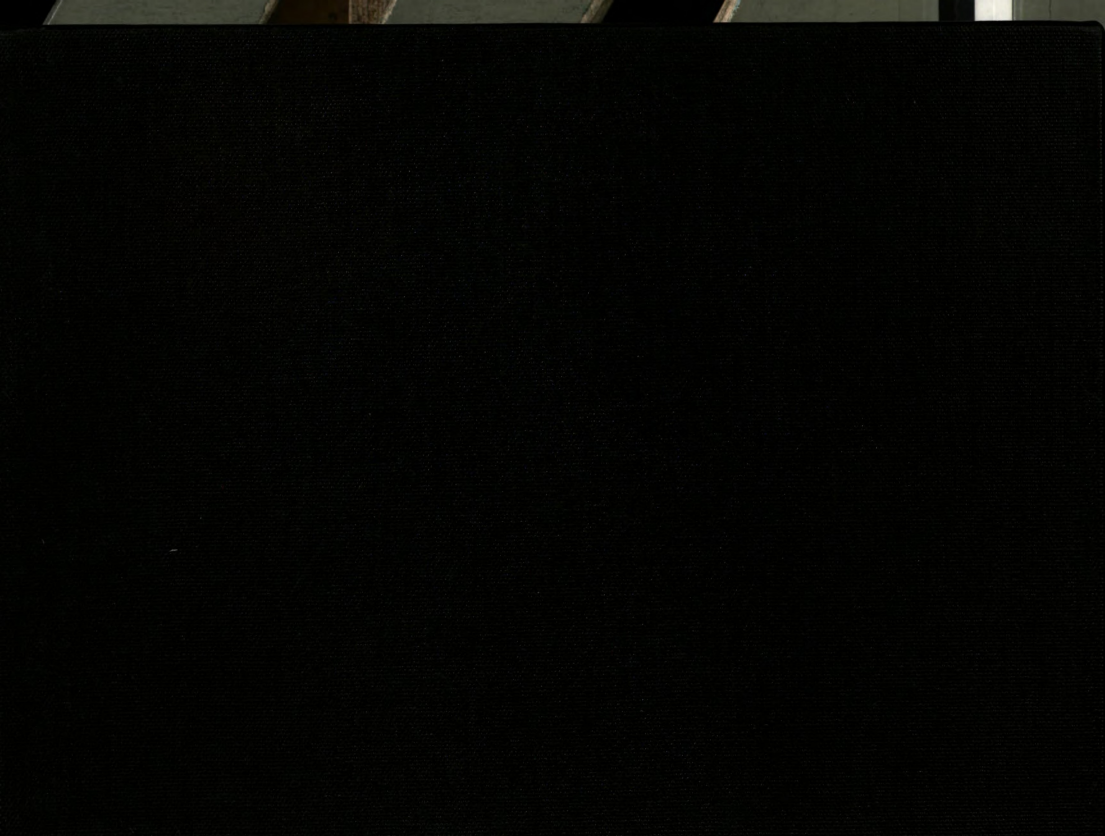

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Major professor

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WRITERS WRITTEN: JOHN BARTH'S CHARACTERS AS WRITERS

By

Matthew R. Nikkari

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ABSTRACT

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By

Matthew R. Nikkari

John Barth's professional life is comprised of three main activities conducted simultaneously from within academe: fiction writer, humanities and literature professor, and writing teacher. All three of these concerns inform and shape Barth's novels, each of which is a sort of Bildungsroman centering on a writer-protagonist who must confront reality through writing and written texts as a way to learn about the self and the nature of reality. Although this general situation characterizes all of his novels, little attention has been given to how this operates over the course of Barth's canon.

To examine this, I chart the course that Barth's novels take in regard to the situations faced by his writer-characters as they work to negotiate the world, at times even to control the world, through learning to use writing and written texts in various ways, from exploring epistemological and cosmological assumptions to recreating themselves and the world. But more important, Barth's writer-characters come to learn about the limits that writing encounters when used to make sense of the self and the world; they all come to understand that writing, both as act and artifact, undermines truth as much as it creates it.

To the memory of R. Glenn Wright, friend and guide.

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Chapter 1

The Key to the Treasure

John Barth's professional life is comprised of three main activities conducted simultaneously from within academe: fiction writer, humanities and literature professor, and writing teacher. However, he warns against taking any of his pedagogical roles at face value, saying

> I teach three things--"humanities," literature and fiction-writing. Of these three, my only specialty is fiction writing, and I'm not altogether persuaded yet that it can be taught; or, if it can, that it ought to be; or, if it ought, that I know how to teach it. . . . I'll make you the same disclaimer that I make to my students: that I'm not an expert in literature or in philosophy, but a mere storyteller. Which is to say a professional liar (Friday Book, 16).

Yet, for Barth, being a teacher whose strengths derive from playing the part of professional liar implies more than what is often associated with equating fiction-making with lying. That is, "lying" through writing stories offers possibilities for discerning and creating reality beyond those available through more widely accredited and traditional avenues to the Truth such as religion, philosophy, and science. Barth sees his tripartite career providing ways to "manufacture a universe," one that very well might be "more orderly, meaningful, beautiful, and interesting than the one God turned out" (Friday Book, 17). Barth has some reservations about God's literary predilections:

If you are a novelist of a certain type of temperament, then what you really want to do is re-invent the world. God wasn't too bad a novelist, except he was a Realist. Some of the things he did are right nice: the idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny is a master stroke; if you thought that up you'd be proud of yourself. But a certain kind of sensibility can be made very uncomfortable by the recognition of the arbitrariness of physical facts and the inability to accept their finality. . . .this impulse to imagine alternatives to the world can become a driving impulse for writer (Enck, 8).

At first glance, however, the universes which Barth creates in his fictions appear anything but orderly or meaningful, and for good reason: he sees order and meaning as qualities that are subjectively experienced, created, and imposed upon the chaos of The Universe by individuals, each with unique perceptions about what Reality actually is, should be, or could be. The uniqueness of individual perception, always in process as it accommodates itself to changing circumstances, creates a kind of disorder as Barth's characters struggle to recognize, assess and overcome their limitations in opposition to static conceptual systems as well as against "reality" itself. All of Barth's protagonists are, in some way, linked to established systems for defining reality--all of them find these structures too brittle, incomplete, and inadequate for constructing a personally meaningful and orderly "universe." Each of Barth's novels is, then, a sort of Bildungsroman wherein his protagonists undergo a process of learning and reassessment much broader and, for them, more relevant than

any provided by sanctioned educational and philosophical systems. He observes that

> I hadn't quite realized how academic, in this special sense, my life's work as a writer of stories has been. . . . More dismaying, when I reviewed my literary offspring under this aspect, I realized that what I've been writing about all these years is not only orientation and education (rather disorientation and education) but imperfect or misfired education at that. . . .many of the wandering heroes of mythology reach an impasse at some crucial point in their journey, from which they can proceed only by a laborious retracing of their steps (NYTBR, 1984, 36).

An important aspect of the process whereby Barth's characters attempt a "retracing of their steps" involves their recognition that the written texts making up the archives through which institutions of knowledge perpetuate themselves are useless for developing a personally satisfying sense of meaning, especially because the archives support large-scale systems rather than accommodating themselves to individual realities. Further, though his characters seek to reestablish their faith in the authority of texts by producing their own writings, in the hope that the act of writing will create meaning, they all come to learn that writing undermines truth as much as it asserts it. For Barth, then, a persistent concern is how writing, both as act and artifact, is self-contradictory. That is, he sees writing as an important, even imperative, means for making sense of the world. But, at the same time, he denies the validity of writing as a way to create and enforce an authentic, comprehensive, or enduring "meaning," whether it

be epistemological or cosmological, that holds true enough for individuals to act upon with any real certainty.

These general concerns operating within Barth's novels relate to his professional situation. On the one hand, Barth's fiction both reflects and participates in contemporary debates in literary theory over the nature of modern literature and its relationship to the real world. On the other hand, his pedagogical activities and his novels' treatment of education and writing focus on issues germane to current debates in composition theory. Both areas have in common questions about how writing and written texts can or cannot define reality, help make sense of the world, facilitate communication, create order, or generate meaning. Barth, then, by virtue of his writing and teaching, is located so that his fictions operate between the philosophies and practices of literary and composition theories.

The central issues shared by literary theory and composition theory also form the dominant philosophical and thematic concerns at the heart of John Barth's work. The relationship between writing and the world, the power of written language to shape and create reality, the complex nature of meaning, the efficacy or impotence of epistemological and cosmological systems, the struggle to achieve coherence and meaning in the face of chaos and disorder, the dissonance between institutionalized education and the

individual learner--all of these general issues are explored throughout Barth's literary and non-fictional work.

During a symposium of critics and novelists, Barth remarked

> It seems to me that reality is a nice place to visit . . .but literature has never wanted to live there very long. And in any case that making up stories is a process much closer to dreaming than it is to naively trying to represent our waking days (Henckle, 205).

Such comments have led some critics to assume that Barth's fictional worlds are merely escapes from reality into limited, self-reflexive, and solipsistic realms of the fantastic and the irrational. For example, Jac Tharpe summarizes Barth as someone who

> writes in and of a world in which people must face all the big problems for which no explanation exists. His solution to this problem is to create a body of art that uses the technique of language to metaphorize--to put the ultimate reality off where it will bother nobody. Since we cannot find out what reality is, we shall simply create one to serve. Ordinarily, the result of this process was either myth or ideology. In Barth's case, it is to create a world of fiction, not a fictional world (115-116).

When asked to respond to this assessment during an interview, Barth replies that Tharpe's description is only partly accurate. For him, Tharpe focuses too much on the development of the more fantastic elements over the course of his first six novels while ignoring the connection with reality that Barth insists he always maintains in his writing and that

> I don't like it to be charged against me that my fictions have no particular relation to the world that we experience. I would find that meaningless. I don't like fictions like that, though surely my fictions are not realistic fictions,

no question about it. But if I could not recognize some of my own passions and some of the passions of people in the novellas of the Chimera series or even in the most involuted and self-reflexive fictions in the Lost in the Funhouse series, I would not be interested in them. I would find them sterile and, perhaps, not uninteresting, but of a radically limited interest (Glaser-Wohrer, 214).

For Barth, the balance between objective and subjective realities depends on

a kind of gut certainty about where reality leaves off and irreality begins. . . .Just on the ground of mere metaphysics it seems to me perfectly obvious that the world is our idea. This doesn't mean that we go around living in dream-world. It only means that vigorously examined, obviously, categories come from us and not from out there (Glaser-Wohrer, 216).

But passion and subjectively defined categories of reality do not mean that literature and writing depend upon a kind of philosophical or cognitive autism, nor on a deliberate rejection of historical and literary precedent. In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth outlines how he stands, among other things, in relation to literary history and postmodern literary experimentation. For Barth, "exhaustion" has nothing to do with a commitment to nihilism, a belief in inevitable cultural decline, or a perception that the novel is dead.

By "exhaustion" I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities--by no means necessarily a cause for despair. That a great many Western artists for a great many years have quarreled with received definitions of artistic media, genres, and forms goes without saying. . .(29).

Barth is suspicious, however, about experimentation for its own sake, especially that which seeks to renew literary

possibilities by experimenting with form or the kind of technological manipulation of the physical aspects of the novel praised by Sukenick. Innovations such as novels that are looseleaf and unpaginated, printed on postcards, or that come boxed rather than bound are experiments that lead Barth to say

> It's easier and sociabler to talk technique than it is to make art, and the area of "happenings" and their kin is mainly a way of discussing aesthetics, really; illustrating "dramatically" more or less vivid and interesting points about the nature of art and the definition of its terms and genres (29).

Barth sees this tendency as reflecting a sort of new democratic attitude toward art, one that sets itself up in opposition to the traditional notion of the artist as a conscious, controlling agent who, through talent and technique, depends upon dedication and the perfection of skill to produce works of unique virtuosity. Barth sees himself as a peculiar conservative, as an artist who "chooses to 'rebel along traditional lines'" by perfecting his craft to create "the kind of art that not many people can do: the kind that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration" (30). In other words, he does not find technical virtuosity alone interesting enough, for both the forms and techniques of artistic innovation are influenced, shaped, and given meaning by what came before. For him, tradition is a resource too rich to ignore as a source for renewal because

it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature--such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation. . .even characterization! Even plot!--if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one's predecessors have been up to (31).

Barth admires such writers as Borges who manages to confront an artistic and "intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (31). The fruit of such an attitude is an art that renews or recycles itself by drawing on "exhausted" possibilities from the past to say something genuinely new and relevant to present realities. One aspect of this that Barth relies heavily on is the self-reflexive, parodic view that such a literary sensibility would have: an awareness of literary history ironically recycled to address both its won artifice and the contemporary historical moment. Or, as Barth puts it, he produces "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" (33).

However, some readers misunderstand Barth to mean that the only avenue left to contemporary writers is to parody, satirize, and repackage their literary forebears, a misconception that he sets out to correct in "The Literature of Replenishment."

Leaving aside the celebrated fact that, with Don Quixote, the novel may be said to begin in self-transcendent parody and has often returned to that mode for its refreshment, let me say at once and plainly that I agree with Borges that literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted--its "meaning" residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language (71).

What prompts Barth to readdress these issues thirteen years later is the growing debate between competing literary critical schools of thought, a situation he feels tends to obscure the teaching, writing, and discussion of literature in favor of arguments over critical categories. In his view, ignoring either impulse leads to imbalance.

> Indeed, I believe that a truly splendid specimen in whatever aesthetic mode will pull critical ideology behind it, like an ocean liner trailing seagulls. Actual artists, actual texts, are seldom more than more or less modernist, postmodernist, formalist, symbolist, realist, surrealist, politically committed, aesthetically "pure," "experimental," regionalist, internationalist, what have you. The particular work ought always to take primacy over contexts and categories. On the other hand, art lives in human time and history, and general changes in its modes and materials and concerns. . .are doubtless as significant as changes in a culture's general attitudes, which its arts may both inspire and reflect (69).

In Barth's opinion, the conflict between competing critical elements--between, for example, romanticism and modernism, linearity and disjunction, rationality and irrationality, conventional morality and moral plurality--should not necessarily dictate that a writer take sides by joining one camp or another. Instead,

> A worthy program for postmodern fiction. . .is the synthesis or transcession of these antitheses. . . .My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of the century under his belt, but not on his back (70).

For Barth, the postmodernist writer's task is "the working out, not of the next-best thing after modernism, but of the best next thing" (71). He believes that literature

is less open to radical experimentation than the plastic arts, that the sense of story and the demands of written language (linearity, punctuation, words functioning as symbols for sense stimuli, etc.) put limits in the range of innovation that literature can bear. Technical wizardry is not sufficient by itself, yet on the other hand, according to Barth, a writer interested in exploring the limits and possibilities of literature does not "want to be a technical hick" (Enck, 6). The "trick," he says, is "to have it both ways": to assimilate and utilize what has already been done, yet find a way to be undeniably contemporary (Bellamy, 4), and this can be accomplished outside of critical battlegrounds.

> I happen to believe that just as an excellent teacher is likely to teach well no matter what pedagogical theory he suffers from, so a gifted writer is like to rise above what he takes to be his aesthetic principles, not to mention what others take to be his aesthetic principles ("Exhaustion," 69).

When asked how being a university teacher affects his writing and his opinion about how academic settings influence the relationship between the writer, the critic, and the scholar, Barth replies that

> This is a tiresome subject. . . .because, like so many questions of that sort, anybody who takes a serious position about it one way or the other, is forgetting how many kinds of writing there are, and how varied are the backgrounds out of which good art comes (Enck, 9).

But some maintain that Barth's academic situation exercises great influence over his works. For example, Jerome Klinkowitz sees Barth as an artist writing in

opposition to the nonaligned (either to movements or institutions), nonrepresentational, noncommercial aesthetic which Klinkowitz sees as dominant in the 1950's and 1960's, as if Barth were somehow part of a reactionary literary and academic anti-movement.

> During all these years. . .John Barth was solidly aligned with a tenured academic community and a succession. . .of mainstream commercial publishers; each establishment maintained a vested interest in representational literary art, as eminently teachable and saleable (13).

These associations lead Klinlowitz to see Barth catering, not to the general reading public, but to his colleagues in the profession of English. A knowledge of literary and philosophical tradition complemented by the life-experience of teaching these verities were the qualifications of Barth's ideal reader (7).

Enoch P. Jordan, analyzing Barth's thematic and stylistic revisions of the published versions of his first three novels, somewhat agrees, saying that Barth excised some material in such a way that the reader is given fewer detailed explanations and analyses.

> This change. . .implies an alternative in Barth's conception of his reader, for it requires that the reader be capable of deducing motivation from action and of seeing the relationship between individual actions and the larger concerns of the novels
> . . . .Barth seems to have postulated a reading audience more sophisticated than the one he had in mind for the first editions (124).

A possible reason for these changes, according to Jordan, might be Barth's realization that, though his novels sold poorly to the general public, they drew considerable

scholarly attention and, thus, two of Barth's succeeding works, Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera,

present ambiguous surfaces of a sort historically unsuccessful among the general public, exploring the possibilities of a point of view and fictional structure with such intricacy that they are accessible only to an audience of considerable literary sophistication. . . .Barth's increased confidence in the reader results in versions [of his first three novels] that are swifter and more graceful that the first editions. As a result of the change the novels are more attractive to the critical reader (125).

But these evaluations seem ironic when compared to Barth's own views on these matters. He repeatedly maintains that he is "naive about modern literature" and that he does not "know anything about philosophy" (Enck, 5;8), that critical, philosophical, and even literary issues are, as often as not, serendipitous, evident to him only when someone comes along afterward to point these things out because

one works by hunch and guess and intuition, with some conscious patterns in mind, too, and one has a character do this instead of that because one feels this is appropriate. Maybe in the act of setting it down you say, "I know why he did that," but then you are looking at it as a college teacher. More often you read a piece years later by some bright fellow, interpreting your work, and you realize that while he's strictly left-field here and here, he's got your number in this other place here, in a way you recognize for the first time yourself. This is a rather upsetting, but pleasantly upsetting, experience: to be told by somebody else what you were up to, and recognize that he's right (Enck, 14).

Further, the fact that his works have captured a certain amount of academic attention and managed to become part of required classroom reading is more a source of

bemused interest for Barth than the payoff for a more finely tuned targeting of his audience.

> Do you know what I think is interesting, by the way?. . .It's the spectacle of these enormous universities we have now, all over the place, teaching courses in us! These birds in your series, like me, who haven't even reached menopause yet, Notable Nobodies in the Novel, and already they're giving courses in us. Remarkable. Amusing. And I suppose it's admirable on the part of American universities. But I wonder what effect it will have on literature. For example, where I work there are 600 English majors--maybe 6,000, I don't know. . . .But imagine 600 people in central Pennsylvania knowing and caring who Hawkes and Donleavy are--maybe before Hawkes and Donleavy find out themselves! Boggles the imagination (Enck, 6).

In fact, some critics view Barth as a writer who stands in direct opposition to academe. For example, Theodore Baker Turner, III, groups Barth with writers such as Kesey, Mailer, Burroughs, Bellow, and Nabokov who

> feel that the very organization of universities gives these institutions a power which is inimical to human freedom and growth (2).

Turner sees the work of these writers as strongly oriented toward the struggle between individual human growth, which entails an openness to novel perceptions and realities, and institutional growth, which demands conformity and prepackaged realities. Each of these authors, according to Turner,

> writes about individuals who try to break free from the domination of institutions in order to create their own truths, their own experiences, and to develop their own personal relationships in the major areas of perceived reality of the world. . .(3).

In Turner's opinion, Barth, himself,

represents a serious danger to contemporary university education. Working within the institution, he exhibits subversive qualities of irreverence, and shows anew that living can be an education in itself, and that in spite of the elevation of literary studies to the status of religious exercises, writing can still be a means of communication as personal as making love (93).

But, whether Barth is responding to, or working against, traditional academic forces, a concern with educational structures is central to his work, teaching not the least of them. While working on his M.A. in creative writing at Johns Hopkins, Barth taught course in freshman composition, and after starting the Ph.D. program in the aesthetics of literature, he

had the chance to teach more complex matters to a night-school class of adults: expository, descriptive, argumentative, narrative, and imaginative writing, critical reading, logic, analysis of beliefs and propaganda. He also tutored high school and prep school students in grammar, English, American, and world literature, composition, and ancient and American history (Morrell, 126).

Dropping out of the doctoral program because of financial pressures, Barth took a job at Pennsylvania State University teaching freshman composition as well as "those courses at Penn State that gave him the most free time, remedial English, for example, and prescriptive grammar . . ." (Morrell, 126). Later, Barth became a full professor, teaching creative writing, literature, and humanities, first at SUNY Buffalo, and then at Johns Hopkins where he presently teaches.

In a recent essay titled "Writing: Can it Be Taught?" Barth explores questions about the teaching of writing by

first asking whether it can be learned. He refers to the overwhelming number of submissions to literary journals and contests as evidence that, somehow, writing is being learned "by more writers per annum than anyone has time to read" (1). And, in relation to the quality of writing being learned as reflected in applications to the Johns Hopkins writing program, he says that

> if not many of them knock our socks off (and we don't want to be desocked by more than ten or a dozen yearly), only a few are downright incompetent. Somehow, somewhere, these multitudes of authors have more or less learned their trade, even before they apply to us or others for fine tuning (1).

Nevertheless, according to Barth, over three hundred American colleges and universities offer degree-granting programs in creative writing, "a phenomenon scarcely to be found outside our republic and scarcely to be found inside it before VJ Day" (36)--all despite a seeming decline in the chances for commercial success.

> Not economic recession, not declining literacy, failing bookstores, the usurpation of the kingdom of narrative by movies and television--nothing quenches the American thirst for courses in creative writing. In day school, night school, high school, college, graduate school, correspondence school, summer school, prison school, in writers' colonies and conferences and camps and cruises it is scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble (36).

Whether or not this desire to be taught results in successful literary careers is, for Barth, beside the point. He feels that it certainly does not hurt students' talent to formally study writing, and at the very least,

> I'll bet they all read more knowledgeably and appreciatively, too. . . .If the chief product of all those hundreds

of American creative-writing courses is successful readers rather than successful writers, what a service they render (37).

But for Barth, the most positive aspect offered by writing courses is a community of readers for those who want to write better, especially the feedback of interested peers and experienced teachers.

> The teacher. . .is aware of the strategic problems in composition. If he, himself, is a successful writer, his criticism and encouragement are regarded by the student as of great importance. Also, the approval of members of the class, their approval and their interest in improving creative expression, can be of lasting help (Smith, 104).

However, a good writing teacher does not necessarily have to be a successful professional writer. Speaking of his own experiences, Barth expresses some reservations about the effect that a well-known literary personality might exert on apprentice writers:

> As an undergraduate I had a couple of tutors who were not themselves writers. They were simply good coaches. I've thought of that in a chastened way since. Dealing with my own students. . .I often wonder whether it's a good idea for them to have, at the other end of the table, somebody who's already working at a certain level of success and notoriety. Is that not perhaps intimidating? I just don't know, but I suspect the trade-off is fair enough. I might have learned some things faster had I been working with an established writer rather than a very sympathetic coach (Plimpton, 150).

In Barth's case, he seems to have it both ways. On the one hand, he is a writing teacher who has attracted recognition and critical attention (and, judging by the responses of some critics, he has also managed to draw some measure of notoriety). On the other hand, the role of teacher-as-coach plays an important part in how Barth sees

himself in the classroom. But coaching, for him, is most useful to students at a particular point in their development.

> I happen to think there's some justification for having courses in so-called creative writing. I know from happy experience with young writers that the muses make no distinction between undergraduates and graduate students. The muses know only expert writers and less expert writers. . . .In time, a writer, or any artist, stops making mistakes on a crude, first level, and begins making mistakes on the next, more elevated level--let's say the upper slopes of slippery Parnassus--and it's at that point you need coaching (Plimpton, 151).

But in Barth's novels, characters have to learn to write, or learn to deal with writing, beyond the artificial confines of the classroom, and though they often find guidance from mentors, guides, teachers, therapists, history, and philosophy, none of these provides enough stability or direction to relinquish the personal, active search for meaning through writing. Further, though many of his characters are linked with formal educational institutions, some directly and others only marginally, all of them learn to confront reality by, or by way of, coming to terms with the act of writing--even the reality that they themselves exist only as words written on a page, a fact against which a few rebel.

Drawing on the phrase, "the key to the treasure is the treasure," words that possess magical powers in "Dunyazadiad" (the first novella in Chimera), a number of critics have offered what they believe to be the "key" to unlocking the underlying continuity in Barth's fictional

works. For Theodore Turner, III, this lies in what he sees as Barth's persistent reaction against the repressive forces of institutionalized education. That is,

> Barth emphasizes the creative, personal, intimate in fact, relationship which can exist between artist and audience, teacher and student, writer and reader. It may be that in the end it is this relationship. . .which can save art, education, and society from the negative, death impulses Barth has so vividly described. . . ; in the end, it is this relationship and the search for it which provide the foundation for Barth's educational curriculum (145).

For Charles B. Harris, the key lies in Barth's employment of myth as a common thread running throughout his works.

> The central idea of the myth, as Joseph Campbell and others have demonstrated, is cosmic harmony, unity in multeity, and this idea recurs implicitly or explicitly in each book. . . . But each of Barth's protagonists, like Barth himself, is a writer in the world, not a mystic. The problem. . .is how to translate mythic intuitions, which are finally ineffable, into words capable of evoking that which may not be articulated (7).

Underlying and propelling Barth's use of mythic elements are, according to Harris, philosophical questions about meaning, and when taken as a whole, Barth's novels

> achieve the effect of a constant grasping for meaning, on the one hand, balanced by the realization that all meaning is projected--invented rather than discovered, and therefore relative and contingent--on the other. . . .In Barth's fictions the passionate desire to construct meaning--not meaning itself--assumes the status of a universal human value (8).

For Jac Tharpe, the key is Barth's technical skill:

> Technique. . .is extremely important, It is the key to the treasure of both art and love. Technique, in fact, represents a Platonic essence. Once one finds the essential technique, he will have no reason to give it content. Or he would not have reason except that of course he still has the

problem of informing audiences that he has discovered the essence and wishes to show what it consists in (109-110).

When asked by Glaser-Wohrer to respond to the widely divergent critical interpretations of "the key to the treasure is the treasure," and whether or not the key might be language itself, Barth answers that, for him, it all has to do with the processes of narration being part of the subject of narration. . .language and the things made with it, but not language and the things out there that language points to, right? . . .You know, in the same way, when Roland Barthes says that after 1850 or after Flaubert, when the whole of literature becomes the problematics of language, I always want to change his word there. I don't know whether there he is saying langue or parole, but I always want to change the word language to "meaning", in the sense that if you go along with his myth about literature, the whole of literature becomes the problematics of the medium which involves language (263).

Perhaps it is a mistake to search too closely for the key to Barth's ideas about writing and the teaching of writing. Certainly it would be futile to look for the key, one that exposes and unravels the complex web of plots, characterizations, motivations, philosophies, parodies, and techniques in each of Barth's works, or that which unlocks the complicated interrelationships existing between his novels as themes and characters continually reappear and recycle themselves. No single key can magically provide unqualified order and unity to Barth's ever-changing and multifaceted universe without seriously distorting and misrepresenting the worlds he creates. Nevertheless, some of the predominant elements in Barth's literary universe concern writing, the teaching and learning of writing, and

the limits that writing encounters when used to make sense of the world. Though not the key, a possible clue to a key might be phrased as "the key to writing is writing."

What follows is my attempt to chart the course that Barth's novels take in regard to the situations faced by his writer-characters as they work to negotiate the world, even to control the world, through learning to use writing in various ways. In addition, I have organized the chapters by making each a discussion of pairs of novels that explore similar themes. That Barth tends to write his novels as sets of pairs is, to some extent, evident in the thematic elements employed in each set. But, in much the same way that Barth did not notice the educational motif in his books until he one day looked back over his work as a whole, he did not perceive that his canon was structured in this way:

> One day I realized to my delight. . .that all my books come in pairs. I had not realized that until there were enough pairs there for somebody to see the pattern and point it out to me (LeClair and McCaffery, 12).

Chapter 2

Writing to Escape the Abyss: The Floating Opera and The End of the Road

Barth's first two novels are realistic tragi-comedies which open and explore themes that, to a greater or lesser extent, stand as central philosophical concerns in all of his fiction. Meaning, purpose, and definition of self comprise the predominant issues which, tempered by primary existential questions threatening these things, constitute Barth's general philosophical stance.

> The heart of Barth's work, the discourse which informs his comedy, is the problem of existence and identity. He sees the world as a fluid place, making any position slippery and untenable. If this is the case, why take any position? Why act? Why move? (Trachtenberg, 9-10).

The consequent metaphysical conflicts his characters face, and the means by which they attempt to resolve them, shape and propel his artistic motivations and sensibilities:

> all of Barth's work is pervaded by a sense of moral and aesthetic crisis, the extreme artistic situation of what he has names "the literature of exhaustion", [sic] and it is this tension between narrative power and impotence, between the claims and failures of storytelling to make sense of individual and collective experience, that constitutes his fundamental subject (Garrett, 167).

These issues not only predominate in Barth's first two novels, they make up the subject matter of both books. Both explore the complex responses demanded of the intelligent, eccentric, and isolated protagonists by their awareness and acknowledgment that nothing has intrinsic, absolute value. Both deal with methods for living in an absurd, chaotic

world. Both are written as first-person narratives whose protagonists struggle, through writing, to create sense and come to some kind of personally satisfying accommodation with such a world. Both pertain to characters who

> are aware of the power of the mind to originate a whole range of things which are not the case, or to provide such a variety of versions of what the case is that the very notion of any stable meaning or permanent value inhering in the actual given world is denied. This produces an atmosphere of ambiguous freedom, both for the character in his situation and the author in his fiction-making (Tanner, 230).

Yet, though both present a view of the world as ultimately senseless and meaningless, too arbitrary and complex to allow a finally legitimate scheme of order, at their

> core lies the idea of unity. The problem, stated in simplest terms, is this: If language (specifically print, the writer's only medium) is by nature irreal since it does not refer except in the most arbitrary sense to an antecedent reality, then how can the writer become a writer-in-the world? Can word and world resolve themselves into a unified whole? (Harris, Preface).

These are some of the fundamental philosophical questions that Barth explores, either implicitly or explicitly, in all of his works, which can be looked at in terms of a series of paired novels where each book sets out to revise, expand upon, or negate the views of its predecessor. The questions are important enough for Barth's protagonists, each of whom wants somehow to be a "writer-in-the-world," to lead them to employ writing or the analysis of texts as a necessary tool in their search for some kind of key that unlocks the treasure of meaning, of unity in multeity, in a

universe of arbitrary truths. The search is at its most desperate and poignant in Barth's first pair of novels whose main characters, acting as the "real" authors of the books in which they exist, discover that the quest for a way out of an epistemological dead end (and toward a coherence valid enough to give life meaning), through the act of writing their stories, can take on life-or-death significance when addressed to the existential questions that obsess them.

The "author" of Barth's first novel, The Floating Opera, is Todd Andrews who opens his book by introducing himself and his purpose for writing. We learn that Todd was born in 1900 and writes in 1954, lives in the Dorchester Hotel in Cambridge on Maryland's Eastern Shore, and works as a partner in his deceased father's law firm. In addition to these autobiographical essentials, Todd supplies a great many personal details that might seem trivial and tangential: height and weight, hair style and shaving habits, annual salary, a brief outline of his education at Johns Hopkins and experiences during World War I, his resemblance to Gregory Peck, favorite cigars and whiskey, the efficiency of his digestion, etc. Though these latter facts help round out the initial identity that Andrews tries to create of himself for the reader, they come hurriedly and haphazardly, as if all personal details have equal weight, and this is symptomatic of one of his problems. That is, Todd suffers from an inability to distinguish what is immediately

important from what is irrelevant because he believes that "to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute, requires the understanding of every other thing in the world" (FO, 6).

What Todd seeks to understand, what compels him to write his story to include every possible personal detail, is his need "to explain that day (either the 21st or the 22nd) in June of 1937 when I changed my mind for the last time" (FO, 3). The change he refers to concerns his decision not to commit suicide as his father did. Though such a momentous change of mind would seem to merit a more definite memory of when it took place, Todd can narrow it down to only two possible dates, despite the fact that his book is replete with apparently concrete information about conversations, chronologies, clothes, weather, meals, and a wealth of other minor details. This eventually makes the reader wonder about the authenticity of what Todd relates and leads to the suspicion that he is recreating, rather than merely recounting, his experiences.

This sense of a recreated life is another result of Todd's obsession with conveying every detail of his life--an impossible task that forces him to reconstruct the essence, not the literal truth, of his story (a strategy which he occasionally confirms later in the book). But he has been a compulsive reviser all of his life in another way: he has survived and overcome uncertainty and insecurity

through assuming a series of different identities each time he has made an important adjustment in his posture toward life:

> It is a matter of attitudes, of stances--of masks, if you wish, though the term has a perjorativeness that I won't accept. During my life I've assumed four or five such stances, based on certain conclusions, for I tend, I'm afraid, to attribute to abstract ideas a life-or-death significance. Each stance, it seemed to me at the time, represented the answer to my dilemma, the mastery of my fact; but always something would happen to demonstrate its inadequacy, or else the stance would simply lose its persuasiveness, imperceptibly, until suddenly it didn't work--quantitative change, as Marx has it, suddenly becoming qualitative change--and then I had the job to face again of changing masks: a slow and, for me, painful process, if often an involuntary one (FO, 15).

The fact that these role changes often come about involuntarily is significant because Todd assumes each new mask retroactively as a concession to forces over which he has no control, not as a carefully considered response to changing events.

> 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 (FO, 21).

Part of the impotence Todd feels over events results from the fact that each change, each newly assumed identity, is the product of some experience that causes him to face his mortality directly. A chronic prostate infection and a bayonet wound received during the war, have taught Todd early lessons of his physical vulnerability. But the dominating influence in his life since the age of nineteen is a congenital heart ailment that could strike him down

with a fatal myocardial infarction at any moment. As a result, Todd quite literally measures his life in heartbeats.

> This fact--that having begun this sentence, I may not live to write its end; that having poured my drink, I may not live to taste it, or that it may pass a live man's tongue to burn a dead man's belly; that having slumbered, I may never wake, or having waked, may never living sleep--this for thirty-five years has been the condition of my existence, the great fact of my life: had been so for eighteen years already, or five hundred forty-nine million, sixty thousand, four hundred eighty heartbeats by June 21 or 22 of 1937 . . . .This question, the fact of my life, is, reader, the fact of my book as well: the question which, now answered but yet to be explained, answers, reader, everything, explains all (FO, 48-49).

Death permeates Todd's life, so much so that he sees it inextricably linked to his identity. For example, he points out to the reader that his first name, Todd, is nearly the same as "Tod," the German word for death, a fact that influences his sense of self and the purpose of his book:

> Tod is death, and this book hasn't much to do with death; Todd is almost Tod--that is, almost death--and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost death (FO, 3).

After Todd learned of his condition, he adopted his first mask: that of a rake pursuing any hedonistic pleasure available. This ended in 1925 after he was almost killed by a prostitute who, coincidentally, he had offended years ago during the sexual episode where Andrews lost his virginity. No longer finding adequate escape from ever-present death in a feverish, carpe diem haze of booze and sex, Todd decided that he must face his situation directly and "live with it soberly, looking it squarely in the eye" (FO, 134). For

about five years, while still studying law, he became something like "a Buddhist saint, of the Esoteric variety," a detached and acetic role where he "renounced the world of human endeavors and delight. . .having no more to do with my fellow man and values than I had to" (FO, 18-19). Then, following his father's suicide after the 1929 stock market crash, and finding the body hanging from a belt nailed to a basement rafter, Todd assumed the mask of a "cosmic cynic," believing that nothing had intrinsic value, that "Nothing, absolutely, made any difference" (FO, 208). He pays his hotel bill a day at a time, even going so far as to reregister daily, and relishes what he calls "limited inconsistency"--the deliberate disruption of consistent behavior.

> You have hundreds of habits: of dress, of manner, of speech, of eating, of thought, of aesthetic taste, of moral conduct. Break them now and then, deliberately, and institute new ones in their place for a while. It will slow you up sometimes, but you'll tend to grow strong and feel free. To be sure, don't break all your habits. Leave some untouched forever; otherwise you'll be consistent (FO, 122).

But this mask, too, begins to wear thin for Todd and finally snaps when, on

> the night of June 20, the night before the day of my story, I became totally and forcibly aware of its inadequacy--I was, in fact, back where I'd started in 1919; and that, finally and miraculously, after no more than an hour's predawn sleep, I awoke, splashed cold water on my face, and realized that I had the real, the final, the unassailable answer; the last possible word; the stance to end all stances (FO, 15).

The solution, what Todd assumes will be the final and most legitimate mask of all, is to become a suicide like his father. After a night spent in literally paralyzed

desperation, this answer comes in an instant the next morning, like an epiphany, leaving him feeling greatly relieved: no longer must he cope with a senseless life nor play a role in order to cope with the ever-present threat of sudden death nor remain powerless over his fate. Todd decides to open the acetylene gas jets on Captain Adam's "Original and Unparalleled Floating Opera" (an itinerate showboat that used to ply the tidewater regions of Virginia and Maryland and had docked in Cambridge for a performance) and blow himself up. Despite his initial joy at resolving to kill himself, he plots this with seeming indifference and objectivity, undisturbed that his act of self destruction will also take 699 of his fellow citizens--including Harrison and Jane Mack (his best friends and with whom he has been involved in a sexual triangle from 1932 to 1937, with a break from 1933 to 1935) and their three-and-a-half years old daughter Jeannine, who might very well be Todd's biological daughter. Yet, these plans are not as coldly dispassionate as they appear--Todd's acts are based on the same powerful psychological and emotional motivations as those that led to his taking on roles in the first place.

Andrews is the first of several Barthian protagonists whose world suddenly ceases to make sense. While the resulting anxiety closely approximates Camus's "feeling of the absurd," it also resembles the schizophrenic experience that Laing calls "ontological insecurity," a pervasive anxiety about the vulnerability of the self (Harris, 12).

But, instead of being forced to the point of ultimate despair and then following through with his self

destruction, Todd characteristically arrives at a new kind of awareness, changing his stance yet another time and insisting that his reasons for doing so result from a set of principles pursued to their logical end. To this point, Todd's reasoning has been this: If nothing has intrinsic value, and if any values are irrationally and arbitrarily assigned to things, then there is no reason for valuing anything, including life--therefore, there is no reason to continue living. However, he realizes that one more step remains: If there is no final reason for living, there is no final reason for not living either.

This comes neither as a disappointment nor as cause for celebration, or so Todd says. According to him, it was merely "a simple matter of carrying out my plans to their logical conclusion" (FO, 246). He remains convinced that this act, as all the others, reflects consistent rationality and objectivity.

> . . .though the progress of my reasoning from 1919 to 1937 was in many ways turbulent, it was of the essence of my conclusion that no emotion was necessarily involved in it. To realize that nothing makes any final difference is overwhelming; but if one goes no farther and becomes a saint, a cynic, or a suicide on principle, one hasn't reasoned completely. The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth. Hamlet's question is, absolutely, meaningless (FO, 246).

This turnaround, as with all his changes, is not as calculated nor as deliberate as Todd would have the reader believe. All of his roles had been attempts to preserve self, even the decision to commit suicide. However, this

last role, Todd's "stance to end all stances," is far from convincing because he never intends that his plan to blow up himself and the others on the showboat will actually succeed. Earlier, while conducting Todd and Jeannine Mack on a private tour, Captain Adam makes it clear that the safeguards incorporated into the boat's equipment and design prevent explosions. Todd must, then, have another reason for slipping away from the show and turning on the gas. Therefore, rather than literal suicide, Harris proposes that Todd is engaged in another kind of self destructive mission:

> a simple declaration that the self is dead. At any rate, the posture remains defensive; therefore it is not destructive, but ultimately protective. . . .his actions represent an existential suicide, a symbolic denial of being that is paradoxically intended to preserve being. If the self is dead, it cannot be destroyed (Harris, 17).

From this point on, Todd assumes that he is free of masks, that the role of a suicide is the last part he has to play, and he persists in this belief after abandoning the idea of self extinction to lead what he thinks is a roleless, unillusioned existence. He feels freed from the burden of shielding himself with masks from all the pressures that had threatened to destroy him. But, on the contrary, he ignores the most persistent mask of all, one assumed long ago at the same time that he first began consciously to take on new identities, and he continues playing this part even after supposedly shedding masks forever with his suicide. This role that has sustained Andrews in his urgent battle against annihilation more

emphatically and consistently than he knows is that of a writer who uses his own and others' texts both to conceal, and as a controlling mechanism to combat, the mortality, chaos, and meaninglessness that he fears will overwhelm him. In addition, as with his "false" commitment to suicide, Todd is less that consistent or forthright in his belief that writing offers him real power to stave off doubt and despair.

For example, as a practicing attorney, Andrews depends on the authority derived from the archives of written legal codes forming what society sees as the basis of its standards of ethical conduct, its sense of order, and the way that it locates itself in relation to the progress of civilization over the course of history as reflected in the evolution of codified legal conventions. But all this is irrelevant and meaningless to Andrews--his decision to become an attorney was, in large part, a concession to make his father happy and, in light of his bad heart, no better and no worse than any other career selection.

> I didn't choose the practice of law as my career, except perhaps passively; it had been assumed from earliest memory that I was to study for the Maryland Bar and enter Dad's firm, and I never protested. Certainly I've never been dedicated to anything, although as with many another thing I've always maintained a reasonable curiosity about the meanings of legal rules and the workings of the courts (FO, 71).

However, despite his passive and uncommitted attitude, Todd still wants the reader to know that he is the best

lawyer around--for him, this is not braggadocio but an unadorned, dispassionate fact.

> If I thought the practice of law absolutely important, then my statement would indeed be as much a boast as a description; but truthfully I consider advocacy, jurisprudence, even justice to have no more intrinsic importance than, say, oyster-shucking. And you'd understand, wouldn't you, that if a man like myself asserted with a smile that he was the peninsula's best oyster shucker (I'm not), or cigarette roller, or pinball-machine tilter, he'd not be guilty of prideful boasting? (FO, 71)

However, although meticulous and highly competitive when he puts his mind to it, Todd could not care less about legal ideals or ethics. Rather than worry about legal niceties, concern himself with whether the machinery of jurisprudence dispenses justice fairly or not at all, or even wonder about what the essence of the law might be, Andrews asserts flatly, "I think I'm not interested in what the law is." Instead, he is "curious about things that the law can be made to do; but this disinterestedly, without involvement" (FO, 82). He approaches the law as an amusing activity, in much the same way that a child finds amusement in making a toy tractor climb over a book. As for justice, he claims, "I don't know what you mean, sir, when you speak of justice" (FO, 82). The law is only a means for Andrews to keep himself occupied.

> All right. I have no general opinions about the law, or about justice, and if I sometimes set little obstacles, books and slants, in the path of the courts, it is because I'm curious, merely, to see what will happen. . . .Winning or losing litigations is of no concern to me, and I think I've never made a secret of that fact to my client. They come to me, as they come before the law, because they think they have a case. The law and I are uncommitted (FO, 83).

The accusation that such an attitude is irresponsible and could lead to acts of injustice does not disturb Todd at all. In fact, the idea even holds some attraction for him:

> It does indeed allow for the persecution of innocence--though perhaps not so frequently as you might imagine. And this persecution concerns me, in the sense that it holds my attention, but not especially in the sense that it bothers me. Under certain circumstances. . .I am not adverse to pillorying the innocent, to throwing my stone, with the crowd, at some poor martyr. Irresponsibility, yes: I affirm, I insist upon my basic and ultimate irresponsibility. Yes indeed (FO, 83).

Because he can divorce the law from justice and questions about right and wrong or truth and lies from the practice of law, Todd treats his cases as games where he can choose to try to win or deliberately lose depending on what his whims of the moment might be. Bribery, destruction of evidence, lying, and counterfeit grounds for delaying a trial until more favorable political circumstances arise are not beneath him, and he has no qualms about whether or not to introduce winning evidence by leaving the decision to the toss of a coin (though he might just as arbitrarily decide to inject some deliberate inconsistency into the choice and not follow the result of the toss). Courtroom argument is nothing more than a rhetorical contest, a battle of words, between rival attorneys who struggle to sway judges and juries through well-turned phrases that have the sound and insubstantiality of tabloid headlines. In Todd's view, "judges, no less than other men, are often moved by

considerations more aesthetic than judicial" (FO, 93-94), and any prejudices that judges might have regarding a litigant's political affiliations are "more often influenced by such things as the symmetry and logical evidence of a brief than by more mundane considerations like the appellant's politics" (FO, 100-1).

However, even though the power of legal texts and language to shape reality or discover and define truths is purely arbitrary and subjective for Todd, he wants to be taken seriously as a writer and have the reader believe that his own text, The Floating Opera, is an accurate and serious rendering of the facts of his experience (despite the fact that even he refers to his book as a novel). One of his strategies for accomplishing this is to confess being a novice storyteller.

> I've never tries my hand at this sort of thing before, but I know enough about myself to realize that once the ice is broken the pages will flow all too easily, for I'm not naturally a reticent fellow, and the problem then will be to stick to the story and finally shut myself up (FO, 1).

As already seen, Todd cannot discriminate relevant facts from tangential details, and he recognizes this as one of the obstacles to his writing.

> Good heavens, how does one write a novel! I mean, how can anybody stick to the story, if he's at all sensitive to the significance of things? As for me, I see already that storytelling isn't my cup of tea: every new sentence I set down is full of figures and implications that I'd love nothing better than to chase to their dens with you, but such chasing would involve new figures and new chases, so that I'm sure we'd never get the story started, much less ended, if I let my inclinations run unleashed (FO, 2).

But Todd also works to turn these problems to his advantage and reassure the reader that, however daunting his task is for a beginner, his motivations are sincere and his purpose wothwhile. For example, he entitles the opening chapter "Tuning My Piano" as a way to acknowledge implicitly the difficulties of his undertaking. That is, tuning a guitar or a violin would be much easier for a novice musician, but for some reason, Todd feels that his purpose is much too complicated and important to settle for anything less than a comprehensive attempt at harmonizing all the complex details pertaining to his decision against suicide. He may have to adjust and readjust, tune and retune, the individual notes of his composition, but he is going to try to orchestrate a full account of his experiences into a meaningful arrangement even at the risk of producing some occasionally discordant and grating effects. For him, the opening chapter acts as a kind of warmup where he can tune his writing skills and, at least, get started on the task at hand. Anticipating potential criticisms that his beginning reflects an erratic and awkward sensibility, Todd lays claim to a personal line of reasoning that is, at worst, merely idiosyncratic, not illogical nor undisciplined.

> 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. . . .my life is never less logical simply for its being unorthodox (FO, 1).

Much later in the book, after gaining confidence in his

writing abilities, he attempts a more complex kind of two-handed exercise for the keyboard. In chapter twenty, "Calliope Music," though Andrews claims that "my prose is a plodding, graceless thing, and I've no comprehension of stylistic tricks," he nevertheless tries to write a form of literary fugue by opening the chapter with two narratives simultaneously, both parts printed side-by-side on the page. Both begin identically, but differences slowly occur until two very different pieces evolve--Todd expects the reader to separate them "ever so gradually until you're used to keeping two distinct narrative voices in your head at the same time" (FO, 168).

Yet, perhaps sensing that he needs to do more in the first chapter to generate a reader's trust and tolerance, Andrews turns to another metaphor to explain his approach to writing by comparing his narrative to a "meandering stream," something that he justifies as a reaction against the kind of writing he dislikes.

> . . .it has always seemed to me, in the novels that I've read now and then, that those authors are asking a great deal of their readers who start their stories furiously, in the middle of things, rather than backing or sidling slowly into them. Such a plunge into someone else's life and world, like a plunge into the Choptank River in mid-March, has, it seems to me, little of pleasure in it. Now come along with me reader, and don't fear for your weak heart; I've one myself, and know the value of inserting first a toe, then a foot, next a leg, very slowly your hips and stomach and finally your whole self into my story, and taking a good long time to do it. This is, after all, a pleasure-dip I'm inviting you to, not a baptism (FO, 2).

He then promises to resist his predilection for digressions, saying that both he and the reader must exercise tight control over the "stream" of his story:

> We'll have to stick to the channel, then, you and I, though it's a shoal-draught boat we're sailing, and let the creeks and coves go by, pretty as they might be (FO, 3).

But the most important influence of rivers and streams concerns the book's title and the controlling metaphor for Todd's attitude about how writing and reality convey meaning. Certainly the fact that he had initially decided to kill himself, and then changed his mind, on Captain Adam's Floating Opera would justify naming his book after the showboat. Yet Todd says that he has an even "better reason" for doing so. He imagines a showboat perpetually drifting up and down the river with a play continually in progress on deck, and the audience would sit on the banks catching whatever parts of the performance that they could see and hear as the boat went by.

> To fill in the gaps they'd have to use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbors, or hear the word passed along from upriver or downriver. Most of the time 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 (FO, 7).

For Todd, this is not the product of idle imagination--this is how, he believes, much of life really works.

> . . .our friends float past; we become involved with them; they float on and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely; they float back again, and we either renew our friendship--catch up to date--or find that they and we don't comprehend each other any more (FO, 7).

As a way to link his view of life to his book, and make another try at persuading the reader to follow where he leads, he patterns what he writes on this outlook, saying that his novel is

> a floating opera, friend, fraught with curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction, and entertainment, but it floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose: you'll catch sight of it, lose it, spy it again; and it may require the best efforts of your attention and imagination--together with some patience, of you're an average fellow--to keep track of the plot as it sails in and out of view (FO, 7).

But, despite Todd's admission that writing is new to him, as well as his attempts to mitigate any resulting narrative awkwardness or ward off a reader's confusion, it is immediately clear that he is no newcomer to writing. In fact, he is so prolific and committed a writer as to be obsessed with writing as meaning-making tool and an impetus for staying alive and continuing to act. For example, The Floating Opera itself grew out of many years of exhaustive preparation: nine years of setting down everything he could remember about the day he decided against suicide, the notes for which filled seven peach baskets; three years reading background material--novels and textbooks on such things as medicine, philosophy, history, and the physical sciences; and two years spent editing all this down to one basketful, then revising, commenting, and interpreting until he had again filled seven baskets, and finally distilling his material down to two basketfuls.

As ambitious as this task seems, it is only a small part of a much larger writing enterprise that Todd calls his Inquiry, an investigative work that seeks to explain why his father hanged himself. In order to provide some kind of control ensuring that his work reflects a minimum of personal bias, Todd also keeps a basketful of notes on himself to accompany what he adds to the Inquiry. But he soon realized that he would never reach the end of his work: the fact of his father's suicide is merely fact, no more; but "there is no will-o'-the-wisp so elusive as the cause of any human act" (FO, 214), and trying to bridge the gap between these two points and uncover a full understanding of his father's act is, for Todd, something that he has little hope of completing. Yet, this does not dissuade him from pushing on. Instead, the ever-ongoing nature of his effort changes the purpose for which he writes.

> So, the task is endless: I've never fooled myself about that. It doesn't follow that because a goal is unattainable, one shouldn't work toward its attainment. Besides . . .processes continued for long enough tend to become ends in themselves, and if for no other reason, I should continue my researches simply in order to occupy pleasantly two hours after dinner (FO, 216).

If, by some chance, Todd manages to discover the real cause of his father's death, his writing would only be partially complete because the first investigation, the death-Inquiry, only acts as a preliminary, "at most a relevant chapter," for a larger work--the life-Inquiry, which seeks to uncover everything about his father's life,

"from the umbilicus that tied him to his mother to the belt that hanged him from the floor joist" (FO, 215). Both Inquiries share the goal of uncovering the reasons for the "imperfect communication" between Todd and his father, and he admits of the second that, "If one can compare infinities, this task is even more endless than the other" (FO, 216). But even the "two colossal Inquiries combined are no more than important studies for one aspect: the Letter to My Father" (FO, 216).

The Letter is Todd's original writing project. Begun in 1920 as a result of his failed attempts to inform his father about his heart condition, and believing that he would soon drop dead, Todd went to law school to please his father, composing the Letter as a posthumous explanation of his death. As he continued to remain alive, this purpose eventually became "subsumed into a larger one" in which he set out to study his own life history and "to discover why my communication with Dad had always been imperfect" (FO, 217).

Todd had depended upon these parallel writing projects as a way to cope with his dread of chaos and death, laying them aside for only the brief period--one day--between deciding to commit suicide and changing his mind. However, it is not the product of his work that sustains him, nor does the ongoing process of his endless tasks alone provide much real hope of effectively staving off his fears.

Instead, it is his novel, The Floating Opera, that after seventeen years, acts as a renewed defense against hopelessness.

> . . .Todd keeps himself alive by writing a book. His repertory of masks and evasions having failed, Todd turns to fiction as a last resort. By submitting "reality" to the reordering powers of his imagination, he is able to exert an artistic control over the painful facts of his existence. He keeps at bay an implosive reality by imaginatively transforming that reality according to his own artistic whim (Harris, 23).

But writing to manage or reshape reality is, in the end, only another holding action, something that will suffice, but only incompletely, until something else comes along, if it ever does. Todd's creative revision of his past, his taking on and dispensing of masks, his backing away from real suicide, his callous disregard for justice--all these are evasions of, rather than confrontations with, the truth of his situation. And his book follows the same pattern. According to Harris, "The Floating Opera is largely lies posing as autobiography" (23), and Todd's real purpose in writing is to distract both the reader and himself from the profound insecurities that plague him, not by offering imitations of reality in his novel, but by sidestepping reality as much as possible.

> Art provides Todd a means for manipulating his audience's responses in order to evade their understanding. In this sense, he "invents" his audience as surely as he invents his fiction. That fiction, in its sheer inventiveness, proclaims the "mastery" of Todd's imagination over the materials of his existence. Language becomes the alchemy by which Todd transmutes, and therefore controls at least for a time, an otherwise menacing reality (Harris, 24).

Imaginative rather than actual, physical control is what Todd will settle for--he has no other choice except to succumb to paralysis, desperation, and fear should he surrender to his existential predicament. In Harris' view, this comes about because, throughout his life, Todd simultaneously longs for and fears successful contact with others and being "at one with the world."

> He longs for communication with the other and wishes to be understood. . . .But any form of understanding threatens he whole defensive system, so he conceals his true meaning behind equivocations and evasions (Harris, 27).

The question remains whether or not Todd, using writing to perpetrate lies, necessarily acts dishonestly or with malice toward the reader.

> . . .in the past man could mistake his words for things, his invented realities for Reality itself. It is one thing to construct fictions while under the delusion that they are truths, quite another knowingly to construct fictions that must nonetheless satisfy the need for belief (Harris, 28).

Todd knows full well that his fictions are his own creations, yet he knows just as well that they are no more true or false, effectual or impotent, than any other system by which people live and negotiate reality. At the end of his book, he wonders "whether, in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn't be regarded as in no way inferior and even lived by" (FO, 247). Though he has no answer as yet, and may never get one, he is still fatalistically determined, if not to persevere, at least to keep going, continuing with his Inquiry and Letter and leaving his options open.

> It occurred to me. . .that faced with an infinitude of possible directions and having no ultimate reason to choose one over another, I would in all probability, though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as I had thitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction until death overtakes him (FO, 246).

He can continue to live and act because he has something, never mind how tenuous, by which to live--his writing--and in this sense, he is not unique because he, like so many artists of this and past centuries, has

> confronted a world suddenly grown threatening in its inscrutability. His dilemma recapitulates that primal dilemma when ancient man, confronted with the primordial void, called a world out of nothingness. Like an aboriginal poet-magus Todd confronts chaos with art--the lies that order. If the narrator of The Floating Opera is a liar, and his tale is comprised of lies, those lies. . .are necessary (Harris, 29).

All in all, though far from ideal, Todd's situation is not so bad--his negotiation with the Nothingness he perceives as the underlying fact of reality permits him to continue living. Writing had helped carry him along from 1919 to 1937, The Floating Opera affords him much the same support seventeen years later, and there is little reason to suspect that the act of writing as a shaping, controlling, or meaning-making power will fail him completely in the future. But in his next novel, The End of the Road, Barth takes the same existential predicament faced by Todd Andrews and places it in a darker, bleaker context to explore what might result when nothing, not even writing when valued by a character as a means to potential salvation, proves effective against Nothing, either in the short or the long run.

Jake Horner, the protagonist who, like Todd, acts as the "real" author of the book, cannot resolve his confrontation with an existential reality as well as Andrews. Where Todd suffers only a brief bout of paralysis on the eve of changing his mind, Jake is plagued by recurrent and debilitating seizures of real physical and psychological catatonia. Where Todd assumes several masks to accommodate major life changes, Jake literally sees life as a constantly changing script where, from one moment to the next, he must improvise and change the part he plays in order to adapt to any new contingency. Where Todd is passively involved in a long-term love triangle which does not affect him very deeply, Jake becomes enmeshed in a brief triangle that ends tragically, leaving him badly shaken and on the verge of permanent immobility. But, despite his "spiritual kinship with Todd Andrews," the fundamental difference between them lies in Jake's much more limited vision.

> . . .Todd, as his name suggests, is closer to a realization of mortality and takes the problems of existence very seriously. Jacob Horner, as his name suggests, is far more likely to apply a pragmatic or existential text to his own situation in a parodic way--to pull out plums of meaning instead of considering the whole of a situation (Smith, 69).

Like Todd, Jake writes retrospectively, attempting in 1955 (at the age of thirty) to give some meaning and shape to events that transpired two years earlier. Also like Todd, he opens his book by trying to establish for the reader a sense of who he is and occasionally tells the reader that he has reshaped the literal truth of events for

the sake of convenience. However, though less awkward, halting, and apologetic than Todd (in fact, he seems very confident and capable playing the role of a writer), Jake is a great deal less certain of his real identity. Todd provides a fairly clear introduction to himself early in his opening chapter, but the first sentence of The End of the Road states: "In sense, I am Jacob Horner." What that "sense" might be remains ambiguous, for Jake is afflicted with an inability to choose--any option is equally as valid or invalid as any other because, to him,

> when one is faced with such a multitude of desirable choices, no one choice seems satisfactory for very long by comparison with the aggregate desirability of all the rest, though compared to any one of the others it would not be found inferior (EOR, 3).

This situation holds true for situations that offer only undesirable options as well, and even the mundane, everyday choices encountered in daily life, such as how to posture oneself while sitting in a chair, can become major problems for him. Referring to the above statement, Jake says

> It seems to me at just this moment (I am writing this at 7:55 in the evening of Tuesday, October 4, 1955, upstairs in the dormitory) that, should you choose to consider that final observation as a metaphor, it is the story of my life in a sentence--to be precise, in the latter member of a double predicate nominative expression in the second independent clause of a rather intricate compound sentence. You see that I was in truth a grammar teacher (EOR, 3).

At first, Jake's elaboration hardly seems a more precise definition of what he means, but the "story" of his life in the form of a parsed sentence provides a clue to his

major problem: his repeated attempts to force-fit order to his experience fail because he relies too much on language and a view of life as, literally, a self-authored dramatic text.

All of this comes about because of an incident that has placed him in an institution called the Remobilization Farm under the care of a mysterious figure known only as the Doctor, a distinguished looking black man in his fifties about whom Jake claims to know very little--he may be a medical genius or a dangerous quack, a legitimate professional physician or a gifted con man who periodically relocates his operation in order to avoid the law while running a scam on those who find themselves in his care. Jake first encounteres the Doctor in 1951 in the Pennsylvania Railroad Station in Baltimore. A graduate student in English literature at Johns Hopkins, he had come there with no clear reason, only a vague yet compelling need to leave the university and the city. Nor can he decide on a destination--any one sounds as good as another. Leaving the ticket window to consider where he will go on thirty dollars, Jake sits on a bench and is overwhelmed by paralysis because he can find no reasons for action.

> . . .I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas . . . .My eyes. . .were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and where that is the case there is no reason to do anything--even to change the focus of one's eyes . . . .It is the malady cosmopsis, the cosmic view, that afflicted me. When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunger, and no quick

hand to terminate the moment--there's only the light (EOR, 74).

Jake spends the night on the bench, paralyzed and mentally empty, and is found the next morning by the Doctor who breaks his immobility by questioning him. He says that his specialty concerns various kinds of paralysis and convinces Jake to come to his treatment center where his approach differs from standard medical practices.

> The authors of medical textbooks. . .like everyone else, can reach generality only by ignoring enough particularity. They speak of paralysis, and the treatment of paralytics, as though one read the textbooks and then followed the rules for getting paralyzed properly. There is no such thing as paralysis, Jacob. There is only paralyzed Jacob Horner. And I don't treat paralysis; I schedule therapies to mobilize John Doe or Jacob Horner, as the case may be . . . .I don't treat your paralysis; I treat paralyzed you (EOR, 80-81).

Agapotherapy, Theotherapy, Atheotherapy, Scriptotherapy, as well as Nutritional, Medicinal, Surgical, Dynamic, Conversational, Sexual, Virtue and Vice, and Philosophical therapies are among the many individualized approaches the Doctor applies in treating his patients. For Jake, he prescribes several things to force him to choose and, thereby, avoid immobilization.

> Go out in the evenings; play cards with people. I don't recommend buying a television just yet. . . .Exercise frequently. Take long walks, but always to a previously determined destination, and when you get there, walk right home again, briskly. . . .Don't get married or have love affairs yet: if you aren't courageous enough to hire prostitutes, then take up masturbation temporarily (EOR, 85).

This program is designed to eliminate minor, everyday choices from Jake's life. But, in order to address his

deeper problems, the Doctor insists that he engage in a strict set of text-oriented activities. First, Jake is to but a copy of the 1951 World Almanac and consider it his breviary, studying it as a form of Informational Therapy that provides Knowledge of the World to compensate in situations where logic and reason are insufficient for making choices. If he reads anything else, it is to be plays only, not novels or other nonfiction works. Second, he tells Jake to avoid religious issues and, instead, to "read Sartre and become an existentialist" (EOR, 85). Third, the Doctor orders that, if Jake confronts any situation where he cannot make a choice, then he must

> Above all, act impulsively: don't let yourself get stuck between alternatives, or you're lost. . . .If the alternatives are side by side, chose the one on the left; if they're consecutive in time, choose the earlier. If neither of these applies, choose the alternative whose name begins with the earlier letter of the alphabet. These are the principles of Sinistrality, Antecedence, and Alphabetical Priority--there are others, and they're arbitrary, but useful (EOR, 85).

Eventually, as Jake more or less gets used to these prescriptions, the Doctor suggests a new tack, one where the therapy shifts from Jake ordering his life through texts to turning his life into a text. The Doctor calls this Mythotherapy, a treatment which

> is based on two assumptions: that human existence precedes human essence, of either of the two terms really signifies anything; and that man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will. These are both good existential premises, and whether they're true or false is of no concern to us--they're useful in your case (EOR, 88).

The Doctor explains that Mythotherapy is a way to gain control over life by perceiving it as a script, a dramatized myth in which an individual plays the leading role in his or her life.

> In life. . .there are no necessarily major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story. Hamlet could be told from Polonius's point of view and called The Tragedy of Polonius, Lord Chamberlain of Denmark. He didn't think he was a minor character in anything, I daresay (EOR, 88).

Feeling helpless, impotent, or out of control is, according to the Doctor, a result of failing to recognize that, consciously or unconsciously, we choose the sort of role we play in life. Playing a minor character is, normally, just a voluntary "distortion" of the fact that we are really the heroes of our own life's script. Problems arise when changing situations dictate the need for a new part but we can neither "distort" the new situation to fit our role nor, because we insist on maintaining a consistently "authentic" personality, find a new mask to meet changed circumstances. Jake underwent an even worse conflict: when frozen on the bench, he suffered from a blank script and was completely without any kind of role to play. In addition, he suffered from occasional periods of "weatherlessness," which Horner describes as days when he was without personality and, in effect, ceased to exist as a person.

> 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. The fact that my successive and discontinuous selves

were linked to one another by the two unstable threads of body and memory; the fact that in Western languages the word change presupposes something upon which changes operate; the fact that although the specimen is invisible without the dye, the dye is not the specimen--these are considerations of which I was aware, but in which I had no interest (EOR, 36).

To avoid this in the future, the Doctor orders him to change scripts or masks as often as he needs to and to never be caught scriptless or with the wrong role for any given situation.

The more sharply you can dramatize your situation, and define your own role and everybody else's role, the safer you'll be. It doesn't matter in Mythotherapy for paralytics whether your role is major or minor, as long as it's clearly conceived, but in the nature of things it'll normally always be major (EOR, 90).

To put all of this into practical effect, the Doctor tries to determine some kind of meaningful career field with strict disciplinary boundaries to act as a script for Horner to act out. So far, Jake has worked only at part-time jobs whenever he needed money, but this does not limit his choices enough or offer a stable, clearly defined role-playing opportunity. However, when the Doctor questions him about his education in order to decide on a suitable profession, it turns out that Jake had no specific undergraduate major. Instead, he studied arts and sciences--nearly all of them: philosophy, psychology, political science, zoology, and later in graduate school, Romance philology and cultural anthropology. In exasperation, the Doctor asks him if he studies lock-picking, fornication, sailmaking, or cross examination:

"No sir."
"Aren't these arts and sciences?"
"My master's degree was to be in English, sir."
"Damn you! English what? Navigation? Colonial policy? Common law?"
"English literature, sir. But I didn't finish. I passed the oral examinations but I never got my thesis done" (EOR, 4).

To narrow Jake's focus and provide a strict framework to limit his options, the Doctor orders him to apply for a teaching position at the nearly Wicomico State Teachers College. However, he is not supposed to teach composition or English literature because these do not adhere to a narrow set of rules: "There must be a rigid discipline, or else it will be merely an occupation, not an occupational therapy" (EOR, 3). Therefore, the Doctor instructs Jake to teach prescriptive--not descriptive--grammar because it depends on "a fixed body of rules":

No description at all. No optional situations. Teach the rules. Teach the truth about grammar (EOR, 5).

Jake finds it easy to turn the job interview into an impromptu sketch, playing the role of an enthusiastic young pedagogue, and he impresses the selection committee despite his scant teaching experience which consisted only of "occasional tutoring jobs in Baltimore and a night-school class at Johns Hopkins" (EOR, 16). Jake's audience is unreservedly receptive to his homilies about teaching, and he leads them along, pandering to their idealistic educational visions.

I never seem to be content with ordinary jobs. There's something so--so stultifying about working only for pay. It's--well, I hate to use a cliche, but the fact is that other jobs are simply unrewarding. You know what I mean? (EOR, 17)

Receiving an wholehearted positive response, Jake then turns to the wonders in store for the intellectually hungry but unpolished student who delves into the mysteries of English grammar.

. . .you start him off. Parts of speech! Subjects and verbs! Modifiers! Complements! And after a while, rhetoric. Subordination! Coherence! Euphony! You drill and drill, and talk yourself blue in the face, and all the time you see that boy's mind groping, stumbling, stretching, making false steps. And then, just when you're ready to chuck the whole thing-- (EOR, 17).

Cutting short, Jake allows his rapt audience to fill in saying that the wondrous moment when this hypothetical student finally has "got it" is what they "all live for" and "the greatest miracle on God's green earth" (EOR, 17).

Jake wows his audience and lands the job, and for a moment, it appears as if he will be able to follow the regimen laid out by the Doctor. However, the next morning, he impulsively drives thirty miles to Ocean City, a seaside resort on the Atlantic, and picks up Peggy Rankin: a single, lonely, forty year old English teacher at Wicomico high school at the end of her uneventful two-week vacation. Declaring, "Let there be no horse manure between teachers of English" (EOR, 26), Jake manages to take advantage rather brusquely of her desperate loneliness and craving for affection and callously seduce her, beginning an on again-

off again sexual relationship where he drops in on her whenever he feels like it. In order to maintain distance and exercise control over what happens, Jake tries to cast Rankin in "the role of Forty-Year-Old Pickup" while he hopes to take the part of "The Fresh But Unintelligent Young Man Whose Body One Uses For One's Pleasure Without Otherwise Taking Him Seriously" (EOR, 27). But, even though she gives in to his advances, she also insists on being taken seriously as an intelligent, warm, and interesting person, leaving Jake with the realization that she "was not the sort whom one could leave shuddering and moaning on the bed knowing it was all just good clean fun" (EOR, 29). He takes all this philosophically, as a lesson, considering misassigned roles and reductive, inaccurate characterizations as part of getting on with the plot and keeping in schedule.

> Enough to say now that we are all casting directors a great deal of the time, if not always, and he is wise who realizes that his role-assigning is at best an arbitrary distortion of the actors' personalities; but he is even wiser who sees in addition that his arbitrariness is probably inevitable, and at any rate is apparently necessary if one would reach the end he desires (EOR, 28).

Jake's efforts to apply Mythotherapy by living life as an extemporaneous dramatic script face a greater challenge during his relationship with Joe Morgan, the only member of the selection committee not taken in by Jake's performance, and who teaches ancient, European, and American history as well as volunteering free time as a scoutmaster. Having taken a B.A. in literature and an M.A. in philosophy at

Columbia, Joe teaches at Wicomico to support himself and his family while leisurely finishing his doctoral work at Johns Hopkins by writing his dissertation--"an odd, brilliant study of the saving roles of innocence and energy in American political and economic history" (EOR, 66). Speaking briefly with Jake after the interview, Joe tells him that the entire episode was "a line of horseshit" (EOR, 19). Nevertheless, each senses something in the other, a kind of challenge, that draws them together in a contest of philosophical wills between intellectual equals. Each makes an effective foil for the other as both stand as polar opposites. Jake's existential outlook and Mythotheraputic roleplaying grow out of his conviction that all values are relative and arbitrary, that no one value is, ultimately, of greater or lesser validity than any other. Further, for him, language best manifests the paradoxes and ambiguities underlying any attempt to create a consistent and totalizing version of reality. For example, for most people, the power of language to order and categorize existence also precipitates conflict because labeling experience with words comes with inherent contradictions.

> Things can be signified by common nouns only if one ignores differences between them; but it is precisely these differences, when deeply felt, that make the nouns inadequate and lead the layman (but not the connoisseur) to believe that he has a paradox on his hands, an ambivalence, when actually it is merely a matter of x's being part horse and part grammar book, and completely neither. Assigning names to things is like assigning roles to people: it is necessarily a distortion, but it is a necessary distortion if one would get on

with the plot, and to the connoisseur it's good clean fun (EOR, 141-142).

Similarly, in the hands of a skilled practitioner (which is how Jake sees himself), language offers the best means for manipulating, and gaining power over, reality, and this is as close as Jake gets to a philosophy to live by.

> Articulation! There, by Joe, was my absolute, if I could be said to have one. . . . 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. . .I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, 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 (EOR, 119).

The qualification that Jake makes at the end of his statement indicates that he can adhere to any proposition only for as long as it takes to make it because he

> only exists while verbalizing. . . .words are not formed by Horner into patterns in an attempt to arrive at some stabilizing notions about the conditions of the world around him [but] because he finds he has the capacity and inclination to form them into patterns, and because he finds that he prefers this activity to any form of committed participation in the outer world. Playing with all patterns . . .and believing in none, Horner celebrates something approaching the autonomy of language. Because he finds his first order of reality in language it is not surprising that his account. . .is marked by what one feels to be a very nominal sense of concrete reality. It is as though the dialectic between life and mind has broken down and the dissociated consciousness drifts along in sterile isolation, sealed off in its circular musings (Tanner, 240).

Joe, in contrast, believes that a rigorous insistence on consistency and coherence, backed up by relentless self-

examination and challenge, can produce a kind of personal absolutism that effectively fends off the ambiguities and chaos of a relativistic, arbitrary epistemology.

> He has apparently faced the problems of existence as squarely as Jacob, but instead of becoming paralyzed by cosmopsis, he has created a complete ethic of his own based on the assertion of and consistency to his own relative values (Smith, 75).

His belief does not result from any sort of philosophical naivete--Joe, too, acknowledges the tentative nature of reality, and

> like a good modern, assumes of course the ultimate instability or unprovability of any premise, any value structure for human action; but he insists that a sane and honorable life can only be lived by adopting--arbitrarily but relentlessly--a set of value premises and following them out with a passionate honesty to oneself that, finally, vitiates any question about their "ultimate" truth (McConnell, 129).

In Joe's view, no one needs to feel remorse or guilt because actions and choices are, consciously or not, deliberate expressions of a person's intentions or desires, not the products of randomness or serendipity. Where Jake derives power by becoming an adept and connoisseur of language, Joe becomes an autodidact and seeks the power of knowledge by studying texts and then testing what he learns in the real world.

> Joe is indeed an energetic American Pragmatist, more in the nature of John Dewey than William James. Like Dewey he believes that whatever a person does is what he "wants" to do at that moment. . . . Choices may be very limited, however, because both physical and psychological circumstances tightly circumscribe possible actions, In order to insure the best long-term choice, the person must be educated to understand these circumstances and to see the possibilities as fully as possible (Hipkiss, 84).

Jake and Joe eventually engage in an ongoing philosophical battle of ethical systems: Jake partly to help pass the time, partly because he cannot help himself; Joe to test the mettle of his beliefs. At one point, watching Joe walk straight across the campus lawn, Jake observes that

> Apparently Joe Morgan was the sort who heads directly for his destination, implying by his example that paths should be laid where people walk, instead of walking where paths happen to be laid. All very well for a history man, perhaps, but I could see that Mr. Morgan would be a fish out of water in the prescriptive grammar racket (EOR, 20).

For himself, Jake cannot accept Joe's faith that an arbitrary reality can be turned into an effective system based on the selective generation of absolutes and the stubborn assertion of a concrete self because

> To feel, as Joe did, no regret for anything one has done in the past requires at least a strong sense of one's personal unity, and such a sense is one of the things I've always lacked. . . .for subjectivism implies a self, and where one feels a plurality of selves, one is subject to the same irrefutable conflict on an intensely intramural level, each of one's several selves claiming the same irrefutable validity for its special point of view. . . . In other words, 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 (EOR, 142).

The "battleground" on which Jake and Joe engage eventually becomes Joe's wife, Rennie, and at this point, Jake more or less transfers his position onto her. That is, his early relationship with Joe consists in a series of confrontations and debates

> over the final "sanity" of the Morgan formula for a fully sane life. He becomes trapped, in fact, between two

compelling, contradictory, and deeply self-deceptive philosophical positions, the doctor's and Joe Morgan's (McConnell, 129).

Now, however, it is Rennie Morgan who becomes trapped between Jake and her husband in their ethical power struggle. Besides being his wife, Rennie is Joe's student, and he expects her to understand and assert an independence of mind with a vigor and intensity equal to his own. Rennie once says, "I think of Joe as I think of God" (EOR, 62), and in fact, he exerts a nearly Godlike power over her, seeking to make her over in his image.

Joe, who dominated the marriage and has molded his wife into a replica of his own idea of himself, insists upon total--sometimes brutal--honesty between them and upon a single-minded, unrelenting acting-out of the premises upon which they have based their relationship (McConnell, 128-129).

But Jake sees all this "acting out" as less than authentic, almost as if the two were as guilty of roleplaying as he, and he sees Rennie acting much like a schoolboy "sparring with his gym teacher" (EOR, 31) or playing Galatea to Joe's Pygmalian. Yet Jake also finds himself greatly impressed by their force and energy and has no real objection to their relationship because, "after all, Galatea was a remarkable woman, and some uneasy young pugilists grow up to be Gene Tunney" (EOR, 32).

But verbal warfare is not enough of a test for Joe, and he contrives to throw Rennie and Jake together at every opportunity, ostensibly to inculcate greater intellectual rigor and confidence in his wife-protege. However, this

serves only to confuse her: one the one hand, she finds her love and respect for Joe compromised by her growing attraction to Jake; on the other, she becomes increasingly frustrated by Jake's ephemeral identity, at one point saying,

> You know what I've come to think, Jake? I think you don't exist at all. There's too many of you. It's more than just masks that you put on and take off--we all have masks. BUt you're different all the way through, every time. You cancel yourself out. You're more like somebody in a dream. You're not strong and you're not weak. You're nothing (EOR, 67).

Her seemingly unshakable faith in Joe's integrity, as well as in the durability and consistency of his character, is soon undermined. One evening, returning with Jake to the Morgan's house, they realize that Joe is home alone, presumably working on his thesis, and Jake proposes that they spy on him to "See the animals in their natural habitat" (EOR, 69). At first, Rennie sees no point in this, insisting that Joe differs from Jake in the sense that, "Real people aren't any different when they're alone. No masks. What you see of them is authentic" (EOR, 70). What they happen to see of Joe, regardless of how "authentic" it might be, comes as a shock: he is prancing around the room, performing an exaggerated, one-man military parade, "spinning, pirouetting, bowing, leaping, kicking" (EOR, 70). Spying himself in a mirror, he proceeds to make faces and utter nonsense, and finally, according to Jake,

> He went to the writing table and apparently resumed his reading, his back to us. The show, then, was over. Ah, but

one moment--yes. He turned slightly, and we could see: his tongue gripped purposefully between his lips at the side of his mouth, Joe was masturbating and picking his nose at the same time. I believe he also hummed a sprightly tune in rhythm with his work (EOR, 71).

This grotesque display shatters Rennie's unquestioning reverence for Joe--soon after, she and Jake commit adultery, and once she admits this to Joe, the battle turns grim. Because neither she nor Jake can articulate just how and why they came to have sex, and because both express feelings of guilt and shame over what happened, Joe presses them unmercifully, demanding that they repeat their transgression until they can rationally and comprehensively account for their behavior and then make independent decisions about what to do next. But, aside from his strange actions while being spied on, Joe fails to realize that he acts inconsistently by demanding consistent thought and behavior from Rennie and Horner because

He does not allow for the pressure of circumstances at given moments, for the fluctuation of human feelings, and for the reality of remorse. He does not see, ironically enough, that when Rennie apologizes, that she is doing then what she wants to do just as much as she did what she wanted to do when she had intercourse with Jake. When she is sent back to Jake to "do it again," she is doing what she wants to do but only because she thinks that is what Joe wants her to do and his wish is her command. Joe demands reasons for their conduct. Jake can give no reason. . . . The mixture of circumstance, emotion, and desire is just not reducible to a "reason" (Hipkiss, 54-55).

The whole situation reaches a crisis when Rennie learns that she is pregnant but unsure whether the father is Joe or Jake. She resolves that, because she does not want the baby, she will either undergo an abortion or kill herself.

Joe is determined not to interfere with her decision as long as it is honestly what she wants--he even goes so far as to offer her a pistol and then says that, if she cannot pull the trigger, he would do it for her. But Jake begs her to postpone her suicide, hoping that he can do what seems virtually impossible--finding a legitimate and safe abortionist. At this point, Jake takes on responsibility for the first time, and he works desperately to find an abortionist. However, fraud, forgery, impersonation--all the resources of his imagination prove fruitless, even a futile, last-ditch appeal to Peggy Rankin.

Running out of options and knowing that Rennie will kill herself that evening, Jake suffers a renewed bout of paralysis, and as a last resort, he seeks out the Doctor for help. The Doctor severely reprimands him for so carelessly ignoring orders by neglecting his readings, playing roles badly, entangling himself in love affairs, and getting too involved in complicated relationships. But, because he is in the process of moving the Remobilization Farm, the Doctor agrees to perform the abortion only if Jake quits his job, gives him all his money, and comes to the new location somewhere in Pennsylvania as a permanent resident of the facility. Desperate, Jake readily agrees and brings Rennie in that night. However, the procedure goes very badly after she panics and her struggles turn the operation into a gruesome, bloody affair. To quiet her, the Doctor adminis-

ters anesthesia, not knowing that she had eaten hot dogs and sauerkraut only a few hours earlier--she vomits explosively and, before anything can be done, chokes to death.

Joe takes all responsibility for what happens and is forced to resign quietly from his position at Wicomico. Jake, again in a state of weatherlessness, goes to the bus station to meet the others going to the new Remobilization Farm, ending his story with a single word given to the cab driver--"Terminal"--which leads critic Frank D. McConnell to remark that

> The End of the Road. . .is about the end of the road: the terminal defeat, the end of all fictions which awaits even the most courageous and clever attempts to shape and control reality. . . . The end of the road is the end of the road because it is the point at which the intellectual content of nihilism encounters the sheer fact of human love and human loss which it--or any philosophical position--is inadequate to account for or deal with (McConnell, 130-131)

McConnell points out that one of the most important elements in the book is Jake's Mythotherapeutic role as a teacher of prescriptive grammar

> at once the most precise, most exhaustively formulated, and most pointless of the language arts. . . . Prescriptive grammar--the simple, endless, and completely arbitrary rules pertaining to the civilized use of language--is at once a perfectly adequate and totally inadequate analogue to Barth's own sense of the art of fiction. . . . Like fiction, grammar is an artificial system, and abstraction from the true business of life, which nevertheless is indispensable for the functioning of an efficient civilization, and indeed, for any more-than-minimal communication between human beings. . . .it is utterly sterile, ultimately in a state if perpetual defeat by the unruly, chaotic forces of speech itself--the living matter of language--which it seeks to categorize and formulate (McConnell, 131).

Yet Jake and his predecessor, Todd Andrews, manage to use language to achieve, however imperfectly, important ends: to keep living and, while alive, to continue somehow to act. According to Charles B. Harris, both employ lies disguised as autobiography, but Jake manipulates language as artifice more directly and transparently in that

> unlike Todd Andrews, who tries to fool his reader, Jake candidly admits his story's basis in artificiality. . . . Todd Andrews also calls attention to the artificial nature of his narrative, but he pretends that it is the result of authorial ineptitude and inexperience. A narrative smoke-screen, Todd's feigned sincerity is calculated to convince us that in his bumbling way he is telling the truth. Jake has no such pretense. His formulation is a self-proclaimed falsification. . . . Not objective representations of life as it exists "out there," each is a psychological projection onto life of its author's concerns, fears, moods, values, and general sensibility. To perceive life is to change it (Harris, 40).

Both Todd and Jake ultimately fail to uncover absolute meaning or to develop an epistemology founded on guaranteed universal truths that can generate order beyond arbitrary, merely personal systems of value and ethical behavior. Yet, both have found a way to back off from the abyss of despair and Nothingness: for them, writing suffices as an imperfect but effective substitute for philosophical uncertainty and allows each to conduct an open-ended existential existence. Part of their failure to reduce some of the artificiality inherent in life and in their chief tools, language and writing, for manipulating reality results less from reconstructing events in any self-serving way or from the inevitable idiosyncracies of their individual perceptions

than from a failure to grasp fully the existential concept of Dasein which, according to David Holbrook, is

> the need for every human being to feel that he has been capable of being there: of being somewhere, and at the same moment being conscious of his existence, and responsible for his existence, so that a sense of existential being has been experienced that cannot be taken away even by death. Without some solution to the Dasein problem, man cannot exist (Holbrook, 218).

Todd and Jake are, certainly, very much aware of the problem, but a solution--one that not only resolves, but celebrates, multeity, open-endedness, the tacit mystery of existence, and the power of the imagination to generate meaning through writing--remains largely beyond their reach for now as something that they and their literary successors, in Barth's subsequent novels, manage to approach more fully.

Chapter 3

Subverted Texts and The Writer's Education: The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy

Barth's second pair of novels explores the ways in which his writer-protagonists come to learn about the limits of knowledge and human understanding as opposed to the rich, unbounded possibilities that the world offers. But, for the world, as well as their places as writers in the world, to make sense, they must undergo an often confusing, even painful, learning process that outstrips and transcends their educations. Each central character comes to see that educational institutions do little, or nothing, to prepare him for living or writing, and each comes to value an education in, of, and for life over mere training and acculturation; action and involvement over resignation and passive acceptance of the way things are; and the always open-ended, constructive potential to make, and remake, a fluid self to accommodate and exploit an ever-changing set of circumstances over assigned or desperately contrived and limited identities. Both are novels about education and involve the central lessons that, one, the self can create itself and the world, and two, the texts by which writers and readers attempt to make the self and the world concrete, legitimate, and certain are themselves tentative, incomplete, ephemeral, and deceiving perpetrators of chaos. Unlike Todd Andrews and Jacob Horner who, out of indif-

ference or futility, took college degrees and relied on masks and writing as holding actions against despair, Barth's second pair of writers gradually learns to accomodate reality's multiple and ineffable nature as a source of creative energy and as a basis for self-generated meanings about the world. In other words, the situations that Todd and Jake find themselves in

> predominantly dramatize the search for absolute or relative objectives in reference to world and self; they suggest a failure of mythopoeic strategies in the service of self-formation, and they tend to deal with the issues in the manner of the novel of ideas. . . .The heroes of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road were forever seen coping with questions of "ultimate" sense and "absolute" value. Their answers to such questions consisted, simultaneously, in a gesture of futility and relative affirmation, emphasizing that objectives are arbitrary stipulations not to be defended as absolute in a process of philosophical reasoning (Putz, 66).

On the other hand, in Barth's next book, Eben Cooke, the central character, faces the same things, but his response differs from his predecessors' in that "In the absence of clear-cut answers Cooke chooses to create the absolutes he will henceforth build and rely on" (Putz, 66). The Sot-Weed Factor is set in the late seventeenth-century, and Barth bases the novel on a real text of the same name written by a historical figure, Ebenezer Cooke, after whom the protagonist is named. The fictional Eben is the son of a widowed, middle class English merchant who also owns a sotweed (i.e., tobacco) plantation, called Malden, on Cooke's Point on Maryland's eastern shore which he manages by proxy through factors (i.e., overseers) since returning

to England when his children were four years old. Eben and his twin sister Anna, whose mother died giving them birth, then spend the next six years on the family's English estate, St. Giles. Because of their twinship, the absence of other children, and their father's relative wealth, the twins grow very close and, left largely to their own devices, create a private world spun out of their active imaginations. Their early education is self-conceived, consisting in part of a wide variety of games. In addition,

> Both were great readers, and loved the same books: among the classics, the Odyssey and the Metamorphoses, the Book of Martyrs and the Lives of the Saints; the romances of Valentine and Orson, Bevis of Hampton, and Guy of Warwick; the tales of Robin Good-Fellow, Patient Grisel, and the Foundlings in the Wood; and among the newer books, Janeway's Token for Children, Batchiler's Virgin Pattern, and Fisher's Wise Virgin, as well as Cacoethes Leaden Legacy, The Young Mans Warning-Peece, The Booke of Mery Riddles, and, shortly after their publication, Pilgrim's Progress and Keach's War with the Devil (SWF, 6).

Eben and his sister enjoy nearly complete, virtually idyllic freedom in their pursuits, encountering little direction or constraint in their activities, "and hence drew small distinction between activities proper for little girls and those proper for little boys" (SWF, 6). They take most pleasure in role-playing, a pastime in which they improvise a host of selves and explore the possibilities of their imaginations.

> Indoors or out, hour after hour, they played at pirates, soldiers, clerics, Indians, royalty, giants, martyrs, lords and ladies, or any other creature that took their fancy, inventing action and dialogue as they played. Sometimes they would maintain the same role for days, sometimes only for minutes. Eben, especially, became ingenious at

disguising his assumed identity in the presence of adults, while still revealing it clearly enough to Anna, to her great delight, by some innocent gesture or remark (SWF, 6).

The twins carry their games well into the night by lying in bed and continuing their make-believe roles solely through dialogue, or by playing word games of which

they had an infinite variety, ranging from the simple "How many words do you know beginning with S?" or "How many words rhyme with faster?" to the elaborate codes, reverse pronunciations, and homemade languages of their later childhood (SWF, 7).

When Eben and Anna turn ten, their father hires Henry Burlingame III, an unemployed yet extraordinary polymath and autodidact, as their tutor who

had for reasons unexplained not completed his baccalaureate; yet for the range and depth of his abilities he was little short of an Aristotle. . . .who could sing the tenor in a Gesualto madrigal as easily as he dissected a field-mouse. . .(SWF, 7).

He and the twins take to each other so quickly and enthusiastically that Burlingame is soon given full-time supervision of the children, who "he found to be rapid learners, especially apt in natural philosophy, literature, composition, and music; less so in languages, mathematics, and history" (SWF, 7). Burlingame's greatest appeal for the twins arises from the fact that, instead of stifling the imaginative and creative play they have so far been occupied with, he capitalizes on it as a foundation for their studies. Burlingame's pedagogical philosophy rests on three general principles.

The first was that of the three usual motives for learning things--necessity, ambition, and curiosity--simple curiosity

was the worthiest of development, it being the "purest" (in that the value of what it drives us to learn is terminal rather than instrumental), the most conducive to exhaustive and continuing rather than cursory or limited study, and the likeliest to render pleasant the labor of learning (SWF, 8).

Second, he believes that the best method for learning a subject is to teach it to someone, and third, that the sport of teaching and learning should never become associated with certain hours or particular places, lest student and teacher alike (and in Burlingame's system they were much alike) fall into the vulgar habit of turning off their alertness, except at those times and in those places, and thus make by implication a pernicious distinction between learning and other sorts of natural behavior (SWF, 8).

Overall, this type of pedagogical orientation acts contrary to most established forms of schooling, especially that of late-seventeenth century England and in the United States today, and

> in fact constitutes an attack on most of the common educational practices in America, wherein education is by and large separated from life in general. And even though curiosity is often repressed and students rarely teach each other. . .[Eben] does demonstrate that much of his most important learning takes place outside of a classroom, at odd times and places, in long conversations with people who have had diverse experiences of the world (Turner, 106).

This approach to learning captivates the twins every bit as much as their earlier play had, particularly because Burlingame joins in their games as a way to guide their imaginations into active explorations of academic subjects.

> To teach them history he directed their play-acting to historical events; to sustain their interest in geography he produced volumes of exotic pictures and tales of adventure; to sharpen their logical equipment he ran them through Zeno's paradoxes as one would ask riddles, and rehearsed them in Descartes' skepticism as gaily as though the search for truth and value in the universe were a game of Who's Got the Button. He taught them to wonder at a leaf of thyme, a

line of Palestrina, the configuration of Cassiopeia, the scales of a pilchard, the sound of indefatigable, the eloquence of a sorites (SWF, 8).

Though unorthodox by most standards, Burlingame's pedagogical system both fires the twins' imaginations and helps them identity with, and find meaning in, the academic subjects studied as well as showing how what they learn relates to the world around them. Just as important, though his system lacked the discipline of Locke's, who would have all students soak their feet in cold water, it was a good deal more fun (SWF, 8).

The result of Burlingame's organic, dynamic, and playful tutoring is that the twins "grew quite enamored of the world" especially Eben who, growing into an awkward, gangly, sensitive young man,

could be moved to shivers by the swoop of a barn-swallow, to cries of laughter at the lace of a cobweb or the roar of an organ's pedal-notes, and to sudden tears by the wit of Volpone, the tension of a violin-box, or the truth of the Pythagorean Theorem (SWF, 8).

All this abruptly ends when the twins turn eighteen and their father unexpectedly, to Eben and Anna's horror, fires Burlingame and sends Eben off to Magdalene College, Cambridge. However, Eben's educational background, despite all its positive qualities, does nothing to help him succeed in the formal, structured environment of a traditional English university because, although

a good teacher will teach well regardless of the theory he suffers from, and though Burlingame's might seem to have been an unusually attractive one, yet there is no perfect educational method, and it must be admitted that at least partly because of his tutoring Ebenezer took quite the same sort of pleasure in history as Greek mythology and epic

poetry, and made little or no distinction between, say, the geography of the atlases and that of fairy-tales. In short, because learning had been for him such a pleasant game, he could not regard the facts of zoology or the Norman Conquest, for example, with genuine seriousness (SWF, 9).

Without direction at Cambridge, unable to find meaning in the subjects he studies, Eben soon begins to founder. His vivid imagination, sensitivity, and eclectic interests had, so far, been free of constraint and discipline, and though they led him to a great sense of the arbitrariness of the particular real world, they did not endow him with a corresponding realization of its finality. He very well knew, for instance, that "France is shaped like a teapot," but he could scarcely accept the fact that there was in existence at that instance such a place as France, where people were speaking French and eating snails whether he thought about them or not, and that despite the virtual infinitude of imaginable shapes, this France would have to go on resembling a teapot forever. And again, though the whole business of Greece and Rome was unquestionably delightful, he found the notion preposterous, almost unthinkable, that this was the only way it happened: that made him nervous and irritable when he thought of it at all (SWF, 9).

Eben's situation increasingly degenerates. History, science and philosophy seem alien and nonsensical, and though he greatly enjoys reading such works as Paradise Lost, Hudibras, and History of the Buccaneers, he can make no practical academic use of them. By his third year, he has to confront inevitable failure and returning to his father in disgrace. Worse, Burlingame's influence combines with his undisciplined imagination such that Eben is drawn to all possible activities and careers, yet no single profession dominates his interest. Writing to his sister, he bemoanes the fact that

All Roads are fine Roads. . .none more than another . . . .All Trades, all Crafts, all Professions are wondrous, but none is finer that the rest together (SWF, 11-12).

Neither can he hold an opinion or favor a particular philosophy of the world--any position or argument, if presented with sufficient eloquence, moves him.

The man (in short), thanks both to Burlingame and to his natural proclivities, was dizzy with the beauty of the possible; dazzled, he threw up his hands at choice, and like ungainly flotsam, rode half-content the tide of chance (SWF, 12).

Feeling neither fish nor foul, Eben finds himself increasingly constrained by formalized learning and, much like Jacob Horner, he begins slipping into paralysis as he faces the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of reality. Having lost the playful, protean role-playing ability that made up such an important part of his childhood education, his condition worsens to a point where he

sat immobile in the window seat in his nightshirt and stared at the activity in the street below, unable to choose a motion at all even when, some hours later, his untutored bladder suggested one (SWF, 12).

Luckily, before Eben's situation reaches crisis proportions, Burlingame suddenly and unexpectedly bursts in after having disappeared three years previously, and Eben turns to him for advice. But advice, according to Burlingame, is no cure--Eben will have to decide whether or not to take advice and act on it, and making decisions is exactly what he cannot do at present. Instead, Burlingame offers himself as an example that might be helpful and reveals that he, too, has suffered from indecision and

paralysis since childhood. The remedy, he tells Eben, is action, even if taken without consistency or reason,

> for just as a mild siege of smallpox, though it scar a man's face, leaves him safe forever from dying of that ailment, so inconstancy, fickleness, a periodic shifting of enthusiasms, though a vice, may preserve a man from crippling indecision (SWF, 15).

To further convince Eben that he has turned arbitrariness to advantage, Burlingame recounts to him for the first time the story of his life, which also centers largely on education. An orphan since early childhood and, thus, ignorant of his birthdate or even if his name is accurate, Burlingame was raised by a sea captain and, at about thirteen, accompanied him for a couple of years sailing the West Indies. The captain had taught him to read and write, and one day, Burlingame came across a copy of Motteux's Don Quixote; reading it changed his life:

> 'twas the first real storybook I'd read. I grew so entranced by the great Manchegan and his faithful squire as to lose all track of time. . . .
>
> From that day on I was no longer a seaman, but a student. I read every book I could find aboard ship and in port--bartered my clothes, mortgaged my pay for books, on any subject whatever, and reread them over and over when no new ones could be found (SWF, 18-19).

So great did Burlingame's bibliophilia grow that he ignored everything else, eventually angering the captain to the point where he forbade him to read aboard ship. Distraught, Burlingame jumped ship in Liverpool and took to singing in the streets for handouts until he joined a troupe of gypsies, from whom he learned arts, crafts, and trickery. Being the only one among them who could read and write,

Burlingame performed numerous services for them. When the gypsies found out that many books contained stories, the telling and hearing of which was one of their passions, "they began to steal every book they could find for me" (SWF, 18). After they had provided him with a primer, Burlingame taught the gypsies how to read and write, and out of gratitude, they allowed him access to their deepest secrets and fullest confidence. Eventually, when the troupe wound up in Cambridge where he and the gypsies became popular with the students and a few of the dons, Burlingame found his "eyes first opened to the world of learning and scholarship" (SWF, 19), a world which he now longed to join. Penniless and without social connections or formal preparation, Burlingame contrived to get into Trinity College by first becoming Thomas More's servant and then, taking advantage of More's homosexuality, seducing him into a Platonic love affair--all of which Burlingame exploited to the fullest.

> In the two years with More I'd mastered Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, read all of Plato, Tully, Plotin, and divers other of the ancients, and at least perused most of the standard works of natural philosophy. My benefactor made no secret that he looked for me to become as notable a philosopher as Herbert or Cherbury, John Smith, or himself. . .(SWF, 23).

In addition, due to his weakness in math, Burlingame covertly began to court the favors of Issac Newton in a similar way, but unlike More, Newton's pederasty was not Platonic. More and Newton had, for years, been hostile to one another, mainly over the former's zealous regard for,

and Newton's competition with, the published works of Descartes. As Burlingame described it,

> Descartes, you know, is a clever writer, and hath a sort of genius for illustration that lends force to the wildest hypotheses. He is a great hand for twisting the cosmos to fit his theory. Newton, on the other hand, is a patient and brilliant experimenter, with a sacred regard for the facts of nature. Then again, since the lectures De Motu Corporum and his papers on the nature of light have been available, the man always held up to him by his critics is Descartes (SWF, 25).

In time, More and Newton discovered Burlingame's erotic duplicity, both growing furiously jealous and threatening his position as a student. Although Burlingame ignored the matter, preferring to continue his studies, eventually the two dons modified their philosophical stances, reconciled their differences, and

> fell to tearful embraces, and decided to cut me off without a penny, arrange my dismissal from the College, and move into the same lodgings, where, so they declared, they would couple the splendors of the physical world to the glories of the ideal and listen ravished to the music of the spheres (SWF, 26).

With less than a year to go for his degree, Burlingame was ruined at Cambridge and once more adrift in the world. He set off for London where, as he informs Eben,

> your father found me; and playing fickle to the scholar's muse, I turned to you and your dear sister all the zeal I'd erst reserved for my researches. Your instruction became my First Good, my Primary Cause, which lent all else its form and order. And my fickleness is thorough and entire: not for an instant have I regretted the way of my life, or thought wistfully of Cambridge (SWF, 27).

Ending his story, Burlingame then tells Eben not to worry about failing his studies, that he is not cut out to be a scholar anyway and should let himself pursue another

course of action--in particular, that Eben should go with him to London. Unsure of himself in the wide world and fearing his father's wrath, Eben initially balks at the prospect, but Burlingame presents an existential argument in favor of taking action, one that would have thrown a Todd Andrews or a Jacob Horner into despair, yet it gives Eben courage:

> . . .we sit on a blind rock careening through space; we are all of us rushing headlong to the grave. Think you the worms will care, when anon they make a meal of you, whether you spent your moment sighing wigless in your chamber, or sacked the golden town of Montezuma? Lookee, the day's nigh spent; 'tis gone careering into time forever. Not a tale's length past we lined our bowels with dinner, and already they growl for more. We are dying men, Ebenezer: i'faith, there's time for naught but bold resolves (SWF, 27-28).

At this point, Eben's formal education comes to an end, and he begins to evolve into a writer. Still unable to decide what to do to support himself, Burlingame suggests that he become a teacher like himself. Eben protests that he does not know enough about anything to teach it, to which Burlingame replies that this is an advantage, that Eben should even

> raise thy fee for't. . .inasmuch as 'tis no chore to teach what you know, but to teach what you know naught of requires a certain application. Choose a thing you'd greatly like to learn, and straightaway proclaim yourself professor of't . . . . .for just so have I lined my belly these three years. B'm'faith, the things I've taught! The great thing is always to be teaching something to someone--a fig for what or to whom (SWF, 30).

Not entirely reassured, Eben nevertheless accompanies Burlingame to London and, without notifying his family of his plans, occupies himself for several months as a

freelance tutor. However, he only halfheartedly takes up this work, preferring the company of unemployed poets he meets in a pub whose example leads him into trying his hand at poetry. But lacking confidence and subject matter, Eben finds it impossible to compose anything he feels is worthwhile. After several months, Eben establishes a clandestine correspondence with his sister and, eventually, she arranges a visit to London on another pretext. She tells Eben of their father's anguish over his disappearance, and overcome by remorse and concern, he returns with Anna to St. Giles. Trying to reconcile himself with his father, Eben pledges that, if he were sent back to Cambridge, he would make up for his failure. However, the elder Cooke will have none of this and vehemently orders a different kind of education for his son.

> Cambridge my arse! 'Tis Maryland shall be your Cambridge, and a field of sot-weed your library! And for diploma, if ye apply yourself, haply you'll frame a bill of exchange for ten thousandweight of Oronoco! (SWF, 43).

In his father's mind, scholarship provides nothing of real or lasting value, and to rid his son of the softness he thinks due to the influence of Burlingame and Cambridge, sends him back to London as an apprentice clerk to learn how to run Malden. For his part, Eben initially feels mildly enthusiastic about what he romantically fantasizes as the life of a gentleman landlord: leisurely rides about the estate, refined company and conversation, and the chance to indulge in the finer things in life. But once again, he

soon lapses into lethargy and uninterest; after nearly six uneventful years of an indifferent apprenticeship, he has progressed hardly at all in learning his trade. Instead, as before, he is drawn to the self-proclaimed poets and wits who haunt the pub instead of pursuing their degrees or careers. Eben, though still somewhat diffident and unsure of his literary potential, begins to identify more and more with this crowd and

> more ambitious than talented, and yet more talented than prudent who, like his friends in folly. . .had found the sound of Mother English more fun to game with than her sense to labor over, and so rather than applying himself to the pains of scholarship, had learned the knack of versifying, and ground out quires of couplets after the fashion of the day, afroth with Joves and Jupiters, aclang with jarring rhymes, and string-taut with similes to the snapping point (SWF, 3).

Yet Eben still suffers from rolelessness; in fact, he comes to doubt whether he has an identity in any real sense at all. Though he still socializes with his poetaster friends, his insecurity more often leaves him in awkward reticence. Further, Eben's inability to fully participate socially keeps him, though nearly thirty, both naive about life and a virgin. One night, he inadvertently, and partly as the butt of a joke, gets involved in a wager among his friends about whether or not the best poets possess the greatest sexual prowess, and he is forced into spending the night with the whore Joan Toast. But Eben cannot consummate the bet, nor will he pay Joan for her time as

stipulated. Instead, he suddenly and forcefully proclaims his love for Joan and declares that he has now become something more than what he was. Calling her his savior and inspiration, the first glimmerings of Eben's new self begin to emerge as he tells Joan that

> ne'er till you came to me this night have I been a man, but a mere dotting oaf and fop; and ne'er till I embraced thee have I been a poet, but a shallow coxcomb and poetaster! With thee, Joan, what deeds could I not accomplish! What verse not write!
> . . .Scorn me, Joan, and I shall be a splendid fool, a Don Quixote tilting for his ignorant Dulcinea. . . .Love me and I swear to thee this: I shall be Poet Laureate of England! (SWF, 65).

Joan leaves his room, confused and disgusted, but Eben is now fired with resolve and a rapidly forming new identity. Furiously, he takes up quill and composes a song about love and innocence, after which he ponders the nature of his newfound self and asserts

> Faith, 'tis a rare wise man knows who he is: had I not stood firm with Joan Toast, I might well ne'er have discovered that knowledge! Did I, then, make a choice? Nay, for there was no I to make it! 'Twas the choice made me: a noble choice, to prize my love o'er my lust, and a noble choice bespeaks a noble chooser. What am I? What am I? Virgin, sir! Poet, sir! I am a virgin and a poet; less than mortal and more; not a man, but Mankind! I shall regard my innocence as a badge of my strength and proof of my calling . . .(SWF, 66).

What Eben does here is similar to what Todd Andrews and Jake Horner had tried to do with only partial success as they sought for an identity, a role or a mask, that would help them to negotiate reality. However, rather than seeing his newly-discovered selfhood as a mask, Eben immerses himself in his role as writer as if fiction and reality, or

writer and the role of writer, were interchangeable. In effect, then,

> Cooke decides to create his own essence and to hold on to it no matter how adverse conditions might become. . . .What the declaration amounts to is a deliberate fictionalization of his own being. The decision to be a poet must be seen as a decision for an imaginary version of identity, since preceding passages of the novel have established that in reality Cooke has never written. . . .Consequently, the choice itself does not arise from a confrontation with ecperience but rather constitutes an arbitrary creation ex nihilo as well as a creation in which a clear differentiation between the precedence of creation or creator is no longer possible (Putz, 70).

Initially, Eben's new self provides little real power over his immediate circumstances. Joan Toast's pimp, enraged by Eben's steadfast insistence on his love for Joan and consequent refusal to pay, writes Eben's father about his son's irresponsible, immoral life, which causes the elder Cooke to order Eben to sail for Maryland within a week. This plunges Eben into another bout of paralysis, until he lights on a way to solidify and extend his identity as a writer without shirking his filial duties: he writes to Charles Calvert, Lord Baltimore and Lord Proprietary of provincial Maryland, requesting an audience during which he plans to ask for official recognition as poet laureate of Maryland. Doing this not only relieves Eben's distress, it also leads him to a bold new resolve concerning how he will try to live as a poet in the world:

> By Heav'n. . . .I had near slipped once again into the Abyss! Methinks 'tis a peril I am prone to: 'tis my Nemesis, and marks me off from other men. . . .I must fling myself into Life, escape to't, as Orestes to the temple of Apollo. Action be my sanctuary; Initiative be my shield! I

shall smite ere I am smitten; clutch Life by his horns! Patron of poets, thy temple be the entire Great Real World, whereto I run with arms a-stretch: may't guard me from the Pit (SWF, 77-78).

Eben gets his audience with Lord Baltimore and does his best to make a persuasive sales pitch for his desired laureateship, saying that he is by nature, rather than by education or experience, a poet as some men are, by birth, gentlemen. In addition, Eben professes no interest in getting paid for his literary endeavors--this would be, for him, tantamount to pimping for the poet's muse. Instead, he seeks to court the muse's inspiration because,

as the lover craves of his beloved naught save her favor, which to him is reward sufficient, so craves the poet no more from the muse than happy inspiration; and as the fruit of love's labor is a bedded bride, and the sign of't a crimsoned sheet, so the poet's prize is a well-turned verse, and the sign thereof a printed page (SWF, 81).

As if these lofty artistic ideals lack sufficient persuasive force, Eben then appeals to Baltimore's vanity by pointing out the practical advantages that accrue to one who offers patronage to a poet. The historian, Eben says, cannot fully ensure that his subject's legacy will endure because, no matter how painstakingly accurate his account, "nobody reads him but his fellow chroniclers and his students--the one from envy, t'other from necessity" (SWF, 82). In contrast, by virtue of the universal appeal of art, the poet's audience will, inevitably, include the entire world as well as transcend time. Getting carried away with the grandeur of his vision, Eben then speaks of the power a

writer has to immortalize his subject, even to the extent of recreating reality itself to his patron's greater glory.

> But place deeds and doer in the poet's hands, and what comes of't? Lo, the crook'd nose grows straight, the lean shank fleshes out, French pox becomes a bedsore; shady deeds shed their tarnish, bright grow brighter; and the whole is musicked into tuneful rhyme, arresting conceit, and stirring meter, so's to stick in the head like Greensleeves and move the heart like Scripture! (SWF, 82).

Eben proclaims that he wants nothing less than to act as Baltimore's Homer or Virgil, pointing out that the best friend and most dangerous enemy to any man of power is a poet because

> Heroes die, statues break, empires crumble; but your Iliad laughs at time, and a verse from Virgil still rings true as the day t'was struck. Who renders virtue palatable like the poet, and vice abhorrent, seeing he alone provides both precept and example? Who else bends nature to suit his fancy and paints men better or worse to suit his purpose? What sings like lyric, praises like panegyric, mourns like elegiac, wounds like Hudibrastic verse? (SWF, 82).

Eben's idealistic self portrait as a "pure" poet, and his high flown claims for poetry's marvelous and terrible power, allow him to ask for Baltimore's permission to write an epic poem, a Marylandiad, to ensure his patron's everlasting fame. Here, Eben is playing the role of poet as far as he is able, although he has yet to really write anything, let alone a work of some kind upon which to base his claims to artistic achievement. Nevertheless, undeterred by being a writer without a canon, Eben proposes to write a work that would be "An epic to out-epic epics" (SWF, 83), singing the praises of an idyllic Maryland

inhabited by energetic, vital, industrious, and happy people; Maryland itself would be forever known as

> the brightest pearl in the fair crown of England, owned and ruled to the benefit of both by a family second to none in the recorded history of the universal world. . .(SWF, 84).

Lord Baltimore's response to all this is, finally, a temporarily debilitating fit of laughter, and when he recovers himself, he accuses Eben of being far too ignorant of the actual political climate and Maryland's history. Wars, political and religious intrigues, greed, Byzantine conspiracies, impersonations, shifting loyalties and coalitions, legal maneuverings--all these have upset the balance of power and, as a result, the European and colonial situations are in a state of turmoil due to ever-changing alliances, bids for power, and persistent threats of takeovers results in constant uncertainty about who actually holds legal power to own and rule anything. No legitimate deed, writ, or charter can guarantee one's hegemony for long without being challenged in the courts or subverted by fraud. Worse, this constant state of contention leads to a severe strain on the nobles' revenues, including those of Baltimore. In short, Baltimore does not, at the moment, have undisputed rule over Maryland, nor does anyone else. Moreover, the real Maryland, according to Baltimore, is hardly the virtuous, Edenic place that Eben dreams for it suffers from the present turbulence as do all the other colonies. However, Baltimore makes Eben this offer:

. . .hie you to Maryland; put her history out of mind and look you at her peerless virtues. Study them; mark them well! Then, if you can, turn what you see to verse; tune and music it for the world's ears! Rhyme me such a rhyme, Eben Cooke; make me this Maryland, that neither time nor intrigue can rob me of; that I can pass on to my son and my son's son and all the ages of the world! Sing me this song, sir, and my faith, in the eyes of Charles Calvert and of every Christian lover of Beauty and Justice, thou'rt in sooth Poet and Laureate of the Province! And should e'er it come to pass. . .that one day the entire complexion of things alters. . .then, by Heav'n, I shall confer you the title in fact, lettered on sheepskin, beribboned in satin, signed by myself, and stamped for the world to gape at with the Great Seal of Maryland! (SWF, 103).

Eben is understandably ecstatic at this turn of affairs. Baltimore winds up the audience by hastily scribing a commission for Eben to write the Marylandiad as his poet laureate and sends him on his way. Thus, with virtually no experience as a writer, no publications or public acknowledgement to his credit, and no credentials other that the tentative authority conferred by the document he carries, Eben prepares to leave for America. But Baltimore's commission does more than add a title to Eben's name--it has given an official stamp (albeit of uncertain legal validity), an external and objective status, to the self he wishes to be. In effect, the commission makes the man by making real what until then Eben only imaginatively pretended to be, and this changes him in ways that are immediately visible to his old cronies at the pub. To them, he is another person, totally different from the awkward, nearly paralyzed Eben they remember from the night of the wager. One calls him "Lazarus untombed"; another says that

he seems "thawed" and that "'tis not the Eben Cooke of Old!" (SWF, 105). Eben readily agrees and refers to his earlier self in the third person as someone who has died and been reborn.

> The truth of the matter is, sirs. . .he perished in childbirth the night of the wager and never learned that what he'd been suffering was the pains of labor--the more intense, for that he'd carried the fetus since childhood and was brought to bed of't uncommon late (SWF, 105-6).

The commission that Eben bears, along with his determination to act out the parts of poet and virgin, are enough confirmation of his new self--thinking himself poet, and having the paper to corroborate it, make it so for him, regardless of the dearth of written work he has to show. Unlike Todd Andrews or Jake Horner, Eben finds roleplaying an exhilarating experience, largely because he does not fully realize the distinction between the role he plays and whatever might be his real self. Therefore, unlike his predecessors, Eben does not, or will not, recognize the tenuous and limited nature of the identity he has pretty much fabricated out of whole cloth, a role based on his rich, imaginative childhood which he works to keep intact in the face of hard realities by living out his idealized version of the richly imaginative world of the writer. This naivete, reinforced by his insistence on playing the sexual innocent in the world, sets the stage for Eben's real education as he begins his journey to the New World.

One lesson that Eben eventually learns is that he cannot remain innocent once he enters, and directly participates in, life and reality; another lesson is that nothing in reality remains static, nor can any action, even the act of writing, fully comprehend and give shape to the ever-changing, ever-wider realities of the world. But these lessons do not come quickly or easily. From the moment Eben sets out for Maryland, even before he boards ship, to the end of the novel, he is caught up in a complex, bewildering web of circumstances, impossible coincidences, contradictions, and intrigues that undermine or contract any interpretation Eben makes of reality because any and all version he encounters seem equally valid. Eben finds a world populated by characters who appear, disappear, and reappear, often in a variety of roles and disguises such that he no longer knows for certain whether someone is actually who he or she claims or impersonating someone else or both.

Eben's teacher through this education in life is, once again, Henry Burlingame, who demonstrates abilities even more impressive than those he displayed earlier in Eben's life.

Burlingame not only manages to negotiate and survive in the tempestuous and dangerous world, he actually thrives in its chaos and uncertainty, often seeming to be an authority unto himself working on both sides of opposing political

forces. A master of disguise, impersonation, and fraud, Burlingame is a consummate protean figure who, like reality itself, is always something more than what he appears to be, yet he never remains the same for very long.

Burlingame teaches Eben about the tenuous, ephemeral realities of the world through example. For instance, just before Eben embarks for America, Burlingame appears in disguise and tells him that people are never what they truly seem to be, "especially in Maryland, where friends may change their colors like tree frogs" (SWF, 131). Their conversation then turns to the poem about innocence which Eben composed the night of the wager. Animated by the interest shown in it by the disguised Burlingame, Eben is drawn into a heated discussion about the difference between what he sees as the poem's "merit" and what Burlingame calls its "interest" value. Eben assumes that Burlingame refers only to some sort of refined academic appreciation or that he has read more into the text than was put into it, to which Burlingame replies,

> Nay, ye mistake me. . . . 'Tis no mere matter of schooling, though none's the worse for a little education. However experience is what I mean; knowledge of the world, both as stored in books and learnt from the hard text of life. Your poem's a spring of water, Master Laureate--'sheart, for that matter everything we meet is a spring, is't not? That the bigger the cup we bring to't, the more we fetch away, and the more springs we drink from, the bigger grow our cup (SWF, 134).

For Burlingame, as Barth's foil to Eben, writing and written texts can, at best, capture only a partial aspect, a

limited and biased version, of reality--whether texts are experienced by readers or writers, they are like the world and the self in their open-ended, ultimately ineffable nature. Eben resists this notion, claiming that memory is the unshakable foundation that guarantees continuity and concrete meaning in life and acts as

> the house of Identity, the Soul's dwelling place! Thy memory, my memory, the memory of the race: 'tis the constant from which we measure change; the sun. Without it, all were Chaos right enough (SWF, 138).

But Burlingame denies this, pointing out how memory is selective, erratic, relative from one person to the next, and tends to color what it holds onto. At last revealing his identity to Eben, Burlingame says that, in his view, memory is so unreliable that "all assertions of thee and me, e'en to oneself, are acts of faith, impossible to verify" (SWF, 141). This idea applies to all things, even those about which Eben feels most certain, including Burlingame's identity.

> 'Tis but to say what oft I've said to you ere now, Eben: your true and constant Burlingame lives only in your fancy, as doth the painted order of the world. In fact you see a Heraclitean flux: whether 'tis we who shift and alter and dissolve; or you whose lens changes color, field, and focus; or both together. The upshot is the same, and you may take it or reject it. If you'd live in the world, my friend, you must dance to some other fellow's tune or call your own and try to make the whole world step to't (SWF, 357).

These notions rattle Eben's faith in his ability to assert an underlying stability and meaning in reality, but his beliefs receive their greatest blow when he learns that

his commission as Maryland's laureate and, therefore, his sense of self are doubly fraudulent. That is, Eben already understands that his position as Lord Baltimore's poet is tentative, waiting until colonial politics stabilize in Baltimore's favor. However, Burlingame confesses that he often worked for Baltimore, sometimes disguising himself as his employer, and for security reasons, receiving strangers to sound them out. Burlingame had done just this on the day of Eben's audience; therefore, his commission is both tentative and by proxy. Crestfallen, plagued by doubt because the basis for his identity as a writer is more fiction than fact, Eben begins to despair. But Burlingame tries to put the matter into perspective, saying,

> Ah, now, what doth it matter? . . .Besides, Baltimore heard and seconded all I said. Your commission hath his entire blessing, I swear (SWF, 365).

Chaos and uncertainty are inescapable facts of life in Burlingame's view, but rather than sink into hopelessness and numbed paralysis, he insists on taking action and acting as a writer of the world.

> One needs make and seize his soul, and then cleave fast to't, or go babbling in the corner; one must choose his gods and devils on the run, quill his own name upon the universe, and declare, "'Tis I, and the world stands such a way!" One must assert, assert, assert, or go screaming mad. What other course remains? (SWF, 373).

Burlingame calls his philosophy of life cosmophilism, an all-embracing, wholehearted rejoicing in life's multeities. Where Jake Horner was immobilized by cosmopoly,

Burlingame finds exuberant cause for celebration and a source of possibility and creative energy, declaring

> I love no part of the world, as you might have guesses, but the entire parti-colored whole, with all her poles and contradictories (SWF, 529).

He then tells Eben that his love is literal as well as metaphysical and points to the eroticism of Greek and Roman myths and writers who tapped sexuality in the widest terms possible as a wellspring for inspiration, telling Eben

> Ye say that women are oft the stuff o' poetry, but in fact 'tis the great wide world the poet sings of: God's whole creation is his mistress, and he hath for her this selfsame love and boundless curiosity (SWF, 354).

In contrast to Eben's oath to limit his sexual interests to purely literary ideals and forms of expression, Burlingame's cosmic love knows no bounds. He loves indiscriminately, uninhibitedly, and physically couples with the universe.

> I love the whole world, sir, and make love to it! I have sown my seed in men and women, in a dozen sorts of beasts, in the barky boles of trees and the honeyed wombs of flowers; I have dallied on the black breast of the earth, and clipped her fast; I have wooed the waves of the sea, impregnated the four winds, and flung my passion skywards to the stars! . . . 'Tis the only way for a poet to look at the world (SWF, 355).

Later, Burlingame again professes his enthusiasm for the world in its entirety, calling his cosmophilism "my new religion for thwarted seekers after Truth" (SWF, 762). But he is not entirely satisfied with his situation, as is evident when he declares

> I am Suitor of Totality, Embracer of Contraries, Husband to all Creation, the Cosmic Lover! Henry More and Isaac Newton

are my pimps and aides-de-chambre; I have known my great Bride part by splendrous part, and have made love to her disjecta membra, her sundry brilliant pieces; but I crave the Whole--the tenon in the mortise, the jointure of polarities, the seamless universe.
. . .I have no parentage to give me place and aim in Nature's order: very well--I am outside Her, and shall be Her lord and spouse! (SWF, 536-7)

Despite his resolve, Burlingame finds that his greatest regret results from being cut off from his past, without roots or knowledge about his parentage. Thus, the very source of his independence and the basis of his cosmophilism is also the point of his greatest sadness.

Who grieves for me, prithee, or cares a fig be I fop or philosopher? Who sets me goals to turn my back on, or values to thumb my nose at? In fine, sir, what business have I in the world, what place to flee from, what credentials to despise? Had I a home I'd likely leave it; a family alive or dead I'd likely scorn it, and wander a stranger in alien towns. But what a burden and despair to be a stranger to the world at large, and have no link with history! 'Tis as if I'd sprung de novo like a maggot out of meat, or dropped from the sky. Had I the tongue of angels I ne'er could tell you what a loneliness it is (SWF, 143).

Burlingame's freedom, his all-embracing philosophy of life, and his masterful manipulation of circumstances present a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it turns out that much of his eroticism is mere boast, severely qualified by the fact that his sexual equipment is so acutely underdeveloped that he is incapable of physical love in any conventional way. On the other, he realizes that his protean ability to assume any identity for himself is, basically, paradoxical.

As long as he establishes no irrevocable links with the past and the world, he is free to embrace experience and existence in their totality and to choose or even create any

variety of personal forms. But at the same time his freedom makes him utterly diffuse and somehow nullifies him as an individual person. Embracing everything, he eventually embraces nothing. . .(Putz, 74).

All this indicates that student and teacher are tied by parallel quests for identity that center in some way on writing. Eben seeks to actualize himself as a writer by stubbornly proclaiming his status as a poet and persisting with writing his epic Marylandiad, and by preserving his innocence, particularly his virginity, in the face of recurrent assaults by experience. Burlingame pursues his own genealogy and, simultaneously, a cure for his sexual inadequacy, and he does so, not by writing, but by recovering texts. That is, in the course of tracking down fragments of sensitive documents vital for resolving some of the political strife in Maryland, Burlingame discovers that the reverse sides of the writings, the pages of which are scattered in various parts of the colonies, contain excerpts of Captain John Smith's secret journal, whose scandalous entries make reference to someone who might be Burlingame's grandfather. In addition, he stumbles upon other clues, the most important of which is his grandfather's private journal. These two bawdy texts, when assembled, rewrite some of the more sacred early American myths, such as the "true" version of the story whereby Captain Smith saves himself and his company, in this case by using an ingenious technique to break Pocahantas' amazingly resistant hymen, to her and her father's everlasting gratitude. But Burlingame

is concerned mostly with how these texts establish his family identity as well as offering clues to Smith's Magic Eggplant Ritual which promises to provide a prosthetic remedy for his impotence.

In the end, neither character entirely succeeds at fulfilling the goals of his quest. Eben, disillusioned with the real colony and the people he encounters, turns away from his idealistic visions. Instead of an idyllic land, he discovers only "poor shitten Maryland" (SWF, 318), and instead of the panegyric fiction Marylandiad, he turns his skills to writing a long, scathing satirical piece, The Sot-Weed Factor. In the process, Eben comes to see his innocence and virginity as self-indulgent self-deceptions. Through his naivete, Eben blunders and loses Malden, regaining it only as part of a deal that requires him to marry Joan Toast. However, she is no longer the strong, willful prostitute of Eben's earlier days in London--she is wasted by opium addiction and venereal disease, and Eben can no longer use his literary imagination to turn her into a goddess. Instead, he learns compassion, guilt, and responsibility for the misery he has caused for himself and others. Eben acknowledges that he suffers

> the general condition of things, for which he saw himself answerable--and that the pain of loss, however great, was as nothing beside the pain of responsibility for it. The fallen suffered from Adam's fall, he wanted to explain; but in that knowledge--which the Fall itself vouchsafed him--how more must Adam have suffered! (SWF, 751)

But Eben achieves, however ironically or belatedly, at least part of his dream of becoming an acknowledged writer. That is, for thirty-four years, he lives at Malden without giving much more thought to writing; however, without his knowledge, his satiric attack on Maryland had long since been published in England, gaining a wider audience each year. In fact, Eben's reputation grows so much that the real Lord Baltimore eventually offers him a legitimate commission as Poet and Laureate of Maryland. Yet this has some surprising effects for Eben in regard to his intention in writing the piece.

> The satire that has replaced the epic expresses all of Eben's bitterness, his disillusion with Maryland and its people; the poem is read, accepted, and approved because its very satire is interpreted as proof of the culture of the state, for how could barbarism cultivate such artful self-criticism? His fame leaves Ebenezer more isolated that before, perhaps for the first time in his life deeply aware of the real difference between himself and his fellows (Lemon, 194).

Burlingame also learns that loss accompanies gain. He discovers that he is half-Indian, finds that the remedy for his impotence works, and that he holds a unique position from which to quell rising racial tensions in colonial Maryland. But having discovered himself and, thus, establishing a concrete connection with the world, he

> finds the one identity that substantiates him as a person, but he loses touch with the all-inclusive possibilities which constituted his freedom. There can be no satisfying solution to such a quandary, a fact of which Burlingame himself is aware (Putz, 74).

The lesson for the reader resulting from all these changes and revisions of personal and colonial history is to confound the authority that history, as a form of order and meaning derived from written texts, has in the way of truth value. History is the set of stories that we tell ourselves to explain who we are, but ultimately, Barth shows that

> we cannot place too much unquestioning confidence in the documents that have come down to us. For they too are versions, and as such dependent on the limitations of the particular categories that the particular historian or commentator used. There is a great deal of story-telling in the book, resulting in a multiplicity of versions. . .suggesting that history is, at the very least, two-faced. All documents are to some extent fictions. . . (Tanner, 242).

In the book's final section, an apology to readers, the "author" pleads guilty to dallying with and seducing Clio, the historian's muse who, like Joan toast, "was already a scarred and crafty trollop when the author found her." But he justifies his transgression claiming that he joins others of his kind, including "the noblest in poetry, prose, and politics" (SWF, 805). History in any form is inevitably disfigured because

> we all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest; the happenings of former times are a clay in the present moment that will-we, nill-we, the lot of us must accept. Thus Being does make Positivists of us all (SWF, 805).

As a parting ironic ambiguity, Barth obfuscates the "author's" real identity by, first, using the novel and its central characters to redefine the historical Ebenezer Cooke

and his literary endeavors, which allows Barth some openness:

> The author is primarily rebutting all historical versions and impositions; recognizing the constraints and ravages visited on man by his involvement in the world, the book itself is an assertion of freedom from external conditioning (Tanner, 246).

Second, this and the relationship between Barth and the fictional Ebenezer Cooke lead to some confusion about whom the authorial voice in the novel belongs to.

> Since the title of Ebenezer's satire and that of Barth's novel are the same, and since we are told that Ebenezer writes of his own experiences which are also the subject of Barth's novel, it seems as though The Sot-Weed Factor is one of those novels Barth so much admired in which the characters become the authors of the novels they are in (Kennard, 73).

Idiosyncratic versions of history; the ultimate incomprehensibility of reality; the writer's place in the world; the uncertain validity of belief systems and texts; the shadowy links between author, character, and text--all these elements continue to play a central role as parts of the writer's (and, consequently, the reader's) education in Barth's next book, Giles Goat-Boy. That George, the main character, has a story in which education is the dominant concern is apparent from the start. First, George sets out to become a Grand Tutor, a prophet, whose purpose is to teach humanity important and transcendent lessons about life. Second, Goerge does not undergo a conventional kind of schooling. Instead, in the allegorical world of the story, the world is literally a university. For example, real life

political states are now individual colleges making up a worldwide university; East-West power blocs are East Campus and West Campus; World War II is Campus Riot II; the Cold War is the Quiet Riot; Capitalism and Communism are Private Research Economics and Student Unionism; and the human race is divided into a student body and an administration. In addition, the state--or university--is inextricably tied to various religious and philosophical systems: Nazis and Jews are Bonifacists Moishians; salvation is attained through Graduation; the Last Judgment is a matter of Passing or Failing; God is the Founder, and Eden the Founder's Pomological Test Grove; and the Old Testament is the Old Syllabus.

An orphan known only by the name Billy Bockfuss, George has been raised, literally, as a goat by Max Spielman, an exiled Moishian polymath and political figure who lives as Senior Goatherd on Ag-Hill. For fourteen years, George slowly comes to learn of, and accept, his humanity through observing the various people who pass by, such as lovers trysting in the pastures and a kindly woman who uses children's fables to teach him to read. Not surprisingly, George's favorite story is "Billy Goats Gruff," which he sees as an allegory for heroism and morality. But George's most influential teacher is Max, "the great Mathematical Psycho-Proctologist and former Minority Leader in the College Senate" (GGB, 5). A frustrated writer, Max fed his

literary-mathematical masterpiece, The Riddle of the Sphincters, to the goats. However, he continues his scientific and philosophical research using the goats as subjects because, in his view, "Der goats is humaner than der man, und der men is goatisher that der goats" (GGB, 7). Max's greatest discoveries come while tending the herd, during which

> he founded the sciences of analogical proctoscopy and psychosymbolic cosmography, developed the Rectilineal Index for "distinguishing, arithmatically and forever, the sheep from the goats" (GGB, 7).

But the most important fruit of his work is Spielman's Law of Cyclology,

> his last and farthest-reaching contribution to man's understanding of the University. . . .In three words Max Spielman synthesized all the fields which thitherto he'd browsed in brilliantly one by one--showed the "spincter's riddle" and the mystery of the Universe to be the same. Ontogeny recapitulates cosmogeny--what is it but to say that proctoscopy repeats hagiography? (GGB, 7).

Gradually, over seven years, Max teaches George about the history and nature of the University until, one day, George realizes that

> Great doors had quietly been opened; there stretched the wide campus and everything to be learned. But quite so, I had to learn everything, and those doors I felt were open now for good . . .(GGB, 29).

George develops high ideals which, combined with his great hunger for knowledge and Max's lessons, lead him to aspire to be a hero, largely because he suspects that he might be the Grand Tutor of prophesy, the GILES: the Grand-tutorial Ideal, Laboratory Eugenical Specimen produced by a

union between a human female and WESCAC, the supercomputer that runs West Campus. This concludes the more or less formal element of George's schooling and sets the stage for his subsequent education in life through a series of adventures as he attempts to fulfill his quest on West Campus. What follows is a plot every bit as complex as that in The Sot-Weed Factor: myriad characters come and go, and many versions of reality vie for dominance, not the least of which come from George's competitors for the mantle of Grand Tutor, all of this influencing his perceptions of what is or is not true but never swaying him from pursuing his quest. Like Todd Andrews and Jake Horner, George finds everything ambiguous, and although he

> proceeds to question his world in a reasonable manner, but although many different ways of life are offered to him, there seems to be no reason for choosing one rather than another (Kennard, 74).

In the effort to find meaning in, and complete, the written "assignments" given him by WESCAC, which are "prerequisites" for proving his Grand Tutorhood, he discovers what seem insurmountable obstacles in the sense that

> the more George attempts to understand his tasks the more interpretations of each become possible. The ambiguity of language prevents and certainty of their nature. . . .Language, as always in Barth's Post-existential novels, makes exact meaning impossible. So George develops two theses: that damnation, or failure and salvation, or passage are two different things; that "failure is passage." Neither of these succeeds. . . .There is no answer to be found, no meaning in an irrational world (Kennard, 75).

Complicating Goerge's attempts is the mysterious, shape-shifting character Harold Bray, who always manages to be one step ahead of everyone as he competes, usually with success, for the title of Grand Tutor. But he, too, manages to teach George something--most particularly, that versions of reality are no more than versions and that conflicting claims to the Truth can have equal validity. Like Henry Burlingame (who, not surprisingly, shares the same initials), Bray appears and disappears at will and demonstrates that he knows the ins and outs of the University better than anyone else.

As is evident, George's story concerns education in a very special sense in that his struggles to attain the status of Grand Tutor and free studentdom from the constraints of institutionalized education (which is actually the constaints of the state) depend, finally, on his becoming a writer, of sorts, in order to pass on his teachings, his insights into Truth and the meaning of The University. But George is no conventional author. Rather than directly writing a text, he sets his story down on reels of magnetic tape and feeds them into WESCAC which may or may not really exist.

The Revised New Syllabus, as George's story of his life and education to what he believes might be Grand Tutorhood, is equivalent to a revised New Testament which embodies his teachings for the benefit of followers who organize as a

religious sect. Like Jesus, George does not physically enscribe his lessons, and as in most religious movements, his followers fall out among themselves over conflicting interpretations of "The Word."

The original title of the book establishes the text's claim to be "that most ancient and most unapproachable of literary forms, a sacred book, a scripture" (McConnell, 141) that plays on

> Our modern. . .fascination with the figure of the artist as prophet and as exemplary sufferer, and our obsesssion with the idea of the literary work as at once artifact and a record of a life. . .(McConnell, 142).

In McConnell's view, Barth does this as a way to explore how fictions can be made into self-reflecting works that teach important aspects about the creation of fictions, and that do so with a larger purpose in mind.

> For Barth is not only attempting to write a fiction which explains the philosophical and cultural underpinnings of the fictive enterprise; he is performing the more serious and dangerous task of constructing, before the reader's eyes, as it were, a primal fiction, a myth which will take its place beside the other great myths on which our idea of covilization itself is founded (McConnell, 142).

On its surface, the parodic, burlesque, and comic aspects of Giles would seem to belie its status as a sacred text, but for McConnell, Barth manages to accomplish this through, rather than in spite of, these things by demanding that the reader understand and confront the book's nature:

> A sacred book. . .is not only a book which tells a story. It is a book which insists upon the transcendent, immanent divinity of its existence, a book which. . .can only be effectively read if we accept tis insistence that the text itself is a central, indeed an indispensable,

aspect of human life. This is the claim which makes sacred texts sacred. . .and it is also the claim, albeit blasphemous, of Giles Goat Boy, a claim whose frivolity only serves to reemphasize its fundamental seriousness (McConnell, 142).

Therefore, like Todd Andrews, Jake Horner, and Eben Cooke, George's story comes as an imperative act, a central part of his attempt to make sense of the world through writing and a way for him to share what he has learned with his followers and readers. Barth's parody of traditional religious and archetypal myths acts, not simply to distort or poke fun at fundamental and serious mythologies; instead,

the novel presents itself as an effort to rediscover the power of those myths, a concerted attempt to revivify, of not the specific content, then at least the determinative form of those legends which have always figured most prominently in the genesis of civilization (McConnell, 142).

In effect, then, Barth appears to do all this to "exhaust" the potential of sacred texts in order to recycle the essential qualities of mythological archetypes and to make them more responsive to the modern, post-existential world, a world characterized by a bewildering array of facts, but with no overriding Truth that can claim uncontested hegemony. Giles, then,

may be said to attempt to force man to look at himself, to look inward, and ask again the age-old questions about identity, and the limits and uses of man's knowledge (Turner, 118).

But Barth is relentless in this for, in addition to reworking the explanatory power of myth in order to subvert and resurrect it, he undermines the meaning and truth value of anything stated in the book. That is, the reader must

actively and continuously engage with multiple and contending interpretations from the start. Barth wraps the book in tissues of doubt, even before getting to the main story, as to who the real writer is and, therefore, how the book should be read, because the novel is framed by a series of writings within writings, fictions within fictions, that continually revise and undermine the text in question. The first thing encountered in the book is a publisher's disclaimer, written by the editor-in-chief, explaining that the novel's title has been changed to Giles Goat-Boy from what appears on the submitted title page which reads

R.N.S.
The
Revised New Syllabus
of
George Giles
Our Grand Tutor
Being the Autobiographical and Hortatory Tapes
Read Out at New Tammany College to His Son
Giles (,) Stoker
By the West Campus Automatic Computer
And by Him Prepared for the Furtherment of the Gilesian
Curriculum

Then, the chief editor provides a thumbnail history concerning the various and conflicting denials made concerning the text's author:

> The professor and quondam novelist whose name appears on the title-page (our title page, not the one following his prefatory letter) denies that the work is his, but "suspects" it to be fictional. . . .His own candidate for its authorship is one Stoker Giles or Giles Stoker--whereabouts unknown, existence questionable--who appears to have claimed in turn 1) that he too was but a dedicated editor, the text proper having been written by a certain automatic computer, and 2) that excepting a few "necessary basic artifices" the book is neither fable nor fictionalized history, but literal truth. And the computer, the

mighty "WESCAC"--does it not too disclaim authorship? It does (GGB, ix).

According to this editor, the novel has raised such quarrelling among the editorial staff over whether or not to publish it that he requested all four of the editors involved to submit written statements expressing their views; these are included without signatures following the publisher's disclaimer.

Editor A condemns the novel on moral grounds, saying that its author transgresses accepted forms of rebellion and flouts contemporary standards. Seeing publishing as a moral enterprise, he takes a rather paternalistic position and prefers those popular novelists who

> do no harm as they line our pockets and their own. They are not difficult; they do not astonish; they rebel along traditional lines, shock us in customary ways, and teach us what we already know. Their concerns are modest, their literary voice and manner are seldom wild. . .in straightforward prose they reveal to us how it is to belong to certain social or cultural minorities . . . .Such novels, I conceive, are the printed dreams of that tiny faction of our populace which buys and reads books, and the true dwelling-places of art and profit. In serving the dream we prevent the deed: vicariously the reader debauches, and is vicariously redeemed. . .(GGB, xi).

Doubting the author's sanity and moral sensibility, and fearing his influence both as a novelist and as a college professor, Editor A urges that the text be rejected and the author's dean and departmental chair be informed about the dangers of exposing young student minds to such devious and depraved material. But Editor B, a new employee, accuses Editor A of being so vehemently against publication only

because his daughter ran away "from college with a bearded young poetry student who subsequently abandoned her, pregnant, in order to devote himself to sheep-farming" (GGB, xii) and the writing of romantic poetry. Yet, he agrees that the novel suffers from occasional lapses of literary and moral taste. Nevertheless, in the end, he decides in favor of publication for the practical reason that its author seems to appeal to a slowly growing audience of

> penniless literature students, professors in second-rate colleges, and a couple of far-out critics. Giles Goat-Boy isn't likely to make anybody rich, but if we can saturate this little group it should at least pay its own way, and may even redeem our losses on the man's other books. One day those penniless students may be pennied enough; those professors may rise to more influential positions; the far-out critics may turn out to have been prophets. . .(GGB, xiii).

Editor C initially dismisses both moral issues and the possibility that the book might be a good financial gamble. For him, these are irrelevant to the main interests of publishing. He argues against publication on the grounds that the book is simply poorly written: the story is ridiculous; the characters monstrous, unrealistic, or inconsistent; the dialogue awkward and monotone; the style bombastic; and the theme, wit, and psychology displayed valueless. He compares the novel and its author to syphilis, crabgrass, and cancer and declares that, all things considered, the novel is not worth the trouble nor the expense, concluding with an ad hominem attack on the author as a poor risk who

will merely grow older and crankier, more quirksome and less clever; his small renown will pass, his vitality will become mere doggedness, or fail altogether. His dozen admirers will grow bored with him, his employers will cease to raise his salary and to excuse his academic and social limitations; his wife will lose her beauty, their marriage will founder, his children will grow up to be ashamed of their father. I see him at last alone, unhealthy, embittered, desperately unpleasant, perhaps masturbative, perhaps alcoholic or insane, if not a suicide. We all know the pattern (GGB, xv).

Finally, Editor D proclaims that he does not care whether or not the book is published. Despairing and full of anxiety, he seems to have found a bitter lesson of some kind in the book, some sort of epiphany that mysteriously opens him to a grim revelation leading to his subsequent resignation from the staff and eventual disappearance.

Better victimized by Knowledge than succored by Ignorance; to be Wisdom's prey is to be its ward. Deceived, we see our self-deception; suffering the lie, we come to the truth, and in the knowledge of our failure hope to Pass (GGB, xvi).

In these prefatory disclaimers, debates, and tirades, Barth seems to be doing something more than just having fun at the expense of professional editors and publishers. For one thing, these opening pieces allow him to anticipate a number of negative criticisms and, in doing so, incorporate them as a part of the text--accusations that he is too academic, too silly, or too longwinded now become integral parts of the book. For another, the diversity of opinions expressed establish an array of disparate and contradictory interpretations, any one of which might, or might not, be valid. Finally, the reader is given a set of conflicting

possibilities and expectations to wrestle with even before getting to the story proper.

Barth also manages to undermine the book's credibility in another way because it turns out that the text to which the editors respond has undergone a number of modifications--not only has the title been changed, but the chief editor reveals in a footnote that the text itself has been tampered with.

> In the absence of any response from the author, whom we repeatedly invited to discuss the matter with us, we have exercised as discreetly as possible our contractual prerogative to alter or delete certain passages clearly libelous, obscene, discrepant, or false. Except for these few passages (almost all brief and of no great importance) the text is reproduced as it was submitted to us (GGB, xv).

But the editor's assurance that textual changes are minor and have not substantially disrupted the novel's meaning grow troubling when considered along with the cover letter provided by the "author," who refers to himself only as "J.B.," which follows the editorial statements. He insists that the book was given to him by someone else and that the novel's transcript sat for a long time beside one of his works in progress which, one day, "got mixed with it by a careless janitor" (GGB, xxix). Further, J.B. also admits to taking minor editorial liberties with the typescript by making

> only certain emendations and rearrangements which the Author's imperfect mastery of our idiom and his avowed respect for my artistic judgment encouraged me to make (GGB, xxx-xxxi).

More important than these supposedly small changes is the fact that the reader is again reminded of the disclaimers made by the alleged authors and never certain about who the real writer of the book is. J.B. claims he suffered from writer's block while working on a novel titled The Seeker, that he never will finish, and insists that a mysterious, bizarre, caprine person identifying himself as Stoker Giles (or Giles Stoker) presented him with the typescript of The Revised New Syllabus. J.B. confesses he is not entirely sure that he clearly remembers what transpired next, as if he had fallen into some sort of soporific daze at the time, but according to him, Stoker also denied authorship and claimed that the book was not a novel, asserting that the text is the collected stories and lessons of his father, a self-proclaimed Grand Tutor named George Giles who never actually wrote down or published his teachings. But Stoker (or Giles) found himself beset with problems when he first set out to compile this material: his father's followers had split into hostile factions, and his initial plan to put together a book based on their reminiscences of George resulted in "so many discrepancies, even contradictions. . .he abandoned that project" (GGB, xxvii). He then tried to feed the disparate texts into a supercomputer called WESCAC with little success until the machine itself somehow revealed that its storage banks

contained a rich cache of material read into it by George. In addition,

> the machine declared itself able and ready. . .to assemble, collate, and edit this material, interpolate all verifiable data from other sources such as the memoirs then in hand, recompose the whole into a coherent narrative from the Grand Tutor's point of view, and "read it out" in an elegant form in its automatic printers!. . . After several false starts and program adjustments it produced a first-person chronicle of the life and teachings of the Grand Tutor, a text so faithful to the best evidence and polished in its execution that young Stoker needed only to "change a date or a place-name here and there," as he vowed, to call it finished (GGB, xxvii).

The product, however, did not receive universal acceptance among the Gilesians--many of those who had developed their own interpretations of the Grand Tutor's teachings found that The Revised New Syllabus contradicted their interpretations of George's teachings, which led to bitter infighting and schisms.

All these prefatory pieces leave the reader in more doubt than certainty about the nature of the text in question. Is it a novel or a testament? How much have the editors, J.B., Stoker Giles, and WESCAC corrupted the text? To what degree has the inadvertent mingling of J.B. and Stoker Giles' typescripts confused the storyline? Who is the real author? Should the story be read as a multi-author piece? Is J.B. John Barth? Has WESCAC sacrificed textual authenticity for narrative consistency? How fully did George Giles tell his story in the tapes fed into WESCAC? How trustworthy are the testimonies of the Grand Tutor's followers?

Any answers to these questions must remain permanently suspended because nothing arises in the story itself to help resolve textual and authorial ambiguities. In addition, the novel's endframe compounds these problems--in fact, the last sections of the book amplify doubt in several ways. The story is immediately followed by a "Posttape," allegedly a recorded epilogue by George Giles in which he tries to bring the story of his education and pursuit of Grand Tutorhood to closure by describing the events that transpire twelve years after the story's end. But the reader is left wondering about George's real status at the end.

> The reader never discovers whether or not George is in fact a grand tutor, and this, of course, is Barth's illustration of one of the premises of the Post-existential world that everything is ultimately subjective; we can interpret the facts anyway we choose. The novel is to the reader as the Bible is, for example, to anyone who attempts to understand it (Kennard, 76).

In the end, he confesses that his mission to enlighten the Student Body is doomed to fail because what he has to teach cannot be taught or neatly packaged into a set of philosophical or theological prescriptions. His mystic knowledge as Grand Tutor, learned in the classroom of experience, defies rationality and is beyond the power of language to comprehend or simplify for direct, unadulterated transmission to others seeking the truth. Lacking faith that his teachings or the text he records will benefit his students, he accepts the inevitable truth that what he offers in his instruction and his book will lose meaning.

He sees his followers as eventually falling away from the faintest comprehension of the ineffable truth that he can understand only implicitly but cannot communicate:

> I go this final time to teach the unteachable, and shall fail. A handful will attend me, and they in vain. The rest will snore in the aisles as always, make paper airplanes from my lecture notes, break wind in reply to my questions. . . .they will not remember who ordered their schedules out of chaos and put right their college. . .and set down this single hope of studentdom, The Revised New Syllabus (GGB, 707).

George accepts the final lesson that his failure to transmit the truth through language, through producing a text, is an inherent quality of language itself because his knowledge of the truth "transcends the limitations of time; as all-inclusive 'mystical' truth it resists the reductiveness of language" (Harris, 100).

Following this is a "Postscript to the Posttape," supposedly written by J.B., who call the "Posttape" spurious and claims that it must be the work of someone wanting to sabotage the Grand Tutor's efforts. Pointing out what he sees as a number of textual inconsistencies between the "Posttape" and the story, including punctuation and the kind of tape used, J.B. alleges that the epilogue must be the product of an imposter. Nevertheless, he feels obliged to include it, but the reasons he gives for this raise even more doubts about the validity of the text as well as about the care he took with the typescript that Stoker left in his care.

I include the "Posttape" with the manuscript proper only because I found it (much soiled and creased) stuck among the pages left in my trust. . .and feel unauthorized to delete what he so magnanimously let stand. That is, if he even knew of its existence; it was folded crudely and inserted between two random pages, as though in hast. Quite possibly it is the work of some crank or cynic among Stoker Giles' contemporaries; indeed, the typescript languished unguarded so long on my desk, the "Posttape" might even be some former colleague's idea of a practical joke (GGB, 709).

Finally, this piece is followed by a brief "Footnote to the Postscript to the Posttape" written by someone identified only as "Ed."--perhaps the chief editor or by one of the four other editors trying to further obfuscate matters or virtually anyone else--pointing out that the type of the "Postscript" is not the same as that in J.B.'s cover letter.

The effect of Barth's framing devices work to call into question the validity and meaning of any voice in the novel from the very beginning and, should the reader forget the ambiguities raised by the opening pieces, deliver several severe blows to the story's integrity and the reader's interpretations at the end. However, the reader knows that the entire work is indeed fiction and that Barth uses the frames for other reasons. For example, Barth provides "a warning against a simple absorption of his text and ideas, when in fact a positive, creative response is required" (Turner, 128). Further, according to Douglas Robinson,

the reader's prerogative to be skeptical extends to everything between the book's covers, including the very words that affirm that prerogative. Barth's truth/fiction inversions-of-inversions get pretty knotty at this point, leading some readers to dismiss the whole thing as a hoax,

but another way of looking at is to see Barth as a manipulative author undermining his own authority. . . (Robinson, 321).

Robinson draws a great deal on Wolfgang Iser's theories concerning the relationship of reader, text, and author to explain how and why Barth does this. First, he sees Barth as someone trying to write popular novels yet constantly being criticized as an academic appealing only to other professors, which leads him to look for ways around alienating readers by exercising a writer's manipulative advantage. In terms of the power relationship between reader and writer, Robinson says that it is easy to

escape from the Barthian concentration camp: you just stop reading. This is, of course, the reader's most basic right and primary power over the writer: in order to exert power . . .Barth has to keep him reading, keep him participating in the (re)creation of the text (Robinson, 310).

For Robinson, these considerations lead to a cooperative relationship whereby reader and writer work in consort to create textual meaning. Further, he points out that Barth's frames produce contradictions and ambiguities that create what Iser calls "blanks" or "negations" (which are also inherent in an ideal or implied reader) which require a real reader to actively and creatively participate during the reading process. This ensures "readerly freedom" and the "real reader thus becomes an individual and unassailable partner in the creation of textual meaning" (Robinson, 312). In order to accomplish this, the reader must have the freedom to participate with an author in the

creative act; therefore, Barth's framing devices act to diminish the writer's power to manipulate and, consequently, increase the reader's independence. For example,

> The opening voice that instructs the reader how he must read the book grants that reader a skeptical freedom that extends even to the authority that both delivers the instruction and grants the interpretive freedom. If to say "you are free" is to imply that you are not free enough to declare your own freedom. . .the only way around manipulative authority is to undo it from within: to imply that my declaration of your freedom lacks the authority to make it stick (Robinson, 321).

On the one hand, then, Barth's frames "educate his reader into freedom" by inducing a "kind of skeptical vigilance" that counters any dogmatic or totalizing influence or interpretation that the writer might exert (Robinson, 321). Making manipulation transparent puts the reader on guard and opens greater possibilities for reader-writer cooperation in generating meaning.

> It may not work, of course. The reader may want to be manipulated, or bringing manipulation out into the open may just be another manipulative act that gives the reader the illusion of freedom. But the recognition that no manipulative act is infallible, writerly or readerly, always leaves open a channel of freedom. Meaning is always dialogically variable; it can't be tied down, can't be put in a straightjacket. Meaning is the product of our imperfect human acts; and our imperfection stands surety for our freedom (Robinson, 322).

On the other hand, the frames also work to provide a reciprical freedom, a set of open possibilities, for the writer as well. Tony Tanner, pointing out how Barth's play with history in The Sot-Weed Factor demonstrated "his freedom from history," sees the frames in Giles as

a bid by Barth to liberate himself from any of the available modes of authorship and narration, to create a fictional space into which anything may be admitted and anything done with it withour the author (whoever or whatever he is) being held responsible (Tanner, 246).

In the end, Barth's simultaneous subversion of explicit meaning, and his use of various strategies to open storytelling possibilities, function such that, in the educational world of Giles, his

elaborately ordered fictional world suggests the fictiveness of all ordered worlds. . . .Barth is not imitating "reality' at all, but. . .imitations of reality. . . .Giles Goat-Boy is not about the world, but about the ways we talk about the world. . . .

The artiface in [the book] suggests that the entire novel is but a "way of speaking," an approximation of a Truth that cannot be formulated. At the same time, the novel affirms "ways of speaking" as, quite simply, the only way to speak. It affirms the narrative impulse, accomplishing in the process an artistic achievement of the highest magnitude (Harris, 101-2).

Chapter 4

Beginnings and Rebeginnings: Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera

As in his first four novels, Barth's next pair of books focuses on the central idea of meaning in writing as it relates to such problems as epistemological uncertainty, the tenuous authority of writers and written texts, tension between the forces of chaos and order, the relationship between author and reader, and the search for unifying principles in a universe of multiple possibilities. However, they do so somewhat differently than before. Where the preceding books rely largely on characters attempting to create orderly worlds and concrete self-identities through the act of writing, these works move toward placing equal emphasis both on writer-characters and on the nature of storytelling itself--teller and told are both protagonists. In addition, neither Lost in the Funhouse nor Chimera takes the form of a conventional novel: the former is a compilation of fourteen short pieces exploring the origins of stories and the storyteller; the latter consists of three novellas concerned with the nature of storytelling and which deal with possibilities for the renewal and recycling of both story and storyteller. In both, writing itself, as well as its utility for a character in search of meaning, take center stage.

The subtitle of Lost in the Funhouse is Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice, and in the "Author's Note" prefacing the book, Barth elaborates on the "experimental" approach that this suggests. He begins by saying that the book is "neither a collection nor a selection, but a series . . .meant to be received 'all at once,'" and that "while some of these pieces were composed expressly for print, others were not" (LFH, ix). Some of the alternative presentational modes that Barth suggests are stereophonic recorded versions of the pieces using his voice; live performances; monophonic tape recordings in combination with Barth's live, but silent, presence; and one piece designed solely for the reader's eye. Although none of these extra-print media have been commercially produced, Barth suggests that they act as influences shaping the process of his writing and as things for the reader to consider when approaching the individual pieces. Barth states that his

> regnant idea is the unpretentious one of turning as many aspects of the fiction as possible--the structure, the narrative viewpoint, the means of presentation, in some instances the process of composition and/or recitation as well as of reading or listening--into dramatically relevant emblems of the theme (LFH, x).

This intention, breaking as it does some of the more conventional approaches to, and expectations about, prose fiction, might lead to some confusion about what ties the pieces together as a series. Carol A. Kyle, drawing on Northrup Frye's ideas about the anatomy of fiction, points

to one possibility concerning the unity of the book, saying that Frye's concepts of anatomy

> define a work whose unity is an intellectual concept so lively that is can spin out of its own energy a self-contained, fanciful, and witty anti-novel. The narrator speaks through multiple voices engaged in a freely associative conversation that parodies standard prose fiction and reproduces non-standard conventions of time and size. The anatomy even mocks its own unity (Kyle, 31).

In Kyle's view, the importance of this in regard to Barth comes from her perception that

> Funhouse is a microcosmic anatomy of criticism presented in the unifying and unique metaphor of a funhouse in which any modern reader, critic, or writer of prose fiction can easily get lost. That, in fact, is probably the point. Lost in the Funhouse, then, is an anatomy unified by its own anatomy of criticism (Kyle, 32).

In addition, the unity of the book also comes from Barth's play with, and exploration of, the elements of prose fiction that he mentions above, especially as they reveal the relationships existing among writer, reader, and story. In line with these ideas, the first three pieces set the tone and dominant themes of the whole book. The first, "Frame-Tale," acts more as a graphic meditation on the genre of frame tales and cyclic stories than as a standard work of fiction. It consists of a single sentence--one half printed vertically along the end of the page, the other half printed behind it on the opposite side--that, when one follows Barth's directions to cut the sentence out, twist the paper once, and tape the ends together, forms a Moebius strip which reads, "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT

BEGAN. . . ." The sentence, thus, goes on endlessly, moving perpetually and seamlessly from one side of the strip to the other. What this demonstrates is that Barth

> will not write a Chaucerian frame-tale but he will prove that all stories are frames (put-ons) and that, more important, they are framed by their own limitations, by their beginnings and endings, which never begin and never end. . . .The motif of circularity that frames the absurd in fiction frames the book in a circle. . .which begins and ends only to begin again, a journey that goes nowhere, a trip that ends at the point of departure. The structure of the book in this way parallels the ironic journey of Jake Horner. . .which properly begins and ends in a terminal with the anti-hero waiting for a bus. By a similar device, Chapter 1, Page 1 of Funhouse appropriate signals the structural unity of the whole work (Kyle, 32).

In another vein, the piece also suggests Barth's conviction that writing fiction comes out of an infinite process of storytelling whereby stories are intertextually related, regressively growing out of other stories and progressively generating new methods of storytelling for the future. However, because the process is infinite, true beginnings and true endings are impossible to locate. Instead, the true source of storytelling might be said to be more or less tautological because its locus is intertextual, self-referentially turning back on itself; therefore,

"Frame-Tale"

> situates the Funhouse stories in the tension between tale . . .and text. For the phrase "once upon a time" conveys a sense of the storyteller's presence, of a person related to us by the act of telling a story, while the following clause. . .tells us that story is a predetermined text. Moreover, by virtue of the instructions for turning the page into a Moebius strip, that second phrase contextualizes the first. . .embeds the tale and storyteller within a text (Woolley, 468).

The next piece, "Night-Sea Journey," continues these ideas, but instead of playing upon the origins and cycles of stories themselves, it explores the genesis and cyclic nature of the storyteller by conveying the epistemological and eschatological ruminations of a human sperm struggling to comprehend its existence, purpose, and fate--musings which Barth says, partly in jest, "perhaps illuminate certain speculations of Lord Raglan, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell" (LFH, x).

Finding himself alone, without an audience after his millions of comrades have died off, the sperm confronts the existential situation:

> all are gone down. . .while wretched I swim on. Yet these same reflective intervals that keep me afloat have led me into wonder, doubt, despair--strange emotions for a swimmer!--have led me even to suspect. . .that our night-sea journey is without meaning (LFH, 4).

Fearing that his existence and upstream swim might be senseless, absurd, and merely the product of pure chance, the sperm wonders about an expired colleague who invented theories and stories concerning a "Maker" (the original and immortal source of life) and whose

> pet hypothesis was that Makers and swimmers each generate the other. . .and that any given "immortality chain" could terminate after any number of cycles, so that what was "immortal". . .was only the cyclic process of incarnation, which itself might have a beginning and an end. Alternatively, he liked to imagine cycles within cycles, either finite or infinite: for example, the "night-sea," as it were, in which Makers "swam" and created night-seas and swimmers like ourselves, might be the creation of a larger Maker, Himself one of many, Who in turn et cetera (LFH, 8).

In effect, the sperm wrestles with the same problems that Barth illustrates in the preceding piece: infinitely regressive, self-referential cycles that progressively unfold into possibly infinite variations for the future, but nowhere can he discover a clear beginning nor an end. The same holds true in literature where writers or poets are seen as "makers," although according to Barth's perspective, the genesis of Story remains shrouded in uncertainty. Eventually, the sperm notices a sea-change, a "sweetening and calming of the sea, and what seems to be a kind of vasty presence, song, or summons from the near upstream" (LFH, 9) which might be merely the result of his going mad or some sort of "consummation" with an unimaginable "Other-than-a-he," a "She," "an ugly fiction," or the unfolding of his "purpose" (LFH, 10). In any case, the sperm takes on the role of storyteller because

> I, of all swimmers, may be the sole survivor of this fell journey, tale-bearer of a generation. This suspicion, together with the recent sea-change, suggests to me now that nothing is impossible. . .and brings me to a certain desperate resolve, the point of my chronicling (LFH, 9).

What the sperm has determined on, despite the new, gentler emotions that pervade him as part of the change around him initiated by "Her," is to somehow convey to "You who I may be about to become" (LFH, 11) the horror of his journey and its terrible, overwhelming doubt in the hope that such agonies might end. In spite of the odds against him, the sperm proclaims

I will say the truth. What has fetched me across this dreadful sea in a single hope. . .that You may be stronger-willed than I, and that by sheer force of concentration I may transmit to You, along with Your official Heritage, a private legacy of awful recollection and negative resolve. Mad as it may be, my dream is that some unimaginable embodiment of myself (or myself plus Her if that's how it must be) will come to find itself expressing, in however garbled or radical a translation, some reflection of these reflections. . . .terminate this aimless, brutal business . . . .Whoever echoes these reflections; be more courageous than their author! An end to night-sea journeys! Make no more! (LFH, 12).

The sperm feels himself drawn constantly closer to "Her" and likely to succumb to the gentleness and calmness that "She" emanates and, in the end, knows that he will "foreswear myself, deny myself," and give in to "Her" song that says "'Love! Love! Love!'" (LFH, 12).

In the next piece, "Ambrose His Mark," we meet the possible issue of the sperm's union with the Other: Ambrose, who tells us the story of how he got his name and how this relates to his identity as a storyteller. Neither of these come about easily. His father, once a school principal, has been committed to an asylum, and his mother is an eccentric, self-obsessed woman who tends to ignore her son. In fact, for several months she resists christening Ambrose, preferring instead to call him Christine after the title of a Garbo film because she had wanted a daughter. The other members of the family (grandfather, aunt, and uncle) refer to Ambrose as "Honig," German for honey, as a nickname in lieu of a former name. What finally precipitates Ambrose's naming is a complex, burlesque incident during which a swarm

of bees land on his head, after which his family notices that his birthmark, located over one eye, resembles a headless bee in flight. This causes the family to look for suitable names to fit the coincidental events in Ambrose's young life: his "mark," nickname, and bee experience. Uncle Konrad, an ex-teacher, tuner of pianos, and encyclopedia salesman, suggests that some historical parallels might lead to an appropriate name: Plato, Sophocles, and Xenophon are all, in some way, figures associated with childhood bee episodes similar to Ambrose's. Though the literary and philosophical implications impress Konrad (for example, Plato's gift with language supposedly resulted from a childhood incident where bees landed on his mouth), the family cannot bring itself to giving Ambrose such awkward names. Finally, Konrad suggests St. Ambrose as a namesake; he, too, had been swarmed by bees as an infant, and consequently, "everyone said he'd grow up to be a great speaker" (LFH, 31). The name also suggests ambrosia, food of the gods which gives immortality. When the grandfather points out that the bees had covered Ambrose's eyes and ears more than his mouth, Konrad says, "So he'll grow up to see things clear" (LFH, 31). Thus, Ambrose's future has been laid out in advance: he will be someone who can shape language skillfully, perhaps a writer or storyteller, and whose gift lies in an uncommon ability to see clearly. However, despite his family's agreement on the name Ambrose, years

pass before anyone took the trouble to christen him officially or change his birth certificate, which contained a blank before his surname. Ambrose feels ambiguous about, not quite in touch with, his name and what it means as a symbol of his identity; beyond the possible confusion relating to what the headlessness of his birthmark might symbolize, he finds that even the sound of his name leads him to wonder at its meaning, and he closes his story by saying,

> Yet only give it voice: whisper "Ambrose," as at rare times certain people have--see what-all leaves off to answer! Ambrose, Ambrose, Ambrose, Ambrose! Regard that beast, ungraspable, most queer, pricked up in my soul's crannies! (LFH, 32).

Ambrose's story works on two levels in regard to its relationship with opening pieces. On the one hand, the sperm in the preceding story is, perhaps, part of Ambrose's genetic heritage, a regressive tie to his and the race's history. An Ambrose-in-haploid, the sperm is a story written in DNA who acts as half-author of Ambrose's existence--its "legacy," then, is both biological and, in terms of the message that it wishes to pass on, a literary testimonial. Ambrose's story ends much like the sperm's with both repeating the words that are most mysterious to them, and Ambrose suggests that his relationship to his name is like the sperm's relationship to the zygote when he says, "I and my sign are neither one nor quite two" (LFH, 32).

The is a problem of language and its relationship to self-identity.

> Paradoxically, language leads both toward and away from that holistic state man wishes to reattain. It leads to that state because its secret motivation is the desire for annihilation, the end to all distinctions; it leads away because language by its very nature is a spatializing and temporalizing medium, thus is responsible for the very world of distinctions it secretly wishes to dissolve. "Reality," that is, is essentially a linguistic construct of our own creation. . .(Harris, 110).

On the other hand, Ambrose's story reaches out to a larger context pertaining to our literary legacy, as prefigured in "Frame-Tale." Uncle Konrad's suggestions for names ties Ambrose to the Western philosophical and historical tradition. Also, the events in his story recall the comic, tangent-ridden machinations of Tristram Shandy as a literary forebear. But, in an even more concrete way, Ambrose's story identifies a specific literary progenitor. That is, the title "Ambrose His Mark" echoes the chapter in Moby Dick titled "His Mark" where the illiterate, pagan Queegueg, tattooed from head to toe with the symbols, the "story" of his native culture, "signs" on as a crewman aboard the Pequod by doing two things. First, he impresses two of the ship's co-owners by demonstrating his prowess with a harpoon, thus telling the story of his skill in a demonstration as does Barth in "Frame-Tale." Second, he cannot write, but when asked to sign his name or make his mark on the crew registry, Queegueg points to a particular symbol on his body and transfers it to the document.

However, like Ambrose's ambiguous feeling about his name, Queegueg also has his written identity confused in that one of the owner-agents transcribes his name as "Quohog," a kind of clam. In effect, then, Barth connects Ambrose's story with storytelling at large by making Ambrose the heir of the sperm's legacy and by suggesting that Queequeg's tattoo, the symbol of his identity, has been translated into Ambrose's birthmark.

These three opening pieces establish the general concerns of the remaining chapters in the book which also deal with the ontogeny of teller and told as well as the relationship of writer, reader, and text. The fourth piece, "Autobiography," is subtitled "A Self-Recorded Fiction" and, again, raises questions about how a piece of writing is born. According to Barth,

> The title "Autobiography" means "self-composition": the antecedent of the first-person pronoun is not I, but the story, speaking of itself. I am its father; its mother is the recording machine (LFH, x).

In this piece, then, the words seem to write themselves, telling the tale of their own creation, as the story unfolds. Like the sperm, the text ponders its genesis, and in doing so, takes on a kind of organic, self-created life as the reader reads along. Also like the sperm, the piece sees itself assigned to the task of telling "the tale of my forebears" (LFH, 35). Also, like Ambrose, it has no clear sense of its individuality, as it confesses that "I have no proper name," concluding that "I must compose myself" (LFH,

33) because it has doubts that a reader exists to cooperate in giving it life. The opening words here are "You who/ listen/give me life/in a manner of speaking" (LFH, 33), written with spaces between the words and phrases suggesting a halting, uncertain start. In addition, the first words, "You who," seem almost a hopeful, tentative call for attention, like a beckoning "yoo-hoo" to someone to give life to the words on the page.

The piece has a lifespan equal to the reader's attention span--when reading stops, so does the story. Having tried and failed to precipitate its own premature demise, and discovering that it cannot influence its "father"/creator to stop writing, the piece occasionally tries to end itself by daring the reader to quit reading. However, near the end, it makes a defiant plea to the author in words that echo those of the sperm:

> . . .Father, have mercy, I dare you! Wretched old fabricator. where's your shame? Put an end to this, for pity's sake! Now! Now! (LFH, 36)

Finally, the words simply run out, but like the Moebius strip earlier, the piece does not really end. That is, it finishes by saying

> . . .I'll mutter to the end, one word after another, string the words out, mad or not, heard or not, my last words will be my last words (LFH, 37)

However, no period appears here, which creates the effect that the piece endlessly awaits closure though, at any time,

it will resume itself as soon as the next reading takes place.

With the next piece, "Water-Message," Barth returns to a conventional narrative, focusing on a central episode in the life of Ambrose, now in the fourth grade. Whether or not he has come to "see things clear," as prophesied, is too early to tell, but Ambrose certainly relies heavily on his imagination to give shape and color to his life. Reality for Ambrose is problematic: one of his favorite phrases is "the truth of the matter is," but he uses it in emulation of the radio programs he listens to because the words "struck him as open-handed and mature" (LFH, 40). In addition, the status and meaning of the word "fact" confuse him. He perceives the sensitivity and sometimes prurient attitude of adults in their response to "the facts of life," even though the meaning of this is beyond him. This leads to confusion when such things as the Cyclopedia of Facts and a magazine titled Facts About Your Diet fail to elicit the same response. Nevertheless, Ambrose lives in a rich world based on his imagination and reading. From The Book of Knowledge, he names a dog and a crazy woman, who periodically cause him fear on his walks home from school, Scylla and Charybdis. Classical music on the radio spurs him to imagine himself as Odysseus battling neighborhood bullies, rescuing schoolgirls, and thinking lofty thoughts. For him, classical music

sounded of flight, of vaulting aspiration. It rose, it soared, it sang; in the van of his admirers it bore him transfigured from the hall, beyond East Dorset, aloft to the stars (LFH, 44).

Considered too young to join his brother Peter's gang as a full-fledged member, Ambrose is allowed to take a peripheral part in their activities, even though he gives them their name, the Occult Order of the Sphinx, and christens the overgrown, run-down areas where they play as The Jungle. When the gang announces its intention to be a secret club, Ambrose boils with a Tom Sawyer-like imagination, creating clandestine rituals and signals. But, for Ambrose, a secret club's real value lies in its hoard of special information. Secret handshakes, passwords, and initiation rites are things

he felt meant nothing except to remind you of the really important thing, which was--well, hard to find words for, but there had to be the real secrets, dark facts known to none but the members. You had to have been initiated to find them out--that's what initiation meant--and when you were a member you'd know the truth of the matter and smile in a private way when you met another member of the Order because you both knew what you knew (LFH, 44).

Ambrose never gets initiated into the gang nor does he gain access to anything like the "real secrets" that it might know. However, he does undergo an initiation of sorts and encounters a secret so mysterious and profound that it changes his life. One day, while the gang is occupied with some secret business that excludes Ambrose, he finds a bottle by the riverbank that appears to contain a note--this sets his imagination into full gear. At that moment,

Ambrose feels connected to some unimaginable larger reality, and everything else fades as he is

caught up into the greater vision, vague and splendrous, whereof the sea-wreathed bottle was an emblem. Westward it lay, to westward, where the tide ran from East Dorset. Past the river and the Bay, from continents beyond, this messenger had come. Borne by currents as yet uncharted, nosed by fishes as yet unnamed, it had bobbed for ages beneath strange stars. Then out of the oceans it had strayed; past cape and cove, black can, red nun, the word had wandered willy-nilly to his threshold (LFH, 52).

Overcome with the endless possibilities, Ambrose removes the note and finds a sheet of notebook paper; on the top line, written in red ink, he finds "TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN"; on the next-to-bottom line, "YOURS TRULY." Nothing else appears on the page--no message and no signature. But something happens to Ambrose as a result:

Ambrose's spirit bore new and subtle burdens. . . . Tonight, tomorrow night, unhurriedly, he would find out from Peter just what it was they had discovered. . .and what-all done: the things he'd learn would not surprise him now nor distress him, for though he was still innocent of that knowledge, he had the feel of it in his heart, and of other truth. . . .some small corner of his mind remarked that those shiny bits in the paper's texture were splinters of wood pulp. Often as he'd seen them in the leaves of cheap tablets, he had not thitherto embraced that fact (LFH, 53-54).

Somehow, through the water message, Ambrose finds a glimmering of a new self, a feeling that his life has truly begun, and that he has broken through to a new sense of a truth that he could implicitly engage or embrace even without knowing exactly what that might be. The fact that the letter lacks a body, a message in the conventional

sense, does not cause Ambrose to feel disappointed or that the epistle is meaningless. On the contrary, for him,

> the message consists of the fact of its occurrence. . . .It is literally "his truly," a message of concern to one who feels shut off from others. . . .Ambrose finds his meaning in the fact of receiving a message. . . .Ambrose embraces the medium--not merely the material, the paper, but the letter itself--as evidence of an intentional act of address and as ground on which sender and receiver may meet. The act itself is a message: it says "I--someone besides yourself--exist, and so do you." The blank is filled by the communicative act itself (Woolley, 476-77).

"Petition," the following piece, is also an epistle, a letter written by a Siamese twin petitioning a foreign royal personage (on a visit to the U.S. for cataract surgery) for help in obtaining an operation to separate him from his brother. The writer, disgusted by his twin's earthy, obscene tastes, is attached to his brother's back and, therefore, has little control over his life and must endure countless indignities due to his situation. Most of all, the writer longs to begin life anew and pursue the more refined possibilities of art and life, but this remains impossible while the twins are attached because they are so opposite in temperament.

The main object of contention between them, the symbolic and erotic focal point of the writer's aspirations, involves a love triangle in which the twins both pursue the attentions of a contortionist named Thalia. But, because of his position and his brother's acts of sabotage against his love letters (and, possibly, this petition), the writer feels that his only hope for winning Thalia's love would

come from physical independence. As Siamese twins, the brothers are two and one simultaneously, which is also what Thalia represents in that her name is the same as a figure from Greek mythology: one of the three Graces who is both the muse of comedy and idyllic poetry. In effect, then, Thalia embodies the dualities inherent in the twins' situation and characters as well as in Barth's book generally.

> Thalia suits the differing needs of each brother: the one's body and the other's spirit, the one's consciousness and the other's self-consciousness, the one's id and the other's ego. . . .But the apposite resonances of Thalia do not stop with the Siamese twins. . . .she presides of Lost in the Funhouse as Barth's muse, the figura now of comic Maryland-based realism and now of self-reflexive metafiction (Schulz, 398).

In addition, Barth also presents an undermined truth concurrent with a dual reality. The binary reality represented in "Petition" echoes the bifurcation of a newly-formed self already shown in the preceding pieces: the split sentence of the Moebius strip perpetually remerging with, and retelling, itself; the sperm's sense of self and other on the verge of beginning a new life; the schism between writer and written in "Autobiography" that renews itself with each reading; and especially in Ambrose's feeling of alienation from his name early in life as well as in his desire to connect with the larger reality hinted at by the water message. In each case, teller and told try to convey a message of some kind, but the communicative situation

always remains unfulfilled and riddled with blanks, creating the effect that

> As the stories oscillate between teller and text, language's referential function is weakened. Accordingly, Barth's narrators grow increasingly unnerved by the gap between word and its object (Woolley, 468).

Language itself assumes a dual character as each character-writer and each writing turn back on themselves, reverberating with themes and issues from previous pieces and, thus, growing self-reflexive and sliding into

> enigmatic signs that promise but do not yield significance. His "water-message," which Ambrose reads as emblematic. . . expresses the double nature of language, empty, yet capable of conveying a message (Woolley, 469).

The same happens in "Petition," whose writer proclaims, in a way that is reminiscent of Ambrose musing on the mantra-like effect of his name, "To be one: paradise! To be two: Bliss! But to be both and neither is unspeakable" (LFH, 68). Like the unknown writer of Ambrose's letter, the twin leaves his petition's closing unsigned, ending merely with "Yours truly," in marked contrast with the way he begins his piece: dated, properly addressed, and painstakingly giving the addressee's full title (four full lines of credentials). Thus, the petition will have no effect, either due to the writer's oversight or to his brother's tampering.

In each piece so far, a text or a writer desperately seeks to find its origins and establish the initial conditions upon which to create a new, more promising self, but

each attempt produces mixed results and moves only partially toward the desired goal because

> the writer must address his and our situation; and yet self-consciousness turns all statements ironic, self-negating. Barth's fiction reflects an awareness that the relation between words and what we would have them say is always ironic. That awareness creates a state of self-alienation that renders us unable to complete a statement or a story, to connect with a listener or a lover (Wolley, 467).

In a similarly ironic way, the ideal self that each writer wishes to create is sabotaged by the alienation produced through the paradoxical nature of language which precludes the possibility that consciousness can actually create an ideal version of the self.

> Language, as well as the "reality" it fashions, cuts us off from our lost "authentic" self as surely as it signals that separation. The mythic desire to return to origins is at base the desire to rediscover the authentic self that existed in a state before ego, before language. . . .We locate the self in other; thus our "I," our ego, is another self, fundamentally objective rather than subjective, pure subjectivity lying only in the prenatal state before our fall into language and consciousness (Harris, 110-11).

The next piece, "Lost in the Funhouse," is the title story and lies roughly at the book's midpoint. Its central character is, once again, Ambrose--now in his early teens--and on its surface, the story concerns his experiences during an outing to Ocean City, a decaying amusement park, with his family and his brother's girlfriend Magda. However, many of the ambiguities and writing problems characterizing the preceding pieces arise here also as the narrator incorporates into the story a self-conscious exposition of the conventions and techniques involved in

story writing. These intrusions proliferate, forcing the reader to consider the range of possibilities that a writer must face in the course of writing. For example, the central episode where Ambrose enters, and possibly gets lost in, a funhouse is given a variety of complications and outcomes, some of which might "really" have happened, some that might have taken place only in Ambrose's imagination, and others that the narrator might have used as central incidents but chooses not to. Despite the more or less realistic frame of the story, the reader must deal with many versions of Ambrose's funhouse escapades and consider, simultaneously, ideas that could have generated a number of very different stories.

> The alternative versions of Ambrose's adventures which are included in the story enjoy a dubious existence as possibilities not used (because they are not followed up) and as parts of the story (because they are written, even if they are rejected) (Westervelt, 43).

In addition to the various plot alternatives that the narrator makes visible, the story abounds, from the beginning, with little intrusive "lessons" on the conventional and technical elements that a writer has to choose from. For example, the story's first paragraph is more concerned with professing the effective uses of italics than with such things as creating an initial setting or developing characters and plot. In the next paragraph, the reader gets only initials followed by blanks instead of proper names, after

which the narrator steps in to explain that this device was often used

> . . .in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an illusion that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means (LFH, 69-70).

Throughout, the narrator continually interrupts with such things so that the "real" story seems to be the story of how to make a story. This, instead of a transparent or un-self-conscious reading where one need not confront the writer's strategies and tactics, forces the reader to self-consciously acknowledge matters such as the use of the first person, symbolism, specific literary and historical precedents, methods of characterization, the use of tropes, the traditional form of a short story, the employment of inverted tags in dialogue, and diagrams of conventional dramatic narratives. Along with these, the narrator often asks questions and raises doubts about how the story conforms to these things, sometimes sounding as desperate as Todd Andrews over the difficulty of writing. For instance, he sometimes worries about the story's pace, at one point saying

> So far, there's been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a theme. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder (LFH, 74).

At another point, he declares that

> We should be much farther along than we are; something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems

relevant. Yet, everyone begins in the same place; how is it that most go along without difficulty but a few lose their way? (LFH, 75).

The answer to the question seems to be that Barth has purposely made the reader aware of things that usually go unnoticed during reading--in effect, he has turned the story itself into a written funhouse that allows

> . . .the reader to experience self-consciousness by making him as aware of his role as a reader as Barth is of his role as a writer. The reader engages in a dialogue with a series of narrators, with reader and narrator consciously dependent upon one another. In challenging himself to sport with, to create a "game" out of this situation, Barth on the one hand educates his reader to confront the problem of self-consciousness, at the same time that he challenges himself to play an exemplary game with such a created reader. . . . Thus, he educates a reader capable of engaging in virtuoso reading (Westervelt, 42).

Therefore, much like Kyle's view that the book "is a microcosmic anatomy of criticism," its title story is a microcosmic exploration of a dynamic relationship between a writer and a reader, wherein the latter gets a lesson on, and an invitation to actively participate in, the creation of a text.

The story ends with Ambrose musing on his life and the significance of the day's events, a recycling of parts of the story that seems to signal a return to a conventional narrative.

> However, they give the reader the feeling that the narrator is summing up an otherwise diffuse story, and they tease him into hunting for pattern and significance. The repetition also gives him a sense of familiarity with the material and makes him feel as though he has found a key to the meaning when actually the motifs and their ordering are arbitrary (Westervelt, 45).

For Ambrose, as much as for the reader, the arbitrariness of things is evident--nevertheless, his experiences have made more concrete the pattern of his life begun in "Ambrose His Mark." Perhaps he will never "see things clear," but he will reemerge in another novel as a professional writer, a future that seems more certain with this story's focus on writing and Ambrose's feeling that his destiny, for good or ill, is set.

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

"Funhouse" signals something of a switch in emphasis between the earlier pieces and next: from a more or less dominant focus on the ontology of writer and written, Barth turns to the relationship between teller and told. In "Funhouse," the many narrational intrusions and the resulting heightening of the reader's participation blur the demarcation between reader and writer, author and narrator, story and storyteller. In the next piece, "Echo," these ambiguities grow to the point where the reader cannot clearly distinguish where one begins and the other leaves off. The three main characters come from classical mythology: Echo, the nymph used by Zeus to distract Hera with stories while he philanders; Narcissus, the youth who spurns Echo and is condemned to languish over his own irresistibly

beautiful reflection; and Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes who can "see" backward and forward in time.

Echo is a consummate storyteller, one who

> . . .turns from life and learns to tell stories with such art that the Olympians implore her to repeat them. Others live for the lie of love; Echo lives for her lovely lies, loves for their livening. With her tongue-tried tales she amuses others and preserves her reason. . .(LFH, 97).

But Echo is punished for Zeus' transgressions by losing the power to speak her own words; she may only repeat what others say, first in her own voice, and in Barth's version, she later loses both her body and her voice. This, then, leads to confusion about whose "voice" carries the story. In his prefatory notes, Barth says that

> 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 (LFH, x).

Barth states that his approach resulted from his experiments with recording stories on tape, and when he came to feel that

> after all there's something narcissistic about this business of exploiting the authorial voice, my response was to write a story about the myth of Narcissus and Echo, instead of writing a realistic story that echoes narcissism. At the same time, I made the story into a metaphor for the condition of working with tapes (Bellamy, 9).

Although the reader must simultaneously entertain several narrational possibilities, in the end, the story acts as a statement relating to Barth's position as the writer. That is, the "metaphor" he sees in the compositional situation of "writing" with tapes arises from the

fact that Echo--disembodied, without a personal voice, and only able to repeat others' words--becomes the literary equivalent of "what a tape machine does" (Bellamy, 9). In addition to the confusion about who is speaking and whose story is being told, this ultimately leaves the story with a kind of composite voice arising from Barth's identification of Echo with his role as writer. Or, as Barth states it,

> Finally, of course, it's the author's voice you're hearing, and the author is always all those things he makes up, so the metaphor becomes rigorously applicable to the condition of the fiction (Bellamy, 10-11).

In "Funhouse," "Echo," and to some extent in "Autobiography," attention is drawn not only to formalistic matter but also to the process involved in composition, which leads Barth to say that "The process is the content, more or less" (Bellamy, 10). Further, such stories originate, to a degree, from Barth's experiences of the rigors of professional writing.

> It's a tedious vocation, and it takes lots and lots of time. It certainly is a solipsistic and hermit-like thing to do--to close oneself in a room for hours at a stretch, day after day after day, not in human company, listening to the sound of your own words. Little wonder that one gets interested in stories of people who turn into the sound of their own voices or into their own stories (Bellamy, 16).

The next piece, "Two Meditations," is brief: on short paragraph titled "Niagara Falls" and another titled "Lake Erie." The first considers unknowable and infinitesimal things that, at some point, result in actions out of all proportion to their stimulus:

> For ages the fault creeps secret through the rock; in a second, ledge and railings, tourists and turbines all thunder over Niagara. Which snowflake triggers the avalanche? (LFH, 101).

In "Lake Erie," Barth ruminates on the inevitability of decay or calamity and the feeling that remedial actions come too late: "The wisdom to recognize and halt follows the know-how to pollute past rescue" (LFH, 101); Oedipus being doomed to his tragic fate no matter how hard he tries to avoid it.

Both these one-paragraph pieces are very condensed sets of images and sound a strong note of despair, fatalism, or doubt (echoing some of the existential problems faced by Todd Andrews, Jake Horner, Eben Cooke, George Giles, and others) that gets taken up in varying degrees in the remaining pieces in the book. For example, the next piece, "Title," Barth calls a "triply schizoid monologue" (LFH, x) that

> addresses itself simultaneously to three matters: the "Author's" difficulties with his companion, his analogous difficulties with the story he's in process of composing, and the not dissimilar straits in which, I think mistakenly, he imagines his culture and its literature to be (LFH, x-xi).

The piece begins by worrying over the effectiveness of its placement in, and contribution to, the book as a whole as well as by pondering the difficulties of beginning a piece of writing.

> Beginning: in the middle, past the middle, nearer three-quarters done, waiting for the end. Consider how dreadful so far: passionless, abstraction, pro, dis. And it will get worse. Can we possibly continue? (LFH, 102).

From here, concerns arise over the need for the expected standard literary conventions that seem incongruent with the narrators need to find new ways to express things but which are "as yet not successfully succeeded." Facing existential realities, the "author" states that

> The worst is yet to come. Everything leads to nothing . . . .The final question is, Can nothing be made meaningful? Isn't that the final question? If not, the end is at hand. Literally, as it were. Can't stand any more of this (LFH, 102).

Finding no answers, the narrator determines to try filling in an ever-increasing number of "blanks"--the emptiness encountered in relationships, art, and reality--but does not quite know how to go about this because "Everything's been said already, over and over. . .there's nothing to say" (LFH, 102). Nevertheless, he tries, often making his intentions a self-conscious element in the running discourse and sometimes merely using the word "blank" as a place holder until he can find something to adequately substitute for an ideas or feeling.

> I chose the first-person narrative viewpoint in order to reflect interest from the peculiarities of the technique (such as the normally unbearable self-consciousness, the abstraction, and the blank) to the nature and situation of the narrator and his companion, despite the obvious possibility that the narrator and his companion might be mistaken for the narrator and his companion (LFH, 107).

Another way to view the situation, according to the narrator, is to look at the limitations peculiar to writing as an art in contrast to other, more plastic arts which seem

more amenable to successful experimentation and creative play.

> . . .I believe literature's not likely ever to manage abstraction successfully, like sculpture for example. . . . because wood and iron have a native appeal and first-order reality, whereas words are artificial to begin with. . . . weld iron rods into abstract patters, and you've still got real iron, but arrange words into abstract patterns and you've got nonsense (LFH, 109).

For the narrator, then, the constraints of written language put him at a disadvantage as he seeks to find novel ways to "fill in the blank" by making language expressive beyond standard conventions, forms, tropes, etc. For him, the task requires nothing less than that

> We must make something out of nothing. . . .Not only turn contradiction into paradox, but employ it, to go on living and working. . . .
>
> Very well: to write this allegedly ultimate story is a form of artistic fill in the blank, or an artistic form of same, if you like. . . .The storyteller's alternatives, as far as I can see, are a series of last words, like an aging actress making one farewell appearance after another, or actual blank. And I mean literally fill in the blank (LFH, 108).

As is evident from the narrator's use of "blank" above, he sometimes fails to find suitable ways to express himself, yet he keeps on writing. In a number of cases, he even turns to grammatical labels as blank fillers--for example, referring to the above-mentioned alternatives, he says that

> former is contemptible in itself, and the latter will certainly become so when the rest of the world shrugs its shoulders and goes on about its business. Just as people would do if adverbial clause of obvious analogical nature (LFH, 108).

Desperate for fresh modes of expression and ways to reenliven language, the narrator fears that he has "narrated

himself into a corner" (LFH, 108) and comes very near to giving up all hope. Exasperated, his tone and sentiment at the end echoes that of the sperm in "Night-Sea Journey," and the piece concludes rather inconclusively, like "Autobiography," by simply running out of words:

> Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness. I despise what we have come to; I loath our loathsome loathing, our place our time our situation, our loathsome art, this ditto necessary story. The blank of our lives, It's about over. Let the denouement be soon and unexpected, painless if possible, quick at least, above all soon. Now, now! How in the world will it ever (LFH, 110).

The next piece is "Glossolalia," which takes its title from the phenomenon whereby some people caught up in ecstatic or religious experiences spontaneously break out in unintelligible speech. The piece is composed of six brief paragraphs "spoken" by

> Cassandra, Philomena, the fellow mentioned by Paul in the fourteenth verse of his first epistle to the Corinthians [i.e., Crispus], the queen of Sheba's talking bird, an unidentified psalmist employing what happens to be the tongue of a historical glossolalist. . .and the author (LFH, xi).

Though a diverse cast, Barth points out two things that they hold in common: their pieces "are metrically identical," and "their audiences don't understand what they're talking about" (LFH, xi). The latter occurs, not because the characters speak nonsense; rather, each has undergone an experience that is somehow beyond the power of conventional language to describe or communicate. For example, Crispus says that he "yesterday looked on God," but as a result, his sanity slips because "What things my eyes have seen can't be

scribed or spoken." Horror stricken, faced with a reality that language cannot comprehend, Crispus is powerless to tell others about the "Truth" he has gazed on:

> All think I praise His sacred name, take my horror for hymns, my blasphemies for raptures. The holy writ's wrongly deciphered, as beatitudes and blessings; in truth those are curses, maledictions, and obscenest commandments. So be it (LFH, 111).

Each "speaker" is isolated, desperate, and impotent to convey the reality each knows is true. As Barth points out, each "speech"

> makes its double point: that language may be a compound code, and that the discovery of an enormous complexity beneath a simple surface may well be more dismaying than delightful. E.g.: the maze of termite-tunnels in your joist, the intricate cancer in her perfect breast, the psychopathology of everyday life, the Auschwitz in an anthill casually DDT'd by a child, the rage of atoms in a drop of ink--in short, anything examined curiously enough (LFH, xi)

Nonetheless, the final "speech" comes from "the author," who refers to the preceding five people's sufferings, suggesting that all the pain, despair, and helplessness they see and feel might help to serve as the very wellspring of art or redemption:

> Ill fortune, constraint and terror, generate guileful art; despair inspires. . . .The senselessest babble, could we ken it, might disclose a dark message, or prayer (LFH, 112).

The following piece, "Life-Story," is in three sections, and it is never clear here just where to draw the line between an author and a piece of writing. Barth and the unnamed writer-narrator seem simultaneously distinct and

identical, a condition growing out of the two writers' experience of composing:

> 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, in which he was the leading or an accessory character (LFH, 113).

Complicating this is the work which the "author" is struggling with at the moment: a story wherein a writer-character suspects that he is a character in a fiction while writing stories whose heroes are writer-characters who suspect. . .etc. Each character "comes to suspect that the world is a novel, himself a fictional personage" (LFH, 113). But the "author" encounters some problems with writing, which also get pulled into the story: how to make the "ground situation" work, how to overcome a turgid prose style, and how to deal with a non-credible "vehicle" for the story. Coming as a kind of self betrayal, the latter bothers him the most as

> self-conscious, vertiginously arch, fashionably solipsistic, unoriginal--in fact, a convention of twentieth-century literature. Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus in infinitum! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes? That doesn't continually proclaim "Don't forget I'm an artifice!"? That takes for granted its mimetic nature instead of asserting it in order. . .to deny it, or vice-versa? Though his critics sympathetic and otherwise described his own work as avant-garde. . .he disliked literature of an experimental, self-despising, or overtly metaphysical character. . .(LFH, 114).

Making all this even more disquieting for the "author" is the possibility that the kink of regressive, self-

reflexive fiction he writes and finds himself caught up in may be a pathological:

> One manifestation of schizophrenia. . .is the movement from reality toward fantasy, a progress which not infrequently takes the form of distorted and fragmented representation, abstract formalism, an increasing preoccupation, even obsession, with pattern and design for their own sakes. . . to the (virtual) exclusion of representative "content" (LFH, 115).

The "author" here echoes many of the concerns that Barth has already raised earlier. For example, as in "Frame-Tale," his plot (or what passes for one in each piece) continues both to and to reach out into infinity; like the sperm in "Night-Sea Journey," he can no longer clearly distinguish creator from created; like the text of "Autobiography," his story seems to take on its own life, one beyond his power to fully control; and like many of Barth's other protagonists in other books, the "author" has fears that underlie and propel his writing.

> That is to say, while he did not draw his characters and situations directly from life nor permit his author-protagonist to do so, any moderately attentive reader of his oeuvre. . .could infer, for example, that its author feared for example schizophrenia, impotence creative and sexual, suicide--in short living and dying (LFH, 121).

In a fit of despair and irritation over his inability either to begin his story more conventionally or to successfully turn the problem of writing into a proper "ground situation," the "author" then turns on whoever might be reading what he has written:

> The reader! 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 apeak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where's your shame? (LFH, 123).

He continues in this vein, even as he realizes that he is the primary agent and reader of his work. Nevertheless, his anguish, isolation, and helplessness illustrate much of the burden of the writer's situation, and he displays his awareness of how a piece of writing is born, lives, and possibly ends by forefronting the mutual interdependence of reader, writer, and story.

Not only does the reader give life to the characters and situation in the author's story, but in a real sense the reader gives the author life, since he makes his role possible. By that same token, the writer as well as his story makes possible the reader's role. Tale, teller, and told thus become linked in a reciprocal process. Writing is not a monologue in which a Godlike author creates a world which he then dispenses to a passive auditor; rather, it is . . .a conversation (Harris, 118).

"Menelaid," the next piece, continues to deal with the interrelationship of tale and told. The protagonist, Menelaus--king of Sparta, husband of Helen--echoes Coleridge's Ancient Mariner in that he is compelled to tell his tale to anyone he can make listen to it, even though he no longer has control over either himself or his story: unable to influence the course of his life or his tale, he

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 (LFH, 128).

Menelaus and his tale have grown so inextricably mingled that the story "isn't the voice of Menelaus; this voice is Menelaus, all there is of him" (LFH, 127). This grows more problematic with the fact that the piece is a series of seven parts, each with a different "speaker" and each embedded within all the parts preceding it--then, this pattern reverses until it returns to Menelaus' single narrative voice. Often, the only way to keep track of who "speaks" is by closely following the quotations, which get embedded in up to seven sets of quotation marks.

Menelaus works through the various levels of his story and reality as he seeks the truth and a way to return to origins. But he never finds what he searches for--no single, concrete version of reality exists, and he discovers that language cannot provide answers; as a result, he comes to abandon questions and answers, giving up his quest for the "real" version of things, and resolves to return with Helen to Sparta and begin recycling his life:

> "'"'"'Post-haste he returned to Lacedemon, done with questions. He'd re-embrace his terrifying chooser, clasp her past speech, never let go, frig understanding; it would be bride-night, endless; their tale would rebegin'"'"'" (LFH, 153).

On another level, the story illustrated Barth's attempt to renew the writing of fiction by a return to the origins of storytelling. Near the piece's midpoint, Menelaus asks the oracle of Delphi, "Who am I?" and receives for an answer

only a blank enclosed by seven sets of quotation marks, suggesting that

> Neither Menelaus nor Helen exists outside the stories that contain and create them. . . .Menelaus has worked his way back through the multiple layers of "reality" to the primordial blank from which issues language and all its categories. . . .Understandably, Menelaus recoils from the message--retreating. . .back into story. . .determined to "never let go" od the protean guises of a reality that stands between him and the silence of annihilation (Harris, 116).

Similarly, this illustrates Barth engaging in a metaphorical recycling of, and return to, the origins of story Menelaus facing much the same situation that Barth and, more or less, all of his historically aware characters encounter:

> Not just Menelaus, but mankind, is the story of its collective story, the sound of its own voice. History, as Barth is fond of saying, is fictive if not false. . .to which we must cling even when, like Menelaus, we realize its fictiveness (Harris, 117).

In the next and final piece, "Anonymiad," Barth reaches deeper into a fictional regression concerned with history and the ontology of story. Here, the narrator is an anonymous minstrel banished to a small island with only goats for company and nine amphorae of wine for comfort. For him, the nine vessels come to be the nine muses, and eventually, he is inspired to new levels of creativity. Before his isolation, the minstrel had composed works, as did his colleagues, by making up verses that he committed to memory. These, along with other popular pieces, comprised the canon that he worked with; however, his isolation made the subject matter of these songs and poems (dealing with

the capricious actions of the gods) seem trivial and irrelevant, and his imagination grew too active for his memory to keep up. In time, the minstrel finds inspiration enough to solve these two problems.

> Artist through, I'd been wont since boyhood when pissing on beach or bank to make designs and clever symbols with my water. From this source. . .sprang now a torrent of inspiration: using tanned skins in pl;ace of a sand-beach, a seagull-feather for my tool, and a mixture of wine, blood, and squid-ink for a medium, I developed a kind of coded markings to record the utterance of mind and heart. By drawing out these chains of symbols I could so preserve and display my tale, it was unnecessary to remember it. I could therefore compose more and faster; I came largely to exchange song for written speech. . .(LFH, 186).

In addition to these innovations, the minstrel finds that filling empty amphorae with his writings and setting them adrift on the sea "loosed from my soul a Deucalion-flood of literature" (LFH, 186). He then spends the next few years filling and launching eight amphorae with many versions of a kind of writing never before seen:

> . . .what I came to call fiction. That is, I found that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not, and that people existed who didn't, I could achieve a lovely truth which actually obscures--especially when I learned to abandon myth and pattern my fabrications on actual people and events. . . .
>
> It was as if there were this minstrel and this milk-maid, et cetera; one could I believe draw a whole philosophy from that as if (LFH, 186).

However, despite having invented writing, narrative prose fiction, mimetic literature, romantic writings, etc., the minstrel eventually meets with a crisis when he runs out of ideas and material, and he despairs because he can find nothing new to say. Then, one day, an amphora washes up on

the beach with a parchment inside on which the minstrel sees ink marks, but he cannot decipher the markings nor can he tell for certain whether or not this is one of his earlier jettisoned works. Despite this, this event breaks him out of his writer's block because

> 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 (LFH, 189).

This leads the minstrel to imagine any number of possibilities, the most important of which is the potential existence of a reader. As a result, he sets out to create a new work, an all-encompassing fiction, using the last amphora and the last goat, which means that he must exercise more care than usual in order not to waste his limited materials. He spends a great deal of time mentally drafting and prewriting, turning over ideas while trying to catch the remaining goat, and he finally decides on a general goal:

> Whimsic fantasy, grub fact, pure senseless music--none in itself would do; to embody all and rise above each, in a work neither longfaced nor idiotly grinning, but adventuresome, passionately humored, merry with the pain of insight, wise and smiling in the terror of our life--that was my calm ambition (LFH, 191).

The result is this piece: a tale of the minstrel's early life and the story of how he came to invent writing and prose storytelling. Though he is not entirely satisfied with the product, the minstrel seals the parchment inside the ninth amphora, which he names Calliope after the muse of eloquence and epic poetry, and sends it off. He speaks of

its voyage in terms reminiscent of the world of possibilities that Ambrose envisioned in "Water-Message":

> I like to imagine it drifting age after age, while the generations fight, sing, love, expire. . . .It drifts away, past Heracles's pillars, across Oceanus, nudged by great and little fishes, under strange constellations bobbing, bobbing. Towns and statues fall, gods come and go, new worlds and tongues swim into light, old perish. Then it too must perish, with all things deciphered and undeciphered: men, women, stars and sky (LFH, 194).

Though the minstrel has no illusions about the success of his missive, about the chances that someone might actually find and read it, he feels renewed by the mere possibility that this could happen. More than the desperation and futility felt by the other writer-characters to this point, the minstrel's small, irrational hope for the possibility of success at the end of the book suggests that

> Barth brings us to the point where writing itself becomes of ultimate value, not because of what is expressed but because of what the act involves: faith, commitment, in the face of absurdity (Woolley, 479).

However, another sign of success, unknown to the minstrel, is indicated earlier in the piece "Water-Message" where Ambrose is inspired after he receives what might be one of the minstrel's "messages," which bends the book back on itself. In addition, the minstrel's story echoes the pattern established in "Frame-Tale"at the beginning of the book. Speaking of the first piece in regard to this, Barth says that

> I thought it would be pleasant to have a frame story that would be a literal, physical image of the sequence of stories that was to follow, that is a cycle with a twist, and at the same time be a story that never does begin,

> that's all beginning, a kind of endless beginning that reverts on itself. . . .as the protagonist gets older the time of the stories moves back towards classical antiquity, a kind of double motion of time. And I knew that I wanted the last stories to be being sent out as messages on the water just as the first one was coming in (Glaser-Wohrer, 253).

The ending, then, of the book and of "Anonymiad" combines, among other things, the renewable pattern and potential of story as laid out in "Frame-Tale" (a piece carried solely by words and shape), the nature of the storyteller as depicted in the narrators and writers that follow who seek to renew themselves and establish their origins, and the points at which teller and told meet and meld to renew and recycle themselves and establish possibilities for new beginnings for future stories and storytellers. All Barth's characters experience these things as problematic situations and achieve only partial success as they attempt to accomplish them, but

> The personal dilemma and the writerly dilemma as Barth presents them, both products of the mind's and of language's capacity for self-reflection, have the same solution: voice, or rather what voice makes possible--the expression of human qualities and concerns, One of these concerns is the alienation and fragmentation of the self; another is the need to address an Other and the desire to be "messaged." Voice creates the possibility of relationship and imbues the meaningless word with the mystery of human intentions and human significance. . . (Woolley, 479).

Recycling, a reflexive, self-conscious search for renewed origins, and the bending back on themselves of language, history, and story characterizing Funhouse originate from a particular perception of history that Barth holds:

There's a marine animal I'm fond of. (I don't think I invented him, though maybe I improved on him.) He's a crustacean who creates his spiral shell as he goes along. The material he encounters are assimilated into it, and at the same time he more or less intuitively directs his path toward the kinds of material shells are best made of. How I love that animal! He's the perfect image for me. . . .He wears his history on his back all the time, but it's not just a burden: he's living in it. His history is his house. He's constantly adding new spirals, new rings--but they're not just repetition, for he's expanding logarithmically (Gado, 129).

For Barth, the material provided by language offer a way to construct in writing a meaningful version of reality, and writing stories that recycle mythic elements do not rely on things merely mythical. For him, and for others such as Joseph Campbell, a myth is more than simply a fiction; it has a great deal of explanatory power and suggests possibilities for renewed creative effort.

For if man's first distinctly human act is to create and use language, then his second human act, almost certainly, is to use language to tell stories, to structure the raw stuff of his universe into the controllable and controlling forms of myth. In returning fiction to the primal and forbidding level of story itself, Barth has perforce also developed a style, a language, and a vision to incarnate the most crucial debates of contemporary philosophical thought (McConnell, 111).

Similarly, Barth's recycling of myth and story, especially in such pieces as "Echo" and "Menelaiad," indicate not only a concern with where storytelling comes from (including written stories), but also an interest in ways to expand these to embrace contemporary situations--in effect, Barth (like the snail) manages to have it both ways:

By recasting ancient tales and myths in modern terms, Barth is able to hold onto the demands and concerns of the present while metaphorically returning to literary origins. Barth

thus acknowledges the history that contains him, while simultaneously evoking that cosmogenic moment whence all history began (Harris, 115-116).

These concerns are carried over in Barth's next book, Chimera--both it and Funhouse are

experiments with the idea of the novel as myth. More importantly, they are experiments with the possibilities of myth itself. . .to give us ways of living which can make the world tolerable: to give us not only the sense of life-as-fiction, but of fiction-as-life, which is the only reason for mythmaking at all. . .(McConnell, 119).

Barth develops these ideas in a different way in Chimera, a collection of three novellas. Where Funhouse begins with pieces that focus strongly on ontologies, move outwardly to encompass revised and renewed myths, and then reach back again to beginnings, Chimera begins with myth and storytellers and then expands to examine what might allow or help storytellers to renew themselves as well as what might recycle the tales they tell.

The first story, "Dunyazadiad," is that of Scheherazade (called Sherry), the narrator of the Arabian Nights (also known as the 1000 Nights and a Night), who has set out to save herself and the other young women of the kingdom from Sultan Shahyrar's revenge against her sex. He, embittered by his first wife's adultery, executes her; then he decides to take a new bride each night and have her killed in the morning. Sherry resolves to end this deadly cycle by marrying Shahyrar and telling him stories each night, interrupting each at the right moment so that he will postpone her death in order to hear the rest of the tale.

But this is not simply the story of Sherry doing this; it is the version of what happened as related by Dunyazade (a.k.a. Doony), the title character and Sherry's younger sister, who has set down Sherry's story in writing as a tale told by herself as a character to her husband, Shahyar's brother, Shah Zaman. As an additional twist, it also happens that, at first, Sherry faces a crisis: she has no idea about what stories to tell nor how to go about telling them. Growing desperate, and finding that little in her education has prepared her to solve her problem, Sherry looks to language for an answer:

> . . .as a last resort she turned to her first love, unlikely as it seemed, mythology and folklore and studied all the riddle/puzzle/secret motifs she could dig up. . . .It's in words that the magic is. . .but the magic words in one story aren't magical in the next. The real magic is to understand which words work, and when, and for what; the trick is to learn the trick (CHM, 15).

Then, thinking that they might find an answer by role playing and pretending their situation was a story and themselves fictional characters, Sherry comes to see her problem as an exercise in composing the proper version of their story.

> Now, no matter what way she finds. . .it comes down to particular words in the story we're reading, right? And those words are made from the letters of an alphabet: a couple-dozen squiggles we can draw with this pen. This is the key, Doony! And the treasure, too, of we can only get our hands on it! It's as if--as if the key to the treasure is the treasure (CHM, 16).

With the last words, a "genie" suddenly appears, one whose physical description seems much like Barth's and who

claims to be a professional writer from a far-off land in the future. Overcoming their initial surprise and confusion, the three find that they can communicate easily and, more important, that they all have some language problems to solve. For his part, the genie is in the midst of a writing slump, partly due to the condition of things in his time and place.

> At one time, we gathered, people in his country had been fond of reading; currently, however, the only readers of artful fiction were critics, other writers, and unwilling students who, left to themselves, preferred music and pictures to words (CHM, 17).

In addition, his career has faltered partly because he has somewhat written himself into a corner in that

> he wished neither to repudiate nor to repeat his past performances; he aspired to go beyond them toward a future they were not attuned to and, by some magic, at the same time to go back to the original springs of narrative (CHM, 17).

All this has led to a hiatus in the genie's work and chaos in his life, and though he remains intent on learning "where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been--where we've all been" (CHM, 18), so far he has found little of use in reviving his creativity. He then tells the sisters about the Maryland snail (in words virtually identical to those Barth uses in the interview quoted above) that "carries his history on his back," but then despairs over making any real progress because, unlike the snail

> I'm going in circles, following my own trail! I've quit reading and writing; I've lost track of who I am; my names

just a jumble of letters; so's the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code I've lost the key to (CHM, 18).

Like Sherry, the genie has reached a dead end, but also like her, he felt convinced that, somehow, he has come near to finding the "key" he seeks.

. . .he felt that a treasure-house of new fiction lay vaguely under his hand, if he could find the key to it. Musing idly on this figure, he had added to the morass of notes he felt himself mired in, a sketch for a story about a man who comes somehow to realize that the key to the treasure he's searching for is the treasure (CHM, 19).

This thought, occurring simultaneously with the same words spoken by Sherry, is what magically brings the storyteller and the storywriter together, and now they look for ways to help each other with their problems in story. When the genie learns the details of Sherry's plight, especially that she has never yet in her life even told a story, he is overcome with emotion and declares "his lifelong adoration of her," a passion so great that, since his student days working in the library stacks where he first read her tales,

his love affairs with other, "real" women seemed to him by comparison unreal. . .his own fictions mere mimicries, pallid counterfeit of the authentic treasure of her Thousand and One Nights (CHM, 20).

The two strike a bargain: they will repeat the magic words at designated hours, and when the genie appears, in the limited time they have together, he will tell Sherry a story from his copy of her collected stories to tell to Shahyrar that night. In this, Barth creates a fleshed out

version of the Moebius strip structure laid out in "Frame-Tale." That is, the genie will retell Sherry's stories to her before she even knows them--in this way, the tales originate in a past that is informed by a future inspired by a past that could not exist without its links to the future.

Sherry vows to help the genie with his literary goals in any way she can, although she sees nothing at the moment to do except give her moral support. As consolation and as a sign of mutual respect, she offers him sexual favors, but the genie protests that his love is aesthetic, not carnal, and that he desires "her only as the old Greek poets their Muse, as a source of inspiration" (CHM, 24). His greatest wish in regard to literature is

> that he would not die without adding some artful trinket or two, however small, to the general treasury of civilized delights, to which no keys were needed beyond goodwill, attention, and a moderately cultivated sensibility: he meant 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 alons the painful way (CHM, 25).

As a parting gift on this first meeting, Sherry gives the genie a suitable symbol--"a gold ring worked in the form of a spiral shell"--which he takes, pledging to "spin from it. . .as from a catherine-wheel or whirling galaxy, a golden shower of fiction" (CHM, 26).

Doony relates how, at later meetings, her sister and the genie discuss various aspects of storytelling art, especially techniques, framing devices, and the passion propeling its creation. Their favorite point concerns the

ways in which telling stories (verbally or in writing) is similar to making love. Sherry tells Doony that "making love and telling stories take more than good technique--but it's only technique that we can talk about". The genie agrees, adding that "Heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal . . .so does heartless skill. But what you want is passionate virtuosity" (CHM, 32). In addition, he points out

> that in his time and place there were scientists of the passions who maintained that language itself, on the one hand, originated in "infantile pregenital erotic exhuberance, polymorphously perverse," and that conscious attention, on the other, was a "libidinal hypercathexis"--by which magic phrases they seemed to mean that writing and reading, or telling and listening, were literally ways of making love (CHM, 32).

For Sherry and the genie, the literalness of the comparison did not matter; instead, "they liked to speak as if it were" (CHM, 32). This, they felt, accounted for the similarities between the structure of conventional stories and the rythms of sexual intercourse, but the most important consideration regarding the erotic relationship between reader and writer was that it must be mutually pleasurable because

> Narrative, in short. . .was a love-relation, not a rape: 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. . .(CHM, 34).

As the genie comes to the last story he has to give Sherry, he informs the sisters that he has worked through his writer's block by nearly completing a book composed of

three novellas--in fact, his book seems identical to Barth's Chimera, which means that we now have three "Dunyazadiads": Barth's, Dunyazad's, and the genie's. But Sherry indicates that she does not care for the "original" ending of her tales which require her to kneel before Shahryar and plead for her life. She, instead, intends to exact justice for the sexual terror committed by Shahryar and Shah Zaman (who, allegedly, has followed his brother's earlier example of marrying and killing young women for nearly three years without stopping).

Part I of the story ends not with a "happily ever after" but with a revenge plot. Sherry sets up double marriages between herself and Shahryar and Doony and Shah Zaman; then, according to her plan, the sisters trick their husbands into lying down tied to their beds, intending to let them bleed to death after suffering castration. In Part II, the reader learns that the story to this point is what Doony tells her new husband as a summary explaining why she has tricked him. In response, Shah Zaman then tells a story about what he has done over the last few years: instead of actually killing a young bride every day, he has given them the opportunity to go into exile in a land populated only by women. Though Doony finds all of this incredible, Shah Zaman claims that the things he has said are, in essence, true: "They're too important to be lies. Fictions, maybe--but truer that fact" (CHM, 61).

Proclaiming that they could, if they desired it enough, love each other as equals, Doony responds that such a thing is impossible, that they could do so only as if they were equal. Shah Zaman replies, in words that echo the anonymous minstrel in "Anonymiad," "Let it be as if! Let's make a philosophy of that as if" (CHM, 62). This opens the possibility, at least, for a relationship built on mutual respect and love, and as in Sherry and the genie's perceptions that storymaking and lovemaking are similar, the mutual exchange of stories by Doony and Shah Zaman allow them to begin loving one another--for them, the key to the treasure of love and sexual equality is to act "as if" it were the case, to make a fiction that is "truer that fact" to open the potential for a renewed life together. Doony's story is something that she writes down to offer the same possibility to the reader.

"Perseid," the next story, is told by Perseus, the hero of classical myth, son of Zeus, and slayer of Medusa. Perseus tells his story to Medusa in retrospect, after both have been turned into constellations. However, his tale does not concern the accomplishments that won him heroic stature; instead, he tells the story of the second half of his life when, at age forty, he faces a mid-life crisis.

> The kids were grown and restless; Andromeda and I had become different people; our marriage was on the rocks. The kingdom took care of itself; my fame was sure enough--but I'd lost my shine with my golden locks. . .I was twenty kilos overweight and bored stiff. . .I became convinced I was petrifying (CHM, 79).

Perseus then determines to do nothing less than "retrace" his life in order to recycle and renew himself in the second half of his life as a way to recapture part of his lost heroic self. He denies feeling this as mere pride. In words much like those of the genie in the preceding story, Perseus explains that

> . . .it wasn't just vanity. . .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 (CHM, 80).

Much of Proteus' desire to find a meaningful pattern in his life's story came as the result of seven letters he received from a young woman who wrote to him seeking information for some research she was working on, "almost as if she were doing a dissertation" (CHM, 87). The questions she raised proved so insightful and provocative that Perseus devoted a great deal of time examining his life and himself to find out who he really was. Again sounding like the genie, Perseus began continually looking back on his own story as something that he could comprehend much like a piece of writing.

> Thus, the 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 (CHM, 88-89).

Perseus appeals to Athene for help, asking for a new heroic task, perhaps one involving a renewed Medusa that he could re-decapitate and, thus, renew himself as a hero.

Further, he hoped that the new Medusa's gaze would work to revitalize, rather than petrify, him. He eventually meets someone who seems to be either Athene or one of her priestesses--the woman promises no more than the possibility that Perseus' new mission will renew him but hints at the chance to attain a kind of immortality. However, rather than simply replaying his original heroic deeds, Perseus finds that his new quest has new emphases.

> In general. . .my mode of operation in this second enterprise must be contrary to my first's: on the one hand, direct instead of indirect--no circuities, circumlocutions, reflections, or ruses--on the other, rather passive than active: beyond a certain point I must permit things to come to me instead of adventuring to them (CHM, 102).

Partway through his new mission, Perseus discovers that it is a reconstituted Medusa posing as Athene who has set him off on his adventures. Declaring her love for Perseus, despite his earlier violence toward her, she then tells him the story of her life and her punishment by Athene for vanity by being made a Gorgon. Newly rejuvenated, Medusa would be immediately remade a monster if she ever looked at her reflection or showed her face to someone else.

> there was one compensation and one escape clause. Athene granted her the power to rejuvenate or depetrify, just once, whomever she gazed uncowled at or whoever uncowled and gazed at her; but the conferral of this boon must be at her own cost, since by the earlier stipulation she'd be reGorgoned (CHM, 113)

The "escape clause" provided that, if her gaze fell upon her true love, then both "would turn ageless as the stars and be together forever" (CHM, 115). But they do not

yet get the opportunity to take advantage of this chance for immortality--after a night of lovemaking on a beach, Perseus wakes to find himself alone and without memory.

Calyxa, a young woman, finds Perseus and revives him. He awakens thinking himself dead and in heaven, and for a time, Calyxa indulges this illusion. She takes him to a shrine constructed in the form of a spiral shell, the inside walls of which depict scenes from Perseus' life story in carved bas-relief, which leads Perseus to retell his version of things to Calyxa. Eventually, he learns that he is not in heaven and that Calyxa is, literally, a hero worshipper who has a special interest in Sabazias, Ammon, and Perseus. In Perseus' shrine, she had drawn the diagrams from which the wall carvings originated. But more important, it was Calyxa who, as part of her thesis research in her student days, had written the seven letters that began Perseus' quest for renewal. In addition, Perseus finds out that, since setting out to renew his herohood, his wife Andromeda has left him for someone else, which makes him decide to end his quest, leave Calyxa, and settle family business.

While confronting his wife, Perseus is ambushed by her suitor and his cronies, but he manages to kill them all except Andromeda. They acknowledge both their mutual affection and their incompatibility--then, Medusa walks onto the scene of battle and, despite the danger of re-petrification, Perseus

> chucked wise dagger, strode over sill, embraced eyes shut the compound predications of commitment--hard choice! soft flesh!--slipped back mid-kiss her problematic cowl, opened eyes (CHM, 134).

The result is that both Perseus and Medusa are transformed into constellations; both are renewed by achieving immortality, and they now spend every night, for eternity, listening to Perseus tell his tale for the first half of each evening and then talking together for the rest. Their discussions, though, sometimes sound less like talk between two lovers who have transcended mortality than like two literary critics bickering over the finer points of Perseus' story such as style, narrative technique, and the use of metaphor and alliteration.

Nevertheless, to Medusa's question, "Are you happy, Perseus, with the way this story ends," he replies

> My love, it's an epilogue, always ending, never ended. . . . My fate is to be able only to imagine boundless beauty from my experience of boundless love. . . .I'm content. . . .to have become, like the noted music of our tongue, these silent, visible signs; to be the tale I tell. . .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 (CHM, 141-142).

Perseus and Medusa, then, arise and rearise, night after night, endlessly telling, retelling, and reworking their stories. This ending arises from Barth's interest in constellations as images of perpetual recycling, which grew out of his fascination with the Fibonacci numerical sequence that mathematically describes the shape of a logarithmic

spiral. This shape appears in nature in such things as shells and the patterns on, and shapes of, some plants.

> But the particular occurrence of this pattern which most interested Barth. . .was that between the chambered nautilus and the spiral galaxies (Morrell, 142).

These two objects describe the main settings in the story; and from Calyxa's spiral temple resembling a nautilus shell to the spiral galaxies near the constellation named after him, Perseus and his story have expanded and become transfigured, transcending mundane life, and reached a new status as hero and legend. Because of this, Perseus has gone farther than the characters in Funhouse who, like the genie and Perseus initially, seek to understand their situation by looking to the past and, then, working to find a pattern that will give them clues about the future (Morrell, 143). But merely turning into their own stories offers only limited chances for writing to help the Funhouse characters renew themselves. In Perseus' case,

> Barth saw an opportunity to treat this theme in a fuller, more expansive. . .way than he had ever done before. What accounted for the difference was that. . .Perseus' stories go around in a spiral. . . .Form became content, structure meaning: Perseus, reviewing the events of his life, discovers in their very format the secret of renewal. If the second half of his life must be a continuation of the first, it still can be, if striven for, a movement outward and upward, not just recapitulation but recycling. . .(Morrell, 143).

Perseus began moving in this direction when Medusa, disguised as Athene, gave him tasks to carry out that were essentially the opposite of those that first won him fame. But Perseus also manages to help himself by finally refusing

to follow the "script" carved on Calyxa's spiral walls or those comprising Medusa's orders. In short, he breaks out of preestablished patterns by quitting his quest and directly refacing, while vulnerable, the renewed Medusa.

Bellerophon, Perseus' cousin and the protagonist of the last story, "Bellerophoniad," also tries to renew himself by recycling his past heroic deeds and, thus, reestablishing his status as a hero. His first heroic cycle involved killing the Chimera (a mythical creature with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a dragon's tail). However, he did not accomplish this task for certain, so he sets out again to destroy the Chimera definitively and, thereby, clear up any ambiguities in either his status or his story. But his quest generates, not clarity and order, but a story that grows increasingly confused, disjointed, and seemingly inauthentic. One factor contributing to this is the difficulty he finds in composing his story--a job about which he feels much the same as Todd Andrews:

> How does one write a novella? How find the channel, bewildered in these creeks and crannies? Storytelling isn't my cup of wine. . .my plot doesn't rise and fall in meaningful stages but winds upon itself like a whelk-shell or the snakes on Hermes caduceus: digresses, retreats, hesitates, groans. . .collapses, dies (CHM, 205).

Compounding this is Bellerophon's admission that a blow on the head has confused both him and his story, which leads him to warn the reader about the veracity and fullness of his tale.

. . .I bear yet a crescent scar there and hear a roaring in my skull like wind or time. That blow. . .impaired my memory, hear how I falter. If there are discrepancies or lacunae in this account, you must fill in the blanks yourself (CHM, 174).

But much of the confusion in the story arises from the profusion of possible narrative voices, which increasingly undermine any certainty about whose story this is or who speaks at any particular moment. At one point, the story itself seems to speak out about the problematic nature of its narrator:

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, of not inspire. But put it that one has had visions of an order complex unto madness. . .(CHM, 154).

At another point, the identity of the author is also called into question:

the author could be Antoninus Liberalis, for example, Hesiod, Homer, Hyginus, Ovid, Pindar, Plutarch, the Scholiast on the Illiad, 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 (CHM, 246).

Another disrupting element is the protagonist's real identity, for it turns out that the Bellerophon in this story might be an imposter. That is, the original Bellerus, who later gains renown as Bellerophon, might have been killed as the result of his brother Deliades' intrigues--therefore, Deliades posing as Bellerophon might be the true narrator and hero of the story, but far too many digressions

and competing voices exist for the reader to know for certain.

A final blow to the story's credibility comes when Polyeidus--seer, Bellerophon's tutor, and shape-changer who can turn himself only into documents with dubious truth value--attempts to save himself at the end. Bellerophon has determined to ride the winged horse Pegasus straight to Olympus as a way to immediately and directly claim heroic status and immortality. To counter this, Zeus turns Polyeidus into a gadfly to sting Pegasus and tumble Bellerophon and to earth. As they both fall, Polyeidus changes himself into the written aspect of the "Bellerophoniad" (pages, written text) and turns Bellerophon into his own story, the pages of which fall into the Maryland marshes far below.

Throughout, Bellerophon's greatest problem in renewing his life by recycling his story results from the fact that he fails to understand the pattern that he believes will guide him to herohood. Polyeidus, as his tutor, can only help him in a limited way because his powers to shape-shift into written texts is erratic, unpredictable, and unreliable. For example, when Bellerophon asks to see the heroic pattern, Polyeidus first goes through three other transformations. First, he becomes a letter supposedly written to King George III by someone claiming to be Napoleon, partly composed aboard the H.M.S. Bellerophon enroute to St.

Helena, concerning a scheme to renew both men's leadership and glory. For one hundred fifty years, Napoleon asserts, he has orchestrated a covert plot from tidewater Maryland (to which he managed to escape from exile, regarding "the New, the Second Revolution, an utterly novel revolution" (CHM, 254). The author asks for George III's help with the project, now being moved to Lilydale, near Lake Chatauqua, New York--however, he says very little about the exact nature of the coming revolution except that it is a piece of writing and

> as the first genuinely scientific model of the genre, it will of necessity contain nothing original whatsoever, but be the quintessence, the absolute type, as it were the Platonic Form expressed (CHM, 254).

The second document is a letter to Todd Andrews from Jerome Bray, a possible ancestor of Harold Bray in Giles and someone who claims to be descended from the Bonapartes and, therefore, the rightful heir to the French throne. He is the writer of the first letter, and now he seeks legal advice from Andrews in renewing funding for his work from the Tidewater Foundation. What Bray plans to do is to complete "Napoleon's" scheme, laid out in more detail here. Bray explains that the Second Revolution will result from a revolutionary novel titled NOTES, a computer generated text undertaken "to compose, not hypothetical fictions, but the 'Complete,' the 'Final Fiction.'" He works toward this by feeding the computer with everything he can find pertaining to the writing of fictions, myths, and stories:

> thus equipped, the machine was to analyze the corpus of existing fiction. . .induce the perfect form from its "natural" approximations, and reduce that ideal to a mathematical model. . .(CHM, 260).

Part of Bray's impetus comes from a passion for revenge against those who, he complains, have foiled his attempts to publish by plagiarizing his work and publishing it under a name with the same initials as his own: "J.B." For example, he asserts that the Revised New Syllabus was given to him by Stoker Giles (or Giles Stoker) as a legitimate holy text and the "publication of which would have made him immortal" (CHM, 258). Frustrated, Bray seeks solitude by moving to New York and establishing connections with people at the Remobilization Farm, Jake Horner's retreat and supported by Todd Andrew's friend Harrison Mack who has gone mad and thinks himself George III. The Tidewater Foundation is Mack's philanthropic organization and gives Bray grant money, some of which he uses to produce

> more or less inept parodies of the writings of the plagiarist aforementioned, upon whom Bray thus cleverly revenged himself: they bore such titles as The End of the Road Continued; Sot-weed Redivivus; Son of Giles, or, The Revised New Revised New Syllabus. . .(CHM, 259-260).

The third document into which Polyeidus changes is the water message found by Ambrose in Funhouse, which Bellerophon finds meaningless. Finally, Polyeidus becomes a copy of the heroic pattern: a schematic representation of the circular shape that a hero's life and adventures tend to follow.

None of these documents helps Bellerophon reach herohood or immortality. In addition to the many textual ambiguities, digressions, and subversions of narrative and authorial validity, none are anything more than examples of what someone else has already done, not what Bellerophon needs to do to renew himself. For instance, just as Bray parodies the already existing work of "J.B.," Bellerophon finds that following the written pattern into which Polyeidus turns makes him a follower merely. As Zeus states it to Polyeidus,

> By imitating perfectly the Pattern of Mythic Heroism, your man Bellerophon has become a perfect imitation of a mythic hero (CHM, 308).

As a result, Bellerophon's story falls apart; his fundamental error is to confuse the shape of a hero's path, such as that in Perseus' story, for the path itself.

> Perseus is the true mythic hero. . . .He renews his life by re-living it ironically (and by re-telling it ironically). His heroic immortality is assured, first by his having been made a constellation, then by having the story of his story become part of a story by Barth. Bellerophon is a failed hero. . .[and] the "Bellerophoniad" is about a phony Bellerophon (Edelstein, 104).

Therefore, where Perseus' story and life take on the shape of an outwardly opening spiral, Bellerophon's becomes "A circle because, unlike Perseus, Bellerophon never does transcend himself, merely repeats himself rather than recycles" (Morrell, 151). In effect, Bellerophon's story tends to self-destruct because he misunderstands how writing one's own story leads to rewriting and renewing it. An

earlier symbol of this occurs in the story that relates to this theme: when Bellerophon confronts what he thinks is the Chimera, he has come armed with a spear resembling a pencil in that "instead of a sharp bronze point had a dull one of lead" upon which he placed "several sheets of paper from the prophet's briefcase." In order to overcome the Chimera, these papers were

> impregnated with a magical calorific. . . .Chimera would attack it; the calorific would super-heat her breath. . .and melt the lead, which then would burn through her vitals and kill her (CHM, 235-236).

Bellerophon, then, kills the Chimera--and, in a manner of speaking, brings about the end of Chimera--by wielding the implements of writing as weapons, not as special tools for self-renewal or for rewriting himself. For Barth, this particular kind of combat has special significance in regard to his treatment of Bellerophon's story.

> When I first re-read the myth and its variants. . .what struck me immediately was that one way to think about that myth--though the makers of the myth couldn't have been thinking about it because the myth is older than writing--is that it is a myth about writing. . . .It's the idea of the hero riding Pegasus with this pencil-like instrument that fascinates me. The horse has become the emblem of inspiration; the monster has become the emblem of monstrous fictions or fictive monsters, chimerical projects. What mediates between the hero and the monster is this peculiar instrument with a lead point. . . . I don't write with a pencil, or the thing would come true, but what is pleasing about the classical myth is the notion of this monster cooperating in its own demise, that is the trick about the weapon is that it turns on the monster's characteristics: what had been its offensive becomes its undoing. So it's a peculiar kind of death (Glaser-Wohrer, 258-259).

More important, though, for Barth is the fact that the "Bellerophoniad" also served as a peculiar kind of rebirth

of Barth's writing career. That is, during the time that Barth was taking the story from the planning stage and beginning to write it in the fall of 1969, he suffered his first bout of major writer's block:

> Now the words wouldn't come. He labored with them until the end of the summer of 1970 when he realized that his difficulty with the story was analogous to the problems Bellerophon was having with his horse, that his own non-flights of language, his stops and starts, were the proper technique of his story. . . (Morrell, 149-50).

Barth's eventual success, then, is a triumph of a sort in terms of finding a way to rewrite himself by writing, and where Bellerophon fails because he simply moves in circles, Barth manages to "spiral outward" and move beyond the trap of language.

Chapter 5

Recycling and Reinventing: LETTERS: A Novel

Barth's seventh book continues to explore the idea of renewing the self through writing by recycling both a character's personal history and the life of storytelling. In this way, Barth's writer-characters manage to revivify their lives and, to a greater or lesser extent, generate a personally relevant sense of meaning in the world. In doing so, Barth also reworks his own literary canon, taking stock of, and revitalizing, himself as a writer. As Barth sees it,

> This is the great period of recyclings and reorientations and mid-life crises. So it seems an appropriate time. . .to review the inventory and see how my novels build on each other, like chapters in a larger story (Coughlin, 4).

Barth's taking of inventory in LETTERS makes the novel unlike his other books in that is does not come paired with another novel. Nor does it stand alone as a single volume--instead, it acts in tandem with his whole literary corpus to this point. A large, complex, and intertwined epistolary novel, LETTERS is a collection of letters written by several characters to one another: five have either appeared previously or are ancestors of earlier characters, one is new, and one is Barth himself. The book's lengthy subtitle is An Old Time Epistolary Novel by Seven Fictitious Drolls & Dreamers Each of Which Imagines Himself Actual. This also acts as a map of the novel's organizational pattern.

Composed of eighty-eight letters, Barth arranges the subtitle so that all the letters in it form the book's seven-letter title. He then arranges this so that "L-E-T-T-E-R-S" is superimposed in a calendar--one letter of the title for each month, one letter comprising each letter of the title for each day--covering the seven moths (March to September, 1969) during which the characters compose the eighty-eight epistles in the book. Thus, the novel's organization depends, not upon a conventional linear chronology, but on how certain letters and dates coincide. Barth has several purposes for doing this. First, he says that this scheme allows the reader some latitude when approaching the book because

> It's. . .perfectly possible. . .to read the LETTERS novel in more than one way. You don't have to start on page one of that novel and go through to page 772. I'm a great skipper of pages when I read other people's novels, and the minute I come to a stretch that doesn't immediately interest me, I turn some pages and go to another part, then come back, maybe (Coughlin, 5).

Second, Barth claims that he wanted to look again at the origins of the eighteenth-century English novel "and see whether I could reorchestrate some of those old conventions to contemporary purposes." To his surprise, he found that writers like Smollett, Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson

> had what seems from this perspective an astonishingly modern sense: that what you have when you read a novel is not people in a room, or in situations with each other, but words on a page. . . .most of the early novels pretended to be documents: journals, or letters, or histories, or other kinds of found documents (Coughlin, 4).

Finally, in light of this, Barth decided to write a modern epistolary novel that "would consist of documents and would attempt to imitate not life directly, but the documents of life" (Coughlin, 4). For Barth, fiction presenting itself in this way, rejecting a mimetic approach to life in favor of a representation of a representation of life, necessarily implies questions of history and language. As Barth states it,

> I became increasingly aware that the book's true subject, stated simply, would be Reenactment, or Recycling, or Revolution--the last in a metaphorical sense rather than a political sense. . . .if one endeavors to see that everything reflects everything else--then one of the things you might think of recycling along the way is recurrences in history: repititions, echoes, reverberations, second cycles of human lives. In that context, taking another look at one's own imaginative past. . .seemed highly appropriate (Reilly, 10).

In regard to the book's structure and the effect it produces as a reflection of his concern with language,

> a central motif is established before we even begin the narrative proper: LETTERS is made up of letters (epistles) and the resulting fiction is built out of previous fictions, just as the word "letters" is itself made of letters; similarly, the entire communication process of language is ultimately reducible to individual units (words, sentences) which themselves are further reducible to. . .fragile, arbitrary units. . .(McCaffery, 76).

In addition, the postmodern sense that all perceptions and intellectual concepts have much in common with the processes involved in creating fiction (at the very least in terms of the shaping and reworking of "reality" in the search for making meaning), actually works to enhance,

rather than negate, the connection between language and the world:

> all of man's efforts to form a view of the world--efforts which include memory, history, scientific views, mathematical formulas--involve a kind of fiction-making process. Indeed, this attempt to "storify" reality into some sort of narrative process may properly be considered to be the central, transcendent activity of all mankind. We can never again naively ask writers to deal with the world rather than symbols because our world is made of symbols, our understanding of its processes inevitably tied to narrative processes (McCaffery, 80).

This, in part, explains the fascination that Barth and his characters feel about history and their own lives. Both history and autobiography are comprised of a complex set of facts, but what those facts mean, how they add up to some kind of relevant overall Truth, leads the letter writers to review and reinterpret both the past and their pasts. Similar to what Perseus and Bellerophon attempt, the writer-characters in LETTERS are concerned with achieving some kind of rejuvenation through a recycling process.

> The full implications of Barth's epistolary format. . . are intimately related to one of the book's central motifs: the cyclical or "reenactment" view of history, personal development, and literature. This view reverberates throughout the novel in a dizzying series of spirals. All of the characters. . .including Barth himself, are obsesses with the idea that the second half of their lives will in some fashion reenact the first half. The task set for all of them is to avoid an empty, sterile reenactment. . . (McCaffery, 77).

The first writer to appear in LETTERS is Germaine Pitt, a new character also known as Lady Amherst after a former marriage to a titled husband. She writes only to Barth, initially by way of presenting an official invitation asking

him to accept an honorary Doctor of Letters from Marshyhope State University, where Germaine is the acting provost of the Faculty of Letters. One reason she wishes to have Barth accept the degree is to prevent it from going to another candidate, Andrew Burlingame Cook VI, whom she calls a "self-styled Laureate of Maryland" and a "formidable charlatan" who writes "mind-abrading doggerel" (LTRS, 6).

Barth feels obliged to decline the offer due to his acceptance of a similar one from the main state university, but he sends a letter suggesting that Germaine make an offer to his friend and fellow writer Ambrose Mensch because

> He's an honorable, deserving oddball and a bona fide avant-gardist, whose "career" I've followed with interest and sympathy. A true "doctor of letters" (in the Johns Hopkins Medical School sense), he is a tinkerer, and experimenter, a slightly astigmatic visionary, perhaps even a revolutionizer of cures. . .(LTRS, 50).

Shortly after, Barth also sends a counterproposal asking if Germaine would mind if he made her a character in his latest book. He does so because some aspects of her letter (which included a long, informal discussion of the school's history and academic infighting, as well as some of her personal history) uncannily resembles parts of his book-in-progress. This captures Barth's interest because

> For autobiographical "fiction" I have only disdain; but what's involved here strikes me less as autobiographical than as a muddling of the distinction between Art and Life, a boundary as historically notorious as Mason and Dixon's line. . . .It is as if Reality, a mistress too long ignored, must now settle scores with her errant lover (LTRS, 51-52).

Germaine is, at first, offended and answers by emphatically rejecting Barth's request declaring, "I am not Literature! I am not the Great Tradition! I am not the aging Muse of the Realistic Novel! (LTRS, 57). However, she reconsiders and begins a series of long letters to Barth to which she expects no reply; though she later asks for some response from her reader, for now she is content to relate her thoughts and feelings to him, much as if she were writing in a journal, concerning the university, her career problems, people she encounters, and intimate details of her life.

Germaine differs from the other characters in that she is not obsessed with recycling or reenacting her life. However, she does act in several ways as a participant in the recycling of others' lives through writing. First, it is through her letters that the reader gets an alternative view of the events and experiences that the other characters write about, and this serves to reinterpret and renew what the reader already knows.

Second, Germaine feels obligated to relate to Barth her past as part of her contribution as a character to his new work; thus, she does, in a limited way, recycle her history. She reveals that she has strong connections with both history and literature as the daughter of two

> fashionably expatriate ambitious minor novelists who traced their separate descents from an unrecorded dalliance of young Lord Byron's with the aging Madame de Stael in Switzerland in the summer of 1816 (LTRS, 71).

Third, the events of her life seem to closely parallel that of her ancestor Germaine de Stael. The earlier woman had gained a reputation as the consort of some leading writers of her day: Constant, Gibbon, Rousseau, Schlegel, and Mann. Similarly, Germaine spent her early womanhood as a scholar and aspiring writer while getting in and out of relationships with such figures as Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, H.G. Wells, Sinclair Lewis, Hermann Hesse, and Aldous Huxley. But she was most attracted to a young ex-writer/poet named Andre Castine--of mysterious background, he was most interested in what he called "'action historiography': the making of history as if it were an avant-garde species of narrative (LTRS, 72-73)."

Fourth, Germaine often finds herself running into "real" people who have been characters in Barth's novels. For instance, Castine and his ancestors had devoted themselves to taking active roles in writing and rewriting history, and though he never involved Germaine in these matters directly, she bore him a child out of wedlock and, unknowingly, continues the family practice of meddling with the course of history. Later, it turns out that Castine is a direct descendent of Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame III. Therefore, Germaine becomes indirectly involved in both the revision of history and the recycling of Barth's canon, which leads her to ask "what am I to do with these

'coincidences' of history and your fiction with the facts of my life . . . ?" (LTRS, 198)

Much the same happens as she meets other characters, which further stretches the boundary between fact and fiction: Joe Morgan; Todd Andrews; Jacob Horner; Harrison Mack (with whom she has an affair), Jane Mack (who has an affair with Germaine's ex-husband), and Jeannine Mack; Jerome Bray; and Ambrose Mensch. The latter becomes her lover, and as he recycles his life to purge himself for their upcoming wedding and the "second cycle" of his life, Germaine must play along as a character living out his rescripted personal and professional history.

Therefore, though she does not actively seek to recycle or reinvent her life, Germaine is very much aware of the desire to do so in others, and though she often participates in their efforts, she sees no value in doing this for herself. She

> did not share what seemed all about me to be an epidemic rage for reenactment. The second half of my life, or third third, I must hope would be different from what had so far preceded it. . . . Whatever the future held for me, it did not promise to be a recapitulation of the past, and I was prepared to settle for that (LTRS, 367).

Nor does she see historical and autobiographical coincidences, no matter how often they occur or how significant they seem, as evidence that recycling is either inevitable or necessary:

> none of this, in my opinion, meant anything more than that the world is richer in associations than in meanings, and

that it is the part of wisdom to distinguish between the two (LTRS, 385).

But Germaine cautions Barth about the power that writing can have, a lesson she learns while in the course of writing letters to him:

> Thus has chronicling transformed the chronicler, and I see that neither Werner Heisenberg nor your character Jacob Horner went far enough: not only is there no "non-disturbing observation"; there is no non-disturbing historiography. 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. . .(LTRS, 80).

The next letter writer to show up is Todd Andrews. Barth has written asking if he will consent to be a character in his current project, and in the process of doing so, Barth apologizes for the startling similarities between his earlier novel and the circumstances of the "real" Todd Andrews' life, saying that

> At that time, as a budding irrealist, I. . .would have been appalled at the suggestion that any of my fictional folk were even loosely "drawn from life": a phrase that still suggests to me some barbarous form of capital punishment. I wanted no models in the real world to hobble my imagination (LTRS, 187).

Andrews decides to decline the request for now, but he cooperates to some extent by giving Barth a review of his life from the time of The Floating Opera to the present. He also corrects Barth about the allegedly coincidental similarities between the fictional Andrews and himself. It turns out that, at a yacht party given by the Macks on New Year's Eve 1954, Barth had sat in as a drummer with the band for one set; later, Ambrose Mensch introduced him to

Andrews, and Barth explained his plans for Opera, and Andrews, in turn, gave him some details about Captain Adam's Original Floating Theatre. He then opened up to reveal more intimate details of his life because, "I have always admired the novelist's calling and often wished I had been born to it," and had been influenced by his social acquaintence with Fitzgerald and Dos Passos. Eventually, the two discussed existentialism and "the philosophical implications of suicide," which led Andrews to go

> so far as to confide to you the nature of my Letter to My Father. . .and my Inquiry: the one setting forth my precarious heart condition and my reasons for not apprising Father of it; the other investigating his suicide in 1930 (LTRS, 84).

Therefore, Barth's first novel is, indeed, based on "fact," and it and Andrews' letter have more or less recycled and reopened "actual" events. Andrews, of course, has mixed feelings about all this. On the negative side, he at first felt betrayed by Barth, and because some people in the area where he lives thought they knew the "real" story behind Barth's novel, Andrews' law practice and solitude suffered slightly. But, on the positive side, Andrews felt a measure of pleasure because "my old love of fiction. . .was gratified to see the familiar details of my life and place projected as through a camera obscura" (LTRS, 85). In addition, Harrison Mack liked the novel, which brought him and Andrews to a reapproachment and the latter's position as legal counsel for Mack Enterprises.

Most of Andrews' letters are written to his father as a continuation of his old writing endeavors, and he grows increasingly concerned about the influence of the past on his present and future. He feels haunted by Marshyhope's motto, Praeteritas futuras fecundant, which has several meanings for him in regard to the pressure that the past exerts:

> "The future grows out of the past"; "The future is enriched by the past"; or "not fecundant even in the sense of 'fertilizes,'" but "stercorant: The past manures the future"; in other words, "The past craps up the future" (LTRS, 14-15).

Andrews also comes to change his mind about the existential questions he faced earlier in life after he decided against suicide. He eventually believes that his heart condition is only a minor fact of life and that he will probably live a normal lifespan, and with the threat of instant death gone, his philosophy undergoes a radical reevaluation:

> There I premised that "nothing has intrinsic value"; here I began to feel. . .that Nothing has intrinsic value. . .which is to say that Everything has intrinsic value! (LTRS, 96).

These matters combine and cause Andrews great concern after he gets Barth's letter, the subject of which seems to him simply "as the sort conceived by an imagination overinclined to retracing its steps before moving on" (LTRS, 255). All these things lead Andrews to see a pattern indicating that his life

> has been being recycled since 1954, perhaps since 1937, without my more than idly remarking the fact till now. The

reenactment may indeed be fast approaching its "climax"; and as I made something of a muddle of it the first time around, I's best begin to do more than idly remark certain recurrences as poignant or piquant (LTRS, 256).

He then draws up a pair of lists--set side-by-side on the page much like the "two-handed exercise" of his namesake in Opera--the left side presenting events from the first half of his life; the right showing a repetition of these since.

The conviction that his life is repeating grows so strong that Andrews starts anticipating events as if they have been prophesied by his early life and will return according to some kind of autobiographical schedule. However, nothing does much to lead Andrews away from another powerful conviction: that he will tie up as many loose ends as possible and commit suicide for real once he repeats his life's pattern a second time. He reaches this point largely because the recycling he perceives seems only a repetition of the worst aspect of his earlier life--that is, he is doomed to merely repeat his life, not better it, and remain solitary, never to attain love (from Jane Mack or any other woman) in more than superficial ways. For him, it is clearly time to close all accounts after his life comes full circle:

> Events recircle like turkey buzzards, from whose patient orbits--eccentric, even retrograde, but ever closer--we determine their dead sun. . . .
> . . .I recognized. . .how my future had indeed been fertilized by my past, attained full growth with but a little cultivation, and was ripe now for harvesting. . . . For the summer solstice, the autumnal equinox should serve,

or thereabouts; keep late September clear on your appointment calendar, Dad, for our too long postponed reunion (LTRS, 561).

But before he repeats his suicide attempt (successfully this time), Andrews changes his will to bequeath to Barth his writings, except for personal papers: his Letter, "certain letters from other characters in the little drama of my life's recycling" (LTRS, 567), and the log of his last cruise along with elaborations of its entries.

The next writer, Jacob Horner, at first appears to have progressed little since the end of The End of the Road. He has remained with the Remobilization Farm, moving with it from place to place over the years, and he is still under the care of the mysterious Doctor. Horner acts as the Farm's bookkeeper and correspondence writer, but therapeutic writing remains his predominant activity in that Scriptotherapy is his hedge against the onslaught of paralysis. Most of his prescribed writing deals with two texts: one is something he calls the Hornbook, in which he lists all the historical incidents of cuckholdry he can find; the other is a series of letters to himself chronicling events in history according to their dates, with more concern for the days and months of occrrence than the years. Horner lumps events in this way almost as if they all took place contemporaneously, on the same day, but he now finds that this activity is more an exercise than an insightful or interesting pursuit.

When you Were, in a sense, Jacob Horner, you Interested yourself, at the Doctor's prescription, in such events. Now you Merely Acknowledge calendric resonances, the anniversary view of history, and Catalogue them by Alphabetical Priority (LTRS, 98).

However, two things happen to shake Horner's insularity and the predictability life. One comes from Barth, who writers to Horner asking if he knows of any "real" people, places, or situations corresponding to those contained in The End of the Road and if he will consent to being a character in Barth's new book. He does this partly out of curiosity about unlikely correspondences between art and life, partly to get new material for LETTERS, and partly to compare the past and present with a focus on Horner's "real" life.

That whole business of ontological instability. . .seems now so quaint and brave an aspect of the 1950's. . .that it would be amusing, perhaps suggestive, to hear how it looks to you from this perspective (LTRS, 342).

In particular, Barth wants to find out more about a possible coincidence involving the source for his second novel. Saying that, if he "were obligated to reimagine the beginnings of The End of the Road" (LTRS, 339), he would do so by supposing that he had found a manuscript titled WHAT I DID UNTIL THE DOCTOR CAME while on a ski vacation during the time he taught freshman English and worked on the notes for The Floating Opera. Barth stresses that, "I don't recount, I only invent" (LTRS, 341) and that such a scenario is only imaginative--nonetheless, he asks Horner if he authored the text, saying

My having imagined that serendipitous discovery does not preclude such a manuscript's possible existence, nor such an author's. On the contrary, my experience has been that if anything it increases the likelihood of their existing--a good argument for steering clear of traditional realism (LTRS, 342).

Horner protests that such a manuscript in fact existed, written by him and used by Barth without permission, and he writes to himself that

as an exercise in Scriptotherapy you Began an account of your Immobility, Remobilization, and Relapse. . . .By means that you have not yet Discovered (your Manuscript was lost, with certain of the Doctor's files, in the move from Pennsylvania to New York), this account became the basis of a slight novel call The End of the Road. . .as false. . .to you Account [as] your Account to the actual Horner-Morgan-Morgan triangle as it might have been observed from either other vortex (LTRS, 19).

Barth has, then, inadvertently revised Horner's earlier recycling of the events related in Barth's second novel. Horner replies to Barth by saying that he has no interest in participating in the LETTERS project and that he finds Barth's story of discovering Horner's manuscript "less convincing that the novel itself." In any event, he has his own problems to deal with.

If only roads did end. But the end of one is the commencement of another, or its mere continuation. . .I Am Back at the Beginning of mine, where I Was in 1951. . .only Older; not so much Paralyzed as Spent.
Who wants to replay that play, rewalk that road? (LTRS, 279).

The second shock that Horner receives, the one that makes him feel as if he were rewalking his 1951 path, is the reappearance of Joe Morgan. Morgan turns up as a patient at the Farm and gives Horner an ultimatum:

You're going to Rewrite History, Horner. . . .You're going to Change the Past. You're going to Bring Rennie Back to Life (LTRS, 20).

Morgan means this quite literally. Though he never makes it clear just how Horner is to accomplish this miracle, he expects that Horner will bring Rennie back, not as she once was, but as an entirely renewed person untainted by adultery. Horner initially understands this to mean a kind of resurrection, but Morgan declares, "Not resurrecting, Horner: rebirthing. I don't want my wife exhumed. I want her reborn" (LTRS, 105). He tells Horner, "I demand that you Redream History and Give Me Back, alive and unadulterated, my dead wife" (LTRS, 581).

The real crime, in Morgan's eyes, is not that Horner is directly responsible for Rennie's death, but that he had written the whole thing down in his lost manuscript--which later turned up as Barth's book, thus making the entire situation public and taking it out of the hands of its principle actors. Part of the process Morgan demands that Horner follow for redreaming and rebirthing Rennie is a new piece of writing: a dramatic text called Der Wiedertraum (which roughly translates as "the redreaming") in which Horner is to literally rescript the events leading to Rennie's death. In addition, Horner is to reenact, as closely as possible, every event in the text according to Morgan's supervision, culminating in Rennie's rebirth. But, of course, the entire scheme is impossible; nothing goes as

planned, and the writing and reenactment constantly undergo revision and modification. This happens more often--first, after Horner falls in love with Marsha Blank-Mensch (Ambrose's ex-wife), whom he eventually weds; and, second, after the Doctor's disappearance and probable drowning in Lake Erie--until the whole plan crumbles.

All these events rattle Horner and cause him to fear reparalysis, especially when, after the Doctor's death, Morgan takes over much of the activities at the Farm, including Horner's therapy. But things go awry, and eventually Horner feels secure enough to declare himself finished with reenactments. He destroys the Hornbook, causing a scuffle between himself and Morgan, during which the latter shoots himself to death. With his insulated world now in tatters, Horner decides to leave the Farm with his wife and live on his small savings until he can get a job teaching remedial English at Marshyhope, a prospect that he considers likely. In the end, he resolves never to write again as a means of reinventing himself or as a stay against Nothingness.

> I Do Not Expect the road of our New Life to be free of detours, forks, impasses, potholes, rocks. God alone knows where, past Wicomico and (maybe) Marshyhope, it will lead; nor is it my Intention to Record (ever again) our Passage down it. But with tomorrow's (admittedly tremulous) first step, it will begin (LTRS, 743).

The next correspondent has a dual identity: to some, he is Andrew Burlingame Cook VI, minor poet, academic intriguer, and fahionable right-winger; others know him as

Andre Castine, former literary artist and current political activist of uncertain allegiance. That some claim to know both versions of his identity intimately, without suspecting that they are held by the same man, says much about Cook/Castine's protean talents. For example, Germaine Pitt has deeply loved, and borne a child by, Castine, yet she loathes Cook as a poetaster and pseudo-academic.

Cook/Castine's ability to change identities (including his physical appearance, tone of voice, posture, etc.) comes as part of his heritage. In a series of long letters to his missing son, he reveals the family history, describing how the Castine, Cook, and Burlingame lines merged soon after Ebenezer Cooke's sister, Anna, and Henry Burlingame III had a son--Andrew Burlingame Cooke III--who married a Castine. A family tradition since that time has been to alternate the surnames "Cook" and "Burlingame" with each generation.

Many of the Castines are much like the Burlingames: partly of Indian ancestry and great plotters, conspirators, and manipulators of historical affairs. Both families, combined with Cooke blood, produce a group of consummate players at the "game" of governments, art, and technology who have involved themselves in such things as the Indian rebellions of Pontiac and Tecumseh, the War of 1812 (on both sides), conspiracies to free Napoleon from St. Helena to establish a new empire on the Chesapeake, and the fortunes of Simon Bolivar. In addition, they have taken part in

Fulton's inventions, sabotaged the Manhattan Project, and influenced literature and art through their affiliations with Rossini, Byron, Scott, Cooper, Poe, and Balzac. In fact, the "Star Spangled Banner" is partly the product of Andrew Burlingame Cook IV's association with Francis Scott Key.

Cook/Castine himself claims to have played a vital role in certain literary projects. In fact, in his answer to Barth's request for his participation in LETTERS by providing any information about his ancestors that Barth might resurrect from his third novel, he claims to have co-written The Sot-Weed Factor. The "fact" that Barth fails to mention this confuses him.

> How is it, sir, your letter does not acknowledge that so fruitful collaboration? I must and shall attribute your omission. . .to my one stipulation, now as in the 1950's: that you keep my identity (and my aid) confidential and allegedly fictional (LTRS, 406).

Cook/Castine's "real" relationship with, and his feelings about, Barth remain uncertain to the other characters. For example, perhaps seriously perhaps in jest, he tells Joe Morgan that he would arrange to assassinate Barth. But in regard to his claims to co-authorship, Barth is, understandably, outraged and asserts that they "have never met, never heretofore conversed, much less collaborated on anything!" (LTRS, 533). Barth withdraws his invitation, saying that his intention for Cook/Castine's assistance

was not to play the role of Author in my novel-in-letters; merely to be a model, one way or another and perhaps, for one of its seven several correspondents: an epistolary echo of Ebenezer Cooke the sot-weed factor, no more (LTRS, 533).

Due to the many alleged interferences with history described in his letters, Cook/Castine's revelations in effect rewrite history and subvert any sense that concrete historical truths really exist. Much of what he writes comes as a recent revelation even to him--he learns a great deal about the family history after finding a series of letters written by Andrew Burlingame Cook IV to his child, which detail many examples of "action historiography" where family members play with the "script of history." To them, history is much like a literary text to be written and rewritten with artful skill:

History is your grandest fiction. . .[and] its eloquentest authors, like those of the ancient ballads & Eastern tales, are anonymous, their subtlest "works" known only to the elect. Our deals & double-deals. . .surely works of art . . .(LTRS, 319).

Cook/Castine writes to his son for two reasons. First, he wishes to reveal an important pattern underlying the family history, something called "a pattern of deadly reenactment" (LTRS, 320) which sometimes produces dire consequences. That is, they all eventually come to learn that the first half of their lives is spent rebelling against and trying to undo the intrigues of their parents. Later, they suspect that these efforts are misdirected, either because they inadvertently further the parents' plots, or because they have misunderstood the real goal of

the parental conspiracies, which are opposite to what they seem on the surface. They then resolve to correct these in their lives' "second cycle." But all of this remains murky because no child ever fully or clearly comprehends what his or her parents were actually up to, and no documents or letters or histories exist that are, finally, unassailably authentic because of the family's tampering with historical texts and personages.

Second, Cook/Castine wants his son to take an active part in furthering his life's work: precipitating the Second American Revolution. However, like his ancestors, Cook/Castine never discusses this in enough detail for the reader to know what he means. Some of what he does seems to reenact various details of American history while other actions remain mysterious: setting up a headquarters on Bloodsworth Island, site of the Indian conspiracy in The Sot-Weed Factor, and naming the site Barataria after the pirate Jean Lafitte's refuge; getting engaged to Jane Mack in order to gain access to people and resources to carry out his plans, including a large yacht, the Baratarian, to act as a floating headquarters; taking part in a film version of Barth's fiction that also depends to a great extent on bizarre reenactments of scenes from American history, especially the "second revolution" called the War of 1812.

Whether or not Cook/Castine succeeds in contacting his son or accomplishing his obscure plot is never made clear in

his or the other characters' letters. One night, the yacht explodes, and both Andrew Burlingame Cook VI and Andre Castine disappear, presumably but not definitely killed in the blast.

The next correpondent, Jerome Bray, continues relentlessly with the subversive project outlined in "Bellerophoniad." In a letter to Todd Andrews, he describes his five-year plan, funded by Harrison Mack's Tidewater Foundation, which conerns programming a computer called LILYVAC II to produce a revolutionary text titled NOVEL, "the Complete and Final Fiction, to the end of producing an abstact model of the perfect narrative" (LTRS, 145). Bray feeds into LILYVAC a large number of source materials: an index to folk literature; refernce works such as Masterplots and Monarch Notes; "the complete holdings in fiction of Lily Dale's Marion Skidmore Library"; letters written by literary figures; studies of the Golden Ratio and the Fibonacci Series; "and a list of everything in the world that comes in 5's" (LTRS, 146). With these, the computer generates increasingly complex variations of Freitag's Triangle to graphically represent a range of potential plot patterns in fiction.

However, eventually, LILYVAC's output seems to deviate from Bray's original plan: from the text NOVEL, the computer begins producing something called NOTES, which leads Bray to reinterpret his project, and he comes to view the new output

as some kind of advancement or evolution of his initial scheme. Suddenly, LILYVAC generates number sequences rather than letters and words, which causes Bray and his assistants to add to the computer's input ideas from Horner's Hornbook and a selection of mystic writings dealing with the relationship of numbers to the power of language in the hopes of "finding the key" to turning the project back to prose. But Bray again reinterprets his plans and sees LILYVAC pointing the way to a transcendant breakthrough. That is, instead of a revolutionary novel in conventional prose form, he now seeks to generate "the world's 1st work of Numerature" entitled NUMBERS. Although he only dimly understands the significance of any of this, Bray commits himself to readapting his goals to accommodate the evolving project:

> Ourselves innumerate, like most literati, we have yet to learn our 1 2 3's; everything must be reviewed, revised in this new light! How we itch to spring. . .into the Fall Work Period! When, 1st of the numerati. . .we readdress that mighty printout! (LTRS, 527)

In a letter to Barth, in which he boasts of these developments, Bray lays out the plan of a piece he intends to write, "a little classical story-in-letters to be located at the Phi-point of our story-in-numbers" (LTRS, 527). The "Phi point" he refers to is that part of a logarithmic spiral where the pattern is six-sevenths complete--a point just before the pattern comes round ful-circle to begin again, but not the same linear starting place. What Bray

has in mind is a computer-generated, math-influenced version of "Bellerophoniad" in which the protagonist

> Though he has imitated perfectly the program of mythic heroism, he has not achieved immortality. His days are numbered. Can he, in the final quadrant of the heroic cycle, reset his program and ascend to the company of 1st magnitude stars? (LTRS, 527)

Part of the reason for doing this is to exact revenge on Barth for a perceived wrong, something that Bray brought up in Chimera and that Horner, Cook/Castine, and Andrews have accused him of in this book--plagiarism. Bray has solicited Andrews' legal help to sue Barth for the

> perversion (into his "novel" Giles Goat-Boy, 1966) of out Revised New Syllabus of the Grand Tutor Harold Bray. But that is merely the latest and chiefest of his crimes against us, which extend the length of our bibliography (LTRS, 28).

Bray claims nothing less than that Barth's first four works are stolen and revised variations of books that Bray has written under pseudonyms: The Shoals of Love, or, Drifting and Dreaming by J.A. Beille became The Floating Opera; The W[a]sp by Jean Blanque became The End of the Road; and parts of Backwater Tales by Jay Bray found their way in The Sot-Weed Factor and other books. Feeling outraged and vengeful, Bray issues Barth an ultimatum:

> You may wish to avail yourself of this final opportunity to avoid litigation and exposure. Full accounting from your publishers of monies paid you for "your" "novel" Giles Goat-Boy! Full reparation to us in that amount! Full assignment to us of any future royalties accruing to that "work"! We are willing, if you comply promptly and fully, to drop action against you in the earlier cases. . .though our attorney has been apprised of these also and waits only for a sign from us (LTRS, 148).

Barth answers by explaining what he intended in Giles and says that he takes Bray's letters of accusation as satires rather than as genuine threats:

> Like those book reviewers who choose to mimic (and attempt to surpass) the author under review, you have seen fit to address me in the manner of my novel, as though you were one of its characters nursing a grievance against your author (LTRS, 531).

More amused than put off by Bray's charges, Barth is curious about Bray's life and self-proclaimed revolutionary writing project; he asks Bray to write him more about these matters and even offers to reciprocate by sharing

> what I've learned since the publication of G.G.B. about actual computer applications in such areas as literary structural analysis and the generation of, say, hypothetical plots; information laid on me by workers in the field of artificial intelligence who happen to have read or heard of my novel (LTRS, 531).

Barth comments that Bray's ideas for NUMBERS have given him useful structural and thematic motifs for LETTERS and, in return, he proposes some constructive advice and tidbits of information for Bray's version of the Bellerophon story. He also passes on what he hopes are helpful suggestions for Bray to consider in regard to NUMBERS. For example,

> that by perfectly imitating the pattern of mythic heroism one may become not a mythic hero but merely a perfect imitation; that one might cunningly aspire neither to perfect nor to revolutionize the flawed genre of the Novel, say, but to imitate perfectly its flaws? (LTRS, 534).

Nevertheless, it seems obvious that Bray's missives are as ineffectual as his ability to keep up with LILYVAC's increasingly self-directed programming--neither his attempts

at laying claim to Barth's canon nor his efforts to produce some sort of revolution through writing produce much in the way of the effects that Bray desires. In the end, however, he "ascends" to his ancestors, believing that he has somehow laid the groundwork for his revolution by impregnating Jeannine Mack with a female future Napoleon and Grand Tutor

The next letter writer is Ambrose Mensch, the only professional writer in LETTERS besides Barth's persona, with whom Ambrose has been a friend since their childhoods. From the time of the water-message incident related in Funhouse, Ambrose has spent much of his professional energies seeking some kind of answer to the mysteries he first sensed when he received that "message" in the form of a blank,

> a blank I've been trying now for 29 years to fill! All my fictions, all my facts. . .are replies to that carte blanche; this, like them, I'll bottle and post into the broad Choptank, to run with the tide past cape and cove . . .out of the river and the Bay, down to the oceans of the world (LTRS, 39).

Ambrose addresses most of his letters to two readers: the Yours Truly of the water-message, to whom he sends his letters-in-bottles; and Germaine Pitt/Lady Amherst, who gets photocopies of the pieces. But Ambrose does not feel successful as a writer, either of letters or of literary works. To supplement his income, he teaches at Marshyhope,

> in one letter saying that his career has been on the margins of the academic as well as the literary establishment; I've used the campuses, and been by them used, only in times of material or spiritual want: a chronic but intermittent and seldom intense condition (LTRS, 40).

Depressed and looking for renewal, Ambrose turns away from writing:

> Too distracted to compose (I was anyhow done with avant-garde contraptions, was looking for a way back to aboriginal narrative, a route to the roots), I lost myself with relief in the easier gratifications of teaching, reading, committee work, and the search for a project to reorient me with my muse. . .(LTRS, 40).

One of the projects that Ambrose involves himself in is a film directed by someone named Reg Prinz who, ostensibly, has set out to produce a movie version of Barth's work, for which Ambrose is hired to write the screenplay. However, Prinz is either a radical avant-garde artist or a charlatan--no one knows for sure because he never makes clear what the film's purpose or concept is, and the project remains much too vague for anyone to comprehend. Most vexing to Ambrose is Prinz's contempt for language in any form. That is, beyond his disregard for accurate renderings of Barth's stories or a faithful treatment of the historical background portrayed in them, Prinz seems to declare war on language itself, which provokes Ambrose and reawakens his dedication to written language. For example, at one point, Prinz tells Ambrose that his script, already pared to nearly nothing, is too wordy, and this changes the conception the two have of the film. Germaine writes to Barth about this saying they come to decide that

> since the text in hand was in itself essentially noncinematic, they would, of not quite set it aside altogether, use it merely as a point de depart for a "visual orchestration of the author's Weltanschauung. . . ." They will therefore freely include not only "echoes of your other

works "and. . ."anticipations of your works in progress and to come"--things you may not even have thought of yet, but "feasibly might, on the basis of etc."--but anything Ambrose might think suitable. . .(LTRS, 224).

Later, the film evolves into something even more impressionistic, relying less on a literal treatment of Barth's work in any form and more on the theme of recyclings and echoes, which for Prinz lies at the heart of the enterprise because

> inasmuch as the movie reenacts and re-creates events and images from "the books," which do likewise from life and history and even among themselves, why should it not also reenact and echo its own images and events? (LTRS, 383)

Eventually, Ambrose and Prinz engage in a sort of warfare--the one championing language, the other seeking to rob it of power--each attempting to outdo the other at nonrepresentational art. Once, during a filmed reenactment of Ambrose's water-message experience, Prinz stuffs the script into a bottle and casts it into the ocean--thus, the only language in the scene was thrown away. Ambrose retaliates, in a later scene that echoes the water-message one, by pulling a large bottle from the water and smashing it--inside, unknown to Prinz, are sheets of blank paper that Ambrose begins to write on, shows to an actress, and then tosses back into the water. In this way, Ambrose one-ups Prinz by using writing in such a way that the camera cannot grasp it: the written language has become unfilmable, unseeable, and yet it exists as the dominant element in the scene. In fact, "nobody who witnessed what happened knows

what happened" (LTRS, 391), which leads Ambrose to feel that he has reestablished the writer's control over the recycling of events in the film. Germaine surmises that Ambrose has tried here to write

> a text whose language is predominantly nonvisual, even nonsensory in its reference. . . . Composed in private, to be read in private, at least in silence and virtual immobility, author and reader one to the other like lovers. . . . It would say the unseeable, declare the impossible (LTRS, 393).

Throughout this whole period, and the basis of his courting Germaine, Ambrose feels compelled to purge himself of his past by reenacting it as a way to renew himself as a person and as an artist. He forces himself and Germaine to replay major episodes from his life's "first cycle" to rid himself "of sundry immaturities and historical hang-ups long laid on him like a spell" (LTRS, 544). Much of this entails acting out important events in his sexual history; however, a great deal of Ambrose's drive to reenact involves writing to Yours Truly, Germaine, and Barth about his literary endeavors and his attempts to use literature to recycle himself as a person and a writer. Ambrose directs his efforts in this line toward nothing less than the goal of complete personal and artistic revitalization. For example, one of his early and ambitious works of fiction, written under the pen name of Arthur Morton King, was a largely autobiographical novel titled The Amateur (after his self-defined role in life as an expert or professional amateur of the world). But Ambrose never published the

book--as usual with him, he threw the bottled manuscript into the Choptank River in the vain attempt to somehow answer the water-message of his youth. However, almost one year to the day, he found the manuscript within a few feet of the spot where he discovered the original blank message from Yours Truly. The irony in this event strongly affected

> Ambrose and led him to turn my back on Realism, having perhaps long since turned it on reality. I put by not only history, philosophy, politics, psychology, self-confession, sociology, and other such traditional contaminants of fiction, but also, insofar as possible, characterization, description, dialogue, plot--even language, where I could dispense with if (LTRS, 151).

From this rather minimalist form of literary rebellion, Ambrose eventually "returned to the word, even the sentence, in homeliest form" in the sense that most of his literary energies were spent producing epistolary pieces, still under his pen name, in the shape of complaint letters to such mundane periodicals as Dairy Goat Quarterly, Road & Track, and School Lunch Bulletin,

> which if collected, as they could never imaginably be, would be found to comprise a coherent epistolary narrative with characters, complications, climax, and a tidy denouement--I became reenamoured. . .with that most happily contaminated literary genre: the Novel, the Novel, with its great galumphing grace, amazing as a whale! (LTRS, 151).

But his return to the novel did not include considerations for the literary avant-garde nor did it grow out of an interest in modernist or postmodernist aesthetics:

> No one named as I am, historied and circumstanced as I am, could likely stomach anything further in the second-meaning way. . . .I examined the history and origins of the novel, of prose narrative itself, in search of inspiration; and I found it--not in parodies, travesties, pastiches, and

trivializations of older narrative conventions, but (LTRS, 151-2).

What, exactly, Ambrose found remains ambiguous, but it somehow depends upon a way to join his writing with a purge of his life's first cycle and, consequently, establishing a fresh start for the second cycle of his life. One method that he uses to do this results from a continuation of his minimalist approach, an aesthetic that he calls "Less Is More." Another is to recycle his writing (and, thus, himself) by giving story ideas, plot outlines, and bits of previously written material to Barth to rework. In fact, it turns out that Ambrose has traded three chapters of The Amateur for "a couple of. . .discarded experiments in unorthodox narrative" (LTRS, 150) written by Barth: "Ambrose His Mark," "Water-Message," and "Lost in the Funhouse" are all originally Ambrose's pieces redone by Barth, something that Ambrose has mixed feelings about:

> I don't know how to feel about our friend's rendering. . . .It goes without saying that I've no objections to even the most radical rearrangement of my experience for his literary purposes; my gift of these episodes was a donnee with no strings attached. All the same. . .(LTRS, 168).

An earlier effort to renew himself came about when Ambrose tried to write his first work of fiction, undertaken as an undergraduate. In Germaine's opinion, with this story

> Ambrose claims to have set himself even then the grand objective, since that wordless message. . .of filling in the whole world's blanks. In hand--longhand--was his virgin effort in the fiction way: the tale of a latter-day Bellerophon lost in the Dorchester marshes, "far from the paths of men, devouring his own soul," who receives a cryptic message in a bottle. . .(LTRS, 240).

Another try at literary and personal purgation-and-renewal is Ambrose's aborted Perseus story, which he also offers as a gift to Barth. According to Germaine, Ambrose perceives his version of the Perseus myth as exploring "the theme of ritual reenactment" (LTRS, 347), a project that he envisions, particularly the Medusa element,

> not in the Freudian way as an image of impotence and vulval terror, but (the polished shield of Athene, the reflections and re-reflections) as a drama of the perils of self-consciousness (LTRS, 348).

Ambrose hopes that his treatment of the Perseus story will break out of a replay of themes--for him, circles and "closed-circuit history is for compulsives"--and generate a meaningful pattern of renewal.

> The question of the plot is clear: How transcend mere reenactment? Perseus, in his life's first half, "calls his enemies to his aid," petrifying his adversaries with Medusa's severed head. In its second half. . .he must search wrongheadedly for rejuvenation by reenactment, and some version of Medusa. . .must aid him in a different way: together they must attain "escape velocity"; open the circle into a spiral that unwinds forever, as if a chambered nautilus kept right on until it grew into a galaxy. The story must unwind likewise, chambered but unbroken, its outer cycles echoing its inner (LTRS, 429).

But instead of a passionate attitude toward these ideas, Ambrose finds himself most interested in orchestrating formal elements in the story and playing with the way they fit together to produce some kind of meaningful, abstract pattern that might offer him a controlling metaphor for his life. Once, Ambrose put aside the story during the time when he grew disillusioned with

literary work, but his language war with Prinz renews his energies and leads him to rethink, rework, and redraft the piece. However, writing never in itself, alone, sustains him and, in the end, in his last letter to Yours Truly, he again abandons the story along with his pen name. In this epistle, he provides a detailed and graphic working outline representing simultaneously his life's first cycle and the Perseus story, all based on the ideas of Lord Raglan, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell and generated according to charts, spirals, the Fibonacci series, and resonant metaphysics taken from classical mythology. Ambrose no longer needs Yours Truly nor the complexities of the Perseus work because he comes to see that all such

> considerations are but homely reminders of what mystics and logicians know (and heroes at the Axis Mundi): that our concepts, categories, and classifications are ours, not the World's, and are as finally arbitrary as they are personally useful. Including, to be sure, the distinction between ours and the World's (LTRS, 648).

This insight acts to make Ambrose feel refreshed and able to accept himself again as an "expert amateur" of the world, perhaps even deserving of "an honorary degree of humanity" (LTRS, 651). Even more, he feels a renewed freedom and ends his final letter to Yours Truly with a question concerning his expert artistic amateurship and special human status:

> And if--by a curriculum of disputations, advisements, armings, trials, losses, and gains, isomorphic with a Perseus's or a Bellerophon's--this artist contrived somehow to attain that degree, might he not then find himself liberated to be (as he has after all always been, but is

enabled now more truly, freely, efficaciously to be) in the world? . . .such an "artist," at the Axis Mundi or Navel of the World, might find himself liberated. . .from such painful, essential correspondence as ours. Which I now end, and with it the career of "Arthur Morton King." In order to begin II. My Life's Second Cycle (LTRS, 651).

Ambrose feels that he has reached his Phi point, something that he has been as obsessed with as Bray in terms of its potential for describing the pattern of one's life. These sentiments allow Ambrose to relinquish his obsession with reliving his past, and this leads him to offer Barth even more in the way of literary gifts. For example, Barth eventually writes to Ambrose soliciting his help in writing LETTERS. He explains that his work in the 1960's concerned experiments attempting "a little reorchestration of the oral narrative tradition," but now he wants to try a book-length work "to reorchestrate some early conventions of the Novel" as a way "to administer artificial resuscitation to the apparently dead" epistolary form (LTRS, 654). Ambrose responds with some ideas, all of which are well considered due to the fact that he is unusually qualified to comment on this topic--his master's thesis was titled Problems of Dialogue, Exposition, and Narrative Viewpoint in the Epistolary Novel (LTRS, 252). In addition, Ambrose supplies Barth with thematic and structural suggestions (including the calendar-alphabet setup for the book) as well as all his plans for a "chimerical" work dealing with Perseus, Bellerophon, and a related but different third piece. He orders Barth to call the latter

a novel, since everyone knows that the novella is that form of prose fiction too long to sell as a short story and too short to sell as a book (LTRS, 652).

As far as his own literary plans are concerned, Ambrose tells Barth about a couple of ideas he is toying with: perhaps "a novel based on the movie that was meant to be based on your novels but went off in directions of its own" (LTRS, 653), or maybe a kind of epic Marylandiad. What, specifically, he will do remains uncertain, but Ambrose now feels released enough from the burden of his own past to allow the creative energies to take their own course, wherever it might lead.

Barth, as a character in LETTERS, also feels compelled to seek ways to revitalize himself and his work through the act of writing. he carries on a correspondence with each of the other characters, depending on them a great deal for advice, source material, and technical ideas relating to his project. Part of this concerns simply corroborating "factual" details of the characters' "real" lives, and part centers on his desire to clear the record in regard to how his past writings relate to literary, autobiographical, and historical matters. But he, like Jake Horner, Ambrose, Mensch, and the others, is obsessed with the shape and meaning of his life as well as how he fits into the larger pattern created by standard views of history and culture--for this reason, questions of reality, time, and history proliferate in his letters.

For example, his first letter is addressed to the reader of LETTERS and echoes Horner's anniversary view of history in that it is replete with an inventory of events and people and facts from recent history, particularly from 1968 and early 1969. However, Barth makes it clear that he is playing a game of "as if" here. That is, "if" he were writing "now," on March 2, 1969, then he would be influenced by a large but specific set of events particular to that time. But he also makes it evident that time, once it has been shaped and made seemingly static by having been written down as history, still moves on: events flow, meanings and interpretations shift and evolve, and the relationships between writer and text and between writer and reader necessarily do not stay the same:

> . . .every letter has two times, that of its writing and that of its reading, which may be so separated, even when the post office does its job, that very little of what obtained when the writer wrote will still when the reader reads. And to the units of epistolary fictions yet a third time is added: the actual date of composition, which will not likely correspond to the letterhead date, a function more of plot or form than of history (LTRS, 44).

Playing the game of "as if" is, for Barth, not a way to imagine what might have been. Writing about history (that of his characters, of himself, and of his culture) depends upon more than a set of facts about dates and historical people and events. Instead, Barth uses "as if" to highlight the fictive nature both of his writing and the processes whereby we come to generate meaningful interpretations of personal and cultural history. For him, the spotlight falls

on how reality is composed through writing by focusing on the difference between a profusion of facts and the overall significance of the truths that we shape from them. For instance, he tells the reader that his letter was really begun in 1973, not in 1969, as if he were working on ideas for LETTERS at the same time that he was struggling to bring the various ideas in Chimera together, as if LETTERS were in the process of composition before Chimera (a situation that is also evident from the timing and content of his letters to the other characters, particularly Ambrose). He then informs the reader that he has continued working and redrafting his material so that no exact date of composition is possible; therefore, the reader must confront the fact that time, history, and writing are flexible and made relevant by the creative presence of a reader on the basis of things not strictly determined by time--LETTERS, like any text, is continually renewed with each reading.

At the same time, however, Barth warns against an overly facile and confident reliance on any self-created epistemology based on an idiosyncratically created meaning or truth in writing. After all, Todd Andrews finally succeeds at suicide, Joe Morgan shoots himself to death, Jerome Bray loses control over his computer text, and Jake Horner returns to the refuge of prescriptive grammar. All the characters also learn to resolve themselves to as much doubt as certainty after they have recycled and revised

their lives, and Barth raises many questions about the "real" sources and actual composition of his own writing. In this sense, the failure of all the characters to completely and successfully carve out a reality through writing as a means for renewing themselves is a lesson both painful and valuable. Much of this results from a process that depends on Barth's writer-characters recognizing what Barth calls the tragic view:

> That is, a sense from my experience and the experience of my characters that well-intentioned ideologies and political stances--in fact even well-intentioned life programs generally--don't finally work. At best they usually fail to live up to the best versions of their aspirations, in the way that most people fail to do the same thing (Ziegler and Bigsby, 16-17).

All of the writer-characters in LETTERS, and consequently those in Barth's first six books, come to learn that their attempts to pattern reality through writing must, to a greater or lesser extent, fail in direct proportion to the degree to which they conform to the written life plan they create. Further, any pattern that the reader grasps, based on expectations about the nature and shape of reality as well as narrative fictions, comes under assault in LETTERS because the book undermines any effort by the reader to rely on the ability of written language to order, explicate, or describe the world. Barth confronts the reader with

> the very vulnerability of language to communicate the reality of things, of "truth," and. . .its artificiality when trying to do so. . . .In LETTERS, Barth not only denies the ability of language to describe objective reality. He

asserts its inability to describe any reality. Any verbalization is, to him, necessarily "false." It cannot correspond to reality because. . .it already presupposes mediation. Barth therefore locates the root of the distortion created by verbalization not. . .in the mind or consciousness of the narrator or beholder, but in language itself. Every verbalization is, to Barth, a fictionalization, regardless of whether its "raw material" is factual or imaginary (D'Haen, 49).

However, there is a positive side to all this as well. For example, Ambrose's large novel The Amateur is part of an abandoned project of Barth's with the same title, something that he stopped working on, not because of writer's block per se, but because he could not develop the ideas for the book:

I believe that there must be a kind of literary project whose fate it is always to be put off for some other project, that is, a work that is there always in order to be put aside for some more pressing work. I began writing a novel after the [Sot-Weed Factor]. . . .I started the novel, didn't like it much. . .then threatened to resurrect it after the Giles story and then it was supplanted by the Giles project. . . .So, perhaps there are works whose fate it is always to be put aside. . .that is the ones that fill the gap to keep the machinery going till something else effuses (Glaser-Wohrer, 250-251).

Thus, Barth has managed in LETTERS to recycle at least some part of his ideas for The Amateur through one of his characters and, as a result, revise those ideas. In addition, as the reader encounters characters, including Barth himself as both character and author, who continually fail to fully "write" the world, he or she also comes to see the value of the attempt for, though doomed to incomplete success, the effort offers the possibility for renewal and a measure of freedom. For Barth as literary artist, writing

LETTERS as a reworking of the conventional English epistolary novel is

> Barth's recognition of the traditional novel [and] simultaneously a reinterpretation of that tradition in terms of his own perspective. In Heideggerean terms, LETTERS functions as a repetition, a resolute return to past tradition to recover the possibilities that generated the tradition but that have since become sedimented within it and thereby forgotten (Harris, 166).

Just as Ambrose manages to recover his self and renew his literary career, Barth recycles and, thus, renews the power of language--at the same time that he subverts any naive or direct connection between language and reality, he also draws inspiration and hope from the fact that language has the potential to reshape and revise the world.

> LETTERS illuminates that which is hidden, incipient. . .: the true source and nature of the unity Barth has sought from the beginning. This unity is not located beyond the categories of subject and object. . .but in the reciprocal, dialogic interchange between self and other. The poetic act of saying delivers the world to man and man to the world. While approached in the previous books, this point receives unambiguous emphasis in LETTERS. Thus the novel functions as a kind of conclusion. . . .In LETTERS the reader senses the end of a stage in Barth's developing esthetic. The world, Barth has come to realize, does not exist in so much as through the word (Harris, 194).

In effect, Barth has created his own Phi point with Letters: because it is his seventh book, those preceeding it comprise six-sevenths of his canon so far. Therefore, as Harris believes, LETTERS is in fact "a kind of conclusion," and it acts so in much the same way as the stories told by Barth's most successful writer-characters such as Dunyazade, Perseus, and Ambrose: he has not merely come full circle and revised or retold his previous writings. Instead, he has

spiralled outward and found a way to renew himself without disavowing either his earlier works or the traditions of storytelling and literary art as he begins a new cycle in his writing career.

Chapter 6

The Literally and the Literarily Marvelous: Sabbatical: A Romance and The Tidewater Tales: A Novel

The "second cycle" of Barth's literary career begins with his latest two books, which share much in common with his fiction before Letters: the novels act as a pair of books which open, and then rework, similar ideas and themes; they depend on characters who feel compelled to write in order to create meaningful, orderly interpretations of both reality and their lives; and they focus on an exploration of the boundary area where writing and storytelling overlap, and merge with, the world. But these concerns do not merely exhume or recycle the prominent literary and philosophical concerns raised in Barth's canon to this point. Instead, they deal with ideas related to those in the earlier works, but with a different emphasis. That is, the characters themselves appear less preoccupied with using writing as a tool for constructing the world, or for formulating a template by which to adapt themselves to it, than as a means for creating themselves in writing. For them, the world of text takes a back seat to a perception of the world as text, and they see fiction and reality conforming to similar, perhaps identical, conventions such that ontological and epistemological questions rest on the same foundations as questions pertinent to literary aesthetics and composition. To put it another way, Barth's earlier characters proceeded

from a largely unformed, undefined sense of self, struggling to learn how they could "write" themselves so as to fit into the text of a pre-existing reality; his new characters write from a fairly concrete self-identity to resolve or dispel what they perceive as an arbitrary barrier between the worlds of fact and fiction.

Sabbatical is the story written by a couple who have been married for seven years and are now returning from a nine-month voyage in their sailboat Pokey. They undertook their journey as an attempt to give themselves some time off together in order to take stock of their lives and to make some important decisions regarding such things as having children, playing more active roles in social and environmental activities, and pursuing certain career opportunities open to them.

The husband is Fenwick Scott Key Turner now fifty years old and a direct descendant of the writer of the "Star Spangled Banner." About twenty years earlier, he had an ambition to become a professional writer:

> I had taken my little B.A. in political science and my little M.F.A. in creative writing, and I'd tried for seven disagreeable years to make a go of it in D.C. as a free-lance journalist and night-school teacher, all the while still aspiring to be a capital-W Writer. I had placed, as they say, half a dozen artsy stories in little magazines, but my M.F.A.-thesis-novel, much rewritten over the years, had not as they say found a publisher (SAB, 28).

Jobless, frustrated, and feeling a need for some kind of inspiration that might come from a change in scene, Fenn decided to take his then-wife of ten years and their

nine-year-old son Orrin overseas as a way to rejuvenate both his writing ambition and marriage, each of which had begun to stagnate.

> Nineteen Sixty we declared our Wanderjhar: one might even say our sabbatical. It was also a test. We. . .went off to spend the winter in the south of Spain, where I was to get a real novel written at last. . . .[T]he plan was . . .to make a camping reconnaissance of western Europe, whereof I would keep a writerly notebook for future reference. Then I'd either come home to a new career as a capital-W et cetera or else give up that ambition for good and take a full-time newspaper job (SAB, 29).

Fenn's all-or-nothing stab at writing fell apart, and so did his marriage. He suffered a kind of writer's block, and instead of his intended novel "about the politics of political journalism," he turned to autobiographical materials and wrote about a strained marriage, which presented another set of difficulties.

> My problem--other than insufficient imagination, weak dramaturgy, and the amateur's lack of a real handle on the medium of prose fiction--was how to tell any sort of American suburban middle-class story in a country that rubs your nose in your basic moral principles every day, as our life in the U.S.of A. didn't do from one year to the next (SAB, 33).

Things took an ugly turn, after a quarrel with his wife, when Fenn's "story, bogged down in self-concern, of a story bogged down in self-concern" (SAB, 42), appeared so meaningless and disjointed that he threw the manuscript off a bridge over a deep chasm. Fenn then faced the fact that all his efforts to renew his literary career and marriage had failed. Calling it quits on both counts, Fenn resigned himself to his failure, throwing his writer's notebook

overboard on the cruise home. Returning to the U.S., Fenn was influenced by his fraternal twin brother Manfred and his associate, Dugland Taylor, both of whom worked for the CIA, to join the organization in 1960 for two ostensible reasons: first, he had "decided to live a story, since I couldn't write one" (SAB, 45); second, he secretly wanted to "neutralize" what he suspected might be Manfred's evil power over political and historical events as an operative for "the CIA's Clandestine Services division (code-named KUDOVE)" (SAB, 27). Manfred, nicknamed "Count" and the "Prince of Darkness" (after a poem by Byron), had a very Burlingame-Cook-Castine perspective on history in that he "used to talk about operating on history instead of being operated on by it" (SAB, 45).

Fenn joined the CIA under the cover of a free-lance political journalist, although his actual job initially involved working on the Historical Staff as a historian and "a chief editor of the endless memoirs that senior officers are paid to write upon their retirement" (SAB, 152). Later, he moved into Clandestine Services where he learned more about the real nature of CIA involvement in political subterfuge and torture. Fenn eventually came to see his work as morally abhorrent and found that he was impotent to do anything to mitigate the dirty work carried out by his brother or the CIA while working on the inside. He resigned in 1977, but acted as a consultant for the organization

until the following year when two things happen: first, his brother mysteriously disappeared; second, he followed in the footsteps of such real life writers as ex-operative Philip Agee by writing an expose of the CIA titled KUDOVE about

> covert operations especially in Iran and Chile, publication of which got its author into hot water with his former colleagues. . .but won the applause of liberals everywhere . . .(SAB, 115).

After Fenn's resignation, his book, and remarriage, he now finds himself at a point where he must choose among several career options: going on the college lecture circuit to capitalize on his CIA experiences, accepting an adjunct professorship at the University of Delaware, or taking a second shot at writing a novel.

Fenn's second wife, Susan Rachel Allen Seckler, also finds herself in a position where she must make important career decisions, and like Fenn, is a same-sex twin and an ancestor of a famous figure: Edgar Allen Poe. At thirty-five years old, she is on sabbatical leave at half pay from Washington College in Maryland as an associate professor of American literature and creative writing. Also like Fenn, Susan sees her career strongly influenced by her ethical beliefs. For example, her dissertation was about "The Literary Ecology and Ecological Literature of Chesapeake Bay from Ebenezer Cooke to. . ." (SAB, 46)--to whom remains unclear: although in Sabbatical she says that it ended with James Michener's Chesapeake, her thesis was completed six years earlier, but her joke here illustrates the importance

to her of concrete, real life issues in regard to her literary research.

Susan also has strong convictions about the nature of her teaching. Her twin sister Miriam--a one-time political activist and a former Peace Corps worker, which led to a confrontation with the CIA after it tried to recruit her--often provokes her with accusations that Susan should dedicate her talents to socially responsible caused by teaching economically and educationally disadvantaged children. However, Susan feels that she is most effective with exceptional students:

> It's not that the. . .deprived don't matter. . .: there is to be found among them the occasional diamond in the rough, and no lack of lesser minerals and honest ore. But the excellent and privileged matter also--diamonds in the smooth, Sue calls them; and if she is less antipopulist that Leonardo da Vinci, who dismissed the mass of humankind as "mere fillers-up of privies," she is unabashedly more so that her sister, who will not acknowledge that a young Mozart is in any consequential way more valuable than a semiretarded and pregnant fourteen-year-old escapee from an institution for wayward girls (SAB, 158).

Although not entirely free of guilt, Susan determines to stick with teaching in a more high-powered, elite setting, and her concern on the sabbatical sail is whether or not to take a job offer at Swarthmore and "commit herself to serious professional scholarship as well as teaching" (SAB, 274). The former deals with Susan's "study-in-the-works of Twins, Doubles, and Schizophrenia in the American Literary Imagination" (SAB, 286), which also has a great deal to do with her efforts to understand her relationship

with Miriam, who suffers from occasional bouts of severe mental distress resulting from a series of brutal rapes as well as her imprisonment and torture at the hands of SAVAK, Iran's secret police, when she went there as an anti-government activist.

Fenn and Susan, then, are tied by their shared literary interests, career situations, and the fact that both are same-sex twins. However, they share more unusual things as well. First, Fenn's brother is Susan's stepfather, which makes Fenn and Susan both husband and wife and step-uncle and step-niece. Second, they both have been directly influenced by the CIA due to Manfred's work and Miriam's background. Third, both take very seriously the ecological dangers posed by the shortsighted, unethical, and plainly illegal activities of major corporations that release toxic waste into the environment--especially Allied Chemical's dumping of the insecticide Keypone into the James River, "site of the first permanent English settlement in America" (SAB, 20). Finally, both feel uncomfortable about the growing dominance of military installations, security sites, and weapons testing areas around the Chesapeake, which they fear might indicate an increasingly unstable world.

Most of these concerns impinge on Fenn and Susan's sense of social responsibility and the wisdom of raising a family in middle age and in such an uncertain world. For them, their voyage is a chance to make sense of themselves

and their lives. However, at one point, Susan worries that they have done nothing to resolve their problems, that for none moths they "have been, in the main, indulging ourselves, amusing ourselves. We have been playing" (SAB, 158-9). Fenn responds to this by saying

> We haven't been just playing; we've been also playing. . . . The purpose of sabbaticals is to catch your breath, take stock, get perspective. That's what we've tried to do. We've read a lot; we've thought and talked as we sailed; we've made notes. . . .Not everybody has to be D.H. Lawrence or Dostoevsky, thank heavens. You can be morally earnest without being morally afire. You can be serious with a smile. You can even be dreamy and self-indulgent in your personal life. . .and still get terrific things done (SAB, 159).

What they do manage to accomplish is the book Sabbatical, which reads as if it is a record-in-progress of Fenn and Susan's conversations, dreams, arguments, and ruminations on the last leg of their cruise. But most important to them is the fact that, in writing the book, they have gotten in touch with what they call the Literally Marvelous: the place where the world of real life and the fantastic or fictional meet on equal terms.

Certainly, the things that they share are unusual, but Fenn and Susan also spend much time trying to find ways to spice up their novel-chronical in order to avoid writing a piece that is merely realistic. At one point, in his new writer's notebook, Fenn makes an entry that becomes part of the book and takes the form of an imaginary dialogue between himself and Susan, saying that "We can do anything that we can do, Suse. And what we can't do as Fenn and Susan, we

can do as Author" (SAB, 135). What he emphatically seeks is something that will add mystery and magic to their novel because

> 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. . . .
>
> 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. Your literally marvelous is your mother-effing wind (SAB, 136-7).

They want some sort of mystique to help carry their story, and they look to Odysseus, Sheherazade, Dante, Don Quixote, Huck Finn, and Poe as sources of magic, superstition, and the miraculous. They do not have to look very far for examples of fantastic, yet real, things confronting them. In fact, the CIA presents to Susan and Fenn a set of bewildering real-life events that confound any effort distinguish what is real from what is pure contrivance or fiction. In addition to Fenn's brief tenure with the agency, he and Susan ponder some recent happenings that possibly result from CIA sources. For example, Manfred's disappearance might be due to several factors: his successful attempt at suicide by jumping off Pokey; his going underground to Chile to effect the release of his son Gus, who had gone there in 1973 to oppose the CIA's undermining of the Allende regime; or his assassination by the CIA, or some other intelligence agency, for reasons unknown. Because Fenn and Susan know about the devious

nature of the CIA's clandestine branch, they have more than a little anxiety about ever finding out the truth. Reinforcing their fears and suspicions is the recent case of John Arthur Paisley, another agency ex-operative who disappears from his boat Brillig under circumstances almost identical to Manfred's case. Fenn and Susan include a long section comprised of what seem actual Baltimore Sun articles from 1978 to 1980 outline the investigation into Paisley's supposed suicide--what emerges is a twisted, ever-changing story characterized by uncertainties, misleading statements, contradictory testimony, contradictions, and lies that grows so complicated and contrary that no one can say anything certain regarding what happened. For Fenn and Susan, all this works in the CIA's favor, even if it winds up making the agency look either foolish or guilty. That is, standard operating procedure for CIA dirty work is to propagate uncertainty through the use of deliberately clumsy and unresolvable "muck-ups, contradictions, blunders, checkouts, and cover-ups" (SAB, 110), to the point where seemingly clearcut events get hopelessly tangled and impossible to interpret. What really happened is as ambiguous as the CIA's participation.

Even Fenn's expose, KUDOVE, turns out to work to the CIA's advantage. Fenn had hoped that the book would reveal truths about the agency that would hinder its effectiveness to muddle reality. At first, it does just that--in concert

with exposes published just prior to it, public confidence in the government fell in regard to such things as covert activities in Chile and Iran, the Vietnam war, and the administration's culpability for Watergate. In terms of their effects on the CIA in particular, these writings collectively

> contributed to the lowering of Agency morale and the reining in of it covert operations in the middle and latter 1970s. Resignations and early retirements. . .ran high; recruitment of able trainees. . .grew increasingly difficult despite the poor national job market for college graduates, especially in the liberal arts (SAB, 143).

However, this trend was short lived. The CIA turned from the Ivy League and the more elite Catholic universities to state universities as a source for recruits, and it found great success. In addition, recent political events--such as the American hostages in Iran, the oil crisis, and inflation--acted to erase the public's memory, or at least its conscience. Worse, in Fenn's view, is the fact that his and others' exposes and a recent flood of spy novels have worked to enhance, not tarnish, the public's fascination with the CIA. In short, the writing that Fenn and his colleague's produce is impotent to stem the CIA's influence--if anything, the agency looks forward to unprecedented vigor in the 1980's as it gears up for new biochemical weapons research, gene-splicing experiments to produce toxic weapons, and other equally heinous projects. At a later point in Sabbatical, Fenn describes a meeting with his ex-wife, now a CIA operative, and a senior agency

official; the latter makes Fenn a futile re-recruitment pitch and tells him

> We're prepared to take a positive view of your book: part of the post-Viet Nam reaction of the Nineteen Seventies, blah blah blah, like Agee and Marchetti and Snepp and the rest. You-all hurt us, sure; but what you meant as a stab in the back, we're taking as a shot in the arm. A healthy corrective. It's time we stopped killing the messenger that brings bad news (SAB, 306).

The propagation of lies and half-truths as a matter of routine government policy makes Fenn and Susan (and the reader) suspect both history and the real nature of large-scale political events. But it presents them with a kind of unpleasant lesson, an example of life's uncertainty; for Susan,

> the world of information, disinformation, even superdisinformed supercoded disinformation, for all a mere young woman professor of classical American literature could know--in such a world, simple truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, loyalty and disloyalty, may be as difficult to distinguish--indeed, may be as naive a distinction, as. . . uh. . .happiness and unhappiness, or love and less-than-love. . .(SAB, 113).

Fenn and Susan know that the literally marvelous and literally abhorrent realities associated with the CIA, as well as with large corporations engaged in illegal activities, involve more than just legal and ethical abstractions because real people die real deaths as a result. And besides their family member who have suffered, Fenn and Susan have themselves come close to danger at the hands of mysterious agencies. For example, after weathering a storm in the Chesapeake during which Fenn lost an important map, they pass a large outgoing yacht named

Baratarian II, Key Is., Va, which Susan contacts by radio to ask for a navigational fix and advice regarding a safe harbor. In answer, they receive terse directions to the yacht's home port, Key Island, which has a cove with secure anchorage and a lighted stone jetty--however, they are warned to stay aboard Pokey because, although uninhabited, the island has no supplies and is infested with poisonous snakes and plants. Neither Fenn nor Susan, who are highly experienced Chesapeake sailors and very familiar with the geography of the area, have ever heard of Key Island, which leads Susan to wonder bout "how an uninhabited island comes to have a lighted stone jetty and be the home port of Bartarian II" (SAB, 23). They are aware of the significance of the yacht's name as a reminder of Jean Lafitte's ship (and the reader is made to wonder as well about whether or not the yacht somehow relates to the one Castine/Cook had in LETTERS).

They put in at the cove, which they christen; when Fenn "wonders whether Key Island is named after his alleged anthemic ancestor, we rename our anchorage Poe Cove after Susan's, and in acknowledgement of its mysteriousness. . ." (SAB, 26). Very late that night, both are disturbed by unusual sounds--splashes, "and a muffled exclamations, female, as if people are scuffling in the shallows" (SAB, 26)--but their investigation with a flashlight reveals

nothing. The next morning during a nude, pre-breakfast swim, Fenn comes upon something in the water:

> what looks like a light-colored rag. Treading water, he touches it gingerly, then picks it up: a large scarf, kerchief, bandanna; a crimson-bordered square of white silk or rayon with a light-blue paisley print; unsoiled, unfaded, intact (SAB, 48).

Suddenly, a loudly amplified male voice, coming from somewhere from the island, harasses them with lewd comments. But instead of making them decide to leave, Fenn and Susan decide to make a cursory exploration of the island despite the warnings about snakes. They find nothing except the usual flotsam washed ashore; nevertheless, the night noises and the bullhorn incident arouse their suspicions that, perhaps, the island serves either as a CIA base for a safehouse or as a haven and dropping point for drug smugglers. Fenn and Susan spend the rest of the day making necessary repairs and preparing for another imminent storm that they hear about over the radio, which requires that they stay in Poe Cove until the weather clears. Just before the storm begins, Baratarian II arrives and anchors in the cove, and as the storms hits full force, it lowers a dinghy containing two white men and a black woman who row ashore--only the woman returns to the yacht after the storm slackens, and before Fenn can satisfy his curiosity by rowing over to speak directly with someone on board, the yacht leaves the cove. Though both begin to feel uneasy about the way things are going, nightfall fast approaches,

which means the Susan and Fenn must spend another night in the cove, but they plan to anchor offshore and take turns on watch.

After an uneventful night, they eagerly weigh anchor and begin to move out of Poe Cove. But Fenn, still more curious than cautious, insists that they stop to check some buoys indicating the presence of crab pots in order to see if one might give a clue to the mystery of Key Island--he wants to see if one of the traps contains drugs or something that would suggest CIA use as an information drop. Just as he does this, a warning shot comes from the island, hitting the water nearby. This, finally, squelches further investigation and makes Susan and Fenn leave the area as quickly as possible.

Later, they go ashore at a nearby town and buy a replacement for their lost map, but neither this nor inquiries of local people knowledgeable about the Chesapeake leads to any information regarding the existence of Key Island. Stuck with a seemingly unsolvable mystery, Fenn and Susan find it difficult to fully accept what happened because

> it all smacks too much of paperback gothic with a Hollywood tie-in. Baratarian indeed! Some latter-day Lafitte, we suppose, in the marijuana trade, daring the Coast Guard to suspect a wolf in wolf's clothing (SAB, 133).

Much later, during the meeting with his ex-wife and the CIA official, Fenn learns that his suspicions were warranted: Key Island is, in fact, a CIA recruitment

training camp for women operatives run by Fenn's ex-wife, called BARATARIA, and where

> the women. . .are taught all the skills of their male counterparts--martial arts, tradecraft, and the rest--plus the tactical use of sex. In male-supremacist countries they will cover as embassy-staff wives and clerks: Teapot Terrorists, they call themselves, or Killers in Crinolines, passing as society-minded do-gooders--bright, civic-spirited, harmless. What we used to get from the Ivy League. . .we get now from the seven sisters (SAB, 305).

The whole episode at Key Island causes Susan and Fenn to feel as if their trip, instead of ending with a resolution of their concerns and such mysteries as Manfred and Gus' disappearances, has compounded, and raised new, ambiguities; although

> We had allowed for the possibility, if not the likelihood, that our sabbatical cruise might increase rather than decrease certain uncertainties; that is what has come regrettably to pass (SAB, 84).

To make some kind of sense of the mysterious series of events begun in Poe Cove, Fenn and Susan come to view their experiences and book metaphorically by wondering if life, like the Ship of Story, carries its occupants to critical points that are either convergences or divergences. That is, Fenn asks, does writing, sailing, and living depend on confronting forks or confluences as "navigational" options?

> Does the Chesapeake Channel diverge into York River Entrance Channel and York Spit Channel, or do they converge into the Chesapeake Channel? The one inbound, the other outbound; or, in tidewater, the one on floods, the other on ebbs. Analysis versus synthesis; "male" versus "female." Sperm swim up; ova float down (SAB, 137).

They face this kind of binary situation at each point in their lives and story, from trying to come to terms with

the influence of the CIA to making career decisions--everything, it seems, places them at a "Y," a place where they must choose between often contradictory, yet equally valid, possibilities. For Susan and Fenn, their boat comes to represent this as "a union of contraries prevailingly harmonious indeed but sometimes tense, like the physics of Pokey himself" (SAB, 217): from the combination of their ancestors' names to a reversal of the brand name of the insecticide Keypone, the boat stands as a symbol of the dynamic tension between binary oppositions that rejects an easy "either-or" solution to ambiguities.

This also leads Fenn and Susan to wonder about the opposition of elements in regard to reproductive biology, as they try to decide whether or not they want to have children--for them, sexuality stands as a union of contraries in a literally marvelous way. For example, Susan's mother has a philosophy much like that found in Plato's Symposium as she argues

> that a woman's true children are not her human daughters and sons but the four hundred or so ova which she launches, involuntarily and without male assistance, in the thirty-odd years from her menarche to her menopause; a man's, the thirty-odd billions of spermatozoa he generates. . . . These are out children. . .whom we never know and nearly all of whom die without issue. . . . Given the rare chance, however, these offspring of our are truly and totally sexual: contraries, they come together. . .to become something both and neither: something unlike sperm or egg, but much like the parents of sperm and egg. . .(SAB, 241-2).

Another truly marvelous thing about life is its abundance in the face of its statistical improbability;

Susan and Fenn point to the 99.99% mortality rate for striped bass and human sperm to illustrate that everything alive exists despite the enormously high odds against the successful union of contraries. This idea comes to them again after Fenn and Susan uncannily dream "the same dream from different points of view." Fenn's is brought about by Susan's remark that the paisley pattern on her scarf resembled spermatozoa, and he dreams of John Arthur Paisley, Manfred, himself, and others as giant sperm struggling along; Susan dreams that she and her sister were ova floating downstream like white water rafters, but rather than passively floating, they deliberately navigated to their goal. In effect, their shared dream flowed together as an illustration of both the literally marvelous (i.e., the unlikely coincidence of this) and a confluent "Y" where their dreams merged.

But Susan and Fenn's main problem is how to progress once one comes to see and accept ambiguities. For them, the issue of confluences and divergences presents a dilemma about how to proceed--with sailing, according to Fenn,

> we project our course by estimating our position by plotting our track; decide where to go by determining where we are by reviewing where we've been (SAB, 254).

The danger that this might merely mean a repetition, a circular path to life, does not bother them too much--Susan tells Fenn about her sister's current lover, a Vietnamese poet, which leads Fenn to understand

that rhyme is not repetition (the place one returns to is never exactly the place one left: the river flows, but the shore changes too, not to mention the traveler). . .(SAB, 270).

Susan brings up other parallels between life and literary themes as a means for understanding their situation by way of what might be called the literarily marvelous:

Literary Susan speaks of other goings-back-to-go-forward: Odysseus's return to Circe's island. . .before proceeding on toward Ithaca; Aeneas's return, before sailing on to the promised land. . . . For that matter, all such heroes' descents into the underworld, where the spirits of the great dead enable and advise them on their future courses (SAB, 247).

Progress and return, going-back and going-ahead, occur in other literally wondrous ways to Susan and Fenn; perhaps the most unlikely example of this is Fenn's beret, or "boina," which uncannily boomerangs into and out of his life, getting lost and then returning at significant moments. He bought the hat during his early sabbatical in Spain; he lost it accidentally when he threw his manuscript away but, feeling lost without it, he managed to find it at the bottom of the gorge near a small stream:

Well, it was a symbol, for sure, an omen. But of what? I kept shaking my head (carefully) as I toiled back up, wondering what I was supposed to do with this extraordinary trifle of a happenstance and my life. Such a happy, tongue-tisking anecdote it would have been, in a better marriage, between better people! (SAB, 41).

Fenn lost the boina a second time in the Chesapeake, while working at a CIA safehouse. Manfred found it washed up nearby the next day, but because he had to leave for Europe on agency business, Fenn received his hat as a

surprise "by diplomatic pouch from the U.S. embassy in Austria" (SAB, 46). The third time that Fenn lost his boina happened after he and Susan received instructions from Baratarian II for reaching Poe Cove, but he does not recover it until very near the end of the book, just after another interruption of the literally marvelous into Susan and Fenn's lives: a brief appearance by what might be Chessie, the legendary sea monster of the Chesapeake. The sudden appearance and disappearance of this mysterious something causes Susan to lose her scarf in the sudden activity and it makes Fenn want to know something concrete; he

> wishes the thing would resurface, and not only for the mere excitement: he feels sharply that beyond this narrative diversion, this ontological warp in our story--a fabulous sea-monster in our real Chesapeake!--lies something hard and hurtful (SAB, 343).

Fenn truly lives up to his last two names as he tries to bring all of these diverse things together in some kind of sensible way--he is a "key turner," looking for a mechanism by which to deal with contraries that he and Susan encounter in both the literally and the literarily marvelous. One way he sees to do this comes from the realization that his talents while working for the CIA are the same as those needed by a writer:

> Count once told me that what made him a good CIA officer was that he'd learned to trust certain intuitions before he knew what they were intuitions of. I'll bet a good novelist has the same sort of sense; which things he has to know clearly before he can begin, and which bridges he can't even conceive of, much less cross, till he gets to them (SAB, 278).

In addition, both Fenn and Susan come to view their unresolved problems regarding careers, the mysterious events they encounter, and their book-in-progress as gaining coherence from the nature of the relationship between real-life sailing and language:

> Not the least of sailing's pleasures, in our opinion, is that it refreshes, by literalizing them, many common figures of speech: one is forever and in fact making things shipshape from stem to stern, casting off, getting underway, making headway, giving oneself leeway, taking a different tack. . . . In this instance. . .we set out story's ideal course and then sail the best one we can, correcting and improvising from occasional fixes on out actual position (SAB, 162).

For them, "If life is like a voyage, reader, a voyage may be like life" (SAB, 200), and the same applies to the similarities between fact and fiction. But one problem does cause them a great deal of grief. Susan, finding herself pregnant, feels reluctant to begin a family so soon when so much remains to be worked out. However, she grows anxious and desperate, keeping the fact of the pregnancy to herself--she eventually decides to get an abortion without telling Fenn, and it turns out that she aborts twins. But Susan does not keep her secret for very long, and she suggests that, perhaps, they should separate temporarily in order to sort things out. She proposes this, in part, as a way to encourage Fenn as a writer, telling him

> I happen to be a professional reader, see, and I've read all your notebooks and early manuscripts. You don't talk and behave like people's idea of a capital-A Artist, but that's people's idea's fault, not yours. You're not publicly intense. You don't puff a pipe and make literary conversation. . . . But the fact is, you've grown into

something real. . . . I happen to think there's a good chance that more than halfway through your life you're about to hit the ground running out of nearly nowhere and take literature by surprise. . .(SAB, 346).

But Fenn will not entertain Susan's suggestion that they separate and is surprised by both her proposal and the fact that she has read his works and come to her estimate of his ability. Fen sees them at the midpoint of a "Y" without enough to go on to decide whether to go backward or forward to the left or right. Finally, Fenn begins to have a sort of insight, an intuitive sense of something, that he thinks may help, saying "that at a place where three roads meet, there are four choices. Your Y has three legs, but four possibilities" (SAB, 351)--the fourth choice is to stay put deliberately, to hold off from making a move or resolution. Susan does not quite understand, and Fenn excitedly continues to explain, saying,

A while ago, when you told me I was a capital-A Et cetera . . . . I don't know. That sea-monster was important. There's a power I don't know about, and now I think I've got it. Maybe I had it all song; that doesn't matter. You gave it to me by naming it. In fact, it's not mine: it's ours. And something else's. I don't know (SAB, 351).

Fenn feels as if he is on the verge of an almost magical or mystical understanding of how all the parts of their experience fit together, but he does not yet have the language to explain it clearly. He rejects the labels "enlightenment" and "illumination," and tries to describe what he feels in another way:

It's our power and our voice, and what it's for is our

story. Hoo! Everything's coming so clear! After we saw our friend Chessie back there, and you said what you said . . .I felt as if I could have shut my eyes and reached down into the water and fished out my boina! (SAB, 352)

For Fenn, things now begin to fit together, but he still needs to explain better what he means so that Susan will understand. She asks if this is something that writers tend to do, and

replies without the least hesitation It's what writers do because we did it; and we did it because it was the thing for us as a writer to do. Susan observes that that wasn't mentioned in any writing course she ever took or taught. Rewrite the syllabus, then, says Fenn: we're plotting our own course now (SAB, 352).

Fenn continues to explain his ongoing vision further as it gets clearer, as he gets a sharper conception of what he means:

It isn't just as if scales have fallen from his eyes; it's more as if some inauthentic self--layers of false or unworthy selves--got peeled off. . .like clothes by skinnydippers. It's as if he had been disguised from his own best self, he tells her, or as if he'd only now heard and understood what he's been talking about for years . . . .he wonders what he was doing in the Company, 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? (SAB, 356)

Finally, Fenn describes what he means by saying that he know what he and Susan are all about: for him, their story is what brings everything together and solves what have seemed unresolvable contraries. Not a roman a clef nor mere autobiography nor even a piece of writing in which they necessarily have to appear, Fenn sees their story as "our house and our child" and as a point of departure that brings them around past full circle:

> We'll have made it, says determined Fenn, and we'll live in it. We'll even live by it. It doesn't have to be about us--children aren't about their parents. But our love will be in it, and our friendship too. This boat ride will be in it, somehow. It'll be about things coming around to where they started and then going on a little farther in a different way (SAB, 357).

For Fenn, their life and work can remain unresolved because enforced resolution would create artificial, and thus corrupted, meaning. They neither need to have children nor settle down into static careers, nor do they have to avoid them--nothing need be resolved until the point when they resolve themselves, if they ever do, in the story of life and the life of the story.

> Fenn swears she'll understand what he means as soon as he does. It is not a matter of answers, or even a philosophical position: just a perspective. Our perspective, for our story (SAB, 360).

In other words, the process of recognizing the literally and literarily marvelous, of making attempts to resolve contraries, and of trying to find a central meaning to everything that they have experienced is the most important thing for them to. For Fenn, "This euphoria of his will pass, surely, but the perspective won't; that's the key" (SAB, 361). Much of this perspective depends upon calling

> the distinction between life and art into question. And the key that unlocks the mystery of how this distinction can be overcome is the idea of the story. The imagination thus defines the realm where genuine stories of life are told. Fenwick functions as the "turner," playing at the very threshold between art and life (Ziegler, 80).

But Susan finds only partial comfort in what she

understands by Fenn's insight. She has reservations about not ever having children and earlier had wondered

if, as has been written, the key to the treasure may well be the treasure, her question is Is her key treasure enough . . . . If Sue can't have children, then no paper on Pym will do. If she can't be an artist, say, of the sort whose work vindicates her life; a dedicated doctor; a passionate visionary. . .She contemplates morosely. . .(SAB, 338).

She has not completely come to terms yet with what Fenn tries to make her understand, and still wonders about the same thing, although she has changed her opinion a bit:

What is art, Susan wants to know, what are learning and civilization, where they must substitute for parenthood instead of complementing it? The answer is that for Fenn, for whom they are the complement, they are enough; for Sue--given the magnitude of her love--they are far better than nothing (SAB, 362-3).

Susan sees a parallel between their story and Poe's The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym in that Poe's story cuts off abruptly, supposedly because Pym died before finishing his account and telling the reader how he survived to write his story; she explains this by quoting a Johns Hopkins literary critic, saying,

Well, the point of my story is that the point of Poe's story is that the point of Pym's story is this: "It is not that the end of the voyage interrupts the writing, but that the interruption of the writing ends the voyage" (SAB, 365).

This inspires Fenn to begin writing their story at the end of Sabbatical as he sees "The end of our voyage begins our writing. . . . The doing and the telling, our writing and our loving--they're twins. That's our story" (SAB, 365). Susan, then, accepts this and replies

that's going to be our story, then let's begin it at the end and end at the beginning, so we can go on forever. Begin with our living happily ever after" (SAB, 365).

Though both Fenn and Susan know that nothing, not even stories, actually continue forever, it does not matter because life and fiction depend on acting "as if" such were the case. Fenn, then, begins his story at the end of Sabbatical, commencing "as we would conclude" with "Happily after, to the end" (SAB, 366).

> For Fenwick the challenge is clear: he and Susan want to live, one might even say "perform," a story, a story that is not about anyone, does not represent anything by referring to another reality outside itself. In short, Fenwick wants to use the language of story-telling to love in the world, not merely to refer to the things of the world (Ziegler, 81).

Tidewater Tales, Barth's next and most recent novel, carries on with many of the same concerns as Sabbatical, and its plot and main characters stikingly resemble the preceeding book: it is a collaboratively written piece by a married couple as they sail around the Chesapeake, telling stories about themselves and trying to come to terms with their lives together. Peter Sagamore, nearly forty years old, is a professional fiction writer of some repute and a tenured professor at Maryland State University at College Park. The son of a German immigrant carpenter who specializes in building Chesapeake work boats, Peter grew up moderately poor but managed to go to college on a scholarship. Speaking about his past in a removed, "as if" way, Peter sees this combination of social, economic, and

cultural elements as a shaping influence which provided him with a peculiar advantage as a writer:

> Coming from no very defined cultural tradition, he will have not only all civilizations to discover, but Civilization. Having. . .no very defined self, he will grope his way into art with the one advantage of being unable. . .to practice it as self-expression; he will be free therefore either to invent himself in and for his stories or. . .to efface himself in his invention. Because he has everything to learn, he'll approach the medium without preconceptions, and this innocence may not be altogether a liability. Because he does not quite know who he is, he may never quite learn what he cannot do, and this ignorance, if it does not ruin him, may be his strength (TWT, 15).

As far as his current professional activities go, according to his wife,

> He reads not widely, massively, or systematically, but what he reads becomes a working part of him; he has a gift for language, none for languages; neither a scholar on the one hand nor a primitive on the other, he is an okay instructor in the art of literature from its manufacturers' point of view and a first-rate coach and critic of apprentice writer (TWT, 17).

According to Peter, his fiction is shaped by his personality in that he "can't even tell a joke. He merely and strictly invents, sets down" (TWT, 17). However, even though he eschews strictly authobiographical pieces, his work draws mainly from influences related to places and people he has encountered, and now, after achieving a degree of critical recognition, Peter faces two problems as a writer. First, he must decide whether or not to maintain his professional identity and subject matter, which have till now depended upon the source that he knows best: the Chesapeake area. In most of his work to date, "there kept appearing the marshes, tides, and webfoot passions of [his]

youth," and he feels that he must commit himself to, or reject, becoming a regionalist writer.

> The question poses itself whether, recognizing this circumstance, he were better off musewise to shrug his shoulders and stay put, or go back down there and live on location for some years at least, as the state university had in fact invited him to do, and either sink for real into the bog of literary regionalism or work through to more transcendent terms with those staples of his imagination (TWT, 89).

Peter's second problem is more severe and threatens his writing career. That is, he increasingly gets caught up with the philosophy that "less is more": his first novel was large and a commercial success; a leaner one followed, then came two small novellas followed by short stories that kept getting smaller, eventually turning into what seemed exercises in literary minimalism.

> Neither his vision nor his invention had faltered; between early breakfast and late lunch he made as many sentences as in the days of that teem and sprawl and overflow. . . . But the demon Less Is More had so got hold of him, with its lieutenant demons Cut and Squeeze, that ten pages of notes now made one of the first draft, ten of first draft one of second--and those celebrated minifictions were not infrequently refined through ten or a dozen drafts: diamonds sieved from very mountains of verbal ore (TWT, 21).

The situation worsens until Peter writes the first piece that he cannot get published since his early days as a writer. It is a story entitled "The Olive" that he bases on a joke about

> an old tidewater duck-hunters' folk recipe for preparing the inedible old squaw duck (Stuff that duck with a single olive wrapped in bacon; stuff a large chicken with that duck; stuff a large turkey with that chicken. Roast that turkey twelve hours over low heat. Then discard that turkey; discard that chicken; discard that duck; discard that bacon. Eat that olive (TWT, 21).

Using this idea as the center of a fully developed hunting story, Peter painstakingly drafts and redrafts the piece, making it shorter at each stage, until the only thing left is the title, which no one will accept for publication even as a novelty.

The other half of the team is Katherine Sherritt Sagamore, also thirty-nine years old, who works as a professional "teller" in that she is Director of Folklore and Oral History at the Enoch Pratt Free Library. Because she is eight-and-one half months pregnant and expects to give birth to twins at any moment during the next two weeks, she is now on maternity leave, which means that she is taking a break

> from supervising oral history projects through the neighborhood branches, collecting urban folklore and recording immigrant folktales out of Baltimore's ethnic smorgasbord; from telling apprentice-level tales. . .to the very young and very old and the blind and the unlettered, working toward her brown belt in recitation; from conducting seminars in otolaryngeal narrative and taking them in narration; from assuming the wheel herself sometimes of the Inner City Talemobile in winter or one of the Storycycles in summer to carry forth the word from Cathedral Street as well as bring it back; and in general from looking after the library's Office of Oral Input. . .(TWT, 7.)

Therefore, because of Kathy's imminent delivery, she and Peter are not, like Fenn and Susan, engaged in a full-fledged cruise--instead, they have decided to remain within easy reach of both medical assistance and Kathy's family. Unlike Peter, Kathy comes from a wealthy and powerful family and has had the best of everything for most of her life;

nevertheless, she is devoted to her profession as well as to socially and politically conscious projects:

> Life having been generous to her, she is. . .generous with hers: Much of the Pratt work is hardcore inner-city, and she is forever volunteering for good-citizenly chores over and above: Operation Head Start, the League of Women Voters, the Museum board, the Better Baltimore Committee, her prep school's board of trustees, her college's alumnae association, the local chapter of Amnesty International, and of course her ASPS and HOSCA (TWT, 13).

The latter organizations are the American Society for the Preservation of Storytelling, of which Kathy is co-founder, and an activist group called Hands Off South and Central America "an organization devoted to the frustration of U.S. meddling in the governments of its southern neighbors" (TWT, 10).

Together, as storywriter and storyteller, Peter and Kathy decide to take a brief sail on the Chesapeake in their boat Story, so named because, for them, "life had imitated art to the point of naming that sailboat. . .after a similarly named vessel in Peter Sagamore's first fat novel" (TWT, 90). They do this so close to her delivery date as a way to ease the tensions that they feel about giving birth so late in life, bringing children into an increasingly dangerous world, and working through Peter's writing problems. As a part of the latter effort, Kathy sets Peter the task of telling her his dreams and creating extemporaneous stories, taking them on a cruise through the Ocean of Story. However,

she proposes Peter not write down these tales and dreams and anecdotes. Not yet. Why not let's dream and tell, tell and dream, narrate and navigate whither listeth wind and tide until we are delivered of our posterity, or about to be, and then--by when you'll be as about to burst as I am now--deliver yourself of our several stories, duly arted up (TWT, 172).

To Peter's worry that he will forget his tales, she advises that he keep some kind of inventory or log of titles that would later act as a table of contents, and if he should forget the stories that go with the titles, then he can create new stories to fit them. In effect, the tales generated on this brief cruise will, along with their twins when born, be the offspring, the children of their marriage, similar to what Fenn and Susan come to feel about the fruit of their sailing. Also like their predecessors, Kathy and Peter have some reservations about bringing real children into the world, doubts that manage to infiltrate their tale-telling. They worry about the growing presence of secret governmental and military organizations on the Chesapeake: bomb test areas, military installations, rocket research facilities, the CIA's training camp called ISOLATION, the CIA and NSA headquarters--all these and many more make them feel skeptical.

We do not believe that what we see around us will be here in any agreeably habitable state for the children of the children we are about to bring into this world. We do not believe that the world we value will much survive us. For that matter, we have no tremendous confidence that our children will (TWT, 61).

The prime source of Kathy and Peter's pessimism and unease is identical to that experienced by Fenn and Susan

and opens the door to the literarily and literally marvelous: the CIA. For instance, while sailing a couple of years earlier, Peter, Susan, and Susan's young brother Chip discovered a partially decomposed body floating in the Chesapeake, evidently that of ex-CIA agent John Arthur Paisley who disappeared from his boat Brillig. Susan and Peter never find out much about what happened or why except what they read in the newspapers, which confirm only the corpse's identity but fail to uncover anything concrete regarding the causes of Paisley's death.

In addition, one of Peter's former creative writing students and a personal friend is Doug Townsend, an elderly but energetic person who works for the CIA. He reveals to Peter many aspects of the agency, the most disturbing of which concerns the activities of what he labels Doomsday Factors. Townsend uses the term "factor" to mean "a trading agent," like a "sot-weed factor," and a Doomsday Factor is "your dealer in potential apocalypses." Such people are not merely double or rogue agents; as Townsend explains it,

> A rogue agent is not quite the same as a double or a triple. A double agent is either a spy for some other agency who has penetrated your own, or a spy of your own who has penetrated another agency, or a spy of your own who has been penetrated by another agency. A triple is an agent of your own who pretends to be doubling for someone else while pretending to work for you, while actually working for you. Either of these becomes a Doomsday Factor if and when he traffics in thermonuclear-weapons information or material in such a way as to make the use of such weapons more rather than less likely, in whatever circumstances or cause (TWT, 271).

Townsend, then, approaches Peter because he needs a potential ally against the abuses of covert organizations--for him, the danger posed by such groups is as much a matter of language as it is of secret power.

> Covert government security operations, like organized criminal organizations, are cancers in the body democratic. They have in common that they corrupt and falsify individuals and institutions. They widen the gap between what things represent themselves to be and what they are. They debase the very language (TWT, 275).

Describing himself in terms that sound much like what Fenn originally intended when he joined the CIA, Townsend says that he wants to combat the negative aspects of the CIa and covertly mitigate the effectiveness of Doomsday Factors.

> I double for the Constitution against the CIA, and I rogue for the human race against Doomsday Factors. . . .
> I can't stop the Pentagon from making and deploying the neutron bomb or the cruise missile. But I may be able to stop a rogue agent from peddling plutonium in Libya or Argentina. And I do my best to stop a rogue agency from subverting the law of the land and its own charter in the name of national security (TWT, 273).

One of Peter's early short short stories was called "Part of a Shorter Work" which contained some autobiographical elements, and the one of particular interest to Townsend concerned the covert selling to the CIA of the Sagamore land and house where Peter grew up; now, the site serves as a CIA safehouse and interrogation center. After this piece, Peter's works get increasingly more terse, and when Townsend says that he suspects that this results from letting Peter know more about the shadowy world of

covert operations, Peter replies, "My stories aren't about those things." To this, Townsend answers,

> Let them not be. . . . There are different ways to be not about. Your stories are not about the Holocaust either, for example; if you were a Jewish writer who'd survived the camps, your stories might still be not about the Holocaust--but they'd be not about it in a different way. What we're dealing with here is no holocaust yet, but it's a cancer in our own body. If your stories come to be not about that in a different way, I'll have accomplished all I hope to accomplish on the literary front (TWT, 276).

The fact is, Peter learns a great deal from Townsend about the CIA's involvement in assassinations, the dissemination of disinformation, torture, political subterfuge, support of tyrannical regimes, collusion with the Mafia, etc. Although his "stories were not about all that--so possessed by these matters was his reluctant imagination, very little was left for his stories to be about" (TWT, 281). Eventually, Peter feels that "all this central intelligence has done nothing for my writing except constipate it." To this Townsend replies

> So far. . . . And not quite so, either: That special not-aboutness is beginning to be there. Your last piece reminds me of Thomas Mann's novella A Man and His Dog, which he published in Nineteen Eighteen and which is loudly not about the world war. The sound of two hands clapping (TWT, 283).

Another set of circumstances pertaining to the CIA and writing that plunges Kathy and Peter into the literally and literarily marvelous at first seems to them simply unlikely. For example, during their first day out on the bay, Peter wonders where they and their story are heading and ponders the meaning of both:

> The twin facts are (first) that we are on the one hand so lulled by ubiquitous narrative convention that we may indeed forget, reading a realistic story, that in it even the meaningless is meaningful, it having been put there by the author just to remind us that real life comprises much meaninglessness. When, in a story, nothing happens next, that is the thing that happens next: The nothing becomes a thing, which, we may be sure, the author will quickly cause to be followed by the next thing, a more conventionally dramatic thing, and on goes the story. Whereas (second) in fact, nothing is no thing, and our story does not at all necessarily go on, for the reason that our lives are not stories (TWT, 139-40).

Nevertheless, the "author" does present Peter and Kathy with a "next thing," something that seems uncanny, unnatural, and unrealistic. That is, Kathy and Peter spot a distress flare canister floating nearby and, their curiosity piqued, they pull it from the water and open it to find a worn black beret and a "rubber-banded roll of ruled, three-ring, loose-leaf binder paper sealed up in a transparent plastic food-storage bag, secured with a twist-tie" (TWT, 141). The handwritten manuscript is the first act of a drama entitled SEX EDUCATION: Play, which Kathy and Peter read, include in their story, and consider a rather adolescent but not uninteresting work which portrays the philosophical ruminations of two human ova trying to figure out their predicament. Five days later, Peter and Kathy come across another canister and ask

> Tongue-tisking reader, what do you expect we find? You're reading The Tidewater Tales: A Novel; we're telling our stories, which are our story, which we're living and have lived from moment to moment, creek to creek. No more than you do we really expect a genie, say, to roar like a smoke-flare out of this canister, or Act Two of SEX EDUCATION: Play, or any other astounding, improbable thing (TWT, 396-7).

However, despite its unlikelihood, inside they discover the second act of that very play, along with a faded paisley scarf. The script continues with the problems faced by the two eggs, but this time it includes their encounters with sperm characters. In addition, the whole play seems replete with names, places, and events that Kathy and Peter are familiar with, especially in regard to their ideas and purposes for sailing at this time. Peter feels

> as spooked as his wife by the several resemblances of this story to our--not to mention our finding both canister, in the right sequence, on a body of water as large and multifarious as the Chesapeake. Were the script not literally penned, he might suspect some crank of trashing the estuary with photocopies in distress-flare canisters: Rejected by network television, distressed playwright signals for help (TWT, 407).

Eventually, again by improbable coincidence, Peter and Kathy learn that the contents of the canisters are the work of Franklin Key Talbott. The Sagamores first met Talbott and his wife Leah years before at a dinner party given by Doug Townsend. Frank had worked for the CIA for seventeen years (half that time for covert operations and counterintelligence), and his brother Frederick, according to Townsend, was a CIA operative referred to as the Prince of Darkness and who, perhaps, acted as a Doomsday Factor (eventually, both Townsend and Frederick disappear mysteriously). Frank, a descendant of Francis Scott Key, grew disgusted with the perversity of the CIA, and published an expose of the agency titled KUBARK, after the CIA's cryptonym for itself. Leah is an assistant professor of

American literature at Washington College in Chesterton and, possibly, a descendant of Edgar Allan Poe. Kathy and Peter remeet the Talbotts while both couples sail the bay, the latter as they return to the U.S. after a year-long cruise. Frank reveals that he wrote SEX EDUCATION and that the beret in the first canister is his old boina, which he had picked up years before in Spain where he went to become "a capital-W Writer":

> The novel I was trying to write back then. . . .was about an American writer in Spain whose marriage is going sour and whose brother is a CIA man doing liaison work between U.S. military intelligence and the Franco government (TWT, 439).

But Frank's main problem with the book "is that it wasn't fiction" (TWT, 440); his purpose in writing it was to explore "Y's," the

> forks and confluences in people's lives. . . . Like when the tide runs up the Wye River. . .one thing divides into two. . .and when it runs out, two things become one (TWT, 444).

Frank explains that he then tried to turn factual, autobiographical materials into more conventionally fictional narrative by making a few changes:

> I turned Rick Talbott into "Manfred Turner," because Doug Townsend called him the Prince of Darkness after Byron's Count Manfred. Lee and I were "Fenwick Turner" and "Susan Seckler". . . .My idea of the art of fiction was to make he and "Mimi" twin sisters and Fenn and Manfred twin brothers. You're supposed to nudge your neighbor and say, "Fen as in marshland, et cetera" (TWT, 445).

Frank felt disappointed with the product, which he titled Reprise, and threw it away in Tobago to start writing

something more imaginative: the play found by the Sagamores. One reason for the failure of the novel was because Frank

> kept wishing something amazing would happen, out of the blue; something literally marvelous, unaccountable--don't ask me what--to disrupt the whole story. Like a sea monster. If old Chessie had suddenly risen from the seep, or a flaming sword had appeared in the sky. . .But the world went along being the world. . .(TWT, 448).

In short, it turns out that the "real" writer of Sabbatical, in one of its earlier drafts, is neither Fenn nor Susan but Frank Talbott, who comes to tossing his literary effort into the Chesapeake Ambrose Mensch-like, not "so much throwing it away as floating it off, like a seed or a message" (TWT 452). However, his latest project is another expose called KEYPONE, which details the illegal dumping of toxic wastes in the Chesapeake area through the collusion of the Mafia, the government, and large corporations. As for Reprise, Peter has ideas for making the bok work better as a piece of fiction regarding

> what to keep of the actual experience, what to discard, what to alter, what to invent. . . . There ought for example to be some literal marvel at the story's climax, P believes: some flabbergastment surfaced from the tale's dark depths to echo, sea-changed, those who earlier sank and disappeared: John Arthur Paisley, Frederick Mansfield Talbott, Douglas Townsend (TWT, 626).

Just as Talbott's revelations work to make the reader reinterpret Sabbatical, other events occur which lead Peter and Kathy to confront and reinterpret the connection between literal, real life situations and imaginative, literary ones. That is, if the activities of the CIA and the improbable coincidences concerning the Talbott's are not

enough in the way of run-ins with the literally and literarily marvelous to shake them, the encounters that Kathy and Peter have with real life manifestations of literary figures are. For example, they encounter a mysterious couple who call themselves Theodorus and Diana Dmitrikakis who sail in a Phaeacian 35--a replica of a large, ancient ship with all the modern conveniences for living and navigation artfully camouflaged. The two couples swap tales, but their particular interest is in the Odyssey, especially about what happens to Odysseus after he leaves Ithaca to find a westward land and immortality with Princess Nausicaa. For Peter and Kathy, the Dmitrikakises are spookily like a modern day representation of the mythical couple who have, somehow, found their immortality.

Another instance of this grows out of Peter's fascination with the novel Don Quixote, and he and Kathy eventually run into a crusty old sailor who calls himself Don Quicksoat and his boat Rocinante IV. Quicksoat looks "like a cross between Uncle Sam and the Ancient Mariner" (TWT, 364) and

> is said to pretend to believe that he really is. . .the old fellow in the book. He will explain to anyone who asks. . . that he and his boat have been blown by a certain magician all the way from Spain to the USA, and from the old days to now. People therefore reasonably assume Capn Donald to be daft.
> . . . He has even been reported to be a famous writer living incognito, getting material for his next bestseller (TWT, 365).

Meeting and befriending Quicksoat leads Peter to re-read the novel and begin writing notes for a long work based on Don Quixote. In fact, it starts a process whereby Peter manages to tap new stores of creativity and redefine his professional goals.

> His own quixotic aspiration, P.S. notes not for the first time, has been to leave behind him some image as transcendent as his favorite four: Odysseus striving homeward, Sheherazade ayarning, D.Q. astride Rocinante and discoursing with Sancho Panza, Huck Finn rafting down the Big Muddy (TWT, 513).

As Quicksoat tells his story to Peter and Kathy, the lines between the literal and the literary blur; he says that "I was my own goshdarn Cervantes" (TWT, 570) and that he has close friendships with many people such as himself:

> Huck Finn and Lemuel Gulliver. . .and Aeneas and Candide and Robby Crusoe and Roddy Random and other old salts, including Sinwell the Sailor and his old lady Sheherazade (TWT, 571).

Quicksoat, to Kathy and Peter, is not an old faker or a deranged but harmless crank--instead, something about him makes the Sagamores take him seriously and lead them into the world where fiction and reality merge.

In addition to encountering real-life counterparts to Odysseus and Quixote is someone of particular interest for Kathy as a storyteller: Sheherazade. From a kind of collaborative storytelling session, including the Talbotts, Sagamores, and assorted friends and family members, emerges new versions of Shaherazade's story, one of which focuses on the mathematical structure of the Thousand and One Nights and its relationship to Sherry's menstrual cycle and

pregnancies. But a friend of Kathy's, May Jump, who is also a professional storyteller and story collector, collaborates with Quicksoat to tell about having met the real Sherry at a recent ASPS convention. This tale, purportedly a version told by Sherry to Jump and Quicksoat, reworks and retells the "real" story behind what is given in Chimera's "Dunyazadiad" and goes farther by relating what happens to Sherry afterward. It turns out that the magic phrase "What You Did Is What You'll Do" somehow gives Sherry a new key to a new treasure and sends her across time and space so that she gets stuck in the present day--she and the Barth-like "genie," after a heartfelt reunion, then spend their time trying to find ways to send her back to her kingdom.

Peter gains from all of the swapped stories and all of the experiences with the people that he and Kathy meet in that they provide him with a rich set of experiences to use in the form of notes and ideas to serve as the basis for a long imaginative work. He has overcome his writer's block, and worked through the demons of minimalism that have plagued him.

> Do Homer, Sheherazade, Cervantes, and Mark Twain then and there embrace our P as their peer? Not yet, and no matter: They're stars he steers by, not his destination. Anyhow, he has work to do: Once upon a time is only the beginning (TWT, 694).

With his problem gone, Peter's Tidewater Tales evolves as a reconstructed, revised version of what he and Kathy have gone through, and the book that results insists on

stressing the point that tales continue to retell themselves, changing with each telling or reading, by ending with the title page. In the end, Peter's book blends the worlds of fiction and fact, not only by showing how the literally and literarily marvelous are equally real and equally unlikely, but also by subsuming every experience and everyone else's story into his own. In the same way, Barth subsumes all of these elements into his Tidewater Tales, at the same time reworking and revivifying the stories upon which all storytelling is based, including his previous work in this vein. Doing so, Barth simultaneously interweaves the fictionality of reality with the reality of fiction, as aspect of his work as a whole that rests on a central paradox:

> what makes Barth's treatment of literature. . .paradoxical is the fact that his own literary career continues to undermine the sense of an ending created in each pair of complementary novels. For him, traditional art and personal life enter into a dialectical relationship centering in the figure of the Author. Like the Roman god Janus, Barth faces both ways: toward reality and toward fiction, problematizing and at the same time reconciling their ontological separateness through his double, or ironic, point of view (Ziegler, 84-5).

This double emphasis, carried in part by the fact that Barth writes his books in pairs, also problematizes the roles that his writer-characters play as they attempt to come to terms with the world through writing. They never really manage to achieve complete success in their efforts, but the degree of success that they do accomplish illustrates some important aspects of writing as Barth sees

it: if nature is paradoxical, if real life never comes to clean-cut and fully resolved endings, then writing should not arbitrarily force coherence and closure unless it does so ironically, making its resolutions and form visible as artificial constructs. In this way, both Fenn and Peter manage to dissolve the barrier between the realms of fact and fiction, which have at least as much in common as they do in opposition, using both as sources for new work as well as lessons, of sorts, that show how one can "write" the world.

Chapter 7

Writing's Failure and the Writer's Success

All of Barth's main characters are writers, and all of them seek to use writing to shape experience in some sort of personally meaningful way. Although they all turn to writing as a way to make sense out of the world and their place in it, none manages to do so with unqualified success. Some turn away from writing and the world altogether (e.g., Todd Andrews and Jake Horner); some find that writing has severe limitations and that nothing they do in writing manages to convey the truth of experience (e.g., Eben Cooke and George Giles); and some discover that attempting to compose reality and the self only through writing is not enough to ensure success (e.g., Ambrose Mensch, Jerome Bray, and Dunyazade).

Much of the partial success of writing for these characters results from the fact that they all try to use writing as a projection of their partially formed selves, and this inhibits their chances of success in coming to terms fully with the epistemological issues they confront. One way to describe and explain this situation is to view it from Peter Elbow's notion of what he calls the "believing game" and the "doubting game." Although Elbow does not focus specifically on writing, his discussion of these two games applies well to Barth's writer-characters as they attempt to establish some kind of valid self-identities and

epistemological truths. According to Elbow, the doubting game

> seeks truth by indirection--by seeking error. Doubting an assertion is the best way to find the error in it. You must assume it is untrue if you want to find its weakness. The truer it seems, the harder you have to doubt it. . . .
>
> To doubt well, it helps if you make a special effort to extricate yourself from the assertion in question--especially those which you find self-evident. You must hold off to one side the self, its wishes, preconceptions, experiences, and commitments (148).

However, for Elbow, this kind of intellectual orientation--characterized by a concern only with objectivity, logic, and selflessness--typifies academic work, and he argues against the monopoly that the doubting approach has here in favor of an intellectual orientation that also recognizes the value of the believing game, where

> the first rule is to refrain from doubting the assertions, and for this reason you take them one at a time and in each case try to put the others out of your head. . . .
>
> In the believing game. . .[w]e are trying to find not error but truths, and for this it helps to believe. . . . To do this requires great energy, attention, and even a kind of inner commitment. It helps to think of it as trying to get inside the head of someone who saw things this way. Perhaps even constructing such a person for yourself (149).

This approach does not require a removal of self but, instead, participation, "self-insertion, self-involvement--an act of projection" (149). In Elbow's view, language conveys a range of meanings through the collaboration of individuals and the language communities they are in, and the rules upon which these meanings are built are negotiated and tend to change over time. However, the doubting game offers nothing to help find the "real truth about the

meaning of an utterance or text--a hard, commonsense, empirical truth" (159), because, in the event of a seemingly incorrect assertion or interpretation,

> the doubting game is powerless to demonstrate our error. There are no rules for identifying false assertions of meaning. Whenever anyone ascribes a meaning to an utterance, it is always a waste of time to argue against him. Negative arguments cut no ice (160).

This is true, according to Elbow, because a variant or unconventional interpretation could be valid, even though it goes against mainstream views, due to its novelty, the originality of the perceiver, or changed contextual or historical circumstances. Nevertheless, Elbow does not advocate undisciplined relativism. Rather, he feels that the believing game works better than either the doubting game or unbridled individualism because it involves the self directly with its object:

> By believing an assertion we can get farther and farther into it, see more and more things in terms of it or "through" it, use it as a hypothesis to climb higher and higher to a point from which more can be seen and understood--and finally get to the point where we can be more sure (sometimes completely sure) it is true. . . . [I]f we had started doubting we would have found so many holes or silly premises we would have abandoned it (163).

In short, playing the believing game allows one to see, not by actually participating in, and personally identifying with, the ideas expressed in a text or by a speaker. If this eventually results in a judgment that one's position is incorrect or less valid than another's, then this is all for the better because it leads to a more productive exchange of information and ideas, and requires a certain degree of

empathy with, and understanding of, a conflicting viewpoint. Conversely, if the believing game corroborates one's position, then playing the game reinforces and broadens the intellectual basis for it because one has taken into account elements previously unconsidered. The advantage here lies in the direct, participatory creation of a sense of meaning or truth on the part of the individual believer.

> I think of the doubting game as the dialectic of propositions because the more you get ideas and perceptions into propositional form, the better it works. And I thing of the believing game as the dialectic of experience because the more you get ideas and perception into the most fully experienced form, the better it works (171).

Working in a similar vein, Mary Belenky and others investigated the kinds of knowledge that seem most characteristic of women but have been ignored or devalued, and they found that women tend to fall into two general categories in their attempts to create meaning. The first they see as largely typified by an effort to understand things through personal experience and some degree of identification with an object or person that "involves intimacy and equality between self and object" (101). For such women, this

> mode of thinking emerges not out of a need to understand the opinions of external authorities but out of a need to understand the opinions of other people. . . . In an attempt to achieve a kind of harmony with another person in spite of difference and distance, [such] women. . .try to enter the other person's frame to discover premises for the other's point of view (101).

The second, and contrary, form of knowledge is characterized by a reliance on knowledge rather than

understanding, an orientation that "implies separation from the object and mastery over it" (Belenky et al 101). With this kind of meaning making, the student works from impersonal rules "to construct arguments powerful enough to meet the standards of an impersonal authority" (101).

The investigators label the first epistemolgical orientation "connected" knowing and the second "separate" knowing:

> . . .when we speak of separate and connected knowing we refer not to any sort of relationship between the self and another person but with relationships between knowers and the objects (or subjects) of knowing (which may or may not be persons) (102).

Although Belenky's group feels that an epistemology of connected knowing may be more pronounced on women, they make a point of saying that neither kind of knowing is specific to gender. In addition, they see parallels between their categories of separate and connected knowing and Elbow's games of doubting and believing, respectively, as well as a connection between all these and writing:

> . . .it is easy to see why a teacher of writing may come to value both games: In order to produce a first draft, writers need to believe in their own words; but in editing the final draft, they need a more doubtful eye (104).

These binary schemes may seem a bit too pat, but as a general pattern, they are useful as general descriptive models showing how Barth's writer-characters all demonstrate a continual struggle in regard to these matters in that they never manage to fully and successfully strike a useful balance between the believing and doubting games or between

the related elements in connected and separate knowing. Both sets of epistemologies focus on orientations to knowledge, meaning making, and taking action to shape experience, and Barth's writer-characters continually wrestle with these things as they use writing to deal with themselves and the world. In fact, Barth's canon presents a range of characters who progress from being caught in the doubting game and separate knowing to eventually finding themselves moving into the believing game and connected knowing. Though neither orientation offers them a panacea, Barth's writer-characters find that the latter gives them more opportunities for successfully negotiating reality and writing.

For example, Todd Andrews and Jake Horner both turn to writing as a kind of holding procedure to substitute for taking action in the face what they see as a plethora of equally valid yet conflicting realities as well as a way to hold off despair, paralysis, and suicide. For them, writing is both therapy and an avenue to at least temporary self preservation, and the cause of their dilemmas can be said to lie in their over-absorption in the doubting game and separate knowing.

> Separate knowers speak a public language. They exhibit their knowledge not to themselves or to intimate friends but to an audience of relative strangers. Often, the primary purpose of their words is not to express personally meaningful ideas bit to manipulate the listener's reactions, and they see the listener not as an ally in conversation but as a potentially hostile judge (Belenky et al, 108).

Although Andrews and Horner deviate from this definition to some extent in that they write partly to and for themselves, because of the convention that Barth uses whereby both serve as the "real" authors of the novels in which they appear, both Andrews and Horner appear more concerned with writing their books as a means to objectify their experiences and to address themselves to the public at large rather than to a small group of close friends. This holds true even of their correspondences with Barth and others in Letters: neither Andrews nor Horner actually breaks free of his isolation and can only address his writing to relative strangers.

In addition, both suffer because they can only doubt. That is, they claim that all systems of knowledge, all values, and all beliefs have equal validity and, therefore, both find it impossible to choose one thing over another. Neither manages to play the believing game because each feels, as Andrews continually attests, that nothing has intrinsic value. In the end, they pay a high price: Horner flees to the sanctuary afforded by the authority of prescriptive grammar, and Andrews finds that the only thing with intrinsic value is, for him, the personal extreme of nothingness--death.

Barth's later writer-characters demonstrate a growing sense of themselves in relationships with others that evolve out of a developing awareness of their connectedness

to other people and the world. In addition, they come to play the believing game more adeptly. For instance, Eben Cooke and George Giles eventually learn that their initial naivete and self-absorption cause real harm to others and that the authority of institutions (e.g., education, philosophy, politics) robs one of the ability to actively participate in the creation of a personally meaningful existence. Rather than setting themselves up as authoritative judges and the sole purveyors of truth through their writings, both try to understand the world and to offer what they have learned about it to others, not as prescriptive pronouncements, but as personal testimonials that others might profit by.

> Connected knowers begin with an interest in the facts of other people's lives, but they gradually shift the focus to other people's ways of thinking. As in all procedural knowing, it is the form rather than the content of knowing that is central. Separate knowers learn through explicit formal instruction how to adopt a different lens. . . . Connected knowers learn through empathy (Belenky et al, 115).

Even though Eben and George feel disappointed in the end about how other people interpret and respond to their writings, they have come to a point much different than the one from which they began. From impulsive, young men seeking the truth in a somewhat rushed, compulsive, haphazard, and reckless manner, they have learned that writing cannot fully contain truth and that playing the believing game requires great patience and the realization

that Truth, whatever it may be, is often something less pure and less neat than originally thought.

> What kind of truth do you need? There is a dirtier and a cleaner truth, and the believing game settles, much of the time, for the dirtier kind: truth mixed with error. Many people would say you haven't get the truth unless you have it free from error: part of our feeling for the word "truth" is certainty. But this feeling misleads us. If you have three answers and one of them is true, you have the truth--even if you don't know which one it is (Elbow, 177).

Barth's last pair of writer-characters, Fenn Turner and Peter Sagamore, show that they have come to terms with these matters in a more successful way. Both are tossed about by authoritarian assertions that blur the distinctions between truth and lies, fact and fiction. However, they have a strong sense of themselves in collaboration with a limited group of other people in a mutual effort to shape, and make meaning out of, their experiences. As the Belenky group found, connected knowing proceeds best through exploratory, collaborative work because

> members of the group shared a similar experience. . . . Authority in connected knowing rests not in power or status or certification but on commonality of experience. . . .
> Separate knowers try to subtract the personality of the perceiver from the perception, because they see personality as slanting the perception or adding "noise" that must be filtered out. Connected knowers see personality as adding to the perception, and so the personality of each member of the group enriches the group's understanding. Each individual must stretch her own vision in order to share another's vision (Belenky et al, 119).

Fenn and Peter work to resolve career issues and to establish the basis of their personal and professional lives in active, reciprocal collaboration with their wives, family

members, friends, and in Peter's case, with literary figures in both the real world and in the texts of literature.

Connected knowing works in combination with the aspect of the believing game that depends upon holding off from an authoritarian assertion of the self as primary to the insights and contributions of others.

> Continual practice in trying to have other perceptions and experiences helps people break out of their "sets" and preoccupations--helps them be less rigid, less prey to conventional, knee-jerk, or idiosyncratic responses. It takes practice over time to learn not to "project" in the bad sense--not to see only your own preconceptions or preoccupation; and to learn to "project" more in the good sense--to see more of what's really there by getting more of the self into every bit of it (Elbow, 170-171).

The advantage of all this for Fenn and Peter is that they manage to recreate their relationships with other people and the world as well as to break out of the growing constipation they experience as professional writers. In the end, they discover new resources and new associations from which to live and to write.

None of Barth's writer-characters, then, finds a way to use writing to establish a fully developed, infallible, concrete, or reliable articulation of meaning and reality, although they all initially set out more or less with this goal in mind. As far as creating a self or a universe in writing that holds up against the persistent assaults of the real world, they fail. However, to a greater or lesser extent, they all come to see that writing themselves has led them to rewriting themselves and the world in a perpetually

open-ended process of self discovery and self-invention that creates and recreated versions of meaning. Through writing, they confront reality's chaos and the self's protean, flexible identity, and in doing so, finally come to accept that such a task ends only when they enforce an arbitrary end to their writing and, thus, to themselves.

Although much attention has been given in the professional pedagogical literature to collaborative knowledge-making and the social nature of writing, some theorists argue that very little has been done to illustrate pragmatic approaches to how writing is learned and performed except in tangential ways. That is, only some aspects of process and collaboration find their way into actual practice, and these are often overlaid as minor considerations subordinated to the production of pieces of writing where the main concerns focus on form, structure, clearly defined topics, and formal conventions. Most writing instruction takes place in the schools, and Barth's characters find that this environment does little to advance the kinds of writing that they seek in order to make real sense of the world because

> traditional classroom concerns have not been superceded by such prior questions as how and why these features of writing might originate, how, why, and where they might be learned, and what kinds of circumstances, needs, and motives lead people to want to learn and use them (Reither and Vipond, 855).

Reither and Vipond argue that a better way to understand writing as a social process, in order to implement

this approach in course design and practice in more than an adjunct or superficial manner, would result from thinking of writing as collaborative, rather than as a kind of social activity, because they feel that the latter term tends to remain too mired in theory:

> Instead of asking, "In what ways is writing a social process?" we ask, "In what ways are writers collaborating with others when they write?" Phrasing the question this way brings into focus writers' relationships with other writing and other writers. Thinking of writing as a collaborative process gives us more precise ways to consider what writers do when they write, not just with their texts, but also with their language, their personae, their readers (856).

In a recent study, Steven Schreiner warns against a conception of process composition which fails to acknowledge the often tacit influence of traditional and elitist aesthetics that can shape how we define what a writer is and how we, therefore, see students as writers. He examines seven influential texts pertaining to the research, theory, and teaching of process writing published between 1968 and 1977 and finds that "a paradigm which has influenced the study of the composing process is based primarily on a definition of the modernist author" (1). Although literary modernism and process composition theory seem contrary in many, perhaps most, respects, both tend to define the writer in similar ways:

> The process movement was a response to a discrepancy between reports about the processes of real writers (invariably represented by literary authors) and the way writing texts instructed students to compose. During the decade of process composition which I examine, texts focus on the connections between the student of writing and the "real"

writer. The early process movement, therefore, can be characterized not so much as a concern for the stages of the writing process, but by a concern for how real writers compose. I found that the way real writers were defined by process composition was very similar to the way modernism defined the writer (2).

In Schreiner's view, the modernist definition (taken largely from the aesthetics of Eliot and Pound) characterizes the writer as part of an elite, someone who has great familiarity with literary tradition and who sees the act of writing as predominantly literary, complicated, and difficult. In addition, modernism values the writer over the reader, and the writer is an expert who composes in isolation to create original, unique works and to objectively discern inner truths. Process writing theory seems more democratic and less burdened with a reliance on literary tradition because of its focus on the self and the primacy that it gives to personal expression and voice. But its tendency to view the student writer as someone with inherent or emergent status as a writer, and the value it places on originality, subjectivity, and the individual discovery of a genuine inner truth are all part of what Schreiner, drawing on the ideas of James Berlin, sees as elements in a subjective or expressionistic rhetoric derived from modernist aesthetics. In addition,

process texts nonetheless emphasize "writing well," literary writing, and writing which moves a reader. Expressionistic rhetoric, defined by its concern for the personal apprehension of truth, does not account for the assumption that students have a textual background which allows them to produce memorable "texts." (10).

The unconscious, but inevitable, result of this for process composition pedagogy is that, especially for basic writing students, it

> inadvertently privileges only certain students and only certain types of writing, in spite of its attempt to liberate students who fear writing, lack fluency, don't know what to say, have suffered under unforgiving strictures of correctness, or who write only "Engfish," Ken Macrorie's term for stilted prose (3-4).

Barth's writer-characters are not engaged in writing term papers or in-class essays. Nevertheless, they are concerned, even at times obssessed, with ways to create fresh, powerful, and valid written works that simultaneously make connections with the past--both as history and as literary forebear--as a necessary element of continuity providing the present with something other than a merely arbitrary, self-created sense of meaning. Thus, Barth's writer-characters seek new ways to say things and new modes of storytelling that work "both ways" in that they revitalize what came before as well as the realities that they encounter in order to continue into the future. In opposition to the traditional approaches to teaching writing and to literary aesthetics--both of which tend to valorize demanding strictures of correctness, conformity to models, and a picture of the writer working in isolation--Schreiner, borrowing terms from Berlin, considers a "transactional" or "epistemic" kind of rhetoric as being more valuable because it

> locates truth neither within nor outside the writer. Pedagogy influenced by this rhetoric stresses discourse community, social construction of reality, and the communication triangle in which the speaker or writer, subject, and listener or reader all comprise the event of meaning making. . . . The epistemic view of meaning as discourse-centered rather than fixed in a text or person opposes the modernist legacy, in which the conception of writing relies heavily on the concept of the primacy of the writer (9).

Something like this movement--from an act of composing in isolation in order to create and express a sense of self as primary, to composing in collaboration with a community of others concerned with writing as integral to making knowledge and meaning--characterizes the overall course taken by Barth's writer-characters. Barth and many of his characters (especially those who pursue academic or literary careers, such as Eben Cooke, Ambrose Mensch, Germaine Pitt, Fenn Turner, and Peter Sagamore) are concerned with scholarship, literary aesthetics, and the writer's place in regard to the weight of history and literary tradition. Nevertheless, Barth values, and his writer-characters eventually come to value, writing not so much in terms of what traditional aesthetics demand regarding how a writer is defined nor the structural and formal proscriptions that a piece of writing should demonstrate, but the active and collaborative connectedness with others in a reciprocal process of creating, as well as recreating, knowledge and personal meaning. In much the same way that Elbow values the projection of self as a vital part of the believing game, and most likely on the basis of the fact that he

teaches writing as interactive seminars, Barth points out the need for projecting oneself effectively as a way to deal with some of the limitations on imagination that result from a writer's management of information and experience.

> In writing workshops at every level, as well as in the larger workshop of the world, we see this variety of limitation all the time, with respect both to particular details and to the author's--or our neighbor's--general inability to "project" with authority his or her sensibility across gender, class, age, culture, whatever. And we understandably admire the opposite, for that ability, or its lack, affects our relations with one another as well as our relations with literature (Ziegler, 278).

In addition to connection with others, Barth sees experience and knowledge working in writing and real life as intertwined, tying the experience of reading to the experience of living, and dependent upon the imagination.

> The story of Dido and Aeneas. . .is not likely to move a reader inexperienced in the ups and downs of love as deeply as it moves one who has him/herself painfully abandoned a lover, or who has been by one abandoned. It will move ever more exquisitely a reader experienced in poetry as well as in love. Needless to say, the connection is coaxial: Our ability to experience life may be more or less limited by inexperience of art, as well as vice versa, since each tends to increase the wattage of the great illuminator of both--namely, the imagination (Ziegler, 281).

Ultimately, the vitality of imagination leads Barth to write for the same reasons as his writer-characters do: as a ongoing, open-ended exploration of the possibilities that imagination has for creating universes of personal meaning.

> Barth in his fictions. . .continues to be a forger and provider of imaginative sense in a world possibly without any, while at the same time he is aware that whatever meaning he creates will never be final. So the writing of fictions goes on. What better answer could we, readers, critics, devouring monsters, expect from a novelist back from theoretical excursion? (Ziegler, 296).

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