

JOHN BARTH'S INITIAL TRILOGY:
A STUDY OF THE THEMES OF VALUE
AND IDENTITY IN THE FLOATING OPERA,
THE END OF THE ROAD,
AND THE SOT-WEED FACTOR

Dissertation for the Degree of Ph. D.
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PHILIP ALLAN BILLINGS
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John Barth's Initial Trilogy: A Study
of the Themes of Value and Identity in
The Floating Opera, The End of the Road,
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presented by

Philip Allan Billings

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of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in English

Clinton S. Burkhart
Major professor

Date July 26, 1974

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ABSTRACT

JOHN BARTH'S INITIAL TRILOGY: A STUDY OF THE THEMES OF VALUE AND IDENTITY IN THE FLOATING OPERA, THE END OF THE ROAD, AND THE SOT-WEED FACTOR

By

Philip Allan Billings

John Barth's first three novels, The Floating Opera, The End of the Road, and The Sot-Weed Factor, form a thematic trilogy. Together they make a coherent and complete statement on the possibility of modern man's achieving a sense of value and identity in the nihilistic universe. The Floating Opera traces man's growing realization in the twentieth century that he is a full-fledged part of the irrational, relativistic universe and that, as such, he cannot be his own source of rational, absolute values. He cannot be his own God. When the novel's central character, Todd Andrews, makes this discovery, he ultimately decides to carry his thinking the next and last logical step, to try to find out whether relative values, since there are no absolutes, can, in fact, be lived by.

The End of the Road is the fictional exploration of this "brave ethical subjectivism."¹ It imagines two forms of that subjectivism: one, in the character of Jacob Horner, based on the theory that personal existence precedes personal essence; the other, in the

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character of Joseph Morgan, based on the theory that personal essence precedes personal existence. As its title suggests, the novel demonstrates that both theories are ultimately destructive as well as futile and, so, lead modern man to the cul-de-sac of rationalist ethics.

The first two parts of The Sot-Weed Factor recapitulate the background, formulation, and dead-end course of the essentialist and existentialist forms of ethical subjectivism. Moreover, they broaden this statement on value and identity by asserting that essentialism is the way of innocence and existentialism the way of experience. In its third part, The Sot-Weed Factor goes on to offer an alternative to "non-mystical value-thinking."² Based on an intuitive recognition of the limits of reason, the value of life, and the brotherhood of man, this alternative does not provide the "Answer"; but it does hold out the only possibility of man's learning to live productively and responsibly, if not happily ever after, amidst many "answers." Through his central character, Ebenezer Cooke, and through his most prominent secondary character, Henry Burlingame III, Barth envisions modern man intuitively transcending his ethical dilemma and achieving a paradoxical synthesis of recognition of the loss of absolutes and insistence on their necessity, a combination of experience and innocence.

The particular combination upon which Barth focuses, the combination embodied in his central character, is one in which innocence predominates and a man chooses to act as if absolute identity and

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value existed; and the main symbol for this state of "Higher Innocence" is a husband and a wife who, despite numerous reasons to the contrary, remain true to one another and at last become one in the act of love-making. This symbol is doubly appropriate, since, by transcending the rationalism which has made his ethical problems seem insoluble, modern man is able finally to achieve the irrational but nonetheless real feeling of love for another human being.

¹These are Barth's own words, taken from an article by Gregory F. Bluestone--"John Wain and John Barth: The Agony and the Accurate," The Massachusetts Review, 1 (Fall 1959-Summer 1960), 586.

²Ibid.

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By

Philip Allan Billings

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The relatively small number of critics who have written on John Barth offer conflicting testimony concerning a number of important elements of his work, but they all agree that he is a writer who must be taken into account by any serious reader of contemporary fiction. His corpus consists of four novels: The Floating Opera (1956), The End of the Road (1958), The Sot-Weed Factor (1960), and Giles Goat-Boy (1966); a collection of short stories: Lost in the Funhouse (1968); and a collection of three novellas: Chimera (1972).¹ Each new book of his catches his readers by surprise; each is something the likes of which they have never quite seen. His stories are full of raving madness and calm sanity (and vice versa), the most rigorous intellect and the grossest slap-stick, the funniest comedy and the saddest tragedy, a total immersion in the contemporary human scene and a positive aversion to it. They take wild artistic risks of imagination, and at the same time they seem to be conforming to a coherent, rational pattern. One of his most quoted statements from outside the fiction itself,

¹All are published in the hardbound editions by Doubleday and Company, Inc. The first three and the fifth are published in soft-bound form by Bantam Books, Inc.; the fourth and sixth (Giles Goat-Boy and Chimera) are published in paperback by Fawcett Crest Books.

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"Scheherazade is my advant gardiste,"² marks him as simultaneously innovator and reactionary. One practical upshot of such diversity is that the same two novels can seem to one reader "sophomoric," "puerile," and "about as bad as novels can be,"³ while they seem to another to prove that their creator is "the best writer of fiction we have at present, and one of the best we have ever had."⁴ And then the ambivalence is compounded when one notes that two fictitious editors of one of those novels express almost the identical divergent opinions.

The bare outline of Barth's biography does not shed much light on his fiction, except perhaps to explain in a general way his literal and metaphorical interest in the region of Maryland's Eastern Shore, the phenomenon of twins, the workings of the law, and institutions of formal education. He was born in Cambridge, Maryland, in 1930, the second son of Georgia (Simon) Barth and Jacob Barth, a restaurateur and Orphan's Court Judge. He was also the twin of a sister named Jill.⁵ Barth's education consisted of twelve years in the public school system of Cambridge, one term at the Julliard School of Music, and six years at Johns Hopkins University, where he received an M.A. degree in the College of Arts and Letters in 1952. A year later he left the Ph.D. program in Esthetics of Literature; and from that time

²John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," WSCL, 6, 6.

³Robert Garis, "What Happened to John Barth?," Commentary, 42 4, 89.

⁴Robert Scholes, "George Is My Name," New York Times Book Review (August 7, 1966), 1.

⁵Eric Rosenthal, "John Barth: A Novelist Who Parodies the Novel," Trenton Sunday Times Advertiser (March 24, 1974), 5 & 9.

until the present, he has combined his writing career with that of teaching writing and literature courses at Pennsylvania State University (until 1965), the State University of New York at Buffalo (until 1972), Boston University (until 1973), and, currently, his alma mater. John Barth's two critical essays, "Muse, Spare Me"⁶ and "The Literature of Exhaustion,"⁷ shed much light on his own fiction. They are, in my opinion, the two best pieces of general Barth criticism; and anyone studying his technical innovations must refer to them often.

Although there is much upon which the two dozen or so critics who have turned their attention to Barth do not agree, they do generally acknowledge that he is first and foremost an intellectual writer. Furthermore, Barth's critics agree, though with varying degrees of explicitness, that the ideas with which he deals relate to the questions of identity and value for the modern man. In a nihilistic, relativistic world, a world in which nothing has absolute or intrinsic or fixed significance, how can a human being know who he is or what he should do? How can he live meaningfully, constructively, potently? By what means can he figuratively "live" at all? Because the published works on John Barth have been almost entirely short articles and reviews,⁸ they have not been able to do full justice to the depth

⁶Book Week (September 26, 1965), 28-29.

⁷Atlantic Monthly, 220, 2, 29-34.

⁸Five dissertations have been written on John Barth, one at the University of Illinois, one at the University of Indiana, one at Michigan State University, one at Ohio University, and one at Pennsylvania State University. None of these dissertations, however,

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and coherence with which he develops his ideas relating to these problems. Nor has any of Barth's critics taken the broader view and documented exactly how his ideas are developed coherently from one book to another. Gerhard Joseph in his monograph has come closest to this sort of treatment; but in this case, too, the necessary brevity of the piece does not allow for sufficient attention to the careful details and subtle connections through which Barth works.⁹

My purpose in this dissertation is to contribute to a clearer understanding of John Barth's fiction by studying in a manner that is both broader and more precise than his critics have so far attempted his ideas concerning the ethical and personal problems of modern man. And I intend to accomplish this goal by analyzing the ideas which are embodied in the major characters of the first three novels. Obviously, my choice of the particular element of characterization and of those particular novels as areas of concentration demands explanation. I have chosen the element of characterization simply because that, it seems to me, is the major vehicle through which Barth works out his ideas. The combination of physical and mental traits which his characters exhibit and the actions which those traits result in bear the primary burden of conveying Barth's modern ideas about value and identity. The dimension of characterization which I will be studying is that which is usually called "symbolic" or "allegorical"; however, I

has a direct bearing on my thesis; and none, therefore, will be referred to in the following chapters.

⁹"John Barth," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, 91.

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find these terms too strong for the generally realistic context in which the traits appear, especially in the first two novels, and for the often subtle way in which the traits suggest or imply Barth's ideas. So I have chosen instead to use for my basic terminology the word "illustrative" as it is defined and used by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in The Nature of Narrative.¹⁰ "Illustration," they say,

does not seek to reproduce actuality but to present selected aspects of the actual, essences referable for their meaning not to historical, psychological, or sociological truth but to ethical and metaphysical truth. Illustrative characters are concepts in anthropoid shape or fragments of the human psyche masquerading as whole human beings. Thus we are not called upon to understand their motivation as if they were whole human beings but to understand the principles they illustrate through their actions in a narrative framework (p. 88).

Most of the characters we will be studying are not, of course, simply "masquerading as whole human beings"; they also have a mimetic, or what Scholes and Kellogg prefer to call a "representative," dimension--the kind that does "seek to reproduce actuality." Barth is clearly a writer who tries to work in and bridge the gap between illustrative and representative characterization,¹¹ and a good deal could be said about Barth's representative characterization and his shifting attempts to make it congruent with his illustrative.¹² But

¹⁰"Meaning in Narrative" (Oxford University Press, 1966), 82-159.

¹¹Scholes and Kellogg suggest that Hawthorne and Joyce are two writers who attempt the same sort of thing.

¹²For example, this sort of study, focusing especially on the psychological aspect of the representative characterization, can shed

the goal in this dissertation is to focus solely upon those facets of Barth's characters which directly reflect their creator's "ethical and metaphysical" thinking. Where it seems appropriate in the context of my analysis, I will sometimes use the words "philosophical" or "ideological" or "thematic" in place of "illustrative," just as, under similar conditions, I will often use the words "symbolize" or "stand for" in place of "illustrate."

One reason for limiting my study of this kind of characterization to The Floating Opera, The End of the Road, and The Sot-Weed Factor is admittedly that of practicality. John Barth has written over 2,500 pages of story peopled with hundreds of characters who illustrate scores of ideas. An attempt to study all of these characters and their interrelationships as they are put through their sometimes fantastically complicated paces would be, to say the least, voluminous. There is another, far more compelling reason, however, for my limiting this dissertation in such a way. My intent is to show how thoroughly and how coherently Barth has worked out in fictional form his ideas concerning the modern problems of value and identity; and nowhere does he develop these ideas so thoroughly and coherently, and nowhere is it more important that he do so, than in these first three novels. One is quite justified, in fact, in speaking of them as a thematic trilogy and in thinking of this trilogy as the foundation upon which all his later stories have been constructed. In the course of these first three novels, Barth methodically raises, explores, and

much needed light on the phenomenon of Barth's movement away from realism as a vehicle for his ideas.

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answers the question: how can a man live in the nihilistic, relativistic, "modern" world? And in the three works that have followed, this thematic pattern, though put into varying forms and given varying points of emphasis, has remained basically unchanged.

Barth himself on more than one occasion has pointed to the fact that he meant The Floating Opera, The End of the Road, and The Sot-Weed Factor to be such a trilogy. The clearest instance is in his 1963 interview in Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, where he tells John Enck that his initial intention has been to write "a series of three nihilistic amusing novels."¹³ The fact that Enck's immediate response is to ask what happened after the second novel to keep him from carrying out his intent reflects as well as anything the inability of critics so far to comprehend these first three novels as one illustrative unit. Later critics have less of an excuse than Enck had, however, for Barth soon corrects him by asserting, "I didn't leave off that series, actually: The Sot-Weed Factor is in that series."¹⁴ Another place where Barth clearly points to the philosophical interrelationship of these early novels is in a 1959 letter to critic Gregory Bluestone, where he explains,

I deliberately had him [Todd Andrews, the central character in The Floating Opera] end up with that brave ethical subjectivism in order that Jacob Horner might undo that position in number two and

¹³Enck, "Interview," 10.

¹⁴Enck, "Interview," 10.

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carry all non-mystical value-thinking to the end of the road.¹⁵

The main philosophical thrust of his first two novels is explicit here; and this statement, especially when it is read in the light of Barth's later claim in the Enck interview, further implies that his third novel will provide some alternative to non-mystical value-thinking.

One possible reason for critics not taking Barth at his word and exploring the illustrative unity of his first three novels is that the title of the second, supported as it is by the often-quoted statement in *Bluestone*, leads them to assume that the conclusion of his second novel marks an absolutely total dead end. This assumption probably is given added support by the further fallacious one that Barth, like his first two narrators, is the epitome of the non-mystical value-thinker and therefore cannot have anywhere else to go in number three. Another factor working against recognition of this trilogy has surely been the close similarity in kind between the first novel and the second, and the obvious dissimilarity in kind between them and the third. The Floating Opera and The End of the Road are relatively short, basically realistic stories with, to use Barth's own words, "Characters From Our Time, who speak real dialogue."¹⁶ The Sot-Weed Factor, on the other hand, is a sprawling parody of an

¹⁵"John Wain and John Barth: The Agony and the Accurate," *Mass. Rev.*, 1 (Fall 1959-Summer 1960), 586.

¹⁶Enck, "Interview," 11.

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eighteenth-century novel, with characters who live in 1694 and speak extremely mannered dialogue.

Another reason why critics have not fully perceived these first three works as an illustrative whole has been, no doubt, that the vast complexity and sheer strangeness of The Sot-Weed Factor have in themselves discouraged all but the bravest (or perhaps the most compulsive) from paying close attention to its ideological structure. To explore this great labyrinth seriously for its philosophical center and then to determine the areas in which it reiterates and connects with its two smaller, simpler predecessors, has perhaps seemed too formidable a task. Just such an exploration is what this dissertation proposes, however, as the culmination of an attempt to show that Barth's thinking in The Floating Opera, The End of the Road, and The Sot-Weed Factor follows a coherent and complete course.

This study, then, aims at a better understanding of Barth's thought in his first three novels and secondarily a better understanding of his entire six-work corpus. In order to reinforce this secondary goal, I will conclude the dissertation with a short chapter that suggests some ways in which Giles Goat-Boy, Lost in the Funhouse, and Chimera follow from and build upon the ideas developed in the initial trilogy.

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CHAPTER TWO
THE FLOATING OPERA

I

The Floating Opera is an extraordinary first novel. Written when Barth was twenty-four and published two years later in 1956, it evidences sharp wit; high seriousness; verbal dexterity (despite its fictional narrator's claims to the contrary); pure storytelling ability; and, most importantly from the viewpoint of this study, an imposing intellect. The Floating Opera is basically a realistic novel; its characterizations are basically mimetic or "representative," asking that a reader interpret them primarily in a historical, sociological, and psychological context. Barth incorporates into these realistic characters, however, a significant number of ideas; and it is this "illustrative" dimension of characterization which this chapter will explicate. In so doing, it will go much further than have previous essays on Barth toward understanding exactly how in this first novel he defines the modern problems of value and identity and begins to move toward a solution to them.

But before I begin this study, two matters must be dealt with by way of a preface. One is the matter of the two different editions of The Floating Opera. Barth has written a revised edition of each of

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his first three novels, and it is these editions with which I will be working. In the case of The End of the Road and The Sot-Weed Factor, the changes have been minor ones; in the case of The Floating Opera, however, they are major, and the result is that the revised 1967 edition is more "original" than the first 1956 one. Barth's "Prefatory Note to the Revised Edition" explains this phenomenon:

The Floating Opera was written in the first three months of 1955; its companion-piece, The End of the Road, in the last three months of the same year. The Opera was my first novel; I was twenty-four, had been writing fiction industriously for five years, and had had--deservedly--no success whatever with the publishers. One finally agreed to launch the Opera, but on condition that the builder make certain major changes in its construction, notably about the stern. I did, the novel was published, critics criticized the ending in particular, and I learned a boatwright little lesson. In this edition the original and correct ending to the story has been restored, as have a number of other, minor passages. The Floating Opera remains the very first novel of a very young man, but I'm pleased that it will sink or float now in its original design.

The other task I must perform here in the beginning, again by way of avoiding some confusion later on, is to provide a short plot-character summary of The Floating Opera. This is necessary because it is often impossible to deal with one character without alluding to others who have not yet been introduced and properly to introduce whom would retard the flow of the discussion. Also, a brief chronological recounting of the novel's major events and personages will help to counteract a feeling of disorientation which to some extent must arise from the analysis of a story that is told in a most unchronological fashion. A narrator who, under the guise of a bumbling, fledgling

novelist unable to resist a good yarn or an irrelevant digression, spins a plot that is masterfully complex and unified, is part of the novel's strength and charm. But it is also part of the critic's problem.

The Floating Opera, then, is a story told in 1954 by a fifty-four year-old bachelor lawyer named Todd Andrews. Its central setting is Cambridge, Maryland; its focus in time is a June day in 1937 (Andrews can never remember whether it was the twentieth, twenty-first, or twenty-second); and its avowed purpose is to explain why he decided on the morning of that day to commit suicide, why he acted as he did during the course of that day, and why he decided at its end not to destroy himself after all. These explanations take us back through most of his life and introduce us to the characters who have had prominent roles in shaping his personality. First is his father, an unaffectionate, uncommunicative widower who encourages his son to go to undergraduate and law school at Johns Hopkins; takes him back into his home and into his small law firm for two years; and then, in 1929, commits suicide after having suffered heavy losses in the stock market. Next is Betty June Gunter, a high-school classmate of Todd's with whom he becomes friends at seventeen, and, on his eighteenth birthday, loses his virginity. In the midst of their intercourse he sees them in a mirror and begins to laugh hysterically. She storms out of his bedroom and out of his life until they meet again seven years later in her room in a Baltimore whorehouse, where she smilingly rubs him down with alcohol, pours the rest of the bottle's contents on his anus, and then tries to kill him with the bottle itself.

After high-school graduation, Todd enlists in the army; and only a few months later he finds himself in a muddy Argonne Forest shell hole experiencing for the first time utter, jaw-slackening, sphincter-releasing, mortal fear. Soon he is joined by a grisly little German sergeant who jumps into the hole for shelter from the firing all around. Todd wins a brief struggle with the stranger, forces him at bayonet point to experience the same mortal fear, and then passionately embraces him and is embraced in return. The two men enjoy a brief period of unspoken friendship and peaceful sleep; but when Todd awakens he begins to feel the fear again. When the German, too, stirs awake, Todd panics, runs his bayonet through the man's throat, and bolts from the hole. Todd's other important experience in the army is his fainting on a parade ground a year later, being given a pre-discharge physical, and being told that he has a heart condition, the result of which is that he may literally drop dead at any second.

Not telling anyone of his heart condition, Todd spends seven years at Johns Hopkins. During the first five, up to the incident with Betty June in the bordello, he lives a furiously paced, rakish life, knowing that each moment may literally be his last. After a month in the hospital to recover from the five years of general physical deterioration and the wounds inflicted by Betty June's broken bottle, and also to begin treatment of a chronic prostate infection, Todd begins a period of almost saintly (though not religious) existence. It lasts until he discovers his father hanged in the basement of their home. The important new person in his life during these four

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years is Harrison Mack, handsome son of an eastern Maryland pickle magnate. The two young men meet at a party and become good friends until Harrison goes off to work for the Communist party in Detroit.

In 1930, after Todd has moved into a single room in an old Cambridge hotel and become a cynic, Harrison re-enters his life, this time shorn of his radical social philosophy and accompanied by a beautiful young wife named Jane. A close three-way friendship begins; and then, at Harrison's and Jane's instigation, a ménage a trois soon develops and lasts until Todd in 1933 intentionally insults the Macks. In 1935, after he has begun handling litigation for Harrison concerning his inheritance of the family estate (and after Jane has given birth to a little girl, Jeannine, who may be Todd's), the friendship and the adultery resume and continue up to the June day in 1937 upon which the novel focuses. On that day, the Macks inform Todd of their plans to tour Europe for a year or two and then move to Baltimore and of their desire to end the affair as of that moment. After that day, he sees the Macks only three times, and each meeting is brief and business-related.

The other characters who figure prominently in this story are Captain Osborn, and Mister Haecker, two very old men who live in the same hotel as Todd and with whom he converses at some length on matters of life and death; and Jacob R. Adam, captain and proprietor of the showboat which Todd intends to blow up that June day as a means of suicide. Aside from these characters and events, the only other illustratively significant facts that we know about Todd's life are that from 1937 to 1954 he continues to live in his single room and

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practice law and that he spends nearly all his free time reading and taking notes in preparation for the writing of this novel.

The Floating Opera which Todd writes has, of course, a primarily "representative" kind of meaning. It contains this particular cast of characters who look, think, and act as they do primarily because that, to the best of Todd's knowledge, is the way the conditions of his life "really" have been. The characters are invested with ethical and metaphysical ideas only in so far as Todd rationalizes about them in an effort to understand the philosophical basis for his actions on that June day in 1937. In The Floating Opera which John Barth has written, however, the characters have a much more prominent "illustrative" aspect. They are invested with philosophical significance in ways which both include and go beyond the narrator's post-facto thinking and which thereby give his story a somewhat different, somewhat broader kind of meaning. In order to fully understand that meaning, this chapter will study the illustrative dimension of the novel's prominent characters. It will deal first with the one who is by far most prominent, Todd Andrews; then it will look at the others with an eye not only for the ideas which they illustrate but also for the relationship of those ideas to those illustrated in Todd.

II

The foremost idea for which Todd Andrews stands is that of Reason. He is the epitome of the man who deals with life by means of

rationality and logic, the man of intellect. This is not to say, however, as he himself points out several times, that he is in the strict sense a philosopher; but he does "tend to attribute to abstract ideas a life-or-death significance" (p. 16), and the proudest of all his assertions about himself is that he lives by principles which are idiosyncratic but which nevertheless "usually hang all in a piece, so that my life is never less logical for its being unorthodox" (p. 1). The passage which perhaps best reflects his unacademic but enthusiastic and skillful use of the intellect is the one which recalls his first realization of the story's central idea, that nothing has intrinsic worth or meaning:

Doubtless (as I later learned) this idea was not original with me, but it was completely new to me, and I delighted in it like a child turned loose in the endless out-of-doors, full of scornful pity for those inside. Nothing is valuable in itself. Not even truth. I am not a philosopher, except after the fact; but I am a mean rationalizer, and once the world has forced me into a new position, I can philosophize (or rationalize) like two Kants, like seven Philadelphia lawyers. Beginning with my new conclusions, I can work out first-rate premises (p. 171).

This he does over and over throughout the novel in an attempt to make his life submit to his penchant for rational order; and it is the overall testament of the series of such attempts more than any one passage like that above which marks Todd not just as a rational man but also as the Rational Man. During the height of the first stage of his affair with Jane, he makes several outlines (the most accurate of which, a twenty-four-point one, he gives us) pertaining to precisely how the idea of the affair must have germinated in Harrison's mind,

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how it had proceeded and now stood with the husband, and how it would develop from that point. On the crucial June day in 1937, Todd understands his life from 1919 to then in terms of five moments of strong emotion (mirth, fear, frustration, surprise, and despair) and three stances (rake, saint, and cynic). He is not comfortable with his merely personal decision to commit suicide until he has been able to suggest to Mr. Haecker that the idea of suicide is something that must be faced by one who wants a rationale for living and until he has been able, with "nostril-flaring" excitement, to perceive that decision as the logical consequence of five sequential propositions. Not surprisingly, then, he is not comfortable with his decision at that June day's end until it, too, can be added to his sequence of propositions in the form of a parenthesis tacked on to the fifth proposition.

The fact that Todd's attempts at rationalizing usually become part of his written Inquiry, an on-going, necessarily endless attempt to perfect communication with his father, suggests another way of looking at Todd as an illustration of Reason. That is, a significant part of him is always the Student, the person who sees the world as a tutor of whom to make never-ending inquiries. Technically, his Inquiry is into his father's life and death and into his own personality; but since he believes that "to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute, requires the understanding of every other thing in the world" (pp. 6-7), it is not surprising that he maps out for himself a very unstructured course of research. In fact, almost any observation he makes in the course of any day can fit into it. The student conceit has so permeated Todd's character that when he

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recounts even his most mindless experiences, as in the case of the five moments of emotion, he does not say that he "experienced" them; he says instead, "I learned mirth . . . I learned fear, etc." (p. 224). [The italics are mine.] Moreover, the very reason for Todd's remembering this particular June day is that it taught him to think more clearly.

Like most avid students, of course, Todd likes playing the role of Teacher as well; and the reader cannot help but see him as illustrative also of this aspect of the Rational Man--especially since the prime target of his lecture is the reader himself. Todd has seen fit, after all, to tell us about that enlightening day and all its significant background so that we, too, might be enlightened concerning the subject of suicide. His first page makes it apparent that he conceives of this potential novel of his as an "explanation"; and when he begins his last chapter with "That's about what it amounted to, this change of mind in 1937," it is obvious that class is over, at least for a while.

In addition to his readers, Todd chooses several characters along the way to instruct in one sense or another, foremost among them Harrison Mack and Mr. Haecker; and the philosophy which he expresses to them marks him not only as the Rational Man but also as the distinctively Modern version of him. Todd, although he never says so explicitly, is a thorough-going Existentialist for the better part of his adult life. Often his admonitions to Harrison or Mr. Haecker or the reader sound like direct quotations from Jean Paul Sartre. To Harrison: "We act as if we could choose, and so we can, in effect.

All you have to do to be strong is stop being weak" (p. 100). To Mr. Haecker: "If you do [work out a rationale for staying alive], then you must answer the suicide question for yourself before you start, obviously" (p. 168). And to us: "There's little need for weakness, reader; you are freer, perhaps than you'd be comfortable knowing" (p. 100). Indeed, since, even when he is lecturing to other characters, Todd is, of course, lecturing to us as well, and since his entire novel is very much about the questions of weakness and strength and rational reasons for living or dying, this existentialist aspect of Todd Andrews's characterization makes it quite appropriate to think of his entire story as an "existentialist novel."

Other parts of Todd's characterization suggest that he illustrates the peculiarly American as well as the Modern version of Reason. Born in 1900 (in one of the original thirteen states and into a family whose name is an old one in the county), Todd's life until 1937 parallels in many significant ways the popular interpretation of the history of his nation during those years. Like him, it lost its moral innocence in World War I, lived desperately and irresponsibly in the "gay" Harding-Coolidge era, tried too late to recover from the ill effects, lost its bearings in the stock-market crash, experienced a period of cynicism, and then somehow kept on living despite the rumblings of what was to become World War II.

Todd is illustrative in still a fourth way. He stands not only for the Rational, Modern, American Man, but also for the Writing Man. This is naturally most apparent in the fact that he is writing a book called The Floating Opera--and in the fact that he never lets

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his readers forget that he is writing that book. The first chapter is liberally sprinkled with references to his activity, such as "I've got this book started now," and "Good heavens, how does one write a novel!" And throughout the novel similar instances of self-consciousness, along with apostrophes to the reader and overt considerations of how much material should be in one chapter, how chapters should begin and end, what order they should follow, and how his "meager" vocabulary and "plodding, graceless" style can be made to convey his story, constantly remind us that he is a man who is fascinated with the challenges and implications of putting meaningful words on a page. (It is particularly this phenomenon of the highly--and often humorously--self-conscious first-person narrator which leads many readers to see in The Floating Opera the strong influence of Tristram Shandy).

The whole business of Todd Andrews's Inquiry serves, of course, to reinforce his function as Writer. It is not enough for Todd to spend hours each day simply thinking or talking about his imperfect communication with his dead father; he must go further and try, hypothetically, at least, to remedy the problem. He must try by means of written words to perfect the communication. And the three peach baskets and one tomato carton full of notes that he had accumulated and edited by 1937 are as nothing compared to what he has done since that time in order to prepare for the writing of this novel, which is actually a part of the Inquiry. Moreover, all this writing is done to a great extent for its own sake, because he obviously no longer has a father to communicate with and because he knows that perfect



communication, except for brief, silent moments like that with the German sergeant, is impossible. Todd persists in his writing project for the very logical reason that "processes continued for long enough tend to become ends in themselves" (p. 219)--and for another reason which as much as anything I have so far mentioned marks him as a Writer: "If for no other reason, I should continue my researches simply in order to occupy pleasantly two hours after dinner" (p. 219).

More specifically, it is story writing that Todd seems to find so pleasant. Although his book is sprinkled with short essays on subjects ranging from law to Maryland beaten biscuits and although it has an avowed ideological purpose, he chooses to write about that June day primarily because it is a good story in itself and secondarily because it is a good vehicle for many other good ones: his war story, his Betty June Gunter story, his Mack family-estate story, etc. Clearly, Todd Andrews enjoys nothing so much as spinning a good yarn. He has spent sixteen years pleasantly preparing to write this one.

The central character in The Floating Opera illustrates, then, Reason, Modern Man, America, and the Writer--or to say it another way, he illustrates the Intellectually Modern American Writer. But what does he illustrate about this complex of ideas? His life up until that June day, it seems to me, is the tale of a growing acceptance of nihilism and all of its dark, alienating implications. The shocking news of his heart condition; the excruciating pain and the seemingly inexplicable attack in the whorehouse; the frantic undergraduate days at Johns Hopkins which left him "pale, weak, and educated" and caused him to lose "countless prejudices, much provincialism, [his] chastity

(what had remained of it), and [his] religion"; the saintly years of law school and then practice with his father, the trauma of his father's suicide ("Surely the dirt of the planet would cry the reason for it, the justification that would brook no questioning. I waited."); the odd triangular relationship with the Macks; the cynical years of experience with the law in some of its "least efficient" and most irresponsible moments, like the complicated Mack inheritance litigation--each of these stages and events is another piece of evidence pointing to the fact that the universe is totally irrational,

that absolutely nothing has intrinsic value. Now that the idea was articulated in my head, it seemed to me ridiculous that I hadn't seen it years ago. All my life I'd been deciding that specific things had no intrinsic value--that things like money, honesty, strength, love, information, wisdom, even life, are not valuable in themselves, but only with reference to certain ends--and yet I'd never considered generalizing from those specific instances. But one instance was added to another, and another to that, and suddenly the total realization was effected--nothing is intrinsically valuable; the value of everything is attributed to it, assigned to it, from outside, by people (pp. 170-171).

What has prevented his "generalizing from those specific instances" has been an instinctive belief that there lay within himself, at least, an absolutely valuable, absolutely rational core which projected itself onto the things of the world. He was his own God. All the world's objects, actions, and relationships might be essentially meaningless; but as long as he himself was not, the nihilism was not total. All other human beings might be only "more or less intelligent, more or less healthy, more or less dangerous, more or less adequate fauna" (p. 65); and Todd Andrews might share a good deal of

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that same animality--as proven by his Betty June Gunter and his war stories. But as long as the Intellectually Modern American Writer could feel that he was also more than an animal, as long as he could compare himself not to a "nauseous" Danaïd butterfly but to another "less nauseous one" which only outwardly mimics it (p. 138), he could stand outside the whole human scene as rake or saint or cynic and continue to rationalize cheerfully.¹

What happens to Todd the night before that climactic June day in 1937, however, is that his last bastion against nihilism--himself--is overrun. He is forced to face squarely, to experience fully, his own basically irrational, totally mortal nature; and the result is a despair so complete that the only solution to it seems to be suicide. Todd's experience that night is a totally emotional one, and his resolution the next morning is "entirely personal"; so, in a broad sense, the fact of the experience itself is proof that the universe and the part or replica of it which is Todd are basically irrational. Hence, he readily acknowledges that the philosophical justification for suicide which he works up the next day is, like his previous justifications for the attitudes of rake, saint, and cynic, an interesting but inevitably futile exercise in post-facto rationalization. And yet, even within the province of Todd's illustrative characterization, the reader is not limited to this strictly rationalizing approach to an understanding of what happened to Todd Andrews that last night with Jane. Barth invests his central character with a physical trait which

¹Richard Schickel, "The Floating Opera," Critique, 6, 2, 59-61.

serves as a perfect metaphor for the meaninglessness of the human microcosm as well as of the macrocosm, and it is in terms of this metaphor that Todd's description of his experience that June night reveals Barth's conception of the Intellectually Modern American Writer at what seems to be the end of his ethical rope. The trait which serves this crucial metaphorical function is Todd's diseased heart.

He is perfectly happy that evening until Jane mentions for the first time ever his ugly fingers. The remark stings him, as he says, "all out of proportion to [his] actual sensitivity to [his] fingers" (pp. 224-225), because it reminds him that the childhood illness which clubbed his fingers is the same one which so weakened his heart that it may cease beating at any moment. Having received this vivid reminder of his heart condition, Todd is unable first to make love, then to sleep, then to work on his Inquiry; and thus it is that the ultimate knowledge and the ultimate despair are achieved:

My mood was black, I had little patience with my work. It is only in very weak moments like this that I call my project [the Inquiry] silly; I sat for an hour in the window, looking over at the Post Office and thinking how incomparably silly my thirteen years' work was. How silly, for that matter, was my whole life during those thirteen years--one feeble mask after another!

Ah, there was a symptomatic thought: it was, I think, the first time I'd ever used the term masks in referring to what I'd always considered to be the stages of my intellectual development. Moreover, it was not the thought of a cynic, for as soon as it lodged in my consciousness it sent out quick rootlets of despair to all corners of my mind. Indeed, as I vaguely recognized at the time, it was a sign that the mask of my cynicism--I saw then that it was a mask--was wearing thin, and no

longer doing its job. If it were, would I even have thought of my heart?

And suddenly my heart filled my entire body. It was not my heart that would burst, but my body, so full was it of my heart, and every beat was sick. Surely it would fail! I clapped my hand quickly to my chest, feeling for the beat; clutched at the window frame to keep from falling; stared at nothing, my mouth open, like a fish on the beach. And this not in pain, but in despair!

Here is what I saw: that all my masks were half-conscious attempts to master the fact with which I had to live; that none had made me master of that fact; that where cynicism had failed, no future mask could succeed; that, in short, my heart was the master of all the rest of me, even of my will. It was my heart that had made my masks, not my will. The conclusion that swallowed me was this: There is no way to master the fact with which I live. Futility gripped me by the throat; my head was tight. The impulse to raise my arms and eyes to heaven was almost overpowering-- but there was no one for me to raise them to. All I could do was clench my jaw, squint my eyes, and shake my head from side to side. But every motion pierced me with its own futility, every new feeling with its private hopelessness, until a battery of little agonies attacked from all sides, each drawing its strength from the great agony within me (pp. 225-226).

Clearly, Todd Andrews's diseased heart is Barth's prime symbol for the sum of Modern Man's knowledge of himself. The unmasterable "fact with which [he] live[s]" is that he is, at his figurative heart, "sick." Behind all of the masks which make up the universe, there is actually "nothing." Todd's existence is dependent finally not on a Reason but on a thing, a purely "animal" organ over whose function he has absolutely no willful, conscious control. His basic heart condition is the perfect reminder that Modern Man has found himself to be entirely mortal and inescapably driven by accidental forces; and the peculiar complication of that condition which may cause death

not just prematurely but momentarily further underscores the heightened aura of transience and precariousness which that mortal, deterministic life takes on for the Modern Man who can no longer believe in an "afterlife."

Todd's heart disease is the foremost emblem, then, of "the great agony within" the Intellectually Modern American Writer. Other aspects of Todd's characterization also take on emblematic functions which support this central one. Most obvious among these, because Todd himself points it out almost immediately, is the name Todd itself: "Tod is German for death," he tells us on the third page of his novel, "Todd is almost Tod--that is, almost death--and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost-death." Todd's thin body--he lost thirty-five pounds during his rake phase and now carries only 145 on his six-foot frame--also strongly suggests the almost-death, the emotional emaciation, the inevitable movement toward suicide, to which his rationality has led. Todd's practice of law in its own right, particularly his participation in the Mack inheritance litigation and in another case, Morton vs. Butler, can be seen as emblems of the absurd entanglements one encounters in trying to settle the questions of truth and justice in an irrational universe. "In any world but ours," Todd claims, "the case of the Mack estate would be fantastic; even in ours, it received considerable publicity from the Maryland press" (p. 85). Todd's Inquiry also is a convenient symbol of modern human futility, especially as it regards the attempt to determine the "real" cause of any human action and the attempt to search for that cause with the written word.

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In addition to these illustrative traits, the two most important symbols of the Modern American Mind's condition at this point in Barth's treatment of it are Todd's sexual impotence and the showboat which docks at Cambridge on that June day and from which he derives the title of his novel. The literal cause of his decreasing potency is the estrogen-based drug that he has been taking since 1924 to treat his prostate infection; but the human condition that is figured in this sexual decline is the Modern American's decreasing ability to live aggressively, passionately, fruitfully--in short, potently--in a world bereft of absolutes. And the words Floating and Opera suggest the unstable and unreal character which the world assumes for the person who has given experiential as well as notional assent to nihilism. Moreover, the words Floating and Opera taken together have a more explicit significance. "It always seemed a fine idea to me," Todd tells us in his first chapter,

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

These six factors, then--his sick heart, his thin body, his law practice, his Inquiry, his growing impotence, and his fascination with the concept of a Floating Opera--are the major conditions of Todd Andrews's life and the major metaphors for the condition of the Intellectually Modern American Writer. So, quite predictably, most of Todd's activities on that June day in 1937, can be seen as ways of drawing each of these conditions to a neat conclusion. The day begins with and is predicated on his sudden realization that the only way to deal successfully with his heart is to adopt the "stance to end all stances." "There was no mastering the fact with which I lived, but I could master the fact of my living with it by destroying myself, and the result was the same--I was the master" (p. 227). With the act of suicide, Todd will thereby, of course, be bringing to a logical and literal end the wasting that began in college; but before he does so, he makes it a point to mention how his thin, white body, especially as it moves through the uncharacteristically dry "Wasteland" weather that engulfs Cambridge that day, seems already to be as lifeless as a desert-bleached bone.

The medical examination which he arranges for the noon hour in response to Jane's note suggesting that he find out why he had been "such a pansy" the night before has relevance for both body and impotency symbols. On the one hand, the examination has the effect of drawing attention to Todd's body for the last time and, since the doctor apparently finds nothing wrong, of pointing up the final inability of science to explain a deathliness like Todd's. On the other hand, because it is spurred by Jane's note and because during it Todd won't

allow his prostate gland to be thoroughly checked, the examination suggests that Todd is now fully aware that, for reasons other than physical ones, he is no longer able to live "like a man." A few hours later at the Macks' home, Jane officially puts an end to their adultery, and the private last word of her explanation is, "You were wonderful a great many times" (p. 212). The clearly implied reason for her leaving his bed and his life, "But you haven't been wonderful lately, and I don't think you ever will be again," carries more weight than all the labored, self-conscious explanation which she has just been offering in Harrison's presence; and we are once again reminded that Todd's days of spiritual as well as physical potency are at an end.

The reason for Todd's visiting the Macks that afternoon is not strictly to socialize but to test their "strength," to see if they share his absurd view of the world enough not really to care any longer about the three-million-dollar Mack estate. A note he had received that morning has put it in his power to let Harrison win the legal battle against his mother, and if the couple proves strong enough he will leave a note to his law partner directing him to proceed toward that end. Todd's observations prove inconclusive, however; so, by the flip of a coin, he chooses to make the Macks three million dollars richer and thus puts an end to a case which is the perfect emblem of an irrational universe. Another such case, the Morton-Butler one, has been cleared up earlier in the day by Morton's simply calling it off out of court; and so it is that Todd, after leaving the Macks', finds himself

as unburdened at that moment as must have been Socrates when, Xanthippe at last departed, he was free to face without distraction the hemlock that lay at the end of his reasoning (p. 213).

Such freedom comes to Todd, however, only after he has returned to his room and closed his Inquiry by putting his reasoning into the form of five logical propositions:

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

Having recorded what seems to be the last word in his rational exploration of his father and himself, Todd now is free to go to the boat show and to carry out the suicide plan which he had hatched that afternoon while being taken, along with little Jeannine Mack, on a tour of the Floating Opera.

Fittingly enough, the show is the very epitome of the totally irrational universe that Todd has come to perceive, first outside himself and then within. The audience of seven hundred is there for a short period of mindless entertainment and so does not take kindly to T. Wallace Whittaker as he grandiloquently recites Shakespeare's profoundest lines on life and death--especially the ones beginning, "To be or not to be . . ." They are entirely happy, though, when Jacob R. Adam runs Whittaker off-stage and replaces him with an old-fashioned minstrel show, filled to the brim with all the old slapstick and jokes and featuring the rascally, illiterate Tambo and Bones who time and again lead "the overeducated interlocutor into one trap after another"

(p. 239). When the curtain finally falls on this part of the show and the stage is taken by Burley Joe Wells and his earnest imitation of a famous steamboat race, Todd slips unnoticed from his place with the others. He goes below-deck and opens the valve to the acetyline stage lights which are not in use that night; then he turns on every appliance of a gas stove but lights only one burner, lights several lanterns and removes their chimneys, and then returns to his seat to await the violent end. But the only explosion that takes place is the imaginary one of Burley Joe Wells's neck-and-neck steamboats; so, Todd leaves the Floating Opera with the rest of the audience, still very much alive.

Why his apparently fool-proof method of suicide did not work he never learns. But he does speculate:

There was still a possibility, of course, that the theater might explode--gas accumulated in the bilges of a vessel is particularly volatile--but I rather suspected that either some hidden source of ventilation (Capt. Adam had claimed the Opera was safe) or wandering member of the crew had foiled my plan (p. 246).

In this speculation, we can see a metaphorical acknowledgment on Barth's part of a previously underestimated life force in the universe and in its human inhabitants (and replicas). Mindless though this Floating Opera is, there is something about its very structure that dies hard. And we see this strong life force clearest of all in Todd himself, who, though only the one attempt at suicide has failed, makes no effort at another. Instead, he turns out of pure habit to his rationalizing and utilizes it to the end of remaining alive:

Why did I not, failing my initial attempt, simply step off the gangplank into the Choptank, where no fluke could spoil my plan? Because, I began to realize, a subtle corner had been turned. I asked myself, knowing there was no ultimate answer, "Why not step into the river?" as I had asked myself in the afternoon, "Why not blow up the Floating Opera?" But now, at once, a new voice replied casually, "On the other hand, why bother?" There was a corner for you! (pp. 246-247).

The Modern Mind, the American, the Writer--as illustrated in the characterization of Todd Andrews here at the conclusion--thus remains alive if not exactly well. From 1937 until 1954, he does not pad his skeleton with more flesh, and his impotence seems total; but at least he can continue his daily dealing in legal entanglements; and he can, with the addition of a parenthesis to Proposition V-- "or for suicide"--re-open his Inquiry.

III

The characterization of Todd Andrews dominates The Floating Opera; but the novel contains a number of minor characters whose illustrative dimensions are notable both in their own rights and also to the extent that they clarify and support the central illustration. The first of such characters to whom we are introduced are Captain Osborn Jones and Mister Haecker, an eighty-three-year-old retired sailor and a seventy-nine-year-old retired school principal, who reside in the same hotel as Todd and are charter members of the Dorchester Explorer's Club, which he founded. As we see the two old

men on that June day, they are neatly paired to stand for two old (in the sense of "obsolete," for Todd) ways of coping with, of "exploring," the phenomena of life and death in a Godless world.

Capt. Osborn's way is the Thoughtlessly Hedonistic: what he hates most about old age is the loss of physical and sexual prowess; what he spends much of his time and energy doing is caring for his bad leg and bad sinuses and generally trying to prolong his physical existence as long as possible; what he wishes for most ardently is to be "forty again, with a season's pay in [his] pocket and all summer to live" (p. 15). Mr. Haecker's way is the Thoughtfully Stoical: he never mentions the physical pains of aging but tries instead to "make the most of it"; he spends most of his time searching the classics, especially Cicero, for intellectual and spiritual justification for his condition and his method of dealing with it; rather than pine for his more physically active past, he prefers to consider his present "the last of life for which the first was made." For him, old age is a time to do even more of what he says he has always liked best--to be alone and contemplate. For the Captain, it is a time to do as much as he still can of what he has always liked best--to admire beautiful women, get drunk, and take in whatever form of mindless entertainment is at hand. And most of all, it is a time to swap sounds of any kind, usually words, usually in the form of yarns, with his park-bench friends. For him, Todd observes approvingly, "death . . . would be the hyphenated break in a rambling, illiterate monologue" (p. 47). Mr. Haecker, on the other hand, keeps to himself, chooses his words

carefully, and uses them as a means of knowing or exploring rather than of making; death for him will be surrounded by silence.

It is clear, as I have already implied, that Todd prefers Captain Osborn Jones to Mister Haecker. The Captain's way of living is the way of the masses, of the innocently ignorant common man (both parts of his name in themselves suggest this common, nondescript quality); Haecker's way of living is that of the man who knows the hard realities but tries to side-step them by calling them by nicer-sounding names. Todd's attitude toward their two approaches to a Godless old age is clear:

He [Capt. Osborn] was fooling himself and not fooling himself about it, so that ultimately he wasn't fooling himself at all, and hence it wasn't necessary to feel any pity for him. I felt much sorrier, in my uninvolved way, for Mister Haecker, with his paeans to old age and gracious death: he was really fooling himself, and one could anticipate that he would someday have a difficult time of it. In the meanwhile, he must spend all his energies shoring up his delusion, and do it, moreover, alone, for his intensity and prudishness found him no friends; Osborn, on the contrary, sniffed and wheezed and creaked and spat, and cursed and complained, and never knew a gloomy day in his life (pp. 47-48).

For the above reason and for their affinity as storytellers, Todd prefers, even "loves," Capt. Osborn; but that is not to say that he finds Thoughtless Hedonism any more feasible for himself than Thoughtful Stoicism. Both are obsolete for the intellectually Modern Man, whose reasoning has gone beyond the stages of naive or willful ignorance of nihilism. Neither Osborn's way of spending that June day, swapping stories with old cronies in the sun and then being immensely entertained at the Floating Opera, nor Haecker's way,

remaining alone and morose in his room, can be Todd's way. Theoretically, it is the slightly older Osborn whom he would resemble if he had a choice, but in point of fact it is Haecker whom Todd does most resemble. They have the same shattered delusion of essential rationality in themselves; the same "intensity and prudishness"; the same childlessness; the same fascination with Hamlet's famous question; the same sort of voluminous journal; and, at the day's end, the same dramatic and unsuccessful sort of suicide attempt to their credit. So it is that when Todd lectures Mr. Haecker on how a man who wants to live rationally must face the question of suicide first and how nothing in life has intrinsic value, there is the very strong feeling that he is talking to himself even more than to the old man. The crucial difference between Todd's and Mr. Haecker's methods of living and dying in a nihilistic universe is that Todd has the strength to face up to the final results of his intellectual search, while Haecker, even at the last, is an intellectual coward. He even hedges on his suicide attempt--he leaves two sleeping pills in the bottle beside his bed.

A second, clearly defined pair of illustrative characters is Betty June Gunter and the German sergeant. Todd encounters both when he is eighteen, and they provide him with "two unforgettable demonstrations of [his] animality" (p. 124). The idea of Animality, then, is obviously the focus of their illustrative dimensions; in each encounter, Todd does exactly what the other character does, and what the other character does is exactly what animals do. In Betty June's case, it is to copulate and, moreover, to assume the same position

while copulating as four-legged animals do. In the German's case, it is to retch and to defecate and, moreover, to do so as a result of pure "animal" terror. Of course, Todd's killing the German also serves as proof of his own Animality, but even here the German shares that trait. He is, after all, a professional soldier, one officially cognizant of and dependent for his livelihood upon the act of killing.

In order to emphasize that the Animality to which Todd is referring is that found in all human beings, Barth further develops his characterizations of Betty June and the German sergeant to invest them with the idea of general Humanity. He manages this in a negative way by giving neither character any individualizing mannerisms of speech or thought or act. In a positive way, he works toward the same end by blurring sexual distinctions and by emphasizing those functions which a person could perform for or with Todd regardless of sex.

Betty June, though definitely feminine, has "no hips or breasts to speak of" (p. 118); and in Todd's mind, retrospectively, the fact that she relieved him of his sexual virginity is not as important as the fact that she was a stimulating conversationalist and trusted companion through many otherwise solitary winter months:

I discovered that I could converse more easily and naturally with her than with anyone in my experience . . . the things Betty June discussed were of a new and thrilling order--I felt mature and wise and confident, discussing them, and I found myself able to think more liberally, compassionately, and judiciously than I'd ever thought before.

In fact, reader, I should say that it was at just this point that I lost my innocence. Of what concern is it that eventually I made love to her? . . . she broke the seal of my mind, which had been before her coming an idle enough instrument; took from me my spiritual virginity, which is childishness and naiveté,

and opened my eyes to the world of men and women--
and this gently, and with warmth (p. 119).

When the two adolescents do finally make love and Todd happens to catch a glimpse of their copulation in a full-length mirror, what makes such a hilarious impression on him, then and even now, is not how he and Betty June look as individualized members of the opposite sex at the height of passion. It is how similar and unsexy both "scrawny," "gangly" bodies together look as they perform an animal function.

Similarly, the German soldier, though definitely masculine, exhibits traditionally feminine characteristics in being smaller and weaker than Todd and in being embraced by him "as fiercely as any man ever embraced his mistress" (p. 65). And, again, what Todd in retrospect is most concerned with as he relates this stage of the incident is not its sexual implications but its elements of human companionship and communication. The German jumps into the shell hole precisely at the moment when Todd is most sure that he will be killed and is wishing most fervently for someone, anyone, to be his "friend" throughout the ordeal. When Todd holds the German at gun point for a period of time, the man loses all control of his voluntary muscles, just as Todd had done earlier and as any other human being would do in a moment of ultimate, mortal fear. And their passionate embracing thereafter is not so much an end in itself as it is a prologue to an almost perfect platonic relationship:

The German and I sat on opposite sides of the shell hole, perhaps five feet apart, smiling at each other in complete understanding. Occasionally we attempted to communicate by gestures, but for

the most part communication was unnecessary
 Never in my life have I enjoyed such intense intimacy, such clear communication with a fellow human being, male or female, as I enjoyed with that German sergeant (pp. 65-66).

Besides standing for the Animality which exists in Humanity in general and in Todd in particular, this pair of characters also stands for an idea that can best be termed "Otherness." Each also embodies traits that are strikingly different from Todd's; and his desire to communicate with them takes on, as a result, the aspect of a desire to perfect or to complete himself by incorporating qualities other than or opposite from his own. His passing mention of the resemblance between mating soft crabs which are often referred to as one (a "doubler") and Plato's concept of the half-male and half-female proto-human comes to mind here, especially since one of the "opposing" characteristics of Betty June--even of the soldier to some extent, as was just pointed out--is femininity. A second "Other" characteristic is experience. Todd is innocent in nearly every way; but Betty June is "sophisticated, worldly, informed" (p. 118); and the German is considerably older and more grizzled than his counterpart in the shell hole. Also, neither he nor Betty June is especially physically attractive, while Todd looks like Gregory Peck.

Barth relates this concept of Otherness to the central one of Todd's Animality by juxtaposing to the many points of distinct dissimilarity between him and this pair of characters a few points of notable similarity. Betty June's scrawny build and the German's occupation as soldier are the most prominent of these common traits. What Barth is suggesting through them is that the Otherness that the girl

and the soldier symbolize is not only that which is found in human beings around oneself but also that which is found within. It is that instinctive, animal, "foreign" part of a man's mind which works apart from and often in opposition to his rational, civilized, knowable part. It is, in short, the subconscious. Todd's attempts, then, to embrace first the girl and then the man are emblems of Modern Man's attempts to perfect himself, to make himself whole, by achieving intimate knowledge both of other human beings and of his own animal nature.

What The Floating Opera has to say through these characterizations about this attempt is, as I have already implied, not optimistic. At first, Todd and Betty June's conversation and copulation go spectacularly; at first, Todd and the German "had been one man, had understood each other beyond friendship, beyond love, as a wise man understands himself" (p. 66). But when Todd looks into the mirror in his bedroom and keels over in helpless laughter, Betty June bolts injured and furious out of his life--except for the brief, nearly deadly encounter several years later in a bordello. And after Todd shoves his bayonet through the German sergeant's throat and scrambles out of the shell hole to safety, the entire gruesome scene, particularly the small puncturing sound of the bayonet's entrance, haunts him for life. Man's desire to establish a perfect relationship between himself and another person is futile, and so is his desire to achieve perfect understanding of his subconscious. Attempts to complete himself by fulfilling either of these desires are doomed, no matter how bright at the beginning, to failure; and the failure is not a healthy

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or even a neutral thing. It is potentially catastrophic for all parties concerned. We have already seen this lesson implied in the emblem of Todd on that last night with Jane, when his "knowledge" of her ends in frustration for both; his knowledge of himself leads to his own uncontrollable animal heart; and, as a result, he awakens with the decision to kill himself. We see this same syndrome and the same implied lesson again in the persons of Betty June Gunter and the German sergeant.

The most clearly delineated pair of illustrative characterizations in The Floating Opera is Harrison and Jane Mack. When we first meet them, they share not only a marriage but also a number of other prominent characteristics: physical attractiveness; intelligence; aristocratic origins; athleticism; and, most important of all, Love. Todd makes such explicit and such frequent mention of this last characteristic that it cannot help but be regarded as a concept for which the Macks stand. Todd tells us early in his novel and reminds us often thereafter that Harrison and Jane "are simply full of love: for themselves; for each other; for me"; and, of course, for their little girl, Jeannine. And whenever he mentions Jane and Harrison's Love, it is juxtaposed to his own lovelessness. "Each of the three of us," he writes, "loved the other two as thoroughly as each was able, and in the case of Jane and Harrison, that was thoroughly indeed. As for me--well . . ." (p. 19). He goes on, then, to explain how he cannot rationally define or genuinely feel Love. Thus, the Mack-Andrews relationship is "equilateral" in one sense, as Todd claims (and as

their ages suggest: Todd is six years younger than Harrison and six years older than Jane). But in another sense the relationship is a one-sided offer of Love that the Macks make simply because it is their nature to do so.

The course of the affair, then, can clearly be seen as illustrative of the manner in which the modern mind, in the person of Todd Andrews, deals with the possibility of Love, in the persons of Harrison and Jane Mack, as the way out of its ethical predicament. At first, Todd passively accepts it because it appeals to his curiosity and to his tastes for flattery, sex, and novelty; but, when he becomes aware that Harrison and Jane take love very seriously, that they don't see it as just another "unreal," ultimately unimportant fact of an irrational cosmos, Todd gets very uncomfortable. He finds a way both to show and also to tell them that to him their love is worthless. He tells Harrison that his earlier claim to being a virgin until he met the Macks was a lie; and he tells him the further lie that he has been taking out his fee from a black female client "in trade." Predictably, Harrison and Jane are radically offended and break off the relationship. When, two years later, they apparently have seen the error of their ways and have found their affection for Todd irresistible, they once again make an overture of love and Todd once again accepts. This time, however, there is a difference: "after its (the affair's) resumption it was conducted in a manner more satisfactory to me. No schedules, no demands, no jealousy, no fictions--all was spontaneity and candor" (p. 161). As this quotation suggests, though, Todd is too egocentric and rational and simply loveless--he has a "heart

condition"--to reciprocate in any more genuine fashion than he did before. If anything, he seems to give the Macks even less in return for their love, as his increasing impotency with Jane symbolizes.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that on that day in 1937 the Macks officially and finally take their leave. Apparently, as they have come to know themselves better in the last five years, they have concluded that love, rationally indefinable and indefensible as it may be, is for themselves, at least, very important. If they are to continue to be themselves, they need to continue to offer love and to feel that it is being returned. When the latter condition of their need is not met, the former comes eventually to an end; and, although they may not be able to explain their motivation adequately, they nevertheless gladly cut all ties with loveless people like Todd Andrews. When the Macks tell Todd they want to call off the affair and leave Cambridge altogether and when they all but ignore him that night at the Opera, the clearly implied message is, "We don't love you anymore." In the image of Harrison and Jane standing side by side on their front porch late that June afternoon and not even noticing their old friend's last wave goodbye, Barth is offering an emblem of modern man's losing the irrational possibility of Love as a solution to his rationally created ethical predicament.

Another concept which the Macks as a couple illustrate is what Todd, from his existentialist point of view, calls Weakness. To be weak is to consciously assume a pose, to be inauthentic, to fool oneself about how one "really" feels or how anything in the world "really" stands. And the crux of the Weakness is always the word or deed which

presupposes that the term really as applied to feelings or things has an absolute meaning. One is weak when, despite knowing better, one assumes that any attitude or object or condition or principle has intrinsic value. We have already seen this sort of Weakness in the character of Mr. Haecker, who is fooling himself about the "real" nature of old age and about his "real" attitude towards it. We find a much fuller, more explicit development of this idea, however, in the Macks.

One area of their lives in which they manifest existentialist Weakness is that which I have discussed immediately above, their attitude toward love. They act as if love were absolutely valuable, even though they know that they cannot demonstrate such a thing; and they further compound their error in the first week or so of the affair by refusing to admit to themselves that they do love Todd. The sexual intercourse that Jane and, vicariously, Harrison are having with their new friend is exactly "like playing tennis," they tell him. Kissing, because it does not feel nearly so good in and of itself, is actually a "more serious offense." Todd should not in any way "feel obligated." The Macks soon overcome such self-deception, but they are much slower to stop deceiving themselves that Todd should acknowledge the intrinsic value of their love for him. It is in order to separate himself from such Weakness and perhaps also to help cure it that Todd tells Harrison the lie about himself and his female client. (Her being black and that fact's contributing to Harrison's sense of insult point up, incidentally, another source of Weakness in the Macks. Although

they speak often of their enlightened, liberal views on racial equality, they are, in fact, highly prejudiced.)

The other principal area in which Jane and Harrison are existentially weak is their attitude toward money, particularly toward the possibility of their losing the three-million-dollar part of the Mack estate and getting instead the part which consists of 129 jars of excrement. When the state court in 1936 rules tentatively in favor of the mother and the possibility becomes very real, Harrison breaks down emotionally, moans about plans that he and Jane had, admits that he is inherently "weak," and claims that without the money he does not want to live. Jane, too, cries at the bad news; and before leaving the shaken couple, Todd in disgust makes it clear that he considers them both "sissies" who do not deserve the money unless they change. No thing and no one is inherently anything, he admonishes Harrison. It takes only a simple, easy act of will to feel differently about the money. "All you have to do to be strong is stop being weak" (p. 100). By the same token, no earthly object is "really" important enough to build an entire life around. Money has no more intrinsic value than excrement. And, although he does not say so directly, Todd is clearly implying that money certainly is not important enough to be the sole reason for one's putting another person through traumatic experiences like that which Todd's father put him through when he hanged himself after the stock market crash. Harrison or Jane or anyone else who pretends otherwise is being dangerously weak.

After the lessons which Todd teaches them in regard to love (in 1933) and money (in 1936), the Macks appear to be growing stronger.

The ménage a trois eventually resumes with Jane's firm "Let's get in bed, Todd"; and thereafter there is no more talk from her or from Harrison about love. Also, since the day of the adverse state court ruling, there has been no more talk of money or suicide. In order to make a final determination of whether the Macks' Weakness has disappeared, Todd on that June day puts them to a test. He sends a note to Jane that morning, asking her to offer herself physically to old Capt. Osborn. Harrison's and Jane's consent will prove that they no longer confuse love with sex and no longer attribute absolute value to either; and, if they have overcome Weakness in that area of their lives, there is good reason to believe that they have also overcome it in regard to the three million dollars. That being the case, Todd will leave one of his law partners directions for the implementation of his ingenious scheme to insure their getting the money.

Todd's final decision on the matter proves, however, to be more problematic than he had suspected. We have already partially noted--when we traced Todd's actions on that June day--Jane's immediate response to his proposal. It is a stingingly playful promise to comply if he will first get a physical examination to discover why he is "such a pansy." Harrison's initial reaction over lunch is to suppress his instinctive anger by making a joke, biting his sandwich with more than usual fierceness, and then changing the subject. Though these two reactions appear to be manifestations of a new Strength, they still leave Todd with some doubt; so he decides to make his final judgment on the occasion of his visit to the Macks' home after he has

fulfilled the conditions of Jane's reply. After that visit, however, Todd's decision is more difficult than ever; for Jane had been

neither angry nor insulted, nor had she felt obliged to carry out her end of the bargain. She'd simply laughed at the whole thing. Was this evidence of obtuseness, insincerity, or a real and formidable strength? In fact, I no longer knew how to feel about the Macks at all, whether their new resolutions manifested a commonplace sentimentality or a strange integrity. I had no feeling about them at all (p. 215).

So, Todd flips a coin, and, despite the outcome, decides to give his law partner the instructions which will guarantee Harrison's inheriting the three million dollars. "Harrison had survived a double chance: that the coin would demand the destruction of the letters, and that I would allow myself, a free agent, to be dictated to by a miserable nickel" (pp. 215-216). We can assume, then, that in Todd's mind the Macks are worthy of being afforded at least the benefit of the doubt in regard to the matter of Strength. They have, it appears, learned to accept more readily, to acknowledge more genuinely, the relativistic nature of the universe. They have begun not only to say that there is no inherent value in the three million dollars or in Jane's sexual favors but also to act as if there were none. And their changed actions suggest that they have begun to develop the mental courage to perform the simple act of will which follows from recognition of the absence of inherent identity in themselves.

From the broader illustrative perspective, however, from the viewpoint of John Barth rather than Todd Andrews, there is no doubt at all that the Macks have achieved a "formidable strength"--or, more

precisely, that Jane has. It is she upon whom Todd's attention is finally focused and, therefore, upon whom the family fortunes finally rest; and, ironically, Todd finds her reaction so "difficult to evaluate" exactly because it is the perfectly strong one. By simply disregarding his request on behalf of the Captain, she has refused to allow her life any longer to be shaped, either positively or negatively, by another person. She has at last taken her proper place among all the other elements in Todd's rationally unknowable and immovable universe. Jane has already attained the thoroughly existentialist view of reality which Todd will not attain for several hours yet. She obviously has asked herself in respect to having sex with Captain Osborn the same question that Todd finally asks himself in respect to committing suicide: not just "Why not?" but also "Why bother?"

Certainly, Jane's close six-year association with Todd has a good deal to do with her achieving this degree of Strength; and, certainly, she does not, even at the very beginning of that period, seem quite as weak as her husband. But neither of these factors explains her ability on that June day to become even stronger than Todd. In order to understand this ability, we must recall the events in Todd's room the previous night. Jane's remark about his clubbed fingers had thrown him into a fit of despair over his heart condition and had rendered him impotent once again. Even more importantly, we suspect that she had been awake when, at the nadir of that despair, Todd had come to her for solace:

the embarrassment that I feel at telling you how I
went shocked and trembling to the bed; how I buried
my head blindly in her lap; how I lay there

shuddering until sleep found me, my knees clasped to my chest, fighting despair as one fights appendicitis--this embarrassment is not different from that I'd feel at having to confess that I'd buried myself in God (p. 227).

Clearly, if what has attracted Jane to Todd has been his seeming to be essentially rational, to be, unlike Harrison, an omniscient, omnipotent God-figure, then this display on Todd's part obviously means that her attraction to him and dependence on him are at an end. If there is to be any God in her world at all from now on, it cannot be that man who came trembling to her that night. Her God will have to be herself.

Thus far, I have been analyzing Harrison and Jane Mack as an illustrative unit; but, as we have just seen in regard to the question of their existentialist Weakness, such a task becomes finally impossible. These two characterizations are by no means identical or entirely interdependent. So, let us look briefly at Harrison Mack and Jane Mack as individuals. In the case of the former, the most prominent illustrative facet is that of the Traditional American Man, counterpart of Todd's strictly Twentieth-Century American Man. When we first meet Harrison, he certainly looks the part of the old-fashioned All-American Boy: he is the young, tall, clean, muscular, fair-haired son of a living testimonial to the free-enterprise system. He ages some in the course of the novel, but he is still handsome in the same athletic way; and he still retains those features of personality which make him seem a kind of nineteenth-century, Teddy-Roosevelt, pre-existentialist emblem of American Manhood. (Since

Harrison was born in 1894, Teddy Roosevelt probably was his boyhood idol.) As Todd so aptly sums him up, Harrison

was by no means either a fool or a weakling. He was a reasonable, generous, affable, alert fellow. I might even say that if this were a rational universe and if I could be any person I chose, I should not choose to be Todd Andrews at all. I should choose to be very much like my friend Harrison Mack (p. 150).

The universe as The Floating Opera perceives it is not rational, however; and Harrison, as we have seen, simply is not able to grasp that concept. His physical characteristics underscore the fact that his mind is still in the nineteenth century. It sees the nihilism, the irrationality, the relativism of the world outside itself, but it cannot make the direct connection between that external condition and its own. Harrison has not become fully aware, as have men who are entirely intellectual products of this century, that the untameable, unknowable subconscious mind plays the dominant role in our personalities, and, consequently, that nihilism is the personal as well as the universal principle. Harrison can accept the idea that nothing in the universe has absolute value, but he cannot accept the idea that something which has value in his life is in no way an absolute. So he can proclaim in casual conversation that money and sexuality, for example, as general concepts are ultimately unimportant; but when it is his money and his sexuality that are threatened, he acts as if they were ultimately important. In giving Harrison Mack physical traits which suggest not only the late-nineteenth-century man but also the peculiarly American, Teddy-Roosevelt version of him, Barth seems to be implying that Harrison's sort of mind, the sort which, in

one critic's words, "sees the arbitrariness of the universe but shies from its finality," is a peculiarly American phenomenon. It is not surprising to find that the critic who made that observation is Barth himself.²

Harrison Mack stands, then, for Traditional America; for the Traditional American; and, thus, metaphorically, for any man whose ethical thinking still assumes the existence of an identifiable, absolute, "real" self. Exactly what that self in his own case is, however, Harrison no longer can say for sure; he is the old All-American boy having a modern identity crisis. His good intentions and social consciousness cause him to reject the role that he has been groomed to play; the benevolent but hard-fisted captain of industry; and he cannot seem to find another role adequately, genuinely, to adopt in its place. Instead, he merely imitates the more modern Todd Andrews. When we first see Harrison in 1925, he is playing the Communist that Todd played for a short time at Johns Hopkins. But the masses disillusion Harrison; and when we meet him again in 1932, he has returned to capitalism, married well, and begun to be the non-religious sort of saint that Todd was in 1925. (He has literally as well as metaphorically moved into Todd's old house.) By the novel's climax in 1937, he is the cynic that Todd was in 1932.

Despite all of the trouble Harrison has had in actually defining his personal essence, he still innocently believes in it; just as he still believes in the existence of complete fidelity between

²Richard W. Murphy, "In Print: John Barth," Horizon, 5, 3 (January 1963), 37.

himself and Jane, despite her having spent, with his encouragement, hundreds of nights in another man's bed. Neither he nor his wife "really" loved Todd, he claims on that last afternoon at his home. They just "thought" they did; they just "wanted reassurance." Nevertheless, Harrison senses that what seemed at first to be a traditionally perfect marriage went wrong when it encountered a person with more modern ethical ideas; and he thinks that it is still possible, simply by going to Europe for a year or so, to return to the condition of innocent monogamy which he and Jane first knew.

Harrison's marital trouble, then, serves as a metaphor for his ethical difficulty, and, hence, as a significant element in his illustration of the Traditional American. The same can be said of Harrison's legal entanglements. As his name triply emphasizes (Harrison; Mack as in the Scotch prefix Mac, meaning son of; and Jr.), he is in the archetypal position of the Son who must struggle "rightfully" to inherit the Father's estate. And, of course, that estate is made up of ethical as well as material possessions, since those objects which father hands down to son imply the father's ideas about what is valuable. Each generation must actively strive to "earn" that part of the legacy of the previous generation which will be of real use to it and to reject that part which will not. The son must try, in other words, to inherit the ethical money rather than the ethical manure. Ironically, to accomplish this feat, Harrison, the Traditional American and, by metaphorical inference, any person whose ethics presuppose the existence of a real self, must rely to a great degree on more modern value-thinking. Harrison must depend on the cooperation of

Todd and, indirectly, of Jane if he is to win the legal battle, just as he must finally depend on Jane's and, indirectly, on Todd's desire to end their affair if he is to save his sense of monogamy.

Despite his identity crisis, despite the ethical insecurity mirrored in his marital and in his legal difficulties, the Traditional American in the person of Harrison Mack, Jr., is not without hope. Todd and Jane do finally cooperate; and he does finally end up with a faithful wife and a family fortune--although his achievement in each case is significantly qualified, as we have seen already and will see again shortly when we discuss in more detail the illustrative characterization of Jane Mack. Also, Harrison does manage to maintain that typically American innocence which may, after all, provide the basis for a true sense of identity. This innocence has been a common thread running through each of his false stances. To be sure, it has made him continuously "weak," as Todd often points out; but, as Jane observes on that last afternoon, it also has made each of his stances, even his cynicism, "sweet" (p. 207).

The strongest test of his innocence, however, is yet to come. After Todd's cynicism phase came the desperate decision to blow up the whole Floating Opera, to bring to a brutal end not only his own life but also the lives of crew, entertainers, and seven hundred of his townsfolk--including even little Jeannine Mack. Since it is Todd's sequence of ethical stances that Harrison has been imitating, there is good reason to assume that a similar "stance to end all stances" lies in store for Harrison. Such an assumption is given further support by the fact that Harrison has chosen fascist Italy for his year's

vacation. Todd's final deliberate escape from ethical relativism into radical egocentricity and mindless destruction can accurately be described as "fascist"; and, because Harrison does not think that he will find it difficult to "swallow Mussolini's boys" (p. 206), one finds in Harrison at least a hint of that same sort of deliberate moral escapism. Whether his version of fascism will somehow prove to be both "sweeter" than Todd's and as inadvertently harmless as Todd's remains to be seen.

As this discussion of Harrison has implied, there is in the characterization of his wife a good deal that is illustratively complementary, a good deal of the Traditional All-American Girl. This strain is most evident in Todd's first description of her, which emphasizes the aura of wholesome physical appeal of which Miss Americas are supposedly made:

She was indeed "Ruxton and Gibson Island," a combination of beauty and athleticism. She wore a starched sundress and looked as if she'd just stepped from a shower after a swim. Her dark brown hair, almost black, was dried by the sun, as was her skin. That night she kept reminding me of sailboats, and has ever since. I think of her as perched on the windward washboard of a racing sailboat . . . squinting against the sun in a brilliant blue world--a sun that heats the excellent timber beneath her thighs, and dries the spray on her face and arms, and warms the Chesapeake wind that fans her cheeks, fluffs her hair, and swells the gleaming sails (pp. 25-26).

This, of course, is only Todd's and our initial impression of Jane. As her character is developed, she takes on traits both physical and mental that make her stand for something considerably more comprehensive than the All-American Girl. She is the very idea of Womanhood. In

stark contrast with the almost figureless Betty June Gunter, Jane Mack has a voluptuous, classically female beauty. Our attention is drawn first and most often to her "perfect breasts"; and her close and constant association with the salty, fecund sea, her dark hair, her actively seductive role in most of the lovemaking scenes, her considerable erotic skill, her aura of wantonness--all these suggest not Miss America but Calypso, Dido, Cleopatra, and other exotic sirens. To both Todd and Harrison, she is that mysterious, paradoxical Woman--that possibility of love at the risk of pain, that eternal promise of complete satisfaction and threat of complete humiliation, that tempting and frustrating combination of goddess and whore, mother and lover, with which men through the ages have been simultaneously enamored and appalled. She is that female "Other" whom man must embrace if he, like Plato's proto-human, is to be truly whole. And what happens in the novel is that Todd's embrace fails, while Harrison's succeeds. The prize of Woman does not finally go, as we have noted, to the man who can be her rational point of reference, her God; no man, Jane discovers on that last night in Todd's room, can be that. The prize goes instead to the man who has a healthy "heart," the man who can love her.

Barth takes his characterization of Jane Mack one step further and makes her by the end of the novel stand for the peculiarly Modern Woman, whose proper element is a thoroughly nihilistic universe. Having usurped the hitherto "masculine" quality of rationality, she is proving to be every bit as strong as Modern Man; and she is beginning to make her own independent, existentialist way in the world. Beyond the physical traits already mentioned in this connection, two more

deserve mention here. One is her getting her long, beautiful hair, a traditional symbol of femininity, cropped on the afternoon of that June day. The other is her giving birth to a daughter like Jeannine. The little girl's appearance as well as her name link her very closely to her mother, while her abundant "infant curiosity" links her to Todd as the probable father. This link is dramatized in two specific ways: in her favorite game of asking why? until she drives Todd to admit every time that there is no final reason; and, more symbolically, in her favorite pastime of sharpening his pencils down to the very nubs. (Of course, the humorous Freudian implications of Jeannine's sharpening Todd's pencils, especially while Jane talks with him about their sex life, are clear; and they serve further to link the little girl, and her mother through her, to the concept of Modernity.)

Jeannine has another pair of important illustrative traits in common with Todd. One is that they both have been taken on a thorough guided tour of the Floating Opera and, symbolically, are not completely aware of the nihilistic, relativistic nature of the universe. The lessons that it has taken the mother almost half a lifetime to learn, the daughter will know almost from the start. The concept of the Modern Woman that has begun with Jane's generation will carry on unbroken and pure into the next; and the outlook is intriguing and, on the whole, optimistic. There is just one catch, though. The other trait that Jeannine shares with her probable father is illness. On that climactic day in 1937, she has a slight fever and her tonsils are infected. It probably will not amount to anything serious, just as

Todd's slight tonsillitis at that same age probably did not. Todd's infected tonsils probably were not related in any way to his heart disease. Probably.

The last and most purely illustrative characterization is Jacob R. Adam, builder, owner, and operator of the Floating Opera. Since Barth clearly compares the showboat to the universe, Captain Adam inevitably comes to stand for Barth's conception of the builder, owner, and operator of the universe. The names Jacob and Adam emphasize especially this character's function as the source of that part of the cosmic Floating Opera which is the human race. But if they also suggest the traditional Judeo-Christian conception of that source, then it is surely in an ironic way; for Jacob R. (as in Rex?) Adam is entirely different from a just, beneficent, approachable God who, after he has created man, stands wholly outside him and intervenes directly in his affairs. From the Judao-Christian viewpoint, he is, in fact, a non-God--the very emblem of nihilism. He symbolizes the omniscient, omnipotent force which logically must exist, or must have existed, in order to explain how the universe was created and how it is powered, but about which one can say with surety nothing else.

We see his omniscience and omnipotence manifested in the confidence with which the wiry, sharp-eyed little man guides Todd and Jeannine around his absolutely safe and perfectly functional showboat and in the easy expertise with which he orchestrates his minstrel show. We don't find in him, however, any goodness or any justice, any more than we find their opposites. If they are both there, as his starkly

contrasting black and white clothing suggests, then they cancel each other out; and "good" and "evil" and "justice" and "injustice," all stemming as they do from the same source, lose their meanings. At any rate, we can never know for sure, because we can never experience the "real" Jacob R. Adam. The garrulous, proud craftsman we meet in the afternoon seems genuine enough, although even then he will answer only the questions about himself and his ship that he himself raises. He won't, for example, be seduced into playing Jeannine's why? game. And the Captain Adam whom we meet that night at the show is playing a different role altogether; he is the hustling, witty, efficient, anything-to-keep-you-good-folks-happy master of ceremonies. The congenial surface breaks only once, when he pulls T. Wallace Whittaker off the stage amid a shower of hoots and coins; but we cannot be sure that even this is not part of the act which goes on at a different landing every night, a calculated ploy to stir audience emotion and band them together with him in a show of force against too much profundity. And, again, when Capt. Adam then becomes Mr. Interlocutor, he is "transformed into an entirely different person--grammatical, florid, effusive--so that one doubted the authenticity of his original character" (p. 238).

Todd Andrews has, of course, the same doubts about his own identity; and so Jacob R. Adam comes fully to stand for the ambiguous, unknowable non-God of Todd's and of Todd's creator's world. He symbolizes the truth that there is no Truth, the reality that nothing is Real, the absolute that everything is Relative. He is the proprietor of a spectacle that combines the most mindless entertainment with the

most intellectual problems; and the climax of both experiences is the show's threatening every evening to literally blow itself up. The noise and the smoke which pour from the stage to conclude the performance of Burley Joe Wells, "World Renowned Imitator," are real enough; but, despite the best efforts of men like Todd, the explosion is only the imaginary demise of an imaginary steamboat and, at the same time, the signal for one more "grand old-fashioned minstrel walk-around." At least every performance so far has followed this script. If Modern Man cannot find a satisfactory way to live by "floating" values, he may yet succeed in destroying the whole "opera." Until that time, however, Captain Jacob R. Adam is still in business; and his show is still worth the price of admission.

One more word should be said about this characterization. Captain Adam also illustrates Barth's idea of the Writer--particularly, the intellectually Modern American Writer and, even more particularly, the version of that Writer who is John Barth himself. The fact that Adam's show and Barth's novel have the same title points our attention toward this idea; and what we find is a concept of the writer very much like James Joyce's: a god-like creator who sits above or behind all the elements of his story and pares his nails. Capt. Adam creates and orchestrates all of the roles in his show; but he is not "really" any one of them, not even the central role of the master of ceremonies which he himself plays. One knows a good deal about Todd Andrews at the end of The Floating Opera but nothing about John Barth, except that he can stage a fascinating verbal show and that, for the purpose of this book, at least, he can create and maneuver

characterizations like Todd Andrews to illustrate certain ideas about value and identity in a nihilistic universe. What Barth "really" thinks about these questions we cannot know any more than we can know what Jacob R. Adam "really" thinks about his show--or what God "really" thinks about his. That kind of reality simply does not exist. One imagines Barth near the end of The Floating Opera seeing himself, as Writer, exactly as Todd saw Jacob R. Adam near the end of his Floating Opera: "From high on his chair Capt. Adam regarded his brood with an olympian smile" (p. 244). And one imagines that Barth expects to keep that smile on his Writer's face, that he expects to continue staging "philosophical minstrel shows" like this one,³ despite modern man's best efforts to sink the whole ship.

IV

In The Floating Opera, then, we have seen Barth investing his main characters with ideas about existentialism, sexuality, violence, America, and art--all of which relate to the central concern embodied in Todd Andrews: the modern mind's nihilistic conception of the universe and its attempt to establish within that conception some basis for value. As Todd gradually realizes that nothing has intrinsic worth or meaning, that everything has only the worth or meaning that he attributes to it, the question of what he should value shifts to the

³Barth claims that The Floating Opera began with his getting the idea to write a "philosophical minstrel show"; so the phrase is his, not mine. (Richard Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," WSCL, 6, 10.)

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question of who he is. And when he finally discovers that he is an integral part of the nihilistic universe and has no absolute identity, just as it has no absolute truth, he is nearly at the end of his road. With no God either within or without, he has no "real" reason to do anything, even to commit suicide; so he will "in all probability, though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as [he] ha[s] thitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction until death overtakes him" (p. 251). Only one slim chance exists of preventing the philosophical wound in the modern mind from becoming figuratively and perhaps even literally mortal; and that chance Barth explores in his next novel.

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CHAPTER THREE
THE END OF THE ROAD*

I

The obvious place to begin a study of John Barth's second novel is a statement on the last page of his first. Todd Andrews says there, "I considered too whether, in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn't be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by. But that's another inquiry, and another story" (p. 252). This possibility is the slim chance of remaining truly "alive" that Barth has left the modern mind at the end of The Floating Opera; and this possibility, though its assertion is toned down in the revised 1967 edition from its original form in 1956, is what Barth refers to in the quotation already cited in Chapter One: "I deliberately had him [Todd] end up with that brave ethical subjectivism in order that Jacob Horner might undo that position in number two and carry all non-mystical value-thinking to the end of the road."¹ This chapter will clarify the manner in which The End of the Road does just

*The text to which all page numbers refer is the Bantam Book paperback edition published in 1969. The hardbound edition is out of print, and I have been unable to obtain a copy from any library.

¹Gregory F. Bluestone, "John Wain and John Barth: The Agony and the Accurate," The Massachusetts Review, I (Fall 1959-Summer 1960), 586.

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that; and it will, like the previous chapter, focus on the novel's illustrative characterization. In showing how the ethical and metaphysical ideas developed in the first novel are brought to a logical conclusion in the second, this study will also demonstrate how Barth takes the second of his three fictional steps toward offering a solution to the problem of value and identity in a nihilistic universe. The first step has been to define the problem and show why ethical subjectivism is rationally the only possible alternative to living like "a rabbit shot on the run"; the second will be to recapitulate the definition and show why ethical subjectivism is rationally not a possible alternative after all.

The End of the Road has a much simpler plot and a much smaller cast of characters than its predecessor. Supposedly written in October, 1955, by Jacob Horner, it is the account of his involvement with four persons, particularly Renée and Joseph Morgan, during the late summer and early autumn of 1953 when he was thirty years old. Joe Morgan is a history professor at the state teachers college in Wicomico, Maryland, where Jake takes a job in the English Department that August on the advice of a strange and semi-legitimate doctor; Rennie--the name by which everyone calls Renée--is Joe's wife and the mother of his two children.

In much the same manner as with Todd, Jane, and Harrison in The Floating Opera, though with less open initiative on the part of the husband, Jake, Rennie, and Joe quickly become companions; and Jake and Rennie soon have intercourse. Her guilt leads her to tell Joe, and the perfect rational marriage which they had thought they had is

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seriously threatened. Throughout September, Rennie remains torn between Joe and Jake, with her situation exacerbated by Joe's insisting that she continue to have intercourse with Jake so that Joe can revise and correct his rational estimate of why she did it in the first place. Jake, who cannot accept the idea of rationally determinable motivation, reacts to Rennie's situation by whimsical and sometimes cruel inconsistency. In mid-October she finds that she is pregnant and decides that she does not want to carry the baby; she will either get an abortion or shoot herself.

Unlike Joe, Jake is unwilling to allow her to choose the latter alternative; he desperately works to arrange an abortion, first with a legitimate doctor in Wicomico and then, when Rennie refuses because it would mean having to give a false name, with the mysterious "doctor" who had sent him to the college and who operates a "hospital" not far from the town. Jake is present at the operation; and he watches helplessly as, through a combination of negligence and accident, Rennie dies horribly on the operating table. No charges are pressed, Joe is quietly fired when word that Rennie died from an illegal abortion reaches the college president, and Jake resigns his job to join the doctor at his new location in Pennsylvania. That is where he still resides two years later when he writes this novel.

The Doctor--Jake always uses a capital letter in referring to him--is one of the novel's two other prominent characters. He is a dapper, irresistibly canny and energetic middle-aged black man who first discovers Jake in 1951, on his birthday, sitting completely motionless for hours in a Baltimore train station. After getting him

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moving again, the Doctor insists that Jake come with him to his "Remobilization Farm" in Maryland's Eastern Shore region and begin a schedule of treatments for his "paralysis." Jake concurs, and it is as part of his therapy that he takes the teaching position at Wicomico State. The other important character is a forty-year-old high-school English teacher in Wicomico named Peggie Rankin. She and Jake first meet on an August day in 1953 at Ocean City and within an hour are in bed. Their intercourse is too mechanical on his part and too hysterical on hers to be satisfying for either; but, a few weeks later, tremendously aroused by the first day's classes, Jake finds Peggy, quickly breaks down her resentment, and takes her to bed again. He ignores her phone calls for the next few weeks and then sees her once again only in an attempt to find an abortionist for Rennie. He offers marriage in exchange for the name of one; but Peggie does not believe his offer and turns him down, at the price of a blow to the face.

Jake Horner, Joe Morgan, Rennie Morgan, Peggie Rankin, and the Doctor, then, are the central characters in The End of the Road. As my synopsis indicates, they don't "do" a great deal; here, much more than in The Floating Opera, the action is verbal and takes the form of overtly philosophical debates or lectures on the novel's basic metaphysical and ethical concerns. What the characters say, therefore, in conjunction with their more physical actions and their physical traits, gives them a very prominent illustrative dimension; and it is the intent of this chapter to study that dimension not only to understand this novel as it stands by itself but also to understand it as

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the second part of Barth's initial thematic trilogy. It is primarily by means of investing the main characters in The End of the Road with essentially the same ideas we found less obviously and less amply in The Floating Opera that Barth is able to "take all non-mystical value-thinking to the end of the road."

II

As in the previous chapter, I will begin my study of illustrative characterization with the novel's narrator and central character. The most obvious statement to make about Jake Horner in this respect is that he, like his predecessor Todd Andrews, stands for the intellectually Modern Man. For Todd, as we have seen, the word modern means he perceives that nothing in the universe has any absolute value, either as a manifestation of an absolute God or in its own right. The Modern Man is one who has concluded that none of the apparent facts of the world are rationally explainable or justifiable, and he is fully modern when he applies that conception to the fact of his own existence. Todd Andrews discovers, first experientially and then logically, as must always be the order of discovery in such an arbitrary universe, that he is at heart not a rational god but a "silly," "sick" mortal. And when he makes this discovery, he sits entirely motionless for a long time on his window sill, staring out, and in, at "nothing." Not coincidentally, then, the earliest act of Jake Horner's of which we are told is his terminating his life as a formal student (in the

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College of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins) and sitting motionless in a train station through the better part of a day. His condition is clearly the modern one: he perceives that there is no ultimate reason either in the possible destinations which surround him or in himself for choosing one destination over another or for choosing any destination at all. There is no ultimate reason anywhere for anything.

So Jake Horner takes up Modern Man's search for a solution to the problem of value and identity in a nihilistic universe exactly where Todd Andrews put it down. He begins by experiencing total "nothingness," and then he tries rationally to describe and to live with that condition. Jake Horner sits in the logical "corner" that Todd Andrews left him--that there is no intrinsic, ultimate reason for any kind of action, including suicide--and tries to function there in some way other than that of a "rabbit shot on the run."²

All of the means by which Barth renders Jake an illustration of Modern Man are too numerous to mention here, nor need they be mentioned in order to make the point. But a few of the most prominent means obviously are necessary here not only to make the point but also to show how Jake is more than just a carbon copy of Todd. First, there are the explicit statements which Jake makes on one or another aspect of his modern problem. The novel's very first words are one such statement: "In a sense, I am Jacob Horner." The book is dotted with dozens of others: "when one is faced with such a multitude of

²"Jacob Horner, is supposed to remind you first of all of Little Jack Horner, who also sits in a corner and rationalizes."-- John Barth (John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," WSCL, 6, 12.

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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" (p. 3); "Only the profundity and limited duration of my moods kept me from being a suicide" (p. 30); "I must say I take no great interest in causes" (p. 35).

These statements of Jake's are supported by those of other characters which, because they perfectly apply to him or because he perfectly agrees with them, also mark him as Modern Man. Rennie says, for example, "I think you don't exist at all. There's too many of you . . . you're different all the way through, every time. You cancel yourself out" (p. 67). And the Doctor asserts (a la Whitehead), "The world is everything that is the case, and what the case is is not a matter of logic" (pp. 81-82), and then speaks to Jake contemptuously of "that vacuum you have for a self" (p. 85). Explicit statements like these occur throughout the novel; but, by the time Jake finally explains what paralyzed him on that bench in the train station and gives it a name, this discursive aspect of his definition as Modern Man is complete:

it was there that I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas. There was no reason to go to Cincinnati, Ohio. There was no reason to go to Crestline, Ohio. Or Dayton, Ohio, or Lima, Ohio. There was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to do anything. My eyes, as Winckelmann said inaccurately of the eyes of the Greek statues, were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything--even to change the focus of one's eyes. Which is perhaps why the statues stand still. It is the malady cosmopsis,

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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 (p. 74).

At the risk of repeating some of what I said in my first paragraph on Jake Horner and in my last chapter on Todd Andrews, it is necessary, I think, to add a few words in further explanation of Barth's term cosmopsis. When the classical Greek statues, in Winckelmann's estimate, stared into eternity, they were struck sightless by Plato's infinite meaning. Once they had achieved the ultimate goal of getting beyond the unreal material world and perceiving the Reality, the Truth, at the heart of the cosmos, they had no more ability or desire to see anything else. When Modern Man, on the other hand, gazes on eternity, he is blinded not by infinite meaning but by infinite non-meaning. Once he has attained the ultimate view of both macrocosm and microcosm, what he sees is the paradoxical reality that nothing is Real, the truth that nothing is True. The superficial result of ultimate knowledge is the same for both Greek statue and Modern Man: "there is no reason to do anything--even to change the focus of one's eyes." But for the former, the catatonia is heavenly; for the latter, it is hellish.

The last part of the long quotation above exemplifies a second means by which Barth renders his central character illustrative of Modern Man; he gives Jake the ability to conceive of striking and apt metaphors for his condition. The bullfrog-hunting metaphor is but one of many. On some days, his mind seems "as nearly empty as interstellar

space" (p. 36). On others it is "disengaged" like a clutched automobile engine and is full of "a kind of all-pervasive, cosmic awareness, almost palpable and audible, which I can compare only to the text 'I feel the breath of other planets blowing,' from Schonberg's Second String Quartet" (p. 102). A key metaphor for Jake's identityless view of the human personality is the atom, which is no longer thought to have a solid, indivisible center. Also, the metaphorical implications of his shying away from walking where there are no paths laid down and his feeling anxious in rooms that are very bright and empty are clear.

Other metaphors fix Jake's illustration of Modern Man more strictly as his creator's than as his own. There are a number of more or less static scenes which involve Jake and which, when considered in and of themselves, serve as Barth's "allegorical tableaux" for Jake's mental condition.³ His habit of sitting idly in a rocking chair--suggesting his constant vacillation between alternatives--is one; his reading the Almanac--suggesting his acknowledging that the only real way to know the world is to memorize "everything that is the case"--is another. And the most impressive of all is the one we have already seen--his sitting literally paralyzed by cosmopsis while "shortsighted animals all around" him hurry to and from their easily chosen trains.

The accumulation of these metaphors has the effect not only of establishing Jake's primary illustrative function but also of making

³Herbert F. Smith, "Barth's Endless Road," Critique, 6, 2, 74.

a point about Modern Man which was not fully developed in The Floating Opera: the natural concomitant of his nihilistic knowledge is his lively imagination. On the one hand, this mental quality contributes to the formulation of his knowledge by providing aesthetically appealing metaphors for the expression of it, as we have just seen. On the other hand, and even more significantly, imagination has played the major role in loosing the mind from the confines of "shortsighted" habit, custom, and regimentation. Thus, it has given Modern Man increasingly free reign to discover and explore all the alternatives to "the case" or to what could be "the case" in any given situation which demands choice. The fact that each alternative can be equally pleasing or displeasing to the imagination has nearly as much to do with Jake's inability to take the world seriously or to make a decisive move as does the fact that the alternatives are equally lacking in rational value. We see from the opening chapter, when the Doctor is talking about Jake's getting a job at the college in Wicomico, that it is imagination as well as knowledge which keeps him from making a quick, easy reply:

Instantly a host of arguments against applying for a job at the Wicomico State Teachers College presented themselves for my use, and as instantly a corresponding number of refutations lined up opposite them, one for one, so that the question of my application was held static like the rope marker in a tug-o'-war where the opposing teams are perfectly matched. This again is in a sense the story of my life, nor does it really matter if it is not just the same story as that of a few paragraphs ago: as I began to learn not long after this interview . . . the same life lends itself to any number of stories--parallel,

concentric, mutually habitant, or what you will
(pp. 4-5).

That Jake Horner's illustration of Modern Man is similar to Todd Andrews's is emphasized by Barth's giving the two characters similar death-suggesting physical features. Jake's thin body, like Todd's, is an emblem of the wasting, the loss of energy, which occurs in a spiritual or psychic level as a result of cosmopsis. The most prominent aspect of his physical diminution is his muted sex drive, which, again, has its counterpart in Todd at the end of The Floating Opera. Jake tells us directly at the beginning of his story that he is not highly sexed, and he demonstrates the fact thereafter by his infrequent sexual encounters (his having intercourse with Peggie Rankin and Rennie Morgan on the same day is a rare exception) and by his prudish reluctance to relate the details of those encounters which do occur. In Jake's weakened sex drive, Barth is mirroring, of course, Modern Man's weakened sense of spiritual "manliness," his diminished ability to live fruitfully, potently.

Furthermore, Jake, like Todd Andrews as he sat at the window that last night with Jane, often has a blank, death-like stare. Even when his eyes are functioning in a more lively way, there is apparently something diabolically penetrating about them which is never mentioned in connection with Todd. Our clearest evidence of this is Peggy Rankin's averting her face near the climax of their first intercourse and rasping, "God damn your eyes, God damn your eyes, God damn your eyes . . ." (p. 29). What Jake's eyes have penetrated to, of course, is the hell of universal nothingness.

It might be thought that Jake, like his predecessor, stands for the particularly American version of Modern Man, since he is an American citizen and his story does take place in that country. His imagination, moreover, matches perfectly the first part of Barth's description of the peculiarly American imagination which we noted more than once in the previous chapter: "the sort of ingenious fancy that reimagines history and creation, sees the arbitrariness of the universe" ⁴ Jake's imagination obviously does not, however, fit the last and most crucial part of that description--". . . but shies away from its finality." It is precisely the "finality" which he fully recognizes and accepts in the Baltimore train station; and as he slips into a state of paralysis as a result, he is figuratively out-growing his "American-ness."

Two important factors emphasize this broader version of Modern Man for which Jake now stands. One is the accuracy with which he fits Joe's description of passive and pessimistic French existentialism. The other is his possession of and frequent reference to a statuette of Laocoon, with all its Greek and near-eastern implications. With these connections in mind, there is, as Gerhard Joseph suggests a hint of an international theme in The End of the Road in general and in Jake Horner in particular. ⁵ But the important point from the perspective of this discussion is that these two allusions to parts of

⁴Richard W. Murphy, "In Print: John Barth," Horizon, 5, 3 (January 1963), 37.

⁵"John Barth," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, 91, 17.

the world other than America help to make Jake's characterization illustrative of all modern men. His problem, which begins as one of universal knowledge and finally reduces to one of self-knowledge, transcends such parochial divisions as national boundaries; and it is given its most famous contemporary expression in the writings of Frenchmen--especially Jean Paul Sartre--and runs through all Western civilization back to the Ionian Greeks--especially Socrates.

The allusion to French existentialism has a second and even more important illustrative function for the character of Jacob Horner. Once Barth has established him as Modern Man, he embodies in Jake his stated intention of "carry[ing] all non-mystical value-thinking to the end of the road." Jake illustrates one possible method of living by the "brave ethical subjectivism" on which Todd Andrews ends the previous novel, one possible solution to the question of how relative values might "be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by"; and that method, that solution, is one which can best be termed "Existentialist" in the generally French, Sartrean sense. That is, Jake illustrates the human attempt to define oneself and to live potently not in terms of some concept of personal "essence," but in terms of pure physical "existence." The strange Doctor who finds him catatonically immobilized in the railroad station points him in this direction; so, not surprisingly, it is to the Doctor that we turn to find a more specific definition of "existence." And what we find is the fact of choice. Immediately after rescuing Jake from his first catatonic attack, the Doctor explains to him:

I claim that that inability to choose is only theoretically inherent in situations, when there's no chooser. Given a particular chooser, it's unthinkable. So, since the inability was displayed in your case, the fault lies not in the situation but in the fact that there was no chooser. Choosing is existence: to the extent that you don't choose, you don't exist (p. 83).

Predictably, then, the Doctor's main form of therapy for his young patient (he already has many old ones) consists mostly of gimmicks to help him avoid or simplify situations that involve difficult choices. His first and foremost prescription is, "Above all, act impulsively: don't let yourself get stuck between alternatives, or you're lost" (p. 85). After two years of working with Jake, the Doctor decides to concentrate on strengthening his ability to play a number of roles so well that eventually, in any situation, he can always make a choice and thus avoid paralysis. This form of treatment is "Mythotherapy." It is so central to Jake's attempted solution to Modern Man's problem--and to the comprehension of all of John Barth's fiction, for that matter--that the Doctor's lengthy explanation of it and of its application to Jake Horner deserves to be quoted in large part:

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

In life . . . there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story So in this sense fiction isn't a

lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life.

Now, not only are we the heroes of our own life stories--we're the ones who conceive the story, and give other people the essences of minor characters. But since no man's life story as a rule is ever one story with a coherent plot, we're always reconceiving just the sort of hero we are, and consequently just the sort of minor roles that other people are supposed to play. This is generally true

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

Now many crises in people's lives occur because the hero role that they've assumed for one situation or set of situations no longer applies to some new situation that comes up . . . for you these crises had better be met by changing scripts as often as necessary. This should come naturally to you; the important thing for you is to realize what you're doing so you won't get caught without a script, or with the wrong script in a given situation

It's extremely important that you learn to assume these masks wholeheartedly. Don't think there's anything behind them: ego means I, and I means ego, and the ego by definition is a mask. Where there's no ego--this is you on the bench--there's no I. If you sometimes have the feeling that your mask is insincere--impossible word!--it's only because one of your masks is incompatible with another. You mustn't put on two at a time. There's a source of conflict, and conflict between masks, like absence of masks, is a source of immobility. The more sharply you can dramatize your situation, and

define your own role and everybody else's role,
the safer you'll be (pp. 88-90).

As a description of how persons do in fact operate, the Doctor's mythic theory seems entirely viable; but as a prescription for how one person should operate, as a "therapy," it has two major shortcomings. First, it is a formula for physical action in general but not for ethical action in particular. It talks only vaguely of "crises" and of roles which are "adequate" to meet them and of "wrong" scripts; and the definitions of these terms that do come through (in the last four words, for instance: "the safer you'll be") seem to be purely egocentric and amoral. The Doctor speaks as if Jake could live in total seclusion, as if action itself, apart from its effects on other persons, were all that mattered--as if there were no difference between choosing whether to take a train, for example, and choosing whether to take a lover. Two years earlier the Doctor did advise against Jake's getting intimately involved with another person; but he made that prohibition sound too easy, and his sole interest at that point seemed to be protecting his patient from a prime source of potentially paralyzing complexities, not protecting other persons from his potentially dangerous patient.

The second major flaw in Mythotherapy is its ambivalence concerning the degree of deliberateness with which Jake will assume his various roles. Without rescinding his foremost initial prescription, "Above all, act impulsively," the Doctor also admonishes Jake to "realize what [he's] doing." He says that Mythotherapy can be "done consciously or unconsciously"; he predicts that it "should come

naturally" to Jake; he asserts that Jake must "learn to assume these masks wholeheartedly." As a result of this vacillation between spontaneity and premeditation, Jake cannot be sure exactly how and to what extent he should actually try to practice Mythotherapy at all. To serve as an aid, the Doctor offers not specific directions but only a hypothetical model, an analogy between Jake's mental condition and the physical condition of a paralytic who can deliberately re-learn the instinctive act of walking.

Despite these two shortcomings, Mythotherapy in particular and Existentialism in general seem at first to work for Jake. They translate into a pattern of behavior that is simultaneously self-conscious and impulsive, harmless and irresponsible. With tongue in cheek, he teaches "the truth about grammar" and engages in various forms of nonsense, like humming a Pepsi-Cola jingle every now and then in order to provide a "test pattern" for his existence. He assigns roles quickly and arbitrarily, in the spirit of "good clean fun," to all who briefly cross his path; and the only things that get hurt even temporarily are the feelings of a forty-year-old pick-up. He never allows his relationships with people to go beyond the stage of amusement and disinterested curiosity. Also, he trusts in the characteristic shortness of his blacker moods to prevent his committing suicide. On the whole, he keeps to himself; he keeps moving; and, thus, he continues to exist.

Soon, however, Jake's instinctive curiosity and desire for human companionship lead him to the home of the Morgans; he consciously chooses to wear the mask of friend; and his relationship with them

changes inevitably from one of whimsical disinterest to one of deadly serious involvement.⁶ His first intercourse with Rennie marks the figurative as well as the literal climax of that relationship. From Jake's point of view, the night of adultery with Rennie is a "paradigm of assumed inevitability" (p. 99). His lust comes on him as unexpectedly and as unavoidably as do any of his other moods, and it has disappeared as completely by the next morning. He assumes, of course, that the same holds true for Rennie. The sex acts which are the products of that lust are no more ultimately right or wrong than they are ultimately ridiculous. The role of cuckold, of "horner," which he happens to play that night is no more rationally justifiable, no more worth taking seriously, no more "real," than the seemingly infinite number of other roles which he plays.

⁶ It is on this point that I disagree with Herbert Smith, who maintains that Jake Horner's and Joe Morgan's ethics are not necessarily in conflict and are potentially capable of "providing an ethical stasis for each of the main characters." The real trouble, Smith argues, is that the two solutions are "imperfectly applied upon the ethical vacuum that is Rennie Morgan" ("Endless," 75). Obviously, Smith is correct in saying that neither Jake nor Joe stick entirely to their inner-directed ethics; but to say only that much misses the crucial point. Both characters must break or at least bend their own ethical rules. Not to do so would surely keep them and others physically alive, but it would also make them for all intents and purposes isolates. It would not, to use Jake's phrase at the novel's end, allow them to "live any longer in the world" (p. 197)--with "world" in this context meaning the world of human relationships. The question of whether modern man can live constructively in relationship to other human beings, not of whether he can simply continue to draw breath in solitary confinement, is the key one in The End of the Road; and the question is put without explicit regard to the degree of perfection with which Jake's ethics, and Joe's, too, are practiced--or rather, the degree of imperfection with which they must be practiced.

In strictly therapeutic terms, however, that role is a mistake, because it leads to his nearly being paralyzed with indecision again a number of times in the weeks to come. Jake's assumption of the role of cuckold, moreover, is a mistake in ethical terms, for Joe and Rennie take the adultery seriously, whether they ultimately should or not. It plunges them into weeks of torment and finally into mortal danger in the form of Rennie's pregnancy and a loaded Colt .45, with which she threatens to end that pregnancy if she cannot get an abortion. Actually, there is mortal danger for all concerned, because Joe claims that if Rennie kills herself he will probably shoot Jake and himself as well.

In one of the novel's most vivid "allegorical tableaux," the three characters sit in triangular fashion around a smoking stand which holds the loaded gun and discuss, sometimes calmly, sometimes hysterically, what they ought to do next. When Rennie at one point dives for the gun, Joe, in complete accordance with his principle that a person must be treated as a free moral agent, does not move from his chair; but Jake instinctively dives for the gun and at least temporarily prevents her suicide. He has no idea what he should do after that, however, except for a vague feeling that he wants to try to take his share of responsibility in the matter. When he asks Joe how he can go about doing that, Joe's emphatic advice is to "take a position and stick to it so we'll know who we're dealing with!" (p. 151). The position which Jake takes, finally, is that Rennie should have an abortion under any circumstances rather than shoot herself and that, therefore, he will do everything possible to arrange that abortion.

In making this decision, Jake is consciously forsaking his Existentialist solution for its opposite, for what might be called "Essentialism." Out of his yearning for moral responsibility, he is consciously acting as if the part of his personality which made him spontaneously dive for the gun, which at that one moment wanted Rennie to live, is not just another arbitrarily assumed and discarded mask, but instead is of his very essence. Jake intends to find out whether a strong enough desire for moral responsibility can, in fact, bring it to pass. He is going to attempt to give himself an experience that will off-set the years of schooling which culminated in his paralysis in the railroad station, an experience that will prove he is not, after all, as empty, as irrational and, consequently, as morally irresponsible as the universe around him. Seen illustratively, Jake at this point is Man trying deliberately, even desperately, to divest himself of that final stage of ethical knowledge that has made him fully Modern.

Ironically, Jake's attempt to act "real," to stick to one role, results in his enacting a frantic parody of his previous mercurial role-changing and incorrigible dishonesty. In order to arrange Rennie's abortion, he must race between Wicomico and Philadelphia to play both Distraught Husband and Professionally Concerned Psychiatrist over the phone, in writing, and in person; and he must lie to everyone involved, including doctors, receptionists, notary publics, Peggie, and his own Doctor. Even the Morgans, who have made it perfectly, desperately, clear that they can tolerate no more falseness in their lives, get less than the truth from Jake. He assures them, for example,

that the Doctor is a "retired specialist" (p. 184), after the Doctor himself has made it plain that he does not even have a license. When the operation has finally been arranged, Jake is more than ever aware that his Essentialism, his attempt to fly consciously in the face of modern knowledge and imagination, has failed. He is the same man with the same lack of identity and value as before.

He does not wish, however, to revert completely to his earlier Existentialism or to give up completely on either solution. The passage in which he describes his state of mind immediately after the abortion has been finally arranged is of the utmost illustrative importance:

Back in my room, the pressure off, I experienced a reaction not only against the excitement of the days just past but against my whole commitment. It was not difficult to feel relieved at having finally prevented Rennie's suicide, but it was extremely difficult to feel chastened, as I wanted to feel chastened. I wanted the adventure to teach me this about myself: that regardless of what shifting opinions I held about ethical matters in the abstract, I was not so consistently the same person (not so sufficiently "real," to use Rennie's term) that I could involve myself seriously in the lives of others without doing damage all around, not least to my own tranquillity; that my irrational flashes of conscience and cruelty, of compassion and cynicism--in short, my inability to play the same role long enough--could give me as well as others pain, and that the same inconsistency rendered it improbable that I could remain peacefully in painful positions for very long, as Joe, for example, could remain. I didn't consistently need or want friends, but it was clear (this too I wanted to learn) that, given my own special kind of integrity, if I was to have them at all I must remain uninvolved--I must leave them alone.

A simple lesson, but I couldn't properly be chastened. My feelings were mixed: relief, ridiculousness, embarrassment, anger, injured

pride, maudlin affection for the Morgans, disgust with them and myself, and a host of other things, including indifference to the whole business.

Also, I was not a little tired by myself, and of my knowledge of my selves, and of my personal little mystery . . . my play for responsibility had indeed exhausted me, and I was ready to leave Wicomico and the Morgans. In a new town, with new friends, even under a new name--perhaps one could pretend enough unity to be a person and live in the world; perhaps, if one were a sufficiently practiced actor Maybe I would marry Peggy Rankin; take her surname; father a child on her. I smiled (pp. 185-186).

This passage is important in that it summarizes much of the Modernity which we have seen illustrated in the character of Jacob Horner; but, more importantly, it indicates exactly why he has not yet given up on either Existentialism or Essentialism at this point in his life. The former solution is clearly the only one consistent with his particular brand of knowledge and imagination; and the trouble that Jake has got himself and the Morgans into is, strictly speaking, the result of his being lured from that solution by need for human companionship. The last few days' "excitement" ought to be sufficient guard against similar temptations in the future. Even if it is not, though, even if Existentialism is not a viable way to live with other human beings because the feat of both having friends and "leav[ing] them alone" proves as impossible as it sounds on the surface, all is not lost. A brief flurry of Essentialism can get Modern Man off the ethical hook. While the last few days have not taught Jake that essence does in fact precede existence, they have taught him how to "pretend" that it does; and they have seemed to prove that such pretense can in fact produce responsible, life-affirming results.

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Perhaps some combination of the two solutions, some blend of enough Existentialism to allow one to be true to one's own mind and enough Essentialism to allow one to become intimately and yet harmlessly involved with others, can be achieved. Apparently, this sort of compromise is the formula for living potently in a nihilistic universe.

Had the story ended here, Modern Man would still have reason to smile. But obviously it does not end here. Jake is forced not only to see but also to take part in Rennie's agony and death, and that experience goes further even than to "chasten" him in the manner which he had formerly desired. It teaches him in the most immediate possible way that he can neither live irresponsibly nor pretend to live responsibly in the world of human relationships, that both Existentialist and Essentialist solutions are inevitably fatal.

And so, after the entire episode is finished, we see Modern Man defeated and alone:

I was frantic. Half a dozen letters I started--to Joe, to the police, to Peggy, to Joe again--and could finish none. It was no use: I could not remain sufficiently simple-minded long enough to lay blame--on the Doctor, myself, or anyone--or to decide what was the right course of action. I threw the notes away and sat still and anguished in my rocking chair. The terrific incompleteness made me volatile; my muscles screamed to act; but my limbs were bound like Laocoon's--by the serpents Knowledge and Imagination, which, grown great in the fullness of time, no longer tempt but annihilate.

Presently I undressed and lay on the bed in the dark, though sleep was unthinkable, and commenced a silent colloquy with my friend.

"We've come too far," I said to Laocoon. "Who can live any longer in the world?"

There was no reply (pp. 196-197).

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Jake goes off, therefore, to join the Doctor at his new, hidden location in Pennsylvania and thereby totally remove himself from the world of human relationships. Theoretically, there may still be the chance that the Doctor's schedule of therapy, whether it continues to be Mythotherapy or a new approach, can miraculously save him; but Modern Man does not believe in miracles, and the novel's last word is "Terminal."

One more idea must be added rather anticlimactically to the subject of Jake Horner's characterization. We have seen that he shares many illustrative traits with his predecessor, Todd Andrews; but there are still a few others which must be noted. Jake, too, stands for the Writer. One thing that suggests this is his acute and in a sense absolute interest in language. We see this interest most prominently in two discursive passages. The one hails the act of "Articulation!":

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 (p. 119).

In the other passage, he elaborates on the subject of this necessary betrayal of experience:

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 (p. 142).

This assertion makes us fully aware that it is not just the Writer in general but particularly the Writer of Fiction which Jake

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stands for. Clearly, he sees his life primarily as material for stories, for plots; and the characterizations upon which those plots depend are necessary over-simplifications and thus distortions of the truth about human beings in exactly the same way as are the roles which human beings routinely assign themselves and others in their lives. Barth's view of storytelling, as embodied in Jake Horner, parallels his view of the human personality, as the Doctor gives it in the passage on Mythotherapy which I quoted at length above: "fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life" (p. 89).

What The End of the Road has to say about the Writer, the Storyteller, is even more definitive than the assertion in The Floating Opera. First, to the extent that he is intellectually a man of the twentieth century or is writing to appeal to that sort of man, the Writer is going to have a difficult time writing traditional narration. That is, he is going to have trouble writing the kind of stories that have an implicit faith in cause-effect relationships that are rationally verifiable, in empirically demonstrable connections between God and man, thought and deed, childhood and adulthood, desire and act, etc. The trouble lies, as we have seen, in the modern perception that the "real" cause of any act is unknowable. This is why, on the Doctor's advice, Jake limits his reading to plays, in which we know for sure only what the characters say or do. This is why he finds it so "enormously refreshing" to tell the Doctor the whole story of his affair with the Morgans "as long as [he] stuck to the actual events and made no attempt to explain anybody's motives" (p. 178). This is

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why, in the story he is telling the reader, he gives his characters no histories and thereby obeys the general admonition which the Doctor gives him on their first day of therapy: "Ah, ah, no biography, Jacob Horner . . . just clutters things up" (p. 78). And this is why, after Rennie's death, Jake cannot be "simple-minded" enough to lay blame--and why, therefore, he throws away all his incomplete notes.

Barth's second assertion about the modern Writer is that somehow, in spite of the exhaustion of the tradition in which he has been raised, he endures. Perhaps because for him articulation is in a very real if not an ultimately justifiable sense an absolute, perhaps out of sheer momentum, perhaps as a bid for sympathy or an act of absolution, perhaps for pure fun, perhaps . . . at any rate, the Storyteller doggedly persists. Just as Jake Horner does not commit literal suicide when the tradition of rational value-thinking which he has inherited from Western culture reaches its terminal point for him, neither does he commit literary suicide when the narrative tradition that is based on that rational value-thinking also reaches its terminal point for him. Jake's urge to continue existing on the purely physical level, to remove himself only figuratively from the world, is perfectly paralleled by his urge to continue writing stories--in particular, his urge to write this story. He must keep making written myths for the same irrational "reason" that he must keep making the complex of myths that constitute his being. As long as the words keep flowing, as long as the narrative heart keeps beating, there is still the chance of his miraculously discovering some new, totally satisfying--even saving--mode of Storytelling.

The connection between literal stories and life stories is more than metaphorical or coincidental. If the narrative instinct is symbolic of the self-preservation instinct, then it is symbolic in the Coleridgean sense of being a part of the force which it itself suggests. Moreover, as we have already seen in The Floating Opera, the relationship between the urge to write and the urge to live can be a causal one. Todd Andrews does not kill himself after the events which make up his story because he "needs" to write that story; and, although that point is not made as explicitly in The End of the Road, one cannot help but assume that a similar need has had much to do with Jake Horner's staying alive for two years after he has made the prognosis of "Terminal." For Todd there was obviously another story that needed telling. For Jake, who now has in a sense told that story, there is no other clearly ahead; and it is possible that he will put the final period to his existence immediately after he has put the final period to his page. It is possible, but not probable. One suspects that so powerful a narrative urge will itself somehow lead him to yet another story which "must" be told. After these first two novels of Barth's, one can see why he has elsewhere said that the situation of Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights tales is his favorite metaphor for the situation in which the Modern Writer finds himself. She not only lives to write, but she writes to live. She must continue to tell spell-binding stories for a thousand and one nights or be killed by the king; and if she should die, the rest of the kingdom most surely would follow.

III

Discussing Jake Horner's illustrative characteristics without constantly alluding to Joe Morgan's has been as unfair to the novel as it has been difficult for me. The pronouncement which The End of the Road makes on the state of Modern Man is more comprehensive than has so far been suggested, and much of the added fullness is achieved through Joe's characterization. His most prominent physical and mental traits spin off from certain characters in The Floating Opera as well as dramatically complement the character of Jake Horner; and, in so doing, they indicate that Barth has invested Joe Morgan with an ideological function of great importance.

Like Jake and like Todd Andrews before him, Joseph Morgan also clearly stands for the intellectually Modern Man. As his wife points out, he and Jake start from the same premises in the field of ethics: that there is no God and that therefore nothing is intrinsically valuable. I do not need to belabor the point here, to rehearse all the evidence that can be gleaned from all of Joe's abstract conversations with Jake and Rennie in explaining the now-familiar reasons why he, too, has had to "say good-by to objective values" (p. 47). The truly extraordinary thing about Joe is not his thinking, brilliant as it is, but the nomomaniacal way in which, to use Jake's expression, he lives his ethical convictions "down to the fine print," applying them even to the most mundane situations in his life and usually doing so by way of heavy-handed instructions for his wife. The question of

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whether they ought to require their three- and four-year-old boys to give each other their baths, for example, sparks this exchange:

"Don't think we drive them," Rennie said. "We don't really give a damn. But I guess we demand a lot tacitly."

Joe listened to this remark with casual interest.

"Why do you say you don't give a damn?," he asked her.

Rennie was a little startled at the question, which she had not expected.

"Well--I mean ultimately. Ultimately it wouldn't matter one way or the other, would it? But immediately it matters because if they weren't independent we'd have to go through the same rigmarole most people go through, and the kids would be depending on all kinds of crutches."

"Nothing matters one way or the other ultimately," Joe pointed out. "The other importance is all there is to anything."

"That's what I meant, Joe."

"What I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't consider a value less real just because it isn't absolute since less-than-absolutes are all we've got. That's what's implied when you say you don't really give a damn" (pp. 42-43).

It is above all the frequency and the intensity of such "lessons" on Joe's part which cause him not just to be a modern man but to illustrate Modern Man.

Barth gives Joe Morgan no physical traits or conditions, however, to underscore his morally exhausted or impotent intellectual modernity. In fact, his apparently happy marriage and his physical appearance recall not Jake Horner or Todd Andrews before him, but Harrison Mack--especially Joe's physical appearance. His tall, muscular, athletic body, his golden hair and pencil mustache, his clear blue eyes--these traits in conjunction with his vocation as a

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historian and his avocation as a Boy Scout leader mark him not as a twentieth-century man so much as a man out of the past, an anachronism. In particular, they associate him, like Harrison, with the young-Teddy-Roosevelt era of late-nineteenth-century America and all its "manly" talk of and belief in putting optimism, self-reliance, and pragmatism in the place of religion. His surname, too, alluding as it does to the famous American banker of that era, places him in this part of American history.

There is no real contradiction between the "modern" ethical premises on which Joseph Morgan operates and his traditionally American characteristics. The apparent contradiction has two causes, and a clear understanding of them gets one to the very heart of Joe's illustrative function. One cause is the inevitable ambiguity in the word "modern." As I have used it, the word refers not simply or necessarily to contemporaneity, but to nihilism; a man is "modern" when he perceives that there is no God, that there are no absolutes, that the ruling universal principle is determinism. Such a "discovery" is, of course, a nineteenth-century one; and so the lectures on ethics which Joe so readily offers, like the lecture to his wife inspired by her saying "We don't really give a damn," are not at all in conflict with those characteristics of his that suggest the late nineteenth century. They are, in fact, very much in line with the distinctively American, the "young-Teddy-Roosevelt," aspect of those characteristics.

This brings us to the other cause of the apparent contradiction in Joe's illustrative function. He is made to stand for the peculiarly American version of Modern Man, and that, as we have noted several

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times before, means in John Barth's frame of reference that he is not fully modern at all. The typically American sort of mind is one which "sees the arbitrariness of the universe but shies away from its finality."⁷ In practical ethical terms, this shying away from finality assumes the form of one's not taking that last mental step toward "nothing," not making the more strictly twentieth-century "discovery" that the human mind is entirely part and replica of the Godless universe. When, in The Floating Opera, Todd Andrews does achieve this realization, it is no longer appropriate to think of him as the American; he is now the more generalized version of Modern Man. Harrison Mack, on the other hand, though he gives lip service to ethical relativity, never does take that last step; so he is consistently American and thus, by definition, anachronistic, innocent.

Until the latter stages of that novel, when Harrison's decision to take a long trip to Italy smacks of conscious escapism, his innocence seems entirely natural and unpremeditated. It is exactly at this point where Harrison's and Joe's characterizations diverge, however, where it becomes necessary to speak of Joe, as does one critic, as "a refurbished Harrison Mack."⁸ In order to determine more precisely the nature of that refurbishment and to shed more light in general on Joe's illustration of the Modern American, let us look at a passage to which I have already twice alluded. It is Joe's longest and most coherent assertion of his ethical position; and it follows

⁷Murphy, "In Print," 37.

⁸Joseph, "John Barth," 15.

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his recounting for Jake the time when he "popped" his wife in the jaw for apologizing for an act, and then popped her again when she apologized for apologizing:

"What the hell, Jake, the more sophisticated your ethics get, the stronger you have to be to stay afloat. And when you say good-bye to objective values, you really have to flex your muscles and keep your eyes open, because you're on your own. It takes energy: not just personal energy, but cultural energy, or you're lost. Energy's what makes the difference between American pragmatism and French existentialism--where the hell else but in America could you have a cheerful nihilism, for God's sake? I suppose it was rough, slugging Rennie, but I saw the moment as a kind of crisis. Anyhow, she stopped apologizing after that (p. 47).

Even if it were not supported by so many other explicit descriptions of the Joe Morgan ethical "cosmos" that they seem the products of a man who doth protest too much; and even if Joe did not deliberately, almost defiantly, back up words like these with slightly ostentatious but above all doggedly consistent acts like being a Boy Scout leader or owning almost no furniture or teaching his small children to bathe themselves--even if it stood alone, this passage would constitute irrefutable evidence that Joe's ethical innocence is entirely a willed stance. The self-conscious rationalizing which this declaration fairly shouts is proof that Joe's "cheerful nihilism" does not come naturally; it is a condition which he must struggle with all the strength he can muster everyday to achieve. His old-fashioned ethics are many more times as consciously assumed, methodically obeyed, and enthusiastically promulgated as were Harrison Mack's. And, most unlike Harrison's, they are emphatically, even violently, defended.

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One finally arrives, then, at an interpretation of Joe Morgan not as an illustration of the Traditional American who is somehow caught in the twentieth century, but as a fully Modern Man who is desperately trying to act like a Traditional American. He is trying to shy away from the finality of universal arbitrariness after he has clearly confronted it; and the result is not a "sweet" innocence like Harrison's but an intentionally exaggerated, somewhat ludicrous, somewhat dangerous, completely defensive Boy-Scout-turned-Super-Man dogma. Because Joe talks very little about his past, we have no idea when or how he first recognized his own personal form of nihilism that forced him to construct such a dogma. We can be certain that there was such an experience, however; for, from the moment when Jake and Rennie spy on him alone in his livingroom and find him exuberantly executing parade maneuvers and ballet movements, making silly faces and sounds in front of a mirror, and then simultaneously masturbating and picking his nose at his writing desk, it is clear that Joe has more than intimations of his own irrationality.

The passage in which Joe explains his reasons for slugging Rennie points unmistakably, then, to the principal way in which he is Jake's illustrative counterpart: Joe stands for another--in the context of the novel the other--possible solution to Modern Man's condition of having to live by relative values. And the name Barth himself, through Joe, suggests for this second solution is American Pragmatism. The broad outlines of this solution are clear, but the particulars of how it may actually be applied to one's own life demand further inspection. When the ethical muscles are flexed and the

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Exactly how do they keep one afloat? Toward what specific goals is that all-important energy to be applied? The quotation's last two sentences lead us to the answers. Joe used his physical energy in this one instance (of which he is quite proud) to slug his wife for apologizing; but the end towards which he applied his psychic energy, for which the physical act is both a metaphor and a policeman, is the spotting and eradicating of the philosophic principle that lay behind her apology: that a human being can do other than what he consciously wanted to do. It is the dangerous surfacing of that idea in Rennie that constitutes the crisis. As he tells Jake a short while later, "it's silly for anybody to apologize for something he's done by claiming he didn't really want to do it: what he wanted to do, in the end, was what he did. That's important to remember when you're reading history" (p. 50).

Jake's non-directive reply to this declaration is in keeping with his earlier claim that he is able to grant only notional assent to Joe's position. What that position lacks, of course, that might make it emotionally convincing is any regard for the early-twentieth-century "discovery" of psychic complexity in general and, in particular, of the subconscious. It is this part of the mind, the part from which Jake's many moods unpredictably spring and back into which they unpredictably disappear, which can make us do something we don't want to do, something irrational, something bizarre. Thus, it is awareness of the subconscious that Joe must expend all that energy constantly to deny. To acknowledge it as Jake does is to admit that human beings

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and the relative values by which they must make their apparently independent moral choices cannot be taken seriously. For the most pragmatic of reasons--a life without serious intent is not worth living at all--a man like Joe must struggle bravely and unceasingly to remain in the past, particularly at the turn of the century, before Freud, and thereby to shy away from the ethical implications of modern psychology.

Joe's choosing to be innocent of the subconscious and all of what he calls the "psychological determinism crap" that it implies allows him to act on the assumption that "a man can act coherently; he can act in ways that he can explain, if he wants to" (p. 47). To be more specific, the way a man accomplishes this kind of responsible action is by locating within himself what he takes to be his "psychological givens" (p. 46) and then making these the values from which his actions rationally follow. A man has certain personal "essences" which can be identified and then used as a guide to conduct. It seems to me, then, that another term which might well apply to Joe's general solution to moral relativity, one which has the virtue of more clearly setting him off against Jake Horner and his Existentialist solution, is that of subjective "Essentialism." Joe lives by the theory that personal essence, not existence, defines human identity. Or, at any rate, he lives by the theory that a person has to act as if it does, because that is the only way to be a responsible, serious moral agent. And a person must want to be that. As we have already noted, it is precisely this solution which Jake "borrows" from Joe when he goes about arranging for Rennie's abortion.

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An Essentialist solution obviously does not guarantee happiness in the sense of freedom from conflict and pain. As Joe points out,

"In my ethics the most a man can ever do is to be right from his point of view; there's no general reason why he should even bother to defend it, much less expect anybody else to accept it, but the only thing he can do is operate by it, because there's nothing else. He's got to expect conflict with people or institutions who are also right from their points of view, but whose points of view are different from his" (p. 46).

Moral seriousness alone, quite aside from happiness, is the raison d'etre of Joe Morgan's ethical solution; and its driving forces are innocence and energy. Not surprisingly, then, Joe's doctoral thesis is "an odd, brilliant study of the saving roles of innocence and energy in American political and economic history" (p. 66).

This illustrative dimension of Joe Morgan, the fully Modern Man who has chosen an American Pragmatist and subjective Essentialist solution, is fully developed in the first third of the novel, climaxing with the scene in which Jake and Rennie secretly spy on him through the living room window. At this point, we can already see that the illustration has not been static, that Barth has already made two statements about this sort of ethical cosmos. First, it has been clearly and convincingly linked to the concept of fascism. The ruthlessness with which Joe not only practices but also enforces his survival-of-the-fittest morality points our attention in this direction; and the association is confirmed when we recall that that is exactly the direction in which Harrison Mack is headed when we last see him in The Floating Opera. The link between fascism and Joe's

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subjective Essentialism is further strengthened by Joe's classically Aryan features and by his interest in the Boy Scouts, which cannot help but bring to mind Nazism and the Hitlerjungen. Clearly, Barth seems to be saying, we have seen in this century the grave danger inherent in this sort of ethical solution.

Second, even as Barth develops the Joe-Morgan cosmos in the first third of the novel, he shows that that cosmos is not able genuinely to improve the quality of human relationships--and for reasons other than the ones Joe himself can so easily name in the above passage. We see this as Joe attempts to defend his solution, which by his own definition need not be defended, to Jake and as he attempts to force his solution, which by his own definition is applicable only to himself, upon his wife.⁹ The problem here is that if other persons will not comprehend and live by the only code which allows you to deal seriously with yourself, then those persons cannot be dealt with seriously and you are alone. On the other hand, if you do succeed in forcing your code on them, as Joe does with his wife, then you not only have violated the code but also have erased the other person's true self, his "psychological given," upon which the entire code depends in the first place. Joe has obviously tried to compromise in this regard by trying to make only one other person like himself and by choosing someone whose "psychological given" appeared to be the kind of strength he so prized.

⁹ See my footnote number 6.

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In the middle third of The End of the Road, in the wake of the adultery, Joe is forced to admit openly and unequivocally, as he apparently never has had to before, that his Essentialism is inadequate, fallacious, and quixotic. When Jake quite explicitly brings up the subject of psychological determinism in order to excuse his act with Rennie, Joe is pressed to declare that "no ethical program can be defended clear down the line" (p. 114). And soon he must make the further admission that his actual solution is to "assume that we're free agents--pretend we are even when we suspect we aren't (p. 115) and that what he has been demanding from Jake and Rennie under the name of "explanation" is probably only "rationalizing after the fact" (p. 116).

Nevertheless, he still claims that one must indulge in such rationalizing, such pretense; and when he concludes that Jake is unwilling to do so and that Rennie is unable to do so to his complete satisfaction, Joe reverts to the strict egocentric nature of his own code. He is against his wife's committing suicide, but he doesn't move to prevent it; he takes a stand on the possibility of abortion (he is against it for reasons that prove to be quite sound), but he does not prevent Rennie from having one if she wants it. He allows her to act consciously, and alone, like a free moral agent, even if this means sitting passively by while she shoots herself in the head. And that is exactly what might have happened the night they told Jake of her pregnancy had Jake not dived to stop her. So, Joe allows her to have the abortion that Jake arranges; and, after her death, he does not force Jake to take public responsibility by telling the police

about his role in the murder. On the other hand, he faces up squarely to the personal consequences of his Essentialism: the loss of his wife and his job and, at least temporarily, of his children. At the end he is totally alone. Clearly, Barth is asserting through Joseph Morgan that Essentialism is as fatal an ethical solution as is Existentialism.

And yet, there is more to the question of modern value and identity than that. Barth's comment on Joe's solution is not as bleak as his comment on Jake's. A reader feels much more positive toward Joe at the novel's end than he did earlier, and I think two factors play a part in this feeling. One is that there is something sympathetic in Joe's innocently holding on to a sense of essence in himself even though he knows he cannot finally prove it and then unflinchingly accepting the consequences, no matter how catastrophic. Undoubtedly, this behavior smacks of the bull-headed and the quixotic, but certainly it is more admirable than Jake's desperate, dishonest, ineffective vacillation. When Jake brings Rennie's body back home, for example, he is groveling and indecisive; but Joe is still acting swiftly and still pushing his glasses back on his nose in that characteristic gesture that symbolizes his efforts to "keep his eyes open." And he is doing so in spite of real emotion, as evidenced by his tears and his quivering voice.

This, in turn, suggests the other favorable quality in Joe. For a few weeks, at least, after he has finally stopped his post-facto rationalizing of Rennie's adultery and decided to stay married to her despite her now-mysterious personality, he and Rennie do seem to

achieve the genuine communication that has always been their goal. This is what Joe claims has happened, anyway; and his claim is borne out by the tranquillity of the Morgan home on Jake's last two visits there. This seems especially true of the short scene at the beginning of Chapter 12, in which Jake finally tells them that he has arranged an abortion. It begins by Jake's noting, "it was not suggested that I stay for dinner or anything else"; it runs through a few lies by Jake regarding the Doctor's ability, then suspicion on Joe's part, and then Rennie's consent; and it ends with Jake saying, "It was as though I'd spoiled something." The inescapable conclusion is that the last few weeks' relationship between Joe and Rennie has more to do with real affection, real emotion, than any relationship of Jake's will ever have.

Not because of but in spite of his conscious attempt at an Essentialist solution, Joe achieves at least some measure of temporary moral victory. Perhaps his innocence and energy are not entirely willed after all; perhaps Joe Morgan's traditional American ability to see "the arbitrariness of the universe but [shy] from its finality" is somehow real, somehow essential in him after all in a way that he himself can feel but not explain. In the nihilistic universe of The End of the Road, every assertion must be prefaced with perhaps; and yet many phenomena remain to be explained. One feels compelled to explain, for example, the fact that, having seen precisely the same "finality" which Jake saw, Joe chooses the opposite, innocent solution to it, and the fact that, while less than two days of acting

responsibly "exhausts" Jake, Joe can be as energetic as ever after years of such acting.

Perhaps, then, it is a very genuine "shyness" after all which allows the All-American Boy finally to get the girl in this novel, as he did in the first. Joe and Rennie's apparently perfect union is only temporary, of course; and it does not create any great change in Joe's ruthless consistency. Deliberately, while Rennie considers suicide, he still gets work done on his dissertation; and his last phone call to Jake, asking pleasantly what he plans to do now, suggests that he is still practicing his American Pragmatism with a vengeance. But somehow he is less "dead" at the end of this novel than is Jake. Although Joe has lost a staggering amount, he at least still has the solace of fidelity to an ideal; and there is no indication that he thinks he must remove himself bodily and indefinitely from the world of human relationships, as must Jake. At the end of the phone call, it is Jake, not Joe, who is left with a "dead instrument in the dark" (p. 197).

As with Jake and Todd before him, one postscript must be added to our discussion of Joe Morgan's illustrative dimension; for there is no question that he, like them, is also the Writer. It may at first seem that a novel and a dissertation are two very different kinds of writing, and in a strict sense they are. Joe is first and foremost the Scholarly Writer. But novels and dissertations, particularly dissertations in history, raise similar questions about the writing of fiction in contemporary times. Both Joe and Jake are writing stories about past events, "histories" that try to capture

what "really" happened. Both, because they are fully modern men, have the same problem in determining human motivation. Jake simply tries to ignore the problem, after discursively recognizing it, of course, in order to get along with his plot; but Joe, as we have seen, fervently believes that the mystery and complexity of the mind can be fathomed, or rather, must be fathomed, even if it means retarding the plot so much at times that one appears to be dispensing with it altogether. It does not bother him at all that his thesis should take years to complete.

A person must not write, Joe believes, must not act in any way, until he is ready; and he is not ready until he knows "all the facts and all the interpretations of the facts" (p. 111). And the key to his finally achieving this seemingly endless task is the belief that "what [a man] wanted to do, in the end, was what he did" (p. 50). If this is "important to remember when reading history," as he claims, then it is doubly important to remember when writing history. Of course, Joe is being more than emphatic here--he is being defensive again, because he believes in the concept of history itself, just as he believes in the concept of moral responsibility. He is intelligent enough to see that without the neat desires = deeds equation, there finally can be no history, no stories which rationally explain the human scene, just as there can be no moral responsibility. Life is totally senseless confusion. One must say good-bye to subjective as well as to objective values.

One point that Barth is making through the characterization of Joe Morgan, then, is that the Modern American Writer is caught in the

bind of knowing on the one hand that traditional narrative cannot be written and realizing on the other that it has to be. Joe must mentally write a coherent, rational story of his own life and of Rennie's; after finding out about the adultery, he must, to use Rennie's expression, "do a Marcel Proust on the thing" (p. 138). Similarly, he must finish his dissertation. In both phases of his life, the bind is the same--knowing that people are not rationally explainable but having to pretend they are in order to survive. And he does survive, which is the second half of what the characterization of Joe Morgan illustrates about the Modern American Writer. Even if he still clings to traditional literary as well as ethical values, even if his solution to the problem of writing narrative is exactly opposite to Jake Horner's, somehow verbal energy alone can keep him, like Jake, alive. There is little doubt that soon after Rennie's death Joe returned to his pen and paper and note cards and wrote more vigorously and brilliantly--and, in a sense, more admirably--than ever about the saving roles of innocence and energy.

IV

Rennie Morgan's illustrative dimension is somewhat simpler to describe than the two preceding ones. She, like Jake and Joe, is the fully Modern Man; not only has she lost belief in a God, but she also has, to use Jake's words, "peered deeply into herself and . . . found nothing" (p. 66). What differentiates Rennie from Jake and Joe is

that with her illustration the emphasis is on "Man" rather than "Modern." She is the common man, the average person, who is "caught" between modern forces that she cannot entirely comprehend or deal with. To put it another way, the way in which she herself at one point and Jake at another put it, Rennie is the Human Personality torn between the God of Reason or Being (Joe) and the Devil of Unreason or Not-Being (Jake).

One method Barth uses to create this more generally Human aspect of Rennie Morgan's illustration is to give her at least the rudiments of a biography to serve as a context for her actions. This biography, especially because it is so "commonplace" (p. 57), serves to differentiate her from the two men in her life, who are given almost no biography at all before their meeting her and thus must be construed to a great extent not as persons but as ideologues sprung full-grown from nowhere. Another way in which Barth emphasizes Rennie's function of standing for the more generalized concept of Man is simply by giving her the maiden name McMahon.

There are two other more pervasive, perhaps more subtle ways in which Barth achieves this illustrative function in Rennie. First, in order that she might more clearly stand for all human beings, he downplays and blurs her specific sexual features in somewhat the same way as he does Betty June Gunter's in the first novel. He makes Rennie large and strong for a woman (she is heavier than Jake), gives her short-cropped hair, and endows her with a good deal more coordination and athletic interest than is common with most women. Not unrelated to these traits is the fact that she does not play the

woman's traditional passive role in her first intercourse with Jake and that the "tumblings and flexings . . . and such" of the night are "rather too athletic" for his taste. Even her mental qualities, filtered through the mind of Jake Horner, become means by which she is made to stand for men as well as--often, rather than--women. When Jake first encounters her absolute honesty, his reaction is, "this from a wife?" and then, "What was this beast honesty ridden by a woman?" (p. 22). After Jake has come to know her better, he prefaces the remark about her "modern" mind which I have already cited--"she had peered into herself and had found nothing"--with the qualifier, "alone of all the women I knew, if not all the people" (p. 66).

The second and more pervasive and subtle way in which Barth makes Rennie illustrate a common, generalized version of Modern Man or the Human Personality is by emphasizing the physical, non-intellectual aspects of her character, those aspects which we see very little of in the two men and which, in a sense, constitute a lowest common denominator for all of humanity. Barth accomplishes this emphasis primarily by associating Rennie with animals, particularly with the horses that she rides so well. At first the associations are casual; and once, when the Morgans propose that she and Jake take up horseback-riding together, even funny:

"Do you like horseback-riding, Jake?" Rennie had happened to ask.

"Never rode before, Rennie."

"Gee, it's fun; you'll have to try it with me sometime."

I raised my eyebrows. "Yes, I suppose it would be better to do that before I tried it with a horse" (p. 48).

But when they return from riding early one evening, peek in the front window, and find Joe giving undeniable proof that he is a full-fledged member of the irrational universe, Rennie is shattered; and there is nothing funny about Jake's saying, "I stood beside her, out of the light from the brilliant living room, and stroked and stroked her hair, speaking softly in her ear the wordless, grammarless language she'd taught me to calm horses with" (p. 71). By the time he is driving her to her fatal abortion, it is with deadly seriousness that he observes, "I was very much aware of her as apart from Joe, myself, values, motives, the world, or history--a solitary animal in a tight spot" (p. 187).

The effect of explicit associations like these is to make the point that Rennie, through no fault of her own except that she is "only" human, is not sophisticated enough to hold her own when caught between the suprahuman modern forces embodied in Joe and Jake. Throughout most of the novel, they seem able, in a purely physical sense at least, to live by relative values; and, even at the end, the conclusions we draw about the literal fatality of their respective modes of operation are based on what they do not do to themselves but to a "real human being." Joe and Jake do not physically die or even decline in health any more than do abstract ideas. Rennie, on the other hand, obviously does. Although she tries hard to adopt Joe's and Jake's dogma that "less-than-absolutes" can be enough, she is easy for them to trip up in any argument. Like her horses and like herself when she is riding those horses, Rennie in her everyday life needs absolute, externally imposed rules if she is to function gracefully

and efficiently. Without such rules she is "lost"; and, knowing this, she has made Joe figuratively both her rider and her rule-book. That is why she does not complain about his slugging her in the face when he disapproves of one of her actions. She has had occasion to do as much to her horses.

After Rennie peeks in the living room window, beholds her husband's bizarre antics, and thereby loses the one absolute in her life, she begins physically and emotionally to decline. Her intercourse with Jake shortly thereafter seems inevitable, not only because all acts in a thoroughly nihilistic universe are inevitable but also because her physical intercourse with Jake is a symbol of her conscious acceptance of the existentialist cosmos that he represents. Carnal knowledge becomes an emblem of metaphysical knowledge. Finally, after the confession to Joe, the solid week of rationalizing, the re-enactments of the crime which Joe forces upon her, the discovery of her pregnancy, the two days on the brink of suicide, and the acceptance of the hastily arranged abortion, Rennie is that "solitary animal in a tight spot." The description of her on the Doctor's table is brutally vivid. She cries and squirms in pain as the Doctor un- gently scrapes her uterus, she hemorrhages, she vomits into an ether mask, and in a few seconds she has inhaled the vomit and strangled on it:

And so this is the picture I have to carry with me: the Treatment Room dark except for the one ceiling floodlight that illuminated the table; Rennie dead there now, face mottled, eyes wide, mouth agape; the vomitus running from a pool in her mouth to a pool under her head; the great black belt lying finally unbuckled across the

sheet over her chest and stomach; the lower part of her body nude and bloody, her legs trailing limply and clumsily off the end of the examination table (p. 191).

Had she never met first Joe and then Jake, and finally, through Jake, the Doctor, we would never have been left with that picture; so the foremost conclusion to be drawn from Barth's illustrative characterization of Rennie McMahon Morgan must be that the Human Personality is in an intolerable dilemma. It is torn between two equally destructive and in the end fatal rational modes of operating in a completely nihilistic universe. There is, however, still another facet of Rennie's illustrative dimension; and it serves to qualify to an extent this primary one. In the first three-quarters or so of the novel, her condition is just as she says: "I'm lost, Jake! I'm not as strong as Joe or even you. I'm not strong enough to get caught in this!" (p. 124). She has a characteristic mannerism which, like Joe's spectacle-punching, becomes symbolic of her situation (and which she "borrows" from Todd Andrews that crucial night in his room), a habit of whipping her head from side to side in a squint-eyed grimace which expresses both pain and hilarity. It is the perfect emblem of Man's being torn between the horror and the ludicrousness of a meaningless universe, between Joe's seriousness and Jake's whimsy.

After she discovers that she is pregnant, however, Rennie does not long stay so weak, so caught. She no longer whips her head from side to side. When she and Joe come to Jake's room to tell him of the new development, she is finally able to take a deliberate and calm stand. "I don't want to carry this baby . . . I'm going to get an

abortion or shoot myself, Joe. I've decided" (p. 152). Later, when Jake comes to their home with the fraudulent news that the abortion has been honestly arranged, Rennie further clarifies and strengthens her stand. With impressive dignity she states, "I don't care who does the job or how it's done or under what circumstances, but I won't tell lies or assent to lies, and I won't pretend to be anybody but myself . . . I don't want this baby, Jake. It might be yours" (p. 169).

Quite clearly, Rennie McMahon Morgan is no longer a passive, morally whip-sawed creature. Like Jane Mack before her, only with much more explicit authority, she has gone over to her husband's side for good. She has chosen to act in a manner that I have alternately called American, Pragmatic, and Essentialist. She has chosen to act as if she could "really" choose. In those last days of her life, moreover, she and Joe apparently share the perfect companionship for which they have always yearned; and it has come to pass when, ironically, she has stopped accepting Joe's dictums as God's law and has begun to act as if she were a free moral agent. Even though Joe does not approve her decision to have the abortion, he still can in a sense approve her manner of dying because apparently its risk was freely assumed.

Again, as with the characterization of Joe, one cannot say with certainty whether or not Rennie, by finally acting as if she did have a "real," absolutely important self, comes to the conclusion that in fact she does. From Jake's point of view--ethical as well as narrative--one cannot know the Truth about this or any other human action. Perhaps, then, she "really" does not want to carry the baby;

or perhaps, as an act of willed innocence, she is pretending that that is the case. In either event, Rennie achieves a kind of victory for Modern Man. She experiences, however briefly, an intimate, perfect communication with another human being, the kind of communication which none of Barth's central characters has known since the eighteen-year-old Todd Andrews had his sudden, short-lived encounter with the German sergeant. That Rennie's moment of perfect communication, like Todd's, is attained at tremendous cost and is terminated by death does not finally lessen its value. Her victory is unquestionably a temporary, moral, pyrrhic one; but in a nihilistic universe in which any mode of living exacts a staggering cost and everything finally dies, temporary, moral, pyrrhic victories are all that men can have. Certainly, no close human companionship, no victory of any kind, is achieved by Jake.

In speaking so explicitly and at such length on this aspect of Rennie's illustrative characterization, I am perhaps over-emphasizing a part of the novel which is based primarily on implication and suggestion. Jake is able to observe only a few minutes of the Morgans' final relationship; and, even then, he is incapable of determining its exact nature. He can only note that the couple seems surprisingly serene, that he is not asked to "stay for dinner or anything else," that his presence seems to have "spoiled something" between the two, and that that "something" makes him feel "acutely uncomfortable." The one occasion when we are told directly about the Morgans' newfound happiness, their victory over nihilism, is when Joe tells Jake

"You probably don't realize that in a way Rennie and I have been happier in the last few weeks than we've been for a long time

"For one thing, since this started I've shelved the dissertation for a while, so we've had more time together than usual. We've talked to each other about ourselves more than we ever did before, necessarily

". . . We certainly haven't been carefree; but you can be pretty much happy without being carefree. The point is we've been dealing with each other pretty intensely and objectively--exploring each other as deep as we can. That part of it's been fine. And we've been outdoors a lot, because we didn't want to ruin our health over it. We've probably felt a lot closer to each other than ever, whether we've solved anything or not" (p. 144).

The fact that Joe says all this in late September--before the discovery of Rennie's pregnancy--suggests that Rennie's and Joe's new, "victorious" relationship is more than a matter of her final choice of Joe's solution over Jake's. The relationship actually starts when, after the first few days of desperate, night-and-day analysis of motivation, Joe and Rennie begin to see such activity as not important enough to "ruin our health over," when all their rational talk, whether it "solved anything or not," began to make them feel a new degree of closeness. A few lines after the above quotation, Joe is able for the first time to call Rennie simply his "friend." The discovery of her pregnancy temporarily disrupts this new friendship, but her firm decision either to get an abortion or to kill herself marks the beginning of a return to that happy state. And the principal reason why her decision should have that effect is that it is based not on a rationally devised theory but on a profound feeling that she does not want a baby which might be Jake's.

The upshot of all these considerations is that another word is needed to define the principle primarily responsible for the Morgans' implied victory over nihilism, not a rational, objective word like Americanism or Pragmatism or Essentialism but an irrational, subjective word like feeling or affection--or love. In the Morgans, as in the Macks before them, we see an illustration of modern man being presented with the irrational possibility of Love as a way out of his rational ethical dilemma. Obviously, the Morgans are not as affectionately demonstrative as were Harrison and Jane Mack; it is part of the Morgan code to try to suppress emotionality. They are not, however, entirely successful. Jake's first impression of them is that their calm exterior is not natural; and in their superficially matter-of-fact way, they do offer Jake immediate, spontaneous friendship. Also, their speech reflects that they do take for granted, evidently from personal experience, the notion that there is such a thing as love. Weeks after the adultery, Rennie directly admits that she loves Jake. (Of course, she admits also that she hates him.) And, although Joe always claims to be searching for a purely rational cause for the adultery, he, too, at one point openly acknowledges that he might love Jake. "Did you ever consider," he asks Jake,

"that maybe I'm to blame for all of this? A lot of things could be explained neatly if you just said that for some perverse reason or other I engineered the whole affair. Just a possibility, along with the rest. What do you think?" (p. 145).

The clear implication is that he may have desired his wife to make love to Jake as a way of vicariously doing the same. Certainly, the fact that Joe talks about adultery, with Rennie as the theoretical

example, on one of Jake's first visits and the fact that it is he who suggests the horseback-riding in the first place both support this possibility. Rennie herself suspects from the start that Joe's interest in Jake is more than platonic and intellectual. She tells Jake at an early riding session, "after your first few conversations he was pretty much excited. What he told me was that it would be good for me to get to know a first-rate mind that was totally different from his, but there must have been more to it than that" (pp. 63-64). On the heels of Rennie's admitting the possibility of such "perverse" love, Joe claims that if there were such perversity on his part it was unconscious; but this claim obviously does not refute the possibility. By definition, love springs from unconscious sources.

Joe Morgan implicitly, then, and Rennie Morgan explicitly offer Jake Horner the possibility of Love. His reaction is almost identical to the reaction of Todd Andrews when the Macks make the same offer. He is flattered and intrigued by the phenomenon; but, finally, he won't have any of it. Any possibility that he might accept and reciprocate the affection disappears as soon as Joe hypothetically proposes a permanent, triangular relationship among the three. Love's close identification with sex in particular and with the subconscious in general mark it for Jake as just another irrational and hence unreal aspect of a universe that is not to be taken seriously. The "tender, love-like feelings" toward Rennie which "announce their presence" in him at one point are no more absolutely valuable or enduring than is his "Rennie-torturing mood" at another. He can take the word love and show logically that it is simply a linguistic distortion of reality, a

fascinating, necessary artifice but in no way ultimately important. He does not know how to deal with the fact that he is "thrilled" by Joe at one point (p. 146); so he simply ignores the feeling until it passes. He does not know how to categorize the emotion he feels so strongly for Rennie right before the abortion--"I didn't know how to go about distinguishing compassion from love: perhaps it was only compassion I felt for her"; so, again, he lets the emotion pass without openly acknowledging or acting upon it.

As a result, the possibility of Love passes from Jake, as it passes from Todd Andrews before him, because he knows and imagines too much to accept and return it. He is not sufficiently innocent. Modern Man, in the persons of Joseph and Rennie Morgan as well as in the person of Jacob Horner, is defeated by a thoroughly nihilistic universe no matter what ethical solution he adopts; but, in the case of the Morgans, the defeat is at least slightly qualified by their having been able genuinely to share and thus to brighten each other's lives for a short while before the inevitable death. In the case of Jake Horner the defeat is total because, from the beginning to the end of his road, he has been alone and "in the dark."

Closely related to the above characteristics in Rennie are those which indicate that she embodies an idea which I have called in the previous chapter "Otherness." In Rennie's relationships with Joe and with Jake, man is offered the possibility of achieving a genuine sense of wholeness by joining his own generally male qualities with "other," opposite, generally female ones. Rennie's sexual qualities are not, after all, completely neutralized. She is physically

attractive to both men; and her final, fatal predicament is a peculiarly feminine one. Also, she differs mentally from Jake and Joe in the traditionally female way of being less rational and more emotional than they. Moreover, in Rennie's relationship with Joe in particular, there is illustrated the possibility of man's achieving a sense of wholeness by coming to terms with the Otherness within his own personality, by establishing harmony between the conscious, "male" part of his mind and the subconscious, "female" part. Emphasizing this concept of intra-personal rather than inter-personal Otherness are those physical traits which Rennie shares with Joe: the large size, the light coloring, and the excellent coordination.

To a significant extent, then, Rennie Morgan is an illustration of Otherness, as were Betty June Gunter, the German Sergeant, and Jane Mack before her. And, although it is not stated explicitly in this novel as it was in the first, Barth's model for the wholeness which she offers to the man who can win her is Plato's half-male, half-female proto-human. By having Rennie finally ally herself intimately with Joe rather than with Jake, Barth is reminding us again that the act which joins the opposing halves of Plato's proto-human is an embrace. He is reasserting the contention that a true sense of wholeness, whether it is the result of coming to terms with the Otherness without or the Otherness within, can be achieved only by the man who somehow is able to remain innocent enough to love.

This concern with Otherness is given even fuller treatment in the characterization of Peggy Rankin. Distinctively female characteristics are even more pronounced in her than they are in Rennie. Peggie is shapely and small; she has long hair; she is associated with salt water (she and Jake first meet at Ocean City); and nearly all of her appearances and phone calls revolve around her sexuality. In all these instances, the similarity between her and Jane Mack in The Floating Opera is close. Moreover, Peggy, like Rennie, is placed in a predicament that is in our society exclusively a female one. When Jake is falsely propositioning her after his first day of classes (on the afternoon of the same day on which he commits adultery with Rennie), Peggie cries, "What a horrible spot a woman's in!" (p. 98). And in Jake's last visit with her, he uses her desperate desire to marry and thus to stop playing the role of forty-year-old-pick-up as both carrot and stick to move her to achieve his own ends.

Peggy's illustrative dimension is more fully developed, however, than to make her stand solely for the Otherness that is found in persons outside oneself, especially persons of the opposite sex. She also manifests a number of traits which echo Betty June Gunter and the German sergeant in The Floating Opera and which cause her, like them, to stand for the Otherness in one's own mind, for the primal and mysterious subconscious, the id. First, there are those features which emphasize oneness with Jake: her slim build, her rather long but not unattractive face, her profession as English teacher. Then,

too, she has features which suggest primitiveness: the dark hair and tan, the fact that she is noticeably older and more "spirited" than Jake, the fact that he associates her from first to last with simple, brutish sexual function. Her last name neatly sums up these two kinds of characteristics in Peggie: she is Jake's "Rank-kin." And smile at her though he will, her attraction for him is so strong that, even after she has in no uncertain terms rejected him, he cannot stop entertaining the possibility of making her his legal, legitimate kin by marriage: "Maybe I would marry Peggy Rankin; take her surname; father a child on her" (p. 186).

The pattern of interaction between Jake and Peggie is very similar to that between Todd Andrews and the major characters who stand for Otherness in The Floating Opera. First comes the spontaneous, in a sense inevitable, physical coupling which suggests symbolically that the merging of opposing halves into one whole is possible. Todd wildly copulates with Betty June; he embraces the German sergeant as if he were his mistress; similarly, Jake has intercourse with Peggie in her motel room at Ocean City. Then, this merger is followed by an encounter in which the narrator both inflicts and receives severe pain, in which whatever hopes the narrator and the other character may have had for a new sense of wholeness are shattered. Todd humiliates Betty June in the bordello and as a result barely escapes with his life; he shoves his bayonet into the German sergeant's throat and thereafter is haunted by that soft puncturing sound; and, in the case of Peggie Rankin again, Jake makes a "humiliating" and "false" promise of marriage in exchange for the name of a competent abortionist and

then strikes Peggie a hard blow in the face when she either cannot or will not produce that name. Both before and after her final refusal, however, she is able to inflict some severe psychological blows of her own. She intentionally leads Jake to think that she does know an abortionist and thus to make his humiliatingly false protestations of desire to "clean up [his] messes" and marry her. And her dramatically prepared denial of aid is what literally precipitates Jake's desperate arrangements with the Doctor, which in turn cause Rennie's death and Jake's subsequent retreat from the world.

In the character of Peggie Rankin, then, we again find Barth illustrating the idea that man cannot help but try to "know" what is other than himself, but, paradoxically, that that attempt to embrace Otherness, particularly the Otherness which is the dark, irrational, subconscious side of his own mind, is not only futile but also fatal. In her relationship with Jake, Peggie thus symbolically reiterates the central assertion about modern man which Barth makes through every central character in his first two novels. When and if a man outgrows his ethical childhood, his first response is to turn to the outside world. He attempts to determine what he should do in given situations by acquiring intimate knowledge of the facts, both human and non-human, that surround him--by learning to identify the essence, the truth, the reality, the God, that seems inherent in those "other" facts and then tailoring his actions accordingly. The search brings a number of fascinating discoveries, but finally it proves to be futile; and man concludes that the universe is Godless. He is forced to turn inward, then, and try to discover whether knowledge of himself

can provide the absolute rules for conduct which knowledge of the universe cannot. At first, when he views his conscious, rational faculty, the one that is in charge of the whole investigation, as his dominant if not his sole distinguishing trait, the new approach appears to be working; but when he begins to be fully aware of his "other" subconscious, irrational faculty and to see it as the dominant trait, then the forces of determinism reign supreme and the concept of identity along with the concept of value becomes ultimately mysterious. Knowledge of the Otherness within finally confirms rather than denies knowledge of the Otherness without. A man's intimacy with either does not teach him how to act; it teaches him that there is no reason to act at all. It leads him to "nothing," to death, to "the end of the road."

VI

Like the four other major characters in The End of the Road, the Doctor has a strong illustrative function. He stands for the God or Truth or Secret of the universe as did his predecessor in The Floating Opera, Captain Jacob R. Adam. The "brisk assuredness" (p. 75) with which the Doctor works and explains the workings of the macrocosm as well as the microcosm, the bright light in which he always "operates," the manner in which Jake thinks of him with a capital D and associates him with the words God and Lord (pp. 181-182)--all these traits initially direct us to interpret him in the

illustrative manner suggested above. Yet, paradoxically, what the Doctor, again like Captain Adam, indicates about that God or Truth or Secret in the universe is that it is not there, or at least not there in the traditional absolute sense. All, the Doctor declares, is relativity, impermanence, mystery. His headquarters and his therapies continually change; Jake never does know his "real" name; he never can tell whether the Doctor "really" believes anything he says; he never is given the opportunity to directly question or disagree with the Doctor. "That's my business, not yours," the medic-mentor replies on the one occasion when Jake does try such questioning (p. 83).

Perhaps the best way to elucidate the idea which the Doctor embodies is to enumerate the traits in him which attach generally to two attributes. First is Ambiguity. Barth invests him with both good and evil in the symbolic colors of black (his skin), white (his house, room, chairs, and jacket), and gray (his mustache and sportcoat). The therapeutic paces he puts Jake through are "existentialist" in nature, but he highly approves of Joe's "essentialist" manner of living as well. In fact, as we saw in the first part of his explanation of Mythotherapy, he questions whether those two terms, or any others for that matter, are meaningful at all. The undeniable progress that his patients make toward "remobilization" and the astounding insight and sureness of his advice lead us to agree with Jake that he is amazingly "part prophet"; but the shady nature of his entire institution and especially his part in the butchering of Rennie Morgan make us equally ready to agree that he is "part quack."

In this last act, we see not only Ambiguity but also his second general quality, Indifference. It is difficult to imagine a more callous attitude under such conditions than the Doctor's; for, from the moment Rennie enters so obviously afraid and suffering to the moment she is carried out so horribly dead, all his interest is directed at Jake and at his learning a lesson from the experience. But we have been prepared for this callous Indifference by the Doctor's attitude toward his other patients throughout the novel. He is entirely dedicated to treating their paralyses, or rather, as he would say it, "paralyzed them," but certainly not out of any feelings of love or sympathy or concern. As nearly as one can tell, his sole motivation is curiosity.

Old people, who constitute almost his whole clientele, present him an interesting intellectual and physical challenge. They have often ceased moving altogether not as a result of physical ailments so much as of the mental perspective which their many years have given them; so they are convenient symbols for the Doctor (and for Barth) of the fact that there is, from the broader, longer point of view, no ultimate reason to do anything at all. It is precisely because Jake is not old but still has this broader, longer point of view, this cosmopsis, that the Doctor finds his case "the most interesting . . . [he's] seen in years" (p. 180). It is so interesting, in fact, that the Doctor does show one apparently true emotion, anger, when Jake threatens to ruin his carefully planned program of therapy by getting so intimately involved with the Morgans. The Doctor risks his entire career when he consents to do the abortion in order to salvage that case.

Ambiguity and Indifference, then, are at the heart of the universe--a black Doctor in a white room working assiduously and coldheartedly and illegally and effectively to keep the human race literally moving; treating them with philosophy, drama, calisthenics, and dozens of other "therapies" including love and prescriptive grammar and the World Almanac; "at worst . . . some combination of quack and prophet--Father Divine, Sister Kenny, and Bernarr MacFadden combined (all of them quite effective people) with elements of faith healer and armchair Freud thrown in--running a semi-legitimate rest home for senile eccentrics" (p. 86). He is unquestionably a "most extraordinary Doctor" who finally defies rational evaluation. The most appropriate comment one can make is exactly the one which Jake himself at one point makes: "Well--this is absurd" (p. 78).

And in that comment we have the final description of the universe of The End of the Road and of the non-God at the center. The Doctor stands for the idea of Absurdity itself. By allying Jake more closely than ever with Absurdity at the novel's conclusion, Barth is simply putting the exclamation point to his assertion that modern man cannot deny his fatal knowledge. If he is going to find a cure for the fatal disease of cosmopsis, if he is going to learn to "really live" again, then he will have to do so in the very face of universal and personal nothingness. And until that time, he had better realize that he is no longer fit to exist in the world of ordinary human relationships. The idea of modern intellectualists choosing to hide themselves away in institutions like the Remobilization Farm very much as religious devotees have traditionally chosen to hide themselves away

in monasteries and convents is, of course, absurd. But then one remembers the Doctor's reply when Jake once leveled that same charge at him: "So?"

VII

John Barth thus employs characterization in his second novel as his primary attack on the "brave ethical subjectivism" suggested as a possibility on the last page of his first novel, and the reasoning by which he accomplishes that feat is expressed most clearly and concisely in the atom metaphor which I alluded to early in my treatment of Jake Horner:

the individual is not individual after all, any more than the atom is really atomistic: he can be divided further, and subjectivism doesn't really become intelligible until one finally locates the subject (p. 142).

The End of the Road dramatizes this thinking, first by examining two basic and conflicting ways of living in response to the perception that the personality as well as the cosmos is atomistic, or nihilistic; and then by extending both ways to disaster. The first way, the one I have called Existentialism, is to accept totally the inner nothingness and, finding no meaning anywhere, to concern oneself only with action, no matter how whimsical and irresponsible it may be. The other way, which I have called Essentialism, is stubbornly to deny the inner nothingness and, pretending that you are your own God, to operate in a serious, responsible fashion. Once Barth has formulated these two

positions in the characters of Jacob Horner and Joseph Morgan, respectively, he destroys them by two principal methods. On the one hand, he creates a third character who stands for Man, Rennie Morgan, and traps her helplessly and fatally between the two positions. On the other hand, he has his Existentialist narrator and central character temporarily try Essentialism (Jake decides "absolutely" that Rennie should have an abortion and acts on that decision) and finally realize that it does not work for him, that both positions have been responsible for his share in Rennie's death.

Other ideas are clear in Barth's characterization, particularly the concepts of America and of the Writer; but they are subordinated to this principal concern with modern man's ethical dilemma and with the final termination of all "non-mystical value-thinking." The full fictional explanation of an alternative kind of value-thinking is about to come in Barth's third novel. We have seen it foreshadowed, however, in the characters of Joe and Rennie Morgan, as it was in a fainter way in Harrison and Jane Mack before them. Much of what the Morgans illustrate in this regard is implied, and it is impossible for a person who knows these first three novels well to tell how much of what he sees in one is actually there on its own and how much is the result of reflections from the other two. My point in this dissertation is that these three works of Barth's are essentially one. Suffice it to say at this point, then, that the peace which Jake Horner never finds and which Rennie and Joe Morgan do achieve for a short time has less to do with people thinking about how they should act than it does with people thinking that they love each other.

CHAPTER IV
THE SOT-WEED FACTOR

I

The Sot-Weed Factor is so different in kind from John Barth's first two novels that, as I suggested in my introductory chapter, critics apparently have not taken seriously Barth's claim that his first three works are a thematic unit.¹ At least they have not taken that claim seriously enough to explore fully the meaning of the third novel in relation to The Floating Opera and The End of the Road and to determine what answer Barth offers for modern man's problems of value and identity. Barth has left him with only a "brave ethical subjectivism" in the first novel and then has taken that position to its terminal point in the second,² but has he given modern man an alternative to that position in the third? Has Barth in fact proposed a sort of "mystical value-thinking" to replace the obsolete "non-mystical" sort? My answer to these questions is affirmative, and it is the purpose of this chapter to deal in some depth with the manner

¹John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," WSCL, 6, 10 & 11.

²Gregory F. Bluestone, "John Wain and John Barth: The Agony and the Accurate," Massachusetts Review, 1 (Fall 1959-Summer 1960), 586.

in which Barth defines again the modern ethical dilemma and then for the first time fully defines a solution to it.

As in the previous two chapters, I will approach the problem of meaning in Barth's work primarily through the element of "illustrative" characterization because it is, I believe, the primary tool with which Barth works to create his meaning. Such an approach on my part will again run the risk of making the novel sound more purely allegorical than it in fact is; but, in this novel, the risk is less dangerous. Here, more than in the earlier works, the mimetic, "representative," aspects of characterization are played down, while the philosophical, "illustrative," ones become more prominent. The Sot-Weed Factor is, of course, a "historical novel" based on the life of a real man named Ebenezer Cooke who wrote a real poem entitled The Sot-Weed Factor. But, as Philip E. Diser has pointed out, the historical facts with which Barth had to work are quite few and thus leave ample room for invention.³ Barth himself has happily admitted both at the end of the novel and in other places that he played fast and loose with Clio.⁴ It is apparent that Barth, like the central character he creates, sees in history "no more than the stuff of metaphors"; so, not surprisingly, Barth's answer to the direct question of whether The Sot-Weed Factor is an allegory is, in his characteristically understated way, affirmative:

³Philip E. Diser, "The Historical Ebenezer Cooke," Critique, 10, 3, 48-59.

⁴John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," Atlantic Monthly, 220, 2, 30.

I wouldn't be surprised. I had some things in mind when I wrote it, and it is interesting and cheering to find out later that I had more in mind than I thought I had . . . 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.⁵

The sheer size of The Sot-Weed Factor makes finding and explicating its patterns of "appropriateness" extremely difficult. Its 756 pages are packed with scores of complexly related characters woven into a plot that is intentionally "fancier than Tom Jones."⁶ For the sake of clarity and economy, then, I will concentrate on the two characters who carry the great majority of the thematic weight, Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame III. Even with this focus, however, one cannot help but touch upon the significance of many other characters and the context in which they appear; therefore, a plot summary is necessary at this point if my analysis is not to be constantly bogged down in exposition.

Ebenezer Cooke was born in 1666 on the Maryland estate of his father, Andrew, a tobacco agent (a sot-weed factor). Born at the same time was a sister, Anna; and the mother, also named Anna, died of the difficult birth. After four years of being raised by a young French nursemaid named Roxanne, the twins were taken from her and from the estate (Malden) and were allowed to grow up almost entirely on their own on the family estate at St. Giles, England. When Eben and Anna were ten, Andrew provided for them a brilliant, energetic, affectionate

⁵Enck, "Interview," 14.

⁶Enck, "Interview," 7.

young tutor named Henry Burlingame III. The three became as inseparable as the two had been previously; but, after six years, Henry was abruptly dismissed and Eben shortly thereafter was sent off to Cambridge. He proved to be an uninspired and indecisive student; and, finally, after his former tutor rescued him from a state of literal catatonia to which that indecisiveness had led, he left without the degree. He was no more inspired either as a tutor himself for two months or, after a year of idleness at St. Giles, as an apprentice accountant for six years in a London firm to which his father had sent him in order to prepare to manage and someday inherit Malden. It is at this point, in the spring of 1694, when Ebenezer is still unable to find a satisfactory vocation and, because of the same sort of indecision, is also still a virgin, that the plot proper begins.

As the inadvertent winner of a winehouse wager, Eben ends up alone with a beautiful spirited young whore named Joan Toast. Instead of making use of her for a fee, however, he chooses instead to idealize her and to dedicate his life to remaining virgin and writing poetry in her honor. Joan's lover and pimp, John McEvoy, is so irate at the loss of revenue that he informs Andrew Cooke of his son's supposedly dissolute habits; and Andrew demands, on penalty of total disinheritance, that his son leave on the next ship to America and begin immediately to manage the Maryland estate. Eben ingeniously combines the practical exigencies of his father's demand with the idealistic goals of his newly chosen vocation by asking for and receiving from Lord Baltimore an official commission as Poet Laureate of Maryland. Eben then bids an emotional goodbye to his sister and

boards a coach to Plymouth where the Poseidon is about to sail for the new world.

On the coach he again meets his former tutor, disguised as a Colonel Peter Sayer, who tells him of the fantastically complicated adventures and roles which he has had to assume in the seven years since they last saw one another in an attempt to trace his mysterious parentage. (He was raised from early infancy by an English sailor who found him floating in a canoe on Chesapeake Bay.) Burlingame's personal quest has become entangled with the highly complicated political situation in Maryland, where governor Nicholson is fighting to save the province from corruption at the hands of a villain named John Coode. In order to accomplish the former personal task, Burlingame needs to learn whether Sir Henry Burlingame, lieutenant of John Smith on his famous 1607 voyage up the eastern shore of the Chesapeake and author of a little known Privie Journall, is actually his ancestor. In order to accomplish the latter political task, Burlingame must lay hands on the Maryland Assembly Journal of 1691, the year in which Coode was acting governor. The Journal will allow the present governor to prove against Coode the charges of graft, vice, and sedition.

Upon arrival at Plymouth, Eben is almost killed when he intercedes in a tavern dispute between two of Coode's henchmen. Then he loses touch with Burlingame and finds him again, this time disguised as John Coode himself. Finally, Eben boards the Poseidon and finds that Bertrand Burton, the valet whom he thought he had left in London, has assumed his identity and that, if he does not want to be thrown overboard, he must in turn assume his valet's identity. The crossing

goes even less smoothly than the brief stay at Plymouth. It is marked by the virgin poet's apparently losing his whole inheritance through Bertrand's philandering and wagering, his nearly drowning in a storm, his being nearly raped by the crew, his being kidnapped by pirates, his accidentally coming into possession of part of the Assembly Journal for which Burlingame is searching, his discovering that on the opposite sides of those pages is a Secret Historie of John Smith's 1607 voyage which may well shed light on Burlingame's ancestry, his nearly raping a girl on a whoreship who looks very much like Joan Toast, and his and Bertrand's finally being made to walk the plank.

Instead of drowning, however, they are washed up on what they take to be an island. After freeing a large black man whom they find bound and washed up on the shore--the name he utters sounds like "Drakepecker"--and then leaving him to care for a wounded Indian whom they find in a cave--he is Quassapelagh, king of the Anacostin tribe--Eben and Bertrand make the further startling discovery that their location is not an island after all but actually the eastern shore of Maryland. One of the first persons whom they meet a little inland is a syphilitic swine maiden named Susan Warren, who, except for her sores and for ten years or so of aging, resembles Joan Toast. She claims, in fact, that she knows Joan to be nearby; and, at Eben's fervid entreaty, she promises to arrange a meeting between him and Joan that night at the house of her employer, Captain Thomas Mitchell. The anticipated reunion does not take place; but, after one more instance of Eben's almost committing rape, this time with Susan Warren, a different reunion does occur. The poet accidentally interrupts

Henry Burlingame, disguised as Tim Mitchell, the employer's son, making love to a pig.

The ex-tutor explains that he has become, in every sense of the word, a cosmophile: "I love the world, sir," he tells his shocked friend, "and so make love to it!" He draws the clear distinction between himself and Eben, who, in a Biblical as well as a literal sense, "know[s] naught of the great real world." Nevertheless, it is Eben and his sister Anna whom Burlingame loves most and would most fervently make love to. Though becoming increasingly disillusioned with Henry, Eben accompanies him to the home of a Jesuit priest named Thomas Smith. There they hear the story of a Jesuit missionary named Fitz Maurice--he was executed by Indians in the early 1600's--and then get possession of another part of the Assembly Journal-Secret Historie by means of another of Henry's disguises. The next afternoon, Eben and Burlingame arrive in Cambridge just in time to witness the regular meeting of the Dorchester County court. Its blatantly corrupt method of operation quickly enrages the virgin poet so that, in a paroxysm of righteous indignation, he intercedes in the case of Smith vs. Spurdance on behalf of the grievously put-upon William Smith. When the judge hears Eben's full name, he acquiesces to his will, takes the estate in question from Spurdance, and awards it to the plaintiff. Only too late does Eben learn that Smith is a scoundrel in the employ of Coode, that Ben Spurdance is an honest man in the employ of Andrew Cooke, and that, in short, the estate which he has just given away is his own Malden.

Matters become even worse for Eben when, after his disastrous day in court, he gets drunk for the first time in his life and publicly blames Henry for all of his miseries. In turn, Henry assaults Eben with a vivid public account of his sister's lusty amorous techniques. The poet swoons from the effects of the disclosure and the wine; and when he awakens he is in a corn crib, cold and naked and feeling the first signs of "seasoning," the common name for the illness which so often afflicts newcomers to Maryland. Mary Mungummory, the madame of a four-wheel whorehouse, soon befriends him and, besides giving him clothes, tells him the fascinating story of her ex-lover, Charley Mattassin. He was an Indian who, except for his dark skin, resembled Burlingame in almost every particular and who was hanged for murdering whites. Leaving the "Traveling Whore o' Dorset," Eben at last makes his way to Malden, where, severely weakened by the seasoning, he unknowingly commits two acts that seem to seal any possible legal loopholes in the transfer of the Cooke property. He signs an indenture agreement under William Smith and then goes through a hasty marriage ceremony with Susan Warren, whose employer is Smith's cohort.

Ebenezer comes near to death from the illness and from too heavy a dose of opiate medicine; but in the following weeks his new wife nurses him back to health, despite the contempt with which he treats her because he assumes that she has been part of the plot to rob his family of Malden. During the period of autumn convalescence, Eben finally composes a long poem on Maryland, as he originally promised Lord Baltimore (actually Henry in another one of his disguises) he would do. The poem is not the elegaic Marylandiad which he had

originally envisioned and had worked on intermittently in the spring, however, but a bitter satire entitled The Sot-Weed Factor, based upon his own shocking initiation into provincial life. After penning the last word of his poem, he wants to shoot himself; but his wife stays him with the story of Joan Toast.

She tells him of the young woman who had been so moved by Eben Cooke's innocent, idealistic love for her that night in his room that she left John McEvoy to follow Eben to Maryland and marry him, the young woman who had chosen to cross the Atlantic on a whoreship because it offered the only opportunity for her coming to her husband in no more used a condition than when he last saw her, the young woman who had been raped once by a syphilitic black and almost a second time by Eben himself, the young woman who was so disillusioned by that experience that she sold herself into the bondage of the first man whom she met at the dock, the young woman who was soon so infected and so wasted by opium and ill usage that she looked ugly and old and was considered good for nothing but tending pigs and boxing savages and marrying and nursing a fool, the young woman who nevertheless still loves that fool. Joan Toast, in short, is the woman who, under the false name of Susan Warren, stands before Eben at the very moment. All that she asks of him now is that he take the six pounds that she has earned servicing Indians in the cold woodshed, wait a few hours while she earns six more, escape with her to England on a ship that is about to embark from Cambridge, and care for her like a sister in the few months which she has left.

In a fit of shame and horror so powerful that it makes him retch, Eben begs forgiveness and pledges to do lovingly all that she has asked; but, before she can return, he takes her money and his poem and flees into the December night, intending to return to England alone. At the Cambridge dock, Eben is accosted by Ben Spurdance, the ex-overseer whom his court decision has ruined; and only the sword of Burlingame, this time in the role of a Nicholas Lowe, saves the poet from serious harm. Burlingame's personal magnetism and his news that Anna may well be in St. Mary's City convince Eben to ferry there rather than to sail for England. Upon reaching that destination, the two men separate in order for the cosmophile to look for Coode and the poet to look for his sister; but what the latter finds instead is his ex-valet Bertrand, who, since being separated from his master at Captain Mitchell's, has been playing the Poet Laureate again to no greater advantage than before. The man to whom he had wagered away Malden on the crossing now expects him to marry his pregnant daughter.

Bertrand also tells Eben that he has recently seen Anna, who looks much aged, and that she has gone to Malden thinking to find her sick brother there. Deeply afraid that Anna, like Joan, will be put to use in the den of prostitution and opium that Malden under Smith (and ultimately under Coode) has become, Eben takes Bertrand in tow and hires a sloop captained by a man named Cairn and crewed by two blacks to take them across Chesapeake Bay to Malden. A fierce storm drives them south of their destination, however; and only Captain Cairn's exceptional skill, the crew's indefatigable pumping, the soundness of the sloop, and a great deal of luck enable them to find

shelter at last in the Straights of Limbo off Bloodsworth Island. The escape is short-lived, though, for the island is the secret camp of a band of Negro and Indian rebels. Soon Eben, Bertrand, and the Captain are prisoners in a mud hut with a fourth white man who turns out to be John McEvoy. Before falling prey to the rebels, McEvoy had followed Joan to Maryland in a slave ship and been turned away in Eben's name once and for all. He and Eben readily forgive each other for the misfortune which each has caused; but such absolution seems to no avail when, after a month of confinement, the four are tied to stakes in the middle of camp.

Their lives are at least temporarily saved when two of the three rebel leaders who come out of their hut to supervise the burnings turn out to be Quassapelagh and "Drakepecker"--actually Drepacca--the two men whom Eben and Bertrand had saved when they first set foot on Maryland's shore. The Indian and the Negro petition the third and most influential rebel leader, Chicamec, the old Ahatchwhoop king whose militance against whites is legendary, to allow Eben and Bertrand to go free. Chicamec grants the favor, but Eben does not accept it. He maintains that, instead, all four whites must suffer whatever fate he does, since he is responsible for their being there in the first place. To that end he works out an agreement whereby he and McEvoy may leave the island and, if they are able to find Burlingame and persuade him to come there, Bertrand and Captain Cairn, too, will be released. If Cooke and McEvoy cannot produce Burlingame, then they will return and be burned along with the other two.

Such an agreement comes only after Eben is allowed to read the sacred book of the Ahatchwhoops, which is, in fact, the last part of John Smith's Secret Historie. It tells how Smith's voyage up the Chesapeake climaxed with his escaping the savage Ahatchwhoops by tricking Sir Henry Burlingame into becoming their new king and then abandoning him. The upshot of the story is that Smith's lieutenant was Henry Burlingame I and that the old Indian king named Chicamec is also Henry Burlingame II. He had married a woman who was sired by the Jesuit missionary Fitz Maurice on the night before his martyrdom; he had tried to kill his fair-skinned third son by setting him afloat on the Chesapeake shortly after birth; and he is undeniably the father for whom Henry Burlingame III has searched so long and fruitlessly. Eben's plan, though he does not, of course, reveal it to the rebels, is to have Henry go at least temporarily to Bloodsworth Island not only as a means of saving the four lives but also as a means of placating the old father who thinks he will be left without an heir. Thus placated, and with a son like Henry to advise him, Chicamec will be less likely to effectively lead the rebellion which could eventually wipe out every white in Maryland, if not in all of North America.

With this plan in mind, Eben and McEvoy set off to find Burlingame. The first person they meet is Mary Mungummory, on her way to Church Creek to inquire about a prospective whore to whom the citizens refer sarcastically as the Church-Creek Virgin. It is clear now that Mary's ex-lover, Charley Mattassin, was Chicamec's oldest son; and, when the three travelers stop for the night at the house of a trapper named Harvey Russecks and hear his tale of Billy Rumbly an

Indian who resembles Charley and Henry in nearly every particular, it becomes clear that he is Chicamec's second son. Billy has recently come to Church Creek a complete savage; and, in an amazingly short time he has made himself into a perfect English gentleman and taken for his wife the Church-Creek Virgin. (She, in turn, has quickly made herself into a perfect savage squaw.)

Afraid that Billy's new wife is actually Joan Toast, deranged by his cruel desertion, Eben hurries the next day to Church Creek. But before he can find out anything on that score, McEvoy's dallings with the daughter of the miller Henry Russecks (Harvey's brother) give Eben the opportunity for an intimate encounter with the miller's lusty French wife, Roxanne. Eben politely rejects the opportunity and uses the time instead for verbal intercourse on the subject of his own innocence, the last shreds of which he intends to give to his wife. When the miller comes upon the scene, the result is a desperate chase that ends with his taking a bad fall; and when, after that, Roxanne hears the full name of the man with whom she has almost gone to bed, she suddenly falls as unconscious as her husband.

The poet finally does meet the "Englished" Billy Rumbly and accompanies him to his home. There he discovers to his horror, that Billy's "savaged" wife is not his wife, Joan but his sister, Anna. Their long hours of subsequent conversation reveal that she has acted as she has because of her despair over the probability of never seeing her brother again and because of Billy's close resemblance to Burlingame; that both brother and sister are aware of holding an "unnatural" love for each other; and that Anna, like Eben, is still

technically a virgin. Both Henry Burlingame III and Billy Rumbly, it seems, share with their brother Charley the frustrating condition of having a sexual organ too small to penetrate and impregnate anyone. Ironically, it is because of rather than in spite of this deficiency that the men have developed such effective amorous techniques and such insatiable amorous appetites.

By the time the twins have stopped talking, Billy Rumbly has reverted completely to savagery. He goes back eagerly to the rebel camp and forces Anna, who has reverted just as completely to civilization, to go with Eben to Church Creek. First, Eben finds that the miller has died; and then he makes the further startling discoveries that Roxanne was his and Anna's nursemaid and that Henrietta, the daughter, is his half-sister. When Bertrand and Captain Cairn arrive, having been freed immediately upon the return of Chicamec's son, Eben and the whole company of friends and newly discovered relatives board the Captain's sloop to sail for Malden, where, it is rumored, Andrew Cooke and a man who claims to be his son are now residing. Before they can leave shore, however, pirates seize the ship, sail it out into the Bay until nightfall, declare their intention to rape and butcher the women, and then force McEvoy, Bertrand, and Eben overboard.

The three men swim to a tiny island. Finding a small skiff and part of an oar there, they decide to try for land and risk drowning rather than to huddle all night in their wet clothes and risk freezing. After hours of desperate skulling and bailing on the rough Chesapeake, the exhausted men finally reach shore; and, when they

stagger at last to the light by which they have been guiding, they find that it emanates from the front room of Malden. Eben peers into the window; sees that his father is, in truth, there; sees also that the man whom he is calling his son is Burlingame; and once again swoons.

Four days later he awakens to find that, along with Andrew and Burlingame, all of the persons who have claims to the Cooke's property are in the house. Moreover, all of the women whom he had left on the sloop are present and well, having been suddenly and inexplicably set ashore. (Roxanne is sure that it is because the pirate chief is the man who was her first lover.) Joan Toast, too, is present; but she is far from well. Though she has spirit enough left to say that she wishes never to see another man, syphilis and ill usage have transformed her into a "bedlamite." McEvoy is recovering swiftly from the night of exhaustion and exposure, but Bertrand is moving swiftly and surely toward death. Happiest of those in the house is Burlingame. Eben's resolutely innocent maintenance of identity and assumption of responsibility have solved the mystery of his parentage; and, in return, before he hastens off to Bloodsworth Island, he is prepared to apply his vast experience toward putting Malden back in the proper hands.

This he accomplishes after Governor Nicholson, who also has come to Malden, calls an impromptu court session in the diningroom. By means of a brilliant grasp of the labyrinthine legal, political, and personal complexities the case involves, Burlingame is able to concoct for Nicholson an out-of-court-settlement strategy that will

simultaneously return Malden to the Cookes, strike a blow against Coode's vice and sedition activities in the province, and recover the final segment of the Assembly Journal. This last piece of evidence, of course, will facilitate the arrest and conviction of Coode himself. Even more fortunately, on the back sides of the Journal are the last pages of The Privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame, which tell of a secret eggplant aphrodisiac that can cure Burlingame of his hereditary impotence.

The last snag in the proceedings is the fact that Joan has stolen the most crucial pages of the Journall, those which pertain to the actual eggplant recipe, and that in exchange for it she demands Malden itself. At first, the price seems wildly excessive and Andrew objects vigorously; but Eben and Henry soon realize that it is only a moral victory over men which Joan is after. Because Eben has refused to have his marriage annulled, as he might well have on the grounds that Joan Toast married him under a false name and that he cannot legitimately be expected to consummate a marriage with a syphilitic woman, he is still Joan's closest relative and thereby will inherit all of her possessions when she dies. So, Nicholson capitulates to Joan's terms, and the result is a qualified happy ending. Eben eagerly ascends the stairs to consummate his marriage, conscious that in so doing he is exchanging the remnants of his virginity for the pox, ensuring his family's claim to Malden, and, most importantly, offering a measure of retribution for the misery he has caused Joan Toast. Burlingame and Anna ascend the stairs too, in order,

Burlingame says, to chaperone the honeymoon couple; and Andrew calls out for a rundlet with which to celebrate the occasion.

Three points ought to be made as an appendix to this plot summary. First, it has had, of necessity, to ignore or to imply only briefly the rollicking good fun that is so much a part of The Sot-Weed Factor. Unfortunately, my analysis will have to proceed in roughly the same fashion, treating with a straight face a good number of hilarious incidents in order to get at the serious ethical concerns which underlie them. Second, the preceding summary also has had to skip over most of the numerous tales, lectures, discussions, thoughts, and dreams which contribute so much to the motivation and the significance of the characters. Important passages of this sort my analysis will most certainly not skip over.

My third point is that the meticulously knit comic plot which has just been summarized and the meaning which that plot conveys are fairly thoroughly unraveled in the novel's last chapter, which purports to tell what "really" happened to the various characters after that honeymoon night. In general, the lives of Eben, Anna, Henry, and Joan do not work out as well as they might have hoped in March of 1695; nor do they work out as badly as they might have feared immediately before that time. Joan dies; Burlingame disappears; and Anna and Eben live out their lives together, at Malden until 1717, then back at St. Giles. The note upon which Ebenezer Cooke dies in 1732 is weary, somewhat bitter, and, on the whole, inconclusive. The effect of this last chapter is to make manifest a cardinal idea which Eben expresses to Roxanne Russecks; namely, that final meaning is the dream

of art, not the condition of life. For Barth, this truism applies even--perhaps especially--to the final solution to contemporary problems of value and identity which he himself is offering in this third novel.

II

The Ebenezer Cooke whom we meet in the first chapter is, like his earlier counterparts Todd Andrews and Jacob Horner, most conspicuously illustrative of the Modern Mind. Barth's definition of this concept in The Sot-Weed Factor is identical to the definition we have already discussed in great detail. To state it once again, the Modern Mind is one which perceives that chance, flux, and relativity are the reigning principles in the universe; that because man is an integral part of the universe, they are the reigning principles in himself as well; and, thus, that a man can find no ultimate reason either within himself or without to do anything at all. The cause of this Modern Mind, again to recapitulate, is that man has simply reached the outer limits, the point of diminishing returns, of his knowledge and imagination. His rational faculty has grown so great that it quickly spots the relativity underlying every choice, and his imagination has grown so great that it immediately provides equally viable and attractive alternatives to that choice. The end result is that he does not know anymore what he should choose; and, to the

extent that a man is identified by what he chooses, he does not know anymore who he is.

So, not surprisingly, we soon find out that Ebenezer Cooke has, like Todd and Jake before him, known the condition of literally not being able to move. Seven years earlier, he found himself one day sitting at the window of his room in Cambridge, staring blankly at the empty universe, "paralyzed." The abundant knowledge and imagination which had brought him to this impasse had sprung naturally from his innate intelligence and fancy, and they had been aided greatly by the "remarkable" education with which Burlingame had provided him. The tutor had worked on the theory that all facts and ideas ought to be treated even-handedly and that one learns those facts and ideas best through actively playing with rather than passively receiving them. Burlingame had applied his theory with such thoroughness, enthusiasm, and affection that Eben not only had learned a great deal but also had grown "quite enamored" of the world in general. In short, learning had become for him pure fun, with the result that

Ebenezer took quite the same sort of pleasure in history as in Greek mythology and epic poetry, and made little or no distinction between, say, the geography of atlases and that of fairy-stories . . . he could not regard the facts of zoology or the Norman Conquest, for example, with genuine seriousness, nor could he discipline himself to long labor at tedious tasks. Even his great imagination and enthusiasm for the world were not unalloyed virtues when combined with his gay irresolution, for though they led him to a great sense of the arbitrariness of the particular world, they did not endow him with a corresponding realization of its finality (p. 8).

Predictably, then, when his tutor was abruptly dismissed and soon thereafter he was sent to Cambridge where earnest, disciplined scholarship was the order of the day, Eben retreated from philosophy into imaginative literature, found it increasingly difficult to make any choices about a vocation, seemed to himself "consistently [no] special sort of person" (p. 12), did poorly on his exams, and finally ground to a halt:

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

Finally one day he did not deign even to dress himself or eat, but 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 (p. 11).

The abrupt reappearance of Burlingame gave Eben a fortuitous reprieve; and what followed in the next seven years was a series of more or less passive attempts to find a cure for this modern, potentially fatal disease. (Barth's previous novel called it cosmopsis.) Initially, he simply gave over thinking altogether, fell under the spell of his former tutor, and committed the "bold" act of going to London with him and making the short-term goal of feeding himself his guiding principle. And in order to accomplish that goal, he adopted the role of Teacher per se, regardless of the particular subject matter taught. This solution sufficed for two months, but it lost its appeal when Anna brought news of Andrew Cooke's acute distress over his son's sudden disappearance. For better or worse, the Modern Mind

as illustrated in Eben has, as Anna explains, a father, a "link with the past: [a] bond 'twixt him and the world he's born to" (p. 35); and the goal of lining his stomach appears insignificant in comparison to that of preserving that "link" so that he can somehow become a worthy heir.

Eben's next attempt at curing his modern disease was a year of idleness at St. Giles. The year was passed with reading and light exercise; close, unspoken communication with his sister; occasional fruitless attempts at poetry; and day after day of "a kind of nervous exaltation," the result of the pleasant but tentative nature of his surroundings. "Although he could not look to his future with enthusiasm, at least he had not to bear the responsibility of having chosen it himself" (p. 40). This irresponsible year of leisure was "perhaps Ebenezer's nearest approach to happiness" (p. 40). Nevertheless, it was by nature isolated, unproductive, and escapist; and, since the goal of both Eben and his father is that he should live productively in the real world, it is by nature only temporary and, in a sense, not a "cure" at all.

Back in London again, this time apprenticed to a merchant in order to learn the plantation business and, in his father's words, "sweat Burlingame and the college out o' ye," Eben once more "Fare[d] Unspectacularly." The tedious, practical job of clerking he found to be so thoroughly unappealing that he worked lazily and ineffectively by day and idled away his evenings in winehouses and, after six years, still found himself "no person at all" (p. 45). Clearly, Modern Man as we find him embodied in the twenty-eight-year-old Eben Cooke is as

stymied as ever. Neither the general strategy of putting his plight in the hands of others nor the particular strategies of concentrating on the short-term goals of simply staying alive, escaping, or immersing himself in mindless drudgery have provided even the first ounce of cure for his cosmopsis.

Eben's paralysis at the age of twenty-one becomes in itself a vivid emblem of the dead end to which the mind has come in modern times, and Barth has provided his central character with specific physical traits which also are emblematic of this condition. Most of these traits are described in the second paragraph of the novel's first chapter, where Eben in 1694 "Is Introduced and Differentiated from His Fellows." The "pale" and "gaunt" aspects of his face and the "raw-boned" body suggest the ethical starvation, exhaustion, or depletion of his Modern Mind (as they did in his predecessors); and his physical ungainliness, like Rennie Morgan's, is an effective reminder of his inability to act in a controlled, purposeful manner in a universe that gives him no absolute rules for conduct. The facial "discomposure" and the "surprise" of each bodily stance are symbolic of the inconsistency that is characteristic of his various personal stances; and similarly symbolic are the facts that no one expression or position is for long satisfactory or is truly indicative of an underlying mood.

Another differentiating mark which also underscores the ethical and personal inconsistency of Modern Man is Eben's "manner." He is "bent to taciturnity Except for infrequent bursts of garrulity" (p. 4). There is much to say, of course, on the subject

of Eben's manner. The narrator declares that the complicated reasons behind that manner constitute the basis for the entire story; so, of necessity, everything that is said in this chapter will at least indirectly relate to it. For now, however, it is appropriate and sufficient to remark only upon its inconsistency. Still another physical trait of Eben's which serves to illustrate his modernity is his completely bald head. The loss of hair helps to reinforce the concept of exhaustion and death and to remind us that his sort of mind makes him older, in a sense, and less lively than his actual age would suggest.

Still another trait serves to make the central character illustrative of the Modern Mind, and that is the name Ebenezer itself. His father bestowed it upon him, and it is he who later explains why. Andrew's avidly Protestant young wife Anna contracted the seasoning when she moved with him to Maryland; and, when she thought that her illness was subsiding, she liked to refer to the Hebrews' rout of the Philistines and the prophet Samuel's words on the occasion, "Thus far hath the good Lord helped us." So, when she died of the combination of her illness and the birth of twins, her bitter husband "recalled . . . those verses in the Book of Samuel where God smites the Philistines and Samuel dedicates the token of His aid--the stone the Hebrews called Ebenezer." Andrew then continues:

"Thus then, boy, in bitterness and sacrilege, I gave ye that name: I baptized ye myself, ere Roxanne [the nursemaid] could stay me, with the dregs of a flagon of perry, and declared to the company of Malden, 'Thus far hath the Lord helped us!' (p. 36).

Barth's illustrative intent is clear. Ebenezer is the token of an angry age in which man no longer believes in a God, either within himself or without, to help him. He feels that he has been left entirely on his own.

In a second dimension of the illustrative characterization of Ebenezer Cooke, he stands not simply for the Modern Mind but also for the peculiarly American version of that mind. He was born in America and spent his first four years there, and the estate which he is rightfully to manage and then inherit is in America. In addition to these considerations, what marks him unmistakably as the American is his innocence. He has, as we have already noted in another context, "a great sense of the arbitrariness of the particular real world"; but he lacks "a corresponding realization of its finality." This description matches closely the allusion of Barth's, which I have quoted several times in previous chapters, to the innocence which is based on "the sort of ingenious fancy that reimagines history and creation, sees the arbitrariness of the universe but shies from its finality." And the fact that the allusion is followed by Barth's saying, "I'm told this is an American characteristic,"⁷ leads one to interpret Ebenezer Cooke--like Todd, Harrison, Joe, and, before his train station catatonia, Jake--as illustrative of the Modern American Mind.

We can see more clearly in this novel than we could in the first two exactly why it is that Barth agrees with what he has been

⁷Richard W. Murphy, "In Print: John Barth," Horizon, 5 (January 1963), 37.

told about innocence being a peculiarly American trait. An extraordinary number of this country's original settlers were idealists like Eben. The very fact that there was an America meant that they could be idealists, that they did not have to perceive their social or political or even personal condition as being final. They could always go west and create an alternative condition, a new world. And this holds true, of course, not only for the original settlers of the eastern states but also for the later settlers who pushed the country's boundaries to the Pacific. We can see more clearly in this third novel, too, that Barth's yoking the concepts of the Modern Mind and the American into one illustrative unit has not been incidental. The gradual decrease of unsettled American land and, thus, of alternative worlds, up to its terminal point in the early part of the twentieth century provides an apt metaphor for the gradual decrease of alternative kinds of rationalist ethics up to its terminal point at about the same time. Corresponding to the Pacific Ocean is the discovery of the subconscious mind, which proved that there is no final Reason, Truth, or Identity within man himself any more than there is within the universe.

Ebenezer Cooke, as we find him at the start of his twenty-ninth year, stands, then, for the condition of the Modern American Mind as Barth in the mid-1950's perceives it. Like Todd and Jake, Eben has already undergone one nearly fatal siege of paralysis. If Barth has in mind not only a mental process which each individual Modern American Mind must go through but also a historical process through which the best American minds have gone in this century, the

dating in The Floating Opera suggests that this process probably begins around 1937, the era when traditional American optimism and energy seemed to give way to cynicism, lethargy, and a total sense of "Depression." Eben's paralysis is interrupted by the entrance of Burlingame, the man who, ironically, is the very embodiment of those factors which caused the paralysis in the first place. Again, there is a close parallel here between Burlingame and the two characters who afford a similar reprieve in the first two novels--Captain Jacob R. Adam and the Doctor; and, again, a historical parallel is suggested. This time it would appear to be the era of World War II, when war, an archetypal embodiment of the universal chaos whose full recognition caused the era of Depression in the first place, is, ironically, the very act which temporarily ends it.

In the seven intervening years between that time and the narrative present, the Modern American Mind has tried only passively, as we have noted, to find a cure for its condition. Eben's ability to move at all, even in an aimless manner, is the result of momentum rather than choice and, so, cannot last forever. (Todd Andrews's metaphor of a rabbit shot on the run is appropriate here.) Eben's condition, clearly, is as serious as before. He is so inept at his job that he has not earned even one raise in six years, and yet he cannot decide to do anything else. He thinks of himself as a poet, but he has never written a word of poetry because he cannot decide on a subject. He is surrounded by willing women, but he is still a virgin because he cannot decide how or with whom to go about becoming otherwise.

This latter characteristic is the most important in Eben's entire illustrative dimension, for it is far more than a simple effect of Eben's indecisiveness. It is also a perfect metaphor for that quality. Eben's virginity suggests, on the one hand, the impotency, the unfruitfulness, the potentially fatal inability to function "like a man," which are the lot of the modern mind which has exhausted its rationalistic search for value and identity. Acutely attuned to the relativity underlying every choice, it cannot make any choice at all; and, thus, it cannot give issue to that which would confirm its existence. On the other hand, Eben's sexual innocence vividly reflects his peculiarly American mental innocence, his inability finally to embrace, to "know," anything in the real world around him. Just as America is still unable to commit itself to the conditions of life as they actually exist, even though the time is long past when a seemingly endless possibility of "new worlds" justified such an inability, so also Ebenezer Cooke is still unable to make a physical commitment to one woman, even though he has reached the relatively advanced age of twenty-eight.

The Modern American Mind embodied in the Eben Cooke to whom we are introduced in March of 1694 is virgin, then, and is liable to remain in that state until another siege of paralysis finally kills it. But, as the "Momentous Wager" for the favors of Joan Toast begins that night in the tavern, the whore casually pats Eben's hand; and, for the first time in his life, he is aroused:

the hand she touched tingled as if galvanized, and on the instant Ebenezer felt his soul rise up in answer. Had not Boyle shown, and Burlingame taught,

that electrical attraction takes place in a vacuum?
 Well, here was Boyle figured in the empty poet:
 the pert girl worked some queer attraction in him,
 called forth a spark from the vacuum of his character,
 and set him all suddenly a-burn and a-buzz
 (p. 48).

"This prick-up," as the narrator goes on to say, did not "afford the man identity"; but it did, at least, afford him a new generalized feeling of potency, out of which identity might come. Figured in this scene, then, is the assertion that the key to remedying the condition of the Modern American Mind lies somewhere, somehow, in the attraction between men and women. Eben takes, or, rather, is taken, the first tentative step in the direction of productive living when, for the first time in his adult life, a woman touches him.

The ability to choose does not yet visit Eben when the wagering comes around to him; in fact, he "starches up" with indecision twice and at last bolts desperately from the winehouse. Back in his room, he curses the innocence which prevented his claiming Joan for a night, which makes him even now prefer to fantasize about what he could do with her rather than to return to the winehouse and actually do something with her. To his utter surprise, however, Joan comes to him. She has interpreted his vague babbling about the five guineas in his room as the high bid for her, and she is very obligingly his for the remainder of the night. But, again, Eben's inability to accept the "finality" of the real world wins out, his compulsion to idealize overcomes his lust, and he refuses to use Joan for any fee at all. Instead, he makes her into the "savior and inspiration" of his life:

"For 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! Nay, e'en should you scorn me in your error and ne'er look on me more, I will love thee nonetheless, and draw power and purpose from my love. For so strong is't, that e'en unrequited it shall sustain and inspire me; but should God grant thee wit to comprehend and receive it and return it as then you would perforce, why, the world would hear such verses as have ne'er been struck, and our love would stand as model and exemplar to all times! Scorn me, Joan, and I shall be a splendid fool, a Don Quixote tilting for his ignorant Dulcinea; but I here challenge thee--if you've life and fire and wit enough, love me truly as I love thee, and then shall I joust with bona fide giants and bring them low! Love me, and I swear to thee this: I shall be Poet Laureate of England!" (p. 58).

When Joan Toast, like the good whore she is, refuses Eben's feeless offer, his "inspired" response is, "So, you are unworthy! So be't, if't must: I love thee no less for't, or for the sufferings I shall welcome in they name!" And when she leaves in a fury, "he scarcely note[s] her departure, so full [is] he of his love." He feels "such dizzy power . . . such bursting life" that, for the first time, he can choose a subject for a poem and then write it. After he has penned the last word, he is giddy with accomplishment and expectation:

"Tis now but a question of time 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! '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

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badge of my strength and proof of my calling: let her who's worthy of't take it from me!" (pp. 59-60).

Clearly, we see in this scene the Modern American Mind in the person of Ebenezer Cooke experiencing at last the ability to choose decisively and to act purposefully. Compelled to explain to himself this new phenomenon, Eben can testify only that it was initiated by the touch of Joan Toast and that it gave him the long-wished-for sense of identity. Since no other woman had affected him in such a manner in all his twenty-eight years, he concludes that Joan must be the one woman in the world whom he is meant to love. And, since the practical results of his love for her have been the perpetuation of his virginity and the creation of a poem, a virgin and a poet are what he must be. Joan has elevated the innocent fancy and the poetic urge in him from the status of regrettable characteristics to that of a "noble" identity.

When Eben exclaims, then, "What am I? What am I? Virgin, sir! Poet, sir!" he is illustrative of the Modern American Mind embarking upon one of the two courses of "brave ethical subjectivism" which Barth has already explored in The End of the Road. It is Joe Morgan's course--that of making certain "psychological givens" in oneself the "subjective equivalent of an absolute." "Searching your innards for your axioms" is the way Henry Burlingame later describes it. The term which I will apply to this attempt at solving the problem of ethical relativity is the same as that which I applied to Joe Morgan's attempt: Essentialism. From that chilly March night when Eben indirectly turns Joan Toast out of his room in London to that

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cold December night when he very deliberately abandons her at Malden, he operates on the assumption that his new feeling of identity is valid; that human essence does precede human existence; and, furthermore, that one's essence can be made one's guide to value. The making of that assumption, the deliberate acceptance of what seems to be the evidence of one night and denial of what seems to be the evidence of the previous twenty-eight years, is, in truth, Eben's "Momentous Wager."

The adventures which befall the newly declared virgin-poet during the next nine months thoroughly demonstrate once again the serious inadequacies of Essentialism as an ethical solution. Those adventures begin the very day after the wager when Joan's pimp and lover, John McEvoy, comes to complain about his loss of revenue. In the course of their argument, McEvoy makes two key charges against Essentialism, the first of which is the charge of pride. Against Eben's claim that he alone truly loves Joan Toast, the claim which lies at the very heart of his "new-found essences," McEvoy answers: "'tis your love ye love, and that's but to say 'tis yourself and not my Joan" (p. 62). What he is pointing out, of course, is the completely egocentric nature of what Eben has done. Consciously suppressing his lust for a willing whore and conjuring up instead a creed of courtly love for a "vision of all that's fair in womankind" (p. 62) has been Eben's way of trying to glorify rather than to rectify the innocence in himself, the results of which have been far from glorious up to this point. It is clearly an act of narcissism rather than devotion. Also, locating one's values entirely within oneself is a

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sign of disdain for, a denial of worth in, anyone or anything else beyond the limits of oneself. It is not so much an act of principle as an act of vanity.

McEvoy's first charge is abundantly supported by all of the I's, me's, and my's in the long passage from Eben's encounter with Joan quoted above. It is clear there that he is obsessed not with Joan but with the spectacular heights which her inspiration will allow him to achieve. We observe, too, that he hardly notices her leave-taking, so full of himself is he, and that the one act he does commit after she has gone is an example of vanity compounded: he writes a hymn to his own innocence. In it this trait is idealized, of course, into a gift of which he is but the humble recipient; but, still, the gift's function is an entirely selfish one:

Preserv'd, my Innocence preserveth Me
 From Life, from Time, from Death, from History;
 Without it I must breathe Man's mortal Breath:
 Commence a Life--and thus commence my Death! (p. 59).

Among the numerous references to himself in the poem, there is but one to Joan--"The Love, dear Joan, I bear for Thee!" Yet, when the poem is completed, something about it strikes Eben as vaguely wrong; and it is not until he has replaced the word "Joan" with "heart" that he can sit back and declare, "The piece is perfect" (p. 60).

These first proud acts on Eben's part prepare us for a good many more that are to follow as he leaves England and makes his way to Maryland. His insistence on being not just a poet but a Poet Laureate, even if only of Maryland, is the first such act; and it is his new title which singles him out for John Coode's men and thus causes him

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constantly to be in mortal danger. Eben's pride causes him to adopt an attitude of condescension and snobbishness on the ship, first with his valet and then with the crew. He thinks of the former as a "varlet" as compared with himself, a "god" (p. 124); and he sees the latter as "subjects" who will someday reverently acknowledge him as their "king" (pp. 228-229). Consequently, Bertrand has few qualms about appropriating Eben's public identity aboard ship and putting him in the galling position of having to play the servant; and the crew is all too anxious to further degrade him whenever the chance arises. Finally, it is Eben's pride that makes him see the pathetic Susan Warren as worthy of superficially polite treatment and then of a lusty, secretive "swiving," but as eminently unworthy of "officially" receiving in place of the beautiful young Joan Toast the precious gift of his virginity. Reacting vigorously to Eben's proud duplicity, then, Susan Warren flees to prevent the swiving; and Eben does not discover that she in fact is Joan Toast until it is too late substantially to help either her or himself.

The other cardinal charge which Barth, through John McEvoy, makes against Essentialism is that it is based on dangerous, self-deception, that to be deliberately innocent is, in fact, to be deliberately ignorant. McEvoy points particularly to the virgin-poet's ignorance of the world outside himself:

"I shall tell ye a thing about yourself, Eben Cooke, and haply ye'll recall it now and again: 'tis not simply love ye know naught of, 'tis the entire great real world! Your senses fail ye; your busy fancy plays ye false and fills your head with foolish pictures. Things are not as ye see 'em, friend--the world's a tangled skein, and all is knottier than ye

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take it for. You understand naught o' life: I shan't say more" (p. 62).

Manifestations of this sort of ignorance occur with at least as much frequency in the ensuing nine months as do manifestations of pride. The initial example of Eben's ignorance, the one which most clearly prepares us for all of the others to come, relates to his perception of Joan Toast herself. In the course of his argument with McEvoy, Eben contemptuously declares, "To you, haply, Joan Toast is a whore; to me she is a principle." "To me," the young Irishman retorts, "she is a woman. To you she's a hallucination" (p. 64).

By providing Joan Toast as the initial example of the real world which Eben is innocent of and by having provided earlier the emblem of Eben's deliberate physical innocence, Barth once again offers carnal knowledge as a symbol of mental knowledge. Eben's interest in mentally knowing himself has its counterpart in his occasional recourse to masturbation. (His "knuckly hand . . . took no wooing to make his quick mistress.") In contrast, his lack of interest in mentally knowing another person is reflected in his refusing to have carnal knowledge of Joan the night of the wager. Again on the whore ship Cyprian and then again at the house of Captain Mitchell, Eben neither mentally nor physically knows Joan. In both instances his virginity, admittedly, is perpetuated by fortuitous circumstance rather than by his own will. Still, when the opportunity on both occasions has passed, he is grateful to have escaped from so unworthy an object of knowledge. Had he not escaped, however, had he

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actually "penetrated" the disguise of Susan Warren, the fortunes of both of them, as I have already said, would have gone far better.

The "knotty" outside world is not the only area of which Eben's Essentialism renders him ignorant. He knows nothing of his own "knotty" nature either. He certainly is not the "rare wise man [who] knows who he is," as he perceives himself to be the night when his twin "essences" are born, for he will admit the existence only of that part of his mind which is rational and civilized. That is, he deliberately refuses to recognize his own subconscious. John McEvoy's profession, oriented as it is toward the irrational, animalistic part of man's mind, lends to all that he tells Eben about ignorance the implication that his observations apply to the inner world as well as to the outer.

McEvoy's accusation of ignorance on Eben's part in this second sense is borne out not only by Eben's initial reaction to Joan Toast--he suppresses his lust for her--but also by his subsequent series of adventures. The fear that makes him shiver and grow weak in the knees and lose bowel control on several occasions, the heightened sexual desire associated with the thought of raping a virgin on the Cyprian and later with his inflicting pain upon Susan Warren, the strange, vivid dreams of twin pink mountains and tepid green seas--experiences like these disturb and often shock Eben because they spring uncontrollably from a part of him which his Essentialist solution does not acknowledge and because their power is so great as to attest to their being every bit as essential to his being as are the twin essences which he has consciously chosen.

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Before Eben even leaves London, then, John McEvoy has appraised the two major weaknesses in the Essentialist solution--pride and ignorance. Eben does not deny McEvoy's charges, of course. To the contrary, his response is to justify, even to glorify, his pride and ignorance in the name of Joan Toast, as did Don Quixote in the name of Dulcinea. But, as these traits make his "Going to Malden" in Part II more difficult and dangerous at every turn, as humiliation becomes an increasingly familiar experience and knowledge beckons with increasing urgency, essentialism becomes a less and less viable mode of living for the Modern American Mind. Punctuating the series of humbling and informing incidents which take Eben from London to Malden are the two lengthy conversations between him and Burlingame, which serve to keep clearly before the reader the basic philosophical fallacies inherent in Essentialism. In the first conversation, the one which takes place on the Plymouth coach, Burlingame engages in "sophistical discourse" for the purpose of challenging the authenticity, the permanence, and the mutual compatibility of Eben's twin essences and of proving, in general, that "all assertions of thee and me, e'en to oneself, are acts of faith, impossible to verify" (p. 128). The poet cannot refute this contention anymore than he could refute McEvoy's. He can only respond by saying, "Such casuistical speculations lead only to the Pit" (p. 128). With that reply, he reminds both himself and us of the deliberate, desperate pretense to innocence which lies at the heart of his solution.

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journey on horse-back from Captain Mitchell's to Father Smith's, that pretense is fast eroding. "'Here we sit,'" Henry declares, "'upon a blind rock hurtling through a vacuum, racing to the grave'":

"Tis our fate to search, Eben, and do we seek our soul, what we find is a piece of that same black Cosmos whence we sprang and through which we fall: the infinite wind of space . . . " (p. 345).

And then, as if he himself has to remind Eben of the very raison d'etre of the Essentialist solution which he has chosen, Henry continues:

"Why is't you set such store by innocence and rhyming . . . ? One must 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?"

"One other," Eben finally is able to respond. "'Tis the one I flee . . . " (p. 345). He refers, of course, to the catatonic "Pit" in which Henry found him at college. When the conversation is over, Eben feels very close once more to the Abyss:

the wind appeared to howl not from the Bay but from the firmament itself, the endless corridors of space . . . it seemed that he was heels over head on the bottom of the planet, looking down on the stars instead of up, and that only by dint of clutching his legs about the roan mare's girth and holding fast to the saddlebow with both his hands did he keep from dropping headlong into those vasty reaches! (pp. 346-347).

Eben manages to hold fast to his essences for less than one more day before they bring down upon him and a good many others catastrophe in the form of his judgment at the Cambridge court session. He neither knows nor cares to know the facts of the Smith vs. Spurdance

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case; he thinks that a total newcomer like himself is better able to judge it than are life-long residents of the county; and he is all too eager to embrace the cliché, "Justice is blind." All of which is to say that he is proud and ignorant; and, as a result, he performs the act which in one stroke forfeits his and Anna's inheritance; loses the fruits of his father's life's work; and, unknowingly, seals the pathetic fate of Joan Toast and endangers the province of Maryland. Eben signs "with a flourish" the document that seals the sentence; and, as he does so, he wishes that "Burlingame, Anna, and his London friends were present to witness this most glorious hour in his life." A minute later, after Smith has grinningly informed him of his error, Eben swoons away.

At this climactic point in Part II of The Sot-Weed Factor, Essentialism as a possible solution to the Modern American Mind's ethical problem has received its death blow. Not only has it caused apparently irremediable harm to its practitioner and to others; but also, on the most fundamental level, it simply has not worked. It has not achieved its goal of keeping Ebenezer Cooke moving. The virgin-poet lies as motionless on the tavern floor in Cambridge, Maryland, as he had sat in his room in Cambridge, England, seven years before. Clear as the failure of Essentialism may be to the reader, however, Eben himself stubbornly refuses to accept it, just as he has always refused to accept any other finality in his life. When he regains consciousness, his peculiarly American innocence is still intact despite the great loss it has occasioned. Since he has never grown personally attached to Malden and since he still does not realize

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the full measure of harm he has caused, Eben reckons that if he transfers his share of the Cookes' London home to Anna and can manage to hide from the wrath of his father, all will yet go well enough for the virgin-poet.

When Burlingame and the other men in the tavern offer Eben free rum to drown his sorrows and welcome him to the ranks of the mortal, who, like Adam, have "set great store upon [their] innocence, and by reason of't have lost [their] earthly paradise" (p. 401), the poet accepts their drink but not their conceit. He points proudly to the fact that he is still technically a virgin and claims that it is proof that he has not, in fact, re-enacted Adam's fall. The blame for all his misery--he cannot see anyone else's--he places upon his attempted seduction by the devious, jealous, mortal world which, in his mind, Burlingame has come to represent. In a fit of drunken self-pity, Eben identifies his sister's virginity with his own and publicly belittles their ex-tutor for his inability to deflower her, despite his expressed fondest desires to do so.

Forced at last to reply, Burlingame makes it clear to all at the bar that his failure to deflower Anna Cooke, if there was indeed a failure, has not been caused by her unwillingness. To the contrary, she came to him repeatedly more than ten years earlier and begged to be taken. Burlingame gives vivid account of the many times he, with hands and mouth, "made her swoon with joy"; he recalls "her endless tricks to conjure manliness"; and he remembers out loud the name of her favorite game--Riding to Gomorrah. Feeling as if he himself had been robbed of his virginity, Eben falls into a fit of retching; and as he

is carried from the tavern, he hears Burlingame say, "Sleep ye now, my Laureate; in all they orifices be my sins remembered!" (p. 404). The next morning Eben awakens to find himself naked and up to his neck in corncocks.

Humiliated and violated now past the point of ever playing the confident virgin-poet again, Eben is in a state of total despair. Still, out of bitter anger rather than optimistic will ("anger's e'er a physic for despair," the redemptioner who gives him a ride up the Choptank River to Malden tells him), he remains truer than ever to his twin essences during the dying months of the year. He refuses to consummate his forced marriage to Susan Warren, and he writes his stinging satirical The Sot-Weed Factor. All the while, he is recovering from a particularly strong siege of "seasoning," the illness from which all newcomers to Maryland suffer. The fact that the disease carries such a name suggests, of course, that the harsh treatment Eben has just undergone should be construed as a necessary process of curing or tempering him through trial and experience; but the remnants of pride and ignorance in Eben blind him with self-pity and he is incapable of viewing his misfortune in this light. When he has finished his angry poem, when he thinks that he has, in effect, had the last word in his argument with the unworthy provincials of Maryland "Where no man's Faithful, nor a Woman chaste!," Eben calls resignedly for a pot of rum and a pistol with which to end his miserable treatment.

But it is Susan Warren with her pathetic story of Joan Toast who delivers the coupe de grace to Essentialism as a possible ethical

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solution for the Modern American Mind. The final revelation that the woman who stands before him at the moment--"a pig-driver, an opium-eater, and the lowest sort of prostitute"--is, in fact, Joan Toast and that she has come to this end largely on his account forces Ebenezer fully to acknowledge for the first time that the willful ignorance and pride upon which his twin essences are constructed causes even greater harm to another than to himself. He is forced to admit to himself that there is such a thing as "another." There is a person outside himself who is wholly different from and far more real than his own idea of her, a person whose claim of worth is at least as valid as his own. And there is a part of the human mind, a part of his own mind, that will sometimes make a man act like an animal despite his conscious aspirations to the contrary. All Joan asks now is that Eben treat the "otherness" which she represents as equal in worth to his own. She proposes that he escape to England with her, allow her to support them as long as she can with the money her profession brings in, and then care for her in the last days of her life. In other words, she offers Eben a second chance to put by his innocence.

Once again, however, as in the Cambridge tavern three months earlier, Eben refuses. With an act of will that is both awesome and despicable, he rejects the humility and the knowledge which yet could salvage a measure of redemption for himself. He accepts the money for one ship's fare; he swears to heaven that he and Joan are man and wife "forever and aye!"; he exclaims, "May some god strike me dead" if he does not wait the two hours for her to earn the other fare; and then, with no god to strike him dead despite his reiterated plea, he

absconds into the cold December night. Clutching to him his newly-penned poem, the sign of his one essence, and carrying in his mind's eye the face of his sister, still somehow the emblem of his other essence, Eben puts behind him Joan Toast, in her own words the "very sign and emblem" of the world (p. 468), and sets off on the first leg of a journey back to England and irresponsibility. Ironically, as he slips away from the lights of Malden, he is becoming the very thing which his twin-essences are predicated upon denying: "a piece of that same black Cosmos whence we spring and through which we fall."

At this point in The Sot-Weed Factor, then, at the end of Part II, "Going to Malden," Barth has taken Ebenezer Cooke to approximately the same end-of-the-road point as Joe Morgan. Ebenezer has tried consciously to fly in the face of his modern relativistic knowledge and imagination, to embrace rather than to discard his peculiarly American innocence and to discover whether, by asserting that innocence with as much energy as possible, he can live productively, decisively, manfully, in the world. Like Joe Morgan, Eben has remained true to one woman--or, rather, to an idealized version of one woman--just as he has remained true to one version, an idealized version, of his own identity; and, like Joe, he has seen the values which result from his fidelity to an ideal come into conflict with reality and result in the death of his wife ("Susan Warren" refers to herself as the "corse" of Joan Toast) and the loss of his worldly estate. His Essentialism clearly has not allowed him to "live" in the world of human beings; but at the end, even as he escapes from that world, he still clings

to it as the only solution he knows, the only one which rationally makes sense.

There is a parallel, too, between Ebenezer Cooke and Jacob Horner, who, not only because of the failure of his usual solution but also because of the failure of the one which he "borrowed" for two days from Joe, declares that he has reached his ethical "terminal." But, beginning with Part III, "Malden Earned," Barth is breaking new ground. He is attempting to suggest an alternative to "non-mystical value-thinking." More accurately, perhaps, he is trying to suggest for the Modern American Mind a kind of ethic which is different but not really separate from the Essentialist kind, an ethic to which Essentialism is a necessary prelude. The urge to arrive at values by solely rational, conscious means must be exhausted before it can be replaced.⁸

Let us return, then, to Ebenezer Cooke. As he arrives at the dock after his short ride from Malden, he illustrates the Modern American Mind at the point where Essentialism clearly has failed it, where "searching your innards for your axioms" has had exactly the opposite effect from providing values which will allow one to live responsibly and constructively in the world. So Eben is attempting to escape from the destruction he has caused and the responsibilities he has incurred; and, if his attempt should succeed, if he should actually sail back to England on the ship (ironically, the Pilgrim) that is about to embark from Cambridge, then he will be marking

⁸Barth, "Exhaustion," 31-32.

himself as a man who has nothing more to lose. He will have literally lost the world.

It is perfectly appropriate, therefore, that before Barth gets on with the series of actions and thoughts which will decide this central question of value-thinking for the Modern American Mind, he presents Eben with the character of Ben Spurdance, a living example, as the chapter title indicates, of "a Man with Naught to Lose." Spurdance had been overseer at Malden before Eben's foolish court verdict; and in just a few months his health and his fortunes have plummeted beyond the point of recovery. He has let himself be beaten; he has given up on the world of ordinary human intercourse. As a result, his existence is governed only by chance and whimsy; and he is given to unpredictable fits of rage that are as destructive to himself as they are to others. Eben himself would have been the victim of one of these fits had Burlingame, in the disguise of Nicholas Lowe, not intervened. It is clear that in the not-very-distant future Ben Spurdance will meet a violent death either directly or indirectly at his own hands. Against the back-drop of this vivid implication of what Eben will become if he gives up now on his attempt to find value in the world, with this brutal reminder of the mortal stakes for which the Modern American Mind is playing, Eben makes his decision to stay in Maryland, and, by so doing, to start out on the road to regaining his estate and his wife.

The complicated pattern of action, storytelling, and thought which makes up "Malden Earned" comprises a lesson for the Modern American Mind in how to give up Essentialism for a more effective

approach to value in a nihilistic universe. Burlingame had told Eben months earlier, on the night when Eben had felt for a moment as if he were about to drop from his horse "headlong into those vasty reaches," that Eben must "embrace [his] Self as Poet and Virgin, regardless, or discard it for something better"; and it is precisely this latter alternative which we see Eben exercising in Part III of The Sot-Weed Factor. As we have seen in Part II, the foundation of Essentialism is a combination of pride and ignorance; so, before Eben can discard that solution, he must first be rid of the last remnants of those two qualities.

This task begins, ironically, with the events which transpire in the last chapter of "Going to Malden" and which culminate there in his last deliberately Essentialist-oriented act. The process reaches its climax a day later when, after listening to Burlingame's short updating of his campaign to arrest John Coode and to his lengthy lecture on Anna and the scholarship she has done on geminology, Eben arrives at St. Mary's City with "twelve perfectly astounding facts: to consider:

He had become the indentured servant of Malden's master.

His father was in Maryland and en route to Cooke's Point.

His wife Susan Warren was in fact his Joan Toast of London.

But she was a slave to opium, a victim of the pox, and a whore to the Indians of Dorchester.

Moreover she had been raped by the Moor Boabdil, and almost by Ebenezer himself.

He had in deserting her committed the most thoroughly and least equivocally dishonorable act of his entire life--indeed, the very first of any magnitude, not counting his thwarted

ill intentions aboard the Cyprian and at Captain Mitchell's manor.

Lord Baltimore might not at all represent, as he had supposed, the very essence of Good, and Coode the essence of Evil, but vice versa, if Burlingame spoke truly; and Andrew might well be party to an enormously vicious plot.

His tutor Burlingame had been, perhaps, a loyal friend after all, and was inflamed with passion for Ebenezer and Anna as one.

His sister was at that moment somewhere in the Province.

She was a virgin to that day, despite her intimacy with Burlingame.

She loved not Burlingame but her brother, in a way too dark and deep for her cognition.

And he himself had no direction, aim, or prospect whatsoever for the future, but was as orphan in the world as Burlingame, without that gentleman's corporal, financial, intellectual, experiential, or spiritual resources (pp. 500-501).

It is clear why the sum total of these facts should have the effect of "very nearly unhinging [Eben's] Reason" (p. 501): each fact chips away substantially at either his pride or his ignorance. Up until now, he has been able to react to each humiliating situation in which he found himself by reasserting that, by virtue of Innocence and Poetry, he was more than mortal--"not a man, but Mankind" (p. 60)--and, thus, that he could not really affect or be affected by the affairs of mere mortals. As long as he remained virgin and poet, it was only a matter of time until the world recognized his immortality and made amends for its shabby treatment of him. Now, however, Eben can see that, rather than his mortal life being fended off by his essences, it has, in a sense, simply started without him. First unknowingly, with his Cambridge court verdict, and then quite knowingly, with his desertion of Joan Toast, he really has affected the affairs of mortal men and been affected by them; and the result has

been that both he and those he has affected are in a drastically worse condition now than they were before.

Also, up until now, Eben has been able to react to charges that he was ignorant and to manifestations of that ignorance with the claim that he was privy to the only kind of knowledge that really mattered. He was the "rare wise man" who knows himself. Now, however, Eben cannot make even that assumption; for Joan Toast was the pillar upon whom the entire edifice of his Essentialism rested, and to find that she is far different from what he had assumed, that she is a woman rather than a principle, is to bring down that edifice. The fact that Eben, when he flees Malden, sees in his mind's eye the face of his sister suggests that perhaps it is she, not Joan, whom Eben has always loved and who has been the real inspiration for his virginity and poetry; but Burlingame's long discourse on Anna as he and Eben ferry to St. Mary's City, in conjunction with his revelations concerning her in the Cambridge tavern, prove that she, too, is a woman, not a principle. The result is that Eben can no longer keep from feeling that he has been totally ignorant, just as he can no longer find any reason why he should have been so proud.

In St. Mary's City, he finds not his sister but his valet; and Bertrand reveals that he has seen Anna only a few hours earlier, that she looked old beyond her years, and that she intended to go to Malden where, she heard, her brother lay ill. This revelation serves as the crowning blow to Eben's ignorance and pride, affirming, as it does, that Anna is very human and is in mortal danger because of her

brother's irresponsibility. In light of the fact that Malden has become an opium and prostitution den under William Smith and the fact that Joan Toast is probably so angry at Eben that she would take out her revenge on his sister, it may well be that Anna will soon find herself forced to follow in the footsteps of "Susan Warren." In a rush to prevent such a development if he can, Eben takes Bertrand in tow and hires a Captain Cairn and his crew of two blacks to sail them across the Chesapeake to Malden.

The violent storm which engulfs the sloop reflects the turmoil which has been raging in Eben during the last twenty-four hours, and his state of mind during the storm reflects the new mental condition which I have been describing. With gale-force winds, high waves, and torrential rains all around, it is impossible for him to feel important or to pretend to be sure of his bearings. The world outside himself--consisting of the three men who might save him with their skill and hard work as well as the storm that might kill him--suddenly seems very real; the possibility of his death seems not only very real but positively "Delicious"; and he no longer feels the urge, as he did as a child and as he might have only recently, to pinch himself and awaken from a bad dream. In short, he is no longer a deliberate innocent. His mind finally is prepared not only to recognize the arbitrary universe but also to accept its finality.

After "three hours' dancing on the doormat of extinction," Eben and Bertrand are brought safely to shelter in the straits known, appropriately enough, as Limbo. The sheer physical effort and suspense have proven a kind of purgative; and he finds the "Island of

his spirit, though by no means tranquil, to be peculiarly serene despite the buffet of past fortune and the sea of difficulties with which it [is] beset" (p. 523). Not coincidentally, he also finds that for Henry and Bertrand, the two men who had most dismayed him because they had demonstrated least respect for his self-proclaimed essences, he now feels affection--"or at least the absence of its contraries" (p. 523). His mental slate is wiped clean now, and he is ready to try another approach to the problem of arriving at values that will allow him to live responsibly in a relativistic universe.

Eben is successful, of course, in his second approach. By the end of Chapter 65, he has managed to be instrumental in righting many of the wrongs that he had committed with his Essentialism and in gaining a measure of redemption for those the results of which are beyond remedy. He has helped to save Maryland from the savage rebels on one hand and from John Coode on the other; he has received Joan's forgiveness and consummated his marriage with her; and, as the title of Part III indicates, he has, for himself and for his sister and father as well, "Earned" Malden. One looks in vain, obviously, for absolute answers to the question of how the Modern American Mind in the person of Ebenezer Cooke goes about attaining such productive results; but answers, or at least guides, of a relative sort are to be found, and it seems to me that they revolve around his learning in an experiential sense to accept as truth three propositions.

First, he accepts the proposition that Reason is a limited instrument. It cannot finally provide the key to value-thinking because there are very real, very important areas of life which,

beyond a certain point, simply are not amenable to it. Reasoning beyond this point becomes mere abstract and tedious rationalization, enjoyable perhaps in its own right but to no practical ethical purpose. In "Going to Malden," Eben liked nothing more than taking Henry on in one of his "sophisticated discourses"; but throughout "Malden Earned" abstract questions of all kinds diminish in interest and importance for him. He will instead trace the complexities of the world around him--the complicated explanation of Burlingame's parentage, for example--as far as he can and as long as he senses that the effort will produce a practical good for someone. His reaction to the patently abstract arguments which other characters from time to time initiate, no matter how ingenious or how theoretically relevant to the present situation those arguments might be, is to venture no reply, or to offer a brief and consciously inadequate one and then quickly lose interest, or to hope that at least the talk itself might serve to calm someone's fears.

The only "big" question for which he can still work up enthusiasm is the nature and meaning of innocence, for which he rightly feels a very personal and practical concern. Yet, even in areas of this sort, Eben is now willing to admit limits to his rationalizing. He has a very personal and practical concern for Burlingame, for example; but, when questioned by the rebel leader on the subject, he now is candid in admitting that his friend "hath passed into realms of complexity beyond [his] compass" (p. 567). Perhaps the ironic title of Chapter 18 best captures Eben's and Barth's conviction that Reason applied to the world around one is a limited instrument:

The Poet Wonders Whether the Course of Human History is a Progress, a Drama, a Retrogression, a Cycle, an Undulation, a Vortex, a Right- or Left-Handed Spiral, a Mere Continuum, or What Have You. Certain Evidence is Brought Forward, but of an Ambiguous and Inconclusive Nature.

Just as Eben becomes fully aware that his Reason is bound from without by these realms of complexity, so also he begins to know that his Reason is bound from within by a realm of primal, subconscious power. Previously, as we have seen--when he had tried to rape Susan Warren, for example--this power had been a complete mystery to him: "On the scales of Prudence one pan lay empty, while Reason's entire weight tipped down the other; what dark force, then, on the scales of Choice, effected counter-balance?" (p. 322). Now, however, Eben is able to recognize at least the outline and the source of that "dark force." That term itself is revealing, since it points our attention to the black- and red-skinned characters in the novel as those who give strongest evidence of that force. They give so strong and so consistent evidence to it, in fact, that they become symbols of the primal subconscious, "savage," drives in man. Eben's month-long stay at the rebel camp on Bloodsworth Island, then, is in a sense symbolic of his gaining an amount of first-hand knowledge of the subconscious; and it makes him more qualified than before to talk about the nature of that "dark force." Mary Mungummory, whose past experience with the swarthy Charley Matassin and whose nightly watch over the sexual "circus" in her whore-wagon makes her even more qualified, expresses best the understanding which the poet attains:

"there's a piece o' the savage in us all. 'Tis that
and more: the dark of 'em hath somewhat to do with't,

I know. What drives so many planters' ladies to raise their skirts for some great buck of a slave, like the Queen in The Thousand and One Nights? Me thinks 'tis an itch for all we lose as proper citizens--something in us pines for the black and lawless Pit" (p. 591).

Whether such savagery is central or peripheral in civilized man, Eben does not, of course, even try now to determine, as he most surely would have in the past; but he does recognize two things about his inner darkness. First, it must be nurtured to an extent and, at any rate, will not be disobeyed, for it is the seat of all emotions and thus the source of all life. It may be emotion which makes the rebels want to kill Eben and his white companions, but it is also emotion which makes rebel and white alike want to stay alive. The sexual passion that he felt for Joan on three occasions in the past had much to do with sadism, but it also had much to do with his and his species' survival instinct. It was the black Boabdil, for example, who brutishly raped Joan Toast on the Cyprian, simultaneously rendering her unconscious and getting her with child and giving her syphilis; but it also was the pair of blacks pumping like brutes during the storm who saved Captain Cairn's sloop from sinking.

The second realization to which Eben comes about the subconscious drives in man is that, though he must recognize and often bow to them, he also must try vigorously to keep them in check. The forces of civilization in man must finally win out over the savage. In this light the Negro and Indian rebels who, from their Bloodsworth Island base threaten to kill or drive back across the ocean every white in Maryland become symbolic of the constant threat of the dark forces in

man overwhelming his Reason; and Eben's efforts to prevent the rebel take-over serve as a metaphor for the effort which he has come to believe that men ought to make to prevent subconscious domination in their own minds. When Eben argues for Billy Rumbly, the "Unsavage Savage Husband," to return to his father Chicamec and work from the inside to defuse the rebellion, he is also arguing for Anna, Billy's "Unenglished English Wife," and for all men to recognize but also to attempt to maintain control over the dark forces in their nature:

But 'tis not the English case I plead: 'tis the case of humankind, of Civilization versus the Abyss of savagery. Only think, sir: what you've acquired in less than a fortnight wanted two thousand years and more a-building; 'tis a most sweet liquor, is't not? Yet the mash whence man distilled it is two dozen centuries of toil and misery! What, will you drink your fill and throw away the flask, when your people hath such thirst? I grant the English have used you ill, but to drive them out is to drive yourself back into darkness (p. 662).

That Reason is a limited faculty, then, bounded from both without and within by forces which are, beyond a point, impervious to its way of knowing, is the first proposition which the Modern American Mind as illustrated by Ebenezer Cooke in "Malden Earned" comes to accept.

The second proposition is that, despite apparent differences of all kinds, all men are related. They are, in a real sense, one man. The act of physical love links them to the same original source; and it is through acts of spiritual love, often reflected in the physical, that they can once more be brought together. Again, Eben's efforts to head off open warfare between the rebels and the English in Maryland provide clear evidence of his new belief; for they are based in large measure

upon the assumption that the two sides are in actuality one, that both are "humankind." Like Eben, Bertrand, and Captain Cairn on the one hand and the two crewmen on the other, light- and dark-skinned men are literally in the same boat and will be either lost or saved together in the same storm.

This new belief on Eben's part is originally affirmed at the rebel camp when the fact that he once saved the lives of a black and an Indian turns out to be the key to freedom for him and his three companions. Indirectly, at least, the belief is also reaffirmed when, after Eben has left the island, that "Shameless Playwright," Life, arranges for an amazing number of persons he meets to be his figurative and sometimes literal relatives.⁹ The Church-Creek Virgin turns out to be his sister; Henrietta Russecks, his half-sister; Roxanne Russecks, his French nursemaid and figurative mother; Harry Russecks, the hated Church-Creek miller whose death at first seems an occasion for nothing but joy, his figurative step-father; and Harvey Russecks, his figurative step-uncle. Complementing this discovery of his own relatives is another, of course--the discovery that a similarly incredible number of persons in the book turn out to be relatives of Henry's.

The act of finding that a person is one's relative becomes, in a sense, symbolic of this belief in the unity of all men through love, just as, in The Floating Opera, the act of two crabs mating and being called a "doubler" becomes symbolic of approximately the same vision.

⁹"There are deep metaphysical reasons why we need more Fielding-like books today, with plots where everybody turns out to be related to everybody else" (Murphy, "Print," 37).

Supporting the frequent discovery of relatives in The Sot-Weed Factor and serving even further to reflect this new conviction on Eben's part are a number of lesser symbols. To mention but two, there is Henry's allusion to the fact that the morning star Phosphor and the evening star Hesper are, in fact, the same star--Venus; and also loveable Mary Mungummory, the Traveling Whore o' Dorset, whose wagon is the scene where men of the county nightly commune with each other by making love to the same half-dozen women. Mary's horse, by the way, is named Aphrodite.

The third proposition which Eben accepts as truth in "Malden Earned" is the simplest one of all and serves as a basis for the other two. It is that life, sheer physical activity, is good and ought as long as possible to be maintained. The preservation of human life is the yardstick by which Eben measures the practicality of his rational faculty as applied to any particular topic; it is to save their lives that persons ought to recognize their relatedness and love one another. Clearly, this third proposition is yet another motive for the poet's opposing the savage rebellion; he is on the most elementary level working to keep as many people of all colors alive as is possible. The important aspect of this belief is that it applies to life under the worst of conditions as well as the best. Even in the black hold of Long Ben Avery's ship, for example, when it appears that violent death is imminent for Eben and for every person for whom he cares except Henry, Joan, and Andrew, Eben does not think anymore of "Delicious Death," as he did on the last occasion of his being on the Chesapeake. Periods of happiness may be brief and far apart, he

tells Anna, and happiness may never be unalloyed; but life is still to be lived to its very end: "we must cling to life and search each moment for escape" from our trouble (p. 686).

When, moments later, Eben is forced from Avery's ship into the cold, choppy Bay, he has no doubt that he should swim as far as he can. Something in his very being, that same "mindless lust for air" that would not let him hold his breath indefinitely as a child, will not now let him willingly drown--even though he knows he probably will anyway, even though he assumes that Anna, Roxanne, and Henrietta are being raped and butchered at that very minute. And when he gets to a small island where he will probably soon freeze, there is no doubt that he will look for shelter and firewood and, finding none, will try to the point of exhaustion to reach the shore in a little dinghy. He will choose the positive heat of physical activity, no matter how brief or apparently futile, over the negative cold of sure death. Life being the "Shameless Playwright" that it is, there is always the chance for a miracle, the chance that the present trouble may be the last. At any rate, there is in Eben that "mindless lust for air" that should not be denied.

Armed with knowledge of the limits of reason, the relatedness of all human beings, and the paramount value of life, then, in place of Essentialism, Ebenezer Cooke is able to live responsibly and productively in the world. It remains to be seen, however, how he attains this saving knowledge and how he translates it into particular actions in choice-demanding situations. To deal with the matter of attainment first--the events during the twenty-eight or so hours between Joan

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Toast's shocking revelation and Eben's being taken captive by the rebels obviously clear the way for that process. Each of the three truths is humbling in nature, certainly no fare for the proudly ignorant virgin-poet who existed before those events cleared his mind in the manner which we have noted. But in order to determine what it was that actively caused Eben to learn these three lessons, we must look to the month following his capture in the Limbo Straits, for, clearly, the act he performs at the end of that month's captivity utilizes each of the three lessons and is the key to Eben's final success.

He finds himself, we remember, in the position of being allowed to go free because he had saved the lives of two of the three rebel leaders when he first set foot in Maryland and because he still had in his possession the fish-bone ring one had given him at the time. Bertrand, John McEvoy, and Captain Cairn, on the other hand, are condemned to burn at the stake. The poet's decision is to refuse the offer and to insist that all four of the whites go free. Refusing to indulge in futile rationalizing in regard to which of the four men is most or least guilty, refusing to think of himself as separate from the other men around him, and refusing to call life a prize not worth the cost, Eben negotiates an agreement that, if he and McEvoy will find Burlingame and convince him to return to Chicamec, the oldest, most bitter rebel leader who is his father, then Chicamec will in turn free Bertrand the the Captain. If Eben and McEvoy do not succeed in sending Henry back, then they themselves will return and die with their two companions. The unspoken part of the agreement for Eben is,

as I have mentioned several times already, his hope that Henry's presence on Bloodsworth Island will at least somewhat mollify the father and thereby help quench the brewing rebellion.

We can find the positive, active sources of the new beliefs which result in Eben's making this kind of agreement in three places. First, for the source of the belief that the world is too complex and mysterious to be interpreted fully by reason, we must go to the first moment of insight which Eben experiences while he is tied to the stake. It is occasioned by the mistaken appearance that McEvoy alone will be freed and that he has somehow gained his freedom by bartering the lives of the other three whites. At first Eben is angry, remembering that it was McEvoy's letter to Andrew Cooke which began the chain of events which had led him to the stake:

But he soon overcame his anger, for despite the extremity of his position, or perhaps because of it, he was able to see that McEvoy had only been following his principles honestly, as had Ebenezer his own; one could as easily blame old Andrew for reacting so strongly, Joan Toast for occasioning the wager, Ben Oliver for proposing it, Anna for crossing alone to Maryland, Burlingame for--among other things--persuading him to disembark in St. Mary's, or Ebenezer himself, who by any of a hundred thousand acts might have altered the direction of his life. The whole history of his twenty-eight years it was that had brought him to the present place at the present time; and had not this history taken its particular pattern, in large measure, from the influence of all the people with whom he'd ever dealt, and whose lives in turn had been shaped by the influence of countless others? Was he not, in short, bound to his post not merely by the sum of human history, but even by the history of the entire universe, as by a chain of numberless links no one of which was more culpable than any other? It seemed to Ebenezer that he was, and that McEvoy was not more nor less

to blame than was Lord Baltimore, for example, who had colonized Maryland, or the Genoese adventurer who had discovered the New World to the Old (pp. 544-545).

It needs little explication, I think, to see in this passage the seeds of the proposition that reason alone is insufficient to decide questions of cause and effect, of credit and blame, in short, of ethics. Irrational, blind determinism would seem to be the ruling principle in the universe; and, if there is a point where that principle stops and free will begins, reason is powerless to determine just where that point lies. Life is indeed, as John McEvoy had told Eben some ten months earlier, "a tangled skein."

For the source of Eben's second belief, that all men are brothers, are in a real sense one man, we need go no further than the moment of insight which follows immediately on the heels of the first:

The point in space and time whereto the history of the world had brought him would be nothing perilous were it not for the hostility of the Indians and Negroes. But it was their exploitation by the English colonists that had rendered them hostile; that is to say, by a people to whom the accidents of history had given the advantage--Ebenezer did not doubt that his captors, if circumstances were reversed, would do just what the English were doing. To the extent, then, that historical movements are expressions of the will of the people engaged in them, Ebenezer was a just object for his captors' wrath, for he belonged . . . to the class of the exploiters; as an educated gentleman of the western world he had shared in the fruits of his culture's power and must therefore share what guilt that power incurred. Nor was this the end of his responsibility: for if it was the accidents of power and position that made the difference between exploiters and exploited, and not some mysterious specialization of each group's spirit, then it was as "human" for the white man to enslave and dispossess as it was "human" for the black and red to slaughter on the basis of

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color alone; the savage who would put him to the torch anon was no less his brother than was the trader who had once enslaved that savage. In sum, the poet observed, for his secular Original Sin, though he was to atone for it in person, he would exact a kind of Vicarious Retribution; he had committed a grievous crime against himself, and it was himself who soon would punish the malefactor (p. 545).

The source of Eben's assent to the third proposition, the one affirming life as an unquestionable value, we find in a moment of strong feeling, if not exactly of insight, which he experiences not many minutes later. At this point in the confused execution proceedings, it seems as if the rebel leaders are willing to let all but Captain Cairn live. Bertrand and McEvoy are already planning to return swiftly to England "so that they might wish the rebels success without wishing their own ill fortune." But Eben's thoughts are different. He

had not lost sight of his late reflections at the stake; yet though he could sympathize with the plight of the slaves and Indians and affirm the guilt even of white men who, like himself, had condoned that plight merely in effect, by not protesting it, he could by no means relish the idea of a wholesale massacre. On the contrary, with his two near-executions to dulcify it, life tasted uncommonly sweet to the poet just then, and he shuddered at the thought of anyone's being deprived of it (p. 548).

These three moments, then, explain how Ebenezer Cooke comes by his new, successful guides for living effectively amidst total relativity. It is clear that they were attained in a non-rational, even mystical manner; and the only footnote necessary for the full comprehension of their significance is the observation that the moments of mystical insight came for Eben only when he was literally at the stake.

As we have seen, the first begins with "despite the extremity of his position, or perhaps because of it"; and the third moment pivots on the phrase "with his two near-executions." The second insight concludes with a short paragraph which not only sums up the important ramifications of these three moments in Ebenezer Cooke's life but also employs the two small words which are used several times in this chapter and whose aura permeates the whole of "Malden Earned":

Grasping the pair of insights was the labor of but as many seconds, and though they moved him as had few moments in his spiritual autobiography, all he said to Bertrand and McEvoy was, "In any case, 'tis too late to split the hairs of responsibility" (p. 545) (*Italics mine*).

The Modern American Mind, Barth is suggesting here, may finally be ready, as was Eben Cooke, for the experience of profound non-rational insights into value precisely because it, too, is living in a time when it is too late for any alternatives.

There remains the matter of how, exactly, Ebenezer Cooke's new values get translated into action, how in particular choice-demanding situations he is able now to avoid paralysis and make particular responsible choices. He tells McEvoy soon after they have departed from Bloodsworth Island that finding the way out of the predicament of choice,¹⁰ the path to "the storied Town . . . where Responsibility rears her golden towers," is simply a matter of "turn[ing] your morality of motive upon yourself and see[ing] that behind this false

¹⁰It is in this scene, I think, where we see the significance of the name McEvoy. Ebenezer is talking to him like a son here and offering him the way out of the difficulties caused by non-mystical value-thinking.

predicament lies simple cowardice" (p. 581). One has only to choose a cause with humility and knowledge as Ebenezer has just done and then have the courage to "lay your flesh-and-blood privates on the line" (p. 582). For a fuller and more dramatic demonstration of the phenomenon, however, we must look at the scene in which Eben chooses to attempt and then succeeds in carrying out the seemingly impossible task of getting Bertrand, McEvoy, and himself to land after they have jumped from Long Ben Avery's ship and have swum to the little island in the Chesapeake.

This episode is equal in importance to the one at the rebel camp since it, too, is a life-or-death situation for Eben and since his presence is necessary to favorably resolve the central issues of the novel. One thing which this episode demonstrates is the contention that life is not a matter of performing one responsible action from which all else follows inevitably, but is, instead, a matter of having to perform responsibly time and again. Moreover, this scene serves as a conceit for Barth's vision of how the Modern American Mind might live, might "stay afloat," in the relativistic universe.

The activity of Boating has already assumed metaphorical implications in several places in the novel--in Henry's last lecture to Ebenezer, for example, when he talks of "right" and "wrong" being concepts like "windward" and "leeward" which take their meaning from the direction of any one particular boat. It is during the violent storm on the Chesapeake, however, that that metaphor achieves full bloom, for it is then that Eben is given in the person of Captain Cairn a perfect demonstration of how a man may stay alive on the sea

of troubles.¹¹ When the gale engulfs his sloop, Cairn indulges in no casuistry about whether he should have left shore in the first place or whether he should have been a seaman at all or what is causing the storm or how long it will last or what it may do to them. He cuts through all that; and, with a full awareness of the danger but with no fear of death, he makes the preservation of life his only goal. In the open Bay where the winds are strongest, he calmly and efficiently does what little he can in rigging a sea anchor and then puts his trust in "the indefatigable Negroes at the pump and an apparent general seaworthiness about the hull, not to mention blind Providence" (p. 517). When the boat gets blown near the eastern shore, the Captain's calm intelligence, acute senses, and solid knowledge of both his ship and the shoreline finally bring not only himself and his crew but also the passengers, for whom fate has made him responsible, into a cove of temporary safety. No man, Barth is implying, can be a better captain of his metaphorical ship.

The lesson is not lost on his passenger, Ebenezer Cooke. When, little more than a month later, he finds himself, McEvoy, and Bertrand on a cold, windy island in the same Bay, the choice is between sure death by staying on the island and freezing before morning and almost-sure death by trying to navigate in a small skiff with only one oar the four or five miles of rough sea between them and a light which they hope is on shore. "What say ye, Eben?" asks McEvoy,

¹¹The significance of the name Cairn here is clear. He serves as a memorial for Eben.

purposely repeating the very words that less than a year ago had paralyzed Eben when it came his turn to wager for Joan Toast:

The poet started, and saw by his companion's grim smile that McEvoy had formed the question deliberately. For an instant he forgot the frightful cold: he was at table in Locket's, where the eyes of Ben Oliver, Dick Merriweather, Tom Trent, and Joan Toast had joined McEvoy's to render him immobile; again, as then, he felt the weight of choice devolve upon him, peg him out like a tan yard hide in all directions. It was a queer moment: he felt as must a seasoned Alpinist brought back to a crag whence he fell of old and barely survived; many another more formidable he has scaled since without a tremor, but this one turns his blood to water

With some effort, Ebenezer threw off the memory. "I say we try for the house. Wind and waves are behind us, and for better or worse we'll have done with't in an hour" (p. 691).

Having chosen the warmth of life as it is represented by the light and the activity which the sea-faring will require over the coldness of death as represented by the island, Eben and his companions launch their skiff and form the same triangular pattern as we saw before on Captain Cairn's sloop--two men bailing in hull and the "captain" controlling as best he can from the stern:

Though he truly cared little now for his own safety, the burden of responsibility weighed heavy on the poet's heart. He knew so little about what he was doing, and they carried out his suggestions, on which their lives depended, as if he were Captain Cairn! But however meager his seamanship, it was apparently superior to Bertrand's and McEvoy's. And however great the burden, it was no longer an unfamiliar one: he grappled with it calmly, as with an old, well-known opponent, and wondered whether his sensibility had perhaps of late been toughened like the hands of an apprentice mason, by frequent laceration (p. 692).

The next two paragraphs owe a great debt to Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" in conception if not exactly in content. They are a hopeful but far from "happy" allegory of the revitalized Modern American Mind that has learned to navigate the seas of a thoroughly nihilistic universe. Eben is firmly at the helm of his ship but at the same time is entirely circumscribed by and dependent upon the physical limitations of that ship. He is dependent, too, upon other human beings even at the same time that he is responsible for them. The early stages of the journey are relatively smooth like the early stages of one's life; but soon he is in open water where each new wave of trouble falls so close upon the last that there is no time or need to take the exact measure of any one of them and there is no true respite. But there is progress. Exhausted, "shocked," and "demoralized" though he is, Eben finds the skill and resources to continue toward the light; and with his companions' help and with luck, he manages at last to bring the boat to shore. The light by which he has been guiding turns out, surprisingly, to be not only a polestar but also a destination. It turns out to be his home.

The vision with which "Malden Earned" closes, then, is one of Ebenezer Cooke finally earning his rightful place in the world, developing a productive sense of identity and value, coming home. He no longer needs the help of a God either outside or inside himself in order to act responsibly. It is a vision both of the modern intellectual product of America and of America as a modern nation that has exhausted the destructive "non-mystical value-thinking" of its past and has adopted at the eleventh hour a more constructive mystical

value-thinking. An ethic based on a theory of personal essences has been replaced by an ethic based on a firmer grasp of the real world outside and of the dark forces beneath the conscious self. In the beginning of "Malden Earned," Eben is fleeing Maryland and Joan Toast, both emblems of that real world; but by the end he is openly embracing both and, in so doing, is contributing to that world's betterment. He rectifies what he can of the disasters which his Essentialism has inflicted; and, for those which are beyond rectifying, he simply asks forgiveness and follows the observation of John McEvoy that such mistakes are "like the sin o' Father Adam, that we all have on our heads; we ne'er asked for't, but there it is, and do we choose to live, why, we must needs live with't" (p. 694).

In short, the story of Ebenezer Cooke in Part III of The Sot-Weed Factor is the story of the Modern American Mind losing its innocence. And since innocence, as we have noted, is a traditionally American trait, The Sot-Weed Factor is the story of the Modern American Mind's having, ironically, to become less American in the traditional sense, having to become more "worldly," in order to "live any longer in the world." It is proud ignorance--innocence--which causes Eben in the beginning to locate his values in himself and thereby to wreak so much grief; and it is humble knowledge--experience--which causes him in the end to obtain redemption for that grief. Clearly, Barth himself realizes the close association between Essentialism and Innocence. He makes Innocence one of Eben's essences; he reinforces that essence with the emblem of physical virginity; he traces Eben's decreasing regard for both essence and emblem throughout the course

of the novel; and he puts a formal end to both with Eben's having carnal knowledge of Joan Toast. Outside the novel itself, Barth goes so far as to explain the difference between his first two and his third books by saying, "What happened was I had thought I was writing about values and it turned out I was writing about innocence, which I found to be a more agreeable subject anyway" ¹²

To close this discussion of Ebenezer Cooke as an illustration of the Modern American Mind, therefore, it is appropriate that we look more directly than we have heretofore at what in "Malden Earned" Eben does and says about Innocence. Much is crystalized, of course, in his final statement to Anna before going up the stairs at Malden to consummate his marriage:

"That is the crime I stand indicted for . . . the crime of innocence, whereof the Knowledge must bear the burden. There's the true Original Sin our souls are born in: not that Adam learned, but that he had to learn--in short, that he was innocent."

He sat on the edge of the couch and took Joan's hand. "Once before, this girl had shriven me of that sin, and I compounded it by deserting her. Whate'er the outcome, I rejoice at this second chance for absolution" (p. 739).

These explicit sentiments are, however, only half of The Sot-Weed Factor's final statement on innocence. The other half is implicit both in the deliberate, formal, even ceremonial manner in which he utters those words and then performs that deed and also in the fact that it is not until this late in the book that he does so. Since he has long since lost any real innocence and real regard for the virginity which

¹²Enck, "Interview," 11.

is its outward sign, why has he not also long since lost that outward sign as well? In order to answer this question and thus to explain the novel's statement on innocence, we must go back some ways. Let us look at the second of the two major moments of insight that Eben experiences in "Malden Earned." The first I have already cited in the context of discussing the source of Eben's new humility and knowledge. The second occurs during a conversation with the good trapper, Harvey Russecks. Eben has expressed his bitterness over Maryland in general and her courts' treatment of him in particular, and Harvey has come swiftly and intelligently to their defense:

Ebenezer's cheeks tingled, not alone because he felt that he had in fact overstated his indictment: his day in the Cambridge court still rankled in his memory, and the price of it drew sweat from his pores; but his wholesale rancor had got to be something of a disposition, and he had been alarmed to recognize, as the trapper spoke, that he fell into it of late, on mention of certain subjects, more from habit than from honest wrath. So grossly had Maryland used him, he had vowed to smirch her name in verse to his children's children's children; could such outrages dwindle to the like of actors' cues? It was by no progress of reason that he reached this question, but by a kind of insight that glowed in his mind as the blush glowed in his face. By its troubled light, in no more time than was required for him to murmur, "I daresay" to Harvey Russecks, he beheld the homeless ghosts of a thousand joys and sorrows meant to live in the public heart till the end of time: feast days, fast days, monuments and rites, all dedicated to glories and disasters of a magnitude that dwarfed his own, and all forgotten, or rotely observed by a gentry numb to the emotions that established them. A disquieting vision, and no less so to the poet was his response to it. Not long since, he would have gnashed his spiritual teeth at the futility of endeavor in such a world. Not improbably he would have railed at human fickleness in allegorical couplets: the Heart, he

would have declared, was a faithless Widow: at the deathbed of her noble Spouse (whether Triumph or Tragedy) she pledges herself forever to his memory, but scarcely has she donned her Weeds before some importuning Problem has his way with her; and in the years that follow, for all her ceremonious visits to the tomb, she shares her bed with a parade of mean Vicissitudes, not one of them worthy even of her notice. Now, however, though such fickleness still stung his sensibilities (which is to say his vanity, since he identified himself with the late Husband), he was not sure but what it had about it a double rightness: "Time passes for the living," it seemed to say, "and alters things. Only for the dead do circumstances never change." And this observation implied a judgment on the past, its relation to and importance in the present; a judgment to which he currently half assented. But only half! (pp. 605-606).

There is no better passage to show Eben in the process of recognizing his own mortal limits, beginning to accept the imperfect flux of the world around him, and thus shedding his innocence. All of this is clear. But what does Barth mean at the end by the implied "judgment on the past, its relation to and importance in the present"? And why does Eben "only half!" assent to that judgment? The judgment, as I understand it, is that it is impossible to make the past a hard-and-fast guide for the present, that the past has no direct bearing on the present. Since the very element of the living is "time passing," any attempt to attach a fixed meaning to a fact in one's life, any attempt to say, "This signifies such-and-such and nothing else and it always will" is an act of innocence. That is, it is an act of pride and ignorance and shares the futility and the destructiveness of all such acts. The split-second after one attaches absolute significance to some fact, it belongs to the past and must somehow be marked if it is to remain in the memory. And for as long as life goes on, one's

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own as well as others' interpretations and observances of such markers--whether they be "feast days, fast days, monuments, and rites," wedding rings, stories, or "cairns" of any kind--will inevitably change and fade. A wish for things to be otherwise is a wish for something life cannot give.

The above or something like it is, I think, the "judgment on the past" that is elicited by Eben's moment of insight; and I think that he assents to the literal statement I have just made. What he cannot assent to is the implied conclusion to that statement: therefore, one should not attempt to attach absolute significance to facts and to erect memorials either mental or physical to that significance; to do so is to be innocent, and one should not be innocent. Eben rejects this half of the judgment to which his moment of insight leads because it contradicts itself in a sense by placing an absolute negative value on that early stage of every person's life when he cannot help but try to locate absolutes within himself, when he must make memorials of all kinds to events that have meaning for him. The judgment assumes that there is an absolute negative value in the fact of innocence itself. When Eben's newly acquired relativistic method of perceiving the world changes its focus from values to innocence, he concludes that a man's period of innocence, too, can have any number of meanings. A man can make it have, for himself, of course, whatever significance he wants, just as Eben made his experience on Captain Cairn's sloop during the violent storm signify a method of salvation for him, McEvoy, and Bertrand a month or so later.

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Eben's first overt statement of this way of viewing innocence takes place during a conversation with John McEvoy and Mary Mungummory, and it contrasts vividly with the more absolutist attitudes of those two characters:

"Innocence is like youth," he [Ebenezer] declared sadly, "which is given us only to expend and take its very meaning from its loss."

"'Tis that makes it precious, is't not?" asked McEvoy with a smile.

"Nay," Mary countered, "'tis that proves its vanity, to my way o' thinking."

"'Tis beyond me what it proves," Ebenezer said, "I know only that the case is so" (p. 608).

With this short conversation for a prelude, we are able now to understand Eben's rationale for maintaining his virginity long after he has lost the quality for which it was emblematic. He offers this rationale during a conversation with Roxanne Russecks while Roxanne's daughter Henrietta is sporting with McEvoy in the mill loft and her husband Harry is being led on a wild goose--or rather, horse--chase by Mary Mungummory. Roxanne is set on having some amorous dallying of her own with Eben, but he demurs on the grounds that he has taken a vow of chastity. She asks if he is a priest and he answers no:

He went on to explain to her how at the outset, being a shy ungainly fellow, he had come to regard his innocence as a virtue rather from necessity; how not a year past (though it seemed decades!) he had elevated it, along with a certain artistic bent of his, to a style of life, even identifying it with the essence of his being; and how through a year of the most frightful tribulation, and at a staggering expense not only of property but perhaps of human lives, he had managed to preserve it intact. It had been some while since he'd been obliged to consider seriously the matter of his innocence, and though to enlarge upon its virtues and shudder verbally at the prospect of its loss had become second nature for him, he was surprised

to find himself dissociated emotionally from his panegyric; standing off, as it were, and listening critically. Indeed, when Mrs. Russecks asked with sharp interest for an explanation of this wondrous innocence, he was obliged to admit, both to her and to himself, that he could call himself innocent no longer except with regard to physical love.

But the lady was not yet satisfied. "Do you mean you've no notion of what your friend and Henrietta have been about this last half hour?"

Ebenezer blushed, not alone at the reference to the other couple, but also at the realization (which he readily confessed to Mrs. Russecks) that even in the physical sense his innocence had come to be limited to the mere technical fact of his virginity--which fact itself (though he would not elaborate further) was not so unqualified as he might wish.

"The truth of't is, then," Mrs. Russecks persisted, "this precious Innocence you cling to hath been picked at and pecked at till you've scarce a tit-bit of't left."

"I must own that is the case, more's the pity."

"And doth that wretched tatter mean so much?"

Ebenezer sighed. The critical listener in his soul had posed that very question not many moments earlier, during his speech, and had observed by way of answer a startling fact: his loss of the quality of innocence, it suddenly seemed, had been accompanied by a diminution of the value that he placed on it; although he still sang its praises from witless force of habit, he had been astonished to remark, in these moments of dispassionate appraisal, what slight emotion he truly felt now at the thought of losing it altogether. Thus his sigh, and the slight smile with which he replied, "In sooth I have grown indifferent to't, lady. Nay, more: I am right weary of innocence."

Still, he will not embrace her.

"What I prized before hath all but lost its point," he said gently, "and when I think that soon or late 'twill come, this end you speak of, as sure as death will come, and belike in circumstances by no means so pleasurable as these, why, then I wonder: What moral doth the story hold? Is't that the universe is vain? The chaste and consecrated a hollow madness? Or is't that what the world lacks we must ourselves supply?"

My brave assault on Maryland--this knight-errantry of Innocence and Art--sure, I see now 'twas an edifice raised not e'en on sand, but on the black and vasty zephyrs of the Pit. Wherefore a voice in me cries, 'Down with't, then!' while another stands in awe before the enterprise; sees in the vanity of't all nobleness allowed to fallen men. 'Tis no mere castle in the air, this second voice says, but a temple of the mind. Athene's shrine, where the Intellect seeks refuge from Furies more terrific than e'er beset Orestes--"

Ebenezer declared that although to present her then and there with the final vestige of his innocence would be a privilege as well as a joy, he was resolved to deny himself a pleasure which, however sublime, would be devoid of a right significance.

"When erst I entered the lists of Life," he said, "Virginity was a silken standard that I waved, all bright and newly stitched. 'Tis weatherblast and run now, and so rent by the shocks of combat e'en its bearer might mistake it for a boot rag. Notwithstanding which, 'tis a banner still, and hath earned this final dignity of standards: since I must lose it, I'll not abandon it by the way, but surrender it with honor in the field" (pp. 627-629).

So eloquent a statement hardly needs a gloss. Clearly, Eben wants the loss of his virginity to be a ceremony in honor of "the knight-errantry of Innocence and Art." He wants it to be an affirmation of belief that his actions during the last nine months of the previous year, no matter how damaging their consequences, were not in vain; and, in order to make that affirmation, in order to give his loss of virginity that "right significance," he must remain chaste until finally he can make love with the one woman who inspired those actions. By having Eben choose to remain faithful to Joan Toast, here in the face of sexual urgencies and, later, as the court proceedings at Malden unfold, in the face of familial responsibilities, Barth is asserting that innocence is cowardly but also brave, vain

but also noble, a "castle in the air" but also "a temple of the mind," its demise necessary but also sad.

A postlude ought to be added to this assertion. Two qualities other than lateness and ceremony distinguish Eben's honeymoon night. There is also a marked aura of heroism, since, by consummating his marriage, he is securing the Cooke's Point estate for his family and therein helping to secure the whole province of Maryland against a vicious plot; and, further, there is a palpable air of martyrdom, since, when he finally makes love to Joan, he will inevitably take her pox. The best passage to explain these qualities of heroism and martyrdom as they relate to the idea of Innocence is that which renders Eben's thinking as he sits imprisoned in the black hold of Long Ben Avery's ship and talks impassionedly with his sister:

The martyr, it seemed to him, was in a sense unnatural, since blind Nature has neither codes nor causes; it was from this point of view that Andromache, like Ecclesiasticus, appeared the more sophisticated moralist, and heroes of every stamp seemed drunkards or madmen. Yet the very un-Naturalness, the hubris, as it were, of heroism in general and martyrdom in particular were their most appealing qualities. Granted that the Earth, as Burlingame was fond of pointing out, is "a dustmote whirling through the night," there was something brave, defiantly human, about the passengers on this mote who perished for some dream of Value. To die, to risk death, even to raise a finger for any Cause, was to pennon one's lance with the riband of Purpose, so the poet judged, and had about it the same high lunacy of a tilt with Manchegan windmills (p. 685).

The term "high lunacy" catches perfectly the kind of ethical thinking which Barth is finally envisioning for the Modern American Mind. An equally accurate term, I think, is "higher innocence."

Barth is recommending hypothetically not that such a mind try somehow to remain in its original state of innocence--we have seen through Eben that that attempt is destructive and futile--and not that it somehow immerse itself totally in the state of experience--the world of "fallen" men has treated Eben no better than he has treated it--but that it strive to transcend the two states and achieve a synthesis of them which will be nobler than either. The Modern American Mind needs to know more about the facts surrounding it both from within and without; it needs to accept the reality of those facts; and it needs to make do with finding in them only relative guides for action. Having done all this, however, it needs also to retain, or perhaps, to regain, its innocent "Dream of Value." The Modern American Mind must learn to adopt a cause out of humility and knowledge rather than pride and ignorance; but then, having adopted the cause, to fight proudly for it not because it is but as if it were an absolute. As for the personal cost of trying literally to live metaphorically in this fashion, of acting out of such quixotic "higher innocence," Anna tells her brother, "'Tis not worth [it]!" "Nor is aught else," Eben replies (p. 686).

A footnote must be added to this discussion of Ebenezer Cooke, for he, like Todd Andrews, Joseph Morgan, and Jacob Horner before him, illustrates the Writer--that is, the Poet in the broad sense of that term. By making Poetry as well as Innocence one of Eben's assumed essences, Barth keeps before us throughout the novel the consideration that the claim to Truth has traditionally belonged to the

poet as well as to the innocent. All of this is figured vividly at the end of "Going to Malden," where Eben makes his escape from responsibility and as he goes holds tight to his first poem of any honesty and merit. In this act, we see the ambivalence of Poetry, which can take its maker and its audience from the world of human responsibility for reasons both admirable and despicable, brave and cowardly. But the statement being made about Poetry here is quite unambivalent on one point: at this stage of the development of the Modern American Mind, verbal art can still be made.

By the end of "Malden Earned," however, there is ambivalence on this point as well. The central question is this: if Poetry is innocent at the core (as Innocence is poetic), then can it still be written by a Modern American Mind which has lost its innocence? And if the answer is yes, then what kind can be written? On one side of the question, Barth offers the spirited rationales for the "knight-errantry of . . . Art" and the "Dream of Value" which we have seen. And there could be no more spirited defense of the particular sort of poetry--narrative--that Eben inclines to than that made by Harvey Russecks:

"No pleasure pleasures me as doth a well-spun tale, be't sad or merry, shallow or deep! If the subject's privy business, or unpleasant, who cares a fig? The road to Heaven's beset with thistles, and methinks there's many a cow-pat on't. As for the length, fie, fie!" He raised a horny finger. "A bad tale's long though it want but an eyeblink for the telling, and a good tale's short though it take from St. Swithin's to Michaelmas to have done with't. Ha! And the plot is tangled, d'ye say? Is't more knotful or bewildered than the skein o' life, that a good tale tangles the better to unsnarl? Nay, out with your story, now

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and yours as well, sir, and shame on both o' ye
 thou'rt not commenced already! Spin and tangle
 till the Dog-star sets i' the Bay; a tale well
 wrought is the gossip o' the gods, that see the
 heart and point o' life on earth; the web o' the
 world; the Warp and the Woof . . . I'Christ, I
 do love a story, sirs!" (pp. 588-589).

This defense, together with the fact that every drop in the ocean of story which Eben hears proves not only pleasurable but also useful in the unraveling of true identities and the righting of fortunes,¹³ certainly speaks eloquently for the place of Poetry in a post-innocence mind. On the negative side of the question is the simple but weighty fact that Eben never writes any more poetry after his satire. Nor does he indicate that he ever intends to.

One way to resolve this apparent inconsistency would be to claim that Eben proves to be not really a poet at all, just as he proves to be not really a virgin. The verses he writes, like the sexual organ he keeps sheathed, are emblems of essences which he only imagines. To be a Poet takes more than a certain way of looking at language and life and a certain temperament that wants to create new worlds. It takes the ability to create those worlds, to give that sort of temperament original expression in a work of art; and Eben never gives any real indication of that sort of ability, his The Sot-Weed Factor being indisputably a second-rate poem. In fact, one of the first things we ever learn about him is that he is "more ambitious than talented" (p. 3). From this point of view, then, Eben stands for the Poet as "seer" rather than "maker," for the spirit rather than the

¹³See footnote 9.

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fact; and there is little doubt that it is the latter category in each of these two pairs that is the genuine article. Eben himself admits as much when he looks back on his satire from a few months' perspective and considers it mere "versifying."

There is much truth in this line of argument, of course; but it alone does not resolve the apparent ambivalence concerning how and what the Modern American Poet will continue to write after he has lost his innocence. To begin with, one cannot accept wholeheartedly the simple preference of the one definition of "Poet" over the other. The particulars of that old argument need not be rehearsed again here, except to say that claiming a man is a poet only when he is in the act of putting words to a page is surely narrow and that therefore Eben in "Malden Earned" may conceivably be seen as a Poet between words or in preparation for his first real work. Or he may be interpreted as a Poet who is understandably too swamped with perilous action and too imaginatively exhausted for the moment to give his talent free reign.¹⁴ At least, there is nothing in the strictly fictional context of this third part of the novel to refute such views directly. It is important, at any rate, for the reading of Eben's whole illustrative function that his embodiment of the idea of Poetry be taken seriously. As fine a critic as Burlingame thought his The Sot-Weed Factor worth publishing, perhaps a sign of even better things to come; and we should not underestimate how difficult it is to make even a

¹⁴This question, of course, relates directly to the validity or lack of validity of Eben's Essentialism. Is a man a poet by virtue of what he is or what he does?

second-rate piece of art. Furthermore, the question of what kind of poetry, if any, the Modern American Mind which has lost its innocence will continue to appreciate, to need, is equally as important and germane as what kind of poetry, if any, that mind will continue to create.

The answer which Barth offers can finally be understood, I believe, as consisting of two parts. First, poetry, particularly the narrative sort with which Barth shows foremost concern, will be much more an end in itself for the Modern American Mind that has lost its innocence than it was before. As Harvey Russecks's enthusiastic tribute makes clear, the pleasure of sheer story, apart from considerations of meaning, will become a greater part of the Writer's (and the Reader's) literary fare. The Writer will be on more familiar terms with the idea of relative significance; he will be more willing now to leave questions of final meaning to "the gossip o' the gods"; and thus he, like Harvey Russecks, will be more attuned to the spinning of good yarns as a joy in its own right. The act of storytelling, then, will more than ever provide its own reason for being.

This is not to say, of course, that the Writer will not try to invest his story with absolute meaning (or that the Reader will not try to find absolute meaning). But it is to say--and this is the second half of Barth's answer to the question of what and how the Modern American Mind will continue to write after its loss of innocence--that that act will now be one of "higher innocence." The Writer will tell stories not because he is but as if he were privy to the Truth, as if he believed that human events could be ordered and

related via the written word so to reveal "the heart and point o' life on earth; the web o' the world; the Warp and the Woof"

Through overt statement and so heavy a reliance on metaphor that it draws attention to the very act of saying "as if," he will admit even as he searches for Significance that it probably can't be found. He will, in short, write a story something like The Sot-Weed Factor.

Ebenezer Cooke, of course, is not capable of this "higher innocence" on a verbal level; but, in his self-conscious act of remaining sexually faithful to his wife and thereby seeming, for a moment at least, to give his life-story Meaning, he serves as a heroic exemplum for the Modern American Writer.¹⁵

III

"There are more ways to the woods than one." Of the scores of aphorisms offered us by the scores of characters in The Sot-Weed Factor, this is the one which is most often repeated. The resultant emphasis encourages a reader to apply this aphorism to a whole host of considerations raised by the novel, but I think that it nowhere applies with greater clarity than in the consideration of the illustrative dimension of Henry Burlingame III. In the broadest terms, he stands for a way to the "woods" of responsibility in a nihilistic universe which is exactly opposite to but equally as successful as Ebenezer Cooke's way. The fact that Henry Burlingame III is not the novel's

¹⁵Barth, "Exhaustion," 34.

main character surely suggests that his creator's attention is not focused primarily on this way; nevertheless, it constitutes for Barth a prominent consideration, one which both amplifies and puts into a clearer context Ebenezer Cooke's way.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, let us begin, then, by noting that Henry Burlingame III, like Ebenezer Cooke, stands first of all for the Modern Mind. It is his theory and practice of education, after all, which to a great extent creates Eben's relativistic, nihilistic, "modern" perception of the universe. It is Henry, not Eben, who initially treats all knowledge as a game, makes no distinction between objects or facts or philosophies on the basis of inherent worth, and achieves so high a degree of knowledge and imagination that he cannot see any final reason for choosing one course of action over the alternatives. When Henry breaks in upon his ex-student at Cambridge and finds him literally paralyzed with indecision, with "cosmopsis," to use Jake Horner's term again, we are not surprised to hear Henry ask, "Will it comfort you to learn that I, too, suffer from your disease, and have since childhood?" (p. 14).

There are two notable differences, however, between these two characters' versions of the Modern Mind. One is that the wit and imagination from which such a mind develops are more acute in Henry than in Eben. "The truth that drives men mad" may be "caught and looked on" by either "insight or instruction," Henry tells Eben (p. 345); and the fact that Henry suffered from this modern paralysis almost from the beginning, while it did not fully strike Eben until he was twenty-one, suggests strongly that Henry's basic way of

catching that truth was that of the "insight" of genius as opposed to Eben's more common "instruction." Since one way to put the "truth that drives men mad" is that mankind is left alone--that is, Godless or "Fatherless"--in the universe, it is not surprising that one of the first things we learn about Burlingame's personal life is that he does not know who his father was. (He does not know his mother, either, but the emphasis in his mind is always on the missing father.) Thus, he not only "looks on" the nihilistic universe but also feels himself to be an integral part of it.

The other difference between Eben's and Henry's version of the Modern Man is that Henry is more sexual. He is from the very beginning in touch with his most primal instincts in a way that it takes Eben the entire novel even to begin to achieve; Henry is, in fact, as much a genius in the area of human sexuality as in the area of the intellect. Again, we see the play on the word know which we noted at several points in the discussion of Eben. Several facts from the early part of Henry's biography serve to underscore this particular characteristic, chief of them being his early association with the sea, which oozed forth the earliest forms of life and which is perennially associated with the liquids of the body. He was not born, it appears at first, but was simply "fished like a jimmy-crab from the waves of the Chesapeake" (p. 134). His first memory is of a sea voyage, his earliest and strongest yearning is to go to sea again, and he is raised until that time by a sea captain and his wife named Salmon. Complementing all this, moreover, is the fact that his first nursing

was on the milk of a goat (p. 135), an animal renowned for its pro-creative drive.¹⁶

The second primary aspect of Burlingame's ideological function--that he, like Eben, stands for the American--again need not be broadly dwelt upon. It is the educational theory spun out of Henry's view of the world which is a major cause of Eben's distinctly American inability to accept the finality of things; and the fact that Henry, too, was born in the New World and spends most of his time and energies during the novel there lends support to this illustrative trait. As with Henry and his illustration of the Modern Mind, his connection with America is, if anything, even stronger than Eben's in that it pre-dates it. Eben does not get back to the New World until he is twenty-eight, while Henry was cavorting there as a neophyte sailor less than a year after Eben was born. Thereafter, Henry was sot-weed planter, pirate, and political agent there while Eben was still laboring dully along in London.

Of course, Henry was cavorting in other parts of the world as well; and all through the novel he declares himself a citizen of that entire world, not just the part that is America. Still, it is America, and Maryland in particular, which he takes as his favorite symbol of the world and which he most articulately and thoroughly understands:

"the Province is no Hell or Purgatorio, but just a piece of the great world like England--with the difference, haply, that the soil is vast and new

¹⁶There is a foreshadowing here of the hero of Giles Goat-Boy, an "Enos Enoch," a savior, "with balls."

where the sot-weed hath not drained it. What's more, the reins and checks are few and weak; good plants and weeds alike grow tall. Do but recall, if the people there seem strange and rough: a man content with Europe scarce would cross the ocean. The plain fact is, the greatest part are castaways from Europe, or the sons of castaways: rebels, failures, jailbirds and adventurers. Cast such seed on such soil, 'twere fond to seek a crop of dons and courtiers!"

"Yet you speak as one who loves the place," said Ebenezer, "and that alone for me is warrant I shall too."

Burlingame shrugged. "Haply so, haply no. There is a freedom there that's both a blessing and a curse. 'Tis more than just political and religious liberty--they come and go from one year to the next. 'Tis philosophic liberty I speak of, that comes from want of history. It makes every man an orphan like myself, that freedom, and can as well demoralize as elevate" (p. 165).¹⁷

It is obvious that Burlingame's comprehension of America is from the inside, as it were; that is, his status as orphan makes it largely a matter of identification rather than of intellectualization, in the same sense as his comprehension of the nihilistic, "Fatherless" universe. His last sentence notionally explains how his orphanhood becomes an emblem of the universe as it is perceived by the Modern Mind.

America's inhabitants, like those of the world at large, are cut off

¹⁷This passage clarifies two important aspects of Barth's work. First, we see here a thematic rationale for his not providing any of the characters in The End of the Road with significant biographies. Their very lack of them underlines their illustration of the American. Second, we see here the real significance of the title of this novel. It is called The Sot-Weed Factor not merely because it concerns the adventures of a tobacco salesman or because its central character wrote a poem by that name. It is so entitled because it concerns the moral exhaustion of America. The "sot-weed factor" in the universe is that factor which seems to wear out every New World for mankind and for individual men as well and to force them finally to accept the imperfect one they have. It is that factor, in other words, which makes men lose their innocence.

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from the old, traditional customs, beliefs, and "parentage" which once gave them identity and value. Thus they, like Henry, are forced to undergo the traumatic experience of trying to discover or to create all by themselves these two qualities. As Henry elsewhere explains about himself, and hence about America:

"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!" (p. 130).

So it is that Burlingame to a higher degree even than Cooke, who knows who his father is, at least, even if he knows almost nothing about him, stands for the Modern American Mind as Barth sees it. Burlingame must try, therefore, even more desperately than Cooke to find a way of acting productively, manfully, in a world which offers no absolute rules for conduct, a way of fighting off "the truth that drives men mad." Eben has at least a vague direction for this life from the start: he should be preparing to inherit his father's estate; he should be "Going to Malden." Henry has absolutely no direction at all. He does, fortunately, have a number of resources denied to his counterpart that will aid him in the attempt to find direction. Foremost among these resources are the two characteristics to which I pointed as marks which distinguish his version of the Modern Mind from Eben's--his intellectual and sexual genius. Also not to be overlooked are his two years of experience in sailing the seas, with all of the connotations we have seen in that experience, and his one year with a wandering gypsy tribe, with its usual suggestions of passion and outlawry.) Actually, it is hard to know exactly whether to call

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these two adolescent experiences "resources" in the sense that they later help him to determine and execute certain attempts at achieving value and identity or to call them his first two such attempts. He never really seems to have been an adolescent, and he claims to have been afflicted with the potentially paralyzing cosmic view since childhood. At any rate, the sailing and the gypsying are instructive preludes to the solution to the Modern American Mind's ethical problem which he finally adopts in his adult years.

The same ambiguity applies to the five years he spends at Cambridge before being expelled, if one takes twenty-one rather than sixteen as the proper demarcation between adolescence and adulthood. This period at the university serves as the climax of his years as student which began when he read his first imaginative literature, Don Quixote, at fourteen. At Cambridge, Burlingame makes a very important decision. He is initially "taken in" (an intentional pun--Barth's all-pervasive use of metaphor invites such things) by Henry More, the famous idealist philosopher, but he soon switches allegiances and embraces, both figuratively and literally, the famous materialist and the sworn enemy of More's, Isaac Newton:

"I was out to learn the nature of the universe from Newton, but knowing I was More's protege, he was cold and incommunicative with me. I employed every strategy I knew to remove this barrier, and, alas, won more than I'd fought for--in plain English, Eben, Newton grew as enamored of me as had More, with this difference only, that there was naught Platonical in his passion" (p. 23).

With the very familiar play on the word know in mind, we understand that Henry's choice of learning in the lap of young Newton

rather than of old More marks a clear inclination on his part for one kind of knowledge over another, for the things of the world over the ideas about them. For two years Henry keeps More as well as Newton in thrall and plays one off against the other, but finally they discover the game and in a jealous fury cast Henry out from the university. The forced but not unwelcome change in the young man's life provides him with his final lesson at Cambridge, that idealism and materialism cannot dwell comfortably under the same roof. A person must incline to one or the other; and, clearly, Burlingame inclines to the latter. It is a dozen years, however, before he accepts this lesson fully enough to apply it to his attempt to find values that will ward off the modern disease he shares with Eben and keep him moving in what seems to be a productive way.

The next activity into which he plunges, after Andrew Cooke finds him penniless in London and takes him to St. Giles, is that of teaching; and its very appeal for him seems to lie in the opportunity to combine allegiances to both idea and fact. On the one hand, teaching gives him the opportunity to demonstrate and to revel in his amazing practical grasp of the world. There seems to be not one human activity from dancing to philosophy that he has not thoroughly mastered, and this includes the activity of teaching itself: "for the range and depth of his abilities he was little short of an Aristotle" (p. 6). On the other hand, because he is such an excellent teacher, his vocation at St. Giles provides a sense of being on familiar terms with his inner reality as well. So, when he is sent packing from St. Giles, he does not adopt an entirely new strategy for lining his stomach as he

has done at every other dramatic juncture in his life, but continues, instead, to be a teacher in London.

There is, in fact, a great deal of Essentialism in Burlingame during these four years, a great deal of attempting to deny his sense of meaninglessness by consciously elevating his knack for teaching to the status of a personal essence. He is, if I may borrow and alter an early phrase of Eben's Henry Burlingame III: "Tutor, sir!" The fact that Burlingame knows a staggering amount really does suit him especially well for teaching; still, one of the things he knows is that his teaching success is as much the result of accident as it is of his having come upon the inner Truth. Pupils as good as Eben and Anna and a teaching situation as free and personal as St. Giles's are a rare good fortune for any would-be tutor. Moreover, he knows that there are a host of other activities at which he is or could be equally successful. But he keeps at teaching as long as possible for the most pragmatic of reasons; it allows him to keep himself fed, and at the same time it is at least temporarily therapeutic. (The parallel here with the Doctor in The End of the Road prescribing the "therapy" of teaching at Wicomico State Teachers for Jake is obvious.

The passage which best catches Henry's mixed pragmatic and tongue-in-cheek attitude toward his tutorial solution to cosmopsis comes from the time when he is taking Eben from Cambridge to London and is trying to talk his ex-student into trying this same solution:

"Tis not my wont to look that far ahead," Burlingame said. "Let us consider rather how you'll occupy

yourself in London. You must not sit idle, lest you slip again into languishment and stupor."

"Alas," said Ebenezer, "I have no long-term goals toward which to labor."

"Then follow my example," advised Burlingame, "and set as your long-term goal the successful completion of all your short-term goals."

"Yet neither have I any short-term goal."

"Ah, but you will ere long, when your belly growls for dinner and your money's gone."

"Unhappy day!" laughed Ebenezer. "I've no skill in any craft or trade whatever. I cannot even play Flow My Tears on the guitar."

"Then 'tis plain you'll be a teacher, like myself."

"'Sheart! 'Twould be the blind leading the blind."

"Aye," smiled Burlingame. "Who better grasps the trials of sightlessness than he whose eyes are gone?"

"But what teach? I know something of many things, and enough of naught."

"I'faith, then the field is open, and you may graze where you list."

"Teach a thing I know naught of?" exclaimed Ebenezer.

"And raise thy fee for't," replied Burlingame, "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 straightway proclaim yourself professor of't."

Ebenezer shook his head. "'Tis still impossible, I am curious about the world in general, but ne'er could choose."

"Very well, then: I dub thee Professor of the Nature of the World, and as such shall we advertise you. Whate'er your students wish to learn of't, that you will teach them."

"Thou'rt jesting, Henry!"

"If't be a jest," replied Burlingame, "'tis a happy one, I swear, 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. 'Tis no trick at all." (pp. 27-28).

The self-consciousness evidence in such a passage suggests that the tutorship solution is about to outlive its usefulness as a

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therapy for Burlingame, just as Cooke's new-found awareness and proud declaration of his virginity the night of the Momentous Wager signals the beginning of its end. For one to ride a trait too hard, to look at it too directly, Barth seems to suggest, is paradoxically somehow to incite or engender in one its opposite, which as a result then soon undermines it as one's "essence." So Todd Andrews the rake becomes Todd Andrews the saint; so Ebenezer Cooke the virgin becomes Ebenezer Cooke the husband; so, in this case, Henry Burlingame the tutor again becomes Henry Burlingame the student, when his two favorite pupils return to their sick father at St. Giles.

For Burlingame at this point, all the old solutions are worn out; the old masks have been discarded. Furthermore, he sees that all the old solutions have been to an extent but one solution--"inconstancy, fickleness, a periodic shifting of enthusiasms, though a vice, may preserve a man from crippling indecision," he attests from first-hand experience when he finds Eben paralyzed in his university room (p. 14). Now, at thirty-three, Burlingame finds himself at the end of that overall "super-pragmatic" solution as well. Anna and Eben's returning to their distraught father not only leaves Henry without the only two human beings for whom he cares but also reminds him more forcefully than ever before that he himself has no parent to demand his return when he goes astray, to give him a toehold in history. He is in every sense an orphan. We do not see his loneliness and despair dramatized, since the novel's narrator follows Eben back to St. Giles; but we do have Henry's description of them to Eben seven years later on the Plymouth coach:

"Were I his [Andrew's] son I'd be disowned ere now for flying in the face of his concern; but what a priceless prize it is, Eben! What a wealthy man I'd be, to throw away such treasure! The fellow repines in bed for grief at losing you; he dictates the course of your life to make you worthy of your line! Who grieves for me, prithee, or cares a fig be I fop or philosopher? Who sets me goals to turn by 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 in 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 never could tell you what a loneliness it is!" (p. 130).

At this point Henry's version of the Modern American Mind is in exactly the same condition that Eben's would reach seven years later when he bolted from the Momentous Wager for Joan Toast; that is, it is in a condition of near-paralytic despair. A comparison of what each near-thirty-year-old man does after retreating to his London room is instructive. Eben falls to cursing the innocence that will not let him claim Joan for a night and then to imagining in place of one real encounter with her a number of impossibly exotic ones; but, when Joan suddenly enters his room, strips, and beckons him to bed, he uses the occasion not to terminate the innocence and imagination which heretofore have been liabilities but to raise them to the status of personal essences. Similarly Henry describes what he did at a similar juncture in his life:

"I spent some hours grousing in my chamber, . . . and at length I came to see this pompous name of mine as the most precious thing I owned. Who

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"'Sheart, I see your meaning!" Ebenezer said, "'Tis your name that links you with your forebears; thou'rt not wholly ex nihilo after all! 'Tis a kind of clue to the riddle!"

Burlingame nodded. "And did I not profess to be a scholar? . . . Then and there I made myself a vow," he said, "to learn the name and nature of my father, the circumstances of my birth, and haply the place and manner of his death; nor would I value any business higher, but ransack the very planet in my quest till I had found my answer or died a-searching.

And search I have--i'faith!--these seven years.

'Tis the one business of my life" (p. 131).

Both men find escape from despair via two aspects of themselves which have been explicit in their lives all along. For Eben it is innocence and imagination; for Henry it is experience and energy. He may have been fickle and inconstant with regard to the various modes of his dallying with knowledge, but his genius for knowledge itself has never wavered; and he may have shifted enthusiasms many times, but the enthusiasm itself has remained constant. Two prominent physical features symbolically reinforce these characteristics: his penetrating, serpent-like eyes reflect his experience; and his strong, wiry, thick-chested build, his energy. Also, his often-used surname (the narrator never calls his central character "Cooke") emphasizes these characteristics, with its first part suggesting "burly" and its second the "game"-like aura of his quest for knowledge. (As a young tutor he "rehearsed [Eben and Anna] 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" [p. 7]).

For both men, then, their two most prominent traits overlap to form one concept of identity. From this point on, however, it is the differences between the two solutions which become especially crucial. Eben interprets his title to refer to what he is; only secondarily does his personal "essence" dictate that he do something (write a panegyric on Maryland). Henry, working in the exact opposite manner, interprets his name as an injunction to do something (to make the search for his parentage "the one business of [his] life"); only after that search will he find out who is. After eleven years of action have failed to give Ebenezer a sense of value, he attempts finally to locate that value in himself and to define himself by being. After eleven years of being a teacher have failed to provide Henry with a sense of value, he attempts finally to locate that value in himself and to define himself by acting. He begins to operate on the assumption that the act implies the actor, not vice versa as does Eben; that personal "existence" does not follow personal "essence," but precedes it.

All of which is but to say, of course, that Henry Burlingame III, like Jake Horner before him, becomes illustrative of the "Existentialist" way for the Modern American Mind to try to live by relative values. Just as its opposite, Eben's "Essentialist" way, is at heart innocent and poetic, so the "Existentialist" way is experienced and energetic.¹⁸ And just as, in order to bear witness to his

¹⁸Explicit here is not only the familiar Romantic dichotomy of Innocence and Experience, but also the more peculiarly Barthian one of Innocence and Energy, which he first made clear in the title

Essentialism, Eben consciously adopts the two outward signs of virginity and versifying, so Henry indicates his Existentialism initially by vowing to track his heritage back to Henry Burlingame I and II and then later, in 1691, by making a second vow to lay hands on the notorious outlaw, John Coode. It is the mysterious presence and/or legend of this man which, for Henry, holds the "truth" about the universe in the same way that his mysterious ancestors hold the "truth" about his self. To complete the symmetry of this patterning, Henry's two activities, like Eben's two essences, eventually converge into one. Henry finds that the Secret History and the Privie Journall he needs in order to capture Coode are literally opposite sides of the same page; that is, they are written in the recto and verso sides respectively of the pages of the Assembly Journal.

All of this illustrative point-counterpoint is summed up quite neatly and of course eloquently by Burlingame himself in a conversation with Eben from which I have already quoted extensively. It takes place in an inn where the two, after being reunited at Captain Thomas Mitchell's, have stopped to dine:

"Two things alone can save a man from madness."
 He indicated the other patrons of the inn.
 "Dull-headness is one, and far the commoner:
 the truth that drives men mad must be sought
 for ere it's found; and it eludes the doltish
 or myopic hunter. But once 'tis caught and
 looked on, whether by insight or instruction,
 the captor's sole expedient is to force his
 will upon't ere it work his ruin! Why is't
 you set such store by innocence and rhyming, and
 I by searching out my father and battling Coode?"

of Joseph Morgan's thesis in The End of the Road: The Saving Roles of Innocence and Energy in American . . . History.

One must 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?

"One other," Ebenezer said with a blush.

"'Tis the one I flee"

"What? Ah, 'sheart, indeed! The state I found you in at college! How many have I seen like that in Bedlam--wide-eyed, feculant, and blind to the world! Some boil their life into a single gesture and repeat it o'er and o'er; others are so far transfixed, their limbs remain where'er you place'em; still others take on false identities: Alexander, or the Pope in Rome, or e'en the Poet Laureat of Maryland--"

Ebenezer looked up, uncertain whether it was he or the impostors whom Burlingame referred to.

"The upshot of't is," his friend concluded, "if you'd escape that fate you must embrace me or reject me, and the course we are committed to, despite the shifting lights that we appear in, just as you must embrace yourself as Poet and Virgin, regardless, or discard it for something better." He stood up. "In either case don't seek whole understanding--the search were fruitless, and there is no time for't" (pp. 345-346).

We have seen already that Eben's Essentialist way of "making and seizing his soul" is a miserable failure; not long after this philosophic interlude, it causes him to sign away Malden, alienate Henry, and betray Joan Toast. But what of Henry's existentialism? Do its energy and experience prove any more successful a cure for the disease of the Modern American Mind? Barth's answer is a clear No. It seems to me that the reasons behind such an answer can be separated roughly into three parts.

The first has to do with the general damage that such a solution does to one's human relationships. To know the world intimately

enough for this solution to have a chance of working, a person must be so single-minded in his quest that he banishes from his life past loves and friendships. As Ebenezer eventually understands, Burlingame must, like Jacob, grapple with his dark angel "in the desert."

(Again, the connection here to Jacob Horner and also to Jacob R. Adam is apparent.) The first effect of Henry's 1687 decision to solve the mystery of his parentage is his disappearance from the lives of all his acquaintances in London, including Eben and Anna, the two persons on earth whom he loves. And even when he is once more united with the brother and then later with the sister, his protestations of concern and unswerving fidelity must always be balanced off in their minds by the awareness that he has a "higher," overriding purpose in all he does.

There is always the possibility, too, even if Henry did not intend it, that his personal obsession might accidentally do his friends harm--as when his signing a petition with Eben's name and title in order to perplex Coode becomes indirectly responsible for Eben's having to walk the plank off the coast of Maryland. Moreover, Henry's conversation with Eben from the moment of their reunification in the Plymouth coach up to their argument after the disastrous Cambridge court is increasingly marked by a mutual disgruntlement which is at least half due to Henry's insistent justification of his own solution and denigration of Eben's. The "familiar, urgent spell of his former tutor" which causes Eben to give up plans of a return to England and to go to St. Mary's City instead has little open, unalloyed affection in it any more. When Henry, in reciting to Eben a pandect of the

extensive study of geminology which Anna has conducted, refers at one point to "the murther of Love by Knowledge" (p. 496), we feel that he knows all too well whereof he speaks.

It is more than Burlingame's singlemindedness, of course, that destroys their friendship by the end of "Going to Malden." It is also the fact that, in order better to discover the Protean truth, Henry himself must become Protean. By pledging his first allegiance to the act of knowing the world, he makes it inevitable that he himself blend into that world. If he is to find the elusive Henry Burlingame II and John Coode, then he, too, must become elusive, embracing intrigue and deception and adopting disguise after disguise as each new exigency demands: Peter Sayer, Tim Mitchell, Lord Baltimore, John Coode himself--the list is appropriately exhaustive. In adopting these different roles to meet different situations rather than trying, as Eben does, to interpret different situations in a way consistent with only one role, Henry is, of course, practicing what Barth in The End of the Road calls "Mythotherapy": "'role-assigning . . . done . . . for the purpose of aggrandizing or protecting your ego.'" Burlingame's term for this strategy is "the game of governments" rather than Mythotherapy, and on the Plymouth coach he explains its debilitating effects on human relationships quite succinctly:

"The truth is, Eben, no man save Richard Hill, Lord Baltimore, and yourself hath known my name since 1687, when first I commenced to play the game of governments; and the game itself hath made such changes in me, that none who knew me erst would know me now, nor do I mean them to. 'Tis better they think me lost" (p. 164).

In the following months' activities covered in Part II, the problem is further exacerbated. As Henry weaves his way in and out of the poet's life, he plays so many different roles and seems so thoroughly immersed in each that Eben is finally pressed to exclaim, "I know you not from one hour to the next!" (p. 367). (The clearest echo here is Rennie Morgan's telling Jake, "you're different all the way through, every time. You cancel yourself out.") Burlingame's reply to Eben is, "Nor should you try"; and only a few hours earlier he has made clear exactly what he means by such a reply:

"your true and constant Burlingame lives only in your fancy, as doth the pointed 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" (p. 330).

Clearly, then, a second and more compelling reason why Existentialism makes friendship impossible is that it is impossible to love someone whom you cannot identify--to "know" someone you cannot "know." Moreover, when an innocent like Eben tries to trust in a friend who has become so thoroughly assimilated into the Protean world of experience, the result, as we have seen, is that he gets hurt. The hurt is not always unwitting, either, as in the case of Henry's signing the petition with Eben's name. At the Cambridge court, Henry is unable to warn Eben from innocently signing away the rights to his family estate because to do so would be to destroy his disguise as Tim Mitchell which he needs for his own purposes. So it is entirely apt that the title of the chapter in which Eben and Henry clash after

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the court decision be entitled: "If the Laureate is Adam, Then Burlingame is the Serpent." Burlingame repeatedly exhorts Eben that he must either accept or reject him, like the world, without insisting on the whole truth; and Eben in each instance finally does accept him. But, as I have suggested, it is with a decreasing amount of affection and only as he himself, with some regret, begins to lose his innocence.

During his seven years of Existentialism, significant changes take place in Burlingame somewhat apart from his numerous disguises; and these changes, I think, constitute a second way in which that sort of solution to cosmopsis proves a failure. The constant alterations in him which I have already mentioned may be thought of as linear, in the sense that they imply neither a rising or falling of his fortunes nor a logical, inevitable end to themselves. But another sequence of alterations charts a definite downward path for Burlingame and, left unchecked, would result in violent death for him and perhaps for many others. The decline effected during this period of Existentialism can perhaps best be described as the common intellectual syndrome of extensive knowledge, perversity, and cynicism. A man sooner or later exhausts all the areas of exploration traditionally considered proper and natural; he turns in boredom to those areas that are beyond the pale of "nature"; and eventually having exhausted them, also, he cynically loses patience with the world for not having more to offer and wants to be done with it. We have seen a fainter outline of this pattern already in The Floating Opera's Todd Andrews, who learns that he is only an animal like all other humans and who wants to blow up

the whole Opera; and in The End of the Road's Jake Horner, who also sees only animality in human beings and ends up trying to escape completely from the world.

The syndrome is best exemplified, however, by Henry Burlingame, who not only lives it but who, through the all-pervasive metaphor of sexual-intellectual "knowledge," describes it most vividly. In his disguise as Timothy Mitchell, the "Laureate of Lubricity," whose amorous advances are not limited to women or even to human beings and whose favorite love partner at the moment is a fat sow named Portia, Henry defends his "catholic" tastes on the grounds that animals are not often choosy about mating with species other than their own. When Eben challenges this rationale with, "These poor dumb creatures are betrayed by accident, but man hath light enough to see Dame Nature's plan," Henry replies:

"And sense enough to see it hath no object, save to carry on the species And wit enough to do for sport what the beasts do willy-nilly. I have no quarrel with women, Master Poet: 'tis many a maid I've loved ere now and doubtless shall again. But just as Scripture tells us that death is the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, so Boredom, methinks, is the fruit of Wit and Fancy. A new mistress lies upon her back at night in a proper chamber, and her lover is content. But anon this simple pleasure palls, and they set about to refine their sport: from Aretine they learn the joy of sundry stoops and stances; from Boccaccio and the rest they learn to woo by the light o' day, in fields and wine butts and chimney corners; from Catullus and the naughty Greeks they learn There are more ways to the woods than one, and more woods than one to be explored by every way. If they have wit and daring there is no end to their discovery, and if they read as well, they have the amorous researches of the race at their disposal: the pleasures of Cathay, of Moors and Turks and

Africans, and the cleverest folk of Europe. Is this not the way of't, sir? When men like us become enamored of a woman, we fall in love with every part and aspect; we cannot rest till we know with all our senses every plain and secret part of our beloved, and then we gnash our teeth that we cannot go beneath her skin!" (p. 326).

After a few minutes of verse like "Let me drink of thy Body's own Wine" and a number of historical precedents for his own peculiar tastes, all of which horrify Eben, Burlingame reiterates the first, licentious stage of the pattern and then goes on to describe his version of the second--perversity:

"I love the world, sir, and so make love to it! I have sown my seed in men and women, in a dozen sort 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!"

So exalted was the voice in which this confession was delivered that Ebenezer shrank away, as directly as he could, some inches farther from its author, who he began to fear was mad.

"'Tis a most--interesting point of view," he said (p. 328).

The third stage of the decline, cynicism which climaxes in death, Henry has not yet reached; but we see it foreshadowed in the story of Charley Mattassin, the Indian who was Mary Mungummary's lover and, we later discover, Henry's older brother. It is apparent that the thirty-nine-year-old Charley whom Mary first "knew" was at the second stage of this pattern, as is the thirty-nine-year-old Burlingame now. "Oftentimes," says Mary, "I felt his fancy bore a clutch of worlds, all various, of which the world these books [everything from Euclid to Boccaccio] described was one--"

"Which, while 'twas splendid here and there," the Laureate interrupted, "he could not but loathe for having been the case."

"That's it!" Mary cried, her eyes bright. "You have laid your finger on its very root and fundament."

Ebenezer sighed, recalling Burlingame. "I know a man who hath that genius, and that very manner: he loves the world, and comprehends it at first glance--sometimes even sight unseen--yet his love is flavored with contempt, from the self-same cause, which leads him to make game of what he loves."

"And would you say," pressed the poet, much aroused, "that this cosmic love I spoke of was as strong in his flesh as in his fancy? What I mean, did he lust for aught that struck his eye, be't man or maid or mandrake root, and yet despise the world for its meagerness of bedfellows?"

"That and more," Mary answered, "for so possessed was he with this same lust and fancy, he e'en despised himself that he could not fancy more!" (pp. 415-416).

The story of Charley Mattassin ends with his dissatisfaction growing into a cynicism that becomes so great as finally to find expression in a brutal murder; and from the moment he is arrested until the moment he swings from the gallows, his sole gesture is a "monstrous laugh" at "the whole of God's creation." "My friend hath not laughed after Charley's fashion and God grant he never shall," observes Eben, "but the potential for't is there; I see it plainly from your tale. A certain shrug he hath, and a particular mirthless smile" (p. 422).

The condition which causes those shrugs and smiles to turn into that monstrous laugh; which engenders an insatiability so acute that it must climax in cynical violence; and which, thereby, constitutes the third and finally the key weakness in the Existentialist attempt to achieve a sense of value and identity in a thoroughly

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nihilistic universe is the stark fact that has been the metaphysical basis for each of Barth's first three novels: the world simply cannot be known. The phenomena which make up a man's life, including the phenomena which are other men and himself, ultimately resist his best rational efforts to penetrate and control them. That is precisely what is meant by saying that the universe is "thoroughly nihilistic." Henry Burlingame has been admitting--even preaching--this truth--that--there-is-no-Truth to Eben from March of 1694 onward; while at the same time, and for seven years previously, he has been trying by dint of sheer experience and energy to prove otherwise. But in his fortieth year he is forced finally to admit that his attempted solution has been futile from the start. The worlds within him and without will not yield up to acting any more than they will to being, a truth by which a man can live responsibly and productively.

Two prominent metaphors reflect this third, insurmountable obstacle to the Existentialist solution. One is the only partially assembled Assembly Journall. After seven years of constant searching, Henry by December of 1694 possesses only half of it, the first halves of John Smith's Secret Historie and of Sir Henry Burlingame's Privie Journall; and he has absolutely no idea how to obtain the rest, how literally to "put two and two together." Also, he has no assurance whatsoever that either Historie or Journall actually does hold the key to his parentage. Thus, he is no closer than he ever was to finding his father or John Coode or to achieving the personal ends to which those two acts are the means.

The other metaphor for this failure is his extremely small penis. All of his talk about impregnating nature in all her parts has actually been wishful thinking, because he, like Charley Mattassin who had the same deficiency, has never been able really to take a female, has never been able to push through to the intimate core of even one fact. His true genius has been in knowing and manipulating surfaces rather than in penetrating to depths. The greatest frustration for Burlingame, the epitome of all the world's facts which he cannot penetrate and make to produce something with his mark, is Anna Cooke. On the heels of his passionate oration about loving the world and, so, making love to it, Henry asks Eben, "D'you think I'd waste my seed on sows, if I could sow a child in Anna Cooke? D'you think I'd flit about the world, if I could take her to wife?" (p. 339). His inability to impregnate anyone, especially Anna, reflects his final inability to "seize his soul," to "assert, assert, assert" his will on the world and see that that assertion has born fruit. In this light, it is wholly understandable why the method of murder which Charley Mattassin chose was to thrust his long hunting knife up into a woman where his penis had been denied access.

In Henry Burlingame III at the end of "Going to Malden," then, we see an illustration of the Modern American Mind having come, by a route exactly opposite from Eben's, to the same dead end in its search for value and identity. Knowledge and energy have proven as ineffective as innocence and poetry in providing a method of living purposefully in a godless universe. Just as Eben's Essentialism has failed because he will not know the world, so Henry's Existentialism

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has failed because he cannot know the world; and just as Eben, despite his best efforts, has been forced to begin accumulating knowledge, so Henry, despite his best efforts, has been forced to remain basically ignorant. Moreover, Henry's last act in the period of time covered in Part II of The Sot-Weed Factor, like Eben's last act, is simultaneously the ultimate manifestation of his attempted solution and its death knell.

Ebenezer deserts Malden and Joan Toast in the name of his innocence and his art and, in so doing, commits his first conscious act of infidelity. He is on his way back to Endland and what he intends to be a life of complete non-involvement in human affairs; he is fleeing responsibility when the whole point of his Essentialism has been to allow him to define and assume responsibility. Henry's last act in Part II (although it, like several other aspects of his characterization which I have mentioned, does not become clear until Part III) is to adopt yet another role--Nicholas Lowe. This time, however, the role is meant to be real; he wants really to "be" that person. He has made Nicholas Lowe his legal name, and his motivation has been to terminate rather than to further the self-appointed tasks of discovering his parentage and arresting Coode. So Henry is simultaneously acting in accordance with and putting an end to the Existentialist attempt to define and assume responsibility. He, too, is escaping:

"When I learned this [that he could not find the other half of the Assembly Journal] I called my search a failure, abandoned hope of proving my identity, and resolved to create one from the outside in. I went to Colonel Henry Lowe of

Talbot, that once years ago I saved from Tom Pound's pirates and, after explaining who I was, prevailed upon him to save my life in turn by owning me as a son. Thus was Nick Lowe born, from nothing and without travail" (pp. 484-485).

In the first scene in "Malden Earned," then, in which Henry Burlingame meets Ebenezer Cooke on the wharf at Cambridge, we see not one but two illustrations of the Modern American Mind at the end of its ethical road. When Henry warns Eben of the danger of a man's reaching the conclusion that he has nothing more to lose (or to gain) and of thereby becoming a violent madman like Ben Spurdance, we know that he is warning himself as well. So the journey to St. Mary's City is for both men the first gesture in a last-ditch effort to stay in the world, of which Maryland is a fitting emblem, and to gain a sense of purposeful living. In Burlingame's case, he is making one last stab at finding John Coode and, perchance, the Assembly Journal and Anna to boot, simply by going as Nick Lowe to the place where Coode may be hiding and looking for him.

From the time he and the poet reach St. Mary's City until the time Eben returns to Cooke's Point, Burlingame disappears from the novel; and after his reappearance, he has little detail to report concerning his recent activities. So any analysis of those activities as they relate to a suggested cure for cosmopsis cannot be as detailed as was the analysis of Eben. When Burlingame does not find Coode at St. Mary's City and, moreover, loses Eben as well, he goes directly to Malden; and there, playing son to Andrew Cooke so as better to help him regain his estate and to size up the extent and nature of Coode's vice ring which has usurped Malden, he waits for word of the twins.

And when Eben finally does arrive and, after regaining consciousness four days later, tells the story of his adventure at Bloodsworth Island, it becomes clear that the exact same process of accepting the limits of reason, the brotherhood of men, and the goodness of life which has given Eben the key to acting productively in a relativistic universe has had the same effect for Burlingame.

Or it has at least provided him with half of the key and raised his hopes of finding the other half. Eben's consciously reckless assumption of responsibility for the lives of his three companions at the rebel camp has made him threaten to throw himself at Chicamec and thereby commit suicide by way of the spears of his bodyguards if the old chieftain does not allow all four whites to go free; and in Eben's last exclamation before carrying out that threat he uses the name "Henry Burlingame." This causes Chicamec to stay him and to show him the sacred book of his tribe, which is, in fact, the second half of John Smith's Secret Historie; and this book, in turn, confirms that Sir Henry Burlingame was Henry Burlingame III's grandfather and that Chicamec is Henry Burlingame II, his father. Furthermore, it confirms that in the other half of Sir Henry Burlingame's Privie Journall, if it still exists, there is related the recipe for a magic eggplant aphrodisiac which can remedy Burlingame's physical "shortcoming." His inability to find his father and his inability to impregnate a woman are, as we have seen, symbolic of the inability of the Modern American Mind to achieve by means of Existentialism, to "know," a sense of place and a sense of purpose for itself in the world. Now the first of those two prizes is his, and the second seems much more within the

realm of possibility. "Nay, how can you despair," he asks the still disconsolate Anna, "after such a miracle as Eben's stumbling on my parentage? Only let him gain his feet again and he'll solve that other riddle for me: the Magic of the Secret Eggplant, or whatever!" (p. 704).

Even with only half of the riddle solved, the half which for eight years has been his motivating force, it is clear that Burlingame feels a sense of identity and a sureness of action which he has never felt before. He is eager to get to Bloodsworth Island to meet his new-found family; but before he can go there, his presence is needed at the trial which Governor Nicholson will hold in the front room. The central issue before the make-shift court is the ownership of the Cooke's Point estate, which three parties lay claim to: one, a shady minister named Robotham who won the estate in a wager from, and whose daughter is pregnant by, Bertrand when he was posing as Ebenezer; another, William Smith, who won it by virtue of Eben's rash interference at the Cambridge court and who, along with his neighbor, Captain Mitchell, and his unscrupulous lawyer, Richard Sowter, are agents of Coode; and, the other, of course, the Cooke family. It is not necessary to relate the incredibly complex legal, political, and personal aspects of the case which Burlingame is able to grasp. The crucial point is that he does grasp them and see in them a way to reach an out-of-court settlement which will return Cooke's Point to its rightful owners and get the final piece of evidence which Nicholson needs to convict Coode and deport his three henchmen. And in confidently turning his genius to this task, Burlingame is demonstrating,

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just as clearly as did Eben when he had captained the skiff safely to shore several nights earlier, that he has learned how to operate responsibly in a relativistic universe. He has learned how to substitute supra-rational for rational value-thinking and thus to settle the whole tangled ethical case, as it were, out of court.

In the end, of course, Eben does answer that other half of Henry's riddle. The trial turns up the last quarter of the Assembly Journal and thus the last half of Sir Henry Burlingame's Privie Journall, but Joan Toast has stolen the two pages of it that contain the actual recipe for the eggplant aphrodisiac and refuses to do her sex the disservice of giving men access to so potent a weapon of subjugation. She finally relents, however, because Eben's insistence on consummating their marriage despite her wasted and diseased condition holds out a glimmer of hope for her that men may not always be women's enemy, that they may yet learn to use their sexual organs for love rather than war. Burlingame reads the crucial two pages; and, with his ex-student now having effected the completion of the two central tasks of his life--finding his father and getting hard evidence against Coode--and, in so doing, having unlocked for him the secret of potency, he triumphantly volunteers to carry Joan upstairs while Eben and Anna follow. In the morning he will go eagerly to Bloodsworth Island to meet his father and brother and possibly to forestall the rebellion, and in the spring he will return and become Anna's husband.

So, in Henry Burlingame III at the end of "Malden Earned," we see another illustration of the Modern American Mind which has "found itself." It has learned how to live purposefully, responsibly,

productively--in short, potently--in the world. Its particular method of living in that fashion is not the same as Eben's, just as its particular method of education was not the same. The penchant for knowledge and energy which caused Henry to adopt an existentialist solution in the first place is still intact, and it will be sorely needed when he tries to manipulate the various factions and forces on Bloodsworth Island to effect the best possible conditions for whites, reds, and blacks alike. Nevertheless, in Burlingame as well as in Ebenezer, we see an emblem of the Modern American Mind which has found all that it can and need know about value and identity; and we see, too, in this characterization as well as in the other, the assertion that, ironically, the Modern American Mind which has made this discovery has lost its traditional innocence and become less American. In achieving its place in the world, in losing its "orphanhood," it has necessarily forfeited the "philosophic liberty" that can elevate as well as demoralize. There are restrictions now on what it can do and be, and in those restrictions there is stability but also a note of melancholy.¹⁹

In so far as Henry Burlingame III illustrates not only a modern intellect which is American but also America itself in the modern era, there is one more observation that should be made. Along with the bitter-sweetness of this country's growing up, we also see in the Burlingame of the novel's last pages a vision or maybe even a prediction of America discovering that its origins are as much in the

¹⁹Richard Noland, "John Barth and the Novel of Comic Nihilism," WSCL, 7 (Autumn 1966), 253.

red man's society as in the whites and returning for a while at least to the former. More is suggested in this act, I think, than a national discovery of the subconscious or an infatuation with primitivism. In the character of Henry Burlingame, whose "ties to the cause of Western Civilization (to say nothing of English colonialism!)" are so "slight and qualified" (p. 707), there is a vision of a country better able than any of the other predominantly white ones to go beyond its "parochial" interests; evidence a genuine sympathy for the dark nations of the world; and, perhaps, effect a manner of aiding them without exploiting them. As a result, America can head off a bloody confrontation with the darker, poorer, less-free nations of the world, a confrontation which it could not win.

Keeping in mind Barth's comment to the effect that he had thought that in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road he was writing about values and had found instead that he was writing about innocence, it is appropriate to conclude this analysis of Henry Burlingame III by relating him to the state which I have called "Higher Innocence." He himself says nothing explicit on the subject, as does Eben; and neither Eben nor any other character explicitly applies the subject to him. So my point here can be made quite briefly. It is clear that Experience is more than one of Henry's two Existentialist strategies; the Existentialist solution to modern ethical problems is Experience, just as the Essentialist solution is Innocence. Thus, through Henry Burlingame III even more than through Ebenezer Cooke, The Sot-Weed Factor inevitably becomes a novel about Experience as well as about Innocence. Noting the manner in which Burlingame is

constantly compared with Cooke, then, and noting further that for the four years before his Existentialism Burlingame had tried Essentialism--tried to define himself by "being" a tutor--we must conclude that with this characterization Barth is reiterating and deepening his assertion that the road to value for the Modern American Mind goes through Innocence and then through Experience until it reaches a "higher ground" which is a combination of the two.

The resolution of the trial at Malden provides a perfect emblem for this combination. On the one hand, Henry is completely dependent upon the "higher innocence" of Eben's fidelity to Joan Toast to effect the recovery of the eggplant recipe which holds the key to his potency. On the other hand, Eben depends completely upon Henry's experienced handling of the terrific complexities of the Cooke's Point case to effect the return of his (and Anna's) rightful inheritance. We can see this combination of Innocence and Experience not only in the interdependence of Eben and Henry but also in Henry himself, who, while he acts in terrifically complex ways, also drops all disguises and claims quite simply to be Henry Burlingame III.

Still, the two characters at the end of "Malden Earned" are quite different; and the kind of lives they intend to lead for at least a short while after the honeymoon night bear little resemblance to each other. Eben will be the faithful husband, firmly settled on the estate which he has earned; but Henry, as Eben originally intended when he struck the bargain with Chicamec, will be indulging as much as ever in the "game of governments" among the various rebel tribes and forces wherever they might be. Working from the inside through

"faction and intrigue," he may be as responsible as Eben for preventing open warfare between Savagery and Civilization. Henry will have a new respect for what Innocence can do; and he may resort to it himself occasionally--by clinging, for example, to his new-found identity as the son of Chicamec no matter what the circumstances. His final embrace of the virgin Anna predicts this much. But, given his innate genius for knowledge and energy and given the exigencies of his new situation, Eben's way cannot basically be his. A more appropriate name, therefore, for the state of the Modern American Mind which Henry Burlingame III illustrates at the end of "Malden Earned" is not "Higher Innocence" but "Higher Experience." As Eben's Innocence is elevated by experience, so Burlingame's experience is raised by that innocence.

IV

In his third novel, then, John Barth recapitulates and goes beyond the themes of his first two novels. Primarily through the illustrative characterization of Ebenezer Cooke and secondarily through the illustrative characterization of Henry Burlingame III, he first raises the problem of how the Modern American Mind can live with relative values. Then he offers two rational solutions to the problem, both dependent on one's determining one's own identity; that is, both based on the theory that one can tell what to do by rationally knowing who one is. The solution which receives most attention is

Ebenezer's--turning inward and making certain traits in oneself one's absolutes. I have called this solution Essentialism, since it is based on the theory that personal essence precedes personal existence; and Barth explicitly states that such a solution is the epitome of Innocence. The other solution is Burlingame's--turning outward and gaining intimate knowledge of the relativistic world. I have called this solution Existentialism, because it is based on the theory that personal existence precedes personal essence; and Barth explicitly points out that such a solution is the epitome of Experience.

By the end of Part II of The Sot-Weed Factor, both Essentialism and Existentialism, both Innocence and Experience, have proven futile. They have not succeeded in giving Eben or Henry a sense of identity and, thus, of value; and, moreover, they have caused great harm to others. They have taken the Modern American Mind to the end of the road of rationalist ethics. In Part III, then, Barth offers an answer to this dilemma, an answer in the form of a mystically achieved acceptance of human limitation and interdependence and an affirmation of life itself. The key to living in a relativistic universe, he suggests, is not any theory of Essentialism or of Existentialism, not consciously chosen Innocence or Experience, but some combination of the two which rises above either. In the double wedding at the end of Part III, then, there are two crucial assertions in symbolic form. First, in the virgin Eben's going up to embrace the whore Joan Toast and in the worldly Henry's going up to embrace the virgin Anna, we see an emblem of Innocence and Experience combining in ways which I have called, respectively, "Higher Innocence" and "Higher Experience."

Second, we see in those two acts the possibility that there exists for the Modern American Mind another kind, a higher kind, of personal and ethical "knowledge," something which has more to do with love than with reason.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that John Barth has succeeded in his initial intention to write a "series of three nihilistic, amusing novels,"¹ a trilogy on the theme of value and identity in modern man. The first novel traces the discovery that man is a full-fledged part of the relativistic, irrational universe and, as such, cannot be his own source of rationalistic, absolute values, his own God; and it leaves him with a "brave ethical subjectivism" as the only means of continuing to live in the world. The second novel imagines two forms of that subjectivism, one based on the theory that personal existence precedes personal essence, the other on the theory that personal essence precedes personal existence; and it shows both forms as ultimately ineffectual and destructive.

The third novel recapitulates the background, formulation, and futility of these two forms of ethical subjectivism; adds that the former is the way of experience and the latter of innocence; and then goes on to offer a kind of "mystical value-thinking" as an alternative. Based on an intuitive recognition of the limits of reason, the brotherhood of man, and the value of living, this alternative does not

¹ John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," WSCL, 6, 6, 10.

provide the "Answer"--the nihilistic universe has no "Answers." It does, however, hold out the possibility of man's learning to live productively and responsibly, if not happily ever after, amidst many "answers." Barth envisions modern man on the verge of individual and collective extinction mystically achieving a synthesis of naive insistence upon absolute value and knowledgeable recognition of its impossibility, a combination of innocence and experience, which is "higher" than either. The act of a man and a woman making love becomes for Barth both the central symbol for this supra-rational union of opposites and also the practical result of such a union, since the ability to love another human being can come only after one has transcended his rational limitations.

Throughout this trilogy Barth relates several secondary lines of thought to this primary one on the ethical condition of modern man. Foremost are those which deal with the conditions of the modern American and of the modern writer. Barth's description of both is very similar to his description of modern man. Partly because the American and the writer are modern men and partly because their particular origins and histories provide parallels to modern man's, the modern American and the modern writer also, find themselves in a potentially fatal identity crisis; and the solution for them, too, is transcending the very terms of their problem and achieving in their affairs a Higher Innocence or a Higher Experience.

This trilogy is closely related to Barth's subsequent works: Giles Goat-Boy, Lost in the Funhouse, and Chimera. At first these works appear so various in form and subject matter as to defy any kind

of generalization. One can see in them, however, a number of themes which Barth continues to reiterate and to develop; and none is more prominent than that of modern man's realizing that his rational attempts to define who he is and what he should do are exhausted and finding that the solution lies in his ability to transcend reason. Time and again Barth asserts that essentialism and existentialism, innocence and experience--intellectually based categories and theories of all kinds--must, after being explored to their terminal points, be superseded through the mystical power of love.

As Barth himself has said in a number of places, he received the inspiration for writing Giles Goat-Boy from reading certain reviews of his third novel, which pointed out that Ebenezer Cooke fit almost perfectly Lord Ragland's twenty-five-point definition of the "Hero."² Barth came to regard the coincidence, he says, "as more inevitable than remarkable,"³ apparently because in writing about someone whose life offers mankind a model for escaping a fatal predicament, he saw himself almost by necessity imagining the Savior type of the Hero. So, in order to underline the point that what modern man both individually and collectively needs is a Savior--the very thing in which he has lost the ability to believe--Barth made his next story

²The John Enck interview and one passage of overt autobiographical literary criticism in "Bellerophoniad" are the two most prominent examples of such statements. The next two footnotes will refer to the passage in "Bellerophoniad." (The work of Lord Ragland's to which Barth refers is The Hero.)

³p. 198.

"the conscious and ironic orchestration of the Ur-Myth which its predecessor had been represented as being."⁴

It is inevitable, then, that the life of George Giles, patently fantastic though it may be, should strikingly resemble the life of Ebenezer Cooke. Just as Eben goes off to the New World having first-hand experience with his own "nothingness" but nevertheless thinking that he has discovered in himself twin-essences which make him more than mortal, so George leaves his goat pens and enrolls in the University having learned on his pulses the truth of his keeper's favorite maxim, SELF KNOWLEDGE IS ALWAYS BAD NEWS, but feeling sure nonetheless that he is a Grand Tutor (Savior). And just as Eben's father has given him the assignment of managing Malden, so George's Father, a giant computer named WESCAC which controls the entire University, has given him the assignment: PASS ALL FAIL ALL.

George's first attempt to interpret and fulfill this assignment is based on innocence. Pride and ignorance lead him into improving the theory that clear distinctions must and can be made between truth and falsehood, that "passage" and "failure" are opposites, and that the former is always good and the latter bad. When he and others whom he teaches actually practice this theory, however, the results for the entire University are disastrous; and the Goat-Boy tries to commit suicide. He is saved; and, after months of confinement, he attempts again to complete his assignment, this time by means of the opposite theory born out of Experience. No longer claiming to be

⁴p. 198.

Grand Tutor and knowing now that the universe is "seamless" and "irrational," George advocates the deliberately specious theory that distinctions of any kind cannot and should not be made, that action is all, that "passage" and "failure" are in fact the same equally meaningless terms. But, again, when he and others try to practice this theory, the results are again disastrous and George again tries to commit suicide.

Saved once more, he, like Ebenezer Cooke on Bloodsworth Island, experiences a "despair [that is] indistinguishable from peace"; and, "full of that positive sensation," he confronts his mysterious assignment anew with a concentration so intense that it transcends reason alone. The paradoxes of PASS ALL FAIL ALL become paroxysms until finally:

I gave myself up utterly to that which bound,
possessed, and bore me. I let go, I let all
go; relief went through me like a purge . . .
my eyes were opened; I was delivered (pp. 650-651).

After this mystical experience, George has no more doubts about who he is and what he and the rest of the University ought to do. Twice before, once as an act of innocence and once as an act of experience, he had descended into WESCAC's Belly as Grand Tutors are supposed to do and has come out a failure. This time his passage through the Belly is a success because he accomplishes it not armed with a theory but locked in loving physical intercourse with a woman. In the climax of their love-making, he escapes all of the rational paradoxes of space and time and discovers: "In the darkness, blinding light! The end of the University! Commencement Day!" (p. 673).

Having left the Belly, George Giles ritualistically affirms that the key to salvation is Higher Innocence. He makes a brief visit to the goat pens of his youth to reaffirm his identification as a "kid," he publicly and forever declares himself Grand Tutor, he drives the False Grand Tutor from the Campus, and he begins his work of certifying students as Candidates for Graduation. To questions concerning the exact nature of Graduation, George offers no answer except that one must try for it. One must, in other words, live as if it were possible. The prospects of a life characterized by that sort of metaphorical viewpoint, by Higher Innocence, are not bright in the usual storybook fashion; the Hero, the savior, always meets a tragic end. But Graduation, Giles Goat-Boy affirms, is the only thing worth striving for; and to the complaint that such high lunacy is not worth the personal cost, we remember Eben Cooke's reply to his sister that nothing else is either.

"Life-Story," like several of its companions in Lost in the Funhouse, develops further the connection between the moribund conditions of the modern writer and modern man which the first three novels establish.⁵ It is a story about an author writing a story about an author writing a story; and the author in each case is having difficulty getting on with his work because, while he has a "vehicle" for it--he is exploring the ramifications of his growing conviction that he is the character in someone else's story--he cannot find a

⁵Barth is very insistent in his Author's Note to Lost in the Funhouse that the stories are not a collection or a selection but a "series" . . . meant to be received 'all at once' and as here arranged."

"ground situation," a reason why he or anyone else should care who and what he is. "Another regressus in infinitum!" each writer exclaims in exasperation, another piece of conventionally modern "preciousness" (p. 117). But, despite his desire to tell and to be in a far more exciting, straightforward, unselfconscious narrative, he cannot keep from getting bogged down in the very sort of impotent introspection and rationalization which he detests. Only a dogged urge to write and to read his next sentence keeps him from reaching for the bottle of sleeping pills. Unable to make himself remain innocent enough to tell the kind of heroic story he likes and unable to find in any of his rationalizations the key to an equally satisfying kind, each writer is threatened with an identity crisis which makes his life-story a completely aimless stringing out of words. Escape from his predicament comes at last from an outside force. His wife bursts unannounced into his room, kisses him, and playfully insists that he "cap his pen"; and in that loving act she symbolically offers the only meaningful plot resolution which modern man and the modern writer can know.

"Menelaiad" also has much to say on the subject of the writer, both in his own right and as a metaphor for modern man; but its primary interest is in further elaborating the metaphor of monogamy. Menelaus is, as he announces proudly in his story's third line, the "eternal husband." As such, he stands for the ability somehow to remain true, to "hold on," to one ideal, to one value, not because it is but as if it were an absolute. That is, he stands for the quality of Higher Innocence which we saw faintly in Harrison Mack's fidelity to Jane, more prominently in Joe Morgan's fidelity to Rennie, and in

bold clarity in Eben Cooke's fidelity to Joan Toast in "Malden Earned." Menelaus loses Helen in the first place when he cannot resist rationalizing his good fortune in being chosen by her, when he cannot accept the answer "Love" to his constant question "Why?" For the seven years following the Trojan War, Helen denies him her sexual favors and he wanders aimlessly "at sea" because his common sense will not believe her fantastic account of how she actually had remained true to him during the ten years previous. Finally, when the Delphic Oracle replies to his "Why did she choose me?" with "No other can as well espouse her" and to his "Who am I?" with a stark silence, Menelaus's insistence on reason is exhausted (p. 158). He returns to Helen vowing to "re-embrace his terrifying chooser, clasp her past speech, never let go, frig understanding . . ." (p. 158); and, because he does, the tale of Menelaus and Helen "rebegins." He becomes embodied immortally in the form of his own story and, beyond even that, in "the absurd, unending possibility of love" (p. 167).

In the last two of the three novellas which make up Chimera, the two which came first in point of time, Barth returns to the theme of the hero. "Perseid" is the story of a genuine hero who saves both himself and the entire race from deathly immobility by magically finding in the very terms of the apparently insoluble problem its solution, by reflecting Medusa's petrifying glance back upon herself. The point at which "Perseid" picks up the life of the hero, however, is in middle-age, after those immortalizing exploits have become history and he himself has begun to ossify in the process of aging:

"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: twenty years it was since I'd headed Medusa; I was twenty kilos overweight and bored stiff" (p. 71).

Perseus becomes, then, the emblem for all men who have arrived at the middle of their lives and found themselves in a depression, pining for the days of their youthful "heroics." Barth's prescription for making the latter half of one's life as meaningful as the former is, once again, not to attempt to solve the problem rationally but to achieve a Higher Innocence and thereby transcend the problem. When Perseus slays Medusa, he achieves the immortality of his own spoken and written story; but, when he returns at forty to the reincarnated Medusa and, despite having just experienced the death of one love relationship, is not afraid to embrace her with lovingly open eyes, his story is translated into the very stars.

The last and longest novella in Chimera also speaks of hero-hood and middle-age; however, as its correspondence to the tale of the mythical serpent suggests, its effect is not reassuring but stinging. Its central character has for his entire life attempted to imitate his heroic cousin Perseus, with the result that after forty years he has made himself not into a hero but into a perfect imitation of one. His story is a "Bellerophoniad" (*italics mine*), and it serves as a powerful reminder that most men are not even demigods and that their attempts to give their lives meaning and to achieve immortality are doomed from the outset.

Despite his best efforts, Bellerophon's life amounts to "confusion and fiasco" rather than heroic pattern (p. 297). He slays a monster, the Chimera, that is harmless and probably imaginary; he accomplishes his various tasks by tricks rather than by transcendence--if, indeed, he can be sure that he did accomplish them; he has no more idea at forty than he had at twenty who he is and what he ought to do; and his life-story will be forever obscure. By this point in our reading of Barth, we are not surprised to find that the final journey upon which Bellerophon makes these stinging discoveries begins with his taking permanent leave of his fine and faithful wife: "Let's see. O: I wish I were good at loving people, which it seems I'm not. So" (p. 263). It is finally the same deficiency in him, the lack of a Higher Innocence, which prevents his being either husband or hero.

In "Dunyazadiad," the last novella written and the first printed in Chimera, Barth once again speaks about the "exhausted" condition of modern storytelling and modern rationalist ethics through the metaphor of male-female relationships; but, in this story perhaps even more explicitly than in the others we have noted, the relationships are a central theme in and of themselves. Dunyazade watches every night for 1001 nights as her older sister Scheherazade beguiles the king with a new amorous technique and then with a new story so that he will not kill her as he has 1001 women on an equal number of nights before her.⁶ After she has run out of invention, the king

⁶Barth has called this image of a young girl having to spin yet another beguiling story every night for 1001 nights and finally, through those stories, saving not only her own life but the life of her country as well, "the aptest, sweetest, hauntingest, hopefulest

marries her; and Dunyazade is married to the king's younger brother, who is believed to have killed a good many women himself. The question then becomes, what kind of relationship does woman form with man now that the slavery and carnage which have marked her treatment at his hands seem to have run their course? Neither young woman is innocent enough any longer to think that monogamy can work; and Scheherazade, therefore, chooses the way of experience. She forms a relationship that is based on mutual infidelity. But Dunyazade, on the other hand, with the eloquent coaxing of her new husband, chooses the way of Higher Innocence. "What do you expect me to do?" she cries at first, "Forgive you? Love you?":

"Yes!" the King cried again, his eyes flashing.
 "Let's end the dark night! All that passion and hate between men and women; all that confusion of inequality and difference! Let's take the truly tragic view of love! Maybe it is a fiction, but it's the profoundest and best of all! Treasure me, Dunyazade, as I'll treasure you!"

"It won't work."

"Nothing works! But the enterprise is noble; it's full of joy and life, and the other ways are deathly. Let's make love like passionate equals!"

"You mean as if we were equals," Dunyazade said. "You know we're not. What you want is impossible."

"Despite your heart's feelings?" pressed the King. "Let it be as if! Let's make a philosophy of that as if!" (pp. 53-54).

With this last line, it seems to me, Barth captures the essence of the vision which he first develops in his initial three novels and has been elaborating upon ever since. Either to totally deny or to

[image] I know for the storyteller."--"Muse, Spare Me," Book Week (September 26, 1955), 29.

totally accept the nihilistic universe is to court lonely immobility or violent madness; but simultaneously to combine and to rise above the only two rational alternatives and to live metaphorically is to achieve all the sense of value and identity that man can know. When Dunyazade's new husband passionately bids her join him in making a "philosophy of that as if," he is offering all contemporary women and men whom she and he represent the only truly satisfactory method which John Barth sees for living in the irrational, relativistic, "modern" world. By "satisfactory," of course, he does not mean "eternally happy." He means "full of life"--in the full recognition that no life-story lasts forever and only a God could say for sure what one means.

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