered existence. The bulk of LETTERS consists of epistles written by Lady Amherst, A.B. Cook IV and A.B. Cook VI, while the Author's illusion-shattering missives are brief and infrequent. Furthermore, because we are ostensibly reading the letters, and not the novel, the illusion

of actual writers and a hidden author is maintained. The Author's hand in shaping the letters into a novel only occasionally intrudes, and his role in planning the novel is shown to be a slight one when Ambrose supplies him, in a letter, with the scheme which graces the title page of the novel the reader holds. This letter is presented, along with the others, as a simple document belonging to the correspondence received by the Author. The journal-like recording of the day-to-day events in the lives of the characters accordingly dominates the novel and to some extent undermines the self-reflexiveness introduced with the Author character.

As Barth has pointed out, neither self-reflexive nor more straight-forward "documentary" novels preclude a concern with life. In "The Literature of Exhaustion," he comments on his "imitations-of-novels," which attempt to represent, not life itself, but the texts with which we preserve records of life: "In fact such works are not more removed from 'life' than Richardson's or Goethe's epistolary novels are: both imitate 'real' documents, and the subject of both, ultimately, is life, not the documents" (276). It would be legitimate to say of LETTERS that its subject is documents--their role in the history of the novel and in ordinary lives--but its subject, like that of the earlier imitations of documents, is also life. Most of the characters of LETTERS are reaching mid-life and are attempting to break out of repetitions of their pasts. But, as Ambrose discovers, writers can best deal with these problems of living by heightening their awareness of language and form.

Indeed, the emphasis on writing and texts in LETTERS allows Barth to exploit an aspect of epistolary fiction which has generally remained only implicit. Franz Kafka, looking back to a time when people communicated primarily through letters, drew attention to a peculiar consequence of letter-writing:

The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced--from a purely theoretical point of view--a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing. (as quoted from Briefe an Milena by Janet Altman)

The letter writer gives himself existence as he writes, but that self is cut off from the actual self--just as the Author is not Barth, although he shares many of Barth's attributes. The letter-writer is, in fact, in a position very much like that of the author of a printed text: he writes in solitude, unaware of the fate of his text and of his reader, from whom he may never hear. He writes to communicate with a person who is not present except in memory and imagination, who is as ghostly as a fictional character. The potential for self-examination and isolation created by this situation is made evident by Barth as he constructs characters who, like all of his previous characters, feel compelled to tell their life-stories, even if they must become ghosts and address ghosts in order to do so.

By basing the action of the novel on the activities of the

film-makers, rather than on the exchange of letters, Barth can use innovative techniques for characterization. We understand the characters, not as they respond to letters they receive (as, for example, we understand the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil in Les liaisons dangeureuses through their reactions to one another's taunts and challenges) nor as they shape their self-images in the hope of influencing the recipient's behavior, but through their choice of addressee.

Janet Altman has pointed out that reading is usually as important to the epistolary novel as is writing, that the novels usually teem with readings, re-readings, and mis-readings, and that many epistolary novels present a "Super Reader Figure" who governs the external reader's response (91-92; 111). In LETTERS, however, few letters are actually exchanged, and most of the epistles are addressed to recipients who do not exist, do not receive the documents, or do not respond. As a result, reading is of secondary importance in the novel. Lady Amherst perfunctorily reads the Author's novels, but she comments only briefly upon them. The Author is in the position to be the "Super Reader Figure" since he receives and presents all of the letters, but he does so without comment. The only Reader in the Text is "the Reader" whom the Author addresses in his framing letters, the implied external reader who is alerted throughout to the fictional nature of what he or she reads. Because the letter writers have no real contact or conversation with their readers, the ghostliness Kafka comments on is highlighted. The characters and their recipients exist only in the words of the printed page.

Todd Andrews exemplifies perfectly Barth's evocation of the act of letter writing. He addresses his letters to a father who committed suicide forty years before the action of this novel begins, and Andrews even goes so far as to mimic the writing of an actual letter, right down to the inside address:

Mr. Thomas T. Andrews, Dec'd

Plot # 1, Municipal Cemetery

Cambridge, Maryland 21613

In this fastidiousness, we witness Andrews' legalistic attention to detail and his ironic sense of humour, but we are also alerted to the peculiarity of his letter-writing situation: he addresses a recipient who cannot reply, and he writes not so much to communicate as to explore his own character. Readers of The Floating Opera know that the primary intellectual pursuit of Andrews' life has been his "Inquiry" into the cause of his father's suicide and that his inquiry has become a vehicle for the self-definition of Andrews himself. Consequently, his (until now) annual letter to his father constituted an opportunity for continued self-examination and self-justification. As Andrews now admits, his father's motives for suicide no longer interest him, but the habit of writing to the dead man cannot be broken because the process of self-definition continues. In the course of the novel, as Andrews moves once again towards a suicide attempt which will bring him closer to his father, he cuts his ties with living characters one by one, and with ever-increasing frequency communicates his discovery that his life is

recycling itself only to his dead father, a father he hopes to join soon in suicide. The silence of his unfathomable father draws many a word from Andrews, and through both Andrews' and Ambrose's literary efforts, Barth seems to suggest that writing allows us to put off awareness of that ultimate silence of death, or in Andrews' case, perhaps even to begin to understand that silence. The silence of the ghostly recipient, in any case, invites the self-examination of the writer, even if it is undertaken only in an attempt to drown out or deny that silence.

Andrews goes beyond simply creating his own ghost in a letter and actually writes to a ghost. As the novel ends, the peculiar link between Andrews' letters and the realm of the dead is strengthened. He is last presented sitting in the Tower of Truth waiting for the revolutionaries' bomb to explode and kill him. As he waits, he writes a final epistle to his father. In the course of LETTERS, Andrews has come once again to value the habit of writing because it helps him to come to terms with and explain the unexpected "recycling" of his own life. Recognizing that a novel based on his letters might also be of value to others, he bequeaths his papers, including his "Inquiry" and his letters to his father, to the Author. The fact that we have access to them suggests that the Author has taken possession of them and that Andrews, therefore, has died. As the reader finishes the novel, he or she becomes aware that Andrews' letters have spoken in the voice of one dead man talking to another dead man. Andrews' status is thus doubly ghostly: he is the ghost of the author's previous character and the ghost of his LETTERS

incarnation as well. His seemingly bizarre habit of writing of his father tells us much about Andrews--and about letters. They are written primarily for the satisfaction of the writer in LETTERS and not to communicate or to effect action on the part of the recipient, although without at least an implied reader, the writers would not begin to write.

Andrews is representative of the characters of this novel because he addresses his letters to a recipient who cannot possibly correspond with him. Most of the letters which comprise the novel are received in silence and remain unanswered. Jacob Horner is forced to resume the habit of recording the narrative of his life in writing when Joe Morgan, the new head of the mobilisation clinic, prescribes a regimen of Scriptotherapy. Joe Morgan's complaint about Horner is not, as Horner believes, that he was responsible in part for the death of Rennie Morgan, but that he recorded his experience in a narrative: "Wrote it all down, Horner! . . . That [verbatim, sir] I don't forgive you" (743). Horner's record of the events of The End of the Road was "found" by the Author, who of course published it as a novel. This publicization of his life is presumably what annoys Morgan, as does the permanence that the written record gives to the events. Like Horner, he feels that he is frozen back in the fifties, that he has been unable to progress beyond Rennie's death. As he forces the re-enactment of their time together on Horner, he includes in his program the re-enactment of writing the record, as if he believes it will somehow erase the first record.

Like Andrews, Horner writes to an unresponsive recipient, in this case to himself, but since he has remained paralysed for so many years his "self" is, as Morgan assures him, a vacuum. In the early sections of the novel, his letters simply record facts and events, offering little self-analysis or personal interpretation of the actions recorded. He is so distanced from the self to which he gives shape in his letters that he addresses himself in them with the second person "you." But, eventually, he begins to find himself in his letters and to recognize emotions, in short, to be "mobilized." His letter writing leads him, it is true, into a laughable marriage with Ambrose's ex-wife Marsha Blank, but Horner has at least achieved a degree of self-awareness. His letter-persona is as ghostly as is that of Andrews, but he has moved beyond the need for Scriptotherapy by the end of LETTERS and embraces life rather than death. Addressing himself, he creates a self substantial enough to act in the world and to defeat his paralysis. Even those early letters which seemingly fail to evoke a response from himself do give Horner shape and being, showing once again that one of the fundamental concerns of the epistolary novel is how character creates itself in language.

In her study of epistolary novels, Natascha Wurzbach stresses the importance of reliving and writing in the lives of the characters: "Things are constantly being remembered and set down, the past is repeatedly evoked and relived in the present. In this process it is not so much action itself which takes the central place in the narrative as the writer's reaction to it,

the mood which it evokes" (xix). As Horner writes, he is forced to consider, to remember, and to identify with the life he is narrating. His writing has the effect of making him re-live his life and even manages to evoke in the "weatherless" Horner a mood. By having a vacuum of a character like Horner discover the value of the written word, Barth illustrates its ability to give, if only a ghostly, at least even a ghostly existence to the writer. Horner demonstrates once again that it is only when manipulating words that he feels, as he puts it in The End of the Road, "alive and kicking."

The problematic letters ascribed to A.B. Cook IV are also received in silence. Through them Barth manages to show not only the role of letters in history but also the pathos of the human desire to communicate effectively through written language when other means (telephone, conversation) are denied. If they are authentic, then the letters were written in 1812 by Cook to his as yet unborn, and therefore unresponsive, child. He writes in a heartfelt attempt to communicate a truth which he has laboured to discover about the Cook/Burlingame family and its role in American history. He hopes to stop the pattern of generational conflict with his own children, but his letters show the inability of the characters of this novel to use letters to effect action. The mother, feeling that Cook has betrayed her with his disappearance before the birth of the child, hides the letters, and the family pattern is repeated until the time of the novel when Cook VI hopes to inform his child and stop the war of

the generations once and for all by publishing these letters. He gives the letters to Lady Amherst and to the Author, hoping that they will be able to reach his (and possibly Lady Amherst's) son, Burlingame VII, with whom Cook himself is no longer in contact because in the family cycle the son always distrusts the father. There is no response to these letters in the course of the novel: this intended correspondent is simply another unknown and silent recipient.

Through Cook IV's and Cook VI's letters, Barth depicts broken or incomplete attempts at written communication and draws attention to the fundamental isolation of the writer (as compared to the teller of oral narratives, who has immediate contact with the audience). Cook may learn something about himself and the family history by writing, but he does not use the letters primarily to discover himself. He seems to wish desperately to communicate--or to deceive; regardless, he uses the letters to influence the recipient's view of history, not to elaborate upon himself. Cook VI may, in fact, be reconciled with his son at the end of the novel in death in the boat explosion, which either killed one or both of them or was a ruse planned by them. A post-script to Cook's last letter, purportedly added by Burlingame VII, denies any reconciliation, however. Because no replies are ever received, the reader cannot determine whether the letters produce any results.

In that the A.B. Cook IV letters are presumably written by a man now dead, they give voice and being through language to a man no longer physically alive. They represent an inversion of Todd

Andrews' situation: Andrews writes to the dead; the dead write to the Cooks. These historic epistles are doubly effective in demonstrating the unreliability of letters and of any document which claims to present a verifiable record of historical fact. The authenticity of the letters is never established, and the points at which deception may have entered are many: they may have been forged in Cook IV's day to deceive his wife and lead her into political intrigues; they may be modern frauds perpetrated by Cook VI in his earnest wish to heal the breach with his son; they may have been written by Cook IV but in an attempt to mislead his children about his and his country's past; or they may have been written by Cook VI to purposely mislead his son. Barth introduces all of these possibilities without solving the question of their validity as historical documents. Through the letters, however, he does show how powerful historical narrative can be in shaping a nation's consciousness of itself. He shows that letters can manipulate the recipients (in the stories told in the Cook IV letters, letters are frequently used in political intrigues) but also that, because these particular letters happen to go unread by the intended recipients, writing is inescapably a process of talking to oneself. Like all the other characters, whoever wrote the A.B. Cook IV letters was inventing a self and a history in them whether in an attempt to be faithful to the facts or not, just as Pamela and Clarissa invent themselves in their letters.

Jerome Bray shares Cook VI's intense desire for

communication and response, but he also hopes for guidance from his addressees. He writes passionate epistles to a number of characters in the novel--to Bea Golden, Drew Mack, Todd Andrews, and the Author. The latter is the only one to honour Bray with a reply. A remote cousin of Cook VI, Bray shares his sense of family continuity and responsibility. But he even more strongly resembles Todd Andrews in his writing to his dead or, as he would have it, "ascended" ancestors: his parents, foster parents, and grandmother. He really does seem, however, to expect a response--an illumination, or even a direct communication in the obscure printouts of his semi-organic computer. Although he hopefully reads a reply into the 'signs,' he is never sure that he has received a message at all. He, too, remains alone, writing into a virtual void, separated from the women he can attain only by forcefully taking them captive. Isolated from his ancestors and from all of the other characters, he fails to achieve a meaningful relationship either by writing letters or by forcing himself upon women.

Ambrose Mensch literally delivers his epistles into a void--the ocean. Barth first depicted him in one of the more conventional short stories of Lost in the Funhouse. In "Water Message," ten-year-old Ambrose discovers on the shore a bottle containing a message which says only, "To whom it may concern," and, at the bottom of the page, "Yours truly." Mensch receives this missive as a challenge and decides to be a writer who can fill up the blank space between the salutation and the complimentary close. Most of his epistles in LETTERS are

addressed to "Yours truly" to whom he has written periodically, using bottles as envelopes and the ocean as the post-box. They are read, presumably, by no one, nor does Ambrose really hope that they will be read. He fills up the blank but acknowledges the futility of his words with his gesture of throwing his epistles into the ocean. Nevertheless, like Andrews and Horner, he seems to derive personal benefits from his writing and writes primarily for himself, not for the recipient, who of course does not answer and is not affected. On one occasion, the bottle returns to Mensch, washed up on the ocean's shore, and reinforces the impression that, like the other characters, he is ultimately writing to himself, even if he had wished to touch an imaginary reader through his letters. Even more than the other characters, he lives in language, thinking of it as a means of dealing with experience but also as a protective cushion between himself and life.

When Mensch meets Lady Amherst, however, he begins to make carbon copies of a few of his letters, and he gives them to her and occasionally to the Author. They do not respond directly to these letters with letters of their own, but Ambrose's missives do help to establish a relationship between Lady Amherst and himself. These letters are, in the end, even more productive than Horner's, helping Ambrose to find a wife and to choose action over mere self-enclosed articulation. Ambrose writes a final letter to "Yours truly" in which he announces his intention to live in the world, to begin the second cycle of his life, to stop attempting to fill up the blank. He breaks his habit of

solipsistic composition so that he can write to his new wife. Along with his former addressee, he also rejects sterile formalism as his artistic métier. He decides, as well, to publish under his own name and to give up his penname, Arthur King. These actions result from his new belief that art must not be produced in isolation from life but in the midst of it. The circle comes complete when he receives another letter in a jug, this time, all body with no salutation or signature. He no longer is tempted to respond with his own blank missive, and he announces to "To whom it may concern" that he has given up such games so that he may "become a member of the human race" (758). For Ambrose, writing letters which cannot be read is no longer satisfying; he wishes to communicate through his writings,

To overcome his habit of writing to himself, he writes about how he will give up his letter-writing habit. He says farewell to his metaphoric penname in a letter addressed to both Arthur King and Lady Amherst. But why, as she continually asks, must he write a letter if it is simply to announce that he will no longer write letters? He also writes a final letter to "To whom it may concern" to say farewell. These two letters are useful for Ambrose because he uses them to work through his problems and discoveries as a writer. He needs to write about his escape to the second cycle of his life because it does not seem to him to be complete until it has been recorded in words. He must abolish his dependence on letters in letters.

When Ambrose gives up his correspondence with "the blank,"

it is presumably to begin an engagement with the world. A long story he wrote, included in his first letter (a copy of which also goes to Lady Amherst) is called "The Amateur." Throughout the novel, he refers to himself as an amateur of life. In his letter to "To whom it may concern," he demonstrates that he can only love life through language and thus is an "amateur of the world" (651).<sup>10</sup> But he goes on from this comment to note that his greatest adversaries in the past--life and realism--are now recognized as in fact being his truest allies. He can still be a writer, but he has realized that his concern all along has been the world and not just the formal properties of language and story.

In the short story "Lost in the Funhouse" (which features Ambrose as both the central character and the narrator) he distinguishes between the makers of funhouses (writers) and the lovers (readers) who enjoy them. His distinction, which is not necessarily Barth's, implies that the artist must be solipsistic, that producing a true work of art requires the artist giving up contact with life, and that writing precludes, not just loving, but also being loved. By the end of LETTERS, Ambrose seems to have abandoned this distinction. Like Sue and Fenn (and Barth's other narrating couples), he sees that these acts have a certain mutuality, allowing and encouraging one another. He gives up his solipsistic writing activities to take up a conversation with his new wife and with the Great Tradition of the Novel, which she represents for him as well as for the Author. In so doing, Ambrose finally eschews all interest in his first wife, Marsha

Blank, whose relationship to his formalist experiments is summed up in her name. He has progressed both as a writer and as a man with his discovery that premodern realism has a role to play in the development of postmodernism. His insistence on the rigorous re-enactment of his love affairs and his toying with the idea of writing "Perseid" have shown him the value of isomorphic spirals which allow one to escape the closed circle of repetition.

Of all of the correspondents, the Author alone receives replies from each of the characters to whom he writes, but his is also a correspondence with ghosts, the inventions of own pen. His, too, is finally a communication with himself in which he reviews his past. Certainly, two of his letters are addressed to "the Reader," but the reader does not reply and his or her existence is never assured, only implied and implored. As a writer, the Author is in a position parallel to those in which he has placed his characters, who all become mirror-images of himself, an author who sends his books out into the silence of the unknown. Most of them, in the end, whether productively or not, are writing to and from themselves despite the lengths to which they go to create the illusion of an addressee who is interested in what they have to say. The unresponsiveness of the addressees (in most cases an inevitable silence) provides the impetus for self-reflection which, it seems, would not occur so freely without the chance to "write it all down." Many of the writers in LETTERS also seek excitement and comfort in their epistle-writing. Many of them are lonely and are depressed by their

inability to progress beyond their present condition: Lady Amherst feels that she has slipped into poverty, mediocrity, and spiritlessness; Todd Andrews suffers from suicidal despair; Horner is paralysed; Ambrose is chronically removed from his surroundings and is pessimistic about his future as a lover and a writer; Jerome Bray is lonely and feels betrayed by Merope Bernstein; A.B. Cook VI is frustrated and possibly saddened by his inability to communicate with his son. For some of them, these problems can be overcome through letter-writing. The unanswered letter offers the characters an opportunity to elaborate upon themselves and to perfect themselves because they are writing, not informative letters, but, essentially, life-stories. Since their addressees cannot question or deny what they say about themselves, these letters grant them authority over their life-stories (an authority which is, of course, somewhat qualified by the presence of the Author). And they all value the perhaps deceptively coherent image of self that a structured narrative account can give. In the chaos of 1969 on the university campuses, in the chaos of a perplexing shooting of the movie FRAMES, in the context of the "accidental" bombings of the film crew by government planes and of deliberate bombings by the radicals, the characters understandably feel the need of the order that narrative provides.

v

In LETTERS Barth deals with the concerns characteristic of

the works which precede and follow it: the role of the novel in postmodern times, the passion of narrators to transcribe life into narrative, the properties of printed and oral fiction. The kind of self-awareness the characters in LETTERS display, however, is unique. Unlike the narrators of "Bellerophoniad" and "Autobiography," for example, they do not display any awareness that they exist only as narrative, (or as words on the page) gives them substance, although some of them do speculate about the properties of printed stories. The characters are presented, as the title page informs the reader, believing that life-stories are distinct from lives and that their actual existence is distinct from the ghostly existence they give to themselves by writing letters. But at the same time (with the exception of Lady Amherst), they are aware that they have been represented in and given a separate life by the novels of John Barth. The self-reflexiveness of this novel arises not from characters who despair of their roles as authors of their life-stories, then, but from the novel's status as a sequel to Barth's other works and from the introduction of the character of the Author.

By orchestrating all of his characters' life-stories in one novel, Barth is re-enacting his own life as an author of narrative fictions. One of the subjects which the Author identifies as central to his novel-in-progress is "re-enactment," which, it becomes clear, is not simple repetition of past actions but a process of re-living and re-examining past actions in order to go forward, to move out of fruitless repetition into

productive progress. All the characters--some willingly, some reluctantly--experience this process of re-enacting their own life-stories, and most of them do manage to break out of the oppressive repetition to which they had fallen victims. Barth's image of the process is a spiral which opens out, the isomorphic spiral he depicts in "Perseid" and which Ambrose re-introduces as he discusses the Perseid myth. Like the characters, Barth hopes to be able to write a new chapter in his life story by re-writing his authorial past in LETTERS. Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales, it is true, are still concerned with narrative and are both highly self-reflexive, but there are no doubts expressed by the narrators of these novels about the relevance of printed fiction in a postmodern world.

In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth recommends turning the feeling that the novel is exhausted against itself: writers can write something new by writing about exhaustion. In Funhouse and Chimera, Barth's most harshly criticized works, he follows this program, writing new stories by using the materials of the old myths and by presenting, as characters, writers who feel that they can add nothing new to Western literature. In LETTERS, Barth turns the dead end against itself in a new way: he uses the epistolary novel, a form considered to be exhausted in Richardson's own life time. His revitalization of the genre is itself one means of making something new out of exhaustion. He exposes qualities inherent in the genre which have not been so fully revealed before and shows that they can still be meaningful. In his novel, as in all epistolary novels, letters

are written in silence and read in silence by isolated individuals, who struggle to come to terms with the self created by their own pens and structured for the reader's education and entertainment. Through the letter-writers, Barth shows that the concerns of his previous Author-figures are basic human concerns: how do human beings use language to make meaning out of their experiences? What kinds of meaning can narrative achieve? The self-reflexiveness inherent in the epistolary novel and the depiction of the Author simply heighten "the Reader's" awareness that he or she, too, is solitary, reading, actively pursuing meaning in the words printed on the page. Barth's reader then becomes engaged in Barth's twin concerns: life and narrative.

In an essay entitled "Historical Fiction, Fictitious History, and Chesapeake Blue Bay Crabs, or About Aboutness," Barth distinguishes between two visual representations of animals. The first, taken from a scientific magazine, is a detailed drawing of a crab, designed to explain to the reader the habits and characteristics of the species. Barth explains that this picture is simply "about" the crab. The second picture is a Rembrandt painting of two birds. It is not nearly so detailed as the picture of the crab and is not informative about the birds in a scientific way. This painting, Barth explains, is not just "about" birds; it is also "about" painting. He goes on to assert that this secondary quality is what qualifies the painting as art. Art, Barth insists, is never simply about its subject but is also about itself. It does not simply represent the subject;

it shows us how we structure perception in the act of recording our perceptions. Moving to literature, he observes: "Whatever else it is about, great literature is almost always also about itself. On rare occasions it may even be mainly about itself, though it is almost never exclusively about itself, even when it seems to be" (Friday 191-91). In short, apart from the specific details of the plot and the setting, literature is, he insists, about "the passions of the human breast and the possibilities of human language" (191).

Some reviewers of LETTERS would put the novel in the category of works exclusively about themselves, but in the epistolary novel Barth has found the ideal vehicle for exploring issues of language and narrative without seeming self-absorbed. His imitation of the epistolary novel is not a simple copy or parody of the form. In Barth's sense of the word, it is a re-enactment of the traditional novel undertaken in an effort to discover those properties of the novel which can be absorbed and those which must be abandoned as the novel, too, spirals outward from premodernism and modernism. LETTERS, finally, is the culmination of the attempt to affirm narrative that, as this study has suggested, informs even the most sceptical of Barth's formal experiments.

## Notes to Chapter 1

1. Lionel Trilling was probably the most vehement in his announcement of the death of the novel. In "James Joyce in his Letters" (1968), Trilling claims that the novel served primarily to contrast moral and spiritual with material values. Because this contrast no longer interests us, he argues, the novel is no longer a viable form (54-55).

2. See, for example, Ihab Hassan's discussion in Para-criticisms, of self and self-reflexive novels: "Fact and fiction acquire the same aspect . . . from a certain vantage, fact and fiction must blur. The enormous volume of the World is matched by even greater expansions of the Self until reality becomes a declaration of the mind" (86).

3. For discussions of Barth in the context of modern fiction, see AfterJoyce by Robert Adams Martin and Paradoxical Resolutions by Craig Werner. Martin discusses some of the formal properties of the modern novel Barth borrows and stresses Barth's interest in language. He sees Barth the novelist as a performer. Werner credits Barth's attempts to write encyclopedic novels to the influence of Joyce. Frank McConnell's Four Post-War American Novelists, Tony Tanner's City of Words, and Robert Scholes' The Fabulators are all early studies which clearly establish Barth's place in the postmodern American tradition.

4. Critics who have attacked Barth on these grounds include

John Gardner (On Moral Fiction 1978), Jerome Klinkowitz (Literary Disruptions 1980; Literary Subversions 1985), Christopher Butler (After the Wake 1980), and Gerald Graff ("Under Our Belt and Off Our Back" 1981). One of the most scathing criticisms is that of John Aldridge in The American Novel and the Way We Live Now (1983). For Barth, he argues, "fiction is all there is."

Aldridge continues:

All that is important has occurred in the novels and not in life, while life has been totally fictionalized by the novels. . . . The extreme internalization of all of those technical effects, which in the work of a realistic novelist would serve as mimetic or at most metaphorical points of exit to the external world, has resulted in a fiction that sustains itself almost entirely through the consumption of its own entrails. . . . [This] make[s] it possible for Barth to avoid the immensely difficult problem of having to confront the complexities of the external world. (126-27)

For Barth's supporters, a response like that of Aldridge is somewhat naive about the properties of fiction. As Sheridan Baker puts it: "Fiction does not imitate reality out there. It imitates a fellow telling about it. And in so doing, it creates a kind of existential parable about the realities of the modern world" ("Narration: the Writer's Essential Mimesis" 156). See also Charles Russell, who in "The Vault of Language" insists that the "art-work which strives for transparency is first and

foremost opaque" (357).

5. See Linda Hutcheon's A Theory of Parody.

6. In Barth's recently published Tidewater Tales, the healing powers of narrative are stressed even more. Peter Sagamore listens to and tells stories to restore himself to psychological and artistic health. He learns to love both his wife and the world more fully by rediscovering his narrative gifts.

7. Frank Kermode's Sense of an Ending, for example, is a classic study of the importance of narrative structure for the whole notion of meaning.

8. Klinkowitz does, however, praise Barth for his achievement of fusing story and self-consciousness in Sabbatical (Literary Subversions 15).

9. See the essays collected by Joseph Waldmeir in Critical Essays on John Barth (1980); see also individual studies by Jac Tharpe, John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (1974); David Morrell, John Barth: An Introduction (1976); Frank D. McConnell, Four Post-War American Novelists (1977); Evelyn Glaser-Wohrer, An Analysis of John Barth's Weltanschauung (1977); Charles Harris, Passionate Virtuosity (1983).

#### Notes to Chapter 2

1. In "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth jokes about McLuhan: "from across the Peace Bridge in Canada came Marshall McLuhan's new song that we 'print-oriented bastards' were

obsolete" (71). But his experiments with stories for tape and live voice show that he took the accusation somewhat seriously.

2. Barth's knowledge of and adaptation of historical source materials are documented by Philip Diser and Joseph Weixlmann. See also Alan Holder's discussion of his use of history.

3. Hayden White is, of course, the best-known historian to analyse the fictionality of history. See, for example, his "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" and "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." In The Exploded Form James A. Mellard notes that this idea has become a commonplace of the contemporary novel: "In the age of the modern, fiction and history are subject to the same sense of indeterminacy as reality itself. This means that our histories, like our fictions, are just as much creations from human resources as the models of the world created by philosophy and science" (x).

### Notes to Chapter 3

1. Charles B. Harris argues in Passionate Virtuosity that Todd Andrews does not make any breakthroughs in narrating his life-story. Instead, he suggests, Andrews is a liar who has just assumed another mask to tell his story (17-18).

2. Altman draws attention to how "awareness of a specific second-person addressee can alter the character and experience of the first-person writing itself" (91).

3. In "Recollection and Imagination in Postmodern Fiction," Alfred Hornung observes that in fictions which evoke biography and autobiography, as Lady Amherst's does, "recollection serves imaginative purposes and helps to establish an identity of the self as a blend of past experiences and present existence" (62). Her letters thus conform to the conventions of narrative models with which she is probably familiar.

4. Janet Altman observes that, in the epistolary novel, dropping a confidant can mark a stage in the protagonist's growth, as it clearly does for Lady Amherst (54).

5. This point is thoroughly discussed by Barbara Hardy in the first chapter of Tellers and Listeners.

6. Jake's feeling of inauthenticity recalls the inauthenticity which Frank McConnell sees as the very essence of postmodern man (xvii).

7. In his discussion of The End of the Road, Harris argues that Jake is as much of a rationalist as Joe is and that both employ reason as a shield against emotion, which only Rennie can experience fully. Although Jake indisputably does take pleasure in arguing well, the pleasure is short-lived and results from the playfulness of arguing a position which he does not particularly believe to be true. He does not live according to the principles of reason, as Joe does, nor by emotion either. Harris's presentation of Rennie as the only one of the three characters who is psychologically sound is also troubling because she is arguably as much of a vacuum as Horner himself.

## Notes to Chapter Four

1. Steven M. Bell aptly describes these short fictions as "the artist's never-ending search for new and better ways to speak the unspeakable, to write what has already been written, but has somehow never been gotten quite right" (85).
2. Deborah Woolley answers the question, "What, then, can self-reflexive fiction speak of authoritatively?" by noting that "Barth's answer is that it can speak of an existential situation, the dilemma of users of language" (480).
3. In The Self-Begetting Novel Steven Kellman explores the father-son relationship of author and text at some length, showing that in self-conscious works the father becomes his own son, a portrait of both the author and the novel itself (2-7).
4. Carol Schloss and Khachig Toloyan discuss Barth's Funhouse treatment of the reader in detail in "The Siren in the Funhouse: Barth's Courting of the Reader." Linda A. Westervelt also discusses the implications for the reader of reading avant-garde fiction in "Teller, Tale, Told: Relationships in John Barth's Latest Fiction."
5. Gerhard Joseph, in contrast, does not see any continuity between the characters of realism and those of Barth: "Barth's characters . . . cannot possess the achieved sense of clearly observed humanity, the degree of characterological 'originality' that one feels in the great characters of realistic fiction or even in the parodic characters of the early novel. For the

further the regression from the pre-existing archetype, the more surely a character becomes a learned and witty commentary upon the archetype" (30).

6. In "John Barth's 'Echo': The Story in Love with its Author" Heide Ziegler traces the roots of the tension of self-reflexive fictions to Romanticism.

7. Max F. Schulz reads "Echo" as a debate "over the place and role of the authorial voice. Should it enclose itself in narcissistic contemplation? Or must it efface the individual self, Echo-like not only in the otherness of a persona's words but also in its voice?" ("Thalian Design" 401).

8. Joseph comments on the difficulty the reader has in determining who the narrator is: "While the narrative line is relatively clear because of the myth's familiarity, it becomes impossible for everyone involved to distinguish teller from listener and, ultimately, narrative from narrator. For the point of the myth is precisely the 'autognostic verge' on which all three of the characters interchangeably live (with the author and the reader)" (42).

9. Harris comments that Bellerophon is slow to accept the idea Barth puts forth in "Anonymiad," the concluding story of Lost in the Funhouse: "properly understood, immortality requires anonymity" (147).

### Notes to Chapter Five

1. In his depiction of Dunyazade, Barth shows how his program for the revitalization of fiction outlined in "The Literature of Exhaustion" can be put into practice. In the essay he suggests that:

an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of the time into material and means for his work--paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation. . . . Suppose you're a writer by vocation . . . and you feel, for example, that the novel, if not narrative literature generally, if not the printed word altogether, has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt. . . . No necessary cause for alarm in this at all, except perhaps to certain novelists, and one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it. (274-75)

Dunyazade ~~is~~ in a similar position: all of the stories have been told. Her response, like Barth's, is to tell a story about their exhaustion and thus use the fact of exhaustion to her advantage.

2. In The Story of Identity, Manfred Puetz notes that many postmodern hero and narrator figures are, like Barth's, "impelled by the preoccupation with a central question in the novel of the times, the question whether imaginative creations can help to identify viable forms of self-definition" (25). In the end, Barth's fiction affirms that fiction can assist in self-definition.

3. Another typical use of the metaphor of writing is equally telling: "Thus this endless repetition of my story: as both protagonist and author, so to speak, I thought to overtake with understanding my present paragraph as it were by examining my paged past, and, thus pointed, proceed serene to the future's sentence" (88-89).

4. Barth's interest in and use of the myth of the hero are best described in the document written by one John Barth which shows up one day in Bellerophon's classroom (207). Briefly, reviewers of The Sot-Weed Factor thought that Barth had deliberately employed the pattern identified by Joseph Campbell and Lord Raglan when he developed the character of Ebenezer Cooke. Alerted by them to the pattern, in Giles he did deliberately and ironically use the Ur-Myth, as he has in subsequent short fictions.

5. Charles Harris sees this notion of "passionate virtuosity" as being so central to Barth's work that he has called his full-length study Passionate Virtuosity.

6. Steven Kellman suggests that what Sue and Fenn see in their narrative is in fact a crucial aspect of the self-begetting novel, "We are at once confronted with both process and product, quest and goal, parent and child" (3).

7. In The Tidewater Tales, Peter and Katherine Sagamore, awaiting the arrival of their child, tell one another stories. They experience a crisis, however, when Peter's muse finally returns and he writes when Katherine would prefer to have his company and support. In the end, however, his revitalization as

a novelist also revitalizes their relationship, just as Sue and Fenn's is revitalized.

8. In a related point, Michel Foucault has observed, "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" (53-67).

9. In If on a Winter's Night a Traveller, Italo Calvino similarly exploits the idea of the reader as female lover.

10. Discussing "Menelaiad," Harold Farwell observes that "Barth's point . . . is not that love is something we can create or preserve in opposition to a world gone mad, but that it is in its essence the image of that world and its absurdity" (67). By indicating that a story is the twin of love or the child of love, Barth suggests that narratives, too, are images of the world.

In her discussion of Lost in the Funhouse, Linda Westervelt suggests that Barth thinks of loving and narrating as two mutually exclusive activities, basing her argument on Ambrose (50-51). While Funhouse does occasionally present this opinion, "Menelaiad" and Barth's later works overturn it.

## Notes to Chapter Six

1. See, for example, "Speaking of LETTERS," in The Friday Book (175).

2. Charles Harris argues that Bray's language is not opaque, that it "contains much information crucial to an adequate understanding of Barth's complicated plot" (177) and that in "the Bray passages language mediates between opacity and transparency, abstract formalism and 'contentism,' self-consciously directing attention to itself while still managing to signify" (178). While this may be true of passages of his letters, which after all still use letters, it will not be true of NUMBERS.

3. Barth is on record in several places giving his opinion of film as a medium. Here is a representative comment from "Speaking of LETTERS": "great fiction can change our lives; turn us around corners. No movie ever did that to me. I might walk and talk a bit differently for a few minutes after leaving an effective film, but that's about it. Novels have heft; films are filmy" (Friday 176). Barth's sense of the threat of film is shared by other postmodern novelists such as Fowles, as Daniel Martin and The Maggot attest.

4. Of the five basic motifs of epistolary fiction cited by Ronald C. Rosbottom, two are especially relevant to Barth: reflexivity attained through "the thematic use of first-person narration" and "epistolarity," or an awareness on the part of the characters that they are writing and reading (183). This second

motif often breaches the verisimilitude of the epistolary novel. Readers of Pamela, for example, often complain that she spends so much time writing that she can hardly have time to act. Barth's characters, however, have a professed interest in "articulation" which goes some way towards explaining away their mania for writing.

Barth departs from his precursors in other, typically postmodern ways, too. William Gass observes that "neither James nor Richardson are really that interested in letters. They are interested in the peculiar, personal, past-tense, meditative manner letters allow. . . . But the contemporary writer is increasingly interested in the question of inscription, notation; in the question of where the text starts, stops" (40). He goes on to cite Barth in particular as a representative contemporary author who is interested in the act of writing.

5. Throughout LETTERS, the Author refers to his detente with realism. As he explains to Lady Amherst, "I am by temperament a fabricator, not a drawer from life. I know what I'm about, but shall be relieved to get home to wholesale invention, much more my cup of tea" (194). Having chosen the epistolary novel, "that hoariest of early realist creatures" (190), as his genre, he feels compelled to come to a truce with the realism it represents to him. While he suggests that his realism is distastefully regressive, he also comes to respect reality: "I approach reality these days with more respect, if only because I find it less realistic and more mysterious than I'd supposed" (189-90). Like Todd Andrews, he discovers to his

surprise that "the bridge between fact and fiction . . . is a two-way street" (96).

6. In "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth lists the features of the premodern novel: "linearity, rationality, cause and effect, naive illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle class conventions" (70).

7. See Lennard Davis's discussion of the news/novel discourse in Factual Fictions for a detailed account of the expectations entertained by the audience of the early English novel.

8. In "Title," a short story in Lost in the Funhouse, the speaker considers the alternative to speaking and telling stories: "Silence. There's a fourth possibility, I suppose. Silence. General anesthesia. Self-extinction. Silence" (106). When Barth's characters write letters to drown out the silence of their "correspondents," they are preventing the self-extinction that silence represents. Through their written utterance, they at least prove their existence.

9. Barth insists, however, that the reader need not assume that Andrews and Ambrose will die in the explosion, although they might well die in it. See Reilly, "An Interview with John Barth."

10. For a full quotation of this passage and a discussion of it, see Chapter 1, 11-13.

11. But the Author insists in his letters that the reader need not be familiar with the previous novels in order to read LETTERS.

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